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The Future of Literary History

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**Publication Date**

2003-08-06

Literary History roundtable: William Warner; Wed, August 6, 2003

These are opening remarks for a roundtable, entitled, "The Future of Literary History", conducted by Professor John Richetti, at the meeting of the International Society for Eighteenth Century, Los Angeles, CA.

I want to begin with an imperative sentence that translates my sense of the charge of this roundtable discussion: "Will the Subject of Literary History Please Stand Up!"

First, to define my terms:

By **literary history**, and without prejudicing the assumptions that will guide the writing of literary history, I mean a **general** literary history, that is one that will find a way to take account of a large sweep of the proper generic types from epic to drama to fiction,. . .even if this literary history only does so by contributing a small piece of a much larger tapestry [e.g. Watt's *Rise of the Novel*], and even if it is critical and skeptical of various earlier attempts to tell an inclusive and comprehensive literary history.

By "subject" I mean two things: first, and most neutrally, I mean subject as "topic"--the topos, the object, the thing about which literary history offers its account. but secondly, because the most compelling literary histories have often developed a narrative, I also mean the "subject" in the more anthropomorphic sense of the central character, the lead, the hero or heroine whose story literary history tells.

For most of the history of literary history it seems to me there have been three obvious subjects for literary history:

1: "literature": many literary histories assume that "literature"--from the *Iliad* of Homer to the present-- is the central character, the more or less autonomously evolving subject of literary history. Although literature may be traversed by events like the English Civil War or the French Revolution, these are subsidiary to an underlying history of forms: epic, tragedy, comedy, lyric, etc as they unfold across the vast procession of European and/or world literature.

2: A second potential subject of literary history is "the nation": There is a broad consensus that the coherence of literary history emerges in the late 18th century as coextensive with an attempt to construct a coherent sense of national identity. Thus, Taine's *History of English Literature* gives literature the role of expressing "the voice of the people"; the analytical drama of his narrative comes from his attempt to account for the complexity of the "race" (in the 19th century sense of that term) through a narrative of its authors, genres, and dominant ideas.

3: A third subject of literary history is the "author": At least since the late 18th century (if not long before), literary histories of many different types have given pride of place to the authors-- those whose lives count for literary history because they have genius, they invent new forms, they think or feel more deeply, and so on.

When I started studying literature systematically, I had teachers reared in the New Criticism who felt that literary history was **one of the main obstacles** to knowing and reading literature. Here the depreciation of history (c.f. through the "intentional fallacy," the "authorial fallacy," the suspicion of reading through

context or biography of any kind), is matched with a dogmatic insistence on the autonomy of literature. The result: the balance between literature and history is impossible to sustain. In the wake of post-structuralism, advanced theory gave new prestige to this position (I'm thinking for example, of essays by Paul DeMan like "Literary History and Literary Modernity," and "The Resistance to Theory.")

But at the same time that theory achieved its zenith, there developed, from within feminism, a strong revision and extension of literary history. The new narratives of feminist literary history change the subject of literary history from him to her, from man to woman. This has several effects: it **expands the scope** of archival research, it **augments and modifies** the teaching canon, and finally, it changes in **how** one reads, by changing the ideas and values inform that reading.

By the middle of the 1980s, as John Guillory has argued, even the most theoretically advanced students of literature in the US felt the pressure of the same question: What about "history"? This question helped to propel the literary studies in new directions: for example, the "new historicism" of Greenblatt and others; the Foucaultian literary histories (like Bender and Armstrong); and so on. The urgency about the need to bring history back to literary studies is expressed by the title of John Richetti's wonderful book on the early English novel: "The English Novel *in* History"; the little preposition "in" bears the weight of the imperative to consider literature, here the early English novel, within a rigorous sense of history. And it seems to me this monograph, and the succession of literary histories John has edited, including the Cambridge History that provides

the occasion for this panel, set out to sustain a balance between the claims of history **and** literature.

Much of the creativity of the newer literary history is animated by a debate about what constitutes history. For example, can literary history be anecdotal and eccentric--as the new historicism is accused of being? Or should it attempt the development of a general horizon for considering history, a history that will be inclusive of the literature we still read, and all the genres of writing we still value? Is a general literary history so tethered to an idea of totality, that it becomes a real question as to whether such a history is possible *or* even desirable?

The methodological focus on "history" as a problem or question poses a new danger to literary history (one that is the opposite of the challenge posed by 'new criticism'): The theoretical and political suspicion directed at the term "literature", and the focus upon "history" as the vital and interesting term for analysis, may entail a loss in the balance between "literature" and "history," a balance that has always been crucial to the practice of "literary history."

My favorite literary history is Denis Hollier's *A New History of French Literature* (1989), where scholars write short articles on moments that juxtapose ideas, events and texts of French cultural history: e.g. 1761, "The Novel and Gender Difference" on *Julie*. What makes this literary history distinctive is its refusal of the grand narrative, its pluralizing of possible subjects and reading practices, to the detriment of any general sense of the grand substantives "literature" or "history." Its reification of the particular and the local may be fetishistic, but it is also very satisfying. In entitling these brief remarks the way I

have—**“Will the subject of literary history please stand up!”**--I may have suggested that we have a subject of literary history at hand, and all we need to do is identify that subject and set it in its proper place. I don't want to foreclose that possibility. In the discussion that follows we may be able to identify that subject. But we may also want to consider that that subject, which once existed, no longer does. We should consider the possibility that this panel is actually a "post-mortem" because the subject of literary history, like the God in Nietzsche's formulation, once lived but is now dead.