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The narrative demands of postmodernist literacy history

My title, “The narrative demands of postmodernist literacy history” contains at least two terms that could command considerable commentary by way of definition right at the beginning, but I would like to leave these terms “postmodernist,” “narrative,” and especially “narrative literary history” open with the hope that the sense in which I am using these highly freighted expressions will emerge with some clarity as the discussion progresses. My intention, however, is to describe the background and theoretical contours of an approach to literary history that is both grounded in postmodernist thought as well as deeply committed to the proposition that history is necessarily narrative in nature. Although both of these premises have been strongly contested, I hope to make a compelling case for their viability, practicality, and efficacy in offering at least one credible means of access to the past.

1. Background of literary historiography

A convenient point of departure for a discussion of contemporary literary historiography is offered by the well-known book by David Perkins *Is Literary History Possible?* Hailed when it was first published in 1992 as a landmark study and a thorough diagnosis of the challenges of writing literary history, its answer is a qualified no if one understands literary history in the traditional and received manner. It is of particular interest to the topic at hand in that chapter 1 is devoted to the problems and failings of earlier examples of more or less narrative histories. Although offering limited praise to the great nineteenth-century literary histories

that are principally narrative in their discursive style and theoretical assumptions – like Hippolyte Taine’s *L’Histoire de la littérature anglaise* (1863), Francesco de Sanctis’s *Storia della letteratura italiana* (1870–71), and the Danish intellectual, Georg Brandes’s, *Hovedstrømninger i det 19. Aarhundredes Litteratur* (1871) – he proceeds to point out the inadequacy of their presentation by drawing primarily on British and American scholarship. Speaking in general terms, he formulates his objections largely with regard to his judgment that narrative history is necessarily and unavoidably a Procrustean endeavor. Literary historians must inescapably select particular details – including authors, works, and events – from a great jumble of particulars that often leave gaps and unbridgeable disjunctions. An intellectual act of violence ultimately forces, thus, an incoherent ensemble of facts into a coherent and basically linear narrative that can conveniently be broken up into periods and movements. There are, moreover, more events making up the past of a literary work than can reasonably be accommodated in any narrative of manageable size. The process of organizing the raw data introduces arbitrary choice as to what may be considered the cornerstone of the enterprise. In making these charges, Perkins departs from a fundamentally Aristotelian view of narrative that prescribes a beginning, middle, and end or in other words an opening, a crisis, and a denouement. To define a beginning for Perkins is an intellectual task tantamount to drawing a straight and stable line across a stream of flowing water.

In the next chapter entitled “The Postmodern Encyclopedia,” he presents views postmodern historiography as related to but at once contrasting with narrative history. He writes,

We have sophisticated conceptions of the past, but no adequate form in which to convey them. The two major forms of literary history are the encyclopedic and narrative. They are not opposites, since narrative is a way of combining events, while encyclopedic form is a way of arranging essays to make a larger work. (53)

Perkins, thus, understands the encyclopedic form to be a collection or anthology of essays. Although the work at large does not aspire to any overall narrative coherence, individual parts may well include narrative aspects. In drawing on the collective expertise of various contributors,

the goal of coherence is replaced by the desire for greater completeness. Most works of this kind have been undertaken with relatively little reflection on the ultimate conceptual foundations or implications of the method and have naïvely moved ahead with greater zeal than understanding. One of the works that Perkins selects for closer scrutiny is Elliott Emory's *Columbia Literary History of the United States* (1988), a tome running well over one thousand pages and consisting of contributions by sixty-six authors. Perkins notes that the general editor argues that the volume is not committed to anything since one essay may – and indeed does on occasion – contradict another in precision, critical method, and depth of scholarly acumen. He then quotes from the general introduction, which construes these occasional contradictions as “postmodern” and continues, “it acknowledges adversity, complexity, and contradictions by making them structural principles, and it forgoes closure as well as consensus” (56). The questionable adequacy of this characterization of the postmodern notwithstanding, it is clear that this formal schema for representing the past is significantly different from narrative history and in its overall lack of coherence may leave particularly the inexperienced non-specialist awash in a mass of detail that allows for little comprehensive understanding. An even more extreme example of this kind of encyclopedic presentation is found in Denis Hollier's *A New History of French Literature* (1989) and in a more recent volume employing the same expository strategy, David E. Wellbery and Judith Ryan's *A New History of German Literature* (2004), both published by Harvard University Press. Unlike earlier examples, both of these consist of a vast number of five- to six-page essays on highly diverse topics arranged in chronological order from the early Middle Ages to the present. The implied reader is someone already possessing a considerable mastery of the history of French or German literature who will appreciate the frequently provocative and highly original essays on specific and often rather narrow topics. Any sense of periodization has been abandoned but more arresting is the fact that there is no apparent logic to the selection of topics discussed other than what might prove particularly interesting. While acknowledging the importance of the histories of American and French literature, Perkins finds them seriously lacking. He sees them as a response to a

