

## Towards a Theory of the Middle Ground

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Milan Kundera, in the Unbearable Lightness of Being, has as one of his major characters a painter named Sabina, who during her school days, a period when the strictest realism had been required of all students so as not to sap the foundations of socialism, had tried to be stricter than her teachers and had painted in a style concealing the brush strokes. But, one day, she happened to drip red paint on a canvas. The trickle looked like a crack; she began playing with the crack, filling it out, wondering what might be visible behind it. And thus she began her first cycle of paintings, called "Behind the Scenes." On the surface, there was always an impeccably realistic world, but underneath, behind the backdrop's cracked canvas, lurked something different, something mysterious or abstract. "On the surface, an intelligible lie; underneath, the unintelligible truth." And thus the goal of her art became to penetrate the false intelligibility of the surface to reach the unintelligible truth below.

History, Kundera seems to be telling us throughout The Unbearable Lightness of Being, like Sabina's realist canvases, is the illusion of an intelligible reality, that intelligible surface that cloaks the presence of an unintelligible truth. Einmal ist keinmal, Kundera insists. Once is the same as never. Linear time, the fortuity of event, cannot germinate meaning, for it lacks the inhering significance of the cyclical, the ever-returning, in effect, the mythic. Therefore, history, in its particularity and in its telling, is only the illusion of an intelligible reality -- but perhaps a necessary illusion, since without it there would be no hope.

Kundera's profound suspicion of the lies that realism proffers - and thus necessarily that historical writing, the final refuge of realism, enshrines, might be attributed to his experience of a Soviet world in which the rewriting of the past routinely attained Orwellian dimensions,<sup>1</sup> were it not for the fact that this suspicion participates in what Ihab Hassan has described as the much broader pattern of postmodernism, which he defines as:

indeterminacy and immanence; ubiquitous simulacra, pseudo-events; a conscious lack of mastery, lightness and evanescence everywhere; a new temporality, or rather intemporality, a polychronic sense of history; a patchwork of ludic, transgressive or deconstructive approaches to knowledge and authority; an ironic parodic, reflexive, fantastic awareness of the moment; a linguistic turn, semiotic imperative in culture; and in society generally the violence of local desires diffused into a terminology of seduction and force.

In short, what Hassan sees as a "vast revisionary will in the Western world, unsettling / resettling codes, canons, procedures, beliefs --intimating a post-humanism."<sup>2</sup>

Whatever else one thinks of it, the anxiety that subtends this postmodern turn is palpable and heard in every corner of the world. "Temps d'incertitude," "crise épistémologique," "tournant critique," Roger Chartier reports of the current "temps des doutes" in French historical thought, betokening a widening circle of pessimism about the very possibility of historical knowledge, which Chartier attributes to postmodernism's effacement of traditional models of understanding and intelligibility in the search for the past, itself the result of what Foucault once called history's liberation from the "bien maigre idée du réel." And nowhere has this epistemological crisis in the writing of history been more insistently sounded than in America, where publications and debates on the philosophical entailments of postmodernism with respect to historical praxis are proliferating at an alarming rate. Indeed, in the view of one recent commentator, "postmodern literary criticism has become so powerful and influential across such a broad

range of disciplines, and it has raised so many troubling questions about the conceptual foundations of history itself, that historians can no longer ignore it."<sup>3</sup>

Even if this jeremiad for history is premature, it remains true that the paradigms that have governed historical and literary study since the nineteenth century no longer hold unquestioned sway.. The confident, humanist belief that a rational, "objective" investigation of the past permits us to recover "authentic" meanings in historical texts has come under severe attack in postmodernist critical debate. The hallmark of this debate has been a growing awareness of the mediated nature of perception, cognition and imagination, all of which are increasingly construed to be mediated by linguistic structures cast into discourses of one sort or another -- the famed "linguistic turn" that has raised such troubling problems for the study of history and literature alike. As John Toews has eloquently summed it up, if we take postmodern theory seriously, "we must recognize that we have no access, even potentially, to an unmediated world of objective things and processes that might serve as the ground and limit of our claims to knowledge or nature or to any transhistorical or transcendent subjectivity that might ground our interpretation of meaning."<sup>4</sup>

