

# **HISTORICAL CRITICISM AND THE MEANING OF TEXTS**

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J. R. de J. Jackson

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**J. R. DE J. JACKSON**

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# CONTENTS

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Acknowledgements	ix
Introduction	1
1 TRIANGLES OF INTERPRETATION	9
2 DISPLACED ENVIRONMENTS	37
3 KNOWLEDGES OF THE PAST	63
4 STRATEGIES	92
5 THE RELATIONSHIP OF HISTORICAL CRITICISM TO SOME ALTERNATIVE MODES	117
Notes	152
References	168
Index	169

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# INTRODUCTION

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The term 'historical criticism' has been used rather casually to refer to a number of activities that differ from one another in purpose and scale. Some of them are vaguely conceived or defined and some are narrow and particular. What they have in common is an interest in the recovery of the past.

Interest in the recovery of the past is more properly the field of the historian than of the literary critic, and it is perhaps appropriate that Taine, one of the first to offer an explicit statement of the aims of historical criticism, should have perceived literature as the hand-maiden of history, and should have felt satisfied to define the goal of the historical critic as being to 'recover from the monuments of literature a knowledge of the way in which people thought and felt several centuries ago' (p. v). Taine's faith in the value of literature as a historical document has come to seem somewhat naïve to historians a century or more later, as has his Viconian confidence that patterns of development can be discerned by means of it. To literary critics it is his reduction of literature to a historical instrument, his assumption that the past is more important than the work of literature, that seems to be at fault. Whatever its theoretical shortcomings, however, Taine's kind of practical exploration of the ways in which we can improve our awareness of the nature of the past has been absorbed with profit and is now taken for granted by historians and literary critics alike.

However, when one turns to 'historical criticism' thought of as criticism in which literature itself is the *raison d'être*, the term is variously understood. There is, for example, the influential employment of the term by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, where he uses it to mean criticism in which an attempt is made to approach

the literature of an earlier period without subjecting it to the values of the present. The historical critic, he suggests, ‘develops . . . toward total and indiscriminate acceptance: there is nothing “in his field” that he is not prepared to read with interest’ (p. 24). Here the emphasis is on the historical critic’s deliberate suspension of his own modern point of view and his modern values. This self-denying aspect of historical criticism is seen in a more positive spirit by D. W. Robertson, Jr, in his appeal for ‘that kind of literary analysis which seeks to reconstruct the intellectual attitudes and the cultural ideals of a period in order to reach a fuller understanding of its literature’ (p. 3). What Robertson had in mind was not merely the suspension of the modern point of view but the definition of the distinctive point of view of a historical period and a temporary adoption of it.

The relationship of the literature of the past to the time in which it was written has traditionally been of interest to literary critics. Generations of them have taken it for granted that one’s understanding of literary works is likely to be impaired or even transformed if one is ignorant of the social context in which they were written. This assumption was challenged indirectly by the rise of New Criticism, with its emphasis on close analysis of texts and its impatience with attention to ancillary evidence that it felt was distracting and largely irrelevant. The relations between the historical approach and New Criticism were amicably explored in a pair of papers delivered in 1950 by Cleanth Brooks and A. S. P. Woodhouse. Woodhouse opened the discussion, acknowledging ‘the common indictment of the Historical Critic, that he allows a consideration of sources and analogues, and of historical influences generally, to distract his attention from the text’. Brooks in turn conceded that historical criticism and what he called, simply, ‘criticism’ ‘are both necessary and necessary to each other’.<sup>1</sup> The sense that historical criticism and New Criticism divided the field of criticism between them and were distinct if allied seems to have been generally accepted until about twenty years ago. During the past twenty years, however, the dominance of New Criticism has been successfully challenged by a number of vigorously expounded critical approaches and either reintroduced in drastically revised forms, such as deconstruction, or abandoned altogether. And the idea seems to have got about that historical criticism – the uneasy contemporary of New Criticism – is similarly outmoded.

In the recent flurries of critical statement and counter-statement, historical criticism has been notable for its absence. Whether this is because, as Woodhouse remarked, 'historical students of literature have tended to work by a silent instinct of accumulation like the bee' (p. 1,033), or because historical critics by temperament and mental habit find the abstractness of critical theory uncongenial, it is difficult to be sure. The effect of their silence, however, has been to make historical criticism, like the New Criticism with which it used to be paired, appear to be something of an intellectual backwater. The assumption seems to have been that historical criticism, like New Criticism, is merely one of a number of optional critical procedures that may have their day and then sink unlamented into oblivion. But historical criticism, as this essay will try to show, is the necessary and unavoidable counterpart of all critical procedures, and, while it too is subject to change and capable of progress and improvement, the supposition that it can be dispensed with is a delusion. The consequences of its temporary fall from favour are doubly unfortunate: much contemporary criticism deliberately ignores its recent findings, supposing that it can remain independent of them without fundamental loss; and historical criticism itself has been spared the rigorous theoretical examination that has been one of the most valuable contributions of recent critical theory, and is not addressing itself to basic weaknesses in its own methods and assumptions.

Given the variety of the meanings that have been associated with 'historical criticism', it will be obvious that any attempt to examine its claims must begin with a definition that limits it. It seems sensible too to define historical criticism in terms of its aim rather than in terms of its method, on the grounds that the aim should define the method rather than the method the aim, and that, while methods are likely to change as our knowledge and skill change, the aim should remain more or less the same.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay, therefore, and without any wish to prejudice the use of the term elsewhere, the following definition is proposed: historical criticism is criticism that tries to read past works of literature in the way in which they were read when they were new.

