

when he tips the hand of his belief in the “deepest sense of experience,” by which, since he glosses it no further, one must suppose that he supposes it just *is* every man and woman’s common experience. An essential human experience, then, that lies beyond and limits the purview of the literary or cultural historian. It is this limiting belief in an ahistorical essence that closes down, as far as I can see, the perspective of a future in which “humanity” or “man” (not to mention “woman”) could ever index as yet unknown “experiences,” even if the same name will continue to be invoked, apparently without any disturbance of meaning.

To put in place one last trait of this contrast, here is Walter Benjamin writing to Adorno about the aim of the essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technical Reproducibility,” which is one of his key works on the historicity of experience: “I am trying to direct my telescope, through the fog of blood, at an aerial view of the nineteenth century, which I am trying to paint in colors that will appear in a *future state* of the world, liberated from magic” (Geulen 139; emphasis added). A mere 30 years later, it is especially this remembering of future “experience” that one now misses in Williams’s influential book, which, in this way, remains a work of the past.

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History

Few words better exemplify what Raymond Williams means by a *keyword* than history. It illustrates how “important social and historical processes occur *within* language” as opposed to being merely recorded or registered by it (22). But it does this now in more complex ways than Williams suggests in the 1970s. In fact, at the moment, history signifies two radically different, albeit interrelated, processes or responses to the past, one thriving in everyday speech and the other in certain forms of academic discourse.

In everyday speech, despite or perhaps because of its assumed transparency, history is both a “binding” and an “indicative” word of enormous power. It binds in the sense that other words draw authority from it—“social processes,” in Williams’s own phrase, for instance, become more grounded, more difficult to challenge once those processes can be described as “historical.” History does this because it indicates a foundation or “transcendent signified” with which many people continue to feel secure. In quotidian

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politics, the evidence for this is overwhelming. World leaders, politicians, and journalists of every stripe routinely invoke it, albeit only when issues are felt to be of major importance. In today's *New York Times* (15 December 2004), for instance, commenting on the merits of Iraq-war recipients of the Presidential Medal of Freedom, a Democratic Senator reflected, "I don't think history will be as kind to these gentlemen as the president was today." Similarly, on the other side, defending his decision to assist the United States in its invasion of Iraq, as skillful a rhetorician as Tony Blair insisted that "history will be our judge." In this use, history assumes a God-like role—it looks down on the actions of men and women, weighs the relative consequences of those actions, and issues "the verdict of history." Like Job's Yahweh, and for Blair mercifully unlike the Hutton inquiry, the wisdom of history is not to be questioned. Not only does this God-like history judge but, as Williams notes, it teaches. President Bush, for instance, feels sure that "history teaches us" that it is a mistake to appease dictators. It cautions those who fail to learn the lessons of history that they are doomed to repeat the mistakes, "the crimes and follies of mankind," that history so carefully records. History is in fact the final moral arbiter. It is always on the side of freedom and does invaluable work in producing moral clarity. In the case of the Iraq war, for instance, it indicates the shortcomings of present-day Islam with self-evident, self-authenticating assurance, for, as Richard Perle insists, contemporary Islam is "on the wrong side of history." Being on the right side of history is then crucially important—for only by being there can second-term presidents and prime ministers hope "to secure a place in history."

History as it's used in these clichés is fairly obviously the vulgarized legacy of the Enlightenment. In *Keywords*, Williams is fully aware of the power of this discourse, the Enlightenment "philosophy" of history or what has come to be called historicism, but his analysis is strikingly unhelpful in enabling us to understand its present, early twentieth-century influence in quotidian politics. For what most interests Williams is very specific; it is the post-Second World War rejection of historicism's optimism. History in the late eighteenth century became historicism because it no longer simply meant a reconstruction or inquiry into the past; it came to mean a theory or process that comprehended past, present, and future—that is, a process that generally assumed "progress and development" and in its later Marxist manifestations implicitly promised to reveal the historical forces or laws that were shaping "the future in knowable ways" (147). Williams betrays the peculiarly post-war orientation of his own thinking by emphasizing his contemporaries' disillusionment with this process. He records attacks on

historicism with more than a little sympathy: “It is not always easy to distinguish this kind of attack on historicism, which rejects ideas of a necessary or even probable future,” he explains of Karl Popper’s critique, “from a related attack on the notion of any *future* (in its specialized sense of a better, a more developed life),” that is, from an attack “which uses the lessons of history ... (history as a tale of accidents, unforeseen events, frustration of conscious purposes), as an argument especially against hope.” History, he speculates, may now mean nothing more than “a general pattern of frustration and defeat” (147). Although *Keywords* was first published in 1976, it is difficult not to hear in this particular speculation a voice from the bleak post-war world of Orwell’s 1948 classic, *1984*. Needless to say, there is nothing of this pessimism in the way the politicians and journalists cited above use history, but equally there is nothing of the Enlightenment’s rigour or imagination either. History as it is used in contemporary political discourse is largely unreflective and profoundly mannerist—it is indicative of what we might call vulgar historicism. At its most pretentious and dangerously misleading, it claims to identify the fulfilment of Enlightenment notions of *telos*, the “end of history,” in the collapse of the Soviet Union (see Fukuyama 1992).

