What Was Literary History? A Critical Synthesis

Gary Shapiro
University of Richmond, gshapiro@richmond.edu

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GARY SHAPIRO

1 Literary history: all or nothing?

Of course, literary history continues and shall continue, if literary history is construed in a sufficiently broad sense. This 'field' or 'discipline', as we all know, is capable of perhaps indefinite renewal. It does not now, on the whole, imagine itself to be a research program with well-defined methods and objects; so it is open to stimulation and provocation from theoretical inquiries in (for example) linguistics, philosophy, anthropology, psychoanalysis or historiography. In fact, literary history shows some signs of potentially limitless expandability in terms of both the theoretical and methodological resources it can draw upon and in the rapidly increasing number of traditional areas of scholarship and criticism that can be thematized as literary histories. Neither Foucauldian genealogy nor Derridean deconstruction are too outre for at least some literary historians, while symbolic anthropology or rigorous linguistics is welcomed by other. Even more encouraging for the vitality of the enterprise are the many studies by philosophers, historians, and sociologists that aim at treating their fields by writing 'A Literary History of...'. Richard Rorty has recently suggested that there is no longer anything really novel about such perspectives. With regard to philosophy, for example, he claims that Derrida and Jonathan Culler have attempted to gain more plausibility for their versions of the deconstructionist project than is really warranted by claiming that 'our culture' draws a sharp distinction between literature and philosophy that must be called into question. Rorty's reply is, in effect, that we are all already (always already, perhaps) deconstructors since such distinctions no longer really carry any weight in our 'high culture'. Rather than supposing that philosophy is necessarily bound to a 'classic' quest for unquestionable certainty and transparent clarity we all, it seems, either recognize or are on the verge of recognizing that philosophy also involves '[t]he Romantic insistence on breaking out of any proposed closure...we would do well to see philosophy as just one more literary genre within which the Classic-Romantic opposition is prominent. We should not use "philosophy" as the same name of the classic pole of this ubiquitous opposition'. Every form of inquiry or discipline, Rorty suggests, periodically goes through a 'literary' or 'poetic' moment in which its texts becomes anomalous and obtrusive rather than normal exemplifications of a well-understood activity. In this sense, everything is literature and consequently everything becomes a theme for the literary historian, who will happen, (just incidentally) to have an academic appointment in literature, philosophy or sociology.

I have some doubts whether we have really reached the relaxed postmodern era that would allow us to turn the study of philosophy, physics and historiography into literary histories. Perhaps this is because I'm not sure who Rorty's 'we' are; but more of that later. But I also want to raise the question whether the pragmatic program for a truly

Author: Gary Shapiro, Department of Philosophy, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045, USA.
general rather than a restricted literary history could be the sign that literary history is in a process of dissolution (in a way analogous, perhaps, to what Hegel meant when he said that art was in a process of dissolution, or *Auflösung*). That is, the more universal the aspirations of a concept or field are, the more suspicious we may be entitled to be regarding its internal coherence and articulation. Hegel liked to point out that the most universal of all concepts, Being, was identical with its apparent opposite number, the concept of Nothing. Similarly a truly general, pragmatized literary history may turn out to be indistinguishable from the disappearance of literary history. I do not say this with the intention of recalling literary history to its true purpose or authentic origin, for I will be suggesting some reasons for thinking such a retrieval would be a futile exercise in nostalgia. But I also want to suggest that a pragmatic approach to literary history may itself be the symptom of a certain conceptual shift which tends to repeat the problematics of the original concept in a new key, rather than being a radical alternative to that concept. (I should say here that I am using the term ‘pragmatic’ to designate the position currently being developed by Richard Rorty; that position is, in important respects, both like and unlike views held by the classical American pragmatists – Peirce, James and Dewey – but these relations are too complex for comment here).

The expansion to the point of possible dissolution which characterizes literary history may be put into perspective by remembering the relatively recent origins of literary history. Most commentators now place its first appearance in the eighteenth century, suggesting that it is a consequence of a distinctively modern conception of historical time and of the quarrel of the ancients and moderns. While there is some truth in these views, they do not, I think help us to see the whole dynamics of the rise, flourishing, and inflationary growth of the enterprise. Elaborating some suggestions from Michel Foucault, I want to suggest that literary history is bound to the conception of ‘man’ that emerges at around the same time identified as the origin of literary history, and that the fate of the activity must be bound up with the fate of that concept. To make the claim plausible I want to sketch something of a narrative account, indulging in a bit of literary history myself, in order to situate that activity more precisely in relation to the concerns of modernity.

2 Literature without literary history

If we begin our account of Western thinking about literature with Plato and Aristotle, as is usual, we might be tempted to suppose that there has indeed always been a literary history. Socrates says in *The Republic* that there is an ‘ancient quarrel’ (diaphora, or difference) between philosophy and poetry. Such a quarrel which differentiates its protagonists may seem to provide the material for the plot of an *agon* in which we could locate a series of attacks and counter-attacks up to Plato’s own attempt to conquer through assimilation by writing a philosophical poetry. Aristotle gives us a number of narrative suggestions for understanding poetry. The first theologians were the poets, he says in the *Metaphysics*; from that claim we might derive a more conciliatory narrative than the sketch just attributed to Plato, according to which poetry peacefully evolves into philosophy, on the one hand, and poetry proper on the other. Then there are the narratives provided in the *Poetics* concerning both tragedy and comedy. These might be taken as anticipations of the evolutionary and teleological conception of literary history so typical of the nineteenth century and which we now tend to stigmatize as ‘Hegelian’. But the point of these narrative passages is not, I think, the construction of what we
would recognize as literary history. In both thinkers these narratives or narrative-sketches are incidental to a concern with the public and political meaning of the epic and the drama. The past of these genres, conceived either as natural unfolding (Aristotle) or as involved in an agon with other contestants for the public realm (Plato), is of interest only in order to establish whether we should give the tragic or comic poet a chorus and what we can learn from him. We might say that literary history is not thematized by the Greeks because epic and drama are conceived as present, public, and political. Because the epic is sung now, in our presence, or the tragedy enacted before us as an audience, the question of history does not arise. There is no 'classical literature' to interpret, no suggestion that either poet or audience might learn something of importance by reflecting on the history of poetry. Of course, many anecdotes are told about poets, both historical and legendary; but these remain isolated stories appropriate to a diverse range of circumstances, rather than the components of a single continuous narrative. When Aristotle concludes his brief story of the development of tragedy by explaining that the form has now attained its true nature, he is telling us that there is nothing essentially historical about this or any other genre.