crisis in literary historiography but woefully deficient. In summary, he notes,

Encyclopedic form is intellectually deficient. Its explanations of past happenings are piecemeal, or may be inconsistent with each other, and are admitted to be inadequate. It precludes a vision of its subject. Because it aspires to reflect the past in its multiplicity and heterogeneity, it does not organize the past, and in this sense it is not history. (60)

With regard to the last observation, it is worth noting that when the *New History of French Literature* was published in a French translation, the title's reference to it being a history was omitted altogether. It is simply entitled *De la littérature française*.

Against this background, I should like to make a number of comments on the critiques of narrative and "postmodern" literary historiography as Perkins has described them. Let me first clearly acknowledge that he is far from a lone voice in questioning the viability, possible accuracy, and distorting effects of narrative histories. The role of narrativity in historical exposition has been widely discussed since the time of Kant and Hegel and during the early and middle decades of the twentieth century seemed particularly unappealing to theorists as well as practicing historians. Among the most prominent to distance themselves from narrativity were the scholars associated with the French *Annales* school whose most preeminent exponent was Ferdinand Braudel. They and many others in various parts of the world admitted that narrative history might be satisfactory for popular or mass-market histories but held little promise for the more serious academic historian. Despite the widely held contempt for clearly and blatantly narrative approaches, interest in the overlapping junctures of history in an abstract sense, rhetoric and the rhetorical structures of which even the most hard core of the academic historians continued to avail themselves, and subtle narrative structure all continued to attract guarded attention but typically very much in the background. By the mid-century when the linguistic turn that had first manifested itself

in philosophy began exerting its influence in historiography, theorists emerging from the analytic school of thought turned to the narrative¹.

Whereas the Anglo-American turn to narrativity arose from analytic philosophy, the French response emerged from structuralist efforts to understand the mute system of conventions and, of course, the structures that characterized historical discourse. Although the *Annalistes* had roundly condemned narrative histories as superficial and deficient in analytic depth, the archeologist and classical historian, Paul Veyne (*Comment on écrit l'histoire: Essai d'épistémologie* [1971]) and Paul Ricoeur, to whom we will return shortly, advanced robust and sophisticated defenses of historical narrative.

Neither the Anglo-American nor the French assertions of the value and indeed the primacy of narrative was without its critics and detractors. Animated debates engaged many scholars on both sides, and although many retained some degree of skepticism with regard to the value of narrativity, one can certainly speak of a mid-century renewal of narrative. Although wide-ranging treatments of narrative history did not focus attention specifically on literary history, the issues they raise, analyze, and critique apply to the history of literary culture as well as to social, political, or economic history.

¹ Among the most important examples are W.B. Gallie's *Philosophy and the Historical Understanding*, Arthur Danto's *Analytical Philosophy of History*, and the work of Louis Mink. Of these Danto is particularly outspoken in his thesis that the construction of narratives – i.e. telling stories – is the way historians organize events and suggest their relative importance. Lawrence Stone offered what is probably the most provocative and influential vindication of narrative in his essay “The Revival of Narrative: Reflections on a New Old History” *Past & Present* 85 (1979): 3–24. His opening paragraph makes his intentions very clear. “Historians have always told stories. From Thucydides and Tacitus to Gibbon and Macaulay, the composition of narrative in lively and elegant prose was always accounted their highest ambition. History was regarded as a branch of rhetoric. For the last fifty years, however, this story-telling function has fallen into ill repute among those who have regarded themselves as in the vanguard of the profession, the practitioners of the so-called ‘new history’ of the post-Second-World-War era.’ In France story-telling was dismissed as ‘l’histoire événementielle.’ Now, however, I detect evidence of an undercurrent which is sucking many prominent ‘new historians’ back again into some form of narrative.”

