History, Literature and Geography

Edward W. Said*

Foreword by Hala Kamal**

In his keynote address at the Third International Symposium on Comparative Literature: History in Literature, prominent postcolonial critic, Edward Said (1935-2003), established interconnections of history and geography with literary studies. Said here adopts an interdisciplinary approach which establishes critical ground for developing literary methods of investigation consciously adopting history and geography as critical approaches. The article establishes connections between critical terms such as temporality, spatiality, hegemony, historical imagination, as well as methods of literary inquiry such as "historicist philology", "praxis", and tracing "homological function". This article carries echoes of Said's profound contributions to approaches and method of literary and cultural criticism, specifically in his works: Beginnings: Intention and Method *(1975),* Orientalism *(1978),* The World, the Text, and the Critic *(1983), and* Culture and Imperialism *(1993).*

Said opens his talk with a recollection from the late 1950s when as a graduate student at Harvard he was involved in an undergraduate programme on "History and Literature". Though neither appreciated by the professors of history nor those of literature, it is this programme that Said says provided him with an early intellectual engagement with literary approaches to history and historical approaches to literature, which he later expanded into philosophy, politics, and music. He begins with a discussion of the critical method adopted and propagated by the German philologist and literary comparatist, Erich Auerbach (1892-1957), who in his book Mimesis and specifically in his "Philology of World Literature" developed "historicist philology". This is the critical method and discipline which Said explains in terms of "the discipline of uncovering beneath the surface of words the life of a society that is embedded there by the great writer's art". This method pays specific attention to a literary imagination that is historically grounded, whereby the philologist is concerned with revealing human history in literary texts, where history and literature crucially inform each other, providing the literary critic with a historical vision.

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A further development in this direction Said attributes to the work of, Hungarian Marxist philosopher and literary critic, Georg Lukacs (1885-1971), whom Said describes as "the prototypical theorist of aesthetic temporality" with reference to his book Soul and Form, showing how his analysis begins from the "sense of discord between self and other". It is the novel, as a literary form, that offers in its formal complexity a reconciliation of dialectical opposites and an "aesthetic resolution" of the temporality of the modern condition. In his discussion of textuality and temporality, Said engages with the writings of Italian Marxist philosopher and linguist, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), which reflect his personal experiences, involvement in the working-class movement, his position regarding the emerging modern state and civil society, together with what Said describes as "a compelling intellect". Said highlights Gramsci's understanding of a literary text as being situated within a matrix of power, culture, and politics, without seeking to achieve "a homological function". Said furthermore highlights Gramsci's critical method rooted in "praxis" – the intellectual effort of connecting theory to practice. It is here that Gramsci's method extends beyond temporality into spatiality, as he sees ideas and texts "embedded in actual geographical situations."

Said brings Welsh socialist novelist and critic, Raymond Williams (1921-1988) into the conversation, by pointing out his concern with the textual, actual, and historical "social contest over territory" and almost viewing writers as inscribed into their texts. Said particularly refers to Williams' The Country and the City, where he "sketches the new geography of high imperialism and decolonization". It is this discussion of the metropolis and periphery that leads Said to expose Anglo-centrism and Euro-centrism, raising questions about "a decentered or multiply centered world" – historically and geographically while moving beyond the notion of text to the "category of culture".

Said concludes his address by raising the following question: "Is there a way for us to understand the connection not simply between history and literature, but between several histories and several literatures?" It is this question and its provided answers that bring us into the investigation of history, literature, and geography, subverting and expanding hegemonic Anglocentric and Eurocentric visions of the world. At the same time, this discussion, with its variety of critical methods, that some go back to the early 20th century, still continues to provide a good deal of relevance today. What literary approaches can help us in the process of engagement with the contradictions and challenges emerging in the 21st century at the crossroads of literatures, histories, and geographies as we move forward into the critical realms of decoloniality and transnationalism.

History, Literature and Geography
Edward Said (1995)

When I was a graduate student at Harvard in the late fifties, I was employed as a tutor in an elite undergraduate program whose name was "History and Literature." Although there were undergraduates who majored in one or

another of the literature departments within History and Literature and a smaller number in it who were in the history department, it was then believed that only a few especially gifted students could handle the two disciplines together. Mercifully, I do not recall a great deal about what as a group the students and tutors of "History and Lit." (as it was called) actually did, but I know that I gave two seminars, one on Thucydides and one on Vico, the idea, I think, being that both writers embodied an approach to history that was literary and an approach to literature that was somehow historical. Aside from that, I recall that the snobbish aura that gave History and Lit. its prestige at Harvard was that our students - who were mostly literary in their interests - were not afraid of, and may even have actually been interested in literature from a historical standpoint, or literature in its historical context. Paradoxically, however, we were not held in very high esteem by either the Professors of History or the Professors of English. There was something about us that- to them- seemed either too weak in our methods (such as they were) or diluted in our focus. Looking back at it, I regret to say that they were probably right in both instances.

