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Annotated Bibliography: Describing Historicism

The works described in this bibliography represent my effort to come up with a description of “historicism” as a theoretical position that can be used in examining literary (and other) texts. The historicism that I’m concerned with is not the “New Historicism” that has emerged as a popular literary critical stance, especially in Renaissance studies, over the past 20 or so years, but is more closely akin to “philosophy of history,” or “historiography.” It is a study concerned with identifying “theories of history” rather than with placing particular texts in some historical context of which they are more or less an expression. Most of the authors central to my discussion are considered “poststructuralist” theorists. Among other things, they tend to posit history as “constructed” and “textual,” regarding the historian’s task as the transformation of past events, the “chronicle,” into texts or “histories.” In my formulation, these “historicist” theories are most usefully applied to literary texts in examinations of the conceptions of history, as a cultural or personal institution, force, preoccupation or obsession, expressed by works such as Thomas Pynchon’s V, James Joyce’s Ulysses, and William Faulkner’s Absalom, Absalom!.

The central critical text of my discussion is Hayden White’s Tropics of Discourse. Works by Friedrich Nietzsche, R.G. Collingwood and Michel Foucault are “background” texts, in the sense that their ideas inform White’s theories about what “history” is and does.

Castle, Gregory. “‘I am almosting it’: History, Nature, and the Will to Power in ‘Proteus.’”

James Joyce Quarterly 29.2: 281-96. Says that Joyce posits a narrative of history

that doesn't sacrifice imagination to the necessity of a final state (284). He shows an alternative to the traditional "master narrative" paradigm, a narrative operating in opposition to a teleological philosophy of history. Stephen desires connection with the past, but he doesn't want this connection to be "organized by the master narratives of patriarchy" (287). He struggles for "historical identity, for a sense of his own role as subject of history" (290).

Collingwood, R. G. Essays in the Philosophy of History. Austin: U of Texas P, 1965.

History, according to Collingwood, is the "imaginative reconstruction of past events." Far from simply recording facts, the historian must fill in the gaps in the historical record with interpolations stretched between known facts. These interpolations must mesh with the "evidence," but evidence here does not simply mean empirical facts. The picture of the past is always incomplete and open to revision, but this does not mean that historical knowledge is impossible. Historical actions must be penetrated in order to reveal the thoughts and intentions behind them.

Deane, Seamus. Introduction. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. New York:

Penguin, 1992. vii-xliii. Points out the importance of Stephen's sense of community: the novel ends with Stephen's determination to form the conscience of his race. Discusses the way the representation of public, "official" history relates to the revelation of Stephen's "personal" history, "the history of Stephen, his friendships, his reading and his thoughts" (xiv). The distinction between the two is not secure. Stephen joins the romantic tradition of radical selfhood in an attempt to make his people individuals rather than members of a colonized mob. In the end, he rejects the assimilation of past and present because this would erase the difference between them (xli).

Fillingham, Lydia Alix. Foucault for Beginners. New York: Writers and Readers, 1993. A

good introduction to Foucault's thought with a brief biography. Explains the primary focus of Foucault's work as the relationship between power and knowledge. Provides synopses of major works: Madness and Civilization, The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things, Discipline and Punish and The History of Sexuality. Also explains concepts related to Foucault's work, such as existentialism, structuralism and Marxism. Points out that Foucault tends to ignore issues of gender.

Foucault, Michel. The Archaeology of Knowledge & The Discourse on Language. New York: Pantheon, 1972. Foucault here undertakes to analyze and describe the methods employed in his other works. He begins by noting that historians no longer seek unity and cohesion in the events they describe, that discontinuity is now the subject of history and the condition of the historian's work rather than a disruption or failure of history. Much of this book is incomprehensible to me, on first reading. The most important idea contained herein, the one that will be essential to my discussion of historicism, is the notion that discourses are not groups of objects so much as they are practices that "systematically form the objects of which they speak" (49).

Fox-Genovese, Elizabeth. "Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism." The New Historicism. Ed. H. Aram Veese. New York: Routledge, 1989. 213-224. Figures historicism, literary scholars' interest in history, as an attack on history. New historicism lacks a clear statement of purpose or philosophical stance. She seems to think that new historicism is nothing more than trendy fluff--but she expresses this vividly and compellingly! Objects to new historicists' insistence on addressing history as text (or a group of texts), ignoring history as "what happened in the past." The assertions of new historicism entail the suspension of our common-sense apprehension of the world--we must, in a sense, deny the ways

of knowing with which we address the everyday world, or at least “admit” that they are inadequate and (possibly) do not yield true knowledge. Accuses the new historicists of complicity in the “excesses” of the post-structuralists. Concludes that Marxist theorists are the only ones with a truly historical orientation.

