



Theories of Literature and History

Overview

PART ONE: HISTORY vs LITERATURE?

- History as Fact: Empiricism
- History as Literature: Hayden White and Postmodernism
- History as Literature: Victorian Historians' Literariness; Victorian Novelists' Historical Preoccupations
- 19th-Century Emergence of the Historical Novel

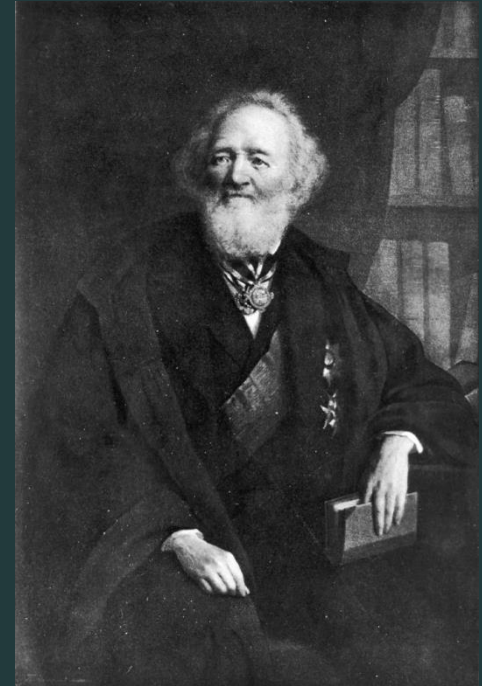
PART TWO: HISTORY AND LITERATURE AS DISCOURSE

- Postmodernist Histories: Keith Jenkins
- New Historicism: Postmodernism for Literary Historians

PART ONE: HISTORY vs LITERATURE?

History as Fact: Empiricism

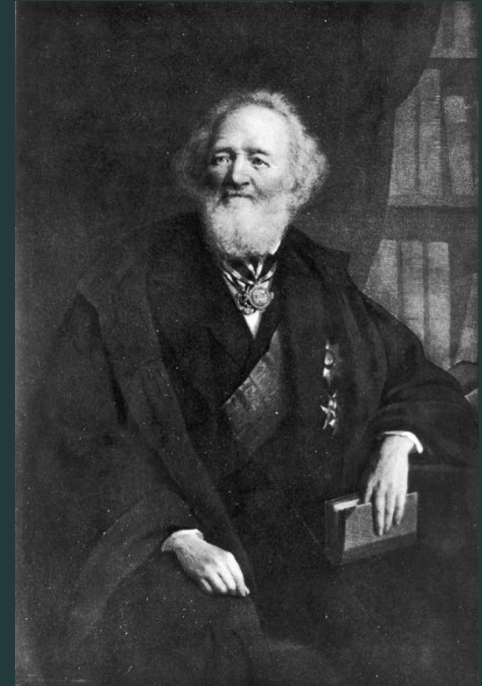
- Ranke professor of history at the University of Berlin, 1825–1871
- Moves towards professionalization of history – and the systemization of historians' methods – take root in Germany in 1820s and 1830s. A leading influence was Leopold von Ranke
- Father of modern 'scientific' history



Leopold von
Ranke (1795–
1886)

History as Fact: Empiricism

- Ranke saw his **empiricist** history – a reliance on documentary sources – as the most reliable means to learn about the past: "It is striking how history, when resting on the memory of men, always touches the bounds of mythology."
- Distinguished himself from predecessors and contemporaries: "You have reckoned that history ought to judge the past and to instruct the contemporary world as to the future. The present attempt does not yield to that high office. **It will merely tell how it really was.**"

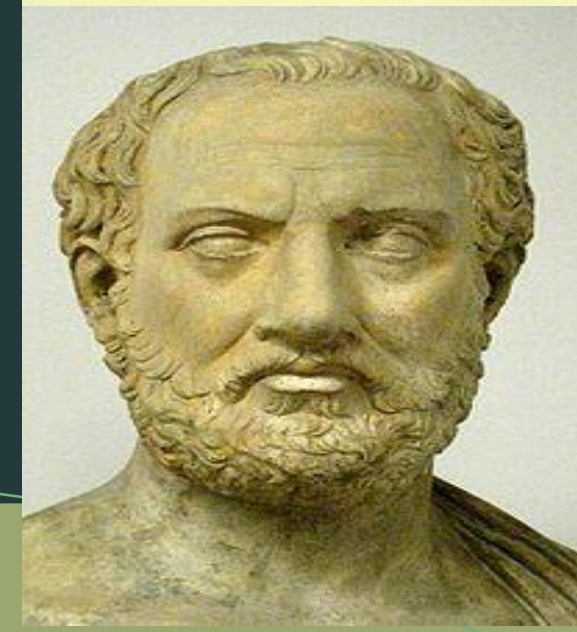
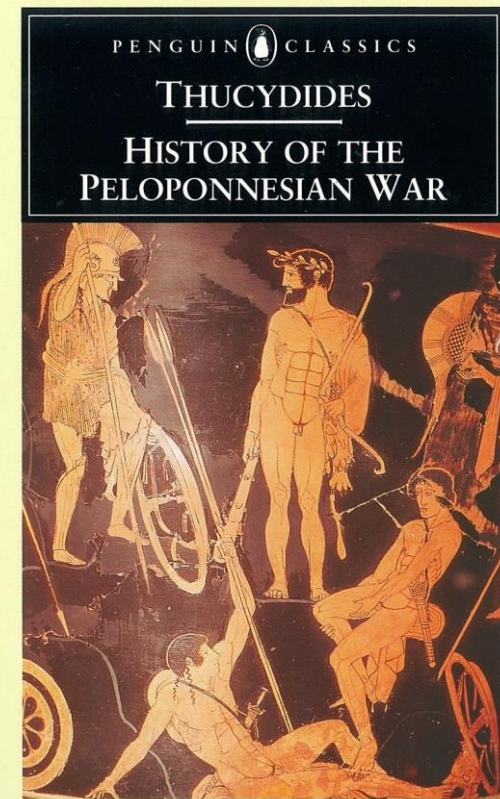


Leopold von
Ranke (1795–
1886)

History as Fact: Empiricism

"The conclusions I have drawn from the proofs quoted may, I believe, safely be relied on. Assuredly they will not be disturbed either by the lays of a poet displaying the exaggeration of his craft, or by the compositions of the chroniclers that are attractive at truth's expense; the subjects they treat of being out of the reach of evidence, and time having robbed most of them of historical value by enthroning them in the region of legend."

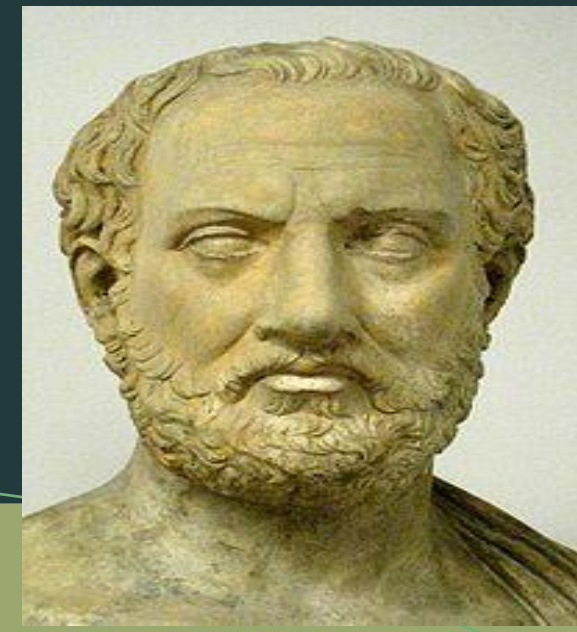
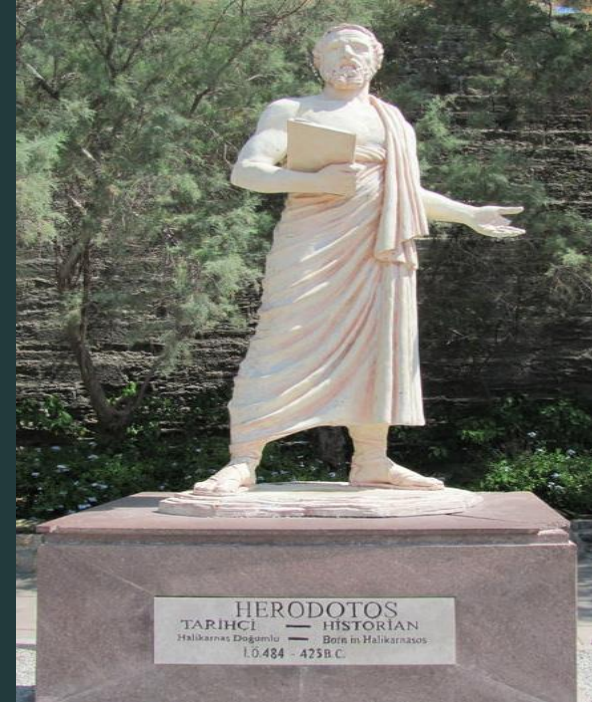
- From Thucydides (bottom), *History of the Peloponnesian War* (430sBC)



History as Fact: Empiricism

"To hear this history rehearsed, for that there be inserted in it no fables, shall be perhaps not delightful. But he that desires to look into **the truth of things done, and which may be done again, or at least their like**, shall find enough herein to make him think it profitable. **And it is compiled rather for an everlasting possession than to be rehearsed for a prize.**"

