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History has many cunning passages ...
T. S. Eliot, 'Gerontion'

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The Challenge of Textualism

Shades of the Prison-house

Many of the most fundamental theoretical battles of the 1930s and 1940s in the field of literary criticism involved an opposition between, on the one hand, a formalism that argued the irrelevance of ‘context’ and saw the life of the text through history to be guaranteed by a transhistorical ‘human nature’ which it both stemmed from and appealed to; and, on the other, various forms of historicism (dominated in the 1930s by a particular variant of Marxism) which denied the text any life apart from that released by and revealed through its incorporation within its genetic context.

Old Wine in New Bottles

Such battles of theoretical titans have, since the 1960s, given way to guerrilla wars and skirmishes between younger godheads – more complex and sophisticated views of the literary work’s textuality and of its historicity. The titans are not yet dead, however, and their subterranean clashes still find forms of expression in perhaps more local theoretical disagreements. Many examples of the tenacious survival and perseverance of these theoretical polarities could be cited, but one will perhaps suffice.

The title of Ross Chambers’s study, *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (1984), suggests straight away a contextualist approach: story cannot be studied apart from the (or a) situation which gives it meaning. Some of Chambers’s opening remarks do much to confirm such an initial impression; indeed, the first sentence in the book would seem to place his study firmly in a contextualist camp:

> With the waning of structuralism, it has become clear that, in general terms, meaning is not inherent in discourse and its structures, but contextual, a function of the pragmatic situation in which discourse occurs. (1984, p3)

A meaning that is not inherent in discourse would, we might well expect, involve the situating of literary works in precisely those extradiscursive contexts that could be relied upon to help generate meaning, and this is Chambers’s next proposal to his reader:

> So, it is my further suggestion that the study of narrative as transaction must open eventually onto ideological and cultural analysis of these enabling agreements, that is, onto what Clifford Geertz might call ‘thick description’. ‘Sarrasine’ is as embedded in the male-female relationships of Paris in the 1830s as ‘The Purloined Letter’ is in a certain American mercantilism, while ‘Sylvie’ presupposes, with its bid for understanding, the desperate estrangement, in the bourgeois culture of the 1850’s in France, of such marginal figures as the poet, the dreamer, the lover, le fou. Similarly, ‘The Figure in the Carpet’ and ‘The Dead’ propose in their different ways striking images of alienation, in the little world of literary criticism remote from the ‘vulgar’ and in the figure of Gabriel Conroy, ill at ease in the (vulgar) Dublin society to which he panders, without being able to become the messenger of a reality radically opposed to that society. (1984, p9)

Some of the terms here might confuse a Marxist of the 1930s, and some of the detail might prompt the objection that the proposed ‘enabling agreements’ were not sufficiently fundamental and determinating, but so far the general thrust of Chambers’s argument would be familiar and welcome. Suddenly, however, our transposed 1930s Marxist would find him- or herself being presented with something that, to him or her, resembled not the one tit but the other, not a belief in the dependence of the text on particular contexts, but its self-sufficiency and independence of them:

1 ‘Thick description’ is a term associated with the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who takes it from the philosopher Gilbert Ryle. For Ryle, thick description goes beyond a mere description of – say – physical gestures and movements, and takes wider social and cultural implications and meanings into account. It can thus be seen to sit very firmly in a contextualist camp, denying the essentialist view that messages have an intrinsic meaning independent of social, cultural or historical context. Chambers’s commitment to ‘the study of narrative as transaction’ also bespeaks an anti-essentialist commitment, implying as it does that meaning is the result of a transaction between teller and reader/listener rather than implicit in the interpreted text. See Clifford Geertz, *Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture*, the first chapter of *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), and Gilbert Ryle: *Thinking and Reflecting* and *The Thinking of Thoughts*, both of which are reprinted in the second volume of Ryle’s *Collected Papers* (1971).
Texts are fixed arrangements of signs designed to have a certain independence of time and space; they are typically intended to be accessible to human beings (or human-controlled entities) who (or which) are separated from the producers of the texts by space or time at least to some degree. However, this relative independence of time and space is a problematic matter. A text designed to have a relatively circumscribed independence of time and space may turn out to be capable of surviving much greater temporal and spatial removal. The letter I write to my wife today may be read, for all I know, by someone ten thousand years hence. Thus although the text may be designed to have a certain independence of time and space (what Chambers refers to as the literary text’s autonomy or alienation), it is normally designed to be read within a particular context – that is, in accordance with a set of interpretative conventions associated with a given discourse or institution. This goes some way to explain the seeming paradox that a body of work such as Shakespeare’s sonnets, which repetitively rehearse their own survival in future, unknown contexts, and their preservation of aspects of the lives of their creator and his subjects, should actually have spawned an immense activity on the part of scholars aimed at recapturing what is perceived to be a missing, meaning-conferring body of contextualizing information. While the sonnets themselves speak confidently of what they will preserve for future generations, so many of these future generations seem to have been most preoccupied by what the poems do not preserve. It would appear that while the possibility of his sonnets being read in ages to come formed part of the subject of Shakespeare’s muse, in an important sense the poems were not intended to be read by these coming generations. If we put the poems into the context for which they were intended, we must recognize that we are not part of that context: paradoxically, a successful genetic recontextualization of the sonnets might exclude ourselves.

Texts are not, then, ever completely independent of time and place. Jerome J. McGann has sought to alert his readers to the dangers of excessive decontextualization, to the need for the reader and critic to beware of precisely that quality of works of literature that gives the critic access to them in the first place:

[The entire tradition of poetry comes into our hands in textualized forms. The problem then becomes: how are we to preserve and encourage a dialectical understanding and engagement with imaginative work that descends to us in those profoundly nondialectical forms we call texts? (1986, p22)]

Another way of pin-pointing the issue is by having recourse to a distinction which has been given wide circulation by recent narrative theory – that between énoncé and énonciation, where énonciation is the act of making an utterance or statement, an act of meaning-creation in which the utterance or statement produces or enables meaning through its links to the specifics of the whole act-in-a-situation, and énoncé is the result of that act, the utterance or statement ‘itself’.

The question seems odd, not least, perhaps, because it comes at the start of a book concerned with literature and history. But it will seem less odd to those who have witnessed the centrality of the notion of textuality to recent debates about the life of literature in history. One of the paradoxes about the turn to history in literary criticism is that, as Chambers points out, it is only because texts are able to escape from confinement to one time and one place that the problem arises at all.
III  
Textualism and Contextualism

The distinction between énoncé and énonciation is one which can be made because linguistic utterances are capable of being fixed and reproduced in a way that — for example — gestures or caresses are not. As soon as writing exists to transfer the difference-system of language to fixed and stable signs, anything in language can be textualized: expressed in signs which are not subject to the vagaries of memory. One cannot divide a caress into énoncé and énonciation. On the other hand, we should remember that the distinction is a theoretical one: in practice there is no énoncé without énonciation, and vice versa. We can choose to concentrate more on the one than the other, and this is what monocular criticism — as I called it in my Introduction — tends to do. These two biases we can name textualism and contextualism. Whereas textualism (a term I take from Richard Rorty) admits of no reality that is extratextual, and sees our world as textually produced — a prison-house of texts — contextualism denies the specificity of texts and attempts to deflect textual meaning back into the text’s (normally) genetic contexts. Textualism could be defined as an insistence on treating the literary work as énoncé rather than énonciation, and we can see the contextualist reaction against textualism as an attempt to reunite the énoncé with its original (or successive) énonciations. Contextualism can be seen as the product of a suspicion of textuality itself, a fear of language that is unfettered by fixed meaning-determining contexts. Contextualism at its most extreme can seek to collapse énoncé back into énonciation, to transfer responsibility for the poem’s meaning to its contexts of genesis and reception. It can seek to limit or qualify the relative independence of time and space enjoyed by the text, and at its most extreme can attempt to reject any literary meaning that is not overtly linked to originary or genetic contexts. John Frow, for example, argues that many of the contributors to Peter Widdowson’s influential anthology Re-reading English reject a textually oriented criticism in favor of an analysis of the social conditions of literary production: meaning is displaced outside the text, but displaced most significantly to another disciplinary discourse: that of history. The assumption that textual meaning can be read off from the conditions of its production is made possible by the elevation of an apparently nontextual mode of knowledge over one which is explicitly textual. (1986, p123)

I want to agree with Frow that the way out of the errors of textualism is not by way of collapsing textual meaning and significance back into the conditions of the text’s production (and I would add that the way out of genetic reductionism of the sort Frow claims to find in Rereading English is not by way of a dehistoricized textualism). Francis Mulhern has suggested, usefully, that if ‘the idea of a perennially self-identical text is a humanist dogma, the antithetical idea of an ever-self-differing text is an academic-libertarian trifle’ (1992, p22). He does not use the terms textualism and contextualism in this context, and indeed it seems that what he has in mind when he talks of ‘an ever-self-differing text’ is more the result of the deconstructionist’s unfettered play of signifiers than a text subject to incessant (and total) redefinition through incorporation in a succession of different contexts. His comment has, nevertheless, the virtue of drawing attention to the weakness academics have for oversimplified solutions: either ignore the text’s changing life through history, or collapse the text and its identity into this changing life or into the forces which produced the text.

The aim of a ‘dialectical understanding and engagement’, as McGann expresses it, has to be that of avoiding both sorts of simplification. I stress this point because there is a danger that we may be led to believe that antithetical or ahistorical approaches to literary works are the invention of modern theorists. They are, rather, a development of a capacity inherent in texts, the capacity to move organized and stabilized systems of language out of their originating and explanatory contexts to quite different contexts. We should therefore remember that if there were no possibility of examining texts apart from their originating contexts, there would be no texts to examine. We need, in other words, continually to bear in mind that reading a text will always involve a sense of lack, that lack which is the necessary precondition of textuality. If we want always to have a meaning that is fully integrated with an expressive genesis we must remain with gestures and caresses, or with linguistic utterances expressed to their recipient in person-to-person contact. Alienation is a necessary condition of textuality: we can do what we can to lessen this alienation — and much of this book will discuss different ways of achieving this goal — but reading texts will always involve balancing the necessary alienation of the text with the fact that texts release their meanings only in determinate contexts. Those who embrace the text’s alienation and ignore the fact that it lives only in a succession of meaning-generating contexts end up in formalism; those who deny this alienation in toto end up in reductionism, collapsing the text back into its genetic or receptive contexts.

