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Introduction: Problems and Paradoxes in the History of Criticism

> *History* being, properly speaking, nothing but a *Rehearsal* of things past, and in the same order as they came to pass, ought also to be a continued *Narration*. Therefore, as it hath nothing more essential than the knowing how to relate well, so, nothing is more difficult. For it is a great Art to fix an unconstant and fickle *Reader's* mind. What *wisdom* does it not require to mannage every where those colours that are necessary to give the resemblance to things, and to mix constantly with them those features, those light touches, those graces, that warmth, that quickness, which hinders a Narration from languishing.
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> —*The Modest Critick: or Remarks upon the Most Eminent Historians Ancient and Modern,* René Rapin, trans. "A. L." (1689)

"THERE IS A WIDESPREAD ASSUMPTION AMONG NEW HISTORICISTS and Cultural Materialists," write the editors of *Neo-Historicism,* "that older forms of historical thinking, at least in literature departments, were naïve and unsophisticated, and that it took 'the clarity of focus provided by the new critical paradigms of our own day' . . . to make us aware of the problems involved in reconstructing the past."[1] In the wake of the theoretical work of eminent historical and literary theorists such as

Ralph Cohen, David Perkins, Jerome McGann, Jonathan Arac, and Marshall Brown, the problems of the literary historian have enjoyed renewed attention in recent years. But while a strong revival of interest in the historical methods and aspects of literature's study has now taken place, the issue of the critical as distinct from the literary past seems comparatively ill-defined and under-explored, and theoretical commentary on the history of criticism has been surprisingly muted, scattered, and rare.[2] Many major literary theorists and general critics have been relatively silent or oblique on the peculiar and complicated problems of form that are raised by the history of criticism, while professional philosophers of history in both continental and analytic traditions have generally disregarded them in favor of the universal problems of history.[3]

The general issues that arise from the theme of this collection of essays, as they are pertinent to the theory and the practice of critical history, are not easily resolved. One of the most fundamental of these, echoing the problems raised by the work of David Perkins, with respect to the history of literature,[4] is the *possibility* of writing the past of criticism that will withstand theoretical scrutiny. In one light, one cannot have a history of a transcendental concept such as criticism without a narrative organization of some kind; and yet to construct a narrative of the critical past, with its embellishments, transitions, chronological and logical sequence and digressions, intrigue and denouement, the historian of criticism must return to, and prioritize, the continuities and contrasts in a sequence that combines chronological and logical organization in some way. In practice, as actual histories of criticism reveal, we see that the historian is caught, at every stage, within the established systems, cultural generalizations, overarching theories, geists or gestalts that have become the necessary building blocks of historical writing on criticism,[5] the conventions—shared with literary history—by which such historical writing *becomes* possible.

Many elements that make critical writing worth writing history about are not easily accommodated by these conventions and are not typically prominent in the major histories of the last one hundred years. One might think of the emotional and aesthetic qualities and particularities of critical expression, of the problems of the aesthetic itself, or of the performance of critical judgment in its intimate and engaged

relationships with specific literary works, figures, scenes, passages, images, or lines while, in virtue of their being part of criticism, many aspects of the function of criticism necessarily run against the grain of their contemporary gestalt. The fact that critics and critical works are drawn into a narrative representation does not mean that the story of criticism, by being a fiction in which much is left out, is therefore distorted, or true only in the sense of metaphorical expression: selectivity and fictionality do not always equate.[6] But these aspects of criticism are no less indispensable to criticism because they are part of history, and when treated reductively by historicization, or accommodated to a particular "narrative archetype" ("classic to romantic," "modernism" to "postmodernism," tragic decline or optimistic rise and so forth), then truth in the history of literary criticism may seem characteristically elusive. One must ask, therefore, whether "history" and "criticism" can ever be combined with sufficient precision and flexibility to enable these concepts to retain the methodological values they independently hold for historians on the one hand and critics on the other, and whether what we call the history of criticism can ever be more than a record of perpetual change within the most fluid or vaporous of literary genres—a criticism which is like literature but is not literature, which regards, sincerely judges, analyzes, responds to, advocates, condemns, feels along with and interprets literature, and simultaneously merges with it, which includes theory but whose history seems often to be told in terms heavily weighted toward theory (as a history of ideas) and is the business not of historians proper, nor indeed of historians of philosophy, but literary critics (with or without an historical training)?