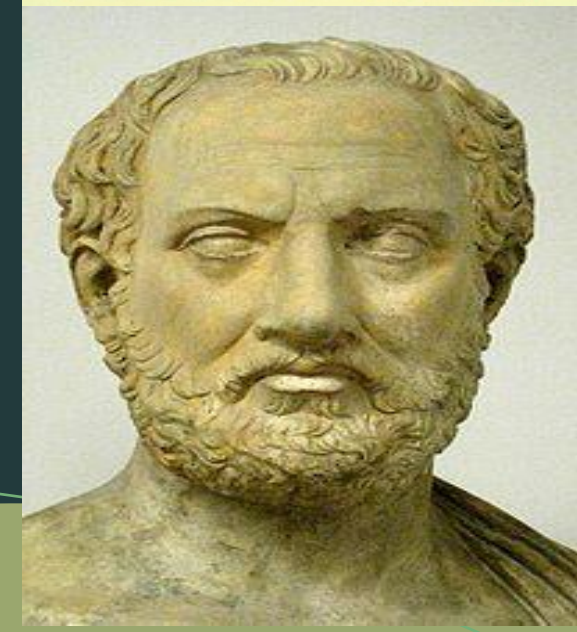
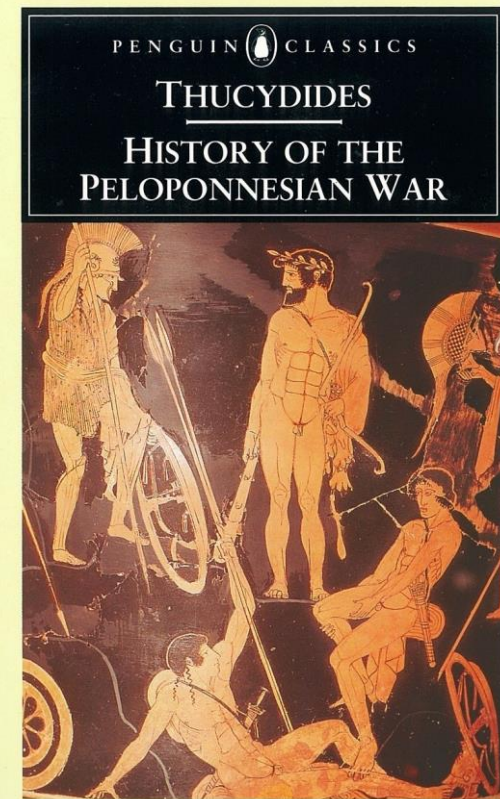
- From Thucydides (bottom), *History of the Peloponnesian War* (430sBC) – veiled critique of Herodotus (top), *The Histories* (450sBC)



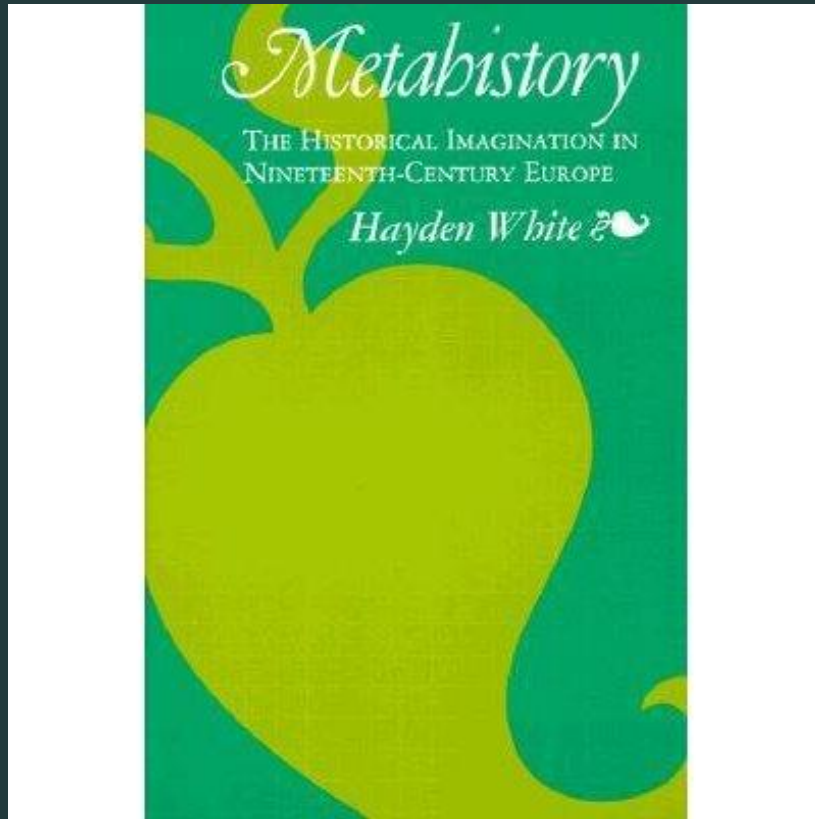
History as Fact: Empiricism

"[But] the distinction [between history and fiction] was **never as clear as Thucydides claimed**. His own resort to direct speech – where he **puts words in the mouths of his characters** that at best could represent **what he thought they might have said** – laid him open to the charge of embellishing his work to make it more attractive."

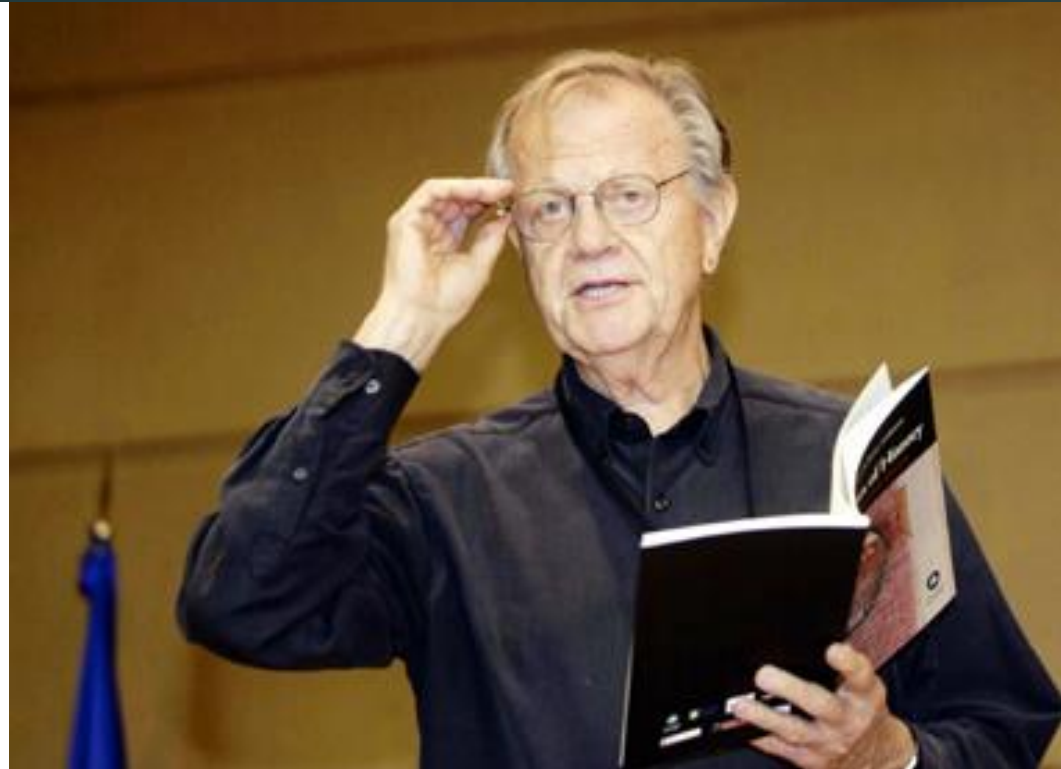
-Beverley Southgate, *History Meets Fictions* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 2



History as Literature: Hayden White and Postmodernism



(1973)

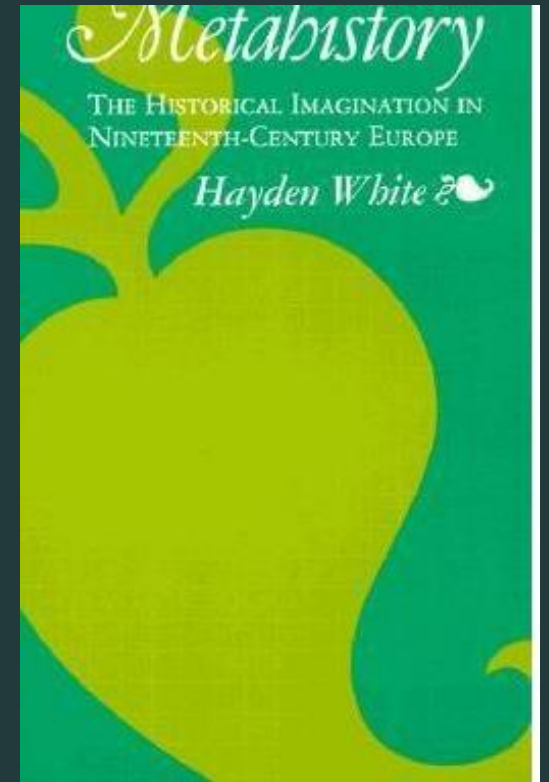


(1928– 2018)

History as Literature: Hayden White and Postmodernism

It is sometimes said that the aim of the historian is to explain the past by finding, "identifying," or , "uncovering" the "stories" that lie buried in chronicles; and that the difference between "history" and "fiction" resides in the fact that the historian "finds" his [sic] stories, whereas the fiction writer "invents" his [sic].

- Hayden White, *Metahistory* (1973)



History as Literature: Hayden White and Postmodernism

This ... however, obscures the extent to which "invention" also plays a part in the historian's operations. The same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories ... The death of the king may be a beginning, an ending, or simply a transitional event in three different stories. In the chronicle, this event is simply "there" as an element of a series; it does not "function" as a story element. The historian arranges the events in the chronicle into a hierarchy of significance by assigning events different functions as story elements in such a way as to disclose the formal coherence of a whole set of events considered as a comprehensible process with a discernible beginning, middle and end.

