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Introduction: History and Contemporary Literature

Christine Harrison and Angeliki Spiropoulou

The 'turn to history' over the last few decades has become a central preoccupation within contemporary cultural criticism, as is witnessed, for example, in the theoretical trend of 'New Historicism.' While the 'history turn' in the humanities has assumed an astounding variety of forms, the new prominence of history in contemporary literature is without doubt one of its most significant and intriguing manifestations. Indeed, historical poetry, drama and particularly fiction, comprising texts at least partly set in past periods, have become a defining feature of the literary scene in diverse regions of the world. Surveying developments in contemporary British fiction, for example, James English stresses the importance of "the putative Renaissance and refashioning of historical fiction in Britain since the 1970s" (11), thus highlighting the many transformations that fiction's most recent engagement with history has also brought. Indeed, the distinct historical focus in fiction produced at least since the late 1970s is only comparable to that in the classic, nineteenth-century historical novel.

Even though formalist modernism's experimental engagement with history and temporality has recently been highlighted, not least by Hayden White,¹ it is the long realist novel that, as White paradigmatically argues, competes with historiography itself in the way it 'emplots' facts and events to render a 'truthful' sense of historical reality. However, contemporary literature may be said not to reproduce 'reality' but rather to reflect on the relation between reality, fiction and history, often alluding to the ways in which realism and modernism have implicitly represented and thus conceived this relation. In her influential study, *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon privileges a new kind of historical fiction which she terms "historiographic metafiction," distinguished by formal self-reflexiveness while, paradoxically, laying claim to historical events and personages (5). Although Hutcheon acknowledges the modernist legacy of problematising

history in such purportedly ‘postmodern’ fiction, she also emphasises the latter’s constitutive difference given its inscription in an ambivalent mode. “Postmodernism,” she writes,

is both oedipally oppositional and filially faithful to modernism. The provisional, indeterminate nature of historical knowledge is certainly not a discovery of postmodernism. Nor is the questioning of the ontological and epistemological status of historical “fact” or the distrust of seeming neutrality and objectivity of recounting. But the concentration of these problematisations in postmodern art is not something we can ignore....The postmodern, then, effects two simultaneous moves. It reinstalls historical contexts as significant and even determining, but in so doing, it problematises the entire notion of historical knowledge. (88,89).

Questions of historical teleology, causality, sources, and point of view are typically thematised in contemporary literature’s revisiting of the past, but without resort to a nostalgic mood or claims to truth. Writing of contemporary fiction’s engagement with history in *The Metafictional Muse* (1982), the critic Larry McCaffery also notes that such literature is “self-conscious” both “about its literary heritage and about the limits of *mimesis*,” but he maintains that it nevertheless manages “to reconnect its readers to the world outside the page” (264). Thus, the question of genre in relation to *mimesis* is posed anew and further complicated by the acknowledged formal hybridity of contemporary historical literature.

Generic explorations

Contemporary historical literature is not uniform in its manifestations, methods and influences: it has been characterised by as many differences as continuities, creating a complexity rarely communicated in relevant critical studies, which tend to subsume diverse developments under very general headings.² In an attempt to redress such neglect, the papers in this issue have been selected with a view to highlighting the aforementioned complexity, for they illustrate both the central continuities and the different directions in form and concern that historical drama, poetry and particularly fiction have taken at various stages of the recent ‘historical turn.’

It is telling that four of the six papers in the issue examine historical novels published during the 1980s, 1990s and early twenty-first century, thus testifying to the acknowledged dominance of the novel form since the beginnings of the history turn in contemporary literature. However, the issue also addresses important developments in contemporary historical drama and narrative poetry. Dorothy Flothow, for example, explores a dynamic new form of historical drama for children in “Kings, Celebrities and Working Mums: Kjartan Poskitt’s Plays for Young Actors as History and Entertainment,” while in “*The Emperor’s Babe*: Re-

narrating Roman Britannia, De-essentialising European History,” Esther Gendusa offers a reading of a novel-in-verse which deconstructs traditional genre boundaries between poetry and fiction. The role such ‘genre-bending’ plays in much contemporary historical literature is yet further explored in other papers in the issue, most notably Angeliki Tsetsi’s study of W.G. Sebald’s idiosyncratic blend of biography, travelogue and memoir in “Historiography in Photo-textuality; The Representation of Trauma in W.G. Sebald’s *The Emigrants*.”

