Between History and Poetry: The Making of the Past

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When Homer wrote about the siege of Troy, he was already part of tradition stretching back to the epic of Gilgamish that in its very representation explored the relation between poetry and history. Long before Aristotle would speculate on the connection among, and hierarchy of, history, poetry and philosophy, Homer was making his epic and representing some of the great themes: love and war, the clash between cultures. This division between East and West, ages before Orientalism, became a prominent trope even into the Middle Ages and the Renaissance when Christian crusaders and the Ottoman soldiers fought for the Eastern Mediterranean, the cradle of both their civilizations. In addition to discussing the relation of poetry and history as well as Europe and its rivals, especially through warfare, this essay, while responding directly to recent scholarship in the field, will, in a more oblique way, elaborate on an image that struck me over again while a child and then in school and university — Achilles dragging Hector round the walls of Troy. This image involves a poetic and mythical representation of what appears to have been a historical event, a kind of synecdochic emblem of combat, especially between Europe and Asia, that translated into early modern Europe and was displaced in the "conquest" of the New World.

The epic and the history play are genres that reshape history, and even romance explores the legendary and fictional aspects of the historical. The historical text and the world it describes and interprets are not identical no matter how mimetic or realistic history is thought to be. Like the epic poet or the historical dramatist, historians, at least since Herodotus, have had to select their evidence and their *muthos*— the shape of their narrative. This story-form had to have a beginning, middle and end: history as action and writing shares an open boundary between event and interpretation. Even in historical writing, though perhaps less so than in historical poetry, the quest for what happened

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature /Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée *CRCL/RCLC* December / decembre 2002 0319-051X/02/29.4/568/$10.00/©Canadian Comparative Literature Association

becomes by definition a reconstruction of what might have happened. Each present generation reinterprets the past according to the historical changes that have defined that generation.

Having said that, despite the insights of metahistory and new historicism, such as the importance of genre and aesthetic choice in the one and of the anecdotal, analogical, marginal and subjective in the other, a knife in the guts is not the text of a knife in the guts. The temptation of textualism and constructivism, both of which are right to bring a scepticism to an unbridled and unmediated sense of the empirical because facts, the world and experience are not self-evident and innocently there, is to think of the world as a book, a kind of translation of the medieval trope to a postmodern metaphor to live by or at least write through. History, like literature, might be easier to prove in practice than in theory, but must begin somewhere along the way, as Descartes discovered in his attempt to dismantle philosophy to a first principle. Admittedly, Descartes, who is much maligned in post-structuralist and postmodernist circles, defined his existence according to his ability to think. Aristotle's rational animal, although he had also called "man" a political animal, was still alive in the Cartesian revolution. Had Descartes declared — I write therefore I am — he would have been more popular with current theorists at the posts to the new millennium. Nor was he interested enough, as Freud was, in the animal in the human, but whatever his assumptions, he did try to go back to a first principle, a premise, something that would have been familiar to Aquinas and to those devoted to scholastic logic. It occurred to me, when I studied logic and long before I knew anything about the theory of literature and history, that a premiss contains a buried conclusion, so that I was sympathetic to and interested in the work of Hayden White, Jacques Derrida and the generation before me even when they were being denounced by a good number of their mentors and contemporaries.

Still, a fact is a fact even if it soon has a batten of interpretation swathing round it (even as it ravelled and unravelled from generation to generation). Lenin lived or he did not. He was born at one time and died at another. There is an "exorable" sequence to his life and to the Russian revolution. A story exists for novelists and historians, who both share a narrative and interpretative art, but as Philip Sidney observed, following Aristotle, history is what happened and not what might have happened. The poet can play with sequence: the historian cannot. Even if historians use flashbacks and other novelistic techniques, they should not introduce an invented character (as Shakespeare does with Falstaff in the Second Tetralogy) or put Lenin's

Bolshevik Revolution before Kerensky's Provisional Government in the revolutional sequence.[1] Shakespeare makes Hotspur and Prince Hal the same age when they were separated by almost a generation because that way he can identify their rivalry and explore the parallel relations these warriors have with their fathers. Thucydides may have had to construct Pericles' speech on the rhetorical principle, which history and poetry shared under the Greeks, that without evidence of what the leader did say, the writer would produce an oration in keeping with what the character of Pericles would have dictated under the circumstances. Even with this latitude, poetic justice is not as available to the historian as it is to the poet. Cultural historians might lecture according to their politics but they do have an archive staring them in the face. History is as much inquiry as it is story even if the boundary between them shifts. The possible world of poetry meets the actual world of history. Poetry, like the epic, can be historical, and history, especially narrative history, can be poetic, but the two, despite their overlap, in practical terms are not identical. Rhetoric mediates the similarities and differences between the historical and poetic even in as disparate forms as econometrics and the novel. Even though arguments have narrative aspects and anecdotes and stories, particularly as they are pointing a moral, have argumentative qualities, stories and arguments differ practically, especially in their extremes, between the metaphorical and the instrumental. The telos of a fiction is that it moves rhetorically and structurally in a putative space whereas the end of an argument is to convince someone in the world that things happened, happen

1 Rather than repeat my earlier views on the relation between history and fiction and on Shakespeare's history plays, I refer the reader to Hart 1992. In a fine history of the Russian Revolution, Orlando Figes shifts the paradigm from a study of structures and abstract forces to a narrative of lives of individuals well-known and not:

> In following the fortunes of these figures, my aim has been to convey the chaos of these years, as it must have been felt by ordinary men and women. I have tried to present the revolution not as a march of abstract social forces and ideologies but as a human event of complicated individual tragedies. It was a story, by and large, of people, like the figures in this book, setting out with high ideals to achieve one thing, only to find out later that the outcome was quite different. This, again, is why I chose to call the book *A People's Tragedy* (xix).

