HISTORICAL STUDIES AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Edited, with an Introduction, by

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The University of Wisconsin Press

Published 1985

The University of Wisconsin Press
114 North Murray Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53715

The University of Wisconsin Press, Ltd.
1 Gower Street
London WC1E 6HA, England

First printing

Printed in the United States of America

For LC CIP information see the colophon

ISBN 0-299-10280-7

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Acknowledgments

THANKS ARE due to the California Institute of Technology and to the Weingart Foundation for providing the funds and the facilities for the fourth annual Caltech-Weingart Conference in the Humanities, which was held at the Caltech campus in the spring of 1984. Special thanks are due to David Grether, chairman of the Division of Social Sciences and Humanities at Caltech, for his aid and support. Finally, there is Betty Hyland, who administered all the important details of the conference; neither this book nor the original conference would have been possible without her kindness, skill, and tireless work.

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Historical Studies and Literary Criticism

Introduction: A Point of Reference

Jerome J. McGann

THE ESSAYS in this book represent such a variety of viewpoints and critical strategies, and cover such diverse subject matters, that their common ground can be easily lost sight of. For all the differences—they are many and important—these essays share a commitment to explore the social and historical dimensions of literary works. More than this, the writers of these essays are all extremely self-conscious about their sociohistorical interests, and about the academic context in which their work has been initiated and pursued. The essays here are antithetical, in several respects, to the (equally various) tradition of formal, structural, and text-centered literary studies which have been so influential in the academy for two generations. In the present essays one sees at work the recently emergent effort to reconstitute sociohistorical methods and interests as the heart of literary studies.

Some of these essays are explicitly critical of formalist traditions, others implicitly so; and all exhibit, in different ways, a positive debt to the various strands of immanent critical traditions. What will not be found in these essays, however, is the assumption, so common in text-centered studies of every type, that literary works are self-enclosed verbal constructs, or looped intertextual fields of autonomous signifiers and signifieds. In these essays the question of referentiality is once again brought to the fore.

The concept—and the problem—of the referential aspects of literary works is so central to an adequate literary theory and critical practice that I want to take it up here by way of introducing this collection of essays. Two things may be initially observed. First, referentiality appears as "a problem" in formalist and text-centered studies precisely by its absence. Though everyone knows and agrees that literary works have sociohistorical dimensions, theories and practices generated in text-centered critical traditions bracket out these matters from consideration, particularly at the level of theory.[1] Second, referentiality appears as a problem in historically grounded criticism because such criticism has thus far been unable to revise its theoretical grounds so as to take account of the criticisms which were brought against it in this century,

and in particular the criticisms developed out of the theory of literary mediations. Involved here is the view, pressed strongly on various fronts in the past fifty years, that language and language structures (including, perforce, literary works) are modeling rather than mirroring forms. They do not point to a prior, authorizing reality (whether "realist" or "idealist"), they themselves *constitute*—in both the active and the passive senses—what must be taken as reality (both "in fact" and "in ideals"). To the extent that traditional forms of historical criticism have not been able to assimilate or refute such a view, they have been moved to the periphery of literary studies.

In recent years, however, textual and intertextual approaches have begun to yield up their own theoretical problems, and literary studies have witnessed a renewed interest in various kinds of sociohistorical critical work. Marxist and Marxist-influenced criticism has been an especially important factor in this development, largely, I think, because the questions it poses are founded in a powerful and dynamically coherent tradition of critical inquiry. Feminist studies have also done much to expose the sociohistorical dimensions of literary work. Because both of these critical approaches necessarily practice a hermeneutics of a repressed or invisibilized content, both have found no difficulty in assimilating the basic poststructural programmatic. At the same time, the traditional methods of historicist philology have also begun to reappear in interpretive studies. Bibliography, manuscript studies of various kinds, analyses of the forms, methods, and materials of literary production: these materialist and empirical branches of learning have been experiencing a renascence and at the same time have begun to rediscover their theoretical ground. Hermeneutical studies are increasingly realizing that the symbolic discourse which is literature operates with and through many forms of mediation besides "language" narrowly conceived. The price of a book, its place of publication, even its physical form and the institutional structures by which it is distributed and received, all bear upon the production of literary meaning, and hence all must be critically analyzed and explained.