These crossings of conventional (formal) boundaries suggest that contemporary historical fiction confirms Bakhtin’s definition of the novel as “a genre that is ever-questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to revision” (39), and this also helps account for the plethora of fictional subgenres that have emerged in the last few decades. However, little consensus exists about the principal forms contemporary historical fiction has taken even within the same cultural and/or geographical context.³ Although it is not within the scope of the issue to fully address this particular question, one of its aims is to shed light on the diversity of subgenres that have proved central to developments in historical fiction, as well as drama and poetry, since the 1980s. For example, Gendusa’s contribution shows how *The Emperor’s Babe* embodies the fruitful encounter of both contemporary historical fiction and poetry with particular movements in turn-of-the-century feminism and postcolonial theory, thus bearing witness to the pivotal role of theoretical trends in the development of new historical literature. Postcolonial historical fiction is also the subject of both Beth Rosenberg’s “The Postcolonial Jew in Anita Desai’s *Baumgartner’s Bombay* and Caryl Phillips’ *The Nature of Blood*” and Nandana Dutta’s “Amitav Ghosh and the Uses of Subaltern History,” thus highlighting the importance of this subgenre in a wide variety of locations and in connection to different ethnicities. However, Dutta refuses to situate Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1987), *The Glass Palace* (2000) and *The Hungry Tide* (2004) in relation to established paradigms of the postcolonial historical novel, instead presenting them as a special subgeneric variation. Dutta thereby draws attention to the continuous evolution of the different subgenres of contemporary historical literature.

Attempts to categorise this literature’s principal subgenres often accompany efforts to identify areas of the past which have exerted a particularly strong appeal. Hence, Richard Bradford argues that three “dimensions of history” have dominated the settings of British historical fiction since the late 1980s: the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Victorian period and the two World Wars (91).⁴ Certain essays in the issue engage in this debate. Christine Harrison confirms the popularity of the early modern dimension within a British context in “Spatialising

Early and Late Modernity: Representations of London in Peter Ackroyd's *The House of Dr. Dee* and *Hawksmoor*," while Poskitt's plays, discussed by Flothow, appear to illustrate the equal appeal of this dimension in popular British historical drama since the 1990s. Meanwhile, Dutta maintains that the recent past of South Asia has proved particularly attractive to South Asian writers since it has allowed them to intervene in the discursive construction of South Asian nations. Nevertheless, the past settings examined in the issue range from the second century AD through to the 1960s, thus pointing to the diversity of periods and dimensions that have been put to work in contemporary historical literature since the beginnings of the 'history turn.'

The issue also emphasises the plurality of cultural/geographical settings that have characterised historical literature since the 1980s, revealing these settings to be important for a variety of reasons. For example, Harrison maintains that the London settings of *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Dr. Dee* signal the capital's role in both the development and contestation of modern socio-cultural forms. On the other hand, Flothow demonstrates how *Nell's Belles: The Swinging Sixteen-Sixties Show* (2002) connects 1660s to 1960s London in order to celebrate sexual freedom, gender equality and both religious and political toleration. Significantly, Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* are all set in locations that witnessed subsequently repressed events, but Dutta shows how the novels additionally gesture towards further unrepresented locations, sites of similar events, in North East India. Rosenberg identifies comparable links between the many cultural/geographical settings in Phillips' *The Nature of Blood*. Although Venice is a favoured symbolic *topos* in this novel, shifts in cultural/geographical as well as historical setting establish multiple links between migrant identities in different places.