Medieval approaches to literature, including sacred texts, resemble some postmodernist tendencies insofar as they bypass questions of history in order to devote themselves to commentary and interpretation. History is not thematized. This is all the more notable in that the Christian exegetical project of assimilating the Hebrew Bible faced the task of explaining an ancient text from an alien culture. While the modern higher critics of the Bible aimed to understand the conditions under which such a text might be produced, the medievals typically took whatever seemed strange or anomalous in the text as a sign that the work had to be understood allegorically, tropologically and analogically. When the patterns of Biblical commentary were extended to secular poetry (by Dante and Boccaccio, for example), interpretation, rather than history, came to be the prevailing mode of discourse concerning literature. Ancient literature came to be valued in much the same canonical way as the Bible, with the consequence that later writings were seen as derivative and secondary.

Of course, the very notion of 'literature' is somewhat anachronistic here. The ancients and the medievals had a poetics and rhetoric, but no concept of literature like that which arises rather precipitously in the modern era. And without a concept of literature there can be no literary history. This suggests that the emergence of literary history marks a radical departure in Western thinking. In this perspective, the beginning of literary history would be more novel, say, than that of the history of philosophy. For the latter would seem to involve simply the articulation of the history of that which is already conceptualized in prevailing discourses and institutions. The appearance of literary history, however, seems to coincide with the appearance of 'literature'. That is, at the moment when literature appears on the scene, in the place of poetry and its genre, it is already thought of as that which must be understood historically. And while there occasionally appear non-historical and even apparently anti-historical discourses about literature after this emergence, they do not succeed in wholly throwing off the historical associations of the concept of literature itself.

3 Literature and 'man'

In Les mots et les choses Michel Foucault suggests, without explicitly saying so, that literature and the various disciplines devoted to its study are functions of the modern
episteme or cognitive configuration known as 'man'. In Foucault's archaeological narrative 'man' appears when the relation between words and things which seemed so transparent and self-evident to the classical, representationalist thought of the Cartesian era became opaque and questionable. One clear sign of that change is in the transition from an infinite system of analysis to an analytic of finitude. Whereas classical thought assumed that it was possible to develop an absolutely comprehensive tabular representation of any genuine object of knowledge, philosophers like Kant (or scientists like Bopp, Cuvier or Ricardo) asked how representation was possible and what its scope and limits might be. Such questioning leads to the demise of ambitious programs like those of classical metaphysics, which in Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz aimed at the rational representation of the totality of all that there is. Whereas they aimed at infinite, totalistic representations, the new perspective asked how and under what conditions such representations could be made. Alexander Kojève illustrates this Copernican turn when he says of Spinoza's Ethics, that it is a book that explains everything in the world except how it could be written by a human being. An 'analytic of finitude' will be concerned precisely with questions of this order. In place of the transparent relation between a rationally purified discourse and an intelligible and all-inclusive structure of things, it posits man as a finite being who has the unique and perhaps uncanny power of understanding the conditions of his own finitude. Foucault suggests that the fundamental forms of this finitude are revealed by the new science of biology, economics, and linguistics:

At the foundation of all the empirical positivities, and of everything that can indicate itself as a concrete limitation of man's existence, we discover a finitude – which is in a sense, the same: it is marked by the spatiality of the body, the yawning of desire, and the time of language; and yet it is radically other in this sense, the limitation is expressed not as a determination imposed upon man from outside (because he has a nature or a history), but as a fundamental finitude which rests on nothing but its own existence as fact, and opens upon the positivity of all concrete limitations.

Foucault attempts to demonstrate that all of the sciences and philosophies of man of this era (that is, the human sciences from roughly 1800 to 1950) can be understood in terms of a double concern with the acceptance of man's finitude and the task of coming to comprehend it as thoroughly as possible. In particular, he articulates three pairs of oppositions which disclose the constant oscillation between acceptance of the finite and determined inquiry into it. All thought that moves within the episteme 'man' is bound, he suggests, to an interminable back and forth movement between the empirical and the transcendental, the cogito and the unthought, and the return and retreat of the origin. While Foucault illustrates the structural oscillation of 'man and his doubles' in terms of movements within philosophy and the philosophy of history (citing Hegel, Comte, Marx, Spengler and alluding to the entire development of phenomenology and existentialism), I propose to show that the pattern is also at work in literary-history. In doing so, I will suggest that many of the 'problems' and 'questions' that haunt literary history are variations on those inevitably connected with the discourses of man or 'human sciences'.

4 The analytic of finitude: Kant and the problematics of genius

Is literary history to be a detailed investigation of all literary phenomena in their diversity and specificity, or is it to seek the laws and principles which underlie and govern this diversity? And if such laws and principles can be established, can they be grounded in even deeper principles, of a psychological, philosophical, or linguistic
provenance? Questions like these occupy those who write on literary history from the nineteenth century to the present. The interest in the sheer multiplicity of literary works, cultures and movements that first becomes evident in German romantics like Herder and the Grimm brothers seems to have an obvious justification when seen against the background of the culture of taste developed in French and English aesthetics of the eighteenth century. A writer like Shaftesbury (credited by Ernst Cassirer as the founder of modern aesthetics) combines the putative elaboration of innate, and hence universal, conceptions of taste and beauty with an ethnocentrism and valorization of one specific form of literary culture that must rigorously exclude the 'gothic' and the 'barbarous'. It is also typical of the culture of taste that flowered in the early eighteenth century to exclude from its charmed circle whatever does not immediately recommend itself to the polite and cultivated judge of the arts; far-reaching analogies are constructed between barbarism and appeal to erudition in artistic or literary matters, for both are deviations from the norm in which a well-formed object is to appeal to the gentleman of properly trained sensibility. Shaftesbury, for example, suggests that Othello can be read as an allegory in which Desdemona's original seduction by a barbarous Moor is facilitated by her fascination with his esoteric stories. Both barbarism and erudition are deviations from the norm.\footnote{5}

