Informal Writing Assignment #5

The idea for this Informal Writing Assignment is to practice some techniques from my “How to Read” handout on a passage of Lee Patterson’s “Literary History.” Although the instructions below are long and detailed, the product you hand in will really only amount to a couple of pages—probably no longer than any other IWA.

First: read the entire essay (Course Reader). Next: concentrate on one of the selected passages attached to this handout, like so: if your last name begins with a letter from A through H, work with Passage #1; J through Se, Passage #2; Sh through Z; passage #3. (You may want to print one or two extras of your assigned passage to use as “practice” copies. You’ll need to transcribe your final scribbles onto a clean copy to hand in; I won’t credit what you’ve done if I can’t read it!) Remember, however, that no passage makes meaning in isolation. Just as you did with “Lycidas,” you’ll want to have a reasonably good grasp on the entirety of Patterson’s chapter, and you’ll want to study the paragraphs that precede and follow yours, in particular, so that you have the immediate context firmly in mind before you begin. But keep the entire essay close by, too, so you can refer to it as necessary.

Now, with that in mind, here are a couple of specific tasks (Part 1):

1. Highlight or underline portions of your assigned paragraphs in such a way that reading back only what you’ve picked out will result in a grammatically coherent summary of Patterson’s main point in that passage. Again: to the extent possible, your highlighting should read back as complete grammatical sentences, even if you’re excerpting from several different sentences. Ultimately, because fragments and phrases convey relatively little—and far less than do independent clauses—highlighting random words may only confuse you later, or force you to reread more of the original text than you want.

So, for example: If you were going to underline the preceding paragraph of this handout, you might have produced something like this:

... to the extent possible, your highlighting should read back as complete grammatical sentences, even if you’re excerpting from several sentences. Ultimately, because fragments and phrases convey relatively little—and far less than do independent clauses—then highlighting random words may only confuse you later, or force you to reread more of the original text than you want.

Your purpose in highlighting/underlining is to pick out the writer’s intentions and objectives—not just statements that you find interesting or provocative or even debatable. Highlighting/underlining represents your effort to understand a writer on their own terms, so that you don’t misrepresent their ideas.

2. Annotate judiciously. Marginal annotations might include brief definitions of unfamiliar vocabulary; questions that the passage raises for you; tentative objections you have to the writer’s claims; random comments that help you to relate her ideas to other ideas (e.g., “This right here sounds like Frye on ‘Lycidas’”); notes on tone/rhetorical strategy (e.g., “He’s being..."
Ironic, right?” or “Understatement.” or even “Oh, snap!”); brief summaries/paraphrases of dense or challenging material (“Okay—what I think he’s saying here is . . .”) or that relate a passage to the essay as a whole (“he’s summarizing the opposing view here, not what he believes”). Marginal notes can also make explicit what the writer states only implicitly (“so, in other words, . . .”).

You shouldn’t note all of these things for every paragraph, of course—you wouldn’t be able to read back your annotations if you did. That’s why I say “judiciously.”

Okay? So far, you’re just writing on (or beside) your assigned passage, and you’ll hand in a marked-up copy. (Again, that’s Part 1 of the assignment.) Now open up a fresh document on your computer. Here comes Part 2, which you may upload to Canvas:

3. In two or three sentences, write out what you take to be the major point(s) that Patterson wants to make in this essay as a whole. For that, you need to read the entire essay carefully. (Remember that this essay comes from a book called Critical Terms for Literary Study that advertises itself as an introduction to literary theory.) Then add a further two or three sentences explaining how your particular passage contributes to making those points. I.e., how does this passage fit into his overall argument or project? (Some questions to ask yourself: What does Patterson discuss in the paragraph immediately preceding this one? Where does he take his discussion after this? Is your passage somehow pivotal or indispensable?)

4. If necessary, write up some brief notes on other things you observed about your passage that you couldn’t fit into your marginal notes: questions/confusions you continue to have, definitions that couldn’t be expressed with a simple synonym (e.g., trying to define “discourse” as it’s used by Foucault would be hard to do in a one-inch margin), and so on. This is not an invitation for you to get long-winded, though; to the extent possible, your notes should appear solely alongside Patterson’s text. This may involve getting a little creative and investing some energy in thinking about how to express your ideas succinctly but accurately.