It is, however, a paradox that for a text alienation is also, simultaneously, integration. Many have believed that as the text is alienated from the context of its production it becomes free-floating, complete unto itself, self-identical. But a literary work always exists in a complex of different contexts at any given time: even at the time of its first publication the contexts in which it is read will not be identical to those from within which it has been produced. Literature is, then, permanently in process of being recontextualized: those who congratulate themselves on looking ‘only at the text’ are actually incorporating it into a context so familiar that it is invisible to them — a process modern theorists call naturalization. John Frow has suggested that the text’s naturalization within its genetic context has to be countered by means of a process of ‘unframing’ as a result of
which it becomes ‘subversive of its own legitimacy’ (1986, p228). Frow’s Marxist perspective is one which is fundamentally opposed to the belief that meaning inheres in a text like the DNA in a piece of preserved tissue. But as I have pointed out, there are opposing traditions which believe that texts carry their own meanings. The New Critics constituted one such tradition, and Jerome McGann has argued that a comparable essentialism is also a part of the interpretive positions of Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Derrida. According to McGann, both Ricoeur and Derrida agree that a distinction must be made between text and event, and that ‘meaning’ – whether ontic or illusory – is a textual and not an eventual function. Their manner of distinguishing text from event produces a shared inclination to ‘textualize’ experience, and to see the reasoned disposal of experience – its manipulation and its interpretation alike – as an exegetical operation. (1988, p.16)

For McGann, in contrast, textuality is not an escape from or an alternative to what he calls eventual meaning, but a necessary precondition of such meaning. Texts allow us to separate meaning from event, it is true, but only by reincorporating meaning into new contexts – new events.

Texts belong to the very latest stage of the development of the human race. Historically, there is something qualitatively new about a highly literate society, a society in which not only do all have access to texts, but all have access to certain key aspects of their society and culture – and to themselves – only through the medium of texts. Even if we can trace back written texts a few thousand years, a modern Western society is permeated by textuality in quite a different way from the way in which, say, medieval English society was. Even an illiterate living in a modern Western society will live a life dominated by texts, although many of them will not be written ones. Although the use of signs – linguistic and non-linguistic – is a central part of being human, our learning to deal with texts is not part of our biological inheritance but has to be imparted exclusively through the medium of culture; indeed, for us culture is to a considerable extent a learning to deal with texts. And it is a complicated process.

Because they can move about in space and time, texts are powerful things. They are the latest product of that process of development which has progressively freed human beings from a real prison-house, that of concrete immediacy. Texts help to release human beings from the confines of the here-and-now, the first and greatest stage of which process was the development of language. Just as language allowed human beings to contemplate themselves and their world at a distance, and thus provided the human race with a vastly increased power over nature (a nature which includes ourselves), so texts provide us with immeasurably more complex and detailed pictures of our world, and allow us to deal with a reality which is more negotiable because aspects of it are presented to us in a stable and reproducible state. If, for example, we had only performances and no written texts of the corpus of – say – English drama, our ability to use this material would be a fraction of what it actually is. In the pages that follow I will be concerning myself with the dangers and problems which flow from the transportability of the text, and I will be exploring various suggestions which have been made as to how the text can be recontextualized in different ways, suggestions which I generally support. But at this stage of my argument I want to insist that the transportability of the text, its relative independence of time and space, must not be seen as merely negative. Texts would not have become so important in modern cultures did they not perform important roles, roles which they could not perform if they did not have temporal and spatial mobility.

As I have argued, however, we should not allow this perception of the text’s transportability to lull us into believing that because texts can move from place to place, and period to period, they have no connection with the realities of any time and place. It is not just our modern textualists who are guilty of such misconceptions: those who deal only with documents have always been susceptible to the belief that there are only documents, or – a weaker variant – that documents are more important than the realities which they mirror, intervene in, or initiate. Here is the unnamed naval captain in Joseph Conrad’s novella The Shadow-Line, thinking about a shore-official with whom he has just been in contact:

He had known me only by sight, and he was well aware he would never see me again; I was, in common with the other seamen of the port, merely a subject for official writing, filling up of forms with all the artificial superiority of a man of pen and ink to the men who grapple with realities outside the consecrated walls of official buildings. What ghosts we must have been to him! Mere symbols to juggle with in books and heavy registers, without brains and muscles and perplexities; something hardly useful and decidedly inferior. (1985, p.34)

It will be noted that Derrida is not the first to believe that there is nothing outside the text. If those who live by the sword perish by the sword, it would seem that many of those who live by the pen – shore-officials, French philosophers, professors of English literature – come to believe not only that it is mightier than the sword, but that it actually writes such things as swords into existence. Whatever the case, the recent history of literary theory is not short of those who believe that the men and women of the world and their actions and experiences are ‘mere symbols to juggle with in books and heavy registers’. (It should perhaps be added that although Conrad’s words express disdain for the ‘man of pen and ink’ who reduces those who grapple directly with physical realities to ‘mere symbols’, it is possible to detect an antithetical prejudice in the quoted passage: only a direct engagement with the physical world is real, while

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2 Frow writes as a Marxist, and his case for ‘unframing’ has a clear political underpinning. But a similar case is made from an apparently more politically neutral point of view by Ross Chambers, who argues that ‘the reader, who is in a position to perceive the ideological and cultural constraints that have limited the text’s self-conception, has a responsibility to free the text from its own limitations’ (1984, p.27).
those who engage with the physical world indirectly, through books and heavy registers, are themselves ghosts. It is of course the case that the reality of the ships of Conrad’s life and books is constituted both by their physical identity and also by their incorporation in nets of economic, social, and political negotiations mediated through symbolic transactions. It is further the case that Conrad’s views would not have come to us were not he also a ‘man of pen and ink’.

When, back in 1982, Richard Rorty coined the terms textualism and textualist, he commented ironically that while in the nineteenth century there were those who believed that nothing existed but ideas, ‘in our century there are people who write as if there were nothing but texts’ (1982, p139). Rorty listed a number of names on his charge-sheet; those accused of being card-carrying textualists or their fellow-travellers included Harold Bloom, Geoffrey Hartman, J. Hillis Miller, and Paul de Man; post-structuralist French thinkers such as Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, historians such as Hayden White, and social scientists such as Paul Rabinow. All of these, according to Rorty, held both an antagonistic attitude towards natural science and a belief that human thought or language can never be directly compared to ‘bare, unmediated reality’. For the textualist, the prison-house is constructed from texts. I will return to look at the particular theories of some of those named by Rorty at a later point; for the time being I want to look at the theoretical roots of this alleged common belief that human thought and language are cut off from direct apprehension of an extralinguistic reality.

IV
Structuralism, Deconstruction and Decontextualization

The title of Fredric Jameson’s influential study of structuralism, The Prison House of Language (1972), serves as a useful negative characterization not just of structuralism, but of a range of recent theories influential among literary critics. Language, for Jameson’s structuralist, is a prison because it is allowed no direct purchase on the non-linguistic world. Like a monarch allowed only to converse with his lords and never with his subjects, according to the structuralists a sign can refer only to a signifier, a concept, and can never engage with a world untouched by language. Moreover, in many versions of structuralism the lord is similarly limited to intercourse with his monarch: the signifier has no more purchase on a world outside language than has the sign. Reference, present intermittently in Saussure’s work, disappears completely from that of many of his followers.

This general position has been subjected to extended critiques by a range of recent writers, critiques made from a number of different discipline bases. But to my mind the most telling of these criticisms is the evolutionist one that such structuralist arguments fail utterly to explain where language comes from and why it has developed. For the non-structuralist, language is the product and enabler of human evolution. The acquisition and development of language gives human beings enormously increased power over nature, far more than is possessed by any animal. If language really were a prison-house, really were incapable of bringing human beings into contact with one another and with the world in which they live (a world over which, before the emergence of language, prehuman minds had far less control than their speaking successors were to enjoy), then it is hard to see for what possible reason language emerged and developed (Woolfson [1982] provides much relevant argumentation on this subject). Emergence and development are, of course, topics explicitly ruled out of court once the synchronic is allowed to obscure the diachronic; modern structuralism is thus able to deny its most potent objects theoretical legitimacy.

Language is not the only prison-house in the realms of recent literary-critical theory, and structuralism is far from being the first theory to posit a pluralist reality in which individual systems – language games, ideologies, or whatever – are hermetically sealed from all the other systems which, together, constitute what is. But it is the most recent of such theories, and, together with its close relatives or offspring, post-structuralism and deconstruction, perhaps the most influential. It is not surprising that if the world of language could be seen as a prison-house, then the world of texts might be established as a rival penal system. In the world of contemporary theory, much as in contemporary Britain and USA, private prisons are very fashionable. Richard Rorty has suggested that there is a direct link between structuralism’s prison-house of language and the newly fashionable prison-house of texts:

There are, alas, people nowadays who owlishly inform us ‘philosophy has proved’ that language does not refer to anything nonlinguistic, and thus that everything one can talk about is a text. This claim is on a par with the claim that Kant proved that we cannot know about things-in-themselves. Both claims rest on a phony contrast between some sort of nonriddiscursive, unmediated vision of the real and the way we actually talk and think. Both falsely infer from ‘We can’t think without concepts, or talk without words’ to ‘We can’t talk or talk except about what has been created by our thought or talk.’ (1982, pp154-5)

Perhaps the best-known statement of what Rorty refers to as textualism is Jacques Derrida’s famous, or infamous, declaration that ‘Il n’y a pas de hors-texte’ – translated, alternatively, as either ‘There is nothing outside the text’ or ‘There is no outer text’. The second alternative is perhaps weaker than the first: if there is no outer text there may even be an outer reality of a non-textual or non-linguistic sort. What Derrida, or his statement, actually means or meant is something that at least many of Derrida’s followers believe could never be established, given their conviction that the play of signifiers is ceaseless and unstoppable. But in the hands of his followers, such statements have frequently provided carte blanche for an unfettered
textualism. Indeed, many have seen textualism as a logical extension of deconstruction. Is not Derrida's aphorism tantamount to claiming that for us the past exists only in texts, and that there is no way of deciding between rival textual versions of the past, as there is no extratextual evidence to which one can appeal?

Lee Patterson has argued that it is not, and that deconstruction bequeaths to us a more nuanced view of such matters:

Thus deconstruction, far from either denying the reality of history or its availability to knowledge, is a critical practice that seeks to understand how 'reality' is put in place by discursive means. When Derrida notoriously says that 'there is nothing outside the text', he is restating the position, held by many sociocultural historians, that reality is culturally or discursively produced, that - in Jonathan Culler's words - 'the realities with which politics is concerned, and the forms in which they are manipulated, are inseparable from discursive structures and systems of signification.' While of course such a program could lead to the neglect of the social, economic, and political institutions by which power is enforced, it need not; and while of course it could lead us to submerge agency into structure, nothing requires that it do so. Indeed, if we locate deconstruction within historiographical practice rather than in opposition to it, then it can be seen as a style of analysis directed towards understanding the production of cultural meanings. (1993, p71)

It seems to me that Patterson's prose, for all its carefulness, still hesitates between two irreconcilable positions: first, that it is texts (or culture, or discourse) which produce reality, and second, that texts mediate between us and reality. 'The reality of history [and] its availability to knowledge'; 'Reality is culturally or discursively produced': these two formulations seem first to posit a history which is separate from knowledge, and then one which is produced by forms of knowledge. It is also worth pointing out that whereas Patterson starts by talking of 'reality' (scare-quotes are very popular when many modern theorists come to write this word), he ends by referring to 'the production of cultural meanings'. This is perhaps a significant slippage: reality can clearly involve rather more than just the production of cultural meanings. To thus limit reality is to prepare for a subsequent step in which all of reality, rather than just that part of it that consists of cultural meanings, is produced by human beings.