Theoretical explorations

'Postmodern' theories of history have indubitably played a major role in the refashioning of historical literature since the beginnings of the 'history turn,' an influence highlighted by the papers in this issue. Inspired by post-structuralist analyses as well as postmodern 'incredulity towards metanarratives' (Lyotard xxiv), contemporary theorists of history, including Hayden White, Paul Ricoeur, Dominick LaCapra, Alan Munslow, Hans Kellner and Keith Jenkins, have challenged history 'in its mainstream realist, empiricist, objectivist, documentarist, lower case, liberal/plural expressions' (Jenkins 2).⁵ They have identified how this dominant paradigm makes "a fetish of archival research" (LaCapra 21) and assailed its assumptions that documents are empirical evidence and the historian can

‘correctly’ interpret these documents to discover objective historical facts. Stressing that such historical ‘facts’ necessarily assume narrative form, these theorists oppose the idea that the reconstruction of the former may reveal the past ‘as it really was’ [*wie es eigentlich gewesen ist*], as the traditional positivist historian, Leopold von Ranke, famously put it.⁶ Instead, they have analysed documents as constructed texts “freighted with cultural meanings” (Munslow 6), examined the role which the equally situated historian plays in trace selection and interpretation, as well as fact invention, and, following the pioneering work of Hayden White, they have shown how facts are ‘emplotted’ according to linguistic tropes, literary generic models and dominant cultural metaphors, producing historical narratives that have no privileged, direct access to the past.⁷

Many ‘postmodern’ analyses have also underlined the links between history and literature, thus challenging the post-eighteenth-century divide between them. For example, Kellner identifies not only the beginnings and endings of historical narratives but also historical periods and events as “literary creations”(129), while in *Deconstructing History* (1997), Munslow sets out to “highlight the essentially literary nature of historical knowledge” (2). The intrinsic link between literature and history had already been pinpointed by Roland Barthes, whose article, “The Discourse of History” (1967), posited the commonality between the two types of discourses by reference to their common discursivity. Barthes reflects:

the narration of past events, commonly subject in our culture, since the Greeks, to the sanction of historical ‘science’, placed under the imperious warrant of the ‘real,’ justified by principles of ‘rational’ exposition – does this narration differ, in fact, by some specific feature, by an indubitably pertinence, from imaginary narration, as we find it in the epic, the novel, the drama?(127)

By revealing the rhetorical structure of historical discourse, Barthes also points to the inherent paradox in the traditional conceptualisation of the ‘fact’ as the object and means of historiography in that “the fact never has any but a linguistic existence (as the term of discourse), and yet everything happens as if this linguistic existence were merely the pure and simple ‘copy’ of another existence, situated in an extra-structural field, the ‘real’”(138).

The comparison of history to literature, however, finds its fullest expression in the work of Hayden White, who has problematised the status of ‘facts,’ showing how “history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation,” (*Tropics* 122). Furthermore, in a much-quoted article, tellingly entitled, “The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” (1974), White not only shows that historical events are made into familiar stories using “all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play” (84), but

he also argues that the type of story a historian tells is determined by “the dominant figurative mode of the language he has used to *describe* the elements of his account *prior* to his composition of a narrative” (*Tropics* 94). In his groundbreaking *Metahistory* (1973), White had effectively problematised the putative ‘objectivity’ of historical writing as well as the truthfulness of facts by foregrounding the narrative nature of historiography and our always already mediated access to the past. Drawing primarily on literary theory, White formulated a typology of the understructure of nineteenth-century historical writing according to dominant narrative modes, tropes of argument and ideological strategies, thus revealing history’s dependence on rhetoric, with modern historical thought being inscribed in the figure of irony. In his more recent collection of studies, entitled, *The Content of the Form* (1987), White extended his critical examination of historiography and philosophies of history to twentieth-century debates and theorists such as Foucault, Ricoeur and Jameson. White has also authored numerous insightful studies on literature itself, some of which are collected in his 1999 book, *Figural Realism*, and reassess notions of historical narration, temporality, factuality and the event by evoking their treatment in modern literary works. The immense impact of White’s anti-positivist poetics of history on historical and literary studies cannot be overstated. We are indeed delighted to host an interview with him in the present issue, and discover his thoughts about the relationship between history and literature, as is manifested in modern and contemporary fiction.

