HISTORICISM

Paul Hamilton

2nd edition

the NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

HISTORICISM

Historicism is a critical movement that has existed in some form from Ancient Greece to modern times. But what exactly does it entail?

In this lucid volume, Paul Hamilton provides the essential guide to the history of the term, its uses and the critical terminology of historicist approaches. He discusses the major thinkers in historicism, both past and present, and guides readers through the vocabulary required to engage with crucial texts in the field. With refreshing clarity, Hamilton explains the place of historicism within literary theory and outlines the differences between historicism and new historicism. He also demonstrates the ways in which historicist approaches might shed new light on contemporary debates around postcolonialism, feminism and, in this second edition, globalization.

Historicism is essential reading for any student new to the sometimes bewildering field of literary theory, or those looking to explore historicist approaches in greater depth. With a new glossary, fully updated bibliography and clear suggestions for additional reading, this is an ideal introduction and an invaluable foundation for further learning.

Paul Hamilton teaches English at Queen Mary, University of London.

THE NEW CRITICAL IDIOM

Series Editor: John Drakakis, University of Stirling

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Series Editor's Preface

The New Critical Idiom is a series of introductory books which seeks to extend the lexicon of literary terms, in order to address the radical changes which have taken place in the study of literature during the last decades of the twentieth century. The aim is to provide clear, well-illustrated accounts of the full range of terminology currently in use, and to evolve histories of its changing usage.

The current state of the discipline of literary studies is one where there is considerable debate concerning basic questions of terminology. This involves, among other things, the boundaries which distinguish the literary from the non-literary; the position of literature within the larger sphere of culture; the relationship between literatures of different cultures; and questions concerning the relation of literary to other cultural forms within the context of interdisciplinary studies.

It is clear that the field of literary criticism and theory is a dynamic and heterogeneous one. The present need is for individual volumes on terms which combine clarity of exposition with an adventurousness of perspective and a breadth of application. Each volume will contain as part of its apparatus some indication of the direction in which the definition of particular terms is likely to move, as well as expanding the disciplinary boundaries within which some of these terms have been traditionally contained. This will involve some re-situation of terms within the larger field of cultural representation, and will introduce examples from the area of film and the modern media in addition to examples from a variety of literary texts.

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Historicism is an enormous subject; I have tried to use the most readily available translations and selections of the different languages and literatures in which I have been obliged to travel. Part of chapter 5 reworks bits of an article published in *English* (Autumn 1993). Almost all the research was done in the British Library, a neglected institution, wonderfully staffed.

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But I wrote it for Reeta and Daniel, who were in on the action throughout.

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INTRODUCTION

> The protagonists of progress in historical understanding are always isolated individuals who are led by such historical convulsions as wars and revolutions to put new questions. Thucydides was induced to undertake his history because he regarded the Peloponnesian War as the greatest war of all times. Augustine wrote his *City of God* under the impact of Alaric's conquest of Rome. Machiavelli's political and historical writings are his reaction to the French expeditions into Italy. The revolution of 1789 and the Napoleonic wars provoked Hegel's Philosophy of History. Upon the defeat of 1871 followed Taine's revision of French history, upon the establishment of the Hohenzollern empire, Nietzsche's 'unseasonable' essay on the 'Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life' – a precursor of the modern discussions of 'historism'. The end of the first World War was responsible for the resonance Spengler's *Decline of the West* found in Germany. Deeper in intent and saturated with the entire yield of German philosophy, theology, and history was Ernst Troeltsch's unfinished work, *Der Historismus und seine Probleme* [Historicism and its Discontents].
>
> (Curtius 1979: 3–4)

What is historicism? Historicism (or 'historism' in this translation of Curtius' *Historismus*) is a critical movement insisting on the prime

importance of historical context to the interpretation of texts of all kinds. It has enjoyed a long tradition of influence upon many disciplines of thought, recently experiencing a lively renewal in contemporary literary criticism. The most prominent late 20th-century critical fashions, poststructuralism and postmodernism, have ended up being understood through the images of history they imply. Yet this historical turn rejoins a well-worn tradition of historicism. At present, historicism is tempted to present itself as 'new', the latest way forward for literary theory. That alone might be a good reason for a book on it. In addition, though, to briefing students on the current state of the critical art, a book on historicism should identify an underlying pattern of historical explanation recurring at different times in different forms.