Semiotics, especially, has argued for a linguistically determined epistemology, viewing language not as a reflection of the world that it captures in words, but as constitutive of that world, that is, as generative, rather than "mimetic". As a language-based conception of reality, semiotics has disrupted traditional literary and historical modes of interpretation by its denial of a referential and material world, a material reality we formerly believed could be known and written about scientifically. Until recently, the writing of history depended on a concept of language which, as Nancy Partner puts it, unhesitatingly asserts the external reality of the world, its intelligibility in the form of ideas, concepts, phenomena or other mental things and a direct connection between mental things and verbal signs.

But postmodernism has shattered this confident assumption of the relation between words and things, language and extra-linguistic reality, on the grounds, as she states, that language

is the "very structure of mental life, and no meta-language can ever stand outside itself to observe a reality external to itself."<sup>5</sup> This dissolution of the materiality of the verbal sign, its ruptured relation to extra-linguistic reality, entails the dissolution of history, since it denies the ability of language to "relate" to (or account for) any reality other than itself. Such a view of the closed reflexivity of language -- its radically intransitive character -- necessarily jeopardizes historical study as normally understood. Where once we confidently asserted the capacity of language to grant an essential and foundational stability at the core of identity, language and belief, postmodernism posits the essentially hybrid nature of the world, rejecting the possibility of pure types of any sort. It is a world of "mixed marriages": between words and things, power and imagination, material reality and linguistic construction. At its furthest reach, deconstruction articulates our sense of the discontinuous, fractured and fragmented nature of reality, whose dubious status is figured by the persistent use of quotation marks. To quote Foucault again, our current practice of history "disturbs what was previously considered immobile...fragments what was thought unified...shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself." Fragmented and decentered as well is the very notion of the individual self, the entire humanist concept of "man" who, in the famous closing lines to The Order of Things, Foucault predicted "would soon disappear like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea."

At stake in this debate, then, are the principal concepts traditionally deployed by historians in their attempts to understand the past: causality, change, authorial intent, stability of meaning, human agency and social determination, objectivity, and subjectivity itself. What place, then, does history have in a postmodern theoretical climate? What, if anything, can the historian contribute to the reconfiguration of both theoretical concerns and interpretive practices signaled by the very notion of postmodernism? How are we to accept the challenge that semiotics and postmodernism poses to historical writing and at the same time preserve some of the traditional goals that have always engaged historians on the deepest level of their commitment to understanding the past: to recover the ways in which

men and women have struggled with the contingencies and complexities of their lives in terms of the fates that history deals out to them and have transformed the worlds they inherit and pass on to future generations? Are we to believe that our representations of the past are no more than illusory realist canvases, intelligible lies we tell ourselves and others in order to mask our fear that what lurks behind is the unintelligible truth of human experience, which defies any and all attempts to apprehend it in the now fractured artifice of our words? Is illusion our only hope for the past, as well as the future? Or must we acknowledge that words -- signs, names, functions, -- are at best only momentarily empowered to capture the reality of the past, the knowledge of which as a lived, experienced, understood repository of life is always slipping away, if indeed it was ever knowable to begin with? If we accept that history is always a written account of the past that is itself based on the mediatory texts bequeathed by the past -- hence irreducibly linguistic at both its termini -- what in a postmodern universe is the generative grammar that defines historical writing, the linguistic protocols that permit the transformation of the past into historical narrative? These are not small or insignificant questions, and the answers to them are not easily procured, at least to the extent that we acknowledge the force of the postmodernist challenge as symptomatic of more profound anxieties about the nature of the contemporary world.