Figes' work, a good example of the "return" to narrative in history that I am discussing here, shares characteristics of the novel, involves a reincorporation of rhetoric that "scientific" history has tried to occlude and is a *topos* where Russian history meets Dostoevsky.

or will happen in a certain way. Historical fiction and metaphysics (in which I include non-empirical theory of any kind) blur those boundaries.

II

The instance of warfare in the Renaissance epic involves the relation between poetry and history. Michael Murrin's study of this topic allows for a suggestive period between the classical and medieval inheritance and the novel as successor to the epic (see Murrin). The lines between history and fiction change as technology and society alter. The responses to this literary and social transformation vary and focus the discussion of the connection between the historical and poetic (literary).

Just as the form of history and literature changes, so too does their content. In epic, which is one of the precursors of the novel, the subject of war began to wane in the sixteenth-century, so that, as Michael Murrin says, despite Tolstoy and Hemingway, warfare does not preoccupy modern fiction (1). Murrin's argument about this shift is that to understand it in epic and romance, one must see how warfare changed and caused these changes through "a slow revolution" that technology largely determined (2). He uses the battle between the Ottomans and the Knights of Saint John for Rhodes in 1522 as a paradigm shift in warfare, a story about who adapts and who does not to changes in warfare. The use of gunpowder changed warfare and writers had to adjust their genres as much as the warriors did. The romance represented war, particularly between Christian and Muslim, although it was translated to the New World where Natives replaced Muslims as the enemy: "Some tinkered with the old genres, as the Knights did with their medieval walls; others opted for a different form, that of classical epic, which came into Italy along with the star-shaped forts of the new military system" (8). For Murrin, the offensive and defensive phases of the Gunpowder Revolution (1483-1610) affected heroic narrative and he tries to create more understanding of the background of war and, therefore, of war poetry by discussing field battles, strategy, sieges, guerilla tactics and naval wars with galleys and with sailing ships. One of the principal reasons Murrin provides such explanations is to attempt to bridge the historical divide between a post-Vietnam pacificism and distaste for war on the one hand and the early modern fascination with, and extensive practice of, warfare (9).

Murrin discusses Luigi Pulci's cantari in terms of their representation of the battle of Roncevalles, which includes a plan for the Saracen attack and that

is testimony to the endurance of the romance tradition (21). He reminds us that romance models served as patterns for the lives of quattrocento nobles (38). Moreover, Murrin suggests that the romancer of the later fifteenth century used abbreviation when he could because of the gap between military practice of the time and the traditional way of narration (39). Murrin also charts Arthur's rise to power through Sir Thomas Malory, noting that Merlin's strategy relates to the fantasy world that French romancers invented for Britain and that in the book culture of the fifteenth century, people started to design their lives in accordance with their reading (40). The relation of romance to history, according to Murrin, worked well in tournaments and duels but created strains in military campaigns, so that this connection did not always fit well with all facets of aristocratic life (55). In representing Agramante's war, Matteo Maria Boiardo did not rework or abbreviate older stories as Malory and Pulci did or model his fictional hero on a historical person. Murrin notes that Boiardo imitated the formal devices of history as opposed to its content (57).

From Herodotus' description of the defeat of Xerxes, there was a military advantage for Europe for eleven centuries, but, as Murrin notes, by the fifteenth century the Europeans were losing more than winning, so that the fiction that small armies of Westerners could defeat multitudes of foreigners came true in life in the western Atlantic after Columbus' landfall (74-75). Murrin sees in certain scenes of the *Orlando furioso* a realism that generated a new approach to heroic poetry in the late sixteenth century (79). Ariosto's innovations affected Torquato Tasso and Ercilla y Zuňiga: the representation of the siege of Paris affected that of Jeruslaem and a fort at Penco in Chile. This new realism did not, according to Murrin, do away entirely with the distinction between poetry and history. Sieges became the centre of wars, which were in turn the principal subject of epic and of various romances in the Renaissance. From Troy to Paris and beyond, sieges and falls of cities were a major poetic concern (102). Plots became problematical for all these poets of historical epic and romance, whether the writers began in medias res as in epic or chronologically as in romance. Murrin argues that Tasso's Aristotelian theory covers up his radical experiment (103). Camoes and Ercilla are poetic foils to Tasso (104-05). Perhaps Tasso's love of fiction underwrites his love fictions, yet is such love a relief from fighting and killing or do they have a grounding in history (118)? Tasso balanced love and war, history and fiction, much more than Ercilla did (119).