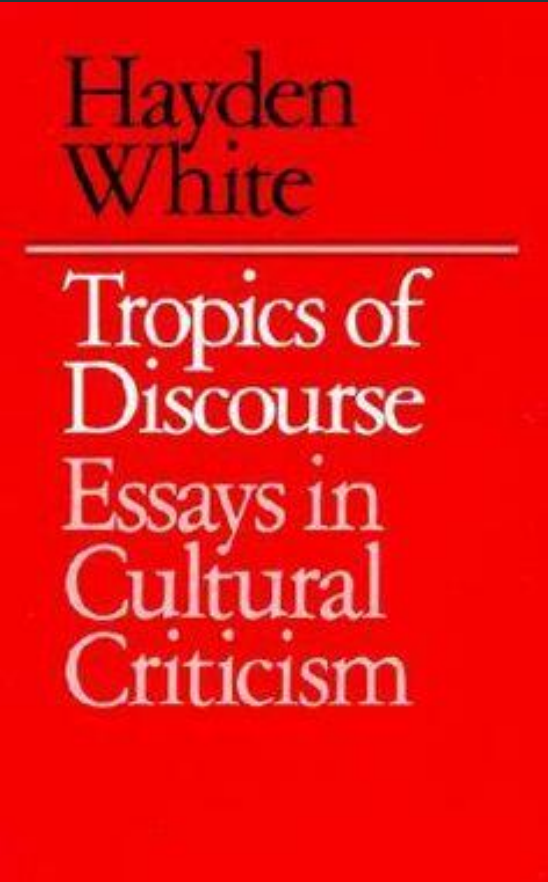
History as Literature: Hayden White and Postmodernism

The arrangement of selected events of the chronicle into a story raises the kinds of questions the historian must anticipate and answer in the course of constructing his narrative. These questions are of the sort: "What happened next?" "How did that happen?" "Why did things happen this way rather than that?" "How did it all come out in the end?" These questions determine the narrative tactics the historian must use in the construction of his *[sic]* story.

History as Literature: Hayden White and Postmodernism

"Readers of histories and novels can hardly fail to be struck by their similarities. There are many histories that could pass for novels, and many novels that could pass for histories, considered in purely formal terms. Viewed simply as verbal artefacts histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another. We cannot easily distinguish between them on formal grounds unless we approach them with specific preconceptions about the kinds of truths that each is supposed to deal in."

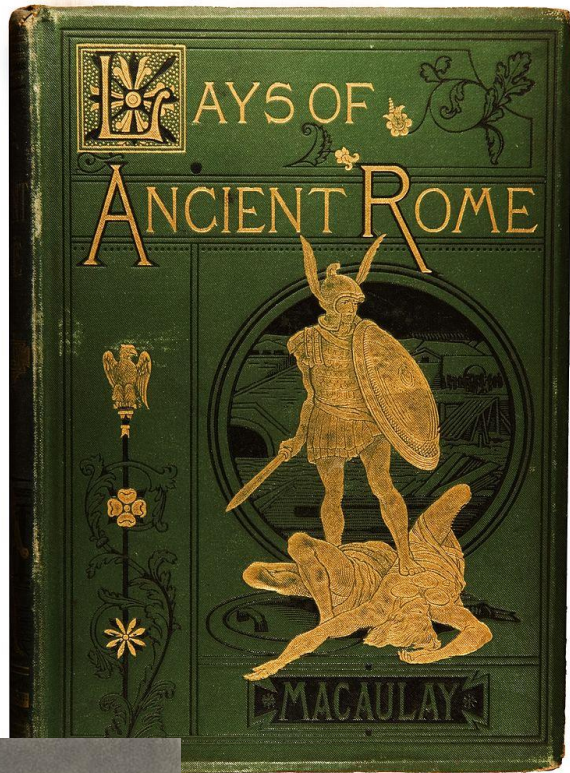
- Hayden White, 'The Fictions of Factual Representation,' *Tropics of Discourse* (1978)

The image shows the front cover of the book 'Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism' by Hayden White. The cover is a solid, vibrant red. The author's name, 'Hayden White', is printed at the top in a white, serif font. Below it, a thin white horizontal line separates the author's name from the title. The title, 'Tropics of Discourse', is written in a larger, white, serif font, with 'Tropics of' on one line and 'Discourse' on the next. Below the title, the subtitle 'Essays in Cultural Criticism' is printed in a smaller, white, serif font, spanning two lines. The overall design is minimalist and elegant, with high contrast between the white text and the red background.

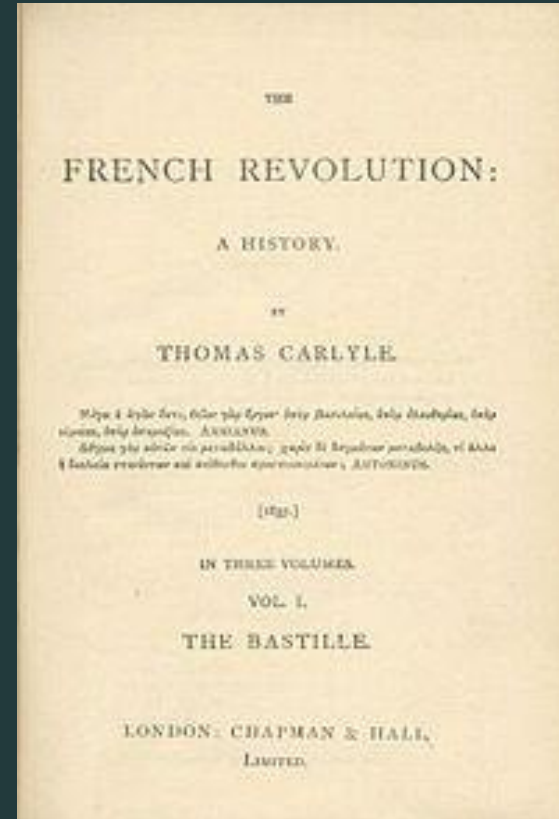
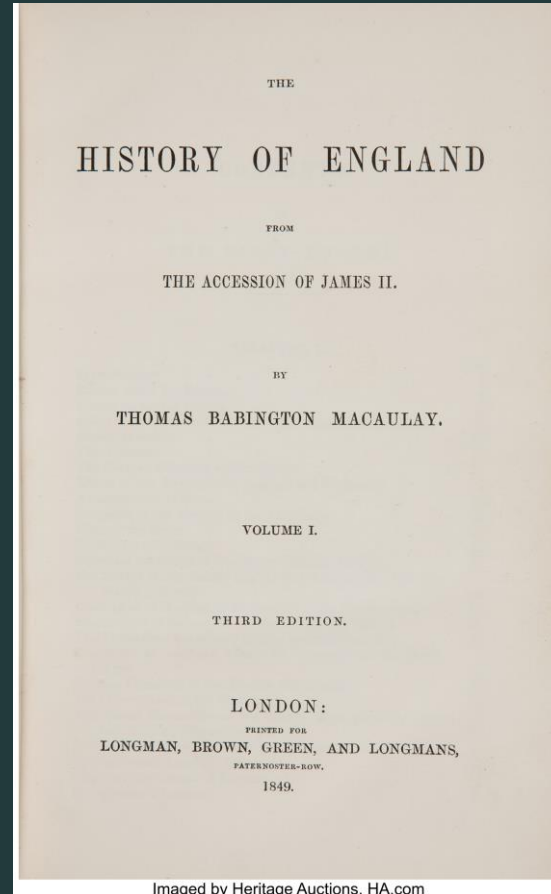
Hayden
White

Tropics of
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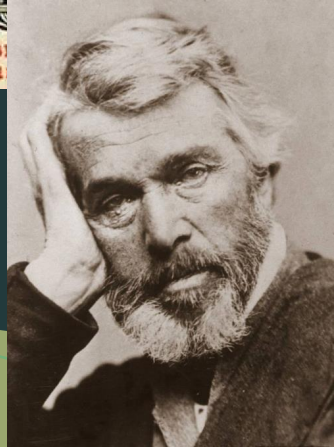
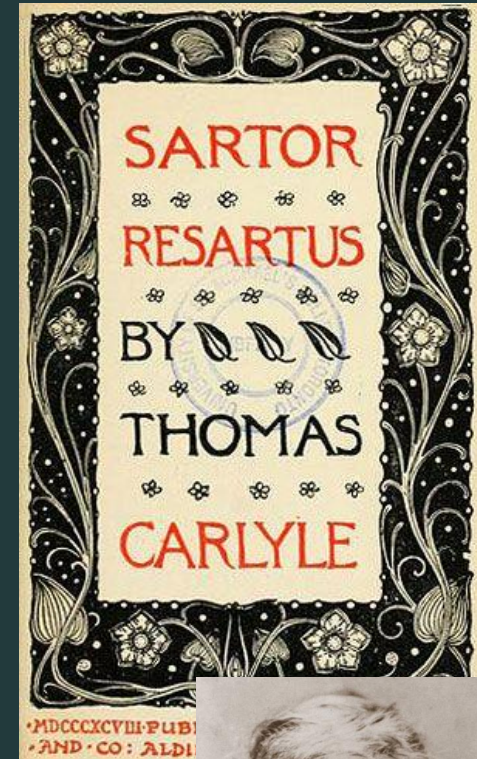
Victorian Historians' Literariness



Thomas
Babington
Macaulay
(1800-1859)



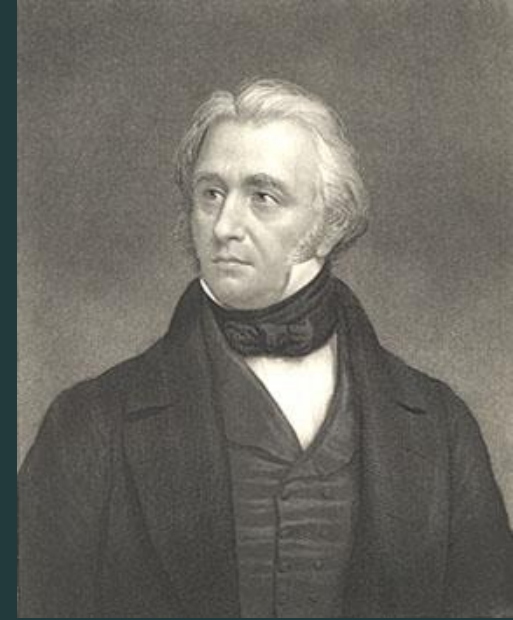
Thomas Carlyle
(1795-1881)



Victorian Historians' Literariness

I PURPOSE to write the history of England from the accession of King James the Second down to a time which is within the memory of men still living. I shall recount how ... the authority of law and the security of property were found to be compatible with a liberty of discussion and of individual action never before known; how, from the auspicious union of order and freedom, sprang a prosperity of which the annals of human affairs had furnished no example; how our country, from a state of ignominious vassalage, rapidly rose to the place of umpire among European powers; how her opulence and her martial glory grew together; how, by wise and resolute good faith, was gradually established a public credit fruitful of marvels which to the statesmen of any former age would have seemed incredible; how a gigantic commerce gave birth to a maritime power, compared with which every other maritime power, ancient or modern, sinks into insignificance; how Scotland, after ages of enmity, was at length united to England, not merely by legal bonds, but by indissoluble ties of interest and affection; how, in America, the British colonies rapidly became far mightier and wealthier than the realms which Cortes and Pizarro had added to the dominions of Charles the Fifth; how in Asia, British adventurers founded an empire not less splendid and more durable than that of Alexander.

