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*Critical Discourse: Problematizing History*

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THE POSTMODERN PROBLEMATIZING  
OF HISTORY

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I

Every culture cannot sustain and absorb the shock of modern civilization. There is the paradox: how to become a modern man and to return to sources. (Paul Ricoeur)

One of the few common denominators among the detractors of postmodernism (e.g., Jameson, "Postmodernism"; Newman; Eagleton), however that term be defined, is the surprising, but general, agreement that the postmodern is ahistorical. It is a familiar line of attack, launched by Marxists and traditionalists alike, against not just contemporary art, but also today's theory - from semiotics to deconstruction. Recently, Dominick LaCapra (104-05) came to the defence of Paul de Man against Frank Lentricchia, claiming that de Man, in fact, had had a very keen sense of the need for inquiry into the conditions of possibility of history and how these are enacted in actual historical processes. What interests me here, however, is not the detail of the debate, but the very fact that history is now, once again, a cultural issue - and a problematic one, this time. It seems to be inevitably tied up with an entire set of challenged cultural and social assumptions that also condition our notions of both theory and art today: our beliefs in origins and ends, unity and totalizations, logic and reason, consciousness and human nature, progress and fate, representation and truth, not to mention the notions of causality and temporal homogeneity, linearity, and continuity (see Miller 460-61).

In some ways, these problematizing challenges are not new ones: their intellectual roots have been firm for centuries, though it is their actual concentration in a great many discourses today that has forced us to take notice anew. It was only in 1970 that a noted historian could write: "Novelists and playwrights, natural scientists and social scientists, poets, prophets, pundits, and philosophers of many persuasions have manifested an intense hostility to historical thought. Many of our contemporaries are extraordinarily reluctant to acknowledge the reality of past time and prior events, and stubbornly resistant to all arguments for the possibility or utility of historical knowledge" (Fischer 307). A few years later, Hayden White proclaimed that "one of the distinctive characteristics of contemporary literature is its underlying conviction that the historical consciousness must be obliterated if the writer is to examine with proper seriousness those strata of human experience which it is modern art's peculiar purpose to disclose" (*Tropics* 31). But his examples are telling: Joyce, Pound, Eliot, Mann - the great modernists, not postmodernists. Today, we would certainly have to modify radically this kind of claim in the wake of the postmodern architecture of Michael Graves and Paolo Portoghesi, or films like *The Return of Martin Guerre* and *Colonel Redl*, or what we might call "historiographic metafiction" like *G.*, *Shame*, or *A Maggot*. There seems to be a new desire to think historically, but to think historically these days is to think critically and contextually.

Part of this problematizing return to history is no doubt a response to the hermetic ahistoric formalism and aestheticism that characterized much of the art and theory of the so-called modernist period. If the past were invoked, it was to deploy its "presentness" or to enable its transcendence in the search for a more secure and universal value system (be it myth, religion, or psychology) (Spanos 158). In the perspective of cultural history, of course, it is now easy to see this as a reaction against the burden of tradition (in the visual arts and music, especially [see Rochberg 3/27]), often taking the form of an ironic enlisting of the aesthetic past in the overhauling of Western civilization (Joyce, Eliot). Modernism's "nightmare of history" is precisely what postmodernism has chosen to address. Artist, audience, critic - none is allowed to stand outside history, or even to wish to do so (Robinson and Vogel 198). The reader of Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* is never allowed to ignore the lessons of the past about the past or the implications of those lessons for the historical present. But surely, one could object, Brecht and Dos Passos were modernists who taught us the same things. And was not history problematized in what Barbara Foley (195) has called the "metahistorical novel" - *Absalom*, *Absalom!*, *Orlando*, and so on? Well, yes and no: paradoxical postmodernism is both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism. The provisional, indeterminate nature of historical knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism. Nor is the questioning of the ontological and

epistemological status of historical "fact" or the distrust of seeming neutrality and objectivity of recounting. But the concentration of these problematizations in postmodern art is not something we can afford to ignore.

To speak of provisionality and indeterminacy is not to *deny* historical knowledge, however. This is the misunderstanding suggested by Gerald Graff when he writes: "For if history is seen as an unintelligible flux of phenomena, lacking in inherent significance and structure, then no exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination can be anything but a dishonest refuge from truth" (403). What the postmodern writing of both history and literature has taught us is that both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past ("exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination"). In other words, the meaning and shape are not *in the events*, but *in the systems* which make those events into historical facts. This is not a "dishonest refuge from truth," but an acknowledgement of the meaning-making function of human constructs.