In response to these questions (conceived as problems of major form and relative to the conceptual identity of criticism as we now know it), this volume marks out some of the different ways in which specialist literary study—in a variety of current scholarly subdivisions—can illuminate the problem of the critical past, the difficult integration, in concept and representation, of writing criticism and writing history. Against a background of analysis broadly derived from such theorists of temporality as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Hans Robert Jauss, the essays in this book emanate successively from scholarly enquiries into major texts of the medieval period, Restoration literary criticism and society,

poet-critics such as Dryden and Pope, the generic interpenetration of literary history, critical history, and criticism, Coleridgean romanticism, New Historicism, twentieth-century British criticism as instanced by the work of William Empson, historiographical aesthetics, and the language of contemporary "management" culture. Each essay is both a contribution to a distinct area of literary, literary-historical, or cultural research, framed within its particular idiom and context of concerns, and an addition to the theory and practice of the history of criticism. The essays thereby complement other kinds of discussions of the problem of critical history written for other occasions—the introductions, for example, to the major multi-volume critical histories of the last one hundred years—by George Saintsbury, René Wellek, and the recent editors of the multi-authored *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism*—all of which have contributed valuable thought to the theory of writing the critical past, as have the most probing and historically sensitive critics who have evaluated these volumes in major reviews.[7]

Beyond this context a few theoretical essays have enduring status and remain *points de répère*. Most notable is R. S. Crane, who published a ground-breaking account of the distinctive problems of writing the history of late seventeenth-and eighteenth-century criticism in the 1950s, this reprinted in his *Idea of the Humanities* of 1968.[8] Latterly, Dominick LaCapra has articulated a brief though suggestive theorization of the problems and paradoxes of the history of criticism *per se* from the perspective of deconstruction, but recalling Crane's earlier sense of the interdependence of critical past and critical present, the perpetual difficulty of defining the criticism one wants to historicize, and the intractable dynamics of its emplotment. "The problem for the historian of criticism would seem obvious," writes LaCapra: "how does one write a history of a radically heterogeneous and internally dialogised 'object'? One way to simplify one's task is to simplify one's story. . . . Different critical perspectives convert the plot into different stories."[9] Other recent critics who have insisted on a more complex and sophisticated model for thinking about the critical past include Jonathan Culler, who in "The Call to History" has taken issue with the conservatism of the notion explicit and implicit in Terry Eagleton's popular and influential volume *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Eagleton,

writes Culler, "lacks a well-thought-out model of critical history but is content for the most part to accept current notions of major critical schools . . . and sees each as a response to the major wars or crises of civilization that occurred prior to their appearance, or at least in the same decade."[10]

Although contributors to this volume have all sought a rapprochement of some kind between critical present and critical past, the organization of the essays, within the limits that this perspective allows, is itself broadly chronological. In his essay on "Literary History, Critical History, and the Question of 'Medieval' Theory," Stephen Penn begins the discussion by giving specialized attention to the medieval phase of the history of critical theory as shaped by models of interpretation and theory that remain current. He observes that what is meant by "theory" today, and the "theory" of the middle ages, are different things, but he asserts the significance to the history of criticism of medieval theory (in vernacular and Latin traditions) and its relative neglect by writers on "theory" of the present day. Next, and from a viewpoint which connects the meaning of criticism two hundred years later to difficulties in the teaching of critical theory, Paul Trolander and Zeynep Tenger, in their essay "Abandoning Theory: Towards a Social History of Critical Practices," define a more socially conscious approach to writing the history of Restoration and early modern literary criticism than is commonly suggested by the conventional narratives of the history of ideas. Their essay reflects on aspects of judgment and evaluation ubiquitous in popular culture and on the forms of social exchange that generate the practice of criticism in critical expressions other than print. Linking the history of Restoration criticism to the manners of the wider culture, its friendships, coteries, and the social institutions of literary discussion, they challenge the notion of a history of criticism as reducible to monopolistic theories, or to theoretical entities, and stress those many human areas of critical life, past and present, that are not written down.