While human beings have generally tried to understand themselves historically, they have not always done so as historicists. Historicism emerges in reaction to the practice of deducing from first principles truths about how people are obliged to organize themselves socially and politically. The natural laws governing human behaviour at all times are formulated, and cultures evaluated by the degree to which they approximate to this ideal pattern. Historicists oppose this tradition, which, primarily associated with the Enlightenment, stretches, in different versions, from the 17th-century natural-law theorists to the sophistications of Kant and Hegel. They argue instead that human nature is too various for such legislation to be universally applicable. They therefore have to evolve a model for apprehending social and cultural diversity different from the scientific, law-governed paradigm of the Enlightenment. Romantic aesthetics, that sense of a human richness unmeasured by scientific calculation and best equated with a natural grandeur similarly exceeding computation, immediately offers itself for this purpose. In Ernst Troeltsch's summary, Romanticism was 'ultimately a metaphysic in which individuality, plurality and pantheism are combined' (Troeltsch 1934: 211). From Schleiermacher to Gadamer, though, the hermeneutic tradition has struggled to recast this aesthetic heritage in order to show that history, properly understood, demonstrates that we can have a kind of knowledge complementing the natural sciences, and that all experience not falling under scientific jurisdiction need not be consigned to a non-cognitive aesthetic which lays no claim to being true.

Simply put, such anti-Enlightenment historicism develops a characteristically double focus. Firstly, it is concerned to situate any statement – philosophical, historical, aesthetic or whatever – in its historical context. Secondly, it typically doubles back on itself to explore the extent to which any historical enterprise inevitably reflects the interests and bias of the period in which it was written. On the one hand, therefore, historicism is suspicious of the stories the past tells about itself; on the other hand, it is equally suspicious of its own partisanship. It offers up both its past and its present for ideological scrutiny.

We can call the first focus of historicism hermeneutical. The past is to be understood on the model of interpreting a text; and texts, literary or otherwise, only have meaning within an economy of other texts, which both limits their possibilities and facilitates the distinctiveness of their utterances. A poetic statement, for example, amounts to one thing in Plato's philosophy, but it might possess an altogether different status in Renaissance, Enlightenment, Romantic or postmodern treatises. In each case, its value is relative to that accorded to adjacent discourses of science, politics, history and so on.

Hermeneutics was originally the science of interpreting Scripture. Secular hermeneutics retains the idea of relating the individual work to a larger purpose into whose pattern it meaningfully fits. Understood hermeneutically, a text's meaning is limited by the value accorded its discourse within the culture of its first audience. Nevertheless, between that past reception and our present attempts to understand it, the text will in all likelihood have generated many more interpretations. The historicist usually claims to be more aware of the conventions governing the first set of expectations than the original readers, for whom they may well have been internalized, unconscious assumptions, and for whom reading the text consisted in straightforward exegesis. Historicists also claim to have gained more knowledge of the text's meaning because of their acquaintance with the new meanings it had for subsequent historical periods.

As soon as the critical heritage of a text becomes an issue in its interpretation, my second question of relativism comes into focus. Is hermeneutics a circular process? Do critical interpreters always find what they want to find? Or, are historicists, by contrast, so effectively aware of this problem that they can break out of the hermeneutical circle?

Can they distinguish between the meaning a piece of writing had for its first audience and a *real* meaning, unclouded by that original audience's or any subsequent period's ideology? A notion of ideology – here a society's unconscious tailoring of criteria of objectivity to fit its own interests – comes into play, because historicists, especially nowadays, frequently define themselves as critics who refuse to take the past on its own terms, regarding the economy with which it regulated the possible meanings of different genres as *the* ideological constraint to be broken. We shall see that the deregulation of original economies of meaning which historicists claim to achieve characterizes the transition from modernity to postmodernity. Modernity's typical insistence on the 'new' is overridden by postmodernity's refusal to accept the fixed sense of the past against which modernity asserted its novelty.