5. Write a paragraph (one paragraph, please) about what you got out of this assignment—that is, what you now understand about this passage that wasn’t clear after your first, presumably more casual, reading of it. What questions, if any, do you continue to have about this passage and/or about the essay as a whole? About the general relationship between texts and their historical contexts as literary scholars currently understand that relationship?

To review: you’re handing in the following:

- A copy of your assigned passage, with your highlighting/underlining and annotations (written tidily and legibly—more tidily and legibly than you would do for just yourself). You will probably submit this to me in person unless you have a scanner and can upload it to Canvas.
- Your responses to #3 and 5, above, (and to #4, if you so choose). You may submit this part on Canvas, as usual—or you may give it to me in person, together with your marked-up passage.
that was its subject.

From a formalist perspective, then, the disparate terms that constituted extrinsic literary history formed a paradox that resisted all efforts at resolution: "literary" and "history" designated two radically incommensurate modes of cultural production that require sharply different analytic procedures. As Jakobson (1969, 356) put it, the poetic function, "by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects"—deepens, that is, the split between writing and the world that it is the literary historian's task to traverse. Or in the words of W. K. Wimsatt (1954, 217), the leading theoretician of American New Criticism, "In most discourse we look right through the disparity [between words and things]. But poetry by thickening the medium increases the disparity between itself and its referents. Iconicity enforces disparity." The historical text, on the other hand, far from being a free-standing literary artifact that can lay claim to transhistorical value, derives its significance from its specific historical moment and remains meaningful in terms of that moment. It is a witness to local processes and concerns, a document whose significance derives from the events to which it testifies. Moreover, and crucially, a historical text is controlled by its author's specific and determinate intention. Rather than seeking to produce a disinterested work of art, the writer of a historical document designs his product to do actual work in the world, to participate in and to shape the historical processes of his own time. Consequently, his text cannot be understood in terms of its own literary dynamic, as an internally consistent verbal artifact governed by the laws of literary production, but must at every point be referred to and understood in terms of the instrumental purpose it sought to fulfill.

Conversely, the formalist emphasis upon the self-referentiality of the literary artwork foreclosed any effort to understand literature in terms of the historically specific intentions of its author. For one thing, in entering into the system of literary discourse, every author takes upon him or herself highly traditional modes of signifying—through structures of narrative, modes of external organization (verse forms, dramatic structures, length, etc.), patterns of imagery, and so forth—that entail meanings inherent within the literary system itself. And for another, in creating an artwork the author—regardless of his or her own understanding of an author's task—is in the position of a disinterested observer who is more concerned with the needs of the text as an internally consistent object than as a vehicle for the promotion of certain historically determined views and values. It should nonetheless be added, however, and especially in reference to American New Criticism, that formalism never embraced the "art-for-art's sake" hedonism of which it has been conventionally accused. On the contrary, both Russian and American formalism insisted that literature was a humanizing force in the world, a mission that the New Critics understood in terms of a powerful if largely unexamined Arnoldian humanism that saw literature as the bearer of permanent truths about the human condition. And in consonance with the ahistoricism of formalism, these truths were understood as having no merely local historical relevance but were, on the contrary, true for all time.

Given the inherent ahistoricity of literary writing, then, any attempt to locate literature within the causal processes of historical explanation must fail. Since historical documents are inextricably dependent upon the events of their historical moment, they can be accounted for by the same covering laws that govern historical explanation per se. But literature evades explanation entirely. On the contrary, it both signifies in ways unique to itself and refers not to merely local historical process but to transhistorical values implicit within the human condition as a whole. Consequently, as a long tradition of cultural studies has insisted, the literary text is an object that can never be explained as the effect of local historical causes but only interpreted as a bearer of cultural significance. While literature necessarily arises from a historical matrix it can never be adequately understood in terms of that origin, no matter how carefully the scholar seeks to reconstruct it. As Rüdiger Wellek said (1982, 72), expressing with admirable directness an opinion that few recent scholars would articulate but that has none theless silently governed a wide range of critical practices, "We must concede the final inextricability of a great work of art, the exception of genius." In the largest sense, the insistence upon the specialness of literary writing (however its characteristics may be defined) serves to sever the original link between the literary text and a context constituted of other sorts of events, and to replace the text within this context requires us to apply to it crude techniques of understanding that subvert its essential nature.
In defining literature as its object of study, literary historians provided themselves with a Fach—a subject matter—that was equivalent to that which legitimized the other academic disciplines. But in designating that object as by definition different from other forms of writing, they erected a barrier that prevented it from being situated within a total historical account. In fact, of course, the arbitrariness of the definition of literature has always been something of an embarrassment to the literary historian. Browne’s Religio Medici has traditionally been taken to be a literary text, while Spratt’s History of the Royal Society is accorded only “background” status; Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus is literature, but Marx’s The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon is not. Despite the difficulty of justifying these discriminations, any essentialist theory of literature must assert them as absolute. And if there is an unbridgeable gulf fixed between these classes of documents, then how can the literary historian negotiate the space between more disparate texts—between, say, Eliot’s The Waste Land, which literary historians locate at the center of modernism, and the writings generated by the general strike of 1926, which they typically ignore? Moreover, and more seriously, the essentializing of literature makes it impossible to understand literary production as itself a form of social practice, to understand it as itself part of both the cultural and material activities of its historical moment.