In seeking to answer these questions, we would do well, I believe, to re-focus our attention on the question of mediation, for it both stands at the crux of the "linguistic turn" and yet may offer a way of connecting our current preoccupation with language to theories of historiography and the historian's function as conventionally understood. At the same time, the obvious links between the notion of mediation and the intermediate may lead us to a theory of the middle ground as the place of mediation, the only ground on which, I believe, history and postmodernism can hope productively to interact with one another. If one of the major moves in poststructuralist thought has been to displace the controlling metaphor of historical evidence from one of reflection to one of mediation (that is, has been

a shift from the notion that texts and documents transparently reflect past realities, as positivism believed, to one in which the past is captured only in the mediated form preserved for us in language), then we need to think carefully about how we understand mediation and how that understanding affects our practice.

The classical concept of mediation views it as an analytical device that seeks to establish a relationship between two different orders or levels of phenomena that are the object of scrutiny, between, say, a work of literature (or any linguistic artifact) and its social ground. Because the objects of analysis are phenomenologically distinct, they can only be compared against the background of some more general identity, and mediation, as Jameson explains, represents "the intervention of an analytic terminology or code which can be applied equally to two or more structurally distinct objects or sectors of being."<sup>6</sup> In that sense, mediation is a term that describes, in Raymond William's definition, "an indirect connection or agency between separate kinds of act."<sup>7</sup> And this definition holds both for the operation of mediation in the past (that is, for example, as embodied in a discourse that mediates between a social world and its literary or discursive consciousness of its own nature) and for the historical analyses that we undertake of that world, allowing historians to comprehend historical experience via the linguistic evidence -- whether literary or documentary -- by which we come to know and understand the past. The critical aspect of the classical notion of mediation is that it keeps analytically separate the dual phenomena that at the same time it seeks to relate, that it functions, therefore, as a middle term that mediates between two disparate, yet analytically relatable domains of inquiry.<sup>8</sup>

The modern concept of mediation, such as articulated by the Frankfurt school, insists, to quote Adorno, that "mediation is in the object itself, not something between the object and that to which it is brought," a concept of mediation that attempts to abolish (or overcome) dualism altogether.<sup>9</sup> In this view, mediation is an active process that constructs its objects in precisely the sense that poststructuralism conceives of the social construction of reality in and through language. Rather than functioning as a middle term relating two

disjunct phenomenal orders from which it stands apart, mediation is intrinsic to the existence and operation of the reality that it actively produces. In studying history, then, what we study are the mediatory practices of past epochs which, then as now, constructed all being and consciousness. Moreover, the performative nature of such discourses -- preserved and thus available to us only in texts of a literate, if not precisely literary, nature -- prohibits our access to any reality other than the codes inscribed in such texts.

One could restate this in simpler fashion by arguing that what we study in the past are discourses, which represent identifiable units of a given society's mediated and mediating practices and beliefs. The result of this focus on discourse, I have argued, is to collapse text and context into a single, aestheticized understanding of culture, a procedure characteristic of New Historicist criticism, with its self-avowed elaboration of a cultural "poetics" and, to a lesser extent, of new forms of cultural history, both of which tend to treat texts and their contexts as equally part of one broad vein of discursive production characteristic of a given epoch.<sup>10</sup> Thus Lynn Hunt, herself an exemplar and advocate of the new cultural history, poses what seems to me to be the relevant and trenchant question that arises from New Historicist and cultural history's focus on the social practices of any given society as discursively homologous artifacts:

where will we be when every practice -- whether it is economic, intellectual, social or political -- has been shown to be culturally determined? Or, to put it another way, can a history of culture work if it is shorn of all theoretical assumptions about culture's relationship to the social world, if indeed, its agenda is conceived as the undermining of all assumptions about the relationship between culture and the social world? <sup>11</sup>