A number of the contributions to the issue stress the influence that the highlighted affinities between history and literature have had on the ‘history turn’ in fiction. Flothow’s essay, for example, also shows how postmodern challenges to ‘mainstream’ history have paved the way for more innovative treatments of the past even within popular historiography, whose status in the high/popular divide, duly deconstructed by postmodernism, has been effectively redeemed. While Flothow reads Poskitt’s plays for children against this postmodern background, Tsetsi highlights the influence of postmodern history on the complex photo-texts of W.G. Sebald. She characterises *The Emigrants’* narrator as the kind of idiosyncratic historian called for by Dominick LaCapra; a figure who bears witness to testimonies rather than examining documents since only the multiple voices of the former can fill the narrative silence produced by the trauma of the Holocaust. It is worth noting in this context that recent Holocaust, trauma and memory studies have been nodal in the resurgence of the historical in literature since the 80s. More particularly, Tsetsi argues that Sebald’s text further challenges historical orthodoxies by transforming its readers into witnessing historians who must

interpret and connect a polyphony of voices, as well as linking these testimonies to their own experiences of trauma through engagement with the often vague, indeterminate photographs spaced throughout Sebald's text.

Both Flothow's and Tsetsi's essays are additionally indebted to literary criticism that has traced connections between 'postmodern' historiography and contemporary historical fiction. Both Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989) occupy a special position in this critical corpus since they also endowed a particular form of historical fiction with new cultural significance, thus adding considerable momentum to the 'history turn' in literature. Recalling Frederic Jameson's early argument in his influential article, "Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism" (1984), Hutcheon identifies such fiction as paradigmatic of cultural postmodernism. But whereas Jameson describes contemporary novels as inert products of late capitalism devoid of any historical consciousness, Hutcheon ascribes them with a degree of political radicalism, asserting that historiographic metafiction "at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world" (*Politics* 11).

The papers in this issue highlight the continuing influence of Hutcheon's paradigm not only on contemporary literary criticism but also on historical fiction, drama and narrative poetry since the end of the 1980s. For example, Flothow shows how the figures of Henry VIII and Charles II "take on different, particularised and ultimately ex-centric status" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 115) in Poskitt's *Henry the Tudor Dude* (1995) and *Nell's Belles* respectively, the former transformed into a modern pop celebrity, the latter into a sex guru. While Hutcheon's paradigm of the political potential of historiographic metafiction is implicit in Flothow's essay, it is an explicit point of reference in Gendusa's analysis of *The Emperor's Babe*. Gendusa argues that Evaristo's novel-in-verse inserts the silenced and excluded stories of blacks and women as well as the Roman Empire into the history of the British nation in order to challenge the nineteenth-century myth of ethnic homogeneity on which British national identities were built.

Whereas such analyses emphasise the interpretive force of Hutcheon's categorisation, other papers reveal its limitations within particular contexts. Although Tsetsi compares the fragmented, multi-perspectival structure of *The Emigrants* to that of historiographic metafiction, she argues that Sebald employs this mode to stress not the differences but rather the analogies between diverse experiences of trauma, thus restoring the postmodern loss of a sense of cultural similarity. Meanwhile, Harrison claims that certain (British) novels usually defined as historiographic metafiction are actually quite distinct, thus suggesting that

recourse to Hutcheon's international paradigm sometimes "obscures distinctive literary heritages and fails to take account of national cultural differences that exert a powerful influence on societies and their perceptions of the world" (Lord 10).