The postmodern, then, effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical context as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematizes the entire notion of historical knowledge. This is another of the paradoxes that characterize all postmodern discourses today. And the implication is that there can be no single, essentialized, transcendent concept of "genuine historicity" (in Fredric Jameson's terms), no matter what the nostalgia (Marxist or traditionalist) for such an entity. Postmodern historicism is wilfully unencumbered by nostalgia in its critical, dialogical reviewing of the forms, contexts, and values of the past. An example might make this point clearer. Jameson has asserted that Doctorow's *Ragtime* is "the most peculiar and stunning monument to the aesthetic situation engendered by the disappearance of the historical referent" ("Postmodernism" 70). But it is just as easy to argue that the historical referent is very present - in spades. Not only is there in *Ragtime* an accurate evocation of a particular period of early twentieth-century American capitalism, with due representation from all classes involved, but historical personages also appear within the fiction. Of course, it is this mixing and this tampering with the "facts" of received history that Jameson objects to. But there is no conflict between this historical reconstruction/construction and the politics of the novel (cf. Green 842). If Doctorow does use nostalgia, it is always ironically turned against itself - and us.

The opening of the novel sets the pattern. Describing the year 1902, the narrating voice introduces a potential nostalgia, but surely it is one already tinted with irony: "Everyone wore white in summer. Tennis racquets were hefty and the racquet faces elliptical. There was a lot of sexual fainting. There were no Negroes. There were no immigrants" (4). Only a page later, we learn that Emma Goldman teaches a quite different view of America: "Apparently there *were* negroes. There *were* immigrants" (5) - and, of course, much

of the novel is about precisely those ex-centric and excluded parts of society Jameson is right, I think, to see this novel as inscribing a crisis in historicity but it is his negative judgement that is surprising. The irony that allows critical distancing is what here refuses nostalgia: *Ragtime's* volunteer firemen are anything but sentimental figures and, many American social "ideals" such as justice - are called into question by their inapplicability to (black) Americans like Coalhouse Walker. There is no generalizing and sentimentalizing away of racism, ethno-centric bias, or class hatred in this novel.

Postmodern works like this one contest art's right to claim to inscribe timeless universal values, and they do so by thematizing and even formally enacting the context-dependent nature of all values. They also challenge narrative singularity and unity in the name of multiplicity and disparity. Through narrative, they offer fictive corporality instead of abstractions, but at the same time, they tend to fragment, to render unstable, the traditional unified identity or subjectivity of character. It is not by accident that I have been using here the language of Michel Foucault ("Nietzsche"), for his description of the challenges offered by a Nietzschean "genealogy" to standard notions of history corresponds to what postmodern fiction also suggests in its contesting of the conventions of both historiography and the novel form. The postmodern enterprise is one that traverses the boundaries of theory and practice, often implicating one in and by the other, and history is often the site of this problematization.

Of course, this has also been true of other periods, for the novel and history have frequently revealed their natural affinities through their narrative common denominators: teleology, causality, continuity. Leo Braudy has shown how the problematizing of that continuity and coherence in eighteenth-century history writing found its parallel in the fiction of those years. Today, though, it is less the problem of how to narrate time than the issue of the nature and status of our information about the past that makes postmodern history, theory, and art share certain concerns. In the work of Hayden White, Michel de Certeau, Paul Veyne, Louis O. Mink, Lionel Gossman, and others, we see today a kind of radical suspicion of the act of historiography. What we do not see, however, *pace* the opponents of postmodernism, is a lack of concern for history or a radical relativism or subjectivism (cf. Lentricchia). What we do see, instead, is a view of the past, is a view of the past, both recent and remote, that takes the present powers and limitations of the writing of that past into account and the result is often avowed provisionality and irony.

In Umberto Eco's terms: "The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its deconstruction leads to silence [the discovery of modernism], must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently" (67). The semiotic awareness that all signs change meaning with time is what prevents nostalgia and antiquarianism. The loss

of innocence is less to be lamented than rejoiced in. This is what permits Frank Kermode to call "a serious historiographical exercise" the description in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49* of a paradoxically unrecorded but historical (which translates directly into : fictive) confrontation of American and Russian warships off the coast of California in 1864. Kermode's reasons for this claim, which he means seriously, are postmodern : the description "illustrates the point that we are capable of a skepticism very remote . . . from the sober historicism of only yesterday. We can, indeed, no longer assume that we have the capacity to make value-free statements about history, or suppose that there is some special dispensation whereby the signs that constitute an historical text have reference to events in the world" (108). This is the skepticism that has brought us, not just changes in the discipline of history, but the "New Historicism," as it is now labelled, in literary studies.