Froula, Christine. “History’s Nightmare, Fiction’s Dream: Joyce and the Psychohistory of Ulysses.” James Joyce Quarterly 28.4: 857-72. Joyce’s figuration of history as nightmare and writing as dream shifts the focus in Ulysses from history to metahistory, from the facts of history to what we do with those facts. Stephen’s Shakespeare theory figures women as the nightmares of history.

“history, history of the philosophy of.” The Oxford Companion to Philosophy. Ed. Ted Honderich. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995. 360 - 164. “Speculative” or “substantive” philosophy of history has as its subject the actual human past, studied to determine the workings and significance of the historical process as a whole; “critical” or “analytical” philosophy of history focuses on history as a specific form of knowledge. Critical philosophy of history emerged in the 20th century in such thinkers as Wilhelm Dilthey and Benedetto Croce.

Lentricchia, Frank. “Foucault’s Legacy--A New Historicism?” The New Historicism. Ed. H. Aram Veaser. New York: Routledge, 1989. 231-242. New historicism rejects “old” historicism’s “metaphysics of determinism” while retaining a commitment to the principle of causality, which is necessary to historicism of any sort. “Literary” historicism maintains a humanist impulse which contradicts its other premises. Foucault’s influence is uncritically accepted by new historicists and is apparent in their use of the term “power.” Observes a lurking Hegelianism that “subverts the Foucauldian new-historicist desire to move beyond mainstream historicist practice and guarantees, in advance, the unity of the culture under historical question” (237). Takes Stephen Greenblatt as primary example of new historicist scholarship.

Greenblatt's positioning of himself as a stable, continuous subject is in conflict with his assumptions / assertions about the discontinuity and disruption of past and present that characterizes "history" (i.e., he doesn't apply his theory consistently); historical subjects are created through relations of power, but Greenblatt himself is not (since he posits for himself intentionality and unity).

Newton, Judith Lowder. "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism.'" The New Historicism. Ed. H. Aram Veaser. New York: Routledge, 1989. 152-167. Notes that the contributions of feminist scholars and thinkers, and women in general, are not mentioned in discussions of the roots of "new historicism." The early feminist project of writing a "New Women's History" entailed redefining "history" itself. The emphases and practices of the "New Women's History" overlap with those currently attributed to "new historicism." Analyzes the way gender is placed in "history" in three critical texts; discusses how their orientation toward feminism leads the authors to construct "history" in different ways. "New historicism" often fails to consider and account for the impact of the "material world of the domestic" on the cultural hegemonies it seeks to expose; in order to present more than "history as usual," this level of culture must be taken into account.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. "History in the Service and Disservice of Life." Unmodern Observations. New Haven: Yale UP, 1990. 75-145. Nietzsche here condemns "historicism" because it posits history as a science. He thinks that history should be addressed in an aesthetic or poetic mode rather than a scientific mode; history cannot be adequately understood, and put into the service of life, by objective, scientific investigation. Ultimately, the entire notion of "objectivity" is called into question. Objectivity, he determines, is an illusion, and therefore no basis for any sort of investigation at all. Only animals and children are truly happy because they live unhistorically; forgetfulness is essential to human happiness. A certain degree

of historical awareness injures, and finally destroys, a living thing--a man, a people, or a culture. Inner strength the key to assimilating or overcoming the past. A degree of the unhistorical is necessary to human existence--without it, the past overwhelms and paralyzes us. History should serve life rather than control it; this is why it should never become a pure science like mathematics. Excess of history causes life to degenerate and be destroyed, finally destroying history itself. History relevant to man in three ways: to the man of ambition and action; to the man who preserves and venerates; to the man who suffers and needs liberation.

Corresponds to the three types of history: monumental (exemplary); antiquarian; critical. The idea that greatness should be immortal fuels man's desire for monumental history. Monumental history doesn't require absolute accuracy; not interested in causes of events but in their monumental effects. Veneration of the past, in the antiquarian spirit, puts history in the service of life by giving people a sense of connection with the past and with the future, and a satisfaction in knowing that they are the inheritors of a common past. This veneration can become dangerous when it stifles progress and the emergence of new things, when it becomes an insatiable desire for anything and everything that is old.