Kant may be said to have raised this culture of taste to a more universal level by his suggestion that the aesthetic judgment is one in which we communicate not about the content or specific qualities of a beautiful object, natural or artistic, but about the process of universal communication itself. Kantian aesthetics marks a Copernican turn in thought about the arts and beauty, for it seeks to ground appreciation neither in an objective order of beauty nor in a Neoclassical appeal to nature and its rules, but in the universally human faculty of judgment. All of Kant's critical enterprises may be called analytics of finitude, following Foucault, but there are good reasons for thinking of his critique of aesthetic judgment as dealing with that which is most distinctively human. For to be human, on the Kantian analysis, is to be constantly living between the poles of the rational and sensible worlds, to be simultaneously witnesses to an impersonal natural order and to be rational beings subject only to our own moral legislation. To know our own finitude most deeply is to know how our experience of the beautiful and the sublime and the occasional ability of some of us – 'nature's favorites' – to create works of art unites those faculties that are both our limitations and our way of comprehending them.

It is when Kant comes to discuss the question how works of genius are understood and received that he opens up some of the themes that we associate with literary history. Here we should remember that genius is the faculty of expressing aesthetic ideas and that Kant's examples of aesthetic ideas are drawn primarily from poetry; moreover, his typology or system of the arts is based on the paradigm of linguistic expression and so gives first place to poetry. A work of art, more specifically a literary work of art, should be, on Kant's analysis, both original and intelligible. It is this double demand that is emblematic for the later enterprise of literary history. Because it is original, no set of rules (and hence no neoclassical aesthetic) will be sufficient to allow us to understand a poem. But some original works may be only 'original nonsense' and so will be unintelligible.\footnote{6} Kant seems to be desperately in need of a theory of literary reception and understanding, and it is not clear that the need is ever met. Yet, in the various maneuvers by which he circles around the space that such a theory would fill, we may begin to see how it is that the genesis of literary history (which fills this place in later thinkers) is bound up with the thematics of an analytic of finitude. It might be supposed
that Kant does not even require a conception of literary understanding because the role of the aesthetic idea is to excite much indeterminate thought; it is 'an intuition to which no concept is adequate'. But, as Kant himself recognizes, different aesthetic ideas have different physiognomies and some may even be 'original nonsense'. How might we be able to tell what kind of an aesthetic idea a poem presents to us and whether or not it is simply nonsense?

Characteristically (since he excludes the possibility of a science of art), Kant approaches such questions only insofar as he discusses the way in which other artists understand a work of genius. Such a work is exemplary; it is not a model to be imitated but to be 'followed'. Kant thus seems to limit his account of artistic or literary understanding to those 'favorite of nature'; and even here he acknowledges that the possibility of such understanding 'is difficult to explain':

'The artist's ideas arouse like ideas on the part of his pupil, presuming nature to have visited him with a like proportion of the mental powers. For this reason, the models of fine art are the only means of handing down this art to posterity. This is something which cannot be done by mere descriptions (especially not in the line of the arts of speech), and in these arts, furthermore, only those models can become classical of which the ancient, dead languages, preserved as learned, are the medium."

Just in the place where we would be tempted to appeal to literary history, Kant appeals to the model of ancient poetry. Literary history, we moderns suppose, allows us to make sense of themes, genres, norms, and conventions; it places within a context, periodizes and relates a work to an accepted canon. In all these ways, it articulates the sense of a work without reducing it. Yet history plays only an exemplary role for Kant; the exemplars must be separated from us by the barrier of a dead language and distanced further from us non-artists (merely cultivated men of taste) by the requirement that they be mediated by genius. That we can make sense of such literary exemplars is demanded by Kant's entire thematics of art as human self-understanding. But if we were to make sense of them in the way that we make sense of other human actions and products, we would (so Kant seem to fear) make sense at the cost of reducing these works in such a way as to destroy that which makes them valuable as literature. Yet if there were no making sense at all the entire enterprise of judgment and taste would be short-circuited at the crucial instance of the aesthetic idea. The latter would remain indistinguishable from 'original nonsense' and the culture of taste would be restricted to natural beauty, leaving a gap in the place where man ought to understand himself. What seems to assure us that this fragile process of sense-making will not break down is simply the fact that geniuses continue to be inspired by nature. The product of a genius is followed by another genius, not by the genius imitating the product in its actual nature but in so far as 'it arouses [in him] a sense of his own originality in putting freedom from the constraint of rules so into force in his art, that for art itself a new rule is won – which is what shows a talent to be exemplary'\(^8\). Here again we might be tempted to read Kant historically; we might think of the geniuses as constituting a succession of writers who build on or articulate their predecessors' 'solutions' to various stylistic 'questions' or 'problems'. Yet it is clear that Kant does not think in these terms, for such thought would require our conceiving of a development or progress in art that would still be going on, and which could proceed indefinitely. But Kant is quite clear that 'genius reaches a point at which art must make a halt, as there is a limit imposed upon it which cannot transcend. This limit has in all probability been long since attained'.\(^9\) At the point where we want to make sense of how man expresses that which is most human about himself, then, we have not (as later) a literary history, but a set of models representing a kind of historical surd: fixed, in dead languages, and commemorated by
those who have been provoked to 'follow' them (although even such 'following' requires that the artist be one of nature's favorites).