## II

The new history we are beginning to see these days has little in common with the old — and for an interesting historical reason : its practitioners were nurtured in the theoretical climate of the 1970s, a time during which the individual literary work came to lose its organic unity ; when literature as an organized body of knowledge abandoned the boundaries that had hitherto enclosed it, to an extent even abandoned its claims to knowledge; and when history began to seem discontinuous, sometimes in fact no more than just another fiction. It is no wonder that the scholarship we now pursue cannot take the form or speak the language of the older literary history. (Herbert Lindenberger )

This new literary history is no longer an attempt to preserve and transmit a canon or a tradition of thought; it bears a problematic and questioning relation to both history and literary criticism. A recent advertisement for the University of California Press series on "The New Historicism: Studies in Cultural Poetics" talks of a critical "return to the historical embeddedness of literary production" that is coeval with "innovative explorations of the symbolic explorations of the symbolic construction of reality" in the study of history. Thanks to the pioneering work of Marxists, feminists, black and ethnic theorists, among others, there is a new awareness in both fields that history cannot be written without ideological and institutional analysis, including analysis of the act of writing itself. It is no longer enough to be suspicious and playful as a writer about literature (or history, though *there* it never really was); the theorist and the critic are inevitably implicated in both ideologies and institutions. Historians such as Le Roy Ladurie have shocked their "establishment" colleagues by refusing to hide their interpretive and narrating acts behind the third-person voice of objectivity that is so common to both historical and literary critical writing. In *Carnival in Romans*, Ladurie presents

himself, not as metaphorical witness or participant of the events of 1580, but as a scholar, reporting outside the story he tells, but from an explicitly and intensely partisan perspective that lays out its value system for the readers to judge for themselves (see Carrard). This flaunting of the transgression of the conventions of historiography is a very postmodern conflation of two enunciativ systems, those defined by Emile Benveniste (206-08) as historical and discursive. Historical statements, be they in historiography or realist fiction, suppress grammatical reference to the discursive situation of the utterance (producer, receiver, context, intent) in their attempt to narrate past events in such a way that the events seem to narrate themselves. In the postmodern writing of history - and fiction (*Midnight's Children*, *The White Hotel*, *Slaughterhouse-Five*) - there is a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation.

What fades away with this kind of contesting is any sure ground upon which to base representation and narration, in either historiography or fiction. In most postmodern work, however, that ground is both inscribed and subverted: Le Roy Ladurie's work has its impact because of an implied intertextual dialogue with traditional third-person narrative history; *Ragtime* derives its power as much from how it *recalls* as from how it *inverts* Dos Passos's work. As David Carroll has noted, the new and critical "return to history" is one which confronts "the conflictual interpenetration of various series, contexts, and grounds constituting any ground or process of grounding" ("The Alterity" 66), but I would add that, in the postmodernist writing of history and literature, it does so by first installing and then critically confronting both that grounding process and those grounds themselves. This is the paradox of the postmodern.

It is a paradox which underlines the separation between "history" as what Murray Krieger once called "the unimpeded sequence of raw empirical realities" (339) and "history" as either method or writing: "The process of critically examining and analyzing the records and survivals of the past is... *historical method*. The imaginative reconstruction of... the past from the data derived by... that process is called *historiography*" (Gottschalk 48). "Imaginative reconstruction" or intellectual systematizing - whichever model suits you best - is the focus of the postmodern rethinking of the problems of how we can and do come to have knowledge of the past. It is the writing of history that, as Paul Ricoeur has shown us, is actually "*constitutive* of the historical mode of understanding" (162). It is historiography's explanatory and narrative emplotments of past events that construct what we consider historical facts. This is the context in which the postmodern historical sense situates itself: outside associations of Enlightenment progress or development,