When we speak of the referential dimensions of literary work, therefore, we have in mind several different things. In the first place, literary work can be practiced, can constitute itself, only in and through various institutional forms which are not themselves "literary" at all, though they are meaning-constitutive. The most important of these institutions, for the past hundred fifty years anyway, are the commercial publishing network in all its complex parts, and the academy. The church and the court have, in the past, also served crucial mediating functions for writers. Literary works are produced *with reference to* these me-

diational structures, are in fact embodied in such structures, and criticism is therefore obliged to explain and reconstitute such structures in relation to the literary work. As we now realize more clearly than ever before, criticism must factor itself and its own mediations into its explanations. In the final accounting, "the work" and its mediations are as inseparable as are "the (original) work" and its (subsequent) critical explanations.

Historically considered, the problem of referentiality first appeared not as a fault line in empirically based critical studies, but much earlier, in the Kantian response to the philosophic grounds of empiricism. Derrida's influential account of the textual dynamic ("the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, without origin, offered to an active interpretation")[2] recalls nothing so much as the opening of Kant's *Critique of Judgment*, in which not only is the radical subjectivity of the esthetic event founded, but it is founded via an explication of the judging subject rather than the "work of art." Coleridge's important variation on this Kantian move was to emphasize even more clearly the "ideal" content which the poetic text constitutes. Poetical works do not "copy" the phenomena of the external world, they "imitate" the ideal forms which we know through the operations of the human mind.[3] As a good recent critic of Coleridge has put the matter: "The 'reality' that poems 'imitate' is not the objective world as such, but . . . the consciousness of the poet himself *in his encounters with* the objective world. . . . the poet's only genuine subject matter is himself, and the only ideas he presents will be ideas about the activity of consciousness in the world around it."[4] Coleridge's critique of the insistently referential aspects of Wordsworth's poetry—what he calls its "accidentality" and its "matter-of-factness"—is merely the critical reflex of his positive position: that "poetry as poetry is essentially *ideal*, [and] avoids and excludes all *accident* [and] apparent individualities."[5]

Coleridge is himself an impressive historicist critic, as his commentaries on the biblical tradition show. Nevertheless, his theoretical ground would eventually be appropriated by those idealist and subjectivist forms of criticism which emerged out of twentieth-century linguistics and semiology. If "poetry as poetry" has reference only to a field of subjectivity, then the criticism and interpretation of poetry which pursue the accidentalities and matters-of-fact of philology will themselves be necessarily misguided.

Coleridge's view is recapitulated, in a variety of ways, by all twentieth-century practitioners of purely immanent critical methods. C. S. Lewis's

remarks in "The Personal Heresy" in 1934, and Cleanth Brooks's in *The Well Wrought Urn* (1947), typify the New Critical position on the matter of poetry's relation to sociohistorical actualities.[6] That is to say, while the New Criticism was a vigorously antihistorical movement, and consciously in reaction to the philological and historicist methods which had come to preeminence in literary studies during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, it always made practical provision for certain "extrinsic" materials in the poetic product. The position is epitomized in Wellek and Warren's widely used handbook *Theory of Literature* (1947), where the concepts of "intrinsic" and "extrinsic" interpretation are enshrined. Equally characteristic are formulations like the following by Brooks, who means to have an organic-intrinsic idea of the poem, but cannot altogether evade the informational-extrinsic dimensions of the text: "If we see that any item in a poem is to be judged only in terms of the total effect of the poem, we shall readily grant the importance for criticism of the work of the linguist and the literary historian."[7]

In short, the intrinsic and text-centered approaches of the early and mid-twentieth century made certain tactical accommodations and compromises in their critical programs and arguments. Indeed, it was precisely this compromised status of their theory which brought them to ruin at the hands of their ungrateful children, the deconstructionists. For the latter had no difficulty in showing that New Critical strategies were based upon an illusory and mystified form of the very empiricism which those strategies were consciously designed to displace. The idea of "the poem itself," of the stable (if paradoxical) object of critical attention, was swept away in the aftermath of structuralism. "De-ferral," "de-stabilization," "de-centering," "de-construction": the history of the emergence of these ideas during the 1970s is well known and needs no rehearsing again here. Nor will it be necessary to point out what is equally well known, that the deconstructionist movement was (and of course is) a form of immanent criticism's twentieth-century wilderness.

