The Limits of Literary Historicism

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THE PREHISTORY OF POSTHISTORICISM

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> . . . we look forward with vivid interest to the reconstruction, in the world that will be, of the world that has been, for we realize that the world that will be cannot differ from the world that is without rewriting the past to which we now look back.
> —George Herbert Mead, *The Philosophy of the Present*

"What is the relationship of present audiences to past works?" According to Brook Thomas, this is the fundamental question with which "any serious historicist criticism" must struggle (206).[1] On the face of it, this question likely seems uncontroversial—and, in fact, it is in one sense the very question this essay addresses. Yet I want to do so by taking issue with it, taking issue precisely because it seems so unobjectionable and because, as I will argue, it is grounded in a set of assumptions about historical time that any historically minded alternative to current historicist practice in literary studies—or what, by way of shorthand, I will call posthistoricism—might want to challenge. So one point of subjecting Thomas's question to some careful scrutiny will be to consider how those aspects of historicism that seem self-evident—in particular, the historicist understanding of time and context—actually structure and delimit the range of possible answers to the question. And another point will be to ask what literary history might look like freed from historicism's entrenched conceptions of time.

To anticipate, let me first say that the title of this essay, "The Prehistory of Posthistoricism," is meant to be ironic, an illustration of the temporal regime advanced by historicism that I want to interrogate. To posit a prehistory for posthistoricism—in the sense of a discernible set of events or conditions that can be said to have led to the phenomenon of "posthistoricism"—is to assert a *telos*, to suggest that posthistoricism is an historical destination, one

whose development can be plotted and traced along a temporal road map in order to explain its arrival—or our arrival there, as the case may be. Yet if *post*historicism designates something other than "historicism" (whether old or new), then to ask what came before or what comes after historicism is a contradictory gesture, for such questions already, as we'll see, accede to basic historicist assumptions. I want to suggest instead that any viable posthistoricist project must, paradoxically, resist its own claims to succession. More precisely, posthistoricism must try to give up the language of progression and superannuation—indeed, the very idea of history—that would otherwise appear to enable it.

By giving up the language of progression and superannuation, the vocabulary of chronology, I do not mean giving up on history altogether. Rather, I mean giving up the habit of thinking about time as an onward sequence and advancing in its place a notion of history that is no longer conceived in terms of "post" and "new." This is no easy task. For one thing, the "historical turn" in literary studies depends upon temporal progression. So, for instance, not only is "new" historicism supposed to represent an advance over earlier (naïve or partisan) understandings of literary texts' relations to history. It also, at least in its more explicitly revisionist strains, serves the mission of a progressive politics. Yet even more fundamentally, thinking of time as linear chronology simply seems perfectly natural; it is, in fact, an almost inescapable effect of our language, which inevitably produces and reproduces the notion that time proceeds steadily onward. Before and after, then and now, pre and post, past and present and future. How can we do without them? They are the terms that organize our understanding of historical change, even the shape of our own lives.

They are also, of course, the terms that enable historicism's contextualizing procedure, mapping and making possible the isolation of particular segments of time in the chronological sequence. Contextualization entails dividing history into discrete moments (or periods), each possessing its own unique individuality. Certain cultural productions and events are thus said to "belong" to certain periods. So, for instance, if prehistory belongs to "then" and posthistoricism belongs to "now," the ideologies and signifying practices of, say, *Moby-Dick* belong to the years just prior to its publication in 1851; that historical period constitutes the novel's context, the bedrock of the text's historicity. Failure to assign texts or other social practices to their proper historical moment is, in this view, a mistake, one that is likely to get you accused of "presentism" or of being "ahistorical" or of committing "anachronism."