- Introduction to Macaulay, *The History of England from the Accession of James the Second* (1848)



Thomas
Babington
Macaulay (1800–
1859)

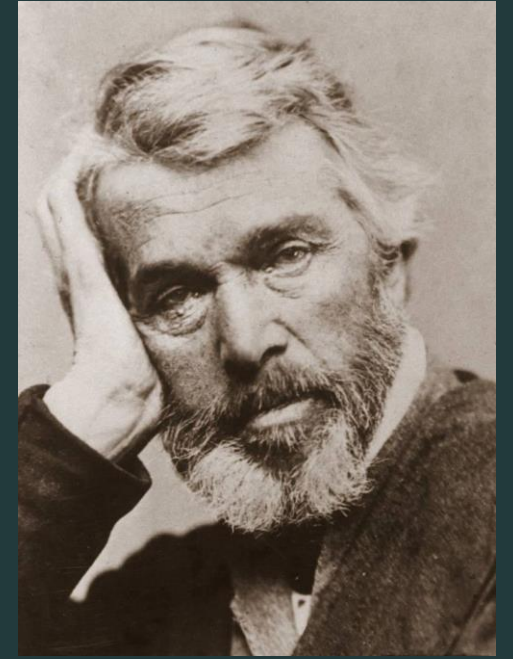
Victorian Historians' Literariness: Great Man Theory

"The history of the world is but the biography of great men"

Quotes from: ***On Heroes, Hero-Worship, and The Heroic in History*** (1841)

Collection of six lectures given in May 1840.

1. **The Hero as Divinity.** Odin (God is Scandinavian pagan mythology)
2. **The Hero as Prophet.** Muhammad (Islam)
3. **The Hero as Poet.** Dante; Shakespeare
4. **The Hero as Priest.** Martin Luther; John Knox
5. **The Hero as Man of Letters.** Samuel Johnson; Jean-Jacques Rousseau; Robert Burns
6. **The Hero as King.** Oliver Cromwell; Napoleon Bonaparte

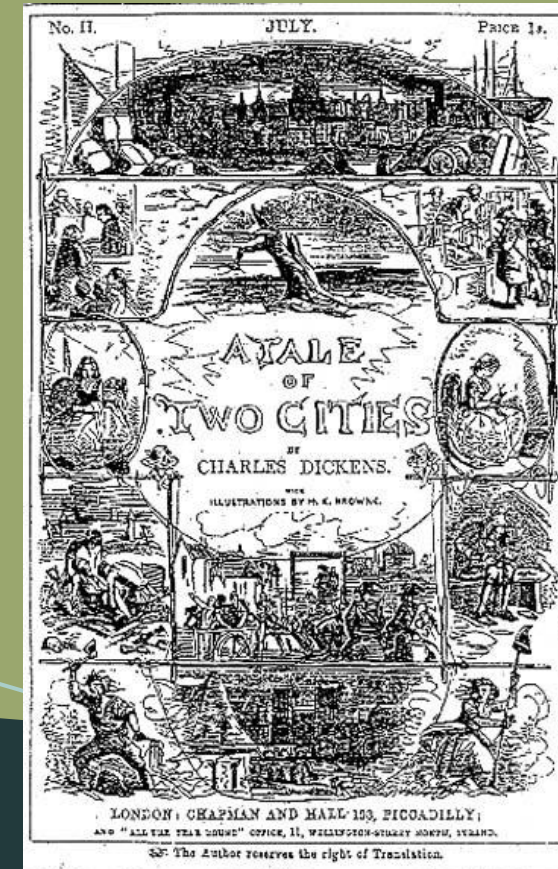
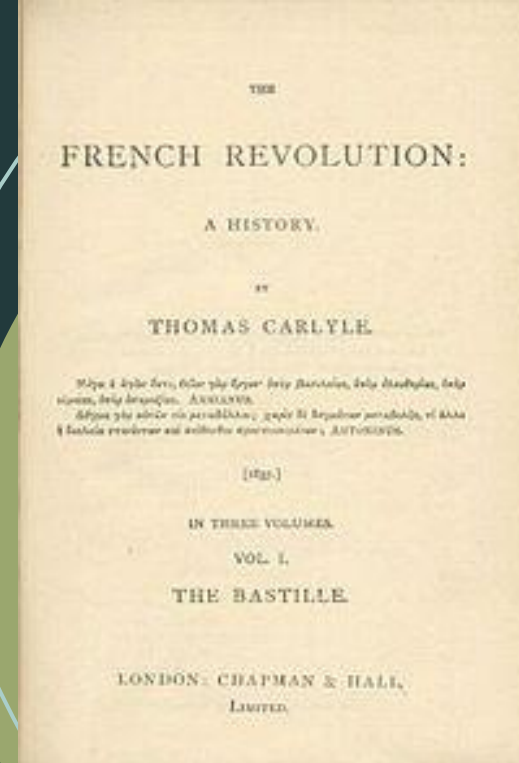


Thomas
Carlyle
(1795–
1881)

Victorian Novelists' Historical Preoccupations

Whenever any reference (however slight) is made here to the condition of the French people before or during the Revolution, it is truly made, on the faith of trustworthy witnesses. It has been one of my hopes to add something to the popular and picturesque means of understanding that terrible time, though **no one can hope to add anything to the philosophy of Mr. Carlyle's wonderful book.**

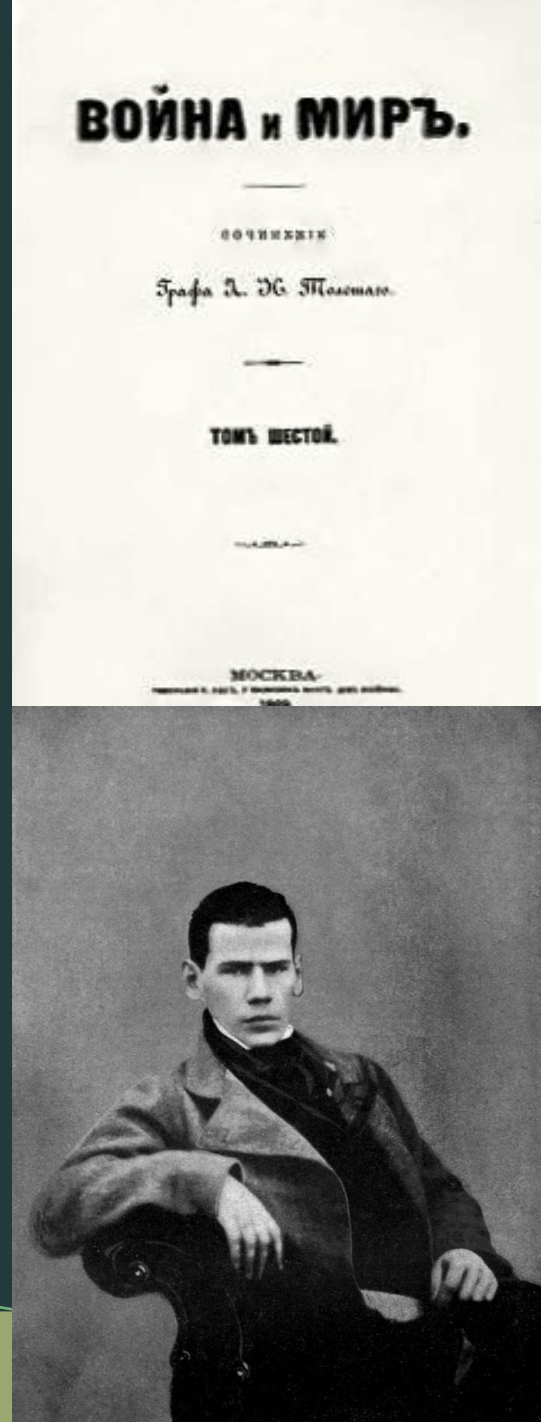
- Charles Dickens, preface to *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)



Victorian Novelists' Historical Preoccupations

"In historic events the so-called great men are labels giving names to events, and like labels they have but the smallest connection with the event itself. Every act of theirs, which appears to them an act of their own will, is in an historical sense involuntary and is related to the whole course of history and predestined from eternity."