5 The empirical and the transcendental

Let me suggest, then, that literary history, flowering so rapidly in its modern guise among the German Romantics and idealists, is in effect a response to these aporias of the Kantian position. But first we must ask what literary history is the history of. It is often noted that the word 'literature' is of surprisingly recent origin; the earliest occurrence listed by the Oxford English Dictionary is 1812, and Grimms Wörterbuch does not include Literatur. This suggests that 'literature' is coeval with that concept of 'man' which proceeds by means of an analytic finitude. Literature would then be the mode in which man expresses himself linguistically; what binds together the different genres that were previously more disparate is precisely their common testimony to the fundamentally human. If this is so, then literary history would be the discipline of understanding correlative to literature. Its aim would be to disclose man to himself by understanding the variety and essential forms of his literary expressions. One strategy for attaining such an understanding is empirical, consisting in seeking out instances of the literary from times and places other than the literary historian's own. If man is a being who expresses himself through literature, then perhaps he and his expressions can be understood by surveying literature in all of its diversity. The quest for the empirical thus becomes a search for the 'other'. J. G. Herder and the Schlegels may be taken as pioneers in the attempt to develop a literary history that is not limited to the production of the analyst's own culture or its traditional stylistic models. In this sense, alterity is part of the original inheritance of literary history. The poetry of the Middle Ages or India was suddenly discovered to be telling us as much about the universally human as the Greek and Latin models or the poetry of Fredrick the Great, which Kant had invoked. Although later, empirically oriented, literary history came to develop a Literaturwissenschaft of much greater subtlety and range, its project is still dependent on that of these pioneers who had a vision of discovering the universally human by examining the array of forms of world literature. This last term, 'world literature', is a coinage that followed rapidly upon the emergence of 'literature', and its use both makes more explicit the concerns of literary history and suggests a certain trajectory of articulating them which may not be immediately obvious. To speak of world literature as Goethe did is to think of literature in its extensive diversity and it is also to attribute a unity to it. The concept seems closely related to that of a world history as formulated by Hegel, for example. For if man is to make himself intelligible through the multiplicity of his literary productions, these productions must add up to something. As Foucault notes it is a similar set of tendencies that produce what may appear to be certain non sequiturs or equivocations in the nineteenth century's philosophies of history. They are, he suggests both positivistic and eschatological: while attempting to elucidate man by reducing him to a concrete and empirical level, they discover that as such he and his project of self-knowledge are necessarily incomplete. So the reduced elements are then seen as forming a series or a whole (actual or potential) which yields its meaning only in its completion. Foucault makes the following claim about such historical thinking which can be applied, without much modification, to literary history:
Comte and Marx both bear out the fact that eschatology (as the objective truth proceeding from man's discourse) and positivism (as the truth of discourse defined on the basis of the truth of the object) are archaeologically indissociable: a discourse attempting to be both empirical and critical cannot but be both positivist and eschatological; man appears within it as a truth both reduced and promised. In literary history we might think here first of Hegel who notoriously announced a certain closure or completion of artistic and literary creation which coincided with the establishment of a historically oriented science of art. Kant and Hegel embody the two great alternative forms of modernist aesthetics. Kant articulates the conception of the purely aesthetic judgment and the attention to the aesthetic object itself in all its purity and isolation which becomes paradigmatic for so many later formalisms. Hegel aims at making genius intelligible by historicizing it; he assumes the data of the romantics, such as their discovery of the poetry of the Orient or the middle ages, but he constructs a narrative in which it is precisely the cunning of literary history to have developed a kind of ultimate self-knowledge through this very odyssey of forms. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel had sketched a transcendental literary history in his analysis of the Greeks (*Kunstreligion*) in which, characteristically, tragic forms with their surds of unintelligibility give way to comedy. Fate is the unintelligible content of ancient tragedy and the gap between the writer, the masked actor, and the audience is a kind of formal barrier to a fully articulated meaning; but in comedy fate disappears, the mask is dropped and Greek art completes itself in an activity of full disclosure and mutual recognition. In his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Hegel simply extends this analysis to that of art as a whole; literature (Hegel still writes of ‘poetry’) is the fullest form of the story. This metanarrative of art ends with modern comedy which is simply subjective modern man’s recognition of his own humanity.

‘Literature’ is thus the hero of a Hegelian metanarrative which ends in art’s version of ‘absolute knowledge’. As Jean-François Lyotard has suggested, such metanarratives are typically designed to legitimize certain institutions and practices, particularly those designed for research and instruction. Hegel’s metanarrative may be read as a response to the Kantian problematic of originality and intelligibility. In Hegel’s story there will be no more geniuses of the sort who were able to keep the ancient examples alive, because ‘for us, art on its highest side is a thing of the past’. Yet the aesthetic idea of poetry can be understood as part of a speculative and dialectical history. Meaning will be kept alive and distinguished from ‘original nonsense’ by *Wissenschaft.*

Some forms of positivist or Marxist literary history differ only superficially from Hegelian eschatology by placing the *telos* of the process in a projected or indefinite future. The great positivistic literary histories of the nineteenth century (e.g., Taine) are either inspired directly by Comtean eschatological positivism or reproduce its spirit on their own. Marx’s sometimes baffling comments about the eternal superiority of Greek art need not be considered an exception to the eschatological pattern; he may be construed, like Hegel, to be noting with a twinge of melancholy that a higher stage of self-knowledge does not necessarily – in fact necessarily does not – coincide with that intensity of delight in the immediate that was typical of earlier cultures.