This may be suggest that textualism is the child of philosophical or theoretical beliefs. But we know from Dickens as well as Conrad that many individuals have a weakness for seeing the world whole in terms of their own profession, and while we laugh at characterizations of such as Captain Cuttle we need to remember that the profession of academic literary critic is no different from any other in this respect; if the whole world is an extended ship for Captain Cuttle, perhaps we should not be surprised if for some literary critics the whole world is a collection of texts: textualism may owe as much to professional myopia as to a fully thought-out philosophy. Scholars and theorists have always had a weakness for forgetting about the existence of the world outside the study or library, and Yeats's splendid little poem 'The Scholars' reminds us that this is no less the case when the pages they are reading in the study or library refer very evocatively to that world. If you spend all your time reading about things, there is always a danger that, like Conrad's shore-official, you may come to believe that things are the product of reading. At any rate, twentieth-century literary theory has many examples of such beliefs, some of which restrict themselves to claiming that literary works have no connection - genetic or referential - to the extraliterary world. Others more ambitiously claim, first, that in this respect literary texts are no different from other ones, and second, that there is, anyway, no extratextual world for texts to come from or refer to, as our world is textually produced - is, in short, purely textual.

V

The Textualism of Postmodernism

Patricia Waugh has suggested that one thing post-structuralism and postmodernism have in common is a belief in the impossibility of a metacritical position - although she then goes on to outline a number of differences between the two as well (1992, p71). The differences should not be underestimated: the term 'postmodernism', as Waugh suggests, can denote many different things: 'a mood or style of thought which privileges aesthetic models over those of logic or method', 'an aesthetic practice with an accompanying body of commentary upon it', and 'a cultural epoch which has facilitated the rise to prominence of such theoretical and aesthetic styles and which may or may not constitute a break with previous structures of modernity' (1992, p7). Nonetheless, the fact that commentaries on post-structuralist and post-modernist (especially hostile ones) not infrequently lump the two together doubtless owes much to their shared rejection of universal, objective or extrasystemic guarantees of truth. If for post-structuralism there is nothing outside the text, a fundamental tenet of post-modernist faith is, as Jean-François Lyotard puts it, 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (1984, pxi). Both positions result in a multiplicity of monadic and self-identical 'truths' or systems which can be considered only in terms of their own, internal standards of validity.

Lyotard's best-known work is, amongst other things, a sustained attack on realist theories of truth. Throughout The Postmodern Condition he argues repeatedly that the grand narratives of the past, 'such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth' (1984, pxxiii) - grand narratives

3 Adherents of such a position are rarely completely consistent; their monadic worlds normally contain secret passages to more public discourses so that messages can be brought back to those outside.
that underpinned metadiscourses which legitimated sciences – hold no sway in the postmodern world. As a result, our accounts of the world – our stories, or narratives – can seek no legitimation from outside themselves:

It is therefore impossible to judge the existence or validity of narrative knowledge on the basis of scientific knowledge and vice versa. The relevant criteria are different. All we can do is gaze in wonder at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant or animal species. (1984, p.26)

Although such a position may appear new it closely resembles those many recent variants of traditional idealism which allow the academic or intellectual the power to observe, but not to intervene in, life. D. J. Manning’s study Liberalism, for example, distinguishes between ideologists (who can so intervene) and academics, who ‘can change minds’, but who are incapable of calling for action’, and who, according to Manning, refer to what is and not what ought or may be. Manning concludes his book with an attack on the liberal belief that the academic can so intervene in the extra-academic world:

The price the academic must pay for being able to demonstrate the intellectual precision of his explanations is political impotence. He can say no more to those who find ideological argument distressing than could de Gaulle, who, in a rare liberal mood, said to his wife as they flew over Africa and she had just complained that she had seen elephants making love below: ‘Laissez les faire’ – ‘Let them be.’ (1976, p.157)

When the example is elephants making love the assertion is amusing, but when one calls to mind that it could just as easily be applied to discussions about war or world starvation, it is less so.

Such idealism, whether it presents itself as postmodernist or not, condemns the writer to a textual or academic prison-house: the teller of tales, whether novelist or historian, is demoted to the task of cultivating his or her garden. Indeed, ‘cultivating’ might be too strong a term, suggesting as it does the possibility of intervention and control, a possibility clearly ruled out of court by Lyotard’s preferred verb: ‘to gaze’. Science, according to Lyotard, ‘plays its own game: it is incapable of legitimating the other language games’ (1984, p.40). Lyotard’s use of Wittgenstein’s term here expresses a clear belief in the spectatorial nature of intellectual activity: the games have their own rules which we may learn, but these rules cannot be changed, nor can a knowledge of these rules allow us to intervene other than in the one game for which they are relevant.

Truth is no longer absolute or objective, but merely local. In the absence of the grand narratives, we are left with a succession of little narratives, gardens which we can cultivate (or gaze at), but gardens with very high walls around them. In his essay, ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’, which is printed as an appendix to the English edition of The Postmodern Condition, Lyotard is even more blunt:

Finally, it must be clear that it is our business not to supply reality but to invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented. And it is not to be expected that this task will effect the least reconciliation between language games (which, under the name of faculties, Kant knew to be separated by a chasm), and that only the transcendental illusion (that of Hegel) can hope to totalize them into a real unity. But Kant also knew that the price to pay for such an illusion is terror. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have given us as much terror as we can take. We have paid a high enough price for the nostalgia of the whole and the one, for the reconciliation of the concept and the sensible, of the transparent and the communicable experience. (1984, pp.81–2)

It is not a long step from this belief that the task is not to ‘supply reality’ but rather to ‘invent allusions to the conceivable which cannot be presented’, to the belief that, for example, the historian’s task is not to expose the reality of what has occurred, but rather to present alternative stories about what has occurred which all share the same truth value (that is, none). As we will see when we turn to the theories of Hayden White, postmodernist ideas blend in very comfortably with other views of the impossibility of deciding between varying accounts of ‘reality’. Lyotard’s admittedly admirable desire to avoid the terrors of forced agreements can, ironically, lead to a terror of a different sort, in which a language game which denies that the Nazi holocaust ever took place is allowed its own territory within which to exist without fear of invasion from those who feel a moral commitment to seek, if not to supply, a reality that is more than just a ‘nostalgia of the whole’. Although morally quite distinct, there is a theoretical continuity between neo-fascist denials of the holocaust and Baudrillard’s statement that the Gulf War did not take place (see the discussion in Norris (1992)): both rely on that denial of the possibility of reference that is at the heart of postmodernism, and both face theory with the morally urgent need to develop a concept of the text that has a place for such reference.

Patricia Waugh has argued that modernism represents not so much a collapse but ‘a proliferation of value which, far from destroying our powers of self-determination, offers them new forms and contexts’ (1992, p.8), and she clearly believes that this judgement can be extended to postmodernism – drawing some telling comparisons between postmodernism and Romanticism in this respect. My own feeling is that although one may understand aspects of both postmodernism and Romanticism as defensive retreats to areas of local truth, ‘gardens’ to which those battling a powerful, centralized reactionary authority felt they could retire, the overwhelming emphasis of at least first-generation Romanticism was on an opposition to that centralized tyranny, whereas with postmodernism there is in contrast a far more celebratory mood which is, to put it at its most positive, indulgent towards central authority. There is, moreover, no doubt that postmodernism generally manifests a far sharper critique of precisely that tradition of reason and justice opposed to reactionary central authorities that we know as the tradition of Enlightenment, than it does of the reactionary...
central authority. Waugh argues that what unites Romanticism and postmodernism is "a shared crisis mentality connected to a sense of the fragmentariness of the commercialised world with which Enlightenment reason is seen to be complicit: in both the aesthetic becomes the only possible means of redemption" (1992, p15). The claim seems to me to apply more to postmodernism than to Romanticism. The Romantics had their suspicions of science and of philosophy (which latter, claimed Keats in 'Lamia', could clip an angel’s wings). But it is not hard to marshal evidence to demonstrate that the major Romantics felt themselves to represent a rational tradition opposed to the obscurantism and superstition of moneymaker power. Moreover, the belief that Enlightenment reason is complicit with the fragmentariness of the commercialized world is one for which the Romantics may be forgiven but which postmodernists may not; the period in which postmodernism appears is one characterized by highly publicized battles against commercialism of various sorts; battles informed and underpinned by what we can term Enlightenment reason.

VI

Post-structuralism and Postmodernism

Another similarity between post-structuralism and postmodernism – it has been claimed – is their shared commitment to a view of all narratives as fictional. Thus in the following account by Elizabeth Ernmark of the textual prison-house, the term 'postmodern writing' could probably be replaced by 'post-structuralism' without the substitution causing too many raised eyebrows:

We are always deciphering a text: the Republican convention, the intentions of a friend, Hiroshima, the emergence of mass media, glasnost, the behavior of a relative, the invasion of a country, the painting of Paul Klee – all are texts; all are constructs; all are readable inventions. To read is to interpret and to interpret is to reinvent, or coinvent, the text. To say such things are inventions, moreover, is not at all to deny their reality or their profoundly consequential and material existence; it is not mere aestheticism to say that life literally is art because postmodern writing collapses the dualism between what is real and what is made that supports aestheticism as well as historicism. (1992, p23)

It seems to me that this is a mixture of the acute and the confused. It is true that most of those reading Ernmark’s words will – fortunately for them – know of Hiroshima only through the medium of texts: television programmes, fictionalized film accounts, magazine articles, books. Quite probably no one who actually experienced the atomic explosion will read these words; of all the people in today’s world who refer to the atomic explosion in Hiroshima hardly any will have had some direct contact with survivors, will have visited the town while the devastation was still apparent, will have witnessed the explosion or its immediate physical effects in some direct, non-textual manner. Few of us are in the position of Saint Thomas, able to thrust our physical hands into the physical wounds.