At the risk of boring you still further with a little more personal rambling, I also recall that after I got my Ph.D. and began to teach at Columbia in 1963, I continued to be dogged by the notion, everywhere current, that history and literature were in fact two quite separate fields of study, and ultimately of experience. I also remember that when I began to write books and articles about philosophy, politics and later about music, I earned myself the suspicion, and even the dislike of professionals in those fields who with good reason saw me as an interloper. I also remember my mother's puzzled question to me time and again when I burdened her with publications by me that patently were not literary in the pure sense, "But Edward," she would say, "I thought your field was literature. Why are you writing or meddling in things that aren't really your line?" This particular complaint became more worried and more hectoring when, for better or for worse, my political writing began to attract attention. This was really a bad business, my mother thought. Go back to literature, was her answer to what she saw as my predicament.

And so it went in my own work for a couple of years more until, I recall, I began to translate a remarkable essay by Erich Auerbach whose book *Mimesis* had established itself by 1960 as one of the crucial critical texts of twentieth century literary study. The essay in question was "Philologie der, Weltliteratur (1952)", and was written and published in Germany after *Mimesis* had appeared; Auerbach uses the occasion to reflect on his own post-war work, the situation of the philologist, and the peculiar entanglement with history that he felt:

> History is the science of reality that affects us most immediately, stirs us most deeply and compels us most forcibly to a consciousness of ourselves. It is the only science in which human beings step before us in their totality. Under the rubric of history, one is to understand not only the past, but the progression of events in general; history therefore includes the present. The inner history of the last thousand years is the history of mankind achieving self-expression: this is what philology, a historicist discipline, treats. This history contains the records of man's mighty, adventurous advance to a consciousness of his human condition and to the realization of his given potential; and this advance, whose final goal (even in its wholly fragmentary present form) was barely imaginable for a long time, still seems to have proceeded as if according to a plan, in spite of its twisted course. All the rich tensions of which our being is capable are contained within this course. An inner dream unfolds whose scope and depth entirely animate the spectator [i.e. the philologist] enabling him at the same time to find peace in his given potential by the enrichment he gains by having witnessed the drama. The loss of such a spectacle - whose appearance is thoroughly dependent on presentation and interpretation - would be an impoverishment for which there can be no possible compensation. ... We are still basically capable of fulfilling this duty [i.e. the presentation of the spectacle through "collecting material and forming it into a whole"] not only because we have a great deal of material at our disposal, but above all because we have inherited the sense of historical perspectivism which is so necessary for the job. ("Philology and *Weltliteratur"*, 4-5)

In this rich description of what in fact is Auerbach's own method as it was so remarkably fulfilled in *Mimesis*, he assigns the philologist the task of collection and presentation. All past written records inherited by us in the present are saturated in the history of their own times; philological work is responsible for examining them. They have a unity which the philologist interprets according to historicist perspectivism. In a sense therefore philology is the interpretive discipline by which you can discern that peculiar slant on things which is the perspective on reality of a given period. Auerbach was Vico's German translator, and the idea he articulates here is indebted to Vico's theory of the unity of historical periods. Vico's new science was the art of reading, say, Homer's poems not as if they were written by an eighteenth-century philosopher, but rather as products of their own primitive time, texts that embody the youth of mankind, the heroic age, in which metaphor and

poetry not rational science and deductive logic, both of which occur only much later, are used to understand and if necessary construct reality. Historicist philology - which is much more than studying the derivation of words - is the discipline of uncovering beneath the surface of words the life of a society that is embedded there by the great writer's art. You cannot perform that act without somehow intuiting, through the use of the historical imagination, what that life *might* have been like and so, as Dilthey and Nietzsche both suggest, interpretation involves an almost artistic projection of self into that earlier world. Hence, for example, the stunning inner readings of Sophoclean and Europedean tragedy in *The Birth of Tragedy*, readings which, you recall, incurred the wrath of positivist philologists like Wilamowitz, for whom words could only be studied with dictionary-like precision.