As Murrin observes, the gun created an unprecedented problem for epic poets and romancers: this crisis occurred mainly between 1440 and 1530. In book 6 *of Paradise* Lost John Milton could make a similar complaint against the gun to that which Ludovico Ariosto had in the Olimpa episode in *Orlando furioso* (123, see Hale). Others, like Camoes, Ercilla and Caspar de Villagrá accepted the gun while maintaining the military code of the Middle Ages (137). These poets celebrated achievements that, owing to the gun, outstripped those of antiquity. Murrin notes that for Spanish poets —Juan Latino, Hiernonymo Corte Real and Juan Rufo — who represented the Battle of Lepanto on 7 October 1571 and who did not see the gun as being instrumental to the victory — it was an ornament. Furthermore, Murrin sees in Camoes and Ercilla poets of colonialism, who take the gun to be a challenge to chivalry, and thinks that their consideration of technology is a precedent for later literature of imperialism (138-39). Both poets, in Murrin's view, detach the charge of fraud from technology: the Portuguese accuse the Muslims of fraud who return the accusation just as the Spaniards and Aracanians exchange mutual recriminations over deceit. These poets reverse history to accuse the enemy of fraud where there was none, so, as in later imperialist fiction, the Natives are said to deceive their lords from Europe. Because the Iberians fought with so few soldiers but were powerful because of guns, the small numbers helped make the gunner into a hero as part of a small band. The individual hero became part of a small collective gunning for its own survival (158-59). This notion of the heroic view, as Murrin points out, was given play in the work of Ercilla and Villagrá. The battle at Chile was a case in point for Ercilla: this group hero of the glorious few was a model from the British square in India, the Foreign Legion in Africa and the U.S. cavalry in the west (162-78). Murrin does not mention the precedence of Greek and Roman battle formations as a group hero, although whether this topic receives extensive attention in the poetry of antiquity is a matter of question.

Poets who wrote about Lepanto, like Juan Rufo, made the commanding officer a new hero of epic narrative (179f). Describing the engagement at Esmeraldas, Pedro de Oňa also glorifies the commanding officer (186). History and poet, according to Murrin, become one as the commander molds his soldiers just as the poet attempts to form morals in the audience (196). Boiardo, Tasso and Ercilla all raised the question of whether there were limits to violence, and the Spaniards in particular paid attention to this debate as it related to limited and total war (199). Murrin contrasts Boiardo, who mutes violence with humour, and Tasso, who softens details to the same end, with

Ercilla, who rejects total war by showing his audience the wounded and the dying. These opposing positions on violence were not resolved (215). The Spanish victory against great numbers and odds at Ácoma Pueblo in New Mexico raised questions about a massacre of the Natives led by Zutacapan (216-17). The poet Villagrá was among this small group and he presented the evidence differently in his poem from his testimony at the Indian trial after the battle. For instance, in his epic he omits the Indian counteroffer (223-24). The issues that arose from this fight helped to affect colonial policy (225-28). Murrin ends his wide-ranging and accomplished study with a consideration of Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia,* Michael Drayton's *Barons Warns* and Samuel Daniels *Civile Wars,* all of them fraught textually owing to the persistent revisions (like the work of their Italian counterparts) (231-32). Murrin concludes that "All three English writers prefer imaginative projection to truth" (238). He also observes that Sidney, Drayton and Daniel limit representations of war and so go against the common connection in romance and epic. After almost continuous wars from the 1330s to 1485, the Tutors brought peace to England and ruled over a largely civilian population (239-40).

This social climate might have affected this poetic practice of downplaying war, which raises the question — could there be an epic without war? Marino in *L'Adone* and Milton in *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* furthered the limitation or purging of war in the seventeenth century (241). After the movement from epic to novel, Murrin asserts, much is lost because whereas Renaissance writers engaged in an intense debate over the limits of violence and the technology of war, subsequent writers did much less or fell silent. Perhaps, as Murrin intimates, it was not until the twentieth century that the novel woke up to these issues that epic and romance had debated so much (244-45). A representation and critique of violence and war is an important bond between poetry and history, fiction and the world.

The question of what happened and the chronology of events in history as opposed to the imaginative licence of the poet is a debate that descends from Aristotle's *Poetics.* Sidney himself, not to mention many of the great French poets and playwrights, responded to this Aristotelian division between poetry and history, universals and particulars. Another aspect of history that grew in importance and sometimes blurred the distinction between the poetic and the historical was the use of the archive. Archiving the national or classical past, especially in epic, romance and the history play during the Renaissance, presented variations on the complications found in the epics of Homer and

Virgil and the biography-history-politics of Plutarch's *Lives.* These intricacies gathered a different momentum after the Renaissance.