Even so, I imagine that I am not the only reader worried by the suggestion that ‘Hiroshima’ is – like the painting of Paul Klee – a text, a construct, a readable invention. I believe that art and fiction have genetic and performative connections to a non-textual world, but I am still unwilling to accept that there is no ontological difference between a Paul Klee painting and the dropping of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima. When I read an account of Hiroshima I certainly have to use my imagination. What I certainly have to interpret is what I read (and do believe that the skills of analysis and interpretation that are fostered by the reading and criticizing of literature can be brought to bear on non-fictional texts – but that is another matter). While Ernmark suggests that to read ‘is to interpret and to interpret is to reinvent, or coinvent, the text’, I would prefer to argue that to read is to interpret, and to interpret is to engage in a process by which meanings and experiences are produced through a dialectical encounter between reader and text in a context or a set of interlocking contexts – meanings and experiences which may be more or less the property of the reader, and more or less the true or false renderings of aspects of a reality which is apart from the text or the reader.

Reading is a creative process – which is why it would appear that no two reading experiences of any substantial literary work, even by the same person, are ever exactly the same. With the exception of certain forms of highly instrumental reading (checking the dosage instructions on a bottle of aspirin, for example), reading is not the same as decoding; it is not just recent reader-response theory which has insisted upon the fact that any reading of a literary work involves a certain degree of reader creativity – what Wolfgang Iser (1974) has referred to as filling in the gaps in a work. It would be very hard to read Anna Karenina with no pre-existing understanding of the concept of marriage. That is how complex texts work: they rely upon our ability to fill out meanings which can never be comprehensively encoded in the work. Clearly, then, a crucial issue becomes that of deciding to what extent what we are putting into the reading of a literary work is legitimate – or of deciding whether it is possible to establish standards of legitimacy at all. (It may well be that a more productive direction in which to proceed involves considering the fruitfulness rather than the legitimacy of what we put into our readings.)

Most ordinary, non-academic readers of Anna Karenina, I suspect, never pause to worry much about what they put into their reading of that novel’s opening lines: the lines propose an unqualified generalization, and modern readers do not, I think, hesitate to wonder whether they need more historical knowledge of the rôle, status, function and experience of marriage in nineteenth-century Russia in order to be able to read them. Much reading of texts is like this: it further develops that force of generalization that is implicit in language itself, the force that those
scientists in Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* reacted against when they proposed that the use of nouns be replaced by direct reference to things — which in turn meant that they had to carry around with them all the things to which they were ever likely to want to refer.

But just as we are on occasions brought up sharply by our perception that certain word-usages can imply a generalization which reality cannot honour, so also our too-comfortable naturalization of certain texts can sometimes be arrested by something which reminds us that the world in which the text was born was in certain crucial respects different from our own. We are confronted by the foreign-ness of the text, its attachment to a world with which we are not familiar, a world which is **alien**. (Most modern readers are, I suspect, faced with the shock of an alien set of cultural assumptions at the end of Shakespeare's *Othello*, when the text appears to expect audiences to assent to the rightness of torturing Iago to death.) We are then forced to realize that our reading of texts can sometimes take their relative culture-independence too far.

It seems to me that it is for this reason that we must respond to Ermarch's argument by insisting that interpretation may involve the reader's creativity, but that it should never be merely invention — or co-invention. Furthermore, the texts by which we know of Hiroshima may be constructs and readable inventions, but this is a world away from claiming — as Ermarch almost appears to do — that Hiroshima itself is a construct and a readable invention. Would that it were. Ermarch clearly recognizes that there is something unsatisfactory about her formulation, which is why she feels impelled to insist of her listed texts that we must not deny their 'reality or their profoundly consequential and material existence'. But it seems clear to me that to collapse 'the dualism between what is real and what is made' is to deny the specific reality of, for example, Hiroshima. And this is neither to argue that contemporary readers can hope for a direct hands-in-wounds experience of the reality of Hiroshima which is unmediated by texts, nor that fictional texts have no connection with the non-textual world: it is just to subscribe to the common-sense notion that fictional texts engage with the non-textual world in ways different from factual texts. The danger of saying that Hiroshima for us is a construct and a readable invention is that it leads very easily to the claim that different versions of Hiroshima — because they are all constructs and readable inventions — all have the same truth value. And one thing which Ermarch's statement does not take fully into account is that in our world there are different versions of Hiroshima. I write this after having read in a daily newspaper this morning that the organizers of an exhibition featuring the aeroplane which dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima have been pressurized into removing material about the horrific effects of the explosion from display, after protests from American veterans who found such material gave 'too pro-Japanese a slant' to the exhibition. One person's Hiroshima is another person's Japanese propaganda. And if both are to be classed merely as constructs and readable inventions, then we would be left in a position in which we had to allow everyone their own Hiroshima, with no grounds for privileging one rather than another invention other than, perhaps, that of aesthetic preference.

**VII**

**Textualism and Reference**

**Reality or ‘Reality’?**

It seems clear that an absolutely central point which is at issue in these debates is the familiar one of reference. Many of the debates with which these early sections are concerned are new versions of old debates, except that instead of asking whether human thought or consciousness actually create a reality which is then deemed to exist independently of such mental activity, **texts** are substituted for thought and consciousness. (Thus preparing the way for a further question about whether texts themselves are the product of thought, and so on.) In other words, what we are seeing rehearsed are some of the traditional debates between realists and idealists, with a sideways shift of emphasis from thought to text.

I do not think that an extensive recapitulation of these debates would be all that helpful here, but for the record I will briefly outline what my own position is. I am a realist to the extent that I believe that if the human race had never emerged, the universe would still exist — and that it will continue to exist when the human race (or any other beings with the capacity to perceive and reflect on the reality around themselves) has vanished. Furthermore, certain aspects of human experience have a reality which is independent of our understanding of them. At the same time, it is clear that without human thought certain aspects of what human beings experience as their reality would cease to exist. As David-Hillel Ruben puts it, 'there can be no knowledge in a world in which there are no individual men to have that knowledge' (1977, p155), and human knowledge is certainly real. In one sense, then, thought does create aspects of reality. In the same way, language does not just give human beings a knowledge of what is, it also creates new levels of reality. And so do texts — emplotments of what is or has been.

Freud's analyses of the human psyche do not just tell us about what is the case, they also create that new element of reality which is a knowledge (or, if you prefer, a misunderstanding) of what is the case. A historical explanation is necessarily to some extent creative because it produces belief, and human beings act on their beliefs — however misguidedly and indirectly. Thus the history of the Second World War does not just tell us what was the case; even though the events and beliefs that constituted the war exist independently of it, it also produces patterns of understanding (or misunderstanding) which are real and have real effects.

Thus it is true both to say that the reality emplotted by a text is prior to and independent of that text, and also that texts can be to a certain extent constitutive of reality. (As I will attempt to argue much later in this book,
the issues raised by fiction complicate this picture because fictional texts have a more complex and mediated relationship to extratextual reality, but nevertheless what I have said about texts in general applies too, I believe, to fictional texts.

As my comments on Hiroshima should make clear, at its most extreme textualism can deny or imply a denial of the existence of any extratextual reality — or, alternatively, can suggest that such a reality is unrecognizable. In an article published in a collection of essays on the representation of the Nazi Holocaust, Christopher Browning draws attention to the fact that the development of such ideas by literary critics and historians has on occasion been put to shocking use. Writing about the Canadian lawyer Douglas Christie, who, according to Deborah Lipstadt (1994, p160), is ‘the main legal defender of Holocaust deniers, antisemites, Nazi war criminals, and neo-Nazis in Canada’, Browning shows how the seemingly ivory-tower theories of contemporary literary criticism can be made to engage with the real world in ways that are anything but unimportant:

A related argument, dealing with documentary evidence rather than postwar testimony, was made by Robert Faurisson, a deactivated professor of literature at the University of Lyons. During each trial he was in constant attendance as an advisor to Christie and was certified as an expert witness in ‘text criticism’. Invoking the authority of recent theories of literary criticism, he claimed that the meaning of such terms found in Nazi documents as resettlement and special treatment could not be established by historical context. Since their meaning was indeterminate, an interpretation taking such terms literally and not as official euphemisms or code words for murder was quite valid. For Faurisson, of course, such literal interpretation also corresponded to objective historical truth. Neither he nor Christie has shied from working both sides of the objectivist-relativist fence. (1992, p339, n12)

According to Deborah Lipstadt, Faurisson’s area of specialization ‘is the rather unique field of the “criticism of texts and documents, investigation of meaning and counter-meaning, of the true and the false”’. Lipstadt points out that Faurisson’s ‘expertise’ has allowed him to claim that ‘the “so-called gassings” of Jews were a “gigantic politico-financial swindle whose beneficiaries are the state of Israel and international Zionism.” Its chief victims were the German people and the Palestinians’ (1994, p9). Her comments on the context in which such views have flourished are, to say the least, food for thought:

While Holocaust denial is not a new phenomenon, it has increased in scope and intensity since the mid-1970s. It is important to understand that the deniers do not work in a vacuum. Part of their success can be traced to an intellectual climate that has made its mark in the scholarly world during the past two decades. The deniers are plying their trade at a time when much of history seems to be up for grabs and attacks on the Western rationalist tradition have become commonplace.

This tendency can be traced, at least in part, to intellectual currents that began to emerge in the late 1960s. Various scholars began to argue that texts had no fixed meanings. The reader’s interpretation, not the author’s intention, determined meaning. Duke University professor Stanley Fish is most closely associated with this approach in the literary field. It became more difficult to talk about the objective truth of a text, legal concept, or even an event. In academic circles some scholars spoke of relative truths, rejecting the notion that there was one version of the world that was necessarily right while another was wrong. (1994, pp17–18)

This is not, of course, to suggest that Stanley Fish or others who have contributed to a more sceptical view of the possibility of isolating ‘the objective truth of a text’, as Lipstadt puts it, are in any way to be blamed for the activities of such as Faurisson. Indeed, Lipstadt makes it clear that in her view such a shift in attitudes had certain things to recommend it: it placed an important, though possibly overstated, emphasis on the role played by the reader’s perspective in assigning meaning to a text, and it was a reminder that the interpretations of the less powerful groups in society have generally been ignored. Against this, however, had to be set the fact that it also fostered an atmosphere in which it became harder to say that an idea was beyond the pale of rational thought. At its most radical it contended that there was no bedrock thing such as experience. Experience was mediated through one’s language. The scholars who supported this deconstructionist approach were neither deniers themselves nor sympathetic to the deniers attitudes; most had no trouble identifying Holocaust denial as disingenuous. But because deconstruction argued that experience was relative and nothing was fixed, it created an atmosphere of permissiveness towards questioning the meaning of historical events and made it hard for its proponents to assert that there was anything ‘off-limits’ for this skeptical approach. (1994, p18)

Given such possibilities of grotesque misapplication (or application) of theories denying that textual evidence was always indeterminate, literary and other theorists were very clearly faced with a renewed moral responsibility to follow through the full implications that their ideas might have in extra-academic contexts.