If Harrison's and Tsetsi's essays highlight the need to move beyond dominant critical paradigms when analysing certain types of contemporary historical fiction, Dutta's paper indicates the import of questioning assumptions about the way (alternative) histories are used in contemporary historical literature. Dutta notes that Ghosh's novels are usually read as fairly straightforward articulations of subaltern history, a practice that is closely associated with the postcolonial (historical) novel. However, she argues that *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* not only represent the subaltern but also highlight the limitations of such representations, thus producing a powerful critique of subaltern history; while subaltern characters achieve the speech denied them by Spivak (104), their previously repressed, alternative narrations of events are shown to repress yet other aspects and views of the same events, and in all three novels these silenced, repressed pasts return as ghostly presences, haunting memories and pregnant silences.

Dutta's contribution also illustrates how contemporary literature often features hybrid and diasporic subjects, foregrounding the historical, spatial, and performative conditioning of subjectivity in the wake of modernism's fracture of the unitary, rational and self-founding Cartesian subject. Recent trends in post-structuralist, psychoanalytic, postcolonial, historical and gender/queer theory have forcefully interrogated the limits and vicissitudes of subjectivity, in connection to power, locality, ethnicity, sexuality, memory and historical contexts. Traumatic, exilic, queer and subaltern experiences have displaced the previously Euro-centric model of the subject and exposed the foreignness constitutive of subjectivity.

The Foucaultian conceptualisation of the subject as 'produced' through time-specific power that permeates discourse and everyday practices has also been pivotal in politically aware, contemporary literary articulations of subjectivity as localised, contingent, mutable and historically constructed (Foucault). Notions of gender or national purity are thrown into question by the hybrid and positional subject configurations found in contemporary historical literature, as pointed out in Rosenberg's discussion of what she terms the "postcolonial Jew," or as evident in the demystifying historicisation of national British and Asian identities in the contributions of Gendusa and Dutta respectively. In addition, postcolonial and psychoanalytic accounts of subjectivity inform a great part of contemporary literature which focuses on (auto)-biography, memory, trauma, the Holocaust and experiences of displacement. Texts like Sebald's, discussed here by Tetsi, privilege

the past as the site not only of action but also of the meaning of the (subject's) present, linking individual with collective memory. However, such literature reveals that the past always comes down to us in some narrative form, showing up fictional characters or poetic subjects as intertextual fragments or voices. And, at the same time, the denaturalisation of the subject and a univocal past effected in most contemporary historical literature throws into relief subjects and voices repressed by official history, leading to the latter's own revision.

In dialogue with the past

By exploring the complications of the past, the literature examined in this issue simultaneously problematises the experience of the present. Gendusa stresses this aspect of *The Emperor's Babe*, showing how the novel-in-verse links complicated questions of gendered racialisation in Roman Britain to equally complex issues in twenty-first century Black British Feminism. However, just as the verse novel's representation of the Roman past illuminates the present, so the present sheds new light on the Roman past, thus creating a past-present dialogue which also echoes LaCapra's description of historiography as "a 'conversational' exchange with the past" (36). Such past-present dialogues are a central feature of the other literary texts examined in this issue, thus underlining their importance in contemporary historical fiction, drama and narrative poetry since the 1980s.

Every dialogue between a particular past and present is built on a specific set of ideas of their relationship. Hence, texts may thematically and/or formally invoke the difference of the past to indicate how "those features of our arrangements which we may be disposed to accept as traditional or even 'timeless' truths may in fact be the merest contingencies of our peculiar history and social structure" (Skinner 67). Alternatively, they may highlight the similarities between past and present, either to trace the roots of the present in the past or to establish historical parallels between particular pasts and presents, thus resonating the Benjaminian conception of history as a construct of the present, as his own 'constellatory' method suggests (1940). The essays in this issue examine literary texts that construct all three types of relationship, and several also show how these types can be combined. For example, Tetsi argues that *The Emigrants* both traces the roots of the narrative present in a traumatic past and employs the "pictorial third" to establish parallels between diverse historical experiences of trauma. Similarly, Harrison demonstrates how *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Dr. Dee* explore the continuities and differences between the early modern past and late modern present, as well as establishing specific historical parallels between these two dimensions.