Antiquarian history is inadequate because it understands only how to preserve life, not how to create life. It paralyzes the man of action. Man needs the critical mode to supplement the exemplary and the antiquarian--because sometimes a past must be destroyed. Exemplary, antiquarian and critical history must be put in the service of life, rather than in the service of a mere increase of knowledge. Morbid insistence on contrast between inward and outward--we stuff ourselves with knowledge (dead, of the past), cultivating the inward and letting the exterior decline. Culture damaged by this fragmentation and disjunction of inner and outer; healthy (national) culture depends on fostering unity. Nietzsche thinks

German culture suffers from a destructive excess of history which continually widens the gulf between inward and outward life. Historical culture stifles philosophy, rendering it merely ineffectual inward knowledge, unallied with action. Historical orientation encourages objectivity, which snuffs out personalities and leads to impotence--figures historian as eunuch. Historians figure "objectivity" as the act of judging the past by the standard of "current public opinions"; this is their sole criterion of truth. Their job is to accommodate the past to the triviality of the present. Conversely, all historiography that refuses to accept these popular opinions as canonical, they call 'subjective'" (115). History can only "preserve or even awaken instincts," that is, be a creative rather than a destructive force, when it can be transformed into a work of art. Dissection kills a living thing--Nietzsche condemns the hyper-analytical historical orientation of his time. The pervasive scientific mode of thought has infected aspects of human life that should be left somewhat mysterious. Hegelian teleology has left us in history's thrall, viewing ourselves as mere "descendants," but also as "the true meaning and purpose of all previous history, defining our own conscious misery as the consummation of world history" (127). The problem of history must be understood historically--i.e., historical knowledge must be turned upon itself. Overly historical orientation leads to a preoccupation with Becoming (as opposed to Being, I guess), which (I think) kills the present. Nietzsche asserts that the attempt to determine or discover "laws" of history is merely a means of explaining the "great" in terms of the "masses." The impulse toward objectivity constitutes a gulf between life and knowledge; "objectivity" requires stepping outside life, observing life rather than participating in it.

Senn, Fritz. "History as Text in Reverse." James Joyce Quarterly 28.4: 765-775. Senn points out the narrativized, textual nature of history. The human element, he says,

makes history problematic; the ambiguity of language poses an additional problem. In “Nestor,” the problem is why some things have “survived in cultural memory” and some have not (767). History is not only what is preserved but what we are able to know, what can be assimilated to our world view. History (text) puts history (the past) in terms of now (770).

Spoo, Robert. James Joyce and the Language of History: Dedalus's Nightmare. New York: Oxford UP, 1994. Stephen struggles to escape history, all the while knowing that he must re-enter it “through the window or the back door before he can achieve anything of value” (10)--could say this back door or window is the childhood relation to history (associational, inclusive); connect attempt to escape from history with attempt to pin down language, develop univocal voice of authority. Spoo claims that history is a subtext of A Portrait which is obscured by the focus on Stephen's unfolding consciousness, his personal history (39)--I disagree: history is a subject of the novel, and this is announced from the very title, not to mention the opening line--title positions the novel's time as past, portrait as a young man implies that the artist is no longer that; opening line, “Once upon a time,” announces historical / mythical orientation (mythical always already historical--and vice versa). The opposition of “personal” to “universal” history is flawed: same narrativizing, historicizing impulses apply to individual experiences as to “world events.” Stephen's resistance to conceptualizing himself as exhibiting a stable consciousness over time indicates a resistance to the cyclical view of history Joyce offers in Ulysses and Finnegans Wake. Stephen wants to believe that development, evolution, revolution are possible, since he wants to revolutionize (or create) the Irish conscience. Romantic historiography: subjective element of historiography, historian reconstructs the past through “intuitive contact with the minds of the dead” (50)--Michelet, Dilthey, Croce, Collingwood; history becomes