6 *The cogito and the unthought*

The reductive forms of literary history seem to lead either to a dispersive interest in detail, to speculative visions of historical progress, or, emblematically, to a movement
of thought oscillating between these two poles. So it is understandable that other strategies will be employed in order to make literature speak, that is, to let it be known how its meaning coincides with the universally human. One such strategy consists in thinking of the literary work, or, more characteristically in this context, the 'poem', as itself a form of conscious awareness. Rather than reserving such awareness for the student of world-literature who can see the deep historical structure of the variety and progression of literatures, this tendency would attribute such a unitary consciousness to the object of literary study. The initial form of this strategy identifies that object with the mind of the author, conceived as a presiding intelligence breathing spirit into words that would otherwise be lifeless or indeterminate, because there would be no criterion to establish a definite meaning for them. In this hermeneutical project, history is indispensable, for an author's meaning or intention can be reconstructed only if the background of his work is available to us; and that background will include not only his place within a social, political, and cultural world but also within the norms and traditions of writing that he assimilates, uses, modifies, and criticizes. Indeed, the more that one spells out the ambition of hermeneutics to know the mind of the writer better than he knew it, in the manner of Schleiermacher and Dilthey, the more daunting does its self-imposed task appear. The thought behind the poem expands from the writer's intention in writing this particular sonnet to the determination of an entire point of view for his work as an author. But here, as the romantics and Kierkegaard demonstrated, we may never be in a position to articulate such a point of view with any definitive claim to truth. In the first place, additional historical data may always change our understanding of a particular work, or of an author's entire project; we may discover a revealing batch of letters or uncover a text which is the parodic model for one in the author's canon or even happen upon an unpublished work by an author which throws our entire reconstruction of his mind into disarray. Such phenomena can be accommodated to the hermeneutic model by acknowledging that its goal is to be understood as a potentially open-ended project rather than as the hope that we readers, now, might participate in our author's thoughts. On a more radical level, however, we might notice that in the nature of the case there can be no definitive determination of an author's meaning that does not beg the evident question in some way. We might find ourselves hesitating between two or more variant interpretations of an author's oeuvre which assign fundamentally different qualities to his intentions. We may for example be unable to decide whether a writer is to be construed as an aesthetic, ethical or religious author (to use Kierkegaard's categories), and this hesitation will also make available several different periodizations of his writings and variant notions of what is canonical and what peripheral in the authorship. Notoriously, an author's own statements do not settle the matter for they may be internally contradictory, or inconsistent with other texts or the historical context, in any case, they too must be interrupted.

Nevertheless, the strategy of clarifying the human meaning of literature by appealing to a mind or soul that animates the poem can return in a more radical form. It may simply reject the intentional fallacy' of finding this principle behind the poem while locating it within the 'poem itself'. The history of recent criticism has made it apparent that this apparently radical revolution by which the New Criticism attempted to displace traditional history is more of a tactical adjustment than a definitive epistemological rupture. For the very predicates which the New Critics take to qualify the successful poem are those of absolute presence and full consciousness that the Hegelian tradition saw at the end of literary history and which the quest for authorial
intentions saw in the presiding intelligence of the writer. The poem is said to be organically unified, all of its elements are taken to be reciprocally illuminating and it contains no unintelligible surd; it is clear consciousness through and through. Murray Krieger, one of the more philosophical champions of the New Criticism describes the mode of being of the poem as the fullness of a presence which we may be privileged to share:

With language leading us to allow this subversive fusion of metaphor and pun to reflect—just this once—and for those one frozen moment—onto substance and concept, we indeed accept the poem as present, a miraculous gift that seems to exclude all else, to turn everything else into absence, what is past or outside, next to its persistent inside ‘now’. It is a ‘now’ which never becomes ‘then’, for it has a presentness and presence that—unlike the flowing moment of sound—have become fixed. If, skeptically, we ask which moment this ‘now’ is, among the many moments or hours consumed in the act of reading, we are returned to the diachronic reality that undercuts our mythic projection of that sacramental moment of aesthetic experience, when the entire poem suddenly becomes ours and we are its.¹¹

Notice that Krieger’s description of how our consciousness can coincide with the cogito of the poem both incorporates and surpasses the experience of fragmentation and uncertainty which characterizes the quest of authorial intentionality. We never know, in the latter strategy, whether or not we have arrived at the promised end; on the New Critical model we may indeed ask when the moment of conscious union occurs, but we will be told that it is not a specific, but an ideal moment which all of our experience points to. The ideal horizon of meaning, we might say, has been rescued from the potentially bad infinite of historical inquiry and constituted as a phenomenological project to be pursued simply between us and the text.

The plausibility of this strategy must become questionable, however, as soon as we begin to focus either on the content of the ‘now’ or on the activity of reading that is constantly in search of the ‘now’. In order to clarify the grounds and possibility of such a reading, something like a phenomenological aesthetics is called for (one thinks, for example, of Roman Ingarden’s work). Such a phenomenology of reading would attempt to delineate the specific forms of intentionality involved in reading a text as a literary work: moving back and forth from part to part to construe meaning, thematizing images, sound and language, and looking for the specific form of unity at work in the text. Yet we ought not to be surprised if such a phenomenological project (a ‘regional ontology’ of literature) exhibits the same complexities as the more universal Husserlian enterprise. Husserlian phenomenology in its effort at a pure description of the intentional activity by which we know and constitute the objects of consciousness, found it increasingly necessary to acknowledge the unthematized but presupposed forms of the life-world in which all our activities are embedded. The thick social and historical context of the scientific civilization that makes possible our construction of epistemic objects cannot itself be fully accessible to phenomenological intuition; in the same way the culture of reading that renders possible our quest for the pure presence of the poem must be presupposed by that quest but will not easily yield itself up to a pure consciousness. Here then our attempt to identify a cogito, a quasi-self in the literary work, leads us to encounter that which escapes consciousness, an unthought that could launch us on another round of infinite investigations.