- Leo Tolstoy (1828-1910), *War and Peace* (1865-1869)



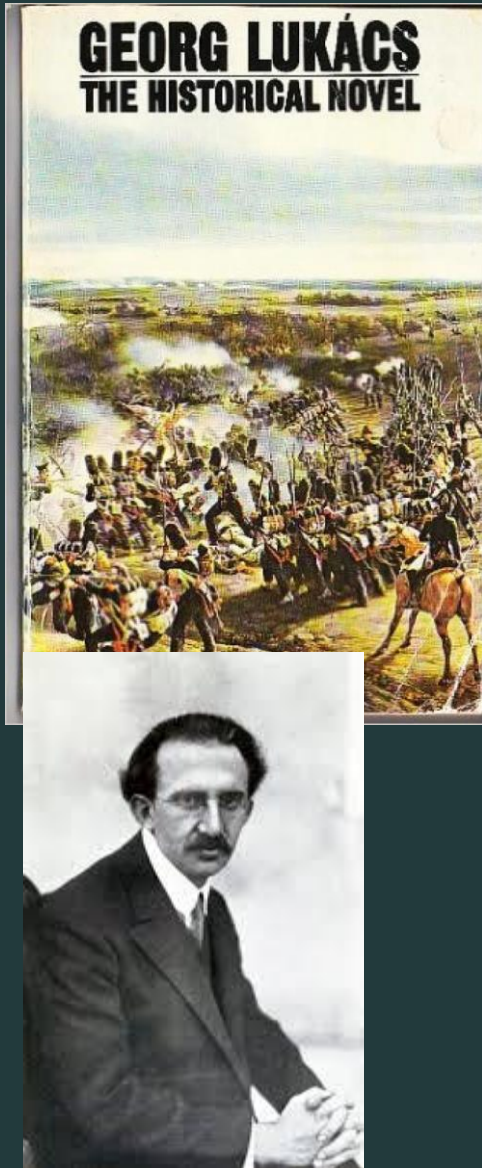
Victorian Novelists' Historical Preoccupations

"A modern branch of **mathematics** having achieved the art of dealing with the infinitely small can now yield solutions in complex problems ... which used to appear insoluble.

" ... To study **the laws of history** we must completely change the subject of our observation, must leave aside kings, ministers, and generals, and study the **common, infinitesimally small elements** by which the masses are moved. No one can say in how far it is possible for man to advance in this way toward an understanding of the laws of history; but it is evident that only along that path does the possibility of discovering the laws of history lie, and that as yet **not a millionth part as much mental effort has been applied in this direction by historians as has been devoted to describing the actions of various kings, commanders, and ministers and propounding the historians' own reflections concerning these actions.**"

- Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (1865–1869)

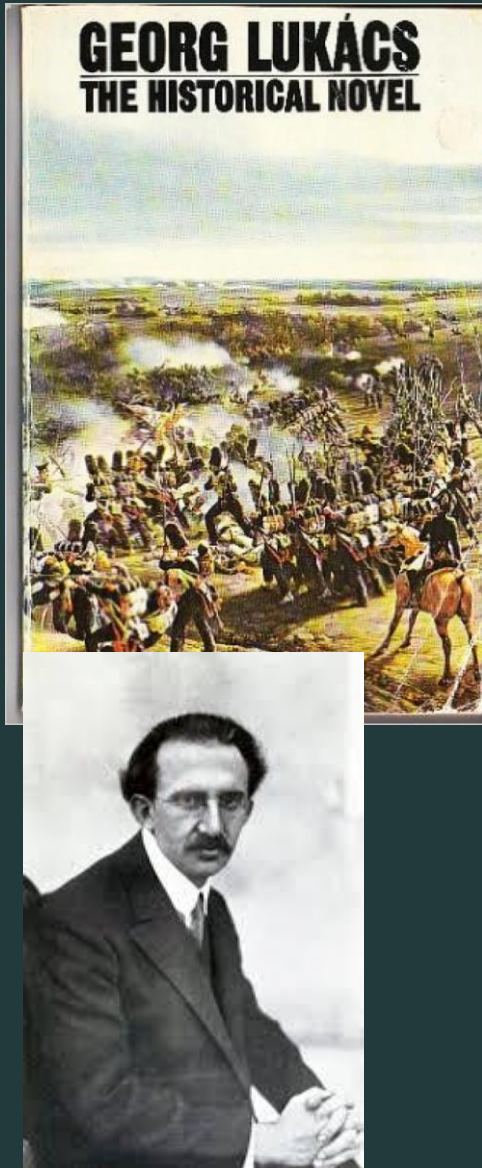
Potentialities of the Historical Novel: Georg Lukács



What matters in the historical novel is not the re-telling of great historical events, but the poetic awakening of the people who figured in those events. What matters is that we should reexperience the social and human motives which led men to think, feel and act just as they did in historical reality. And it is a law of literary portrayal which first appears paradoxical ... that in order to bring out these social and human motives of behaviour, the outwardly insignificant events, the smaller (from without) relationships are better suited than the great monumental dramas of world history.

- Georg [György] Lukács (1885–1971), *The Historical Novel*, trans. by Hannah and Stanley Mitchel (London: Merlin Press, 1989 [1937]), p. 42

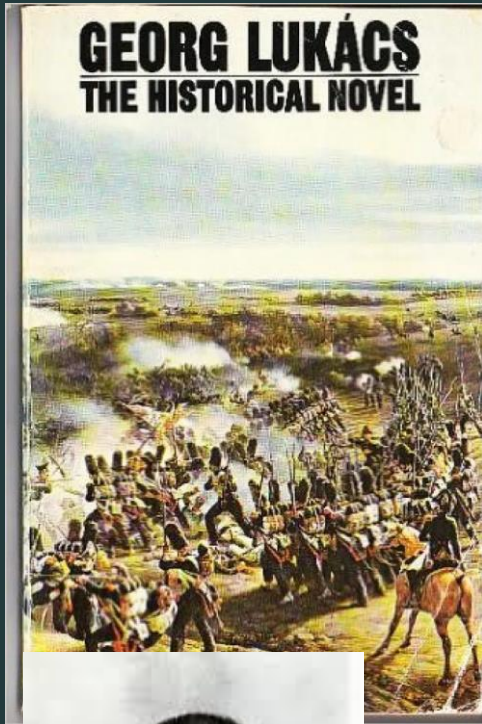
19th-Century Emergence of the Historical Novel



The historical novel arose at about the time of Napoleon's collapse ([Walter] Scott's *Waverley* appeared in 1814). Of course, novels with historical themes are to be found in the 17th and 18th centuries, too, and, should one feel inclined, one can treat medieval adaptations of classical history or myth as "precursors" of the historical novel and indeed go back still further to China or India. But one will find nothing here that sheds any real light on the phenomenon of the historical novel ...

-Lukacs, *Historical Novel*, p. 19

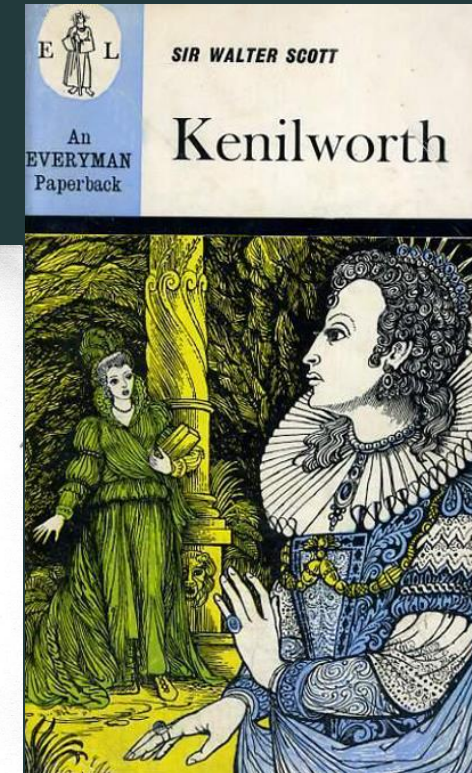
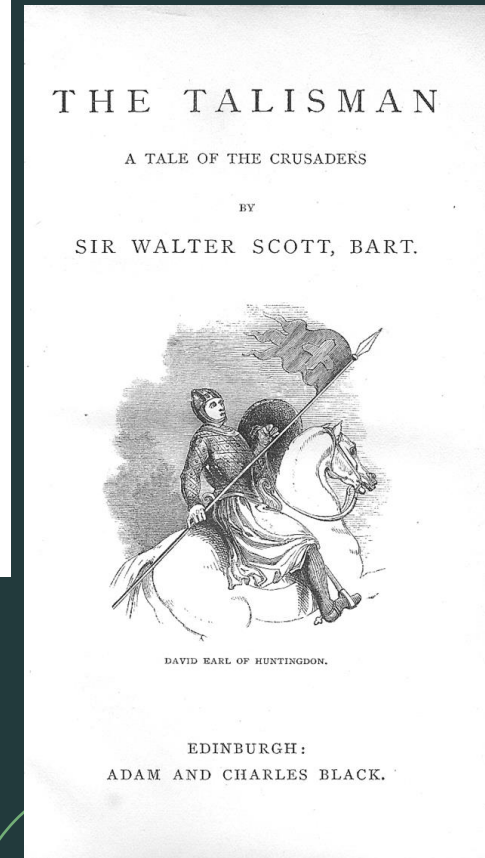
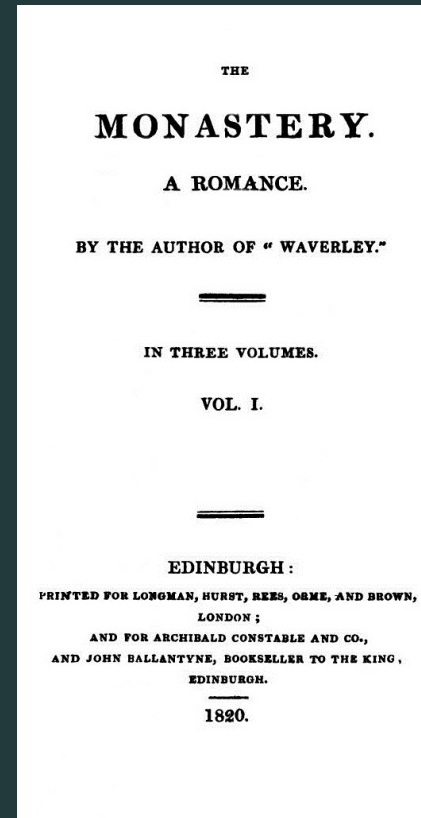
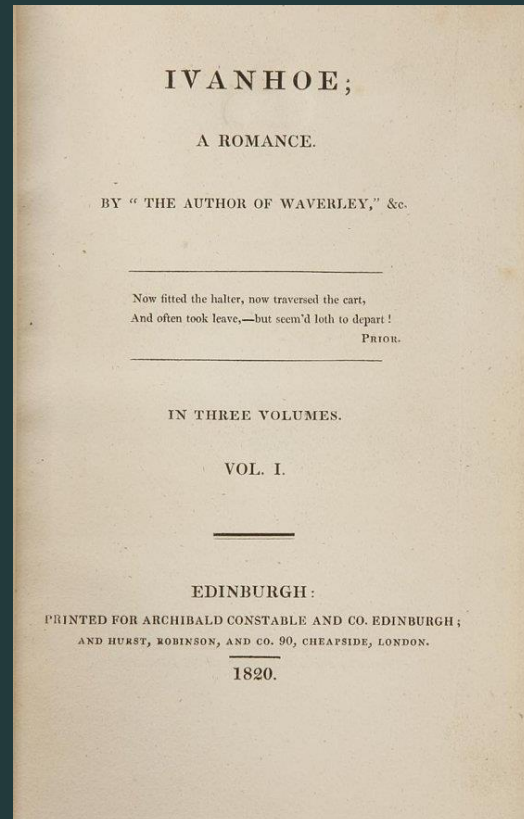
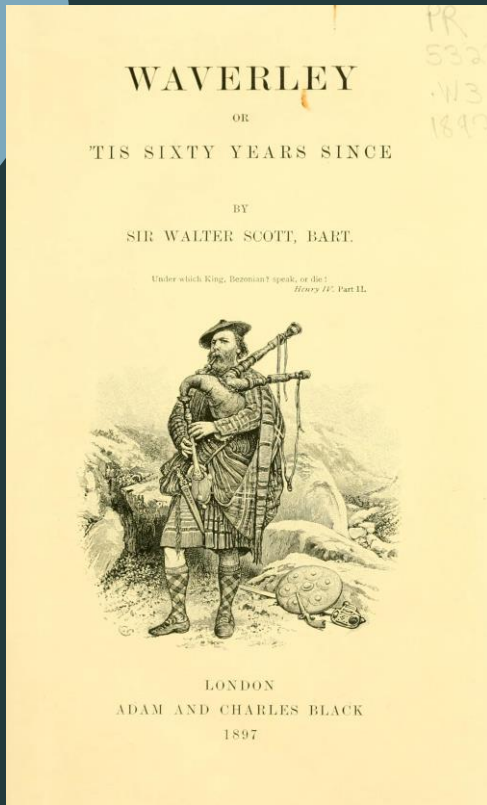
19th-Century Emergence of the Historical Novel