Modernity itself is defined by the idea that we can break from the past by claiming to be the measure of all things and not vice versa, and that this subjectivity is not an embarrassment for science but the grounds of its possibility – an attitude shared by otherwise opposed modes of thinking from the Renaissance onwards. The critique of modernity is an historicizing one, which exposes the ideological content of the logic of a subjectivity that supposedly transcends local interests. To the extent, therefore, that they criticize modernity, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud write as historicist critics of the traditions by which we make sense of the past. Their postmodern successors, Foucault, Derrida and Lacan, pursue especially the reflexive implications of this scepticism. They distrust not only tradition but also any interpretation which does not acknowledge that its history of the past is relativized by being also a history of the present. The way around this problem, though, cannot be to provide yet another interpretation of the bias of their own interpretations. Postmodernists have to find alternative expressions explaining how they can 'think differently' from both their past and their present.

While this book is a survey of historicism and a short history of some of its main effects in the history of critical thought, it also argues towards certain conclusions. One of these is that postcolonial and feminist writings most effectively provide the alternative expression sought by postmodernism. So-called 'new historicism' tends helpfully to isolate the problems from which those critical efforts take off, and, when it goes further, itself mutates into one or the other. The philosophical ingenuity

and range of commentary arising from their rewriting of history has not been fully appreciated; nor is the degree to which their idiom is shared and links widely differing critics to the postmodern moment. Another conclusion is that, while we seem able to examine critically the idea of progress, we still cannot do without some idea of redemption. Its theological overtones, no doubt embarrassing to critical theorists, belong to a language they are obliged to use. So this book follows Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin and, to some extent, Jurgen Habermas, but also, by implication and more controversially, a host of others starting from Schleiermacher, in thinking that to strive for a just estimation of or undistorted communication with the past is simultaneously to believe that the present can be significantly altered for the better. The result might not be progress, with all the questionable assumptions of continuity that entails, but it would make a difference.

1

HISTORY AND HISTORICISM

THE POETICS OF HISTORY

From ancient times, philosophers have been eager to separate history from fiction. Like many others, this disciplinary boundary proved fragile from the start. Despite having expelled poets from his ideal republic, Plato was still constrained to use myth in his descriptions of the ultimate truths of philosophy. In books 7 and 10 of Plato's philosophical dialogue, *The Republic*, his master, Socrates, enlightens his listeners by having them picture two imaginary scenarios for philosophical purposes. The myth of the cave invents a viewpoint from which we can survey the processes of knowledge which normally circumscribe us; the myth of Er imagines a comparable escape from the boundaries of mortality in order to explain the progress of the soul. In both cases, the contradictory recourse to art of a philosopher who has just condemned art as intellectually and morally disreputable implicates history in fiction. Plato's justification of myth here is that it tells a true story in the only terms available. His myths aspire to be history, but in the absence of facts they must resort to fictions. We can only understand them, though, if we read them as supporting his philosophy with imagined histories.

In his *Poetics*, Aristotle had difficulty in seeing why this serious philosophical purpose could not straightforwardly be attributed to art.

Why was history required to accredit the philosophical use of fiction to explain the nature of knowledge and mortality? For Aristotle, history was distinguished from poetry not by greater seriousness of purpose but by the different balance of probability and possibility proper to each discourse. Thus, while Oedipus thinks it impossible that he could have killed his father and married his mother, the narrative power of Sophocles' play *Oedipus Tyrranus* shows how each step he took to avoid this outcome made it more probable. History, on the other hand, is full of examples of victory snatched from the jaws of defeat, or vice versa, in total defiance of what we expect to happen, of all probability. In fact, poetry was more philosophical than history because of its greater freedom to represent the complete understanding desired by philosophy. In poetry, probability was all; history, on the other hand, had to attend much more to what was possible. Provided a fiction was coherent, provided it contained a beginning, middle and end and reached a cathartic conclusion, it served its purpose: one that modelled the philosophical end of apprehending events in their entirety, with nothing necessary to their elucidation left out. History must resign itself to what could have taken place, however improbable this might be, and however its improbability might threaten the coherence of history's relation of events, leaving readers frustrated rather than cathartically purged of their desires for explanation.