Although Perkins was writing well after these intellectually highly stimulating debates had taken place, he generally fails to situate his arguments in the context of any of the discussions but adopts what he calls an empirical approach to demonstrate “the insurmountable contradictions in organizing, structuring, and presenting the subject; and the always unsuccessful attempt of every literary history to explain the development of literature that it describes” (ix). Although it is certainly legitimate to limit the scope of the study to the empirical examination of literary histories, the superficiality of some of his argumentation that could have been avoided by broader contextualization is more difficult to sanction².

One reason literary histories in Perkins’s view are beset with insurmountable contradictions and always provide unsuccessful accounts of literary development is that he typically sets the bar needlessly and artificially high. The fact that “organizing, structuring, and presenting the subject” will always introduce certain orientations, desires, ideologies, or biases is not a defect but an unavoidable aspect of all discourse. One precept that a version of poststructuralism far more robust than the generally misleading conception Perkins evokes has convincingly argued that truth only exists in language and all linguistic articulations are made from a particular point of view. There is no privileged position that allows for absolutely objective observations and statements that are entirely free from some arbitrary element. The literary historian’s challenge is not so much a matter of striving for absolute objectivity, but rather of recognizing and acknowledging in so far as possible his or her discursive position at the same time as striving for fair and balanced accounts. The corresponding challenge facing the reader is to recognize that every writer is working in terms of a personal history and individual orientations and to realize that only part of these will be known to and addressable by the historian. Moreover, all discourse leaves gaps that result from the necessary linguistic process of selection that must in turn be filled by the reader. Totally complete renditions of an event are not possible in language. The only linguistic

² See for example Perkins’s chapter entitled “The Explanation of Literary Change: Historical Contextualization” 121–52. (20)

alternative to partial presentation is thus silence, and balanced though admittedly incomplete presentation is preferable to a mute solipsism.

Perkins is quite right in the implicit suggestion that many – perhaps even most – literary historians have not reflected deeply enough – if at all – on the philosophical foundations of their undertaking. The consequence is lapsing into unnecessary contradictions and untenable positions. Rather than a rejection of the possibility of any intellectually viable literary history, his study could well be taken as a clarion call for greater methodological precision born of careful and thoughtful consideration of foundational requirements and precepts.

2. Literary history and national agendas

One particular type of agenda or teleological orientation that can exercise a strong and, in the beginning of the twenty-first century, undesirable influence derives from either explicitly or implicitly equating literary history with the social and political history of a particular nation. The examples of such histories are legion. The fundamental problem is that when literary history and national history are conflated or seen to run in tandem, the literary works that are taken into consideration *in extenso* are those that support the rise of a national identity and consciousness. Voices that do not contribute to the lofty goal of defining a nation are consigned to the margin if heard at all. This tendency has been the case with literature by women, by members of communities marginalized on the ground of ethnic, economic, or linguistic difference, and often by groups questioning the dominant discursive practices. Attention has recently been focused on this problem by Linda Hutcheon (3–49) and by postcolonial critics investigating the inability of the subaltern to be heard. One obvious solution is to endeavor to cast the net more broadly and include these groups, but too often this approach, though achieving greater inclusiveness, has failed to integrate these groups by blatantly or subtly construing them as the Other who despite inclusion remains a voice from the periphery. Literary histories that take this tack have been appearing with ever-greater frequency over the past two decades in the Anglo-Saxon, Francophone, Hispanic, Lusophone, and Nordic

communities with varying degrees of success in giving a voice to communities that otherwise have languished in silence.