Ill

The archive and basic facts represent textual constraints on the imagination of the historian. These constraints, like the conventions of a sonnet, can allow the historian to sing of arms and the man in at least as profound a way as Virgil or Bernard Shaw did. These limits shift the ground and the eye and present different points of view in which to look at a past battle or revolution. The narrative of events and the interpretation of those events is in a constant flux: during the Enlightenment, Voltaire attacked history as a narrative of events, whereas in the nineteenth century Leopold von Ranke brought events back to the centre of historiography. Once again, the debate on narrative is preoccupying contemporary historians: structure and events are the dividing lines. At a practical level, as Peter Burke has suggested, there is a danger of making narrative indistinguishable from description and analysis (234, see Stone and Schama). Structural historians, who often discuss material and determined conditions, have argued that in historiography, as in fiction, narrative is not innocent whereas narrative historians, who frequently explain history in terms of individual intention and character, have maintained that, being static, the analysis of structure is therefore unhistorical (Burke 235-36). Perhaps it is possible to combine narrative and structure and to see them as part of a larger process which addresses discrete events and vast processes (Burke 237, Phillips).

One of the possible ways of resolving this conflict between the structural and narrative in historiography is to see the rhetorical connection between history and poetry. Those writing historical narratives could use increasingly (as some have) narrative techniques from fiction, something Hayden White advocated nearly thirty years ago.[2] Historians write an interpretation of what happened from a given point of view, but still have to examine the facts even

2 Burke makes a convincing case for using the novelistic techniques of modernists like Joyce and Woolf such as the breakdown of the continuity of time and for seeking new literary forms, such as multiple points of view as found in the work of Aldous Huxley, William Faulkner and Lawrence Durrell (237-38; see G. Wilson). I assume that the logic of Burke's argument would also make postmodernist fictional techniques, or any that are useful, available to the historian. He also refers to Baxtin's heteroglossia, so that there is also a cross-fertilization between literary theory and historiography (239).

if they might do so in terms of fictional techniques. Contemporary historians have addressed, as Burke notes, the problems between the fictional and the factual through microhistory, a narrative about ordinary people in their locality; a shift within the same work between history from above and below; writing history backwards; or an examination of the cultural signatures of events, how a culture orders events, that is categories and concepts shape how members of a society perceive and interpret what happens during their lives. The structuralist dream of total history was helpful in calling attention to the analysis of something behind the apparent story of events, but the leaving off of narrative left its own kind of gap. In literary studies the arrival of new historicism, which with its thick structures indebted to Clifford Geert2 and its anecdotal to micro-histories like Carlo Cipolla's *Cristfano and the Plague* (trans. 1973) and Natalie Davis' *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1973), followed a similar pattern of trying to bring a new kind of narrative into literary theory and criticism after much attention had been given to structure by critics as diverse as Roman Jacobson and Northrop Frye.[4] These new forms in historiography and literary theory and criticism involve micro-narrative, backward narrative and stories that move between private and public spheres or represent the same events from many vantages. History can use similar new techniques to literature and film but their use is no guarantee of a profound understanding of the connections between events and structure, but, as Burke hopes, an intelligent use of such narrative methods as cross-cutting, flashbacks and alternation of scene and story might help in the regeneration of narrative in historical studies (245-46). Can a postmodernist dissolution of any textual authority, including it would seem historical documents as being as rhetorical

3 Although rhetoric is something history and poetry share neither is entirely rhetorical, especially as the one relates to fact and the other to the making of patterned rhythms that are not predictable, mechanical or necessarily continuous. See Burke 241-45, Siebenschuh, Sahlins.

4 Not wishing to repeat myself, I refer the reader to some of my work on the relation of fiction and fact and my comments on new historicism in Hart 1992 and Hart 1994 as well as to the bibliographies in both volumes. Burke's insight into the ways in *Gate of Heavenly Peace* (1973) and *The Death of the Woman Wang* (1978) that Jonathan Spence sets up an analogy between private and public, above and below, may be applied to the important work of new historicists, like Stephen Greenblatt, but in Greenblatt's work the intellectual daring and perceptive interpretations depend in large part on the yoking of public and private, central and marginal, high and low in the same essay or book — something I have discussed in relation to *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988).

as any other text, be incorporated into a new historiography? It is also interesting to speculate what examples or methods postmodernist novels, which have rebelled against the modernist examples Burke sets out, could provide for historians.

It is possible that "postmodernism represents a reformation of temporality" and that it suggests that viewers and points of view are even more subjective an insecure than previously thought (Ermath xi).[5] The difficulty in adopting postmodernist views to history is that, for many postmodernist theorists, history is just another text. Elizabeth Ermarth, for instance, says: "the term 'event', like 'text' or 'self or 'historical,' retains the essentialism that postmodernism challenges" (3). Rather than give up the realist and humanist view that a world exists that is beyond the text even if the text represents it in refractory ways, the historian may wish to use and adapt the techniques of postmodernist fiction to show, even in the face of the mimetic fallacy, the difficulty of representing what happened in the past. With some scepticism the historian need not adhere to the beliefs and assumptions of postmodernists but can, as postmodernists do in their use of citation in architecture, painting, literature and other endeavours, call upon their methods of narrative as part of a larger archive. If, for the sake of argument, we grant that postmodern narrative, as Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet have argued, places fabrication, invention and self-conscious fictionality above all else and that postmodernists stories subvert time, as Ermath maintains, then historians