This mannerism is important because it suggests the degree to which our self-proclaimed historicist culture’s sense of history, certainly as it’s articulated in everyday discourse, is paradoxically only skin-deep. This is not simply a matter of ignorance or forgetfulness—there is something willful about it. Consider the cultural amnesia that allowed George Bush to get away with his arrogant assertion that the Second World War started in 1941—that it too had started with a 9/11-like attack on the United States. When this issue was raised in a recent seminar, the response on the part of a number of American visitors was one of angry defensiveness: “You people, you people, you were doing nothing until we came in.” What is most interesting about this response is the way it suggests that strong cultures, however historicist they claim to be, will suppress or ruthlessly re-interpret information, transforming history into myth, as soon as they feel their identity to be threatened. All cultures have a tendency to solipsism, nationalist cultures more so than others. There is, of course, no question that in most Western countries enormous energy is devoted to historical research and when that research has an obvious instrumentalist application, in science, medicine, economics, or engineering, say, then it is likely to have real agency, real power to effect policy and change. Concepts like evolution or the general theory of relativity are profoundly historicist. But when that research is focused on Williams’s key areas of concern, the more speculative, social science areas of culture and society, its radically

diachronic perceptions often seem to be easily assimilated into already existing synchronic structures.

The chief rhetorical instrument of such assimilation is analogy. Marshall Sahlins makes this point in his recent book *Apologies to Thucydides*. “If the past is a foreign country,” he says, “then it is another culture” (2), and to the degree that analogy occludes cultural difference in the name of self-evident universals like “human nature” or the “human condition,” it turns history into an endless present. Sahlins points to the unusually influential role of Thucydides in modern presentism. Because Thucydides insists on writing his history in terms of universals—universals which appeal to the modern West but were in fact defining features of his own culture, a culture that often idealized a specifically “competitive, self-interested” view of human nature (4)—there is hardly any modern war that the West has not reproduced as an analogue of the Peloponnesian War. Not even the Cold War, which the sage and serious General George Marshall once described as “the Russians playing the Spartans to our Athenians” (17). Since the Spartans won, this was not the most upbeat analogy, but then it didn’t really matter because the figure was never meant to be taken that seriously. It was merely a gesture identifying America, as Milton had done England, with “the old and elegant humanity of Greece” (*Areopagitica* 238), an allusion assimilating the imagined political grandeur of Athens (the real Greece) into the culture of the United States. In vulgar historicism, all that matters is the simulacrum not the original of which it is *supposed* to be an exact copy. The monuments of vulgar historicism are everywhere. There is, for instance, a direct correlation between history as it functions in popular political discourse and as it manifests itself in the artifacts of the heritage industry, works of ingenious presentism from Colonial Williamsburg to Hollywood’s holocaust in *Schindler’s List* (see Lowenthal 2003).

Sahlins’s argument is primarily addressed to conventional historians in defense of anthropology—if anthropology has for a long time been “historyless,” he says, then “history has for even longer been ‘cultureless’” (17). However true this may be of quotidian history, it is not true of history as practiced in so much contemporary literary criticism. Fredric Jameson’s wonderfully stimulating 1991 critique of New Historicism as an assault on historicity, as the production of a “new depthlessness” (6), misses its mark and is better applied to what I’ve been calling vulgar historicism. What distinguishes the New Historicism and Cultural Materialism that emerged in the 1980s inspired by Michel Foucault and others is precisely the desire to avoid “cultureless history,” to write literary history that demonstrated the extraordinarily assimilative power of historically distinct, synchronic

cultures. The subversion-containment debate of the '80s, especially as it was articulated in works like Stephen Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets," is best understood as an excited overstatement of this insight (see Stevens 2002). So many critical modes that now dominate English literary studies, modes as diverse as Postcolonialism, Postmodernism, Gender Studies, or even the New British History (see Armitage 2000), are deeply indebted to, if not wholly explained by, the historicist perceptions of the '80s—that history is a matter of the genealogy of cultures and those cultures produce or come to consciousness of themselves in language. Though many of these historicizing modes of criticism are capable of falling back into a kind of archival antiquarianism, at their best their practitioners insist on the crucial relevance of culture to history. This is a cause for some pride. For while the vulgar historicism of so many elites both inside and outside the academy has made them incapable of resisting various crude, neo-liberal and/or neo-conservative agendas, the nuanced, "culture-full" history of so many academic disciplines, not least literary criticism, has enabled their members to stand firm and keep faith with the deeply humane ethos of Williams's *Keywords*. History is a keyword because at this point in time it reveals how two rival social processes or responses to the past occur simultaneously within the same language—the one closing our minds, effortlessly assimilating the past into the present; the other opening them, tirelessly defamiliarizing the present by showing how the past is another culture and how other cultures themselves reveal the possibility of other pasts.

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Individual

Some coordinates:

Anthony Wilson, 43 of Branson, Mo., has changed his name legally to They. The inventor says he became the mythical person cited as "they say" for the fun of it, and also: "It's important to be an individual. But this is a reminder that the sum of all is greater than the individual."

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