Reading past works of literature in the way in which they were read when they were new is what most naïve readers suppose they are doing already. Experience makes one increasingly aware of the discrepancies between the original readings and subsequent ones,



and many sophisticated readers think the discrepancies so great as to be beyond remedy. In proposing such an aim for historical criticism, therefore, some further explanation is required. The formulation has to be qualified in several ways. It is not assumed, for example, that the value of a past work of literature to its readers when it was new has a direct bearing on its value for the historical critic; the historical critic, as historical critic, is concerned only with meaning. It is possible that evidence of originally acknowledged value may help the historical critic to arrive at an understanding of originally perceived meaning, but there its usefulness to historical criticism stops.

It may also be observed that readers are often slow to understand the meaning of new literary works and that the understanding of the readers of past works of literature when they were new is likely to be an unsatisfactory criterion to aim at. A double confusion is involved here. The first is the fundamental one of not distinguishing 'meaning' from 'significance'.<sup>3</sup> What we are proposing is meaning in the sense of the meaning the work conveyed and not in the sense of the meaning (significance) that meaning had for any particular reader at first or later. The second is a confusion that is characteristic of the aesthetics of modernism, to be found in, say, the poetry of T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound and the novels of Joyce, all of which bewildered many of their original readers. It is tempting to claim that these works are an exception, but in fact the difficulty that their original readers felt on reading them when they were new is part of the experience that the historical critic will wish to preserve or at least to be aware of. To read the *Four Quartets* or *Ulysses* after they have been tamed by half a century of critical commentary and literary imitation is to have an experience that is profoundly different from that of their first readers. We may prefer the tamed version, but historical critics will wish to be able to compare it to the challenge the works first represented.

Finally there is the problem posed by authors who failed to come to grips with their public, because they were eccentric, or socially isolated, or because they did not publish their work. The poetry of Henry Vaughan, of Blake, or the later poetry of Clare, all seem ill suited to the criterion of being understood as they were understood when they were new. But the incongruity is one of the letter and not of the spirit. If there were no readers for a work when it was new then the historical critic will wish to achieve a sense of how the readers who were contemporary with it would have been likely to

understand it if they had had the chance. Historical criticism in such circumstances may be unsatisfactorily speculative and its results will be treated with appropriate caution, but it will nevertheless continue to be an essential element in critical activity.

A corollary to the aim of reading past works of literature as they were read when they were new is that historical criticism is not an end in itself but a means to other ends. It is certainly possible for a historical critic to be a historical critic and no more; like scholarly editing, the activity can be intellectually and even aesthetically satisfying in itself. But establishing the original meaning of a text, like establishing the original wording of a text, is normally undertaken with a view to providing reliable materials for all other kinds of criticism to work with.<sup>4</sup> In fact most historical critics are not historical critics only and make a practice of applying other kinds of criticism to the materials they themselves have provided. It may be added that it is virtually impossible for any kind of literary critic to function without indulging in some historical criticism, and that the less conscious and systematic the indulgence is the less bearing the results are likely to have on the work of literature being discussed.

The division of literary criticism into two branches that Woodhouse and Brooks acknowledged in the 1950s was a division into complementary critical responsibilities, not a division into independent and unrelated activities. Historical critics learned from the analytical advances of the New Critics, and, while the New Critics for the most part turned from the active pursuit of historical criticism and urged others to do likewise, they did so from a vantage-point of historical knowledge that they shared with the historical critics who were their contemporaries. From a historical point of view they may be said to have lived off their capital without ever quite exhausting it. But, while their heirs, the formalist critics of the past twenty years, have inherited many of their characteristic strengths, the historical awareness they took for granted is not one of them. In recent years the anachronistic results of determinedly ahistorical formalist criticism have begun to be challenged by historical critics, and efforts have been made to explain the importance of historical criticism by both precept and example.<sup>5</sup>

Hitherto it has proved very difficult to find common ground. One does not regret lacking historical awareness if one has never experienced it consciously. Formalists may agree that historical critics are more likely than themselves to know what a past work of literature

meant when it was new without feeling that they are missing very much. Nevertheless a concern for meaning is shared by formalists and historical critics alike, and it seems possible that a re-examination of the elements of literary semantics in terms that are calculated to take into account the effect of the passage of time on meaning will provide a useful bridge between the two.

The book that follows attempts to construct such a bridge. It is made up of five chapters, each of which constitutes a necessary part of a cumulative argument. The overall theme is the nature of historical criticism and an account of the part it plays in all criticism of past literature. The first chapter, 'Triangles of interpretation', reconsiders the traditional analogy between author and work and speaker and utterance in attempts to determine meaning. The limits to a speaker's right to determine meaning are compared to the limits of an author's right, and the roles of hearers and readers relative to one another are assessed. The link between utterances and the environment in which they occur is compared with the link between works of literature and the environments in which they are read. The second chapter, 'Displaced environments', develops the consequences to the environments of works of literature when time passes and their readers take for granted different environments. One of the most important consequences is that if meaning depends on environment (as I argue it must) a change in environment is likely to bring about a change in meaning. A reader or critic may or may not be aware of such change. The third chapter, 'Knowledges of the past', takes up the possibility that such change, while regrettable, is unavoidable. Making use of current theories about the nature of historical knowledge and about the nature of our knowledge of our own personal experience, I concede certain limitations to our recovery of past environments but maintain that the past environments to which literary works refer are more limited and more accessible than the past environments that historians attempt to recover. Chapter 4, 'Strategies', presents a group of methods by which historical criticism may be made more effective than it has been hitherto. This chapter is necessarily speculative but it is also practical. It considers the potential resources of information, showing how they differ from the resources relied upon hitherto; it suggests the stages necessary to the adequate exploitation of these resources and estimates the kind of scholarly co-operation that they will require. The final chapter, 'The