idealist/Hegelian world-historical process, or Marxist notions of history. Postmodernism returns to confront the problematic nature of the past as an object of knowledge for us in the present. There is no abyssal infinite regress to absence or utter groundlessness in the fiction of Salman Rushdie or Ian Watson, or in the films of Peter Greenaway. The past really did exist. The question is: *how* can we know that today - and *what* can we know of it? The overt metafictionality of novels like *Shame*, *Waterland*, or *Flaubert's Parrot* acknowledges its own constructing, ordering and selecting processes - but always as historically determined acts. It puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real. This is why I have called this kind of postmodern fiction "historiographic metafiction." It can often enact the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization, thereby raising the same questions about the cognitive status of historical knowledge with which current philosophers of history are also grappling. What is the ontological nature of historical documents? Are they the stand-in for the past? the trace? What is meant - in ideological terms - by our "natural" understanding of historical explanation?

Historiographic metafiction refutes the common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth-claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both are discourses (human constructs or signifying systems) and both derive their "truth" from that identity. This kind of postmodern fiction also refuses the relegation of the extra-textual past to the realm of history in the name of the autonomy of art. Novels like *The Public Burning* and *Legs* assert that the past did indeed exist prior to its "entextualization" into either fiction or history. They also show that both genres unavoidably construct as they textualize that past. The "real" referent of their languages once existed, but it is only accessible to us today in textualized form: documents, eye-witness accounts, archives. The past is "archeologized" (Lemaire xiv), but its reservoir of available materials is acknowledged as textualized.

This postmodern "return to history," then, is not recuperation or nostalgia or revivalism (see Kramer 352). From a non-Marxist perspective, at least Ihab Hassan is right to castigate Jameson for missing the point about history and postmodernism in the light of architecture like that of Paolo Portoghesi (507; 517-18n). And, I would add, in the light of music like that of Stockhausen, Berio, and Rochberg, or novels like those of Fowles, Fuentes, Grass, and Banville. Cultural commentators like to say that Americans turned to history in the 1970s because of their bicentennial. But what would explain the contemporaneous historical investigations in Canada, Latin America, Britain, and the continent? Ironically, it is Jameson who, I think, has put his

finger on one of the most important explanations: those of the sixties' generation (who have, indeed been the creators of postmodernism) might, for obvious historical reasons, tend to "think more historically than their predecessors" ("Periodizing" 178). The sixties saw a move "out of the frame" (Sukienick 43) into the world of contemporary history (from peace marches to the New Journalism) and materiality (in art, we had George Segal's plaster casts of "reality"). Our recent and even remote past is something we share, and the abundance of historical fiction and non-fiction being written and read today is perhaps a sign of a desire for what Doctorow once called reading as "an act of community" (in Trenner 59). To say, as one critic of the postmodern does, that "history, whether as public collective awareness of the past, or as private revisions of public experience, or even as the elevation of private experience to public consciousness, forms the epicenter of the eruptions of contemporary fictional activity" (Martin 24) is not, however, to say that postmodern fiction "decreates" history. It may problematize -that is, use and abuse- the Conventions of teleological closure, for instance, but that is not to "banish" them from the scene. Indeed, it logically could not, for it depends upon them.

To elevate "private experience to public consciousness" in postmodern historiographic metafiction is not to expand the subjective; it is to render inextricable the public and historical and the private and biographical. What are we to understand when Saleem Sinai, in *Midnight's Children*, tells us that he personally caused things like the death of Nehru or the language riots in India, or when little Oskar tells us that, on his tin drum, he "beat out the rapid, erratic rhythm which commanded everybody's movements for quite some time after August, 1914"? Is there a lesson to be learned from the postmodern paradox here: from both the ironically undercut megalomania and the refusal to abnegate personal responsibility for public history? Works like these speculate openly about historical displacement and its ideological consequences, about the way one writes about the past "real," about what constitute "the known facts" of any given event. These are among the problematizations of history by postmodern art today. Of course, theoretical discourse has not been reticent in addressing these issues either.