History, then, appears to be as vulnerable to criticism as poetry is safe from it. This is an unusual way of looking at Aristotle's *Poetics*; usually the standards of coherence he imposes on fiction are viewed as restrictive and parochial, canons to be broken by creative writers down the centuries. It is worth stressing the comparable dilemma in which the *Poetics* leaves history. If the historian tells a coherent tale, one that has point and purpose, its probability may undermine its possibility and leave the author justified as a philosopher and discredited as an historian – probability, we recall, being the sign that poetry's is a philosophical imagination. If, instead, the history in question records a host of improbabilities, however possible, faithfulness to what happened or could have happened will produce a discourse without point and purpose, philosophically negligible, random in its accuracy and literal in its confusion. Faced with this choice, it is fair to say, most historians reach a compromise. 'It is sometimes fiction. It is sometimes theory', wrote Macaulay of his craft in 1828 (Stern 1970: 72). They find their own ways

of making the possible and the probable interact, balancing truth to the facts against the need for those facts to make sense. Equally, though, writers of fiction have often had to confront the resistance of the individual fact to ordinary explanation. They have taken it as their task to devise a context for understanding or even just tolerating the exception to probability, the event which cannot be regularized. Some things, one might say, have to be remembered because they cannot be imagined. It may take as great a creative effort to step outside our criteria of probability as it did to reanimate them from within. Art and history inflect each other in commemoration and elegy, hypothesis and vision, record and story. Memory – Mnemosyne – was, after all, the mother of the Muses, and the leading muse, Clio, presided over history.

When we look back to the ancient historians, we find just this tangle of common concerns rather than Aristotle's clear demarcation of purposes. In a famous aside in *De Legibus*, Cicero tries to stick to the Aristotelian agenda, but he is obliged to concede that in practice distinctions become blurred: 'different principles are to be followed in history and poetry . . . for in history the standard by which everything is judged is the truth, while in poetry it is generally the pleasure one gives; however, in the works of Herodotus, the father of History, and in those of Theopompus, one finds innumerable fabulous tales' (I.5). In his classic review of Herodotus' reputation, 'The Place of Herodotus in the History of Historiography', Arnaldo Momigliano shows that Herodotus' standing as the inaugurator of ancient history persists alongside the assumption that he did not tell the truth. Momigliano is rightly fascinated by the fact that Herodotus' alleged unreliability clearly counts against him, yet does not diminish his importance to his detractors. Partly this results from Herodotus' historical situation: commentators have noted that he was as much the son of the fabulists, Homer and Hesiod, as the father of subsequent historians (Vandiver 1991: 239). Looking forward, we find that his immediate successor, Thucydides, though not attacking Herodotus by name, was eager to distinguish his own style of history writing from that of previous poets and chroniclers. Thucydides successfully 'imposed the idea that contemporary political history was the only serious history' because there was supposedly no room in it for the art of fable, myth and unproven anecdote associated with Herodotus (Momigliano 1966: 131).

But it is only by contrast with Herodotus that Thucydides' history can appear as strict documentary. His own magisterial statement of principles at the start of his account of the Peloponnesian War fatally allows that 'it has been difficult to record with strict accuracy the words actually spoken'. As a result, 'the speeches are given in the language in which, as it seemed to me, the several speakers would express, on the subjects under consideration, the sentiments most befitting the occasion' (Thucydides 1972: 47–8). In the absence of possible documentation, then, Thucydides relies on probability, on his own sense of what sounds inevitable and fitting. Again, history no longer looks opposed to fiction, but within history we encounter different genres of writing, in which it is appropriate to tell different kinds of story. Or we could say that different kinds of historical evidence need to have different kinds of construction put upon them. Herodotus writes not about contemporary political history, but about the past, and about different cultures, Lydian, Scythian, Egyptian. His evidence is oral, anecdotal, antiquarian. While Thucydides' success in setting a pattern for future historians meant that few had a good word to say for Herodotus, the distinctive legitimacy or propriety of Herodotus' kind of history to the sort of evidence available – Thucydides' own criterion – remained undeniable, and so his lasting reputation was assured.