Two important aspects of these late forms of immanent criticism do need to be attended to, however. The first is the extremity of their antihistorical position. None of the earlier twentieth-century text-centered critics ever spoke, as Hillis Miller has spoken in one of his most celebrated essays, of "the fiction of the referential, the illusion that the terms of the poem refer literally to something that exists."[8] This bold pronouncement offers a final solution to the problem of the social actuality of poetical work, and it is quite typical of (at any rate) the American deconstructive establishment. The repudiation of referentiality is made, as Miller says, "according to the logic of a theory of language

which bases meaning on the solid referentiality of literal names for visible physical objects."[9] Here Miller intends to dispose once and for all of that Great Satan of so many humanists, "empiricism," by dismissing at last the supposed "theory of language" on which it rests.

In making his attack, however, Miller unwittingly exposes another important aspect of his critical position. That is to say, he reveals his assent to a particular concept of referentiality. A "solid" correspondence of "literal names for visible physical objects" is certainly *an* idea of referentiality, but it is manifestly an impoverished concept. This idea of how language "refers" to the actual world where those language forms called poems operate may reflect the view which someone (besides Miller) has held at some time or other. It is not, however, characteristic of the thought of the great traditional philological and historical critics. When Miller dismisses this concept of referentiality, then, he is trying to cast out a mere phantom. His dismissal thus fails to confirm his own critical practice.

Of course one can, with some searching, find other critics besides deconstructionists like Miller who have subscribed to excessively simple concepts of referentiality. When Daniel Aaron, for example, says that "the historian who writes about the past might be likened to a naturalist as he observes and analyzes specimens in a museum or perhaps animals caged in a zoo,"[10] his words betray a concept of referentiality that is quite comparable to Miller's. One is tempted to reply merely that this is not a persuasive idea, and that it runs counter to the lines of historical thought which have dominated critical thought for almost three centuries. But one might do better to quote, for example, Vico's stronger thought, that "human history differs from natural history in this, that we have made the former, but not the latter."[11] Indeed, it is Miller's sympathy with Vico's thought which has helped to set him, along with so many other recent literary critics, in opposition to "referentiality."

What is necessary at this juncture, therefore, is not to bracket the referential dimensions of poetry out of critical consideration on the basis of an impoverished theory of language and literary reference. Rather, we should be trying to recover and reformulate the idea of referentiality which underlies the thought of the great historical critics of the recent past. Only in this way will the full significance of Miller's excellent critical work—and the work of many other immanentist critics—be revealed. The American line of Derridean thought, in particular, would do well to recall the following passage from Derrida himself: "A deconstructive practice which would not bear upon 'institutional apparatuses and historical processes' . . . , which would remain content to operate upon philosophemes or conceptual signified[s], or discourses, etc., would not

be deconstructive; whatever its originality, it would but reproduce the gesture of self criticism in philosophy in its internal tradition."[12] When Miller, in his essay "The Critic as Host," speaks of "deconstructive strategy" as "going with a given text as far as it will go, to its limits," he echoes Derrida, as he does when he goes on to add that all criticism, including deconstructive criticism, "contains, necessarily, its enemy within itself."[13] But the fact is that American deconstructionism does not go to those limits and does not expose its internal fault lines. On the contrary, it hides and obscures them at every turn. The enemy which deconstructive critics like Miller will not face is history, and the fault line of such criticism appears as its elision of the sociohistorical dimensions of literary work.

At the beginning of his first book, *L'épithète traditionnelle dans Homère* (1928), Milman Parry consciously set his work in the line of the great tradition of modern historical scholarship.

> The literature of every country and of every time is understood as it ought to be only by the author and his contemporaries. . . . The task, therefore, of one who lives in another age and wants to appreciate that work correctly, consists precisely in rediscovering the varied information and complexes of ideas which the author assumed to be the natural property of his audience.[14]

Parry is quick to observe that this scholarly project of "reconstructing that [original] community of thought through which the poet made himself understood" is a task "so complex as to be impossible of realization in an entirely satisfactory manner."[15] Nevertheless, the project must be pursued if we are to hope to have any reliable understanding of the culture of the past.