To be sure, for historians and literary critics alike, whichever definition of mediation one chooses, the mediating function will be constituted by language because language, by definition, is that which mediates human awareness of the world we inhabit. Moreover, it is late in the day to have to insist that all historians, even of positivist stripe, live and breathe

in a world of texts, or that knowledge of the past is primarily present to us in textual form. But our understanding of the implications of this "always already" textualized character of historical data, its inevitably mediated state as made up of language, depends to a high degree on what concept of mediation we adopt and, by logical inference, what view of language we deploy. Just as there are multiple models of mediation, so also are there various ways of viewing language: the fashionable, postmodern performative idea of language as constitutive of the world, hence inherently self-reflexive; an instrumentalist or constative view of language, in which language is seen to describe and explicate as well as to "invent" reality and, in that sense, to constitute an "instrument of mediation between human consciousness and the world it occupies."<sup>12</sup> This second concept of language is normally employed in scientific discourse or in any discipline concerned with purveying information about the world rather than with the construction of social meaning. One of the features of the "linguistic turn" in the humanities has been to replace the classical notion of mediation with the modern and to undermine our faith in the instrumental capacity of language to convey information about the world. But must we really choose between these two conceptions of language and mediation? Must we limit language's power to the reflexive, or is there not room in our historiographical practice, as there clearly is in our everyday linguistic habits, for a constative, (i.e. descriptive) as well as performative use of language, even when that language is embodied in past texts (including documents) and thus possesses something of the literary character that poststructuralism has taught us to apprehend? The alternative between seeing language as either perfectly transparent or completely opaque is simply too rigidly framed.<sup>13</sup> Without in any way creating a hierarchy of discourses, can we not, nonetheless, differentiate among forms of language use and kinds of texts, some of which -- the literary -- obviously belong in the realm of the self-reflexive, while some others -- what we normally think of as the documentary -- may at least in part be usefully categorized under the rubric of instrumental. And, to extend the argument, while the majority of the first sort of texts, in their literarity, almost certainly work in the



performative fashion that poststructuralism suggests, and thus constitute mediations in Adorno's sense, is it not possible to be persuaded of this and, at the same time, to grant that instrumental uses of language are capable of conveying to us positive knowledge of history, inferentially derived from records of all sorts, and thus to mediate between us and the past? The duality of perspectives that I am arguing for would allow us to maintain these distinct issues in a more clearly delineated and fruitful tension with implications for our understanding of the character of representation as well as of "reality."<sup>14</sup>

I do not wish to contest the "linguistic" character of even instrumental language as preserved in documentary records. The archive is as much the repository of written traces as the literary text. I do want to insist, however, that language functions in many registers and in many modes (often at the same time), not all of which are mis-en-abîme. The polarized character of the debate over poststructuralism has tended to insist that we align ourselves on one or another side of the semiotic divide, as if we were somehow in a zero-sum linguistic game. But in opting for the middle ground, I would also opt for a mixed and potentially richer understanding of language and its mediatory possibilities in the interests of a more highly differentiated analysis of past texts and their social contexts. The middle ground that I am seeking to demarcate would allow both concepts of mediation and language to be put into play simultaneously.

A duality of perspectives in the investigation of texts (both literary and documentary) and their social contexts is what I have elsewhere tried to convey by the phrase "the social logic of the text," a term that seeks to combine in a single but complex framework a protocol for the analysis of a text's social site -- the social space it occupies, both as a product of a particular social world and as an agent at work in that world -- and its own discursive character as "logos," that is, as itself a literary artifact composed of language and thus demanding literary (formal) analysis.

My emphasis on the text's social site stems from my belief that the power and meaning of any given set of representations derives in large part from its social context and

its relation to the social and political networks in which it is elaborated. Even if one accepts the poststructuralist argument that language constitutes the social world of meaning, it is possible to maintain that language itself acquires meaning and authority only within specific social and historical settings. While linguistic differences structure society, social differences structure language.<sup>15</sup> Texts, as material embodiments of situated language use, reflect in their very materiality the inseparability of material and discursive practices and the need to preserve a sense of their mutual implication and interdependence in the production of meaning.