Ahistoricism, presentism, and anachronism are transgressions not just because they fail to adhere adequately to normative ideas about time, but because, in doing so, they fail to respect historical difference, or what historians call "the otherness of the past"—the uniqueness of each period in time in relation to earlier or later periods, especially the critic's own.[2] Now, in some cases the problems that might lead one to commit presentism or anachronism may be simply methodological. But more often such problems are taken to be ethical or political: the presentist judges one era using the methods, standards and criteria of another, thus projecting or imposing modern concepts and beliefs onto the texts of the past—in a kind of colonizing gesture. Hence the respect for historical difference has its analogue in the imperative to respect cultural difference. Indeed, it is no accident that the discourse of racial or cultural "otherness" in so much post-1960s literary and cultural theory coincides with the rise of historicism in literary studies. As Walter Benn Michaels has recently argued, postmodernity or posthistoricism (in Michaels the terms are synonymous) is characterized, above all, by its "commitment to difference" (32), the logical counterpart to "the posthistoricist valorization of identity" (60). The dangerous consequence of the posthistoricist commitment to identity, according to Michaels, is that it necessarily entails the "disarticulation of difference from disagreement" (30), such that "the conviction that others are mistaken must be redescribed as dislike of the fact that they are different, and the desire to convince them of the truth must be redescribed as the desire to get them to be the same" (60), to assimilate.

I will return to Michaels later. For now, I simply want to note that the historicist insistence on historical difference is not just a matter of methodology or politics; it is also, as Wai Chee Dimock has recently shown, a question of mathematics. Dimock argues that "numerical chronology" derives from Newtonian science, which converts what may simply be analytically useful—a system of numerical designations, assigning numbers to years, days, hours—into "a mathematical truth, unified at any given point, and binding in every instance" (128). Adherents of Newton in this sense, historicist critics fix texts—and, as we will see in a moment, audiences as well—"into a brief duration, a numbered slice of time, as if that slice were a container" (128). This system provides historicists a way of bracketing certain kinds of connections—relations of sameness across time periods—in order to discern (or establish) difference, the uniqueness of particular historical moments, particular segments of time. It also helps to establish sameness by allowing for connections to be made among disparate social practices occurring within the

same moment in time. This procedure "works" because it draws upon what goes without saying: the apparent naturalness of chronological, linear time.

But what if we were to approach history with the assumption that measuring time by successive periods (months, years, eras) is only a conceptual convenience, just one among the many possible tools we can use to make sense of and account for difference? What if it's the case that historicism doesn't honor or disinterestedly attend to the past's otherness so much as, through its particular discourse of temporality, it produces that otherness? What kind of understanding of history and the historicity of literary texts would follow from a view that says: the past is not "other" because time is divided into periods; historicists divide time into periods in order to establish the otherness of the past?

We can employ this proposition against Thomas's question about the relations of present audiences to past works. That is to say, Thomas's question—"what is the relationship of present audiences to past works?"—actually inscribes the very relationship that it seeks to understand. Its starting point is the essential difference between past and present; it posits a gulf between "present audiences" and "past works," "now" and "then." This gulf Thomas's follow-up question makes clear: "How . . . can a reader, locked within a present perspective and separated from the past by an irreversible temporal distance, understand a work that has taken shape in a culture that no longer exists?" (206).

Setting aside, for the moment, the problematic theory of literary texts this question proffers, one might ask: why should the relations of present audiences to past works be any more vexed—or any less historical—than the relationship between present audiences and *present* works? Or for that matter the relationship between *past* audiences and past works? More importantly, what constitutes past and present here? How does one locate the boundary between them, the line that seals the one off from the other? And if, in fact, we are "locked within a present perspective," how far into the past (or the future) does such a present extend? A decade? A lifetime? A generation? In other words, upon what basis does one determine where the past ends and the present begins? Presumably, Thomas has in mind a relationship of some obvious temporal distance: a twenty-first-century audience's relationship to a work published in, say, 1850 rather than one published last year. But aren't both of those, by definition, past works? In fact, isn't it the case that, strictly speaking, by the time it reaches its audience every work is a past work? Or

we might put this another way and say that, for an audience, there is no such thing as a present work—in which case we find ourselves at "an irreversible temporal distance" from every text we read.[3] This seems to me a frightening prospect, for to imagine ourselves so estranged—locked within our present perspective—would seem to deny us the possibility of understanding anything at all.[4]

Historicism sidesteps this problem—and, in doing so, violates the logic of its own insistence on historical difference—by claiming a certain portion of the past (not to mention a portion of the future) for the present. How could it be otherwise? After all, the present always slips into the past at the very instant we try to apprehend it. That is, our experience of the present is always an experience of what just happened (the past); our selves are continually slipping into history, continually involved in a process of becoming historical. So—and this is the crucial point—our experience of time, of ourselves in history, is always anachronistic: it's what allows us to think of yesterday and tomorrow as now.