In his introduction to the volume of essays in which Christopher Browning’s essay is published, Saul Friedlander puts the matter clearly:

notwithstanding the importance one may attach to postmodern attempts at confronting what escapes, at least in part, established historical and...
Artistic categories of representation, the equivocation of postmodernism concerning 'reality' and 'truth' — that is, ultimately, its fundamental relativism — confronts any discourse about Nazism and the Shoah with considerable difficulties. I cannot but adopt Pierre Vidal-Naquet's... words: 'I was convinced that... everything should necessarily go through a discourse... but beyond this, or before this, there was something irreducible which, for better or worse, I would still call reality. Without this reality, how could we make a difference between fiction and history?' (1992, p20)

'Something irreducible which, for better or worse, I would still call reality:' This is a conclusion drawn by others concerned with the Holocaust. The word used by Deborah Lipstadt is 'irrefutable'.

Each one tries to glean some new insight or understanding from a story already known, seeking some new way of interpreting the past to help us better understand the present. That interpretation always involves some constant 're-visioning' of the past. By its very nature the business of interpretation cannot be purely objective. But it is built on a certain body of irrefutable evidence: Slavery happened; so did the Black Plague and the Holocaust. (1994, p21)

Now it might be countered that this is the way in which extreme textualism in the field of history can be assaulted, but it is hard to see how such a strategy could successfully be applied unadapted to the field of literary criticism. Literary interpretation is not built on a certain body of irrefutable evidence in quite the same way: 'slavery happened' and 'Darcy eventually marries Elizabeth Bennett' are statements which clearly differ in terms of their truth status. Deborah Lipstadt has noted that those genuine historians (rather than covert apologists for Nazism) investigating the Holocaust have recognized that not all the stories told by the Holocaust's victims are reliable. As a result, such historians have adopted from anthropology a procedure known as 'triangulation', in which a survivor's testimony is matched with other forms of evidence, including documents and other historical data (1994, pp53-4). Most literary critics recognize that literary interpretations can also be authenticated in different ways, but that these tend to be less precise, less straightforward than 'triangulation'. Moreover, as I will attempt to demonstrate, there are important (and common-sense) differences between works of literature which appear to refer to real events such as the sinking of the Titanic, and works of literature which present us with fictions.

One solution to some of these problems is to give up the attempt to combat textualism in literary studies, to concede that there is no basis for preferring one interpretation of a literary text to another, save on aesthetic grounds. Textualism in the field of history can then be opposed much in the way Lipstadt does, by reverting to a traditional distinction between literary and historical texts: historical texts relate to an independent reality which is pre- and extratextual and whose objectivity can test the truth or falsity of these texts. Such a solution is by no means new: Sir Philip Sidney declared that poetry could not tell lies because it affirmed nothing, and he was by no means the first to banish literary works to a limbo of practical impotence and political irrelevance.

Many of those recent critics and theorists involved in the 'turn to history' have thus had to define themselves in opposition to two limits: on the one hand a textualism that denies that textual accounts of any sort can ever be ranked in terms of their relative truth or falsity, and on the other a traditionalism that accepts that historical texts can be so ranked by appeal to an objective reality which is seen to be relatively unproblematic, but which believes that the only grounds for preferring one interpretation of a literary text to another are aesthetic, and subjective — matters of personal taste and preference. The first of these solutions trivializes literary texts along with all other texts; the second restores the importance of historical texts at the cost of again trivializing literary ones.

It is for this reason that New Historicism literary critics (using this term as a blanket description to describe a range of different theoretical positions and critical practices) have been forced to find some new answers: because the existing answers of new textualists and of old historians (and old aesthetes) are found to be equally unacceptable. What is required of such answers is that they provide some means to justify the importance of literary texts which goes beyond that of providing documentary historical evidence. For most of the critics with whom I shall be concerned this has involved attempts to analyse and display the various and complex ways in which literature interlocks with social and historical realities. In particular, it has involved attempts to grapple with the complex ways in which literary works arise out of and engage with a reality that may be mediated through texts or discourses, but which also exists independently of them.

VIII
Michel Foucault's Theory of Discourse

Most commentators on the New Historicism agree that the writings of Michel Foucault have been an important element in the theoretical movements behind the 'turn to history'. Foucault is a writer whose work is
difficult to summarize or to gloss; not only does it range over a large number of subjects but it also manifests a constant element of self-criticism and modification. Even within the space of a single book we can see Foucault reconsidering his methods and reassessing their relevance to the direction in which his argument is proceeding. Richard Rorty, as has been seen, names Foucault as one of his 'textualists', and yet Foucault is inconsistent when it comes to the issue of the relationship between texts and the non-textual. Foucault's influence on such groupings as the New Historicism is not then likely to be a simple matter.

In spite of this it seems fair to claim that Foucault's theory of discourse constitutes a major influence on those who have contributed to the 'turn to history'. 'Theory of discourse' is perhaps too optimistic a way of putting it; even in his *The Archaeology of Knowledge* - the work in which Foucault addresses the problem of defining discourse most directly - he admits to considerable vacillation and inconsistency:

> Lastly, instead of gradually reducing the rather fluctuating meaning of the word 'discourse', I believe that I have in fact added to its meanings: treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that allows for a certain number of statements; and have I not allowed this same word 'discourse', which should have served as a boundary around the term 'statement', to vary as I shifted my analysis or its point of application, as the statement itself faded from view? (1972, p80)

This fluctuation notwithstanding, it is discourse as 'a regulated practice that allows for a certain number of statements' that has generally been taken to be central to Foucault's use of the term. The definition shows the influence of structuralist ideas in spite of Foucault's expressed reservations concerning structuralism: 'discourse' for Foucault focuses not upon the expressive force involved in a statement within a discursive formation, but on those rules that allow the statement to be made; not on meaning but on meaning-enabling rules and conventions. Later on in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* Foucault adds that a discursive formation is 'the principle of dispersion and redistribution, not of formulations, not of sentences, not of propositions, but of statements', and that 'the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation; thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse' (1972, pp107-8).

Such a theory of discourse is not without its problems - not least that of defining what a 'system of formation' is and how it can be recognized. But at its best (or, to put it another way, in certain of Foucault's formulations but not in others) it is arguably anti-monocular in the sense in which I used this term in my Introduction, for it focuses attention both on to the conditions of emergence of a text and also on to the text's developing life through history. The strongest statement of such a dialectical approach to be found in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* is perhaps the following one.

Foucault here refers to 'the statement', but his argument nonetheless has clear implications for texts - including literary works:

> The challenge, then, must not be treated as an event that occurred in a particular time and place, and that the one can do is recall it - and celebrate it from afar off - in an act of memory. But neither is it an ideal form that can be actualized in any body, at any time, in any circumstances, and in any material conditions. Too repeatable to be entirely identifiable with the spatio-temporal coordinates of its birth (it is more than the place and date of its appearance), too bound up with what surrounds it and supports it to be as free as a pure form (it is more than a law of construction governing a group of elements), it is endowed with a certain modifiable heavity, a weight relative to the field in which it is placed, a constancy that allows of various uses, a temporal permanence that does not have the inertia of a mere trace or mark, and which does not sleep on its own past. (1972, pp104-5)

What is striking here is that Foucault underwrites neither a formalist or 'textualist' treatment of the statement as pure *enonce* wholly free from the conditions of its creation and birth, nor an 'old historicist' view of the statement as a goldfish that must swim in the bowl of its originating context if it is not to die. Foucault's argument in this quotation avoids some of the more rash and extreme polemics against originary meaning of which he can be guilty, and instead balances the need to pay attention to those spatio-temporal coordinates of [the statement's] birth with which the statement cannot be 'entirely identifiable', against the need to recognize the statement's 'modifiable heavity'. 'Modifiable heavity' strikes me as a fine description of the literary work's paradoxical identity: 'heavy' - that is, resistant to being shifted around by us, distinct, not reducible to its origins or the uses to which we would put it - but at the same time possessed of a heavity that does get modified from reading to reading, from historical period to historical period. Discourse, Foucault argues, 'must not be referred to the distant presence of the origin, but as and when it occurs' (1972, p25) - including, presumably, its first appearance.

Foucault's position here is, then, an anti-essentialist one. For him, the 'frontiers of a book are never clear-cut; beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network' (1972, p25). Indeed, as his later comments make clear, the book is a node within many networks - not just at the time of its first publication but also subsequently. This is not just an anti-essentialist position but also a dialectical or relational one; the book is not just 'caught up' in systems of reference, but these systems of reference actually bring the book into existence - not in a physical but in an interpretative sense: [T]he object does not await in limbo the order that will free it and enable it to become embodied in a visible and prolix objectivity; it does not pre-exist itself, held back by some obstacle at the
first edges of light. It exists under the positive conditions of a complex group of relations’ (1972, p45). There is more:

These relations are established between institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization; and these relations are not present in the object; it is not they that are deployed when the object is being analysed; they do not indicate the web, the immanent rationality, that ideal nerve that reappears totally or in part when one conceives of the object in the truth of its concept. They do not define its internal constitution, but what enables it to appear, to juxtapose itself in relation to them, to define its difference, its irreducibility, and perhaps even its heterogeneity, in short, to be placed in a field of exteriority. (p45)

Clearly, then, when ‘institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization’ change, then the relations between them and the object must change, and thus the object itself will alter. Hence Foucault’s position has built into it a conception of the historical life of the object, a life which will be richer the more complex the object’s relations are. With a literary work whose relations to ‘economic and social processes’ are extremely complex we can expect to see an extremely complex historical life:

The affirmation that the earth is round or that species evolve does not constitute the same statement before and after Copernicus, before and after Darwin; it is no… for such simple formulations, that the meaning of the words has changed; what changed was the relation of these affirmations to other propositions, their conditions of use and reinvestment, the field of experience, of possible verifications, of problems to be resolved, to which they can be referred. (p103)

If this is true, then think how much more development and alteration there must be in the life of a literary work through history.