### III

With an ever increasing urgency we hear the cry today from various quarters that we must get back to history, and indeed we must. The problem is of course how to get back and what form of history one is proposing to get back to. Too often the cry is made simply out of frustration and in reaction to the various types of formalism that still seem to dominate the intellectual marketplace, to the fact that formalism just won't go away no matter how often and how forcefully history is evoked to chase it away or at least to put it in its place (in the place history assigns to it). (David Carroll)



Historiographic metafiction explicitly contests the power of history to abolish formalism. Its metafictional impulse prevents any occluding of its formal and fictive identity. But it also reinstates the historical, in direct opposition to most (late modernist) argument, for the autonomy of art: for instance, in Ronald Sukenick's memorable terms, "unless a line is drawn [between art and 'real life'], the horde of Factists blunder in waving their banner on which it is written: 'It really happened'" (44). But it is not as if "it really happened" is an unproblematic statement in itself. Just as definitions of what constitutes literature have changed over the years, so definitions of what makes history-writing historical have changed from Livy to Ranke to Hayden White (see Fitzsimmons *et al.*). There are continuing debates over the definition of the historical field and about the strategies deployed to collect, record, and narrate evidence. As many have noted, these debates generally assume that history can be accurately captured; it is just a question of how best to do so. As the record of empirical reality, history, according to this view, is usually seen as radically alien from literature, whose way to "truth" (be that seen as provisional and limited or as privileged and superior) is based on its autonomous status. This is the view that has institutionalized the separation of history and literature in the academy.

The twentieth-century discipline of history has traditionally been structured by positivist and empiricist assumptions that have worked to separate it from anything that smacks of the "merely literary." In its usual setting up of the "real" as unproblematic presence to be reproduced or reconstructed, history is begging for deconstruction to question the function of the writing of history itself (see Parker 58). In Hayden White's deliberately provocative terms:

[historians] must be prepared to entertain the notion that history, as currently conceived, is a kind of historical accident, a product of a specific historical situation, and that, with the passing of the misunderstandings that produced that situation, history itself may lose its status as an autonomous and self-authenticating mode of thought. It may well be that the most difficult task which the current generation of historians will be called upon to perform is to expose the historically conditioned character of the historical discipline, to preside over the dissolution of history's claim to autonomy among the disciplines. (*Tropics* 29)

At a less global level, the way in which history is written has, of course, come under considerable scrutiny in recent years. History as the politics of the past (the stories of kings, wars, and ministerial intrigues) has been challenged by the French Annales School's rethinking of the frames of reference and methodological tools of the discipline (see Le Goff and Nora). The resulting refocusing of historiography on previously neglected objects of study - social, cultural, *economic* - in the work of Jacques Le Goff, Marcel Detienne, Jean

Paul Aron, and others has coincided with feminism's reorientation of historical method to highlight the past of the formerly excluded ex-centric (women ... but also gays, the working class, ethnic and racial minorities, etc.). Of course, the same impulse can be seen in historiographic metafiction. Christa Wolf's *Cassandra* retells Homer's historical epic of men and their politics and wars in terms of the untold story of women and everyday life. In historiography, Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worm* uses a narrative and anecdotal style to invoke, rather than analyse, the popular cultural world view of a sixteenth-century peasant as representative of a basic culture of the period (so basic it is usually ignored by historians [see LaCapra 45-69]). The very concept of time in historiography has been made problematic. The work of Fernand Braudel has called into question the "history of events," the short time span of traditional narrative historiography of individuals and isolated events in the name of a history of "longue duree" and the "mentalite collective." And the three volumes of Paul Ricoeur's *Temps et recit* study in painstaking detail the configurations and refigurations of time by narrative, both historical and fictive.

The analytic philosophy of history as practised by Arthur Danto and Morton White has raised different, mostly epistemological, questions for modern historiography. But most historians of history feel that the discipline is still largely empirical and practical (Adler 243), with a radical distrust of the abstract and the theoretical. However, like the poststructuralist and feminist challenges to the similar assumptions still underpinning much literary study today, the provocations of theorists of history are starting to work to counteract the marginalization of history caused by some historians' unwillingness to justify their methods even to themselves. There have been three major foci of recent theorizations of historiography: narrative, rhetoric, and argument (Struever 261-64), and of these, it is narrative that most clearly overlaps with the concerns of postmodern fiction and theory.