Of course, unlike people, literary texts are not temporally finite. This is not to say that (certain) literary texts are timeless and universal—a notion anathema to historicists; rather, it is to say that the literary texts of the past are (potentially at least) continually present. This is why, for instance, we teach our students to use the present tense when writing about the events in a novel. And it was to this aspect of literary texts that I referred above when I said that the question—"what is the relationship of present audiences to past works?"—proffers a problematic theory of literary texts. That theory—the historicist theory of literary texts—too often takes as the defining characteristic of such works their pastness. By contrast, the posthistoricist answer to Thomas's second question—"How . . . can a reader, locked within a present perspective and separated from the past by an irreversible temporal distance, understand a work that has taken shape in a culture that no longer exists?—is: she can't. To the extent that a particular culture no longer exists, a work that has taken shape in that culture no longer exists either. But the good news is that there are no such readers and there are no such works. That's because literary works are not like cultures (or people or events); I may not be able to experience the culture that 1850 Americans experienced (as they experienced it), but I can read many of the same works that many of them did. And when I do, I am reading a work that is taking shape in the culture in which I exist, perhaps I am even helping to give it that shape; and certainly the traces of that

"other," "past" culture, however remote, exert pressure and help to shape my experience. In this sense, just as every work is a past work, every work is also, when read, a present work.

In its strenuous insistence on historical difference and chronological time, I am suggesting, historicism prevents us from recognizing this double movement, this pastness within the present—or what I prefer to call the experience of anachronism—and so prevents us from potentially productive moments of cross-temporal contact. Recently, Marjorie Garber has referred to the historicist certainty about what it means to return to history (and, along with it, the historicist devotion to chronology) as "historical correctness"—"the suggestion, either implicit or explicit on the part of literary scholars, that history grounds and tells the truth about literature" (180). As a counter-force to historicism, Garber mounts a compelling case in favor of anachronism both as a literary practice—one that eludes the determinism of historical correctness—and as a viable form of literary history—one that, following Walter Benjamin and the practice of "antichronology" in art history, is capable of "rais[ing] issues of similarity and difference, form and mood, that neither chronology nor historical context will address or ground" (184).[5]

Yet for all of its appeal, Garber's advocacy of anachronism as an alternative to historicism ultimately entails a certain acquiescence to historicist presuppositions. Hence her equation of anachronism with "playing fast and loose with history" and her statement that "some kinds of literary questions . . . cannot be posed through a predominantly historical approach" (196).[6] In other words, the allure of anachronism for Garber turns out to be the allure of the "illicit," of play. Anachronism's deliberate violations of history provide powerful examples of the way "literature shocks us into awareness, and preserves something that cannot be reduced to a ground" (198). Implicit in this view is an acceptance of the traditional notion of anachronism as a transgression against the norms of history. So for Garber, historicists may well have their history right; it's just the literature they get wrong.

To put this another way, by opposing anachronism to history, by presenting anachronism as history's alternative, Garber does not question the historicist's sequential understanding of time but only its adequacy for understanding works of literature. Garber's notion of anachronism would thus lead us away from history (and toward, say, aesthetics and form), rather than toward a reconceptualization of it.[7] It is here that Dimock's notion of "non-Newtonian time" proves especially instructive, for she considers not just historicist methodology but the historicist conception of time upon which that methodology rests. Following the temporal insights of Einstein's theory of relativity, Dimock conceives of a temporal "domain in which the reign of number is not absolute, in which experience is not bound by seriality." Hence, "the most important claim to be made for literature, is the evidence it provides of a temporal order outside the jurisdiction of number" (132). For Dimock, this alternative temporal order finds expression in the experience of reading, an experience that brings disparate time frames into generative collision. Dimock terms this experience "the relativity effect":

> This relativity effect comes about when we are drawn to words that came into being long before we did, not occasioned by us and not referring to us. In that sense, these words are entirely outside our life spans. But in another sense, they are not outside, because as a result of the temporal foreshortening created by reading, they are actually, literally, in our hands. They have been pulled into our gravitational field and grafted upon our immediate environments. Perhaps this is a case of temporal colonization, the domestication of an alien segment of time. But—and this is important to recognize—any domestication we undertake is bound to be limited by the paradox that these texts are ours and not ours, both in and not in our hands. (132)

The experience Dimock here describes might also be described as the experience of anachronism, of what I have already called the pastness within the present—a moment of converging temporalities, of cross-temporal contact made possible by reading. Central to this experience, as Dimock explains it, is the negotiation of difference, of otherness. Recognizing the dangers of "temporal colonization," Dimock nevertheless emphasizes not the *distance* between past and present but what we might call their simultaneity, their coincidence.