Another approach that eliminates the temptation of identifying social, economic, and political progress with the trajectory of literary development is to abandon the nation as a central construct and instead endeavor to trace the developmental course of larger units in which national agendas in the aggregate are far from consistent and univocal and are often competing with and contesting one another. The obvious challenge to such an approach centers on how the region is defined and on assuring that it does not simply become a convenient substitute for the nation, i.e., a kind of super nation. Although many common cultural and historical practices may be evinced warranting a conception of various kinds of continuity in the region, certain traditional components may be part of its definition. The region in this sense is most emphatically not envisioned as an established area with stable boundaries, unified traditions, or consistent allegiances. It may involve multiple accounts of origin that emerge with particular clarity when seen juxtaposed to other often similar but nonetheless independent narratives. It is a more tentative and ultimately fragmented construct in which voices not contributing to national discursive practices can readily be accorded attention because they are not diminished by their failure to contribute to a national agenda of progress and development. In purely pragmatic terms, the region is a provisional working construct susceptible to changing definitions. Inhabitants of these regions will not necessarily feel themselves citizens of the region. Inhabitants of the United States, for example, will not deny that they are also North Americans, but this fact plays only a minimal role in their sense of identity. Yet to view, for example, the literature of the American south in the context of the agricultural, plantation culture based on slave labor that extended all the way around the Caribbean basin will bring to light numerous insights that are difficult to accommodate in a literary history that has its origin in Puritan religious and political texts and flourished in New England. Similarly inhabitants of the Nordic region do not see themselves in terms of being Scandinavians – to use that most problematic of Anglo-Saxon regional designations – but rather as Danes, Icelanders, Norwegians, Swedes, or Finns with some allowance being made for the wonderful

vagaries of Sámi national and Inuit affiliations. What justifies this grouping as a region, though, is among other factors a long political, social, and cultural history that entwines developments in each of the modern nations in complex and nearly inextricable ways; a pattern of shifting boundaries in the area that have at various times united parts or in some cases the entirety of the modern nations with one another; and the presence of two language families, which, though not mutually accommodating within their own boarder – i.e., Nordic Indo-European and Finno-Ugaric – within their respective families allow for a high degree of mutual comprehension. When a regional metric is applied to the Nordic area, the similarities but also the arresting and perhaps even more important differences come to light. In addition to these reasons for grouping these contemporary nations together, there is a sense in which the region so delineated is a construct emerging for the sake of telling a story about the complex course of literary-historical development within a reasonably delimited area. The grouping is not arbitrary but also has no absolute, incontrovertible, and irrefragable viability. It is a position from which a literary historian may reasonably choose to speak while acknowledging that other alignments may be possible. The challenge is to examine the history of the production, mediation, and reception of literature – understood broadly as complex verbal art – within a large geographic region spanning multiple nations and language groups. Not only does such an approach lift the burden of teleologically grounded distortions, but it allows for a narrative construction that is in a typically postmodern fashion left open rather than artificially foreclosed by achievement of communal goals or rigid sequentiality.

3. History and narrative emplotment

In dismissing narrative histories, Perkins argues all emplotment can be reduced to just three basic types: rise, decline, and rise and decline. To be sure, many literary histories have been constructed around tracing the rising trajectory of a theme, genre, style, or period. Typically, moreover, if one of these is on the ascendancy, it is while an earlier is declining and giving way to the new. Perkins's observation is not only

true of published literary history, but applies as well to the pedagogic strategies for teaching literary history. Although most will probably agree that this reductive analysis is at least in part true with regard to much that has been written in the past, like so many other deficiencies in older literary histories it results from authors not having adequately reflected on foundational issues of literary historiography. The problem I see in Perkins's severely reductionistic analysis is that he claims that it applies not to many or even most of the previous literary histories, but "to the possible plots of narrative literary histories" (39). This argument makes an extravagant claim, and it is a claim that I would argue is patently false both with regard to the past but most especially in its projection into the future.

The postulation of just three plots for a narrative history assumes an unnecessarily simplistic – even cynical – conception of time and a severely limited capacity of narrative to communicate complex temporal relationships while dealing effectively with multiple time frames. No one would question the possibility of these challenges being met in narrative fiction, and there is no reason to suppose that the narrative historian is in any less control of the narrative possibilities that present themselves in the contemporary world. Accordingly histories can well endeavor to bring a richer and more nuanced conception of temporality to bear on the narrative strategy that will not be amenable to reduction to one of Perkins's three possibilities. To be sure, temporal sequentiality is necessarily implicated in any kind of narration that endeavors to contextualize events and offer explanations of the what, the how, and why of historical events. Attention, though, must be directed not just to the relatively short time spans that Perkins's reductionist strategy seems to imply. Although the *Annalistes* were decidedly unsympathetic to narrative history, Braudel, the most influential among them, has stressed the importance of the *longue durée*, which has so often been largely neglected in favor of briefer and presumably more manageable temporal frames of reference. In the context of extended duration, attention can be accorded to temporal imbrication in which none of the overlapping components is advancing at the expense of others, to interpenetration in which components play off one another and are mutually enriched, and to the continuation of previously dominant modes of expression

in new subordinate social formations that then reappear modified in new dominant positions. Rather than being built around and therefore determined by a simple chronological sequence of events, new modes of historical discourse can at each juncture look for competing and contrasting temporal relationships with the ultimate goal of offering a more richly textured display of historical development that goes far beyond the naïve reductionism Perkins evokes.