5 Elizabeth Ermarth, for instance, speaks about the challenge of postmodernism to History, but history is as much narrative history, which includes microhistory, as structural history, which aspires more to the kind of "totalization" postmodernist theorists so often attack (7-8). She does note with Andre Breton that aspects of postmodernist movements, like surrealism, can be found in Romanticism. Ermarth outlines the high stakes, political and otherwise, in not resisting or coming to terms with postmodernism in the empirical domain of the Anglo-American world while also recognizing that she cannot give up history even as she challenges what she takes to be its hegemony (something Aristtole and Philip Sidney would not admit in their respective advocacies of philosophy and poetry). Instead of the Cartesian *cogito,* she advocates rhythmic time, which takes the dictum, "I swing therefore I am" from chapter 16 of Julio Cortazar's *Hopscotch* (1963) and qualifies or throws off dialectics, transcendence, neutrality and teleology of historical time (9-16) . Postmodernism can, then, open up new possibilities in history: while history is, like any verbal discipline, textual, it is not, in my view, the same as saying that history is entirely textual. There are facts and actions in the world that are soon interpreted and disputed in verbal constructs, but the pursuit of the question — what happened?— is, as hard as it might be, important to pursue.

would have to use postmodern fictional techniques and theory against themselves as a means of representing the importance and intricacy of time without textualizing time out of existence or anything but a fictional state (see Robbe-Grillet). The realism and the humanism of the Renaissance would not, even from a point of view that adapted postmodern techniques in narrative, be entirely a misguided dream from which our culture, so much more able now, is trying to awaken. This kind of presentism or present arrogance, particularly in fields that are not sciences, is something a historian cannot fully accept. If the past is simply a present text, then what is the point of history? Certainly, the present always regards the past with present purposes in mind, but, as Marx and Brecht argued, it differs from the past. That alienation cannot simply be an identification of past and present in a timeless presence. Time may not simply be linear but it can, in part, be seen as a road (even if Nabokov and Robbe-Grillet begged to differ) or in terms of many other metaphors we grapple for to describe the linearity, circularity, helixity or whatever shape of time. Instead, I propose an archeology, a simultaneous archive of narrative and methods from different times: time is so complex that historians need all the help they can in telling a story from the past or analyzing earlier events.

What happened in the world is a necessary and fundamental goal for the historian. It is naive to think, as some literary theorists do, that historians have ever thought that this quest was an easy one. The very existence of the work of historians like Hayden White and Peter Burke demonstrates a current self-examination in the theory and practice of history. Postmodernist time, which includes some of the modernist experiments in the wake of Einstein's theory of relativity, would allow for a history that does not conceive of time as neutral but where the observer is part of what he or she observes, takes into account the multiple possibilities of the past and not simply a linear or dialectical process or narrative, and demonstrates an awareness of the playfulness and give-and-take *(jeu)* of language and of the view that reality and language cannot IDC separated, or at least language is not transparent in the ways it produces meaning about the past (see Ermath). History can rediscover its creativity without giving up a similar imaginativeness in science (as Einstein's view of time suggests) while easing away from the positivistic science it hoped to become, especially before the Second World War. This constitutes an emphasis on something that has never left history even if it has been less prominent in historiography during this century: the literary form and rhetorical nature of history.

IV

As this essay is about poetry and history, it might serve to shift our focus to postmodernist historical fiction. Historical novels generally, as Umberto Eco has noted, create characters who assert an identity between possible and actual worlds (see Eco). In Carlos Fuentes' *Terra Nostra* (1975), however, the author does not want to erase the differences between historical fiction and historical world: instead, he emphasizes their differences — Philip II marries Elizabeth I.[6] Not even Shakespeare would do that despite his use of Falstaff and his equating the ages of Prince Hal and Hotspur. This postmodernist technique emphasizes its own fictionality by calling attention to its difference from the world and by flouting historical fact, which, paradoxically, stresses the existence of a realm of actual existence and fact. Historical fiction can be realistic, legendary, mythological, fantastic, romantic and even anti-historical or anachronistic: Shakespeare ranges from the realistic chronicle *Henry VI* plays through the tragic, fantastic and fantastic *Titus Andronicus,* the melodramatic *Richard III,* the tragic *Richard II, Julius Caesar* and *Macbeth,* the legendary *King Lear and Cymbeline,* the realistic and mythic *Antony and Cleopatra* and the fantastic and romantic pageant of *Henry I/Ill,* to name a few of historical methods and moods. In Shakespeare as much as in Fuentes unofficial history vies with official history: Shakespeare's very costuming was anachronistic if the De Witt drawing of a performance in 1595 of *Titus* is any measure and his allusions are full of anachronism, as the apparent references to Essex in *Henry V* attest, so that the anachronisms we find there are not much different from those found in Fuentes. In *Richard* II John of Gaunt prophesies a future that is already past for Shakespeare's audience just as Fuentes' Valerio Camillo, whose theatre of memory is a cinema in Renaissance Venice, predicts a future that is already past for the reader. If, as Brian McHale suggests, when postmodernists fictionalize history, they imply that history is a form of fiction, this conflation of poetry and history cuts both ways (McHale 1987 96, see 92). To conflate two things as one identity, there has to be some distinction between the two entities, so that history must in some way not be fiction. For more than two thousand years, history has been a rhetorical and literary art, although since the Renaissance it has aspired to a science whose inquiry into the evidence of what happened is not something that can be effaced as readily as constructivists might wish. History has a *muthos,* perhaps

6 For related comments on Fuentes' novel, see McHale 1987, 17.

many literary and rhetorical shapes, but that does not necessarily mean that interpretation is all. Something that happened, however difficult it might be to discern and represent, is the beginning point. While granting that facts may already contain interpretations, they are not entirely interpretative.