So if, as I have been arguing, historicist contextualization is primarily a technology for the production of difference, anachronism—or, similarly, Dimock's notion of "non-Newtonian time"—might be seen as a means of coming to grips with sameness, or what elsewhere I have called a noncolonizing form of presentism.[8] This, I think, ought to be the central task of posthistoricism: to imagine forms of history that view the past as neither simply a reflection of present interests nor as an irretrievably distant "other" but as a complex and open-ended interaction between the two. Such a project would be akin to what Jonathan Ree has called a "nonhistoricist approach to history," the point of which "would be to respect the historicity of things, the fact

that they take place without benefit of an enveloping historical plot" (976). "The fact is," Ree asserts, "that historicism, with its horror of anachronism, is the opposite of historicity, because historicity itself is anachronistic." I would simply put this in another way and say that our *experience* of history and of our selves in history is always anachronistic, which is to say that history only comes alive, or becomes real, when it is made a part of our present.

It might be objected at this point that the posthistoricist project I have just described is simply another version of new historicism as Walter Benn Michaels characterizes it in *The Shape of the Signifier*. For Michaels, the quintessential statement of what he calls "posthistoricist historicism" is Stephen Greenblatt's "desire to speak with the dead," or, more generally, "the effort to make the past present," an effort that entails not just knowing about the past but experiencing it. Michaels refers to this as new historicism's "ambition to turn history into memory" (146), an ambition that considers history to be not merely an object of knowledge, something that can be learned about and represented, but a part of one's experience and identity, "something that can be remembered and, when it is not remembered, forgotten" (138). Hence, for example, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is for Michaels "not only a historical, but a historicist novel":

> It is historical in that it's about the historical past; it's historicist in that—setting out to remember "the disremembered"—it redescribes something we have never known as something we have forgotten and thus makes the historical past a part of our own experience. (137)

By contrast, Michaels wants to maintain a distinction between knowledge and experience. After all, he asks, "how can we be said to remember not just things that happened to us but things that didn't happen to us?" (133).

Notwithstanding the obvious objection to Michaels's characterization of historicism—that he simply denies Greenblatt and Morrison their metaphors—his argument does pose a serious challenge to the ways in which some versions of historicism attempt to imagine the relations between the past and the present. After all, if one of the more powerful lessons of the new historicism, as well as the work of Hayden White and other poststructuralist challenges to the practice of history-writing,[9] is that our access to the past is always mediated by language, then the "ambition to turn history into memory" does seem to amount to an evasion of, rather than an engagement

with, the question, as one of new historicism's commentators has put it, of "whether history is ever distinct from the manner of its representations" (Jay 215). Nevertheless, I want to register a different objection to Michaels, an objection to the particular constraints he places on the concept of history itself.

That is, in Michaels's account, history would seem to be coterminous only with the past, something that lies always behind us. In this view, the present is merely the culmination of a series of events that have taken place in the past, which events can serve to explain, by way of causation, the present. Hence Michaels's assertion that "the minimal condition of the historian's activity is an interest in the past as an object of study" (137–38). Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead "goes beyond that minimal condition" (138). Of course, while Michaels doesn't say so, Greenblatt's particular version of (new) historicism is surely not unique in this regard. As the question with which this essay began—what is the relationship between present audiences and past texts?—illustrates, most versions of literary historicism are motivated by much more than a strictly antiquarian interest in the past.[10] So the real problem Michaels sees with Greenblatt is not that his desire to speak with the dead exceeds the strictly antiquarian; it's that his historicism goes beyond even "standard accounts of the continuity between past and present. Greenblatt is not, that is, interested in the kind of continuity offered by the claim that events in the past have *caused* conditions in the present or in the kind of continuity imagined in the idea that the past is enough like the present that we might learn from the past things that are useful in the present" (138). Greenblatt wants to "*speak* with the dead . . . not to find out or explain what they did" (138).