A parallel result can ensue from the side of what we might call the content of the poem, construed along New Critical lines. No matter how much energy and ingenuity is applied to the project of making sense of each discriminable aspect of the poem, by seeing it as part of a meaningful totality, there is no guarantee that this activity will succeed. Or rather, it will succeed only at the cost of producing a narrow, stipulative
definition of the literary text excluding all those works that do not lend themselves to such treatment and requiring some tendentious maneuvers even with those that do. Poems seeming to exhibit gaps, discontinuities, or metonymic conjunctions that are irreducible to metaphoric unities will be excluded from the canon; through such devices, of course, a hermeneutical circle is kept in motion by means of which the canon, the conceptions of what literature is and the appropriate procedures of literary history continue to reinforce one another. Such a defensive move may be impervious to internal criticism, but it does not seem capable of withstanding the pressures that inevitably arise from a more broadly based canon, or alternative conceptions of literature and literary history. On what Foucault would call the archaeological level, the strategy succeeds in intensifying and preserving the clarity of the cogito only by isolating a number of points of light, monads with which we can identify in consciousness, from a vast context of less clearly illuminated formations. The consequence of excluding the unthought from the canon is to be surrounded with it everywhere and to have no principle of explanation that would enable one to account for this duality between the knowable and the unknowable.

7 Return and retreat of the origin

If man cannot be disclosed by means of the cogito which gives itself the task of thinking the unthought, then perhaps it is necessary to proceed to a deeper level at which the origin of the human is brought to light. An interpretation of man and his works along these lines would seek to interpret both in terms of a principle of arché explaining the conditions of human finitude. For literary history such a project consists in unearthing a primal origin of literature which gives it sense. Typically this search for the origins involves a critique of at least some of the intervening works between the origin and ourselves and looks forward to recapturing the origin. The beginnings of literary history in the nineteenth century abound with proposals to put us in touch with lost or forgotten origins — the origin of language, of culture, the birth of tragedy, the ‘true Homer’. This enterprise cannot be called nostalgia in any simple sense, since nostalgia supposes some memory of a nostos or point of origin, whereas here it is supposed that the origin can be revealed only by the most strenuous hermeneutic activity.

An exemplary form of this interpretive quest for origins, so far as literary history is concerned, is to be found in the early students of folk-lore and folk literature. With the Grimm brothers the belief is that we are connected to a primal level of the literature and wisdom of the Volk by a somewhat tenuous series of intermediaries which it is the task of literary history to preserve and trace back in order to make the origin once again present. The view is that the true origin of poetry is not the individual writer on the modern model, but the ancient and anonymous collective of the Volk. One might say that this movement was interested in displacing the author-function from the individual genius to the genius of the people. The Volk, of course, did not write; it sang, and oral traditions or literary transcriptions of those traditions must be carefully interrogated in order to reconstruct its Ursage.¹² Naturpoesie, the product of an anonymous national tradition, is opposed to Kunstpoesie, which is attributed to an artificial individuality. In tracing literature back to its origins, we discover man in his primary finitude, that is, in the specificity of a particular tradition and culture, but freed from modern, alienated forms of literary production. Yet the search for the true lore of the past (as in ‘folklore’) proves elusive. For as soon as we begin to sketch a form of
collective artistic production untrammeled by all modern conceptions of individuality, the more unattainable must this origin seem. This retreat of the origin is embodied in the several meanings of the English ‘lore’ which signifies both that which is remembered, handed down and preserved and that which has been lost.

The project of recapturing such an origin requires more than literary history; it demands a social or cultural revolution (to which literary history might contribute) as envisioned in so many disparate ways by the romantics or Wagner. That is, correlative with the search for the origin is the construction of a metanarrative that would restore us to the lost presence of our humanity. Such metanarratives generally follow a Hegelian (or Christian) schema in which an original period of immediacy is first lost and then restored at a new, enriched, and ‘higher’ level. Of course, these metanarratives differ radically among themselves. In the realm of ‘folk’ interpretations of literature, for example, there is the contrast between the somber piety of the Germanic Ursage and the effort by Mikhail Bakhtin to uncover the suppressed festive and carnivalesque origins of much of the European literary tradition. In both cases, however, the origin is held to be popular, spontaneous, and collective, as such its expressions constitute material meant to provide man with a deep knowledge about himself. Other metanarratives of the return of the origin take a more ‘formal’ or general approach by focusing not so on the content of the original song or poetry as on its more formal or universal features. Such a story is to be found, for example, in Walter Ong’s notion of a primary oral culture, from which we have been doubly alienated, first by writing, and second by the culture of the printed work; its restoration is now made possible through the agency of electronic media. The categories are essentially the same as in the more ‘material’ version of the Romantics: collective vs. individual, spontaneous vs. contrived, genuine community vs. alienation and atomization.

Such metanarratives, as Lyotard points out in his analysis of analogue stories of social and political development, must generate the suspicion that they are told in order to legitimate contemporary states of affairs. Indeed, there are many close connections between the ‘return of the origin’ stories told by romantic literary historians and legitimation. These become evident in nationalist mythology. But could this be the all-important origin of our humanity, we ask, if we are indeed so close to it an it can be so easily restored? We may then seek the truly deep origin behind this apparently more accessible one. Such an origin will be one that is genuinely in retreat from us, and our knowledge of our finite human condition will be constituted not by the illusory vision of recapturing it, but in knowing our very distance from it. As Foucault points out, this is the fundamental reply of Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Heidegger to romantic and Hegelian metanarrative. The origin is always still to be understood, as Foucault characterizes the modern episteme:

in setting itself the task of restoring the domain of the original, modern thought immediately encounters the recession of the origin; and paradoxically, it proposes the solution of advancing in the direction of this everdeepening recession . . . and if the recession of the origin is thus posed in its greatest clarity, is it not the origin itself that is set free and travels backwards until it reaches again, in the dynasty of its archaism?

Nietzsche’s struggle with the archaic is exemplary here. In The Birth of Tragedy he suggests the need for an archaeological undertaking to excavate the genuine origins of tragedy underneath several layers of misleading construction and ornamentation. But even the Apollonian and Dionysian tendencies are not the deepest level of this archaeological site; further down, there is that primal chaos which generates all of the texts and interpretations of culture. In Walter Benjamin and T. W. Adorno, the
postulation of the receding origin of art and literature is a way of historicizing the experience of the sublime that the eighteenth century had seen as a permanent possibility of aesthetic perception. Such moves demonstrated what might be called, reversing a phrase of Geoffrey Hartmann's turn from the hermeneutical to the sublime.