This search for origins may be circular or illusory just as Descartes' quest for a first principle might have been. None the less, all disciplines begin somewhere even if that beginning seems almost as estranged as distinct ethnological points of view to others from different fields. This estrangement can present observations about another discipline, like history, that are salutary and helpful, but even the vantage of the person who looks from another discipline or set of assumptions is subject to a disappearing disciplinarity or ground in the rear-view mirror. Each discipline has to start somewhere and history has done so with the view that the field is an attempt to find what happened in the past and to interpret it. Postmodernism, from this view, can ask interesting questions about the grounds of history and its relation and possible identity with fiction, but it cannot obliterate history on history's own terms.

Postmodernist explorations of the relation between fact and fiction, such as Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose (Il nome della rosa)* (1980), call attention to the joint between the factual and fictional through the use of anachronism (in a way that is much more self-conscious than many uses in Shakespeare, which constituted a view that emphasized historical accuracy and difference as much as historians in our century), the interweaving of fantasy and actuality and the contradiction of historical events.[7] These techniques, which are hardly new — Shakespeare plays with them in *Henry V,* particularly in the choruses — are reconstituted in a movement, postmodernism (as well as its modernist precursors), that revive and innovate on the conventions of the novel in the mode of Rabelais, Cervantes and Sterne before the ascendency of realism in

7 For a discussion of this kind of "historiographic metafiction," see Linda Hutcheon 1988 and Brian McHale 1992, 152-53: McHale says that Eco claims that when his readers praise him for historical accuracy, they do so when citing a modern passage and when they dispraise him for anachronism, they point to a passage he has quoted from a fourteenth-century text; see also Eco 1984, 74-77. Eco's novel does not necessarily borrow any more characters from other texts than Shakespeare does (Falstaff, after his name is changed from Oldcastle, perhaps for political reasons, echoes the name of a historical figure and is a different character in the *Henry VI* plays) and it is not necessarily any more polyglot than that supreme modernist fiction, Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1941), not to mention Rabelais' Panurge (McHale recognizes this debt). Postmodernism may, then, represent a different concentration and reconfiguration of this narrative techniques and literary conventions in a later historical period.

the nineteenth century.[8] Paradoxically, postmodernist fiction, which may seem to erase the distinction between fiction and history, reinscribes it in two senses: first, it reuses or reorients the archive of pre-modernist poetics or fictional conventions and, second, it uses an estrangement, like Brecht's alienation effect, to point out the juncture or joint between reality and representation, history and poetry. Postmodern fiction, and I have given a couple of examples only because their authors are interested in medieval and Renaissance texts, might be used as a means of showing how hard and how illusory it can be to say what happened and that the use of fictions and divergent fictional points of view and techniques might help to emphasize the reality of facts and events in the past.

Shakespeare's multiplicity in representing history, as I have argued elsewhere, makes it difficult, if not impossible, for the reader or audience to associate, with any rigour, the author with one point of view, except, perhaps as a textual expression of the polyphony itself. This dialogism or polyphony, which Baxtin also sees in Dostoyevsky's novels and something that occurs elsewhere in the various literary genres, is something Carlo Ginzburg thinks can shed light on some features in inquisitorial witchcraft trials (159-60). Like Burke and Ginzburg, then, I am in favour of history learning from the narrative and representational techniques of literature. If modernist and postmodernist fictions can be excavated in such a fashion, then I would add that Joyce learned from Rabelais and Ben Jonson and Eco read Joyce, so that the techniques of modernism and postmodernism often reshape those of early modern texts in a new historical context and that historians, novelists, poets and playwrights have not exhausted the excavation of fictional texts from the Middle Ages, Renaissance and Enlightenment in this regard. Fuentes and Eco have shown this to be the case.