Yet the very terms that Michaels deploys in his critique of Greenblatt's historicism—continuity and causation (terms drawn from the traditional historian's arsenal)—are precisely the terms that, for Greenblatt and other new historicists, are in question.[11] Against what he views as Greenblatt's and Morrison's identitarianism—the ends served by their attempt to convert history into memory—Michaels turns only to the notions of continuity and causation, both of which conceive of time as a linear succession, an unbroken string of events linking past and present. By contrast, I want to explore in the remainder of this essay the possibilities of a conception of history and temporality that is reducible neither to (what I agree with Michaels is) the mistaken notion that we can remember things that never happened to us, nor to the notion (that is, Michaels's own notion) that history only makes sense as an object of knowledge, not as an experience. The claim I wish to advance, then, is twofold: first, while we cannot experience the events of the past *qua* past, we

can (and do) experience history, the historicity of our lives; and second, our conceptions of history, paradoxically, ought not to be reduced simply to the past (whether as knowledge or experience) but must necessarily also encompass the present and the future. Or to put this last point in terms drawn from Michaels (via Greenblatt): it requires no "*effort* to make the past present"; the past is always, ineluctably so.

Both of these claims derive in large part from the pragmatist philosopher George Herbert Mead's analysis of experience and temporality in his late work *The Philosophy of the Present.*[12] Largely neglected during the recent revival of the American pragmatist tradition, Mead has attracted even less attention among literary scholars interested in the relations of literature and history.[13] This is unfortunate, given the resonance of Mead's mature thinking about time to the kinds of historiographical questions that have preoccupied scholars since the historical turn.[14] And while what follows marks only the beginning of the kind of full consideration Mead's insights deserve, I hope nevertheless to suggest how Mead can help to redirect some of the more intractable problems raised by new historicism generally and the present essay in particular.

Let me begin my consideration of Mead by returning to Stephen Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead, another (more recent) version of which Greenblatt has described as an attempt to recreate in his literary criticism "the touch of the real."[15] Notwithstanding Michaels's criticism, this desire, in many ways, is simply the traditional historian's aspiration—at least since Ranke—to capture the past "as it was."[16] This past, what we might call the actual past—as distinct from its representations in the present—Mead calls "irrevocable." The irrevocable past is that world of events that have occurred but that are no longer available to us (hence Michaels's incredulity at Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead; they are, after all, dead and so cannot speak); it is a past to which we have no direct access. As Mead puts it, "That which has happened is gone beyond recall" (37). However, for Mead the past is not only irrevocable; it is also "revocable." The revocable past is to be found in what Mead calls the "what it was": "It is the 'what it was' that changes," Mead claims, "and this seemingly empty title of irrevocability attaches to it whatever it may come to be." And yet, the "'what it was' is what is not irrevocable" (37). So for Mead, the past is both fixed—insofar as the actual past is beyond our reach—and constantly changing—insofar as each new event and each passing generation reconstructs the past in accordance with its present.

To this point, it might seem that Mead simply expresses a set of historiographical commonplaces: in particular, the familiar idea that, while we can never access the actual (or irrevocable) past, we can provide more or less accurate accounts of that past. For Mead, however, the accounts we provide of that past are, unlike the irrevocable past, never final—even when they are accurate. Rather, they are always subject to modification and revision: "There is a finality that goes with the passing of every event. To every account of that event this finality is added, but the whole import of this finality belongs to the same world in experience to which this account belongs" (37). Mead's statement here is what distinguishes his account from ordinary understandings of the relations between the historical past and its representations. The finality of the event is not something that we should attribute to the "actual" past that has taken place; rather, the character of finality is entirely a function of the present (or the world of experience, as Mead says), the same present to which the account belongs. In other words, the finality does not inhere in the present of the event itself, for that has slipped into the past; and in its presentness, we might say, it would have had no way of knowing of its own finality.