This essay is followed by Tom Mason's markedly autobiographical "On (Not) Writing Literary and Critical History: Dryden's Preface to *Fables, Ancient and Modern*," an enquiry which recollects a twentieth-century British critical education in the light of Samuel Johnson's

portrait of Minim, the critic from the *Idler*. Broaching the difficulties of the critical historian addressing an audience for criticism with ever-changing expectations in the present, Mason reflects in broad terms on the problems of writing a history of criticism that is also sensitive to the history of the literature of which it is part. He contrasts developmental models in the history of criticism with the historical advances in the fields of physics and of poetry and questions the notion that modern or later assumptions in criticism are necessarily liberating compared with the thoughts and responses of critics in the past. The works of such past critics need to be seen as more often potentially instructive experiences, equals in the debate alongside modern critical essays, academic articles, monographs, and reviews. Using Dryden's "Preface to *Fables*" of 1700 as his case study and the example of Dryden's own historical, genealogical, and critical consciousness of the past in his poems, Mason concludes that without an understanding of the literature on which the past of criticism is based, the history of criticism is a meaningless fabrication.

Next, in my own contribution, "To 'Value Still the True': Pope's *Essay on Criticism* and the Problem of the Historical Mode," I extend the main lines of this theoretical and practical critique of established (teleological) histories to the criticism of the eighteenth century, and I take issue in related terms with a narrative of generalized constructs and cultural universals, with the concept of a literary criticism that is defined through a history of its systems of thought. To this end, and taking my own case study from a controversial work of the early years of the eighteenth century that was deeply influenced by the poetry and criticism of Dryden, I examine the twentieth-century historicization of Pope's *Essay on Criticism* in the light of the historiographical work of Gadamer and Jauss. The details of the aesthetic form of this *poetical* "idea of criticism," its verbal texture, its imagery and language, I argue, cannot be simply dissolved into categories of intellectual and cultural development, conventions, theories, or the ideas of a reductive contextualism. They are the elements and essence of a highly specific yet simultaneously ambiguous *critical* history that is *sui generis*.

Moving from the early eighteenth to the late eighteenth and early

nineteenth century, two contributions then focus in very different ways on critical-historical issues pertinent to post-Augustan literary and critical life. For April London, in her "Johnson's *Lives* and the Genealogy of Late Eighteenth-Century Literary History," the categories of literature, history, historiography, and criticism are shown to be generically permeable in the later years of the eighteenth and the early years of the nineteenth century in the period from Johnson to Hazlitt and were themselves inflected by contemporary crises in the political world. By reference to the narratives inscribed in the editorial commentary appended to major literary collections that came into being after the copyright decision of 1774, London shows how the various modes of resistance to Johnson's conception of literary history in the *Lives of the Poets*, to his damning judgments of minor eighteenth-century poetry, and to conceptions of the history of criticism embedded in the *Lives*, were modified or resisted by those who immediately confronted the authority and influence of Johnson.