and aesthetic act and art becomes history. “Contextualist” conception of history rejects totalized picture of historical process (56). Stephen’s relationship to language parallels his relationship to history: views the “two faces of language” as he views the “two faces of historical understanding,” in binary terms (58). Poem to E.C., loses the particularity of the event in attempting to turn it into art. Nightmare a “characteristic trope of modernist historiography, a figure for the desire to break through received textualizations of the past to an unwonted authenticity” (90). Woolf also uses this trope. Stephen / Mr. Deasy = art / history. Oppressive, totalizing historical narrative constitutes Stephen’s nightmare; totalizing historical narratives omit the possible, “a category indispensable for a sense of history’s alternatives as well as of its alterity , its difference from the present and from itself” (93). Relates to Haines’ assertion that “history is to blame,” which implies an impersonal determinism--admitting the category of the possible (as Stephen does) allows the assertion that things didn’t have to be the way they are (Ireland didn’t simply become of necessity a colonized, oppressed nation, etc). In Ulysses, Stephen learns that “the notion of a surmountable past is a dream, a dream that quickly passes into a nightmare as each effort to shed one’s antecedents reinscribes them ever more deceptively in the present” (99). In “Proteus,” history is transformed from a teleological “measure of all things” and integrated into the natural surroundings; cycle of Stephen’s memory imitates the ebb and flow of the sea; language and history are represented as natural deposits, gradual accretions. The difference between “Nestor” and “Proteus” is a movement from “rigid actualizations to rich potentialities” (109).

White, Hayden. Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. Identifies tropics as the means by which all discourse constitutes the objects which it pretends to describe objectively. The subject of

the essays is the way tropes function in the discourses of the human sciences, particularly historical discourse. These discourses evince the same “master tropes” that have been identified in literature: metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, irony. Calls the discourses of the human sciences “mimetic-analytical discourse.” Many of the essays are concerned with critiquing historians’ conceptions of what it is they’re doing, with the historian’s claim to be producing a combination of science and art. Concerned with blurring the distinctions, or at least noting a pre-existing ambiguity, between “history” and “literature” and between “history” and “historiography,” White frequently points out the linguistic similarities of each of these modes-- always coming back to the idea of tropes.

White, Hayden. “The Burden of History.” Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 27 - 50. Discusses the inadequacy of the current notion of historical consciousness and historians’ conceptions of what they’re doing and what they are supposed to do. Notes the modernist literary repudiation of history and historians (short analyses of Sartre, George Eliot, Camus, Gide, Ibsen). The main problem is that historians identify their work as a combination of art and science while hanging onto outdated notions of what art and science are, thus making their study primarily antiquarian (cf. Nietzsche) or necrophilic in nature. The historian’s idea of what artistic and scientific expression are have not evolved--they still hold to 19th c. ideas. Historians refuse to accept the historicity of historical discourse, that it is itself the product of a particular historical moment. Historical consciousness, in its current formulation, is an outmoded worldview, but it is also dangerous (in the view of more progressive artists, scientists, philosophers, etc.). Historians must accept that they do not, and cannot, supply the truth about the past: they must “recognize that there is no such thing as a single correct view of any object under study but that their are

many correct views, each requiring its own style of representation” (47). Also, the historian must abandon the project of constructing a “specious continuity” between past and present and instead should educate us in discontinuity because discontinuity, chaos and disruption characterize the situation in which we find ourselves now.

White, Hayden. “Interpretation in History.” Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 51 - 80. Notes the conventional distinction between “proper” history and metahistory (“speculative philosophy of history,” p. 76, note 2). Will argue in this essay that this distinction “obscures more than it illuminates about the nature of interpretation in historiography in general” (52). Positivist view of explanation: “historians explain past events only insofar as they succeed in identifying the laws of causation governing the processes in which the events occur . . . history can claim the status of a science only in the extent to which historians actually succeed in identifying the laws that actually determine historical processes” (54). Narrativist view of explanation: “historians explain the events that make up their narratives by specifically narrative means of encodation . . . by finding the story which lies buried within or behind the events and telling it in a way that an ordinarily educated man would understand . . . [this story] is empirical and subject to techniques of verification and disconfirmation in the same way that theories of science are” (54-55). Notes Levi-Strauss’ conclusion that historical facts are constructed by the historian rather than given to him; the coherence of the historical narrative is mythological in nature. Northrop Frye: the difference between a historical and a fictional account of the world is formal, not substantive. Historian’s narrative constrained by the kinds of stories available--”must draw upon a fund of culturally provided mythoi in order to constitute the facts as figuring a story of a particular kind, just as he must

appeal to that same fund of mythoi in the minds of his readers to endow his account of the past with the odor of meaning and significance” (60). Outlines four different conceptions of explanation that correspond to the modes of emplotment used by historians in constructing their narratives: idiographic, contextualist, organicist and mechanist (66-67). Because “every representation of the past has specifiable ideological implications,” four types of historical identification, having their origins in different types of ideological commitment, can be identified (69). Those who wish to separate “proper” history from metahistory have no theoretical justification because every proper history presupposes a metahistory (i.e., you can’t get away from theory because there’s a theory behind even the most naive statement). History is not scientific yet because it hasn’t developed its own language--it is dependent upon “natural” language and therefore functions under the same restrictions and by the same rules (this is why there can still be confusion between a metaphysical and a scientific question in history). This is where the tropes come in--the meaning of historical narrative will be construed in terms of “the possible modalities of language itself” (72), i.e. metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony.

White, Hayden. “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact. Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 81 - 100. Basically repeats the same points as “Interpretation in History,” admonishing historians to be conscious of the “literary” nature of their textual productions. Concludes that such self-consciousness will lead to the development of a theory of history. Discusses the meaning of emplotment (“the encodation of the facts contained in the chronicle as the components of specific kinds of plot structures” (83)) and the methods by which historians emplot the facts that they discover. Notes that history and fiction have in common the familiarization of unfamiliar events, fictive

events in the case of the novelist, and distant factual events in the case of the historian. The construction of history entails placing events in relationships that endow them with meaning.

White, Hayden. "Historicism, History, and the Figurative Imagination." Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 101 - 120. More repetition of the stuff about tropes. This time tries to remove the distinction between "history" and "historiograph," concluding that the primary difference between them is the level of self-consciousness: the historian and the historiographer both use figurative language in constructing their narratives (or arguments), but the historiographer is conscious of his troping. Posits an interesting formulation of (historical) discourse: fact + meaning = discourse (107). Also proposes that the modes of discourse employed in the sciences are theoretical formulations of the tropes of natural language.

White, Hayden. "Foucault Decoded: Notes From Underground." Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 230 - 260. Foucault a post-Structuralist because he turns the Structuralist linguistic interpretative strategy back on the human sciences and Structuralism itself, insisting that they too are in the thrall of their own linguistic protocols. The modern human sciences are, according to Foucault, founded on the illusion that words enjoy a privileged status as "transparent icons" when they are, in fact, merely things among other things. The discourses of the human sciences are simply "games played with the languages in which their basic concepts have been formulated" (231). For Foucault, language constitutes both categories of the mind and the perceptions of the world that they address. "History" is a delusion, a "reactionary formation against the discovery of the seriality of all things": "Foucault writes 'history' in order to destroy it as a discipline, as a mode of

discourse, and as a mode of (social) existence” (234). Foucault isn't interested in relating a corpus of work to its social, economic and political context, just as he isn't interested in relating it to the intentions or life of its author. Foucault rejects comparison, typology, causality and “spirit” as modes of explaining events. White asserts that there is a “transformational system built into Foucault's of the succession of forms of the human sciences, even though Foucault appears not to know that it is there” (251). Foucault overturns the historians project, seeking to defamiliarize the “phenomena of man, society, and culture” rather than normalize or familiarize them; this impulse can be traced to Nietzsche's call for a poetic historiography in “The Use and Abuse of History.”

White, Hayden. “The Absurdist Moment in Contemporary Literary Theory.” Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1978. 261 - 282. Divides orientation in contemporary criticism into “Normal” criticism and “Absurdist” criticism. “Normal” critics are those who continue to interpret texts without reflecting on what it is they're doing as critics; they maintain the assumptions that there is some “meaning” to be gotten at in a text and that in fact this meaning can be gotten at. “Absurdist” critics, on the other hand, question the very assumptions upon which Normal criticism is based, treating language itself as a problem and “linger[ing] indefinitely on the surface of the text, in the contemplation of language's power to hide or diffuse meaning, to resist decoding or translation, and ultimately to bewitch understanding by an infinite play of signs” (263).

White, Hayden. “New Historicism: A Comment.” The New Historicism. Ed. H. Aram Veenser. New York: Routledge, 1989. 293 - 302. Outlines the fallacies through which New Historicists offend other literary and historical theorists: the “genetic fallacy” (offensive to New Critics); the “referential fallacy” (offensive to Post-

structuralists); the “culturalist fallacy” (offensive to historians); and the “textualist fallacy” (offensive to historians and traditional literary scholars). Defends the “textualism” of New Historicists.