... [in earlier works] it is only the curiosities and oddities of the milieu that matter, not **an artistically faithful image of a concrete historical epoch**. What is lacking in the so-called historical novel before **Sir Walter Scott** is precisely the specifically historical, that is, **derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age**.

-Lukacs, *Historical Novel*, p. 19

Walter Scott's Historical Novels



Lukacs on Walter Scott



Sir Walter
Scott (1771–
1832) painted
by Sir William
Allan, 1844

Scott's greatness lies in his capacity to give living human embodiment to historical-social types. The typically human terms in which great historical trends become tangible had never before been so superbly, straightforwardly and pregnantly portrayed.

- Lukacs, *Historical Novel*, p. 35

Lukacs on Walter Scott

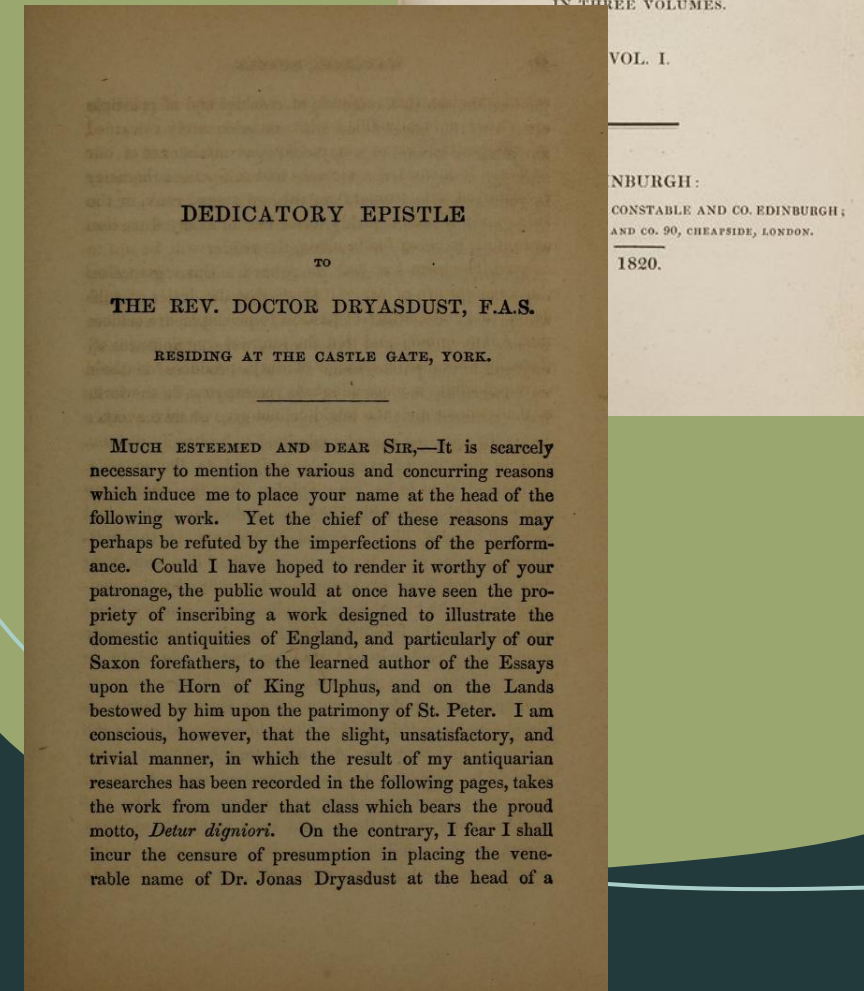


The historical novel has to demonstrate by artistic means that historical circumstances and characters existed in precisely such and such a way. What in Scott has been called very superficially "authenticity of local colour" is in actual fact this artistic demonstration of historical reality. It is the portrayal of the broad living basis of historical events in their intricacy and complexity, in their manifold interaction with acting individual

- Lukacs, *Historical Novel*, p. 43

Scott vs. Dryasdust – preface to *Ivanhoe* (1820)

The severer antiquary may think, that, by thus intermingling fiction with truth, I am polluting the well of history with modern inventions, and impressing upon the rising generation false ideas of the age which I describe. I cannot but in some sense admit the force of this reasoning, which I yet hope to traverse by the following considerations.



Scott vs. Dryasdust – preface to *Ivanhoe*

It is true, that I neither can, nor do pretend, to the observation of complete accuracy, even in matters of outward costume, much less in the more important points of language and manners. But ... it is necessary, for exciting interest of any kind, that the subject assumed should be, as it were, translated into the manners, as well as the language, of the age we live in.

IVANHOE;

A ROMANCE.

BY "THE AUTHOR OF WAVERLEY," &c.

Now fitted the halter, now traversed the cart,
And often took leave,—but seem'd loth to depart!
PRIOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

DEDICATORY EPISTLE

TO

THE REV. DOCTOR DRYASDUST, F.A.S.

RESIDING AT THE CASTLE GATE, YORK.

MUCH ESTEEMED AND DEAR SIR,—It is scarcely necessary to mention the various and concurring reasons which induce me to place your name at the head of the following work. Yet the chief of these reasons may perhaps be refuted by the imperfections of the performance. Could I have hoped to render it worthy of your patronage, the public would at once have seen the propriety of inscribing a work designed to illustrate the domestic antiquities of England, and particularly of our Saxon forefathers, to the learned author of the Essays upon the Horn of King Ulphus, and on the Lands bestowed by him upon the patrimony of St. Peter. I am conscious, however, that the slight, unsatisfactory, and trivial manner, in which the result of my antiquarian researches has been recorded in the following pages, takes the work from under that class which bears the proud motto, *Detur digniori*. On the contrary, I fear I shall incur the censure of presumption in placing the venerable name of Dr. Jonas Dryasdust at the head of a

It is true, that this license is confined in either case within legitimate bounds. ... However far he [the author] may venture in a more full detail of passions and feelings, than is to be found in the ancient compositions which he imitates, he must introduce nothing inconsistent with the manners of the age; his knights, squires, grooms, and yeomen, may be more fully drawn than in the hard, dry delineations of an ancient illuminated manuscript, but the character and costume of the age must remain inviolate; they must be the same figures, drawn by a better pencil, or, to speak more modestly, executed in an age when the principles of art were better understood.

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Scott vs. Dryasdust

What I have applied to language, is still more justly applicable to sentiments and manners. The passions, **the sources** from which these must spring in all their modifications, are generally the same in all ranks and conditions, **all countries and ages**; and it follows, as a matter of course, that the opinions, habits of thinking, and actions, however influenced by the peculiar state of society, must still, upon the whole, bear a strong resemblance to each other.

IVANHOE;

A ROMANCE.