The implications for historicism of Mead's distinction between the irrevocable and the revocable pasts become clear when he pauses to imagine the consequences of gaining access to the irrevocable past or, more precisely, to the present of any past period or event. "We could not bring back these presents simply as they occurred," Mead says, "except as presents. An exhaustive presentation of them would amount only to reliving them" (46). The surprising turn of phrase here is "would amount *only* to reliving them." It is as if, having been granted his wish, Stephen Greenblatt finally meets with the dead, only to find himself disappointed by the conversation. Why? Because, for Mead, "reality exists in a present" (35), which is to say that the events of the past (and the future) take on character and meaning only in relation to what Mead calls a "conditioning present." Mead thus warns against the idea of thinking of the past as simply "a scroll of elapsed presents, to which our constructions of the past refer, though without the possibility of ever reaching it, and without the anticipation that our continual reconstructions will approach it with increasing exactness" (58). The question for Mead is not whether such a view of the past (as having an existence beyond our capacity to know it, but serving as the measure of our historical investigations) is the correct one. Rather, the point for Mead is that, ironically, such a past turns out *not* to be the one we were looking for after all. "Such a scroll," Mead says,

> if attained, is not the account that our pasts desiderate. If we could bring back the present that has elapsed in the reality which belonged to it, it would not serve us. It would be that present and would lack just that character which we demand in the past, that is, that construction of the conditioning nature of now present passage which enables us to interpret what is arising in the future that belongs to this present. (58)

It is the shape of our present, in other words, that motivates (or "conditions") our particular historical interests in the first place. To revisit the past in its former presentness would be, paradoxically, not to visit the past at all. As he puts it in *The Philosophy of the Act*, "a past never was in the form in which it appears as a past" (616). Having lost its historical character, such a past would cease to be a past. Devoid of its historicity, "it would not serve us" because its historical character was precisely that which interested us: "The moment that we take these earlier presents as existences apart from the presentation of them as pasts"—the moment we approach them, that is, in terms of their unique "otherness"—they cease to have meaning to us" (*Philosophy of the Present* 41).

So while, on the one hand, Mead's idea that the present is "the seat of reality" (57) challenges historicism by deflating its dream, exemplified by Greenblatt, of returning us to the past as past, on the other hand, the same idea vitiates Michaels's recourse to causation and continuity in his critique of Greenblatt's historicism, his insistence on history as an object of knowledge rather than an experience. That's because just as the past in Mead is constantly changing, so too is the present. "For that which marks a present," Mead says, "is its becoming and its disappearing" (35)—in precisely the same way, as I said earlier, that our selves are continually involved in a process of becoming historical. Indeed, it is this evanescent quality of the present that makes historical causation possible. It is, we might say, the cause of cause. As Mead puts it, "The emergent when it appears is always found to follow from the past, but before it appears it does not, by definition, follow from the past" (36). With each new event, each new present, the past must be reconstructed anew. So only in retrospect can the present be explained as following causally from the past.[17] This is a process which repeats continually, since "the emergent has no sooner appeared than we set about rationalizing it, that is, we undertake to show that it, or at least the conditions that determine its appearance, can be found in the past that lay behind it. Thus the earlier pasts out of which it emerged as something which did not involve it are taken up into a more comprehensive past that does lead up to it" (46). Each new event, then, gives rise to a new past. In

this way, Mead reverses the normal understanding of causation: to the extent that there exists a continuity between the past and the present, it is a continuity that can only be glimpsed after the fact; hence, causes turn out to be effects of the passing present. This inevitably reconstructive quality of causation—the idea that no past exists independent of a present—is why access to the present of the past that interests us would be of no use. And it is also why the past as an object of knowledge cannot be divorced from experience: because pasts "have to be reconstructed as they are taken up into a new present and as such they belong to that present, and no longer to the present out of which we have passed into the present present" (52).

It is worth noting, in this regard, that the constantly changing nature of the past is not in Mead an argument for historical relativism, or, worse (for Michaels, at least), mere subjectivism. That is, Mead is confident that we can "reconstruct what has been, as an authenticated account of the past," but such an account ought not to be considered what Mead calls an "'in itself' correctness" (40), but only a correctness within the field of a particular present, subject to change with the passing of a new event. This is why Mead maintains that "it is idle to have recourse to a 'real' past within which we are making constant discoveries" (36). An "in itself correctness" that is "independent of all presents" "must be either . . . that of a reality which by definition could never get into our experience, or . . . that of a goal at infinity in which the type of experience in which we find ourselves ceases" (40–41). So the "end of history" in Mead is not, as in Michaels, the end of ideological dispute. Instead, the realization of a complete and total picture of the past in itself—the very goal to which historicism aspires—would, paradoxically, bring an end to history. "We can conceive of a past," Mead notes, "which in any one present would be irrefragable. So far as that present was concerned it would be a final past" (59). But anything more than that, any "past independent of the present," would necessarily entail the suspension of emergence, which is to say a halting of time: "There must be at least something that happens to and in the thing which affects the nature of the thing in order that one moment may be distinguishable from another, in order that there may be time" (50).