What implications does such theoretical work have for the literary critic? As one might expect from the man who wrote ‘What is an Author?’ (1980), Foucault is not especially interested in directing attention back to the origins of a literary work in an authorial consciousness:

Now, the function of enunciative analysis is not to awaken texts from their present sleep, and, by reciting the marks still legible on their surface, to rediscover the flash of their birth; on the contrary, its function is to follow them through their sleep, or rather to take up the related themes of sleep, oblivion, and lost origin, and to discover what mode of existence may characterize statements, independently of their enunciation, in the density of time in which they are preserved, in which they are reactivated, and used, in which they are also – but this was not their original destiny – forgotten, and possibly even destroyed. (1972, p123)

Even when Foucault is interested in a statement’s first appearance in public, then, it is in terms of the network of relations which gives it its identity and not the originating consciousness of its human parent. As the above statement makes quite clear, Foucault is not interested in enunciation as against énoncé. Moreover, although it is apparent that it is possible to find statements in Foucault’s writings which are what I have termed ‘non-monocular’ in their view of statements and texts, it is necessary to admit that it is also easy to find other statements in which one of his critical eyes is less than fully open. For if at one point Foucault admits to a recognition of the ‘heaviness’ of the statement or text and the (admittedly limited) interpretative relevance of ‘the spatio-temporal coordinates of its birth’, at other times he is happy to allow the statement to drift away from the ‘flash’ of its birth, and he is unwilling to challenge its drifting away from its origin in a sleep that he treats more like an awakening, an awakening to potentialities impossible unless it achieves independence of its enunciation and is allowed to be ‘reactivated, and… forgotten, and possibly even destroyed’.

Thus although Foucault’s work undoubtedly encourages a complex view of a statement as having a ‘heaviness’ which is certainly related to the conditions of its birth while (presumably) modifying or losing some or all of this heaviness in the sleep of its existence in times other than those in which it was born, the emphasis of his work seems more on the sleep than the weight. If we gloss the traditional function of scholarship as being that of awakening literary works from their present sleep and reminding them or their readers of who or what they ‘really are’, then it must be said that the emphasis of Foucault’s work is likely to find favour not with the traditional scholar, but more with the literary sociologist investigating the ‘sleep’ of literary works through a range of different interpretive contexts.

To this extent it may appear odd that Foucault is more often cited as an intellectual patron of the (largely) American New History than of the (largely) British cultural materialism – odd, because it is the latter rather than the former group of critics and theorists which has laid more emphasis on the need to pursue the literary work through its ‘sleep’ in cultures different from that in which it first saw the light of day.

The oddity diminishes somewhat, however, when we note the distance between Foucault’s theoretical positions and those of traditional Marxism – a distance that seems likely to have contributed to making his work more palatable to American New Historians than to British cultural materialists. Both Foucault and (probably all) Marxists agree that a statement cannot be examined ‘in itself’ in terms of a self-identical meaning, but must be understood to produce a meaning through its relations to institutions, economic and social processes, behavioural patterns, systems of norms, techniques, types of classification, modes of characterization. Marxists, however, have gone beyond this to arrange such determinants and other factors in particular hierarchies of determination, and thus have believed themselves to have had a clearer view of whether (for example) an economic process is more or less fundamental in this hierarchy of determination than is a
system of norms. This is not to say that Marxist analyses have no gaps of their own (for example: in the life of a statement over time what respective weight do we give to the ‘economic basis’ of the society in which the statement was made, and what to the ‘economic basis’ of the societies within which it survives?). But it does leave Foucault’s discursive formations seeming very vague in contrast to the components of a Marxist analysis of society, not least when they are used as a guide to interpretative action. Foucauldian discourse, then, has little in common with the Marxist concept of ideology – itself one of the more problematic and controversial of Marxist analytical terms. Indeed, Foucault’s description of literature as both something which bases itself on, and is, ‘true discourse’, is very far removed from many Marxist accounts which place literature among the ideologies.

Consider a statement to which I have already referred. The frontiers of a book are never clear-cut; beyond the title, the first lines, and the last full stop, beyond its internal configuration and its autonomous form, it is caught up in a system of references to other books, other texts, other sentences: it is a node within a network (1972, p23). There is nothing here to suggest where one should start in tracing this system of references, these networks – references and networks which, presumably, change from reading situation to reading situation. Thus in a long account of the ‘associated field’ that turns a sentence or a series of signs into a statement, Foucault lists the following components:

- the series of other formulations within which the statement appears and forms one element;
- all the formulations to which the statement refers (implicitly or not);
- all the formulations whose subsequent possibility is determined by the statement, and which may follow the statement as its consequence, its natural successor;
- all the formulations whose status the statement in question shares (adapted from 1972, pp98–9).

With no guidance as to which of these factors is determining, which are primary and which are secondary, an investigator could spend a lifetime researching a single statement from, say, a play by Shakespeare without exhausting his or her potential material. One would like to know: where does a particular discursive formation begin and end, and what are, typically, its determining elements?

Unfortunately, these are questions which Foucault rarely addresses, and to which he seems not to give consistent answers. At this point his shifting definitions of what a discourse is (‘treating it sometimes as the general domain of all statements, sometimes as an individualizable group of statements, and sometimes as a regulated practice that allows for a certain number of statements’) becomes a problem for the investigator concerned to set – say – a literary work in the context of its relevant discursive practice or practices:

Foucault writes of ‘systems of formation’ of a discourse, but these are not really defined in such a way as to make clear what the ‘laws’ which lie behind their formation are.

[And by discourse, then, I meant that which was produced (perhaps all that was produced) by the groups of signs. But I also meant a group of acts of formulation, a series of sentences or propositions. Lastly – and it is this meaning that was finally used (together with the first, which served in a provisional capacity) – discourse is constituted by a group of sequences of signs, in so far as they are statements, that is, in so far as they can be assigned particular modalities of existence. And if I succeed in showing, as I shall try to do shortly, that the law of such a series is precisely what I have so far called a discursive formation, if I succeed in showing that this discursive formation really is the principle of dispersion and redistribution, not of formulations, not of sentences, not of propositions, but of statements (in the sense in which I have used this word), the term discourse can be defined as the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation; thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse. (1972, pp107–8)

It cannot be said that the reader of The Archaeology of Knowledge is offered much unambiguous advice as to how to settle boundary disputes between different discourses; Foucault’s discourses are given an autonomy and self-sufficiency on the theoretical plane which parallels that granted language games by Wittgenstein, while in practice (as, it will be seen, Foucault admits) reality is a lot more messy. Foucault suggests that discursive

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7 The comments come in Foucault’s lecture ‘The Discourse on Language’, which is printed as an appendix to The Archaeology of Knowledge. For, even with the sixth century Greek poets, true discourse – in the meaningful sense – inspiring respect and terror, to which all were obliged to submit, because it held sway over all and was pronounced by men who spoke as of right, according to ritual, meted out justice and attributed to each his rightful share; it prophesied the future, not merely announcing what was going to occur, but contributing to its actual event, carrying men along with it and thus weaving itself into the fabric of fate (1972, p218). ‘I am thinking of the way Western literature has, for centuries, sought to base itself in nature, in the plausible, upon sincerity and science – in short, upon true discourse’ (1972, p219).

8 A refusal to rank determining factors in hierarchies is common to a number of otherwise very different theorists of the last few decades. In my next section I will refer to Hayden White’s view of non-narrativized reality as constituted by ‘chains of mechanical causes and effects’, and later on I will argue that Raymond Williams’s rejection of the Marxist base-superstructure model in favour of his concept of ‘structures of feeling’ leaves him, in like manner, with a multiplicity of determining relationships any one of which may be dominant. I will go on to suggest that this common refusal to espouse a theory which involves ranking determinants in hierarchies is reflected in the woolliness of much American New Historical discussion of social determination, and I will refer to lain Wright’s telling criticism of Stephen Greenblatt’s concept of circulation on just these grounds.
formations are recognized through a 'system of dispersion' such that 'between objects, types of statement, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlations, positions and functionings, transformations)' (1972, p.38). The trouble is that, as Foucault implies elsewhere, one can define all sorts of rival systems of dispersion between these different elements.

There is also the problematic issue of the relation of discourse to the non-discursive. Take the following statement:

The determination of the theoretical choices that were actually made is also dependent upon another authority. This authority is characterized first by the function that the discourse under study must carry out in a field of non-discursive practice. The General Grammar played a role in pedagogic practice . . . (1972, pp.67-8)

From this it would appear that pedagogy is not a discursive practice, although why pedagogy should be distinguished from medicine in this way is not at all clear.

IX

Hayden White: History as Text

Narrative theory – sometimes called narratology – has played a significant part in the development of the New Historicism, and has helped to undermine the comfortable assumption that the academic disciplines of history and literary criticism are fundamentally distinct in terms of their methodologies. Both historians and novelists (and literary critics) tell stories, and the way in which they tell stories has been the starting point for attempts to demonstrate that the narratives of the historian have far more in common with those of the novelist than had previously been supposed – especially by historians themselves. The debates engendered by such arguments have had, not surprisingly, their greatest impact within the discipline of history. But a more long-term effect has been that of forcing literary critics to look afresh at 'the historicity of texts, and the textuality of history', as Louis Montrose has expressed it.

Without much doubt Hayden White's book *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973) was instrumental in setting an agenda for much subsequent debate. The radical nature of White's challenge to established historiography was apparent from the start of his book; instead of accepting that the writing of history is to be distinguished from other writing by means of its factual subject matter, White started off from an emphasis of a very different sort, on the work of history as 'a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse'. There is a clear textualist emphasis here, an emphasis not on the object of historical writing but on its textual form. Such an emphasis has the potential of drawing attention not to what distinguishes historical writing from other forms of writing, but to what it shares with other narrative discourses:

In this theory I treat the historical work as what it most manifestly is: a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse. Histories (and philosophies of history as well) combine a certain amount of 'data', theoretical concepts for 'explaining' these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past. In addition, I maintain, they contain a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively 'historical' explanation should be. This paradigm functions as the 'metahistorical' element in all historical works that are more comprehensive in scope than the monograph or archival report. (1973, p.xi)

Now it should be noted that White's interest in narrative structure is here limited to the *presentation* of both 'data' and theoretical concepts for explaining these data; there is no suggestion at this stage that historical events are in any way themselves created by their narrative presentation. But White does then go on to outline three kinds of strategy by means of which historians are able to gain different kinds of 'explanatory effect':

I call these different strategies explanation by formal argument, explanation by emplotment, and explanation by ideological implication. Within each of these different strategies I identify four possible modes of articulation by which the historian can gain an explanatory effect of a specific kind. For arguments there are the modes of Formism, Organicism, Mechanism, and Contextualism; for emplotments there are the archetypes of Romance, Comedy, Tragedy, and Satire, and for ideological implication there are the tactics of Anarchism, Conservatism, Radicalism, and Liberalism. A specific combination of modes comprises what I call the historiographical 'style' of a particular historian or philosopher of history. . . .

In order to relate these different styles to one another as elements of a single tradition of historical thinking, I have been forced to postulate a deep level of consciousness on which a historical thinker chooses conceptual strategies by which to explain or represent his data. On this level, I believe, the historian performs an essentially poetic act, in which he prefigures the historical field and constitutes it as a domain upon which to bring to bear the specific theories he will use to explain 'what was really happening' in it. (1973, p.x)

White outlines four types of such prefiguration: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, and is soon ready to confirm that by disclosing the linguistic ground on which a given idea of history was constituted, he has attempted to establish 'the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work' (1973, p.x). 