If literary writings were to be relocated within a nonliterary context, what needed to be sacrificed was nothing less than the very idea of “literature” as a special kind of writing. And this change entailed another, larger critique, an attack on the distinction between subjective literary studies and objective historical science that had originally driven literary critics to erect “literature” into an object of study sequestered away from other forms of cultural practice. In the late 1960s and 1970s these changes were accomplished through the intersection of two very different kinds of interests. On the one hand was a deconstructive textual analysis that appeared at times to be simply formalism writ large but that in fact subverted formalism’s most deeply held assumptions. And on the other was a politically committed criticism that insisted that literary scholars could not escape from social engagement by taking refuge in the realm of the aesthetic. The combined effect of these movements has been itself twofold. First, literary critics have come to realize that the distinction between objective and subjective forms of cultural study cannot be sustained, that every historical account is constructed only by recourse to practices that are themselves as thoroughly interpretive as those that characterize literary criticism. And second, the term “literature” has been revealed as functional rather than ontological, as designating a kind of writing whose difference from other kinds is a matter not of its essential being but of its cultural function. In other words, a piece of writing is “literature” not because it possesses certain characteristics that other pieces lack, but because its readers regard it—for a variety of reasons—as literature.
While this syncretism has at times been felt by English departments as threatening, the reframing of the relation of literature to other kinds of writing has in fact made possible a return to the extrinsic literary historicism with which the professional study of literature first began. But this is a return with a difference—or at least it should be. As originally conceived, the defining feature of extrinsic literary historicism was not the particular historical formation that served as the privileged category of explanation, nor even (as Jakobson charged) the invocation of a confused congeries of categories. Rather, what was definitive of this brand of literary history was its pervasive reliance upon the notion of explanation itself, or a cause-and-effect model of cultural production: first history, then literature. Hence the shift in recent years away from the more “idealistic” of these categories of explanation (biography, history of ideas, period consciousness) and toward more “materialist” formations, especially socially determined patterns of gender definition and economically based political oppositions, has not, in and of itself, brought about a significant redefinition of the practice of literary history.

What has brought about a change, however, is the philosophical revision entailed by deconstruction. By insisting that all modes of writing are located at an equal distance from reality, deconstruction has established, as Fredric Jameson (1976, 205) has succinctly said, the methodological hypothesis whereby the objects of study of the human sciences . . . are considered to constitute so many texts which we decipher and interpret, as distinguished from the older views of those objects as realities or existents or substances which we in one way or another attempt to know.

The deconstructive argument that all writing stands at a distance from that which it seeks to represent entails both the dethronement of historicism as an objectivist discipline and the recognition that every document, no matter how closely tied to the events from which it arises, is itself a text that requires interpretation. In other words, the traditional attitude that would set a historicism that deals with objective facts over against a literary criticism that must rely upon the subjective interpretation of texts can no longer be maintained. Similarly, it is no longer possible to believe that an objective realm of history can serve to measure the correctness of the interpretation of literary texts, since history itself as much the product of interpretive practices as are the literary interpretations it is being used to check. Both literary history and history per se deal with materials whose undeniable differences are less important than their shared status as verbal artifacts, a similarity that renders the methodology of the two disciplines essentially the same. So that the quest after causal explanation that had traditionally been taken as the hallmark of historicism—and that had distinguished it from, set it against, and served to devalue literary criticism—is now replaced by interpretive practices applicable across the field of historical studies as a whole.