#### IV

The one duty we owe to history is to rewrite it. (Oscar Wilde)

Hayden White feels that the dominant view of historians today has gradually come to be that the writing of history in the form of narrative representations of the past is a highly conventional and indeed literary endeavour — which is not to say that they believe that events never occurred in the past: "a specifically *historical* inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish *that* certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might *mean* for a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present tasks and future prospects" ("Historical Pluralism" 487). The shift to signification, to the way systems of discourse make sense of the past, is one that implies a

pluralist - and perhaps troubling - view of historiography as consisting of different but equally meaningful constructions of past reality, or rather, of the textualized remains (documents, archival evidence, witnesses' testimony) of that past. Often this shift is voiced in terms that recall the language of literary poststructuralism: "How did [a given historical] phenomenon enter the system entitled history and how has the system of historical writing acquired effective discursive power?" (Cohen 206). The linking of power and knowledge here suggests the importance of the impact of the work of Michel Foucault and, to some extent, of that of Jacques Derrida in our postmodern rethinking of the relation between the past and our writing of it, be it in fiction or historiography. In both, there are overt attempts to point to the past as already "semiotized" or encoded, that is, already inscribed in discourse and therefore "always already" interpreted (if only by the selection of what was recorded and its insertion into a narrative). Historiographic metafiction self-consciously reminds us that, while events did occur in the real empirical past, we name and constitute those events as historical facts by selection and narrative positioning. And, even more basically, we only know of those events through their discursive inscription, through their traces.

Merely to invoke the word "trace" is to recall the Derridian contesting of what he calls the metaphysical foundations of historiography. Derrida's challenge to the notion of linear historical temporality is perhaps more radical than the Foucauldian model of discontinuity: he offers a complex notion of repetition and change, iteration and alteration, operating together (LaCapra 105). This is a conceptual "chain" of history: "a 'monumental, stratified, contradictory' history; a history that also implies a new logic of *repetition* and the *trace*, for it is difficult to see how there could be history without it" (Derrida, *Positions* 57). This is set in opposition to any attempt to reflect or reconstruct or re-present the "present-in-the-past" (Carroll, "History" 446) as unproblematic presence. Historiography, according to Derrida, is always teleological: it imposes a meaning on the past and does so by postulating an end (and/or origin). So too does most fiction, including postmodern fiction. The difference is in the challenging self-consciousness of that imposition that renders it provisional. As Michel de Certeau has argued, history writing is a displacing operation upon the real past, a limited and limiting attempt to understand the relations between a place, a discipline, and the construction of a text (55, 64).

Like Derrida, Michel Foucault has forced us to look at things differently, to shift the level of our analysis out of our traditional disciplinary modes and into that of discourse. We no longer deal, therefore: with either "tradition" or "the individual talent," as Eliot would have us do. The study of anonymous forces of dissipation replaces that of individual "signed" events and accomplishments made coherent by retrospective narrative; contradictions displace

totalities; discontinuities, gaps, and ruptures are valorized in opposition to continuity, development, evolution; the particular and the different take on the value once held by the universal and the transcendent. For Foucault it is irregularities that define discourse and its many possible interdiscursive networks in culture. For postmodern history, theory, and art, this has meant a new consideration of context, of textuality, of the power of totalization and models of continuous history.

Foucault's work has joined that of Marxists and feminists in insisting on the pressure of historical contexts that have usually been ignored in formalistic literary studies, as they have in historical interpretation as well. Historians are now being urged to take the contexts of their inevitably interpretive acts into account: the writing, reception, and "critical reading" of the narratives of the past are not unrelated to issues of power, both intellectual and institutional (LaCapra 127). Foucault has argued that "the social" is a field of forces, of practices - discourses and their anchoring institutions - in which we adopt various (constantly shifting) positions of power and resistance. The social is inscribed within the signifying practices of a culture. In Teresa de Lauretis's terms: "social formations and representations appeal to and position the individual as subject in the process to which we give the name of ideology" (121).

The focus on discourse in Foucault's work was enabled by more than just the textualized Derridian mode of thought (cf. Lentricchia 191); there are Nietzsche and Marx before Derrida. Foucault is not a simplistic "pan-textualist" (White, "Historical" 485) who sees the real as only the textual. In his own words, discourse is "not an ideal, timeless form that also possesses a history" but is "from beginning to end, historical - a fragment of history, a unity and discontinuity in history itself, posing the problem of its own limits, its divisions, its transformations, the specific modes of its temporality rather than its sudden irruption in the midst of the complicities of time" (*Archaeology* 117). To speak of discursive practices is not to reduce all to a global textuality, but to reassert the specific and the plural, the particular and the dispersed. Foucault's assault on all the centralizing forces of unity and continuity in theory and practice (influence, tradition, evolution, development, spirit, oeuvre, book, voice, origin, *langue*, disciplines [*Archaeology* 21-30]) challenges all forms of totalizing thought that do not acknowledge their role in the very constitution of their objects of study and in the reduction of the heterogeneous and problematic to the homogeneous and transcendental. Critics have not been slow to note in Flaubert's *Bouvard and Pecuchet* the parodic forerunners of attempts to totalize the particular and the dispersed and to give meaning by the act of centring and universalizing (see Gaillard). And Salman Rushdie's narrators are their postmodern heirs.