Implicit in the notion of the "social logic of the text," then, is the belief that we are capable of recovering some sense of the material world of the past, a belief that in turn commits us to at least a partial acceptance of language's instrumental capacity to convey information about historical forms of life, for without that capacity we could never know in even a partial sense anything about history. This is not an attempt to smuggle positivism in through the back door, It is an attempt to argue for an understanding of semiotics that retains a conception of the sometimes referential (if always "arbitrary" because conventional) function of signs as part of socially shaped systems of human communication organized by languages, as Saussure himself understood semiotics. It is only by acknowledging the irreducibly semiotic character of our historical practice, I believe, that we can respond to the challenge semiotics has posed to traditional historiography. But a semiotic conception of language does not commit one to a belief in the intransitively self-reflexive character of all linguistic acts and artifacts. Indeed, it was over this very point that Derrida ultimately broke with Saussure's theory of language, accusing him of a lingering nostalgia for a "transcendental signified."<sup>16</sup> As successor to semiotic theory, Derrida wishes to install a view of the endlessly ludic and mediatory play of language unconnected to any ground exterior to itself. In granting the force of semiotic conceptions of language, we do not necessarily have to concede the Derridean spin that deconstruction places on it. We must refuse, as Chartier has recently argued, to "postulate an identity between the logocentric and

hermeneutic logic that governs the production of discourse, and the "logic of practice," which rules behaviors that define social identities and relations...To concentrate on the concrete conditions and processes that construct meaning is to recognize, unlike traditional intellectual history, that minds are not disincarnated, and, unlike semiotics, that the categories which engender experiences and interpretations are historical."<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, even an acceptance of a semiotically-based view of language and of deconstructive modes of reading does not compel us to abandon our effort to enrich our understanding of the past as more than a complex of discursive strategies and events. Thus I would agree with Dominick La Capra's desire to "elaborate a critical and self-critical historiography that remains open to the risks Derrida explores but also insists upon certain constraints in the manner that engages the disciplinary conventions of professional historians."<sup>18</sup> These "disciplinary conventions" comprise a respect for empirical-analytic techniques of research -- i.e. a belief in the referential, constative possibilities of language -- along with a new and theoretically informed appreciation of the literary nature of all historical documents and their mediating and supplementary role in all historiography.

Postmodernism challenges us to develop such complex strategies of research and reading, despite the fact that they are not easily theorized. Moreover, it is clear that many historians have already taken up this challenge and are implementing it in practice, even if they have not yet fully voiced their theoretical stances. Although the precise links between thought, language and action may be difficult to explain, it is not helpful to deal with them in terms of what Brian Stock has called "textual gnosticism."<sup>19</sup> A flexible appreciation of the ways postmodernism can aid in redefining the nature of historical investigation and enhance historiographical practice would surely represent a healthy appropriation of its tenets, without necessarily consigning us to its more extreme, and polarizing, forms. The middle ground is rarely a comfortable terrain to seek to occupy, since one is by definition always (already) outflanked on both sides. But any contemporary historiography that hopes to be successful will inevitably have to integrate both theory and practice -- to make

compatible both the practice of theory and a theory of practice -- and that will mean negotiating the middle spaces and grounds that currently divide theory from practice. Historians have traditionally shied away from such questions, preferring to leave them to the airy speculation of philosophers and critics. It is a mark of how unusual our own engagement with history has become that we feel compelled to confront them now. But this is scarcely cause for regret. A historiographical practice grounded in an awareness of its own philosophical and practical commitments will not diminish but rather strengthen our appreciation both of the past as the object of our study and of the present as the site of our investment in the past.

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup>.. From this perspective, it is interesting to see the ways in which deconstruction has become demonized as a threat to the whole value structure of Western civilization, a phenomenon that Dominick La Capra relates to the passing of Soviet communism: "In the recent past the widespread belief that communism has failed and is no longer a serious threat to the West has induced a tendency to seek a stereotypical enemy and scapegoat elsewhere. Preposterous as the gesture may seem, deconstruction has itself at times been cast in this role as the homogenous, anxiety-producing, politically and socially dangerous "other." In "The Personal, the Political and the Textual: Paul de Man as the Object of Transference," History and Memory Studies in Representation of the Past, 4 (1992), p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>. The Postmodern Turn: Essays in Postmodern Theory and Culture (Ohio State University Press, 1987), p. xvi.

<sup>3</sup>.. David Harlan, "Intellectual History and the Return of Literature," American Historical Review, 94 (1989), p. 582.