V

This essay is concerned with the connections between poetry and history in the early modern and the postmodern. Erich Auerbach gave Shakespeare an important place in *Mimesis* when he devoted a chapter to the *Henry IV* plays:

8 Harry Levin's fine study of five French realists, *The Gates of Horn* (1963), shows how the notion of reality in fiction was quite different in the nineteenth-century than it was to become. Like Erich Auerbach, Levin is interested in the ever-expanding notion of reality and the techniques available to make the reader aware of that expansion.

he says Shakespeare represents the relation between the real and history in a "multi-layered" manner (285). Hegel's "dialectic" and Auerbach's "reality" represent the central movement of history for each of these thinkers: the one seeks the essence of reason with which philosophy informs history whereas the other claims to be more concerned with the specific and the contingent.[9] While I have been arguing for narrative and representational techniques in early modern texts, like Shakespeare's histories, that modernist and postmodernist texts recycle and reorient, it comes as no surprise that Auerbach uses the many-faced Shakespeare to show an advance in realism. In one sense my argument is that realism and self-conscious fictionality need and define each other: words call attention to themselves and therefore the gap between word and world as much in texts like Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and Shakespeare's *Henry V* as in postmodernist novels like Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse five.* Words can also seek a kind of realism or naturalism as in Falstaff s trashing of honour or Thersites satirical remarks, no matter how rhetorical the style might seem or in the novels of Flaubert and Zola or in Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood.* In this sense the real, then, is often a matter of content and is infused with the everyday, which moves away from tragedy and towards comedy and satire.

From a slightly different angle, realism is the content of trying to come to terms with an ever-expanding subject matter, an expansion of consciousness, so that poets, novelists, dramatists and historians do not have to represent official history alone from the point of view of the ruler or dominant classes but can, as concerns change over time, represent all classes, different genders and sexual and domestic preferences, various cultures and not simply that of the writer. It may be realist and anti-realistic techniques, or more precisely representational and anti-representational or self-reflexive conventions and modes are needed as contrasts that distinguish each other and combine over time in order to represent what the writer or historian consider to be true or to have happened. By saying, as an anti-representational or self-consciously artificial writer might, that she is going to write in a way that is about writing or about art itself and does not reflect the world, the assumption is that there is a series of realistic conventions and a reality that she is trying to ignore, subvert or obliterate. In time what appeared to be realistic might seem self-reflexive and, after the revolution of the times,

9 For a discussion of Hegel and Auerbach, including Auerbach's use of Shakespeare, see Gearheart, 133-38.

something anti-representational might appear so much a part of a world-view that it becomes natural. By definition, the changes over time demand that the historical poet and historian find new means of representing truth and reality or even the impossibility of both. What happened in the past is a shifting presence — trying as much to get the present of the past write as the philosopher seeks the presence of truth. To assert the evanescence or constructedness of that past or truth does so from a historical point of view that cannot make that claim absolutely but as just another contingent sentence in the rhetorical text of the world.

This brings us back to the point where poets, historians and philosophers have to begin somewhere even if that somewhere is on a shifting ground or an ever-receding line on the horizon where even an asymptote is an act of faith that the curve is approaching a line and that the line exists. Historical narrative, as Louis O. Mink once argued, constructs a complex past as a means of understanding the facts and events of the past, which in and of themselves are not intelligible and do not have a structure of meaning that admits understanding in the reader (55). As historians have known from the beginning, history is events in the past and writing about the past. Constructivists concentrate on the writing as if writing were the event itself or the only event that matters or that can be understood in relation to itself. After providing a reminder that history is what happened and a knowledge of what happened, Bernard Bailyn makes an important observation:

> One needs to understand the relationship between reality of what happened — the totality of past events and developments, past circumstances and thoughts — and what, in historical writings and compilations, people represent them to have been. That relationship, it seems to me, is crucial to all historical study and knowledge. The accuracy and adequacy of representations of past actualities, the verisimilitude or closeness to fact of what is written about them, remain the measure, in the end, of good history — this despite all the fashionable doubts that are raised about the attainment of absolute or perfect objectivity and accuracy (which no one pretends to, anyway). (7-8)

History is partly subjective and constructed because it involves a historian representing knowledge about what happened in the past which is held up against other interpretations of what happened and of the past itself.

History happens, even for Hegel, who thinks that philosophy brings coherence and understanding to history: what is the truth of what happens?[10] In Hegel's view this use of philosophy has a constructive power for history. Timothy Bahti takes the unpopular view that the university is built on *Wissenschaft,* a teaching and scholarship that history has construed and delimited, so that any return to narrative and to a view of a discipline, like literature, in terms of itself (more like the field of physics) would constitute a challenge to the prevailing interests of the university, a view that flies in the face of the prevalent position that new history, new historicism and cultural materialism are attempts to subvert the anti-historicist and totalizing textual dominant of the university (291-92). Disciplines in the university are constituted mainly along historical lines, so that, for Bahti, the only two recent literary theorists in the university who challenged this status quo by attempting to understand literature after history, that is to understand literature and its meaning as emerging from history without being understood by placing that meaning back within the context of historicism, were Northrop Frye and Paul de Man (293). Rather than heirs to the New Critics, or to F. R. Leavis, or to the structuralists, all of whom attempted to dwell on the present moment of meaning as opposed to a historicism, Bahti sees Frye and de Man as heretics within "a modern university that has thoroughly institutionalized historical *Wissenschaft,* but theory does not seem to have moved beyond narrative even in these two heresies or even after the attempts at non-narrative history in Hegel and Walter Benjamin" (293, see Hart 1994). Frye's attempt at the shape of the *muthos* of all of literature in terms of itself and his quest for organic unity in the text and the totality of literature as a text and de Man's deconstruction of the constructions of meaning in literature based on extra-textual historical meaning challenges the relation between poetry and history but are once again in the shadow of the very kind of historicism they attempted to displace. With *Anatomy of Criticism,* in the face of "old historicism" and intellectual history, Frye had tried to introduce a new kind of literary theory that was constructed in terms of literature itself as a history of genre and convention, but his influence waned as he faced the heresy from his

10 Timothy Bahti has an interesting discussion of Hegel and the understanding of history in which he draws on Paul de Man (77, see de Man). If the literary and allegorical are equivalents, as Bathi assumes, then there is a gap between historical understanding and historical events, then, as I have also argued, history's truth to itself would be a difficult matter and historians might not necessarily decide the same thing about historical truth that literary historians would (see Bahti 291).

heresy, if we are to take up Bahti's view for a moment, the textual scepticism and poetics of disunity of Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man.