In the fourth area of challenge - that is, to notions of continuity and tra-

dition - theory and practice again intersect. Historiographic metafiction shares the Foucauldian unmasking of the continuities that are taken for granted in the Western narrative tradition, and it does so by first using and then abusing those very continuities. Edward Said has argued that underlying Foucault's notion of the discontinuous is a "supposition that rational knowledge is possible, regardless of how very complex - and even unattractive - the conditions of its production and acquisition" (283). The result is a very postmodern paradox, for, in Foucault's theory of discontinuous systematization, "the discourse of modern knowledge always hungers for what it cannot fully grasp or totally represent" (285)' Be it historical, theoretical, or literary, discourse is discontinuous, yet bound together by rules, albeit not transcendent rules (*Archaeology* 229). All continuity is recognized as "pretended." The particular, the local, and the specific replace the general, the universal, and the eternal. As Hayden White has remarked:

Such a conception of historiography has profound implications for the assessment of the humanistic belief in a 'human nature' that is everywhere and always the same, however different its manifestations at different times and places. It brings under question the very notion of a universal *humanitas* on which the historian's wager on his ability ultimately to 'understand' anything human is based. (*Tropics* 257)

Foucault was by no means the first to make us aware of any of this. He himself has always pointed to Nietzsche as his predecessor. Rejecting both antiquarian nostalgia and monumentalizing universalization that denies the individuality and particularity of the past, in *The Use and Abuse of History*, Nietzsche argued for a critical history, one that would "bring the past to the bar of judgment, interrogate it remorselessly" (20-21). He also made clear where he felt the only available standards of judgement were to come from: "*You can explain the past only by what is most powerful in the present*" (40). It is this kind of belief that Foucault brings to what he calls the New History (*Archaeology* 10-11). And his own version of this history is never a history of things, but of discourse, of the "terms, categories, and techniques through which certain things become at certain times the focus of a whole configuration of discussion and procedure" (Rajchman 51).

Clearly, then, there have been major attacks on historians' customary fetishizing of facts and hostility to theory. Hayden White has been the other major voice in lifting the repression of the "conceptual apparatus" which is the ordering and sense-giving principle of historiography ("The Fictions" 30). He has joined poststructuralists like Catherine Belsey (2-4) in arguing that there is no practice without theory, however much that theory be unformulated or seen as "natural" or even denied. For White the question facing historians today is not "What are the facts?" but "How are the facts to be described in order

to sanction one mode of explaining them rather than another?" ("The Fictions" 44). This is not unlike the questions that literary critics face in the new theoretically self-conscious climate of the eighties. In both disciplines it is getting increasingly difficult to separate history or criticism "proper" from philosophy of history or literary theory. Historical accounts and literary interpretations are equally determined by underlying theoretical assumptions. And in postmodern fiction too, diachrony is reinserted into synchrony, but not in any simplistic way: the problematic concept of historical knowledge and the semiotic notion of language as a social contract are reinscribed in the meta-fictionally self-conscious and self-regulating signifying system of literature. This is the paradox of postmodernism, be it in theory, history, or artistic practice.

## V

Asked what changes in Twentieth Century struck her as being most remarkable Margaret Mead mentioned TV (possibility of seeing what's happening before historians touch it up). (John Cage's Diary)

In the three areas of history, art, and theory, there have been direct cross-fertilizations as well as these parallel or overlapping concerns. Like Hayden White before him, Dominick LaCapra has been arguing for the commonality of interest in historiography and critical theory, and his intended aim is a "cognitively responsible historiography." This would involve a problematized rethinking of the nature of, for instance, historical documents. From this perspective, they would become "texts that supplement or rework 'reality' and not mere sources that divulge facts about 'reality'" (11). His account of the situation of crisis in contemporary historical studies will sound familiar to literary sorts: the challenge to dominant humanist assumptions ("the postulates of unity, continuity, and mastery of a documentary repertoire" [32]), the contesting of the past as a transcendental signified, paradoxically considered objectively accessible to the historian (137), and the reconceptualization of historical processes to include the relations between texts and the contexts of reading and writing (106).