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PRIOR.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

DEDICATORY EPISTLE

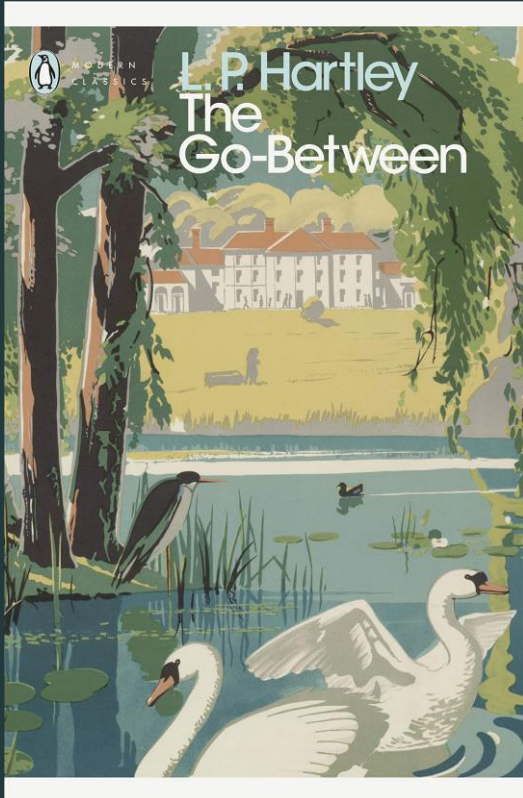
TO

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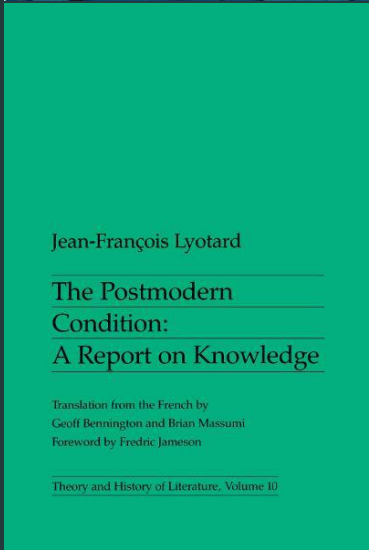
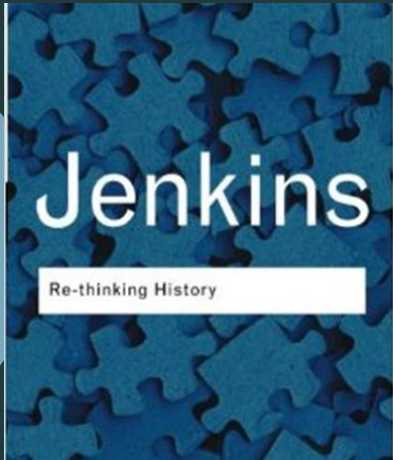
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... or is the Past a Foreign Country?

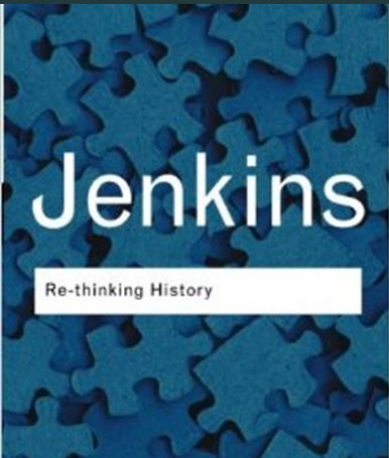


"The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there."



PART TWO: HISTORY AND LITERATURE AS DISCOURSE

Postmodernist Histories: Keith
Jenkins, *Rethinking History* (1991)



Postmodernist Histories: Keith Jenkins

Favours definitions of postmodernism by Jean-François Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition* (1979)., which has two key characteristics:

- **A 'death of centres'**
- **An 'incredulity towards metanarratives'** (Lyotard: "The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.")

Jean-François Lyotard

The Postmodern
Condition:
A Report on Knowledge

Translation from the French by
Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi
Foreword by Fredric Jameson

Theory and History of Literature, Volume 10

What do you understand by the above and what challenges might these developments pose for historians, writers of literature and literary critics?

Postmodernist Histories: Keith Jenkins

"... the consequential existence of [a] whole mass of history genres which currently surround us and which have **helped relativise and historicise history** at the very same time as history began to be widely expressed through these 'sceptical' characteristics."

- Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 77

- *What do you understand by the above and what challenges might these developments pose for historians, writers of literature and literary critics?*

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- Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, p. 77

To treat as being in proportion to something else; as not
absolute

To treat as being subject to historical context

Postmodernist Histories: Keith Jenkins

" ... anything can be made to look good or bad, desirable or undesirable, useful or useless, simply by being re-described."

" ... a past that can be infinitely redescribed."

" ... no [work of] histor[y] has any necessary permanence; is expressive of no essence."

" ... the utter contingency of readings."

- Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, pp. 77-79.

Postmodernist Histories: Keith Jenkins

" ... **the variable facticity of facts.**" (*facticity = the quality [or appearance] of being a fact*)

" ... 'the past' is as notional a concept as 'the real world' to which novelists allude in realist fiction – **only ever existing in the present discourses that articulate it.**"

"... history is **a written discourse** as liable to deconstruction as any other."

- Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, pp. 77–79.

HISTORY AS DISCOURSE

"I use the term **discourse** ... in the sense that it **relates people's thoughts about history to interests and power**. Thus, to be in control of your own discourse means that you have *power over what you want history to be* rather than accepting what others say it is; this consequently empowers you, not them. **Similarly, the use of the phrase 'the discourse of history', means that, rather than seeing history as a subject or a discipline which suggests that you just learn something that is always already there in some natural or obvious way and to which you innocently, objectively and disinterestedly respond, you actually see history as a 'field of force';** a series of ways of organising the past by and for interested parties which always comes from somewhere and for some purpose and which, in their direction, would like to carry you with them.."

- Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, footnote, pp. 85-86.

HISTORY AS DISCOURSE

"... Viewed **not in its traditional guise as a subject discipline aiming at a real knowledge of the past**, but seen rather as what it is, a **discursive practice** that enables present-minded people(s) to go to the past, there to delve around and reorganise it appropriately to their needs, then such history may well have a **radical cogency** that can make visible aspects of the past that have previously been hidden or secreted away; that have previously been overlooked or sidelined, thereby producing fresh insights that can actually make emancipatory, material differences to and within **the present - which is where all history starts from and returns to.**"

- Jenkins, *Rethinking History*, pp. 80-81

New Historicism

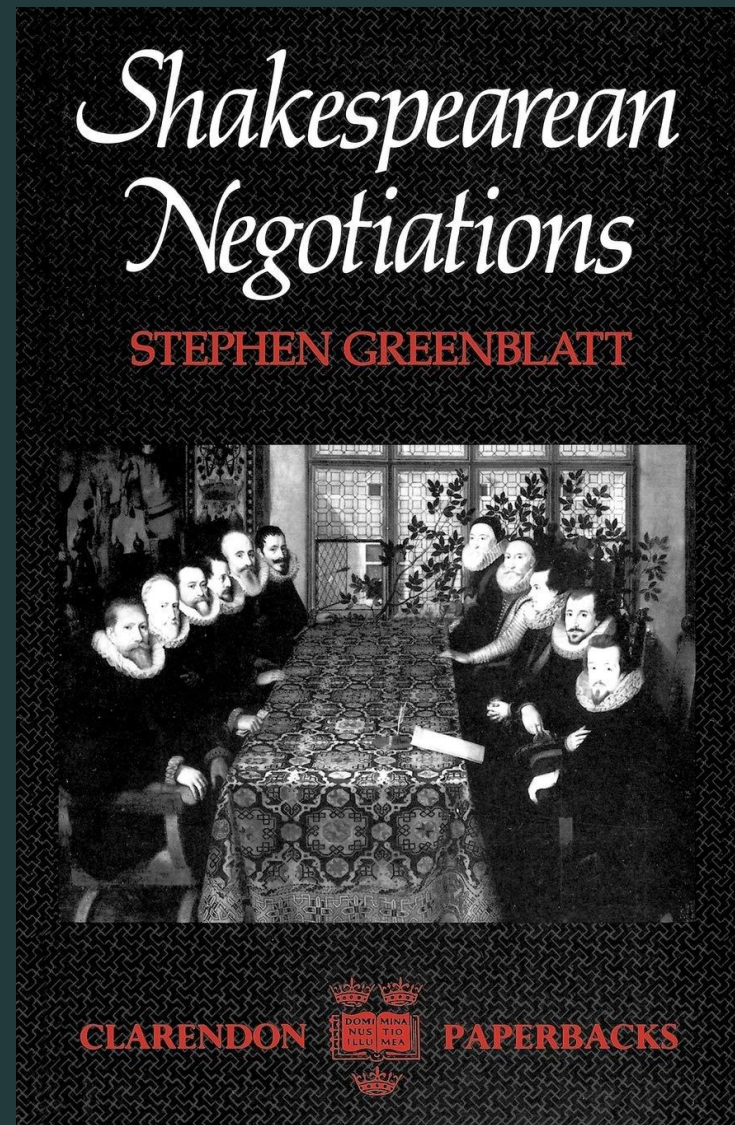
- 'Situating texts in their original historical context' (oversimplification?)

Versus 'Formalism' and 'Old Historicism'

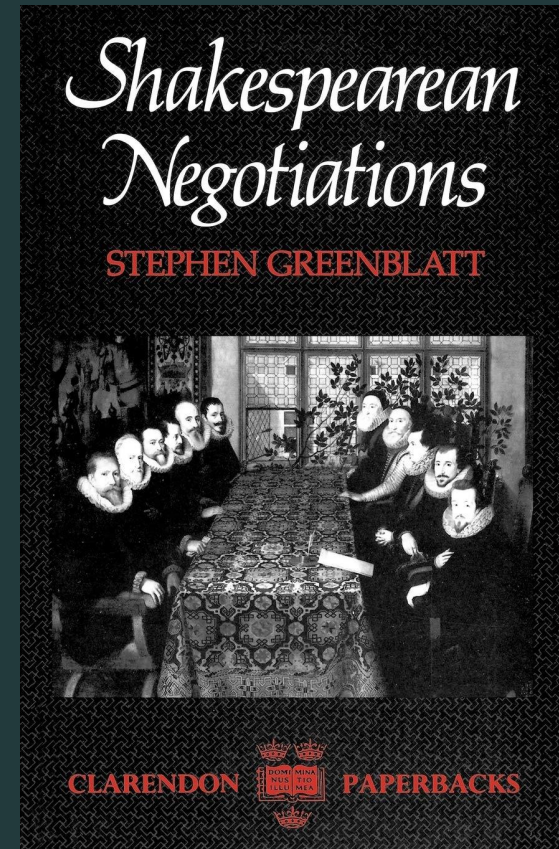
New Historicism: Stephen Greenblatt

I began with the desire to speak with the dead.