For this same reason, time ought not to be conceived as merely a succession of points capable of quantitative measurement or even isolation one from another, for such a conception does not account for the relational character of emergence or passage, which always implies a past and a future. To put this another way, "a present," Mead insists, "is not a piece cut out anywhere from the temporal dimension of uniformly passing reality. . . . As soon as we

view it, it becomes a history and a prophecy" (52). So against the historicist understanding of time, Mead maintains that "a string of presents conceivably existing as presents would never constitute a past" (58).[18] Put more radically, the implication of Mead's view is that historicism, in its insistence on dividing time into discernible and measurable units, each different from the other, succumbs to the very ahistoricism that, in literary studies at least, it was designed to correct. For in Mead's terms, the present, rather than the antagonist of the past, is the fundamental condition of its existence.

So what are the implications for the future of literary history that might follow from the Meadian conception of temporality—the version of posthistoricism—I have presented here, however provisionally? Well, for one thing, it diffuses the force, and hence allows for a revaluation, of the familiar critiques of presentism and anachronism. Rather than aspiring to a form of historical inquiry that has freed itself from the interests of the present, Mead invites us to see not just that such an aspiration is unattainable, but that it is actually undesirable—even, paradoxically, counter to our historical interests. For another thing, it invites us to think beyond structures of difference and to seek a past that is not irretrievably "other," but one that can serve us in the present.

And yet here is the difficulty—and, I would argue, the promise—of Mead's insistence on the present as fundamentally vital both to temporal experience and to history: it doesn't last. However much we might want to pin it down, to fix it within a slice of time the way that historicism would fix literary texts to their contexts, such fixity eludes us.[19] But this same condition also means possibility. Because it continually passes away, because the present is by definition fleeting, it compels us (we have no choice) to endless renewal. Hence the passage from Mead which I have taken as an epigraph:

> . . . we look forward with vivid interest to the reconstruction, in the world that will be, of the world that has been, for we realize that the world that will be cannot differ from the world that is without rewriting the past to which we now look back. (36–37)

The hope that Mead here expresses is hope for a future rooted in historical change, in the past as an unfinished project: he looks forward to looking back. So no matter what the limitations of our current historicist paradigms, this is

why, I think, literary scholarship is not yet through with history, but in need of reinventing it. The best years of the past are still ahead.

Notes

1. By taking up Thomas's question, I do not mean to imply that his account, perhaps the most comprehensive consideration of the new historicism, lacks awareness of the perplexities of such a question, but only that the problem of temporality it implies invites further commentary.

2. See Berkhofer, who notes that "historians assume the otherness of past times; the longer ago they are, the more the then and there differ from the here and now" (106) and also that for traditional historians "No greater sin exists than committing anachronism, by representing something outside the supposed context of its times" (32).

3. I should stress again that by "past work," Thomas clearly—and quite reasonably—refers to works that are obviously historically distant. At the same time, Thomas does not draw the line that can distinguish the close past from the distant past. Nor could he. But that is precisely the point: the question of where and how to draw such a line besets every discussion about the relationship of present audiences to past works.

4. Thomas compares Stephen Greenblatt's attempts to negotiate "the historical otherness of the text" with that of Wolfgang Iser and Walter Benjamin. See 206–12. However, it is the very assumption of such "otherness" that I mean to complicate.

5. Thomas also draws on Benjamin, specifically Benjamin's claim, as Thomas puts it, that "to historicize a text is to create a 'constellation' between its moment of production and its moment of reception." As the examples of Garber and Thomas suggest, Benjamin has become something of a touchstone for scholars interested in alternative modes of literary history. As we'll see, I think that the thought of George Herbert Mead can be similarly helpful.