Against this background attention can be turned directly to the central task of defining narrativity in at least one sense. Most simply historical narrativity is taking the step from the communication of the *what* – the fact, the event, the state of affairs – to the *why*. But the communication of historical facts will typically involve modes of communication – most usually but not exclusively linguistic – whose semantic elements and rhetorical structures will have broad implications. It is difficult to imagine what a bare, brute, raw, utterly independent, *eo ipse* fact might be and where it might reside. I would like to postulate that facts apart from interpretation are very rare if not nonexistent. This proposition does not necessarily mean that one must subscribe to Derrida's much-cited assertion that “il n'y a pas de hors-texte” but does clearly stress the centrality of interpretation. As Hayden White has discussed, the medieval annals listed events in chronological order, but no attempt was made to explain or rationalize the selection or to suggest any relationship among the events (*Content of Form* 4–11). Similarly modern historians – Tocqueville, Burkhardt, Braudel and in the field of literary history Hollier and Wellbery – have opted for discursive forms that are not explicitly narrative and would seem to have readers believe that the facts speak for themselves. I would suggest that on the contrary facts never speak for themselves but will always have narrative component that may not be actualized or may even be intentionally occluded or hidden in a tacit appeal to scientific objectivity or presumed priority of event over interpretation. To be sure, literary works can be arranged in a chronological list based on their date of publication, but they were written and published in a specific context and selected for the list in a specific context while presumably others were not – and the reason for their selection and ordering is not necessarily self-evident. Many would thus argue that the explanation of

why a state of affairs exists as it does rather the presumption that facts speak for themselves is a *sine qua non* for historic discourse. Indeed even historians like Braudel – his insistence on historical methods based on archival research and the punctilious scrutiny of documentary records notwithstanding – have been shown to resort to narrative despite themselves. In the first volume of *Temps et récit*, for example, Paul Ricoeur has undertaken the remarkable and intellectually courageous task of convincingly demonstrating that Braudel’s *magnum opus La Méditerranée et la monde Méditerranéen à l’Époque de Philippe II* makes extensive use of typically narrative strategies throughout and, in spite of frequent protestation, his work is strongly marked by narrative strategies and ways of thinking.

In a less theoretical sense, narrative history is history that tells a story that accounts for why a particular state of affairs exists as it does. It contextualizes events and in so doing explains the possible reasons things are as they are. The fact that there may be competing explanations is far from a fatal flaw precisely for the reason that a narrative written from another perspective on events augments rather than subverts the first. In the introduction to an important article, “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” Hayden Whites observes, “So natural is the impulse to narrate, so inevitable is the form of narrative for any report of the way things really happened, that narrative could appear problematical only in a culture in which it was absent – absent or, as in some domains of contemporary Western intellectual and artistic culture programmatically refused” (5). He then continues, “Far from being a problem, then narrative might well be considered a solution to a problem of general human concern, namely the problem of how to translate *knowing* into *telling*, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form assimilable to structures of meaning that are generally human rather than culture-specific” (“The Value of Narrativity” (5).

Departing from the proposition that histories – unlike annals, for example, that just provide lists of dates and events – are narratives and explanatory contextualizations naturally requires attention as to how this task is undertaken. One must bear in mind the pitfalls described in so many recent critiques of narrative literary historiography. Among the

most prominent of these argues that efforts at contextualization often extend scarcely beyond constructing a historically unsophisticated – if not naïve – social and political background against which literary history is portrayed as playing itself out. One must, thus, strive to understand how elements of the ambient context – be they linguistic, geographic, political, social, or institutional – were engaged and configured in various ways at different times and places. This fact alone makes clear that the best literary criticism is of necessity becoming genuinely interdisciplinary in the best sense of that word.