8 Literary history after 'man': control pragmatism

I have been claiming that Foucault’s account of 'man and his doubles' helps us to place the typical aporias of literary history into something like a systematic perspective, enabling us to understand how certain deep shifts and oscillations in literary history and theory are functions of its coceptualizing its task in terms of its implicit purpose of contributing to man's knowledge of himself in his finitude. Now I want to suggest some consequences of such an analysis.

How are we to understand some of the antagonistic reactions to contemporary literary criticism and to the infection of literary history by semiology, deconstruction, Foucauldian genealogy, Lacanian psychoanalysis and the like? One form taken by that antagonism is the attempt to stigmatize all such approaches as subjective and to view work produced by these currents of thought as nothing more than individualistic self-indulgence. Such a criticism employs or presupposes the concept of subjectivity; presumably the latter has a proper place for the critic either in the historically reconstructed subjectivity of the author or in the subjectivity implicitly attributed to the individual work. The critique seems to accuse the newer criticism of displacing subjectivity from its proper position or of stealing it from its rightful owner (author or poem). Indeed, one way in which the dialectic of 'man and his doubles' may continue is by such a displacement in which the reader or critic is held to be the true human subject, finite but self-knowing, of the literary process, so that the literary analytic of finitude becomes the theory and practice of reader response criticism. But the deconstructive, the Foucauldian and the Lacanian practices of literary science are strategies for articulating texts without recourse to a strong concept of the subject, i.e., 'man', whether it is to be located in the literary past, in the present poem, or in the critic/reader. Of course, we must immediately register a Derridean caveat about the impossibility of simply jettisoning 'man' or the subject; what is to be envisioned is a rigorous attempt to avoid the formulations and commitments associated with that concept so far as possible.

There is perhaps more truth in the complaint that there is something impersonal, abstract, and inhuman in the newer approaches to literature. One hears what are meant to be horror stories about instructors who cover the blackboard with complex diagrams rather than giving a voice to the soul of the books that they teach. These laments, however distorted, do seem to involve the perception that the older paradigms of the humanities have been seriously questioned, even if they fail to see that the paradigms themselves have become questionable through their own history. It also seems that what is at stake here is the status and importance of literary history and its associated enterprises. To treat the text formally, or at the other extreme, to allow critical discourse to assume the form of the Lacanian 'symbolic' or of a Foucauldian language no longer anchored in 'man', is to reject the tradition of thought that would attribute a central cultural role to literary history. Literary history was one of the crucial ways in which man was to understand the scope and limits of his own finitude. The great literary histories of Hegel, Taine, Auerbach and others would be versions of a
Phenomenology of the Spirit purged of unnecessary metaphysics and attuned to the concrete forms of linguistic expression; such history, and the smaller scale stories that might be told about specific periods, movements, or authors would show us how we had become what we were. But this special role for the literary historian (and the literary intellectual) is difficult to maintain in a world that has become suspicious of humanist metanarrative. We may extend Lyotard’s observations concerning the politically legitimating uses of Hegelian and Marxist metanarrative to suggest how the stories told in literary history, with expressive man as their hero, may play a similar role in legitimating a certain culture.

But now two questions arise. Must the culture be conceived as having a center? If such a center is attributed to the culture, must it be construed so as to provide a special place for man knowing himself by means of his literary expressions? Foucault posed such questions by contrasting the ‘universal’ intellectual (‘the man of letters’) with the ‘specific intellectual’ whose activity is grounded in some more or less limited sphere. The notion of the universal intellectual is bound up with the conception of man insofar as he is destined to arrive at a comprehensive self-knowledge, that is, to attain an adequate analytic of his own finitude. To this model Foucault opposes the ‘specific intellectual’ without such universal aims. We might be able to sketch some of the differences between the literary history of the universal intellectual and the literary history (or its ‘successor subject’) that might be practiced by specific intellectuals of various sorts. Even in proposing such a contrast in this form, however, we violate the terms of the contrast, for while there can plausibly be talk of the purpose of literary history within the modernist perspective, it is not clear how such a singular intent, even one quite different from the traditional norms could be attributed to the diverse specific intellectuals who replace the universal intellectual.

Richard Rorty, as we saw, suggests that every intellectual field, discipline or enterprise may have good reasons for generating its own literary history, for each of them exhibits some contrast between a normal way of proceeding and revolutionary or poetic modes. From the standpoint of the ‘specific intellectual’ in any of these fields, assessing the past in relation to current questions and an uncertain future take the form of a literary history of philosophy, physics, or anthropology. The very mention of these diverse disciplines, however, is sufficient to raise some questions about what remains fixed and what is allowed to float in a pragmatic, Rortyan perspective. For surely part of what is in question in current projects of the form ‘a literary history of ...’ is precisely the identity and endurance of the traditional disciplines. A literary history of anthropology, for example, which emphasized the themes of the travel narrative, the confrontation with the other, and the attribution of higher or lower values to different cultural groups might lead not to the renewal of anthropology but to its anxious self-examination and to fears (or hopes) for its dissolution.

The pragmatic answer to such observations, Rorty suggests, is that universities, professional associations and other institutions have provided a well-nigh unshakable social ground for the various fields of knowledge. In that sense, he suggests, we need not fear that the literary historical approach to philosophy, say, will mean the death of philosophy, for there will be philosophers left to carry on the discussion as to how the literary history of their Fach ought to be conceived and whether it is truly relevant to their calling. But such a pragmatic answer says both too little and too much. It certainly makes claims about the future of political and educational institutions about which we should be hesitant. For the institutionalization of intellectual activities has never been a way of guaranteeing that global shifts in the prevailing episteme will not eliminate some
pursuits or throw them into eclipse; a case in point is precisely the devaluation of rhetoric in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries which coincides with the valorization of 'man' and 'literature'. Such shifts might be said to be of relatively little importance in the perspective of more comprehensive social and political transformations, and this is the line that the Rortyan pragmatist will take, for example, in suggesting that philosophy's modern, Cartesian concern with its self-grounding ought to be regarded as nothing more than an obsession largely confined to 'an isolated order of priests'. The reply says too little, however, in so far as it takes for granted a collective subject, conceived variously as 'we philosophers', 'we literary historians', 'we of the North Atlantic culture', and so on. That is, the pragmatic way with literary history and the possibility of its infinite extension to include whatever has been thought, said and written seems to assume that the authors of the new, de-transcendentalized 'literary histories of . . .' are relatively clear about their own needs, purposes, and historical situation. Whether the 'we' invoked is of those who would assume something like the traditions of their own special disciplines or whether they feel free to range over an ever widening cultural spectrum that makes no essential division between literary and philosophical texts (to take Rorty's favorite example), there is much that is both implicit and obscure in such a collective subject. Rorty would like to place the burden of proof on those who reject a pragmatic identity with their communities. He writes:

It is as if thinkers like Foucault and Lyotard were so afraid of being caught up in one more metanarrative about the fortunes of the subject that they cannot bring themselves to say 'we' long enough to identify with the culture of the generation to which they belong.

If these thinkers would only allow themselves this simple identification, the pragmatist suggests, 'we' (now including 'them') would be able to write new narratives of our cultural history on a grand scale, unconstrained by the rigid canons of the past that have either reflected narrow, institutionalized interests or have needlessly separated (for example philosophy and literature). These new literary histories would then contribute to new visions of community and culture.

What I want to suggest then, finally, is that the 'rosy prospects' that Rorty sees opening up for us if we just allow ourselves the 'we' of cultural identification are accessible only at the cost of ignoring some of the deeper insights of the French postmodernist thinkers. In the statement above, for example, Rorty seems to have no doubt that the thinkers in question, or those who would think with them 'belong' to a culture and a generation; this is to assume, as Derrida would say, the value of the proper, including that of ownership, belonging and identity. The refusal to say 'we' is based in part on a general skepticism about the philosophical viability of such a thematics and on such arcaheological or genealogical analysis as Foucault's (of 'man and his doubles') which suggest that there may be an unthought problematic in the 'we' that would appear as both subject and narrator of histories of the Rortyan sort. The 'refusal to say we' seems to be based on something other than simply an existential leap of faith or a blind stubbornness. Literary history, like the historical and sciences with which it entered the world, may need to be envisioned without such a collective subject. Rorty's pragmatic reply would be, I suppose, that it was always a mistake to think of the collective subject that writes a history of any sort as having a universal or transcendental status and that way, especially, in our enlightened post-enlightenment era, 'we' can be just who we are: members of this culture and generation rather man in his finitude and universality.

But perhaps this Rortyan pragmatic move bears more than a superficial resemblance
to the reductive strategy that Foucault discusses as part of the empirical and transcendental doublet. And so it is not surprising that the reductive move is followed by an eschatological thematics in which we are urged to take up again the enlightenment’s principle of self-assertion: ‘the willingness to center our hopes on the future of the race, on the unpredictable success of our descendants’.

This sounds precisely like the archaeological affiliation that Foucault detects between positivism and eschatology in such thinkers as Comte and Marx, even when each side of the doublet is hedged round with warnings against interpreting it in a transcendental manner. And when ‘we’ think about ourselves, and of the pragmatic literary histories that ‘we’ might write now, other variations of some familiar strategies must also occur to us. Caught somewhere between our facticity as members of this culture, this generation, and the hopes associated with our descendants, we might begin to ask just what we know of ourselves. Reduction, then, is followed by clarification and its thematic of the cogito and the unthought. And that may very well give way to strategies of interpretation. Now it seems appropriate to ask the pragmatist just what the difference would be between such a pattern and the Foucauldian account of man and his doubles. Clearly, it is not enough for the pragmatist to go through the same cycle of strategies while putting up a number of warning flags declaring that such practices are not to be understood ontologically. As Foucault points out, after all, the nineteenth century also placed such warnings everywhere in attempting to distinguish its cognitive practices from those of the infinite representation aimed at by classical metaphysics and its epistemic analogues. But this in an especially embarrassing question for the (Rortyan) pragmatist because he must insist that practices with the same result and structure are the same, regardless of the philosophical claims made about their status either by the active practitioner or the philosopher on the sidelines. The distinction between ‘man’ in the modern episteme and Rorty’s postmodern ‘we’ may turn out to be a distinction without a difference. No doubt literary histories of great interest and unsuspected scope may issue from either style of procedure, but some skepticism is in order as to whether the pragmatic style will help us to avoid the patterns of the past.

Notes


Foucault uses the expressions ‘man and his doubles’ to refer to the emergence of the modern conception of humanity as a unified object of study in the late eighteenth century. Prior to Kant’s coinage of ‘anthropology’ in the title of one of his later works, human beings were normally characterized as an uneasy mixture of rational, animal and vegetable souls. Each of these souls was subject to its own science, with ‘man’ being little more than the object in which these three studies happened to intersect. However, the concept of ‘anthropology,’ or ‘the human sciences’ (as it would come to be known in the nineteenth century), implies that there is an essence to ‘man.’ Kant set the precedent for defining this essence in terms of the tension between our psychologically determined and the morally autonomous selves. And as befits something with an essence, an archetype was established for this newly emergent being, ‘man,’ namely, the romantic genius given to both political and aesthetic revolution—a figure that was invariably portrayed as being of the male gender. This explains our continued use of ‘man’ in Shapiro’s piece. Moreover, it heightens the tension between this modern portrayal and the postmodern point that Shapiro is striving for, which would call into the nature of the ‘we’ who is subject and object of literary history [Editor’s Note].
7. Critique of Judgment, par. 47 (see note 6).
8. Critique of Judgment, par. 49 (see note 6).
9. Critique of Judgment, par. 47 (see note 6).
12. GRIMM, J. Gedanken: wie sich die Sagen zur Poesie und Gesilwich verhalten, Zeitung für Einesdes (1808), cols. 152–156.