Auerbach inherits all this in his own training, the likes of which no one today can ever receive. For not only must one have studied all the European languages (Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Spanish, Provençal, etc.), but one must also be able to deal with legal, historical, numismatic, and of course literary texts in all their details and complex special concreteness. But all this is not enough. One must also have the courage to relive within oneself the whole of human history, as if it were one's own history: in other words, by an act of both creation and of self-endowment, the philologist undertakes to assume human history in his/her own work as a spectacle unfolding minutely and patiently in the texts studied. This of course is what makes *Mimesis* the extraordinary work that it is. Each of Auerbach's passages is looked at first as a text to be decoded; then as his angle of vision expands, it is connected to its own age, that age understood as fostering, if not also requiring, a particular aesthetic style. One wouldn't therefore read Flaubert the way Petrocius should be read, not just because they are two different writers working in hugely separated historical periods, but also because their way of apprehending and then articulating the reality of their time is completely different. In the end, however, historical reality is transmuted into a highly idiosyncratic, irreducibly concrete structure of sentences, periods, parataxis, and it is this structure which the philologist tries to render.

And yet *Mimesis* itself is put together episodically: it begins with a reading of Homer and the Old Testament, followed by a whole series of *explication de texte*, from classical antiquity, through the Middle Ages, and stretching forward through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and arriving finally in the periods of Realism and Modernism. Although Auerbach makes no concerted attempt to connect the chapters with each other, his underlying theme remains "the representation of reality," which in technical rhetorical terms means the various styles, high, low, and mixed, by which western writers since antiquity translated reality into sentences. The core of the book, however, is Auerbach's treatment of Dante, who represents the first Western

writer to achieve a synthesis in the *Divine Comedy* of the two disparate extremes of classical style: using the figure of Christ, who of course represents a fusion of tragedy and comedy, as a representative of the new middle style, *dolce stir nuovo,* Dante produced a poem whose ambition and indeed subject was nothing less than the unification of past with present and future. And this, in effect, becomes Auerbach's ambition in *Mimesis,* to create a historical vision of the secular world incarnated in language through an unfolding, dramatic interpretation of its entire literature, which Auerbach, in an act of supreme poetic imagination, represents in the various readings.

My interest in Auerbach's method, about which he says next to nothing in *Mimesis* itself, unlocked the system of correspondences between history and literature that is the cornerstone of a whole tradition of regarding temporality as both the repository of human experience, past, present and future, as well as the mode of understanding by which historical reality can be comprehended. An important preliminary point to be made about this takes us back to the two main words of our conference's title, history and literature. Neither history nor literature are inert bodies of experience; nor are they disciplines that exist out there to be mastered by professionals and experts. The two terms are mediated by the critical consciousness, the mind of the individual reader and critic, whose work (like Auerbach's) sees history and literature somehow informing each other. So the missing middle term between history and literature is therefore the agency of criticism, or interpretation. Auerbach's own background and tradition allowed him the possibility of mediating the two with the techniques of philology, a science for which today there is not, and cannot ever again be the kind of training provided between the ears in Europe for an Auerbach, or for like-minded polymathic colleagues such as Leo Spitzer, Ernst Curtius and Karl Vossler. Our generation has been left with criticism, an activity undergoing ceaseless transformation.

In any event, as I said a moment ago, the kind of work done and described by Auerbach takes as its guarantee an underlying notion of commensurability, or correspondence, or conjuncture between history and literature, which the critic by dint of hard work, the mastery of lots of different texts, and personal vision, can in fact reproduce in his/her work. In this perspective, then history and literature exist as temporal activities, and can unfold more or less together in the same element, which is also common to criticism. So whereas he may be one of the finest exemplars of this common unfolding, Auerbach is only one representative of a much larger movement that probably goes back as far as Hegel, whose greatest modern literary theoretician is Georg Lukacs, about whom I shall speak in detail presently. If Lukacs is the prototypical theorist of aesthetic temporality, then I should like to counterpose him with Antonio Gramsci, whose perspective on the relationship between history and culture is mediated and intervened in by a very powerful *geographical* sense. And it is

this spatial sense of discontinuity that complicates and renders far less effective than ever before the possibility of correspondence, congruence, continuity, and reconciliation between different areas of experience. I shall argue that Gramsci's geographical awareness makes it more appropriate for late twentieth century criticism, which has had to deal with disjunctive formations and experiences such as women's history, popular culture, postcolonial and subaltern material that cannot be assimilated easily, cannot be appropriated and fitted into an overall scheme of correspondences.