... I wanted to know how Shakespeare managed to achieve such intensity, for I thought that the more I understood this achievement, the more I could hear and understand the speech of the dead.

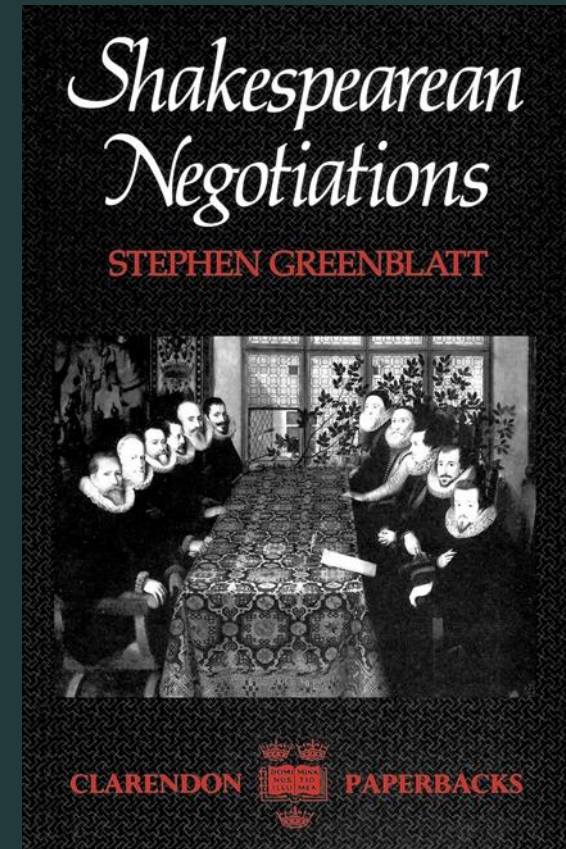


I did not doubt that the plays attributed to Shakespeare were in large part written by the supremely gifted alumnus of the Stratford grammar school ... But I grew increasingly uneasy with the monolithic entities that my work had posited. No individual, not even the most brilliant, seemed complete unto himself and Elizabethan and Jacobean visions of hidden unity seemed like anxious rhetorical attempts to conceal cracks, conflict, and disarray. I had tried to organize the mixed motives of Tudor and Stuart culture under the rubric power, but that term implied a structural unity and stability of command belied by much of what I actually knew about the exercise of authority and force in the period.



New Historicism

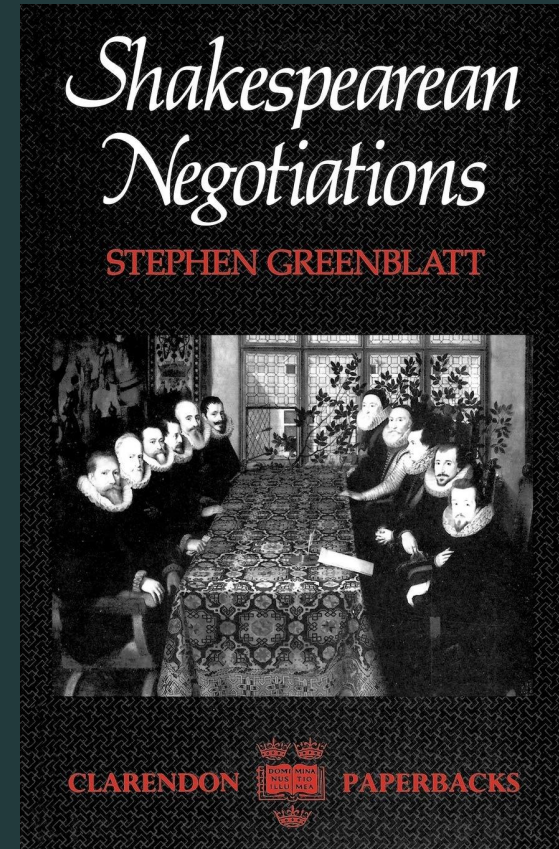
I propose something to look *less at the presumed center of the literary domain than at its borders*, to try to track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the *margins of the text*. The cost of this shift in attention will be the satisfying illusion of a "whole reading" ... My vision is necessarily more fragmentary, but I hope to offer a compensatory satisfaction: insight into the *half-hidden cultural transactions* through which great works of art are empowered.



New Historicism

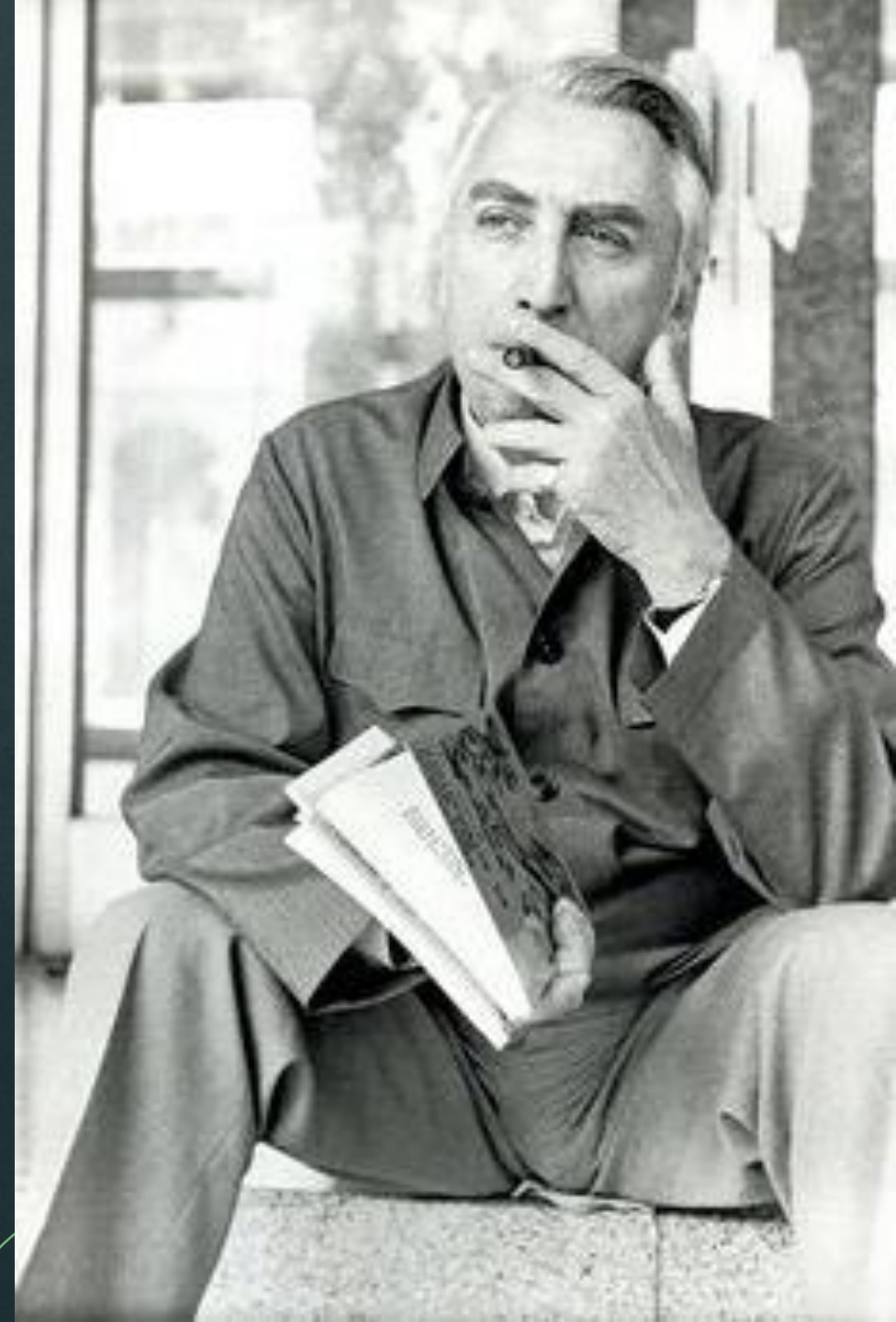
"I propose that we begin by taking seriously the **collective production** of literary pleasure and interest "

Rather than interpreting literature as the product of "the individual artist, as if whole cultures possessed their shared emotions, stories, and dreams only because a professional caste invented them and parceled them."



Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author' (1967)

We know that a text does not consist of a line of words, releasing a single "theological" meaning (the "message" of the Author-God), but **is a space of many dimensions, in which are wedded and contested various kinds of writing, no one of which is original**: the text is a tissue of citations, resulting from the thousand sources of culture.'



Who 'makes' a book?

- Author
- Scribe
- Typist
- Commissioning editor
- Copy editor
- Peer reviewer
- Typesetter
- Software engineers
- Paper manufacturer
- Cover artist
- People who transport books
- Booksellers
- Authors of previous books -
intertextuality

Key Tenets of New Historicism

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a **network of material practices**;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition **uses the tools it condemns** and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes [*i.e. it's hard for a critic to escape the same interpretive problems as one identifies in the text*];
3. that **literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably**;
4. that **no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature**;
5. that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism **participate in the economy they describe**.

- H. Aram Veeser, introduction, in Veeser ed. *The New Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. xi

Ideas to think about:

- How distinguishable are history and literature?
- How secure are the boundaries between fact and fiction?
- How much interpretive value should we place on authorial intent?
- How literary should historians aspire to be?
- How much does insisting on historical contingency detract from literary pleasure?
- How do we avoid being Dryasdusts?