6. Other recent works that engage the possibilities of anachronism for literary study include Jerome Christensen's *Romanticism at the End of History* (3, 11–12) and Jay Clayton's *Charles Dickens in Cyberspace* (113–17). See also Phillip Barrish's *White Liberal Identity, Literary Pedagogy, and Classic American Realism*, which promotes an interpretive strategy Barrish terms "critical presentism" (18–20).

7. I do not want to be understood as advancing an argument against a return to aesthetics in literary studies. Quite the contrary. I mean only to highlight that the

present critique of historicist inquiry is not a call for a turn away from history, only for an alternative understanding of it.

8. See Insko, "Anachronistic Imaginings," 183.

9. For an extended treatment of the implications of poststructuralism and the "linguistic turn" for the practice of history, see Berkhofer.

10. However, Michaels also argues that "the interest in the past shouldn't be mistaken for an analysis of or attempt to deal with the problems of the present" (168).

11. Thomas provides an illuminating discussion of the problem of causation among the progressive historians of the twentieth century, 90–94.

12. The volume published as *The Philosophy of the Present* consists of Mead's Carus Lectures, delivered in 1930 at the meeting of the American Philosophical Association. The published volume also contains draft fragments for the lectures found among Mead's papers after his death. The work represents, among other things, Mead's attempt to think through the philosophical implications of Einstein's theory of relativity. Mead's theory of history is further developed in *The Philosophy of the Act* and *Movements of Thought in the Nineteenth Century*. These works were also published posthumously, based on Mead's unpublished papers and students' lecture notes. During his lifetime, Mead did publish one essay, "The Theory of the Past," that specifically addresses some of the questions pursued in the works published after his death.

13. Mead's most important recent commentator is Hans Joas, whose account of Mead's philosophy of temporality and its implications for historical practice have informed mine. See, in particular, *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought*, 176–81. For other examinations of Mead's understanding of time and history, see Natanson and Miller. For an especially perceptive and inventive reading of the Carus Lectures, which locates a number of "conceptual affinities" between Mead and Jacques Lacan, see Christopher Hanlon's excellent 2002 doctoral dissertation, *Pragmatism and the Unconscious.*

14. For just one example of the timeliness of Mead's ideas, consider the recent publication of the philosopher of history F. R. Ankersmit's provocative *Sublime Historical Experience*. Ankersmit attempts to move theoretical considerations of history beyond the linguistic turn. Following recent trauma theory, he argues that the past arises from experiences of rupture and loss. But while Ankersmit's deeply erudite book includes a chapter on pragmatist aesthetic and historical experience, he seems unaware of Mead—even though Mead's theory of historical experience bears a very striking resemblance to his own.

15. See Gallagher and Greenblatt, esp. ch. 1, "The Touch of the Real."

16. Indeed, it is this aspiration, the faithful recreation of the past on its own terms, that, in turn, gives rise to the notions of anachronism and presentism as historiographical transgressions: they deny the past its pastness. But in new historicism, presentism emerges as a contradictory matter. That's because, on the one hand, presentism is precisely that which the historicist devotion to context is designed to protect against; while, on the other hand, presentism is also that which new historicists are sometimes accused of—a fact attributable, in part, to new historicism's self-awareness of poststructuralist insights into the nature of historical representation. To a certain extent, every history is a presentist construction. So the trouble with presentism (or anachronism) for current literary-historical practice is that it is at once unavoidable *and* a sin against historicist norms. I am suggesting that Mead offers a way out of this impasse.

17. See Ankersmit, who similarly argues that "there is not, first, a past, and next, an experience of this past. . . . The experience of the past and the past itself (as a potential object of historical research) are born at one and the same moment, and in this way experience can be said to be constitutive of the past. This is how the past comes into being" (102).

18. As Mead argues, such a string of presents represents a spatial conception of time, which he calls a "knife-edge point of view" which "assumes that all our experience takes place at instants—instants that have the same relation to time that a point has to space. As a point has no magnitude, so an instant has no duration" (*Movements of Thought* 298). On this point, Mead prefigures Dimock, whose book is an argument against this same image of time, what she describes as "a spatialized image: time here looks a bit like a measuring tape, with fixed segments, fixed unit lengths, each assignable to a number" (2).

19. Ankersmit argues that "historical experience and contextualization mutually exclude each other, and it is certainly true that the contemporary cult of the context has blinded us more than anything else to the notion of (historical) experience" (125).

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