The Hegelian dialectic, as no one needs to be told, is based on a temporal sequence, followed by a resolution between those parts of the sequence whose relationship was initially based on opposition, contradiction, antitheses. Thus, opposition is always destined for reconciliation, provided the correct logical process can be instigated. Lukacs inherits this basic scheme, but from the beginning of his career--I refer here to his precocious early book *Die Seele und die Formen*--is also haunted by the possibility that the opposition between one pole and another may be too strong, too stubborn to be resolved in temporality. This is what his early works are really about, the dissonance between dream and reality, which the mere poet or Platonist can do nothing about but which the real artist--the artist as form-giver--can reconcile. Here are a couple of passages chosen almost at random:

> A problem arises when the Platonist's eternal uncertainty threatens to cast a shadow over the white brilliance of the [poet's] verse and when the heaviness of his sense of distance weighs down the poet's soaring lightness, or when there is a danger that the poet's divine frivolity may falsify the Platonist's profound hesitations and rob them of their honesty .... A real solution can only come from form. In form alone ("the only possible thing" is the shortest definition of form known to me) does every antithesis, every trend, become music and necessity. The road of every problematic human being leads to form because it is that unity which can combine within itself the largest number of divergent forces, and therefore at the end of that road stands the man who can create form: the artist, in whose created form poet and Platonist become equal. *(Soul and Form,* 22)

The beginning point of all of Lukacs's analyses is dissonance, that sense of ontological discord between self and other, or as he was later to discuss it, between subject and object. In the study of the novel that immediately followed *Die Seele und die Formen,* he produced an extraordinarily penetrating treatise on the genre itself, which for him became the modern artistic form of expressing and overcoming dissonance par excellence. For the

first time he posits a before and an after, the perfectly unified and consonant classical world whose inner nature is expressed in the epic, and the fallen, subsequent world, whose inner nature expresses itself as a gap between various fragments of a fallen being. The former is plenitude and totality; the latter is disintegration and inadequacy. Time in the classical world of plenitude and totality is not a problem, whereas in the modern world it is the problem of temporality, that ironic sense of transcendental distance between subject and object lodged at the very heart of existence. And, says Lukacs, it is this sense of transcendental homelessness that produces the novel as a form whose fundamental structural principle is temporality as irony, not as fulfillment or reconciliation. Thus the novel form itself furnishes an aesthetic resolution to the difficulties of modernity, although its complexity as a form, as well as its internal disharmony--after all the novelistic hero, says Lukacs is either a criminal or a madman and even though the novelist is committed to biography as a vehicle for conveying the hero's life, it cannot really mute or smooth out its fundamental turmoil--are always evident. "The composition of the novel", adds Lukacs, "is the paradoxical fusion of heterogenous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over." As he says a moment later:

> The novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God. The novel hero's psychology is demonic; the objectivity of the novel is the mature man's knowledge that meaning can never quite penetrate reality, but that, without meaning, reality would disintegrate into the nothingness or inessentiality... Irony, with intuitive double vision, can see where God is to be found in a world abandoned by God... Irony... is the highest freedom that can be achieved in a world without God. That is why it is not only the sole possible a *priori* condition for a true, totality-creating objectivity but also why it makes that totality - the novel - the representative art-form of our age: because the structural categories of the novel constitutively coincide with the world as it is today. (*The Theory of the Novel*, 84, 92-3)

The genius of this description of the novel (which is certainly the most brilliant ever offered) is that it shows how as an art-form the novel reconciles within itself the internal discrepancies of modern life, and in so doing coincides "with the world as it is today." Moreover, Lukacs goes on to show that reconciliation and coincidence are only provisional, since the formal organic whole of the novel is abolished over and over by irony. What makes possible the novel's constitutive aesthetic form, however, is time which Lukacs says about Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* gives the meaningless comings and

goings of Flaubert's characters their essential quality *(The Theory of the Novel*, 125). So, for Lukacs's time, in all its ironic makings and unmakings is the core of the great modern art form, the one that most perfectly expresses the transcendental homelessness of contemporary life. Time gives and time takes away. Only *theory* – and hence the meaning of the title of Lukacs's treatise – theory in the Hegelian sense of the word can contain both the accomplishments and ironic dissolutions of form in the novel.

What Lukacs seems to have discovered in his theoretical survey of the novel is that whatever reconciliation might be possible between dialectical opposites can only be aesthetic and in the final analysis private. But then all the immense weight and complex pathos of those early years of seeking and desolation finally come to reset in his next, and greatest work, *History and Class Consciousness,* his first overtly Marxist treatise. He now re-examines the history of consciousness in its purest forms within classical philosophy, whose core problem remains the endlessly reiterated discrepancy, or antinomy, between subject and object. The reconciliation between them that he had found in art is now seen as only one solution along the way, in the period between Kant and Schiller. It is only after Hegel and then Marx that the notion of a dialectic between opposites acquires in Hegel logical force and in Marx sociopolitical force. For the first time historically then, Lukacs says, Marxism provides for the "putative" consciousness that might finally resolve the ontological contradiction that has been sitting at the heart of classical philosophical narrative, and it introduces the very idea of totality which had once been the hallmark of the classical works, but which has since been lost to modernