

T. Craig

Introduction

This double issue of the *Dalhousie Review* features thirteen papers selected from the 1987 Atlantic University Teachers of English conference held at Mount Allison University. The conference theme was the relationship between literature and history. Dr. Peter Buitenhuis gave the keynote address, discussing his handling of the historical material for his 1987 study, *The Great War of Words: British, American and Canadian Fiction and Propaganda, 1914-1933*. Thirty papers were delivered, followed by a panel discussion. These selections demonstrate a wide range of applications of historical research and historiography to literary scholarship. The concluding panel discussion concentrated on the similarities of studying in both disciplines, virtually to the point where history seemed to have been subsumed by literature.

The extinction of history as a discipline is unlikely to be caused by literature, for reasons that transcend both disciplines. The range of the papers itself reveals a paradox that implicitly informs their critical conclusions. The subjectivity of the processes of writing history and literature is recognized as an assumption in most of these papers, but the need to treat history as if it were objective is evident also. Often a foundation of objective assumptions underlies discussion of the subjective nature of a text, discussion represented here in analyses of the biases of gender, of politics, of nationalism, and even of mercenary opportunism. And further, the critics who perform this schizoid task in their papers are commenting on writers performing the same task in poetry, prose, and drama.

History appears in these papers in two forms, either as literary or constitutional history. The first is the record of man's violence; the second is the record of man's various attempts to control and reduce violence. The two forms have in common the exercise of power, one by force and the other by law. We know no more of some historical fi-

gures than that they were in power. Yet history does seem to be interesting for the gamesmanship of its power struggles, and literature probably draws some of its attraction by being conscripted into the service of these struggles, where myths are bought and sold to legitimize factions.

The opportunist nature of some conscripted literature can be seen well in the papers by Alan Young and Stephen Brown. Brown attacks Defoe's integrity, showing the mercenary nature of his efforts to work both sides of an issue. Defoe's literature was aimed at the middle class, whereas the form of literature examined by Young aimed with great hope at the head of state. Literature is reduced to propaganda for money and power, two interchangeable constants, and can be aimed upwards or downwards within the class system. In both papers the historical contribution works out to social kind of intentional fallacy, the speculative reconstruction of interest groups and motives behind the writing process. In both papers it has to be presumed that certain ideas are facts, or else the entire literary argument becomes a game. Both critics assume that there is a bottom line in literary criticism, and it is called history. Further, literary criticism is serious because it is about power.

This paradox can be seen in statements as simple as the final sentence of Brown's paper on Defoe: "If all histories are kinds of lying, it is better that we should know who the liars are." Surely if one accepts that all histories are kinds of lying, then all those who write about it are liars. This is the cliff over which these critics refuse to march, recognizing the suicidal nature of admitting the consequences of total subjectivity. Literary criticism seems to require an objective foundation. Derridan deconstruction is fine as long as each layer of meaning can be replaced by another. Is there any point in identifying a liar once lies are recognized as a norm which may exclude truth forever?

For all we may pick away at our distrust of history, we clearly have a deep need for it, if we allow it to exist once philosophy has overcome it. There is, as Philip Gardner points out, the ongoing need to come to terms with one's roots. This impulse to search for and recover such material clearly rests on expectations that it can be found in some degree of objectivity. The integrity of history becomes a problematic guarantor of one's self image, even of one's rationality, in the present. The creative literature that is built upon such attempts depends on enormous presumptions that have much more to do with psychology than the chimera of objective history.

Finding one's roots is likely to be seen at the time as a positive act of historical recreation. Other, more negative exercises in historiography are probably more obvious. Tom Gerry argues against the gamesmanship of Post-Modernist literary tendencies to give in to subjectivity. For him, the all too real threat of the past to intrude on and even to terminate our future takes precedence over Post-Modernist wordplay. The nuclear threat of obliteration is a terribly objective-appearing fact in the present, a threat backed up by the last forty years of history. Gerry points out people's surprising ability to selectively tune out the negative in favour of the positive. This "psychic numbing" is, in fact, a refusal to face the facts of history. The critic, Gerry argues, should note the imposition of literary games upon historical fact, a dance upon time that draws attention *because of* its neglect of reality. Gerry deplores the refusal of literature and criticism to concern themselves with history other than for its contributions to personal, introspective functions. History and literature and criticism are seen defined by an ameliorative social function, all three meshed into an equation which considers power as a manipulative abstract instead of as a constant traded between mutable people. Criticism becomes a testing of power behind myths, a now deadly real analysis of games played upon the public by power brokers. Criticism becomes an attempt to impose rationality upon the machinations of power. Perhaps the imposition of rationality is the literate act upon the irrationality of history. Rationalization is narratization, especially the ability to imagine new narrative forms for new versions of rationality. But Gerry points out that only certain history is narratized, or it is narratized in certain ways that exclude certain relationships.

Marilyn Rose discusses Kogawa's demonstration in *Obasan* of the narrator's pain in facing up to the negatives of history, relating it to Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Literature here is seen to push through the veil of psychic numbing, dragging a more complete history with it to fill in the gaps of an "unreasonable" present. Perhaps this is what literature does with history, explore and publicize the silences and the negatives of the past to try to forge an understanding of the present that minimizes such gaps and thus ostensibly minimizes unreason by apparently legitimizing a rationality.

Catherine Kerrigan makes an associated point in her paper on MacDiarmid, noting this veteran's view of the pre-war "model of history" as a fraud exposed by the absolute irrationality of the war. MacDiarmid then settled down to construct a reasonable model, using a newer, more reasonable language because older words had been dis-

credited by abuse—by lying, really. Kerrigan concentrates on this abuse, seeing the words themselves not at fault, but rather the authority which exploited the words being challenged. Reason is always new, if transiently so: history is always not only old but unreasonable.

Most incarnations of authority would seem to have an interest in minimizing change—or at least the kind of change that might challenge it—and thus in promoting theories of history that minimize the effects of change. However, literature seems to attract practitioners who use it to define, justify, and promote change. Literature straddles a past and a desired future, pushing between them to insist on a change—personal or social—and to insist on its ability to employ words in a rational, persuasive manner to move authority directly, or indirectly through a mass audience and democratic pressure. Kerrigan makes this point about the change that Modernist writers have wrought, a change that perhaps because it is so near to our own time, is fairly clear. History is something literature has to liberate itself from to move forward. Again, literature is new: history is old. But literature is selective about what it takes from history—a dangerously relative decision.

In examining David Jones' work, Diana Austen notes that literature is an imaginative act of history, and thus literary form must be sought for historical interpretation. This is, again, best seen in the Modernist challenge to literary conventions in the 1920's. And perhaps it is best seen from a post-Foucault critical perspective.

While repetitive patterns in the past may be noted, they can also be used to force newness into the circuit. Chris Ferns describes how Farrell demythologizes the past to undermine similar myths in the present; indeed, the author's choice of irony itself undermines the narrative and its constituent myths. The form's ironic subversion of itself can be seen in the text as a model of what Farrell is doing to recent British history.

Most of the literature discussed in these papers treats the past as a broken pavement that humanity has walked over to build the present into a structure of certainties. This is not true for all literature, especially Post-Modernist deconstructive efforts set in the present or science fiction set in the future, but for the literature examined here it seems generally true. Even the papers themselves do this, exposing the past's mistakes in documents that must pretend to some certainty in themselves. Ultimately criticism is the imposition of certainty (disguised as reason)—an overlay of security placed over literature which itself is an overlay of security sitting uneasily upon history. Literature filters history to produce a coherent pattern of stable facts, and criti-

cism acts as another filter, one with greater sophistication; both levels exercise authority over history, assert objectivity upon subjectivity, and constitute themselves as authorities even as they challenge it. In this sense, we recognize the deceptive newness of literature. It claims to be the cutting edge of history, but its edge is a tempered amalgam of the past. Its newness is defined by its ancestry. It is a desperate attempt to make the present rational, knitting together scraps of reason from the chaos of the past. And if literature cannot sufficiently make the present rational, then criticism steps in to do the job instead, to the point where textuality becomes a blanket term for any attempts at ordering.

That an inherently subversive medium should be employed for its architecturally assertive social and philosophical functions is the paradox that presides over the relationship between history and literature. The paradox can be self-illustrative, as Richard Knowles demonstrates, in meta-literature that self-reflexively exposes its gamesmanship with history. But problems of terminology seem to multiply with such an exposed paradox, as they do with Kristin Brady's paper on the sexism of literary criticism dominated by male concepts of history, and with Albert Furtwangler's panel contribution concerning the separateness of history and literature. The term "history" itself, embracing both our assumptions of objectivity about the past and our literary attempts to record them "reasonably," is so huge a term that to employ it inevitably results in a discourse not much more useful than a series of near platitudes. Similarly, literature's gigantic canvas incorporates history in such a bewilderingly large variety of ways, that the relationship seems unmappable. A conference like this makes clear the usefulness of some approaches over others, especially in the light of cited appeals to Derrida and Foucault. Equally clear is the need for new specialized terminology about history and its presence in literature, terms to compartmentalize and define the concepts and relationships raised by these papers and the many others that routinely make use of history. A conference built up of such specialized paper sessions focussing on the functions and ramifications of critical terms—and indeed compartmentalization itself—and brought together at the end to generalize into some kind of unity again, could well be the successor and complement to the conference at which these papers were delivered.