

Studies in 20th Century Literature

Volume 10 | Issue 1

Article 2

9-1-1985

Introduction

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Recommended Citation

Higgins, Lynn A. (1985) "Introduction," *Studies in 20th Century Literature*: Vol. 10: Iss. 1, Article 2.
<https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1170>

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Introduction

Abstract

From an issue of the *Magazine Litteraire* featuring the work of Fernand Braudel to an article by Hayden White on the "Absurdist moment" in criticism, it is clear that the disciplines of history and literary studies are converging. Historians like White and Dominick La Capra in the United States, and Michel de Certeau and the members of the *Annales School* in France are investigating the rhetorical modes of their craft and exploring implications of the fact that it is historians themselves who "make history." At the same time, literary scholars, emerging from Structuralism and the New Criticism, are seeking with increasing urgency to understand the historical dimensions of fiction. By bridging the gap between story and history and by opening lines of dialogue between two traditionally separate, even hostile, fields of inquiry, the essays in this issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* provide support for the recent assertion that to raise the question of the historical within literary studies is "the most vital stance to take at this particular moment in history..."

Keywords

history, French literature, literary studies, White, American Literature, Dominick La Capra, Michel de Certeau, Annales School, rhetorical mode, historians, literary scholars, Structuralism, New Criticism, fiction

INTRODUCTION

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From an issue of the *Magazine Littéraire* featuring the work of Fernand Braudel to an article by Hayden White on the "Absurdist moment" in criticism, it is clear that the disciplines of history and literary studies are converging. Historians like White and Dominick LaCapra in the United States, and Michel de Certeau and the members of the *Annales* School in France are investigating the rhetorical modes of their craft and exploring implications of the fact that it is historians themselves who "make history." At the same time, literary scholars, emerging from Structuralism and the New Criticism, are seeking with increasing urgency to understand the historical dimensions of fiction. By bridging the gap between story and history and by opening lines of dialogue between two traditionally separate, even hostile, fields of inquiry, the essays in this issue of *Studies in Twentieth Century Literature* provide support for the recent assertion that to raise the question of the historical within literary studies is "the most vital stance to take at this particular moment in history."¹

Although Structuralism and the New Criticism—with their emphasis on synchronic codes and self-reflecting formal features of cultural artifacts—have often been blamed for an ahistorical, even an antihistorical, phase of criticism, it is perhaps ironic that the skills learned during that phase are precisely what permits formulation of the question of history in more sophisticated ways than before. The current return to history is not a nostalgic retreat to a naive criticism of a time before language became opaque and the subject and representation problematic. It is not a return to what Barthes called "The Work." Rather, it is an attempt to pose the question of literature and history within writing, within "The Text."² Frank Lentricchia, for one, even practices a sort of structuralist fundamentalism when he

looks back to Saussure and to the early Barthes (of *Writing Degree Zero* and *Mythologies*) to discover the seeds of a newly historical method of criticism.³ The essays presented here are thus investigations of "historiography" in the most literal sense of the term: they examine how the historical is *written*, and how writing (*l'écriture*) is traversed by history. This means that they ask not only how historical concerns are encoded in language, but also how our knowledge and experience of history are themselves shaped by the literary.

It is not surprising, then, that the essays here focus on specific texts, even while raising broad theoretical issues. All the contributors to the volume are students of the French cultural tradition. At the same time, each essay poses questions that transcend specific examples. The essays converse with each other, creating cross-currents in a multitude of directions. For Colette Gaudin and Steven Ungar, for example, history is to be found in the story of the text's genesis and its own status as historical event. With Lawrence Kritzman, they reexamine links between writing and an author's role as public figure. Elsewhere, history appears in the pressures and transformations of ideologies: those of generic conventions (Philippe Carrard), of fascism (Mary Jean Green), of gender (Gaudin). All the contributors show in some way how knowledge of the past is mediated: by memory, by discourse, by a speaking voice (Carrard), by the present time of writing (Kathleen Smith, Lynn Higgins). While most of the essays examine fiction as it is marked by history, Carrard scrutinizes the historian's text through the lenses of the more traditionally literary categories of rhetoric and narratology. All examine how modern textuality subverts and disperses claims that traditional narrative (historical and fictional) represents the real.

Finally, all the essays, by testifying to what Kritzman calls a "desire for history," inevitably reveal the historicity of the critical enterprise itself. Kritzman's phrase is meant to describe Malraux's "fables," but it also helps explain why we have come around once again to the question of literature and history.

NOTES

1. Herbert Lindenberger. "Toward a New History in Literary Study," *Profession 84* (MLA). 1984. p. 22.
2. Roland Barthes. "From Work to Text," in *Textual Strategies: Perspectives in Post-Structuralist Criticism*, ed. Josué V. Harari (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1979), pp. 73-81.
3. *After the New Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), pp. 123-30 et passim.