<sup>4</sup>.."Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn," American Historical Review, 92 (1987), pp. 901-902.

<sup>5</sup>.. "Making Up Lost Time: Writing on the Writing of History," Speculum, 61 (1986), p. 95.

<sup>6</sup>.. Frederick Jameson, The Political Unconscious Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act, (Ithaca, New York, 1982), p. 225-226.. Jameson further stipulates that "it is not necessary that these analyses be homologous, that is, that each of the objects in question be seen as doing the same thing, having the same structure or emitting the same message. What is crucial is that, by being able to use the same language about each of these quite distinct objects or levels of an object we can restore at least methodologically the lost unity of social life and demonstrate that widely distant elements of the social totality are ultimately part of the same global process."

<sup>7</sup>.. Marxism and Literature (Oxford and New York, 1977), p. 98.

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<sup>8</sup>.. An example of how this works is afforded by Michael Baxandall's use of the "Bouquier principle," which states that "in the event of difficulty in establishing a relation between two terms, modify one of the terms till it matches the other, but keeping note of what modification has been necessary." Thus Baxandall, acknowledging that "art and society are analytical concepts from two different kinds of categorization of human experience" -- are, therefore, "unhomologous systematic constructions put upon interpenetrating subject matters" -- shows how some strands of modern criticism have modified the term "society" into the term "culture" in order to establish an analyzable, homologous relationship between the two. See his "Art, Society and the Bouquier Principle," Representations, 10 (1985), pp. 40-1. For a discussion of Baxandall, see also Stephen Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," in H. Aram Veeseer, ed., The New Historicism (New York, London, 1989), p. 11-12.

<sup>9</sup>.. Quoted in Lee Patterson, Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature (Madison, 1987), p. xi. See also Raymond Williams, Marxism and Literature, pp. 98-99 and idem, Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society (rev. ed., New York, 1985), pp. 204-06. Mediation in its "classical" sense here corresponds to William's definition (ii), while Adorno's falls within his category (iii).

<sup>10</sup>.. See my "History, Historicism and the Social Logic of the Text," Speculum, 65 (1990), pp. 67-74.

<sup>11</sup>.. "History, Culture and Text," introduction to The New Cultural History, ed. Lynn Hunt (Berkeley, 1989), p. 10.

<sup>12</sup>.. To borrow the formulation of Hayden White, "The Problem of Change in Literary History," New Literary History, 7 (1975), p. 109. I derive the term "constative" for language that is instrumental or descriptive from La Capra's use of it in Soundings in Critical Theory, (Ithaca and London, 1989).

<sup>13</sup>.. See Martin Jay, "Should Intellectual History Take a Linguistic Turn? Reflections on the Habermas-Gadamer Debate," in Dominick La Capra and Steven L. Kaplan eds., Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives (Ithaca, 1982)," p. 110.

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14.. Thus Judith Newton insists, "Taking the 'material' seriously, a material always apprehended within representation, changes the way that representation itself is represented." In "History as Usual? Feminism and the 'New Historicism'," in H. Aram Veesser, ed., The New Historicism, p. 166.

15.. See especially Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Body Politic," in Feminism/Theory/Politics, ed. Elizabeth Weed, ed. Coming to Terms: Feminism, Theory, Politics (New York, 1989), p. 101.

16.. Positions, trans. and annotated by Alan Bass (Chicago, 1981), p. 19.

17.."Popular Culture: A Concept revisited," Unpublished paper delivered to a conference on Popular Culture, MIT, October 16-17, 1993. The author would like to thank Professor Chartier for giving her a copy of this paper.

18.. Soundings in Critical Theory, p. 6

19..` "History, Literature and Medieval Textuality," Yale French Studies,70 (1986), p. 17. Similarly, Edward Said, in arguing for a "secular criticism" maintains that "even if we accept ...that there is no way to get past texts in order to apprehend "real" history directly, it is still possible to say that such a claim need not also eliminate interest in the events and circumstances entailed by and expressed in the texts themselves." The World the Text and the Critic (Cambridge, MA, 1983), p. 4.