4. Narrativity and historical understanding

With regard to a broadly Nordic literary history, as already elicited as a regional example, the most significant of these configurations lies in the fact that the population of the region in general and the authors in particular have robustly engaged the givens of the physical environment and have given them meaning in the world of human experience by attributing symbolic meaning to various aspects of it or in other words by transforming space into place. With social, political, and commercial import long invested in certain places, centers or locales, sites of cultural-historic interest emerged over and against the surrounding peripheries upon which significance was less abundantly endowed. The task of portraying the landscape, the linguistic diversity, and the literary as well as societal institutions that impinge on writers will be, on the one hand, to present them descriptively in as accurate, sensitive, and unbiased manner as possible while rising to the challenge of adducing the multifarious ways they have been figuratively engaged throughout the region over time. A certain tension will inevitably tend to characterize historical narration, which, on the one hand, strives for the dispassionate presentation of events and their relationship to one another, and, on the other, figurative analysis, which stresses the meanings and values human beings attribute to places or moments in time, in divergent directions. This productive tautness, however, is a source from which much of what we understand as literary culture arises.

In this regard, the importance attached to narrativity must be engaged directly³. In subscribing to a narrative approach to historical understanding and discourse, one must remain aware that narrativity has been used to ground and justify a variety of ideological ends and has been guilty of glossing over and smoothing out the complexity and untidiness of lived experience in order to achieve a sense of order and closure. By acknowledging past deficits of narrative history, by clearly articulating the position of writing in so far as it is present to consciousness, and by pursuing an account that is explicitly left open rather than arbitrarily brought to closure, one can hope to avoid at least the most egregious faults of the past. Most importantly, rather than minimizing the import of ruptures and disjunctions, they should be vigorously engaged as defining junctures.

Emplotment or narrative configuration understood as the process whereby particulars are gathered and arranged – that is taken or grasped together – in such a way as to give the experience of literary temporality its unity and meaning is the process central to this endeavor⁴. Differing emplotments – divergent configurations and analyses of factors – are of course possible and indeed to be expected, and some stories may

³ The role of narrativity in historical exposition has been widely discussed since the time of Kant and Hegel and has come to the fore in the work of contemporary theorists. Hayden White distinguishes four main groups: 1. that including a number of analytic philosophers (Walsh, Gardiner, Dray, Gallie, Morton White, Danto, and Mink); those associated with the *Annales* group and taking a negative view of the role of narrative (Braudel, Furet, Le Goff, and Le Roy-Ladurie); those sharing a semiotic-deconstructive orientation (Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Todorov, Julia Kristeva, Genette, Benveniste, and Eco); and a smaller group drawing ultimately on Heidegger and hermeneutic phenomenology who understand narrativity as mode of understanding through which the human beings grasp their own historicity (Gadamer and Ricoeur). See Hayden White's "The Question of Narrative in Contemporary Historical Theory" in *The Content of Form* (31). In the chapter entitled "Narrative and History" in *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn*, Elizabeth Clark provides an insightful discussion of the narrative impulse in historical discursive practices in the last half of the twentieth century.

⁴ Ricoeur offers a cogent explanation of the procedure. "Cet acte configurant consiste à 'prendre-ensemble' les actions de détail ou ce que nous avons appelé les incidents de l'histoire ; de ce divers d'événements, il tire l'unité d'une totalité temporelle" (*Temps et récit* 1:103).

be deficient while others are preferable, but preferable because of their more comprehensive explanatory power rather than any claim to an empirically objective and thus implicitly privileged vantage point or, even less, any transcendently warranted truth. Although one emplotment may differ in emphasis or even merit from another, the important task of proposing causality, connections, and ultimately symbolic meaning in the present remains undiminished.

The fundamental precept, however, derived from Paul Ricoeur is even more basic: it is his contention that the way in which human beings encounter temporality is fundamentally narrative: i.e., narrativity is the discursive form in which temporality is articulated. The historian does not impose narrative structure on events that could otherwise be constituted non-narratively, but rather vigorously exploits that structure in the linguistic constitution of historical events. In his brief but important essay, “The Human Experience of Time and Narrative,” Ricoeur makes the point very succinctly: “Narrativity is the mode of discourse through which the mode of being which we call temporality, or temporal being, is brought to language” (Valdés, *Ricoeur Reader* 99)⁵. The resulting historical narrative – the kind of narrative toward which we are striving – hence has a bipartite truth claim: firstly that the events that it relates literally happened and secondly that they figuratively as a narrative ensemble have a significance or symbolic meaning.