Momigliano notes that, subsequent to Herodotus, when Western archivists recorded the wonders of the New World, classical scholars were quick to point out that Herodotus and not Thucydides was now the useful historical precedent. Momigliano believes too that historical writing since the 18th century has become, more and more, a discourse within which you can find that mixture of geography, ethnography, mythography, sociology and any other human science originally conflated in Herodotus and condemned by his critics as the mixing of poetry and history (137, 141, 220). Eventually Herodotus arrives on the agenda of American 'new historicism' when a study of him appears in a series under the aegis of the journal, *Representations*, by François Hartog, who concludes that a 'return' to Herodotus is possible because of 'a shift . . . in the historical field' especially signalled by 'recent inquiries into the imaginary representations of various societies' (Hartog 1988: 378).

This coincidence raises the question of how to historicize the historians Herodotus and Thucydides. We see our reflections in the

historical mirror by which they make us more aware of our own preoccupations, methods and practice. But their power to make modern historians conscious of their own preoccupations, methods and practice may, in turn, inspire these historians to still more productive meditations on Herodotus and Thucydides. Hartog notes that Herodotus wrote his more documentary histories of the Persian Wars, closest to what was to become Thucydides' model, later than his more ethnographic work, and probably during his stay in Athens. History, then, becomes the discipline into which Herodotus matures, 'one which – naturally – could ripen only in Athens' (312). His pre-Athenian writings were therefore retrospectively constructed as mythologies and fables; they were in this way distinguished from the greater seriousness which belonged ideologically to an Athenian history representing its cultural supremacy past and present. Sophisticated scholarship of Classical historiography is now attentive to the ways in which historical meaning can change with the reception of its audience; how, for example, 'the language in which Greece once celebrated itself can come into its own to celebrate Rome' (Fox 1993: 47).

One can easily point to passages in the *Histories* which support the view of Herodotus as an Athenian ideologue: 'Thus Athens went from strength to strength, and proved, if proof were needed, how noble a thing freedom is' (Herodotus 1972: 369). Here is that mixture of civic optimism and chauvinism recognizable in the funeral speech Thucydides gives to Pericles in his history and which is taken up, ironically, by the Chorus in Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*. The conclusion to be drawn by someone writing up the Greek campaign against Persia is straightforward: 'one is surely right in saying that Greece was saved by Athens . . . It was the Athenians who – after God – drove back the Persian king' (487). While there are qualifications and caveats built into Herodotus' account of Athenian glory, many more appear in his tentative records of other cultures. When he has lived in the environment in question he happily turns his experience against home prejudices:

> The Greeks have many stories with no basis of fact. One of the silliest is the story of how Heracles came to Egypt and was taken away by the Egyptians to be sacrificed to Zeus, with all due pomp and the sacrificial wreath upon his head; and how he quietly submitted until the moment

> came for the beginning of the actual ceremony at the altar, when he exerted his strength and killed them all. For me at least such a tale is proof enough that the Greeks knew nothing whatever about Egyptian character and custom. The Egyptians are forbidden by their religion even to kill animals for sacrifice, except sheep and bulls and bull-calves as have passed the test for 'cleanness' – and geese: is it likely, then, that they would sacrifice human beings?
>
> (Herodotus 1972: 148–9)

Famous and fabulous stories of Indian ants bigger than foxes, or snakes that fly, either characterize his ethnography – his interest is as much in the Persian character of the anecdotes – or, in the case of the snakes, are checked against the bones themselves, viewed by Herodotus and graphically described for our supposedly wiser interpretations. By way of contrast, we could argue that Thucydides in his history was repeating the sin he deplored, a self-destructive introspection in Greek culture typified by the internecine quarrel between Athens and Sparta after their combination to forge an emancipating Greek identity in the war against Persia. The historiographical corrective here would have been the interest in other cultures, devoid of imperialist design, found in Herodotus' histories, and the significance of his writing of a history of the Persian wars while the unity it epitomized collapsed all around him.

Both historicizings of Herodotus situate him ideologically, the first making him a tool of Athenian propaganda, the second placing him in opposition. It is perhaps not possible for both interpretations to be true, but what has been historically transmitted to us is the probability of both. In this endless shuttle, though, questions of probability return us to the present and the task of deciphering the rationale for choosing one interpretation over another. Hartog, consistent with his new historicist setting, has a Foucauldian suspicion that all writing, in one way or another, ends up conniving at the political power that permits it. Yet, as Momigliano has demonstrated, it is then necessary to explain the consequent misreading of Herodotus' writing as possessing, above all, a liberating alternative to the sad tales of contemporary political history.