

THE VERACIOUS IMAGINATION

Essays on American History,
Literature, and Biography

Cushing Strout

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Literature, and Biography

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Some of these essays first appeared in journals, and the author is grateful for permission to reprint them to *History and Theory* for chapters 2 and 12, *American Quarterly* for chapter 3, *Yale Review* for chapter 4, *Clio* for chapter 5, *Prospects* for parts of chapter 6 and chapter 10, *Daedalus* for chapter 11, and *New Literary History* for chapter 13. Chapter 14 was originally delivered in a much more informal and shorter form as a lecture at a symposium in honor of Erik H. Erikson at Adelphi University in 1977. All the published essays have been revised to take account of repetitions or dated topical references.

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THE VERACIOUS IMAGINATION

Essays on American History,
Literature, and Biography

Cushing Strout

In these "border-country" essays in humanistic scholarship Cushing Strout explores the overlappings of history, fiction, and biography in terms of their common concern for truth-telling through complex narrative order. Strout's defense of narrative—and of its historical, literary, and psychological importance—is sympathetic to the historical philosophy of R. G. Collingwood, the literary realism of Erich Auerbach and Lionel Trilling, and the psychological concerns of William James and Erik H. Erikson.

The essays of *The Veracious Imagination* are joined by their challenge to three current theoretical trends: the positivistic tendency to discount the narrative as explanatory; the critical tendency to emphasize the asocial, metaphysical character of American literature; and the structuralist tendency to "decenter" the thinking subject, to disdain representational justifications for fiction, and to discuss texts as self-referring and indeterminate.

Strout distinguishes narrative from chronicle and insists on its sophisticated functions of explicating, explaining, and evoking. Against the modish "voracious imagination,"

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which finds fiction and rhetoric everywhere, Strout counterpoises the "veracious imagination," which takes seriously the connection between the historical and the imaginary without sacrificing one to the other. With a similar eye for crucial distinctions, he clarifies the uses and abuses of psychoanalytic ideas in history and literature.

Specifically, these wide-ranging essays in American studies contribute fresh interpretations of classics by Harriet Beecher Stowe, William James, Henry James, and Henry Adams, and modern works by John Steinbeck, James Gould Cozzens, Ralph Ellison, Arthur Miller, Lionel Trilling, Norman Mailer, John Updike, and E. L. Doctorow.

Cushing Strout is Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters at Cornell University. He is the author of *The Pragmatic Revolt: Carl Becker and Charles Beard* (1958), *The American Image of the Old World* (1963), and *The New Heavens and New Earth: Political Religion in America* (1974), and the editor of several books.

To the memory of my father
Sewall C. Strout, 1894-1980

Preface

"Yes, it needs doing. Only it's getting too big."

"Don't worry about that, mun. Say your say."

Raymond Williams, *Border Country*

All of the essays in this book might be called border-country pieces. They are preoccupied with the territory marked out by the overlapping concerns of fiction, history, and biography. Inevitably, looking at this territory requires shifts in perspective derived from moving back and forth among different disciplines. Fitzgerald's narrator in *The Great Gatsby* concludes that "life is much more successfully looked at from a single window, after all," rather than from the outlook of "that most limited of all specialists, 'the well-rounded man.'" But literature and history, which reflect on experience rather than merely reflect it, need more than a single window to do justice to their complexities. In this case my emphasis on "binocularity" reflects my own experience as a teacher of both history and English. It puts me on guard against the tendency to isolate one from the other, as academic departmentalization tends to do. But in this respect following E. M. Forster's famous advice—"only connect"—is also going against the grain of two tendencies in our current climate: the historical suspicion of

literary evidence because it does not lend itself to the quantification of historical analysis and the aesthetic suspicion of history derived from the structuralist elevation of "synchronic" over "diachronic" perspectives. At the same time the development of analytical social history and the subversions of narrative in modern and "postmodern" novels have combined to put story telling, a common feature of histories and novels, into a dubious light. Yet, especially among Anglo-American philosophers since Collingwood, a valuable line of thought has rediscovered the truth-telling function of narrative in opposition to the long-standing positivistic assumption that only scientific laws provide genuine explanations. The first essay, "The Fortunes of Telling," written for this volume, explores the peculiarities of this intellectual situation and establishes the historical and literary themes of this collection. My own perspective is sympathetically (but critically) affiliated to the post-Collingwood tradition, as my early essays on historical causality and on William James's "unfinished arch" of "tychism" make clear.