A very similar conclusion is reached by the highly-respected American cognitive psychologist and legal theorist Jerome Bruner, who in a long series of publications has persuasively and articulately argued that the nature of understanding that engages the diachronic particularities of human experience is fundamentally narrative. His overarching thesis is that the mind operates in such a way that experiential specifics are perceived in comparison with one another and linked in sequences that are conceptually engaged as narrative. In a seminal essay published in *Critical Inquiry* entitled “The Narrative Construction of Reality” he offers a detailed discussion of ten of the most important features of

⁵ The article was first presented as a paper at the International Colloquium on Phenomenology and the Human Sciences at Duquesne University in 1978. It was translated by David Pellauer and first published in *Research in Phenomenology* 9:17–34.

narrative. Although all ten of his points are intellectually engaging, the fifth, “Canonicity and breach,” invites particular attention in the present context. Analyzing various arrays of events will inevitably eventually reveal ruptures or Aristotelean *peripeteia* to couch the concept in highly traditional literary critical terminology. Bruner argues that narratives require normative, foundational expectations of how events might play themselves out. He continues arguing that “narratives require such scripts as necessary background, but they do not constitute narrativity itself. For it to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated, or deviated from in a manner to do violence to what Hayden White calls the ‘legitimacy’ of the canonical script” (“Narrative Construction” 11). In his more recent *Making Stories: Law, Literature, Life* (2002), he formulates the point even more elegantly: “We know that narrative in all its forms is a dialectic between what was expected and what came to pass. For there to be a story, something unforeseen must happen. Story is enormously sensitive to whatever challenges our conceptions of the canonical. It is an instrument not so much for solving problems as for finding them” (15).

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to argue that contrary to the implicit determination of the book with which I began, literary history is not only possible, but can flourish if one does not impose requirements that are inconsistent with the fundamental human condition, requirements like privileged and absolutely objective platforms from which to speak, a conception of the past that fails to acknowledge its irretrievable pastness, and a mediation of the past that does not involve figurations and the unavoidable vagaries inherent in symbolic representation. Even with these caveats having been asserted, I have not completely or explicitly fulfilled the promise of my title. I should be clear about why I believe a literary history that is oriented toward narrative techniques – i.e., toward accounts for the hows and whys of literary developments – is an eminently viable mode of literary discourse, but also in what sense is it postmodern.

Truth – however one wishes to define it – only exists in language. Although I readily concede that there may well be meaningful mental activities apart from language – a much debated point – truth and particularly historical truth requires articulation and is subject to the structural mechanisms of language. All linguistic articulations are made from a particular point of view since there is no privileged position that allows for absolutely objective observations and statements that are entirely free of some arbitrary element. All statements – including literary historical ones – embody a receding series of assumptions, some of which are conscious and some of which are not. Instead of vainly pursuing the goal of absolutely objective, disinterested, and all-inclusive descriptions, the literary historian is well advised to acknowledge in so far as possible the place of writing and the foundational assumptions – in so far as they are accessible – that are being made.

The historiographic mode I am describing is not teleological, but remains open throughout. There are to be sure beginnings, middles, and ends, but they are provisional and invite interrogation. Efforts are most effectively aimed at a thoroughgoing contextualization that is interdisciplinary – cognizant of spatial, institutional, and figurative structures – while necessarily acknowledging the unavoidable sequentiality of verbal articulation. But because sequentiality is only one of the organizing principles, the overall history remains generally open and endeavors to avoid artificial foreclosures that are teleologically dictated.

Without necessarily endorsing – or worse yet celebrating – contradictions, I can acknowledge the possibility of differing plotments. Variant ways of grasping together the particulars and sometimes differing particulars relating to any event, though, are inevitable. Traditional research in archives, in libraries, record bureaus, and excavations will bring aspects of the past to light, but in terms of answering the most pressing questions, their results will not and cannot speak for themselves. Mediated from different perspectives with contrasting narrative strategies in mind, they may furnish contrasting but complementary conclusions that are enriching rather than undermining the cultural capital of such historical methods.

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