The twentieth-century attack upon the historical method in criticism, initially focused on the so-called intentional fallacy, soon became a broadly based critique of genetic studies in general. John M. Ellis's *The Theory of Literary Criticism: A Logical Analysis* (1974) has summarized and completed this line of critique. His argument is not merely that genetic studies cannot recover the "original context," but that the human meaning of literary works does not lie in that context. Rather, it lies in the context of immediate use: "If we insist on relating the text primarily to the context of its composition and to the life and social context of its author, we are cutting it off from that relation to life which is the relevant one."[16] In addition, genetic criticism limits and shrinks the dynamic potential of literary products by reducing their meanings

to "static" forms, and by suggesting that certain "information" can supply "the key to the text" and its meaning.[17] Poststructural critics like Miller would merely take this (ultimately Nietzschean) line of thought to a more extreme position. Genetic criticism is the epitome of all critical forms which seek after the "univocal reading" of a text.[18] For deconstructionists, it does not matter whether the finished reading stands as an "originary" form to which criticism seeks to return, or an accomplished form which criticism makes in its own rhetorical praxis. All are unstable and operating under the sign of *différance*. Thus, "Nihilism is an inalienable alien presence within Occidental metaphysics, both in poems and in the criticism of poems."[19]

Ellis's view that criticism justifies itself in its social praxis is important and will be reconsidered below. Before taking up that matter, however, we have to inquire into the idea that genetic criticism offers static and univocal meanings for literary works. In fact, all the great historicist critics were well aware that their method could not do this. The ideal of reconstructing the originary material and ideological context, even if fully achieved, would provide the later reader only with what "the author assumed to be the natural property of his audience." The method does not offer static and univocal readings, it attempts to specify the concrete and particular forms in which certain human events constituted themselves. The "meanings" of those events, whether for the original persons involved or for any subsequent persons, are themselves specifically constituted events which can and will be reconstituted in the subsequent historical passage of the poem. The "reading" and the "criticism" of poems and the human events they represent set what Blake called a "bounding line" to human action. In this sense criticism—and historical criticism paradigmatically—does not establish the "meanings" of poems, it tries to re-present them to us in "minute particulars," in forms that recover (as it were) their *physique* in as complete detail as possible. Thus Parry says, of the historical reconstruction which his criticism brings about: "I make for myself a picture of great detail,"[20] *not* "I translate for myself and my world the meaning of the ancient texts." The originary "meanings" (Parry's "complexes of ideas which the author assumed") are themselves concrete particulars, not concrete universals; and their complexity involves diverse and often contradictory lines of relations. Historical criticism's great critical advance lay in its ability to reconstruct, in methodical ways, the differential and contradictory patterns within which poetical works constitute themselves and are constituted.

Parry and those like him understood very well that texts and the criticism of texts labored under various destabilizing forces.

> If I say that Grote's account of democracy at Athens is more revealing of the mind of an English Liberal of the nineteenth century after Christ, than it recalls what actually took place in Athens in the fifth century before Christ, and then go on to admit that the opinion which I have just expressed about Grote may in turn reveal even more my own state of mind than it does that of Grote (indeed, I know that I am expressing this thought here because I came across it about two weeks ago in one of the essays submitted for the Bowdoin prize essay contest and it struck me)—even in that case I am still doing no more than to try to attain a more perfect method for the historical approach to the thought of the past.[21]

This is Parry's version of "the critic as host," and it explains why he will state the following basic paradox of historical method: that by it "we learn to keep ourselves out of the past, or rather we learn to go into it."[22] Historical method in criticism clarifies and defines the differentials in concrete and specific ways for the originary and the continuing past, as well as for the immediate present (and the as yet unconstructed future).

These passages are taken from Parry's great essay "The Historical Method in Literary Criticism" (1936), where Parry also expresses "a certain feeling of fear" that this method will "destroy itself."[23] His fear recalls Nietzsche's critique of philological studies expressed in *On the Advantage and the Disadvantage of History for Life*, and anticipates the antihistorical arguments of the immanentist critical methods which, in the early 1930s, were just beginning to gain force and prominence. "I have seen myself, only too often and too clearly, how, because those who teach and study Greek and Latin literature have lost the sense of its importance for humanity, the study of those literatures has declined."[24] What Parry proposes is that scholars "create their heroic legend" of the importance of the historicity, not merely of truth, but of the search for truth: "Otherwise they will be choosing a future in which they must see themselves confined not by choice, but by compulsion, to be forever ineffective, if they would not be untruthful."[25]

In fact, however, historical criticism—at least as it was practiced in the Western academy—did not go on to fulfill what Parry called for. This failure occurred, I believe, because historicist criticism always tended to conceive its terms in a recollective frame. Thus "referentiality," in this program, tended to be construed as bearing upon persons and events which lay behind us, in a completed form of pastness. It is true that language "refers to" particular actualities. But if no historical critic of any standing ever understood this referential connection in the simple empiricist terms laid down by Miller, neither, on the other hand, did they explore the full theoretical implications of some of their most important historicist principles.