The larger challenge to Frye's heresy, perhaps, was not deconstruction or metahistory, as Hayden White had used some of Frye's insights on genre, but a larger return to a referential historicism, and with it an appeal to other worldly disciplines not given as much to being so overtly fictional as literature was. New historicism, cultural studies and cultural materialism are now dominant models — all historicist — within a university still given to the historical constitution of disciplines. Bahti's view, while not telling some aspects of the story, or analysis, provides a fresh view of textualism as a powerful aberration rather than a dominant. While this insight is important, my primary interest lies elsewhere — I am not interested in choosing among philosophy, poetry and history, or any of the disciplines that have sprung from them and multiplied, to declare a preference for new historicism over genre theory. Instead, as Brecht said, we should have as many theories in our pockets as possible: each of these primary disciplines in practice and theory provide us with something, even if they share rhetoric as a bond, the other lacks. In considering the world or past events in the world, in seeking meaning and truth, balanced somewhere between irony, paradox and allegory, the historian and poet need as many tools as they can borrow from other disciplines as well as the history of their own craft to attempt to understand reality, something whose presence is always past. Time is slippery as the ground on which we think we stand.

Narrative histories, as Jerome Bruner has suggested, tell stories that "constitute the psychological and cultural reality in which the participants of history actually live," so that stories create an actuality of their own that coincides with paradigms (42-43). Charles Taylor makes a similar point in situating his study of the making of modern identity in relation to historical explanation: "One has to understand people's self-interpretations and their visions of the good, if one is to explain how they arise; but the second task can't be collapsed into the first, even as the first can't be elided in favour of the second" (204). Can these historical narratives, which are written in given historical periods, carry transhistorical meaning?" Is such understanding

11 Thomas Pavel discusses the possibility of transhistorical communication, something Northrop Frye saw as being at the foundation of literature even as it grew out of its own history (Pavel 129-31).

possible if the writer of a document and its reader are each separated in a distinct time?

VI

The classical foundations of modern historiography run into the difficulties of rhetoric, which can question the existence of fact or what happened and replace it with a recreation of purpose and motive, an enactment or reenactment, in R. G. Collingwood's view. Richard Lanham suggests a new literary history and a new conception of history as literary based on a view that dramatic motive or play rather than purpose, animates history: none the less, he then asserts that events are purposive and playful (Lanham 19-20). Although one does not have to be solemn to be serious, the rhetorical play, with its give and take and its sense of audience, can seem frivolous in light of what Stephen Daedalus referred to as the nightmare of history — all those horrors that pervert the sense of play and imagination or obliterate it. At one level, Lanham is making a similar point to Bruner and Taylor, that as hard as it is, history must take into account the mental states and motives of the actors within it (see Lanham 191-93). History as well as historical poetry and drama is, too, a matter of construction and style, but my argument is that it is not entirely so, as some rhetorical arguments, like Lanham's, seem at times to suggest. It is also debatable whether historiography is unbroken from Herodotus and Thucydides, whether a rupture occurred at the beginning of the nineteenth century when scientific history began in earnest to assert itself (Woodman ix, Atkinson 14, Momigliano 1-3). Much depends on how much one takes into account the return to narrative, rhetoric and style in the new history or, in literary studies, new historicism. Rhetorical constructivism, since metahistory and deconstruction, have challenged the positivism of scientific history. It is quite possible that new views of science, which emphasize imagination and elegance, might combine with these rhetorical and textual histories to create a new synthesis in historiography.

VII

Perhaps rhetoric, as much as society and technology, lie between poetry and history. In war and peace the writer — poet, novelist, playwright and historian — try to make sense of the world, reflecting and refracting it. A critique of

war or the motives of politics are part of an aesthetic of history and poetry even if they were often divided more and more from the late Renaissance. The early modern and postmodern share some important techniques in social critique, satire and narrative mode. Poets and historians adapt with the times, and the matter of science and technology, has thrown curves in the telling of story and history. With each change or crisis, the question is whether literature and history can keep pace and make a difference. Perhaps if "poetry" runs too far from the world, it leaves history to do all the work and does not provide another kind of memory, critique and protection. Perhaps if history gets too mired in the world, it loses shape and a style to make it memorable or attractive to readers lost in statistics, graphs and arid discourse. To flee into language or to flee from it is a danger to the world, a danger that has changed shape and will assume new forms worthy of Proteus.

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