In part 2 my essays on influential American political novels link history and fiction to counter the dominant critical tradition of overemphasizing the fabulistic, mythological, and metaphysical character of our classic writers, a habit whose ancestry I trace to Tocqueville's speculations on democratic literature. This interest in the symbolic, however, has led to the discovery of typology, and it has the merit of closing the gap between myths and symbols, on the one hand, and historical and social ideas, on the other. Typology connects symbolic forms with an idea of history and therefore with an orientation in time. My essays on millennial themes in the political novel reflect the stimulus of Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*, which found a connection between biblical figuralism and modern literary realism in the idea of historical consciousness.

The essays in part 3 (not previously published, except for some of the material on Doctorow) focus on the recent revival of historical consciousness in the documentary drama, the memoir, and the historical novel, forms which have attracted among others such considerable talents as Arthur Miller, Norman Mailer, John Updike, William Styron, Gore Vidal, and E. L.

Doctorow. My polarizing of the "veracious" and the "voracious" imagination (an adaptation of George Eliot's phrase) points to the hazards involved in exploring the border country where fiction and history merge. The historicizing of fiction and the fictionalizing of history are very different things, but in an atmosphere where the "realistic" novel has lost prestige and everything is seen "structurally" in terms of rhetoric, the imagination can become imperialistic, as it does in *Ragtime*. My references to Aristotle, Virginia Woolf, and George Eliot show that the problem of the relation between the imaginary and the actual is an old one; but it is still something of an unknown territory in current criticism, which wobbles between too easy a triumph of imagination over everything, a surrender of imagination to fact, or a confusion of realms in such categories as "the nonfiction novel" and "the factual." In exploring Mailer's memoir; Kipphardt's play on Oppenheimer, Gibson's on the Adamses, Miller's on Salem Witchcraft, Updike's on Buchanan; or Styron's novel on Nat Turner, Vidal's on Burr, and Doctorow's on the Rosenbergs, I have tried to explore at the same time the general issue of the role of the actual in the fictional without resolving one into the other.

Part 4 deals with the equally controversial area of "psychohistory." Working on American images of Europe¹ had alerted me to ambivalence as a concept, and later collaboration with Dr. Howard Feinstein, a psychiatrist, taught me much about psychoanalysis. Unfortunately propagandists have touted it as the key to open all historical locks, while skeptics have repudiated it with equal facility because one cannot literally put a dead person on the psychoanalyst's couch.² My position, responsive to Erikson's ego psychology, neither embraces nor spurns psychological analysis but seeks rather to integrate it within biographical (individual or collective) studies as a way of keeping both historical and literary discussion in touch with paradoxical conflicts that often mark the creative life of thinkers, doers, and artists alike and help to illuminate their thought and action. It is fitting that for both the uses and abuses of psychoanalytic insight my major examples involve both William and Henry James as subjects, for both of them touch on many of my own themes. The older brother was

interested in evangelical religion and Freud because both tapped "the subliminal self," while the younger was not only fascinated as a novelist with the sense of the past, but also thought of the novel as a kind of psychological history.

As a theorist of history, Collingwood himself rejected both biography and psychoanalytic thinking; but in these respects I think he was false to his own best insights, and the affinity that clinicians like Erik Erikson and Roy Schafer have felt for Collingwood's stress on the "inner side" of history ought to correct his own prejudices. The case histories of Freud, as he confessed, read like short stories, though in a nonlinear, spiral form, because psychoanalytic therapy is a way of providing what neurotics can not give: "an ordered history of their life in so far as it coincides with the history of their illness." There is, of course, another side to Freud, the positivist who thinks of "sexual substances" as "chronic poisons" which may one day be understood as "chemical changes." But for the humanist historian, biographer, and critic what is most useful in him is his insistence that we must pay as much attention to "the purely human and social circumstances of our patients as to the somatic data and the symptoms of the disorder."³ In this light the themes of this collection of essays form a circle by finding a family resemblance in biography, history, fiction, and psychoanalysis as modes of truth telling by complex narrative order.

No preface can prevent misreadings, but I particularly want to guard against one. In a recent sympathetic and valuable account of structuralist theory a colleague observes: "Notions of truth and reality are based on a longing for an unfallen world in which there would be no need for the mediating systems of language and perception but everything would be itself, with no gap between form and meaning." This critical description of the idea of literature as a form of intentional communication is part of the structuralist project "to divert attention from the author as source and the work as object" to focus instead on "writing as an institution and reading as an activity."⁴ But an interest in truth and reality can be thus reduced to a naive realism only on the untenable assumption of an irrevocable gap between a pure subjectivity and a pure objectivity. To divorce interpretation from truth and reality