In the next essay, Gavin Budge, in a speculation on "History and the New Historicism: Symbol and Allegory as Poetics of Criticism," works with reference to the next chronological phase of the critical past in its implications for a modern academic controversy where history and the historical methods of literary study are at stake. Budge reflects on the interplay between Coleridgean or "organicist" notions of the literary artifact and "New Historicist" assumptions, as articulated by literary criticism making interpretive claims to major romantic texts (such as *Tintern Abbey*). Focusing on a debate between Thomas McFarland and Marjorie Levinson over the legitimacy of "New Historicism," and the problem of historical evidence and context, Budge suggests how the deconstructionism of Paul de Man can be seen as recovering a notion of literary identity that precedes the romantic and appeals to the idioms and concepts of the poststructuralist tradition to suggest a further mode in which the past of criticism can once again begin to redefine and renew the critical present.

The remaining essays take up problems of history as problems of critical practice and principle within the recent past and the critical here and now. In an essay on the neglected critical merits of William Empson, Adam Rounce brings the twentieth-century past of criticism

into a dialogue with its inspiration in the literature of the seventeenth century and the assumptions underlying the editing of Donne's poetry and the modern literary criticism of Milton. He focuses on the complications imposed on our conception of twentieth-century critical history by the bold intentionalism of Empson's criticism, his unclassifiable individualism, his unrelenting sense of textual detail in the face of theory, and his intimate engagement with poetry. Next, Robert Eaglestone, in "Truth, Aesthetics, History," examines from a contrastingly theoretical perspective the overarching issue of "correspondence" and world-shaping approaches to the truth of history as they are evident in contrary or compatible forms in the work of Heidegger, Levinas, Derrida, Isaiah Berlin, and Hayden White, and he explores the consequences of historical construction, fictionality, and factuality for our idea of the "aesthetic" (such as the criticism of literature comments upon). In so doing, he lays down a possible foundation for any engagement with the past of literature or criticism of any period which aspires to historiographical coherence. Finally, in "The End of Criticism," Gary Day recapitulates the history of criticism from the ancient Greeks to the eighteenth century with a regard to the language and wider culture of criticism, and he examines the entry into recent phases of the history of criticism of a managerial rhetoric and a philosophy of the market. His essay investigates the oppositions between culture and commerce, literature and value, in ways that suggest deep-seated and traditional parallels and which re-affirm the value and integrity of the literature of which literary criticism historically speaks.

As the distinctive emphases of all the essays in this volume suggest, a leading function of the history of criticism has been to help readers take the current state of criticism seriously by presenting its variety of theoretical and chronological specialisms in a continuum with the past, while sharpening consciousness of the present by awakening marked contrasts of emphasis. In this, histories of criticism, as modes of writing the critical past, can be seen to make a difference to the present. They do the work of criticism itself. We write the past of criticism because we want to understand and explain in coherent terms that part of literature which consists of critical works whose function is to illuminate and

explain literary works that still matter today, or once mattered. The history of criticism is thus literary criticism defined within certain constraints and enjoying certain liberties expressed through the expectations such histories arouse and the narrative models they employ. It is consonant with this definition that the function of the history of criticism, as well as bringing the past into the present, should also deliberately serve to set the critical past at a distance, to make the reader feel its otherness, not ideally to subdue or repress the past but to situate it in a relation of particular privilege to the present.

From this we may deduce that if literary criticism is to qualify as a legitimate subject for historical treatment, as the essays in this volume also imply or suggest that it can, its elements must also be active deposits within the categories of the critical present, as "deconstruction" or "New Historicism." They must bear on issues that have centrally concerned twentieth-century critics, such as the nature of poetic intention, the relation of criticism to civilization in general, and the role of evaluation and judgment. A sufficient continuity between past and present critical works must be envisaged, and the chronological order of events that makes possible the writing of critical history will need to be reflected in a corresponding and satisfying logical order. The criticism of the present day will in other circumstances go unenriched by the sum of its past. Criticism might inhabit the realm of change, but it would remain outside the realm where the past is conserved as a condition of the present (to paraphrase R. G. Collingwood), to be lived again in the shape of tradition. Critical works from the past will merely *reflect* isolated historical and linguistic communities that interact with their "context" or "culture" but will not in the event speak as criticism to our own—as Stanley Fish might argue. We might then conclude that criticism may have a chronology, but it does not have a history.