Crucial to White's approach, then, is a distinction between different 'levels of conceptualization' in the historical work, which he enumerates as follows: '(1) chronicle; (2) story; (3) mode of emplotment; (4) mode of
argument; and (5) mode of ideological implication’ (1973, p5). For our purposes it is the distinction White makes between the first three of these categories that is of interest: while a chronicle is a mere list of events with no beginning and no end, a chronicle is organized into a story ‘by the further arrangement of the events into the components of a “spectacle” or process of happening, which is thought to possess a discernible beginning, middle, and end’ (1973, p5). Finally, when the historian provides a meaning for his story ‘by identifying the kind of story that has been told’ (a tragedy or a comedy, for example), then he has provided an explanation by emplotment’ (1973, p7).

It is fair to say that White does not appear to be wholly clear and consistent in the distinctions he makes between, for example, ‘organizing into a story’, and ‘emplotment’ – and this should not surprise us as the distinction between story and plot in narrative theory, although enormously productive, has proved to be far more complex and problematic than was once supposed. In a later article, for example, White attempts to distinguish between a historical discourse that narrates, and one that narrativizes. Thus a discourse that narrates ‘openly adopts a perspective that looks out on the world and reports it’, whereas one which narrativizes ‘feigns to make the world speak itself and speak itself as a story’ (1981a, pp2–3). This would certainly seem to suggest that the narrating of events (what one would normally refer to as telling a story) can be such as to avoid imposing an order on to the chaos of events, for in normal usage the verb ‘to narrate’ is not normally applied to the recounting of a chronicle (a sequence of events not linked by some sort of causality or other). If a historical discourse can narrate a story that just ‘looks out on the world and reports it’ and imposes no order on it, then this would suggest that it is possible for the historian to discover an order in the world, in the sequence of events. But later on in the same article White makes it quite clear that stories are always imposed by human beings on events in the world:

[T]his value attached to narrativity in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary. The notion that sequences of real events possess the formal attributes of the stories we tell about imaginary events could only have its origin in wishes, daydreams, reveries. Does the world really present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles and ends, and a coherence that permits us to see the ‘end’ in every beginning? Or does it present itself more in the forms that the annals and chronicles suggest, either as mere sequence without beginning or end or as sequences of beginnings that only terminate and never conclude? (1981a, p23)

In all this there seems to be some hesitation concerning the extent to which stories can or cannot be innocent of emplotment, and also concerning the extent to which stories are, or are not, to be found in the unannarrated world, the actual flow of historical events. Such issues, as we will see, are by no means unimportant, and form the basis of much later controversy around White’s work. There is however no doubt that White’s characterization of stories as fundamentally different from the world which they ostensibly describe, and with which they profess to engage, has the effect of trivializing them. From White’s perspective, stories have much the same function as that which Marx attributed to religion – the heart of a heartless world, the opiate of the people. Stories for White are ‘wishes, daydreams, reveries’ – and White seems less convinced than is Freud that our wishes, daydreams and reveries are produced by, and have a productive function in, the lives that we lead.

In particular, White’s clear belief that explanation and persuasion when practised by the historian have more to do with rhetoric than with fact – have, perhaps, only to do with rhetoric – are clearly extremely controversial. For it is apparent already in Metahistory that White believes order itself to be something which is imposed on events rather than something which is discoverable in them and their interrelations. ‘Unlike the novelist, the historian confronts a veritable chaos of events already constituted, out of which he must choose the elements of the story he would tell’ (1973, p6, n5). This leads White, ineluctably, to view different historical emplotments as enjoying a parity of accuracy and truth. (More precisely, that matters of accuracy and truth are relevant only when dealing with monadic events, and not when considering the virtues of different emplotments.) Not surprisingly, then, White admits that

My method, in short, is formalist. I will not try to decide whether a given historian’s work is a better, or more correct, account of a specific set of events or segment of the historical process than some other historian’s account of them; rather, I will seek to identify the structural components of these accounts. (1973, pp3–4)

In consort with such an approach, then, when discussing the work of Karl Marx, White is not prepared to assess whether Marx’s account of history is better or worse, more or less true or false, than the work of another historian:

My aim is to specify the dominant style of Marx’s thought about the structures and processes of history-in-general. I am interested in Marx primarily as a representative of a specific modality of historical consciousness, a representative who must be regarded as neither more nor less ‘true’ than the best representatives of other modalities with which it contended for hegemony in the consciousness of nineteenth-century European man. In my view, ‘history’, as a plenum of documents that attest to the occurrence of events, can be put together in a number of different and equally plausible narrative accounts of ‘what happened in the past’, accounts from which the reader, or the historian himself, may draw different conclusions about ‘what must be done’ in the present. With the Marxist philosophy of history, one can do neither more nor less than what one can do with other philosophies of history, such as those of Hegel, Nietzsche, and Croce, even
though one may be inclined to do different kinds of things on the basis of a belief in one’s philosophy’s truth. (1973, p283)

I find it curious that the historian is allowed talk of ‘the best representatives of other modalities’ – that is, to rank within a modality – but is not allowed to rank modalities themselves. I must also confess to a stunned inability to imagine what the world would now be like had the theories of Nietzsche had as much effect on the course of the twentieth century as have those of Marx.

White concludes that

The Marxist view of history is neither confirmable nor disconfirmable by appeal to ‘historica’ evidence’, for what is at issue between a Marxist and a non-Marxist view of history is the question of precisely what counts as evidence, and what implications for the comprehension of the present social reality are to be drawn from the evidence thus constituted. (1973, p284)

It is worth noting that in the two above quotations White is quite happy to see a cause-and-effect relationship between Marxism and a specific modality of historical consciousness’, while simultaneously denying that the logic of a Marxist account of history can possibly be said to be more or less true than any rival account. If one denies that one historical account in any way can be said to represent any reality higher or more complex than that of the individual events of history, what stronger evidence is there for seeing that historical account to represent a specific modality of historical consciousness? The answer would seem to be that as a (self-confessed) formalist, White – like all formalists – is happier seeing relations between formal structures (linguistic, intellectual, academic) than between such formal structures and the non-textual events of history.

Significantly, White sees history to be quite different from science in terms of its falsifiability:

We have no choice with respect to the principles of knowledge we must adopt for effecting transformations in, or for exercising control over, the physical world. We either employ scientific principles of analysis and understanding of the operations of nature or we fail in our efforts to control nature.

It is different with history. There are different possible ways of comprehending historical phenomena because there are different, and equally plausible, ways of organizing the social world which we create and which provides one of the bases of our experience of history itself. (1973, pp283–4)

I find this to be significant for two reasons. First, because it makes clear that White and Lyotard are in complete agreement that science and history proceed according to completely different rules – that they constitute different language games. Second, because it makes clear that for White the purposes of history do not include that of ‘effecting transformations in, or for exercising control over, the physical world’ – or, presumably, over the social world. Attempts to control the social world in a manner comparable to the way in which the scientist controls the physical world are categorized by White as ideological:

By the term ‘ideology’ I mean a set of prescriptions for taking a position in the present world of social praxis and acting upon it (either to change the world or to maintain it in its current state); such prescriptions are attended by arguments that claim the authority of ‘science’ or ‘realism’. (1973, p22)

If, then, attempts to change the world by reference to a theory of history cannot be underwritten by an appeal to the events of history themselves, and if different historical accounts are – in like manner – equally valid when judged by reference to historical events, then why should historical accounts ever be written? According to White, ‘the best grounds for choosing one perspective on history rather than another are ultimately aesthetic or moral rather than epistemological’ (1973, p81). But can one claim that one is making a moral (for example) choice when that choice can make no appeal to a non-subjective truth or to any possibility of bettering the world? It seems clear that such an attitude degrades moral and aesthetic choice to the level of – as Wordsworth put it in the Preface to the Lyrical Ballads – having ‘a taste for Poetry ... as if it were a thing as indifferent as a taste for rope-dancing, or Frontinian or Sherry’ (de Selincourt 1944, p394).

White clearly does not see it thus. According to him,

I would contend that the world has a specifically moral, as well as a determinative physical, meaning. Story forms, or what Northrop Frye calls plot structures, represent an armory of relational models by which what would otherwise be nothing but chains of mechanical causes and effects can be translated into moral terms. (1981b, p253)

The comment is revealing to the extent that it shows that White does believe that there are chains of cause and effect in the world; it would be interesting to know why the historian is unable to represent such processes and use them as the structuring principle of a historical narrative. But White’s causes and effects are of course only mechanical: human history here seems to be reduced to precisely the level of the physical world from which White has declared he wishes it to be distinguished. Are there no chains of cause and effect in history which have a moral dimension? According to White,

It is only by virtue of what it teaches about moral wisdom, or rather about the irreducible moralism of a life lived under the conditions of culture rather than nature, that narrative can claim cognitive authority at all. (1981b, p253)
Surely human beings live both in culture and nature? Is not culture built on, in, and around nature? White here presents us with a monastic vision of the moral world as parallel to but separate from the natural world.

At this point I would like to underline what seems to me to be the two key elements in White's arguments. First, that order exists in our accounts of events, and not in those events or their interrelations or succession themselves. In brief: no patterns of cause-and-effect can be attributed to events in history, which form a chaos quite different from the implied order of the physical world. Second, that attempts to find such an order are actually attempts to impose an order on the chaos of events by means of a sort of selective quotation; because of this, it is not possible to demonstrate the superiority of one such attempt over another, one story over another story, by appeal to the facts, the events of history.

It is this refusal to recognize any reason to prefer one historical emplotment to another (other than moral or aesthetic) which has been most controversial in White's work and not least when this work has touched upon sensitive issues relating to Nazism and the Second World War. In the same collection of essays on representations of the holocaust to which I referred earlier, Carlo Ginzburg takes White to task for extending his belief that different historical emplotments of the same events cannot be ranked by reference to the events with which they deal:

The Zionist historical explanation of the Holocaust, [Hayden] White says, is not a contra-vérité . . . but a truth: 'its truth, as a historical interpretation, consists precisely in its effectiveness [my italics] in justifying a wide range of current Israeli political policies that, from the standpoint of those who articulate them, are crucial to the security and indeed the very existence of the Jewish people.' In the same way, 'the effort of the Palestinian people to mount a politically effective [my italics] response to Israeli policies entails the production of a similarly effective [my italics] ideology, complete with an interpretation of their history capable of endowing it with a meaning that it has hitherto lacked.' We can conclude that if Faurisson's narrative were ever to prove effective, it would be regarded by White as true as well. (Ginzburg 1992, pp3; for Faurisson see p26)

The perhaps predictable result of arguing that one can decide between rival historical accounts of the same set of events only on moral or aesthetic grounds, and never in terms of their greater or lesser truthfulness, has by now degenerated into a rather squallid instrumentalism: we concoct fictions about the past (ideologies) so as to be able more effectively to get what we want in the present. I might add that I fail to understand how it is that narratives can help us to get what we want in the world but cannot reflect that world in an accurate manner.