Historiography has had its impact on literary studies too, not just in the New Historicism, but even in fields - such as semiotics - where history had been formally banished. Just as history, to a semiotician, is not a phenomenal event, but "an entity producing meaning" (Haidu 188), so the semiotic production and reception of meaning have now been seen as only possible in a historical context. And historiographic metafiction like Eco's *The Name of the Rose* did as much to teach us this as any theoretical argument - though this is not to deny the impact of the work of people like Frank Lentricchia, Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton, Hans Robert Jauss, Teresa de Lauretis, Catherine Belsey.

and many other feminist critics. Both theory and artistic practice work to situate their own discourses economically, socially, culturally, politically, and historically.

The general desire to get beneath or behind the "natural," the "given," the assumptions which sustain historiography, theory, and art today is shared by Barthesian de-mythologizing, Marxist and feminist contextualizing, and even, despite appearances at times, Derridian deconstructing. Derrida defined deconstruction early on as a "question of . . . being alert to the implications, to the historical sedimentation of the language which we use" ("Structure" 271). Even Paul Ricoeur's argument, in the three volumes of *Temps et récit*, that time becomes human time by being narrated turns out to belong to this general postmodern process of cross-fertilizing that leads to problematizing. Historiography and fiction are seen as sharing the same act of refiguration, of reshaping our experience of time through plot configurations; they are complementary activities.

But nowhere is it clearer than in historiographic metafiction that there is a contradiction at the heart of postmodernism: the formalist and the historical live side by side, but there is no dialectic. Just as we find those now familiar critical paradoxes - the masterful denials of mastery of a Derrida or the totalizing negations of totalization of a Foucault - so we find that the unresolved tensions of postmodern aesthetic practice remain paradoxes or contradictions. Barthes' utopian dream of a theory of the text that would be both formalist and historical (45) is possible, but only if we accept problematic and doubled texts. Bakhtir/Medvedev argued that form and history were interconnected and mutually determining, but in postmodernism this is only true if no attempt is made to unify or conflate the two. The Bakhtinian model of the dialogic is useful to keep in mind. The monologic discourses of power and authority are not the only responses possible to what has been called our age of recognition of the loss of certainties as the state of the human condition (Reiss 194). To install and then subvert may be less satisfying than resolved dialectic, but it may be the only non-totalizing response possible.

Architectural theorist Manfredo Tafuri has argued that it is important today to engage in a "historical assessment of the present contradictions" (2) — not necessarily a resolution of them. Postmodern architecture and visual arts, like literature, must contend with modernism's attempts to be *outside* history - through pure form, abstractionism, or myth - or to *control* it, through theoretical models of closure. It is only recently that art history, for instance, has been able to see itself as "a utopia as compellingly well-ordered and internally self-consistent as it is fictional" (Preziosi 22). In literature, it is the intense self-consciousness of historiographic metafiction that has had both theoretical and practical implications for the writing and theorizing of history. Art and historiography are always being brought together in post-

modern fiction - and usually with destabilizing, not to say unnerving, results.

A final example: the hero of Angela Carter's *The Infernal Desire Machines of Doctor Hoffman* finds himself puzzled by a series of paintings in the doctor's home:

These pictures were heavily varnished oils executed in the size and style of the nineteenth-century academician and they all depicted faces and scenes I recognized from old photographs and from the sepia and olive reproductions of forgotten masterpieces in the old-fashioned books the nuns gave us to look at when I was a child, in the evenings after supper, when we had been good. When I read the titles engraved on metal plaques at the bottom of each frame, I saw they depicted such scenes as 'Leon Trotsky Composing the Eroica Symphony'; the wire-rimmed spectacles, the Hebraic bush of hair, the burning eyes were all familiar. The light of inspiration was in his eyes and the crotchets and quavers rippled from his nib on to the sheets of manuscript paper which flew about the red plush cover of the mahogany table on which he worked as if blown by the fine frenzy of genius. Van Gogh was shown writing 'Wuthering Heights' in the parlour of Haworth Parsonage, with bandaged ear, all complete. I was especially struck by a gigantic canvas of Milton blindly executing divine frescoes upon the walls of the Sistine Chapel. (197-98)

Seeing his bewilderment, the doctor's daughter explains: "When my father rewrites the history books, these are some of the things that everyone will suddenly perceive to have always been true."

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