One of the most authoritative general contributions to thinking on the critical past—based on the heroically single-handed composition of six volumes of a critical history—is Wellek's. "Only by limiting the subject," writes Wellek in his "Introduction to Volumes 5 and 6: Method and Scope" of his epic *History of Modern Criticism, 1750–1950*, "can we hope to master it."[11] The fact that we have such things as histories of criticism is testimony to the fact that they are possible, and

the fact that we use them as guides to the past suggests that their limitations are generally allowed. Wellek's consciousness of the problems that attend his chosen form, his awareness of the contradictions the historian must face, cannot be overestimated. But the fact that critical histories have use, or the fact that they have literary qualities, and sometimes obey traditional narrative rules and sometimes deviate from them, does not make their accepted form defensible on theoretical grounds. The degree to which Wellek is able to accede to limitations in his idea of criticism, if he is to ensure the integrity and unity and coherence of his volume, is ultimately an ethical issue and a critical aporia that calls for evaluation by critics. The essays in this volume (by critics in several cases actively involved in the construction of critical histories) reveal the enduring dilemma of writing the history of writing criticism.

Notes

1. Robin Headlam Wells, Glenn Burgess, and Rowland Wymer, eds., *Neo-Historicism: Studies in Renaissance Literature, History and Politics* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2000), xi.

2. Maurice Mandelbaum, "History and Criticism: A Commentary," *New Literary History* 5 (1974): 613–18, largely side-steps the point when he tries to address "the question of how historical studies and criticism may be related" (617) but poses the problem "through reference to philosophy" and not in terms of the history of criticism as such. In an essay entitled "The History of Criticism," *Daedalus* (1997): 133–53, Catherine Gallagher is only very specifically concerned with the "history" of American "New Criticism" and the challenges to it, without broadening the issue in the direction her title appears to suggest.

3. For a valuable recent collection of essays see *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, ed. Brian Fay, Philip Pomper, and Richard T. Vann (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998). Fay's belief that for the half-century prior to 1963 "positivism broadly conceived . . . had dominated thought" (2) appears to underplay such influential British philosophy of history as that of R. G. Collingwood.

4. See David Perkins, *Is Literary History Possible?* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992).

5. Brian Vickers writes of the grouping habits of guides to criticism and of histories that "When it comes to classifying the criticism of the past, a period of time which stretches back to Aristotle, the same group-labels—none of them more than fifty years old—are applied." See preface to *Appropriating Shakespeare: Contemporary Critical Quarrels* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), xi.

6. For a detailed critique of Hayden White's tendency to represent the fictionality of historical discourse by implicit reference to "the copy ideal of fictionality," see Noël Carroll, "Interpretation, History, and Narrative," in *History and Theory: Contemporary Readings*, 34–56.

7. In this connection there is the admirably balanced response by Erich Auerbach to the first two volumes of Wellek's history (*Romanische Forschungen* 62 [1956]: 387–97), and latterly the review of vol. 7 of the *Cambridge History of Literary Criticism* by Stefan Collini. Surveying the twentieth-

century "Industrial Revolution" in literary criticism, it is Collini who asks most sharply the central question that motivates the history of criticism as it is addressed by all the writers for this collection: "what exactly the history of literary criticism should be a history of." See "How the Critic came to be King," *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 August 2000.

8. R. S. Crane, "On Writing the History of Criticism in England, 1650–1800," *The Idea of the Humanities and Other Essays Critical and Historical* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 157–75.

9. Dominick LaCapra, "On Writing the History of Criticism Now?," *History and Criticism* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 99.

10. Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and its Institutions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 62.

11. René Wellek, "Introduction to Volumes 5 and 6: Method and Scope," *A History of Modern Criticism: 1750–1950*, vol 5: *English Criticism, 1900–1950* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1986), xix.