The potential of literary past-present dialogues to intervene in contemporary debates and shape both the attitudes and actions of receivers is another important focus of the issue. It is perhaps most fully explored in Dutta's essay, for she shows how *The Shadow Lines*, *The Glass Palace* and *The Hungry Tide* not only 'speak' silenced histories and reveal the repressions in these speech acts, but have also played important interventionist roles in the areas whose histories they either explicitly or implicitly rewrite. Her principal example is *The Shadow Lines*, whose setting she describes as a mirror image of Assam and which was published in the wake of the Assam Movement against illegal migrants (1979-1983). Dutta argues that the novel's popularity in the region enabled it to mould political and cultural discourses on migration and citizenship, thus influencing responses to migrants.

By stressing the interventionist role that Ghosh's historical novel has played in Assam, Dutta highlights not only its relation to attitudes and actions but also its potential (through these) to create different futures. The future orientation of much contemporary historical literature is further explored in other essays and thus constitutes a final focus of the issue. For example, Harrison lends support to Steven Connor's claim that contemporary British fiction frequently traces "lines of connection from imagined or narrated pasts into speculative futures" (137); she shows how *Hawksmoor* and *The House of Dr. Dee* direct their readers away from (modern) rationality to the alternative ways of seeing and being that are immanent within the surviving pre-modern spaces of Ackroyd's late twentieth-century London.

Although this issue of *Synthesis* cannot hope to examine all of the ways in which contemporary historical literature has linked the past to the future, just as it cannot hope to explore all the diverse forms such literature has taken in different regions of the world, it nevertheless speaks to current critical debate since it surveys central developments in genre, forms of historical representation, the exploration of identities and the construction of past-present dialogues within a range of contemporary historical literature, as well as assessing the validity of central literary critical paradigms. The issue's focus on historical literature from the 1980s, 1990s and twenty-first century also enables the tracing of both continuities in form, structure and theme and the many new directions that have characterised various stages of what is now a historical period in its own right. Since the 'turn to history' shows no signs of abating, such a survey also anticipates some of the future directions that literature might take in its ever-dynamic engagement with history.

¹ See, for example, Hayden White, “The Modernist Event,” in *Figural Realism* (66-86).

² An apt illustration of this trend is Jerome De Groot's *The Historical Novel* (2010), which surveys developments in historical fiction over the past forty years under chapter headings such as “Genre Fiction,” “Literary Fiction and History” and “Postmodernism and the historical novel: history as fiction, fiction as history.”

³ For example, in “The Historical Turn in British Fiction” (2006), Suzanne Keen identifies women’s historical romances, traditional historical novels and postmodern historical fiction as the three major subgenres of historical fiction in contemporary Britain, while Jerome de Groot categorises contemporary British (and wider Anglophone) historical fiction into subgenres of popular fiction aimed at men and women, literary fiction and postmodern writing in his 2010 study *The Historical Novel* (2-3).

⁴ Bradford employs the term “dimensions of history” to signify areas of the past that are “too broad and elastic to be termed ‘periods’” (91).

⁵ Also see, Elizabeth Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (2004).

⁶ This is the governing principle of Ranke’s *Histories of the Latin and Teutonic Peoples 1494-1514*.

⁷ See, for example, Hayden White’s “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth,” included in his book *Figural Realism* (27-42), alongside his seminal, *Metahistory* (1973). In “Language and Historical Representation,” Hans Kellner summarises some of the central cultural metaphors employed in history writing: “the organic figures of growth, life-cycles, roots, seeds, and so on; the figures of time with their rises and falls, weather catastrophes, seasons, twilights; the figures of movement (flow of events, crossroads, wheels); the technical figures of construction, gears, chains; theatrical figures of stage, actor, contexts. Most of all, of course, the figure of History as pedagogic, ever ‘teaching’ lessons” (135).

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