merely takes for granted the ideal of the naive realist, even while denying the possibility of realizing it. But thought's acts—symbols—are not inferior substitutes for an original reality; they connect subject and object. "The symbol intervenes between subject and object," as a philosopher has put it, "and is directed towards both."⁵ Unfortunately today, in some fashionable quarters, literary sophistication has come to mean "the disappearance" of "the thinking subject," the denigration of "representational justification" or description of the world, the inflation of textual meaning to a range of "infinite possibilities" and the narcissistic reduction of any text to "an exploration of writing," the goal of criticism being to show the reader, "by the acrobatics in which it involves him, about the problems of his condition as *homo significans*, maker and reader of signs."⁶ These essays, on the contrary, seek to put in the foreground the person and his historical world, while legitimating some interpretations rather than others.⁷ In my view this strategy is basic for humanistic study in history and literature, even though I am well aware that my discussion of texts, restricted by the purposes of my argument, cannot do justice in this context to the nonmimetic aspects of fiction, which are always part of one's experience of it, especially in stories that are not pertinent to the issues I explore.

Some of these essays were written in June 1978, at the Villa Serbelloni, Bellagio, Italy, home of the Rockefeller Study and Conference Center. It is a place where every prospect pleases and not even man is vile. I am grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for the happy privilege of the experience, darkened only by the shadow of one's flickering awareness of the difference between that magical setting and the current historical torment of Italy.

I am in debt to several colleagues: to Dr. Howard Feinstein for close collaboration in research for chapter 11, to Meyer Abrams for a reference to Dr. Johnson, to Sander Gilman for a clinical clue to James's crisis, and to the section on the History of Psychiatry at Cornell Medical College for hospitality and stimulus to my ideas on psychological interpretation. Justin Kaplan has graciously permitted me to quote a letter of his to Albert Stone.

1. Cushing Strout, *The American Image of the Old World* (New York, 1963).
2. For an assessment of psychoanalytic work in social science, literature, and history in American studies see the Bibliography issue of *American Quarterly* 28, no. 3 (1976), which includes my essay, "The Uses and Abuses of Psychology in American History," pp. 324-42.
3. Sigmund Freud, *Dora—An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria*, introduction by Philip Rieff (New York, 1963), pp. 31, 135, 32.
4. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics: Structuralism, Linguistics, and the Study of Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1975), pp. 131-32.
5. John William Miller, "On the Problem of Knowledge," in *The Paradox of Cause and Other Essays* (New York, 1978), p. 61.
6. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*, pp. 29, 201, 246, 260, 130.
7. "Post-structuralism," the latest critical fashion from France, has arisen in the wake of structuralism, and its characteristic voices continue to speak (with cultish opacity of style) about the irrelevance of the author, the radical indeterminacy of texts, and the identification of history with fabulation. But in a recent collection of such voices Edward W. Said strikes a valuable dissenting note by arguing that texts place themselves in the world and so "impose constraints and limits upon their interpretation." See Said, "The Text, the World, the Critic," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca, N.Y., 1979), p. 171. In a wide-ranging polemic against these "postmodern" tendencies Gerald Graff parallels my argument in calling for a historically oriented teaching of literature and for a recognition, in opposition to the radical skepticism favored by current literary theory, that it makes sense "to appeal to the facts when we assess the merits of conflicting interpretations, even though it is true enough that what the facts are is something that can be determined only by an act of interpretation." See Graff, *Literature against Itself: Literary Ideas in Modern Society* (Chicago, 1979), p. 202.

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PART 1

Narrative Explanation

To know a story when we see one, to know it *for* a story, to know that it is not reality itself but that it has clear and effective relations with reality—this is one of the great disciplines of the mind.

—Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination*

1/The Fortunes of Telling

A decade ago Lionel Trilling remarked that the contemporary novel is unhappy with the narrative mode, "which once made its vital principle, and its practitioners seek by one device or another to evade or obscure or palliate the act of *telling*." He thought narrating was in difficulties because it took for granted the authority of the teller over his characters and his confidence in presuming to give counsel to the reader. "It is the nature of narration to explain," he observed, "it cannot help telling how things are and even why they are that way."¹ In his view the modern uneasiness over narration reflected a decline in the sense of history as providing either the sanction of a past or the assurance of a future. For him, story telling, historical consciousness, and explaining were all connected.

The fortunes of telling are much in dispute and have their own story. What Trilling joined together much of our current intellectual culture has rent asunder. Philosophers under the dominance of scientific models of explanation have tended to see stories as dependent upon nonnarrative causal regularities, rather than having any explanatory functions of their own. Many fashionable literary critics have been bent on subordinating the idea of temporal development to an ahistorical "structural" analysis. While some novelists have been deeply attracted to taking history seriously, others have been drawn to "deconstructing" it through parody. For many historians the