Such problems emerge even more clearly in White's comments on the German revisionist historian Andreas Hillgruber, who controversially argued that the struggle of German soldiers on the eastern front during the Second World War was worthy of respect in terms of their perception of what they were fighting for. White acknowledges that this point of view is controversial, but counters:

Yet Hillgruber's suggestion for emplotting the story of the defense of the eastern front did not violate any of the conventions governing the writing of professionally respectable narrative history. He simply suggested narrowing the focus to a particular domain of the historical continuum, casting the agents and agencies occupying that scene as characters in a dramatic conflict, and emplotting this drama in terms of the familiar conventions of the genre of tragedy. (White 1992, p42)

So much the worse for the conventions governing the writing of professionally respectable narrative history. White seems unable to grasp the fact that 'narrowing the focus to a particular domain of the historical continuum, casting the agents and agencies occupying that scene as characters in a dramatic conflict, and emplotting this drama in terms of the familiar conventions of the genre of tragedy' (in other words, perhaps, ignoring that the tenacity of German soldiers on the eastern front was prolonging the war and allowing for the more complete murder of the Jews of Eastern Europe) is morally unacceptable precisely because it renders the particular emplotment in question adequate to those historical events which demand to be taken into account because they are causally linked to a particular domain of the historical continuum. What I am saying, then, is that an 'emplotted story' of the Second World War which sees the murder of the Jews and the military dedication of German east-front soldiers as unconnected is untrue; it can and must be rejected precisely because it inadequately measures up to 'what really happened'. It is not merely one possible emplotment among many, all equally true, if more or less morally or aesthetically pleasing. Such an interpretation, indeed, is morally unacceptable – but because it is not true, because it lies by omission.

In his introduction to the volume of essays to which I have been referring, Saul Friedlander offers a useful summary of White's position:

White's by now familiar position aims at systematizing a theory of historical interpretation based on a fundamental redefinition of traditional historical understanding: Language as such imposes on the historical
narrative a limited choice of rhetorical forms, implying specific emplotments, explicative models, and ideological stances. These unavoidable choices determine the specificity of various interpretations of historical events. There is no 'objective', outside criterion to establish that one particular interpretation is more true than another. In that sense White is close to what could be termed a postmodern approach to history. (Friedlander 1992. p6)

Why should White's work be of interest to literary critics? Why indeed have works such as Metahistory started to appear on the reading lists pinned up in departments of English as well as departments of history? What influence has White's work had? I think that a number of answers to these questions can be volunteered.

First, it will be noted that White uses a certain model and conception of literature to underpin his arguments. In referring to 'the ineluctably poetic nature of the historical work', White engages in a concealed categorization of the poetic work as one which cannot be judged in terms of the truth or falsity of its account: of the world. Such a categorization feeds off views of literature as a sort of invention or feigning which belongs to a world of the imagination quite distinct from the real world of fact and event. White's work thus presents us with what in many ways it is fair to describe as the transposition of formalism from literary criticism to historiography. Given the clearly postmodernist elements in White's work (mentioned by Friedlander), White's work has drawn attention to the formalist and anti-realist elements in postmodernism, and has presented literary critics with a view of what such elements can lead to. Literary critics are not normally asked to explain what implications their theories have for depictions of (or even the existence of) the Holocaust.

Second, that if there is no "objective", outside criterion to establish that one particular interpretation is more true than another, as Friedlander's account of White has it, then this undercuts much of the competitive energy of literary-critical argument during (at least) the present century, which has famously striven to determine which interpretations of literary works are the most true, and which are either inadequate or wrong. Literary critics have, therefore, a vested interest in determining whether or not White's view of the parity of interpretations is correct.

Third, White's work has drawn attention to what one may call the ideological dimension of emplotment, the fact that accounts of the world - whether histories of the Second World War or interpretations of Anna Karenina - inevitably organize their depictions in ways that have philosophical and ideological implications. Thus many of those recent critics who are least sympathetic to the formalist and anti-realist elements in White's work (myself included) have found much that is thought-provoking in the way he infuses an ideological dimension into the analysis of narrative and rhetorical techniques. Narratology, it should be remembered, grew out of structuralism, and its enormously important categorizing of narrative techniques and strategies was initially highly formal and technical in nature. White's work had the perhaps unexpected effect of drawing attention to the fact that narrative techniques - techniques of emplotment - are never ideologically neutral. This lesson has had a considerable impact on the way in which recent theories view the history of literary works' reception. It has, in other words, drawn attention to the ideological elements in literary criticism itself.

Another way of expressing this point is by saying that White has forced researchers in a number of fields to consider the extent to which interpretations are already explicit in reports, such that there are very few neutral 'facts'. In the critique of White to which I have already referred, Martin Jay takes White's two levels of 'narrativized chronicle' and 'the historian's imposition of plot and meaning', and suggests that these be seen, rather, as first- and second-order narratives:

For although not absolutely everything that historians fashion into their own stories is already emplotted by the actors, enough is to make it more than unformed raw material available as mere fodder for the historian's imagination. There is instead a process of negotiation that goes on between the two narrative orders, which prevents historical representation from being an utterly arbitrary concoction. (Jay 1992, p104)

The proposal is strikingly reminiscent of what a number of New Historical literary critics have argued concerning literary interpretation. The work of literature is not just fodder for the critic's imagination - but neither is it merely self-identical, carrying its own fully formed and final meaning within itself. Its meaning and significance for successive generations have to be regularly renegotiated. There is, following Bakhtin, a necessary dialogue between the critic and the work or the author, and between the twentieth-century critic and the nineteenth- or eighteenth-century one. If White's work dramatically exposes the inadequacy of a post-structuralist mise-en-abyme of self-generated interpretations by transposing it to the arena of history, it nevertheless draws attention to the impossibility of seeking refuge from such interpretative play in a simplistic realism. Thus if White's argument for preferring the more 'effective' emplotment meets with many of the same problems as Stanley Fish's 'interpretive community', like Fish's work it nonetheless forces the unconvicted to come up with some way of preferring one emplotment to another which is not that of a simplistic realism which ignores the saturation of facts by interpretation in human history and culture.

Finally, White's work has, I think, forced literary critics to think more of the problems of recapturing the past - problems faced both by the author and by the critic. The fact that White is primarily concerned with the discourses of the academic discipline of history but has utilized many theoretical insights from literary critics has helped this process.

If we move to a brief consideration of Howard Felperin's 1990 book The Uses of the Canon: Elizabethan Literature and Contemporary Theory, it is very quickly apparent that recent literary criticism such as Felperin's which is engaged in productive dialogue with New Historical ideas is throwing up
some very similar topics to those we have seen emerging from Hayden White’s work. Felperin sees much post-structuralist criticism to have ended up in a sort of conventionalist impassé:

The weakness of this new ‘conventionalism’, then, is a new vulnerability to the charge of relativism, in so far as its claim to objective validity or verifiability has been abandoned. Having insisted on the textuality of history and culture, what extratextual grounds are left on which to mount the claim that one’s own interpretations are correct or privileged, or to meet the charge from a resurgent ‘right’ that they are not? The deconstructive aporia beyond which the new historicism was supposed to have moved us thus returns in the form of a relativism that goes to the heart of its own project. Having left behind an older ‘empiricist’ or ‘realist’ historical narrative constituted by ‘facts’ and connected by ‘cause and effect’ for a ‘conventionalist’ historical hermeneutics consisting of only ‘texts’ and ‘discourses’, there is nothing solid to fall back on when its ‘knowledge’ is relativized as only a matter of opinion or interpretation. (1990, pvi)

This is surely no bad description of central problems in White’s work; White has himself declared, for example, that ‘There is an inexpungible relativity in every representation of historical phenomena’ (1992, p37). White’s work has put sharp focus on a dilemma faced by many contemporary literary critics influenced by post-structuralism, one expressed with plain directness by Felperin:

[The] relapse into ‘realism’ is particularly embarrassing for post-structuralist interpreters of all schools, whose commitment to what Catherine Belsey terms ‘discursive knowledge’ and Louis Montrose ‘the textuality of history’ has effectively deprived them of the right of appeal to an outdated or unsustainable objectivity, or in Montrose’s elegant phrasing, ‘the historicity of texts’, to substantiate their historical readings and clinch their political points. Short of bracketing everything one writes in inverted commas, there is no avoiding the relapse into a residual interpretative realism from which we have all taken leave – at least in theory. And even if one were to bracket everything thus, one would then be exposed to the opposite and no less vitiating charge of interpretive relativism. (1990, ppviii-ix)

If deconstruction achieved a limited notoriety outside the academy through Derrida’s ‘There is nothing outside the text’, textualism seems set to achieve the same goal through Louis Montrose’s ‘the historicity of texts, and the textuality of history’. Montrose has attempted to explain what he meant by this chiasmic and gnomic utterance as follows:

By the historicity of texts. I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing – not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the ‘documents’ upon which historians ground their own texts, called ‘histories’. (1989, p20)

We see here, I think, the same double emphasis which we have found in the claims of other ‘textualists’, but in a less extreme form. On the one hand there is the argument that human beings are forced recurrently to reinvent the past through textual interpretations, and on the other the argument that ‘we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question’.

Few (if any) have ever really gone so far as to claim that such access is possible. Nonetheless I call this a less extreme form because here Montrose does not attempt to obliterate the distinction between fictional and non-fictional texts, nor does he reject the possibility of preferring one historical account to another by means of an appeal to extratextual evidence. (I am not saying that this applies to all that Montrose has written on this subject, but it does apply to this particular statement.) Montrose here leaves open the question as to whether we can have access to a less than full, less than completely authentic past, but one which has an at least partially non-textual existence which is mediated to us by texts, and not created for us by texts. Nonetheless, I draw attention to the familiar double emphasis of textualism: no direct, non-textual access to the past; continual remaking of the past through subsequent textual mediations. It will be noted that this double emphasis has equally important implications for the disciplines of history and literary criticism, and for their relationship with each other. Perhaps one of the most important legacies of textualism has been that of shattering the Berlin wall between these two disciplines, leaving excited but nervous individuals wandering into recently out-of-bounds territory and meeting with those who live next door but who are strangers, while musing about the implications of this territorial revolution.

The recent turn to history (in literary studies and elsewhere) is then both a reaction against textualism and in part a product of it. It is a reaction against textualism inasmuch as it seeks to assert very strongly that there is something outside of the text which both produces the text and produces responses to it. At the same time the turn to history owes a debt to textualism inasmuch as it draws on textualist ideas to explore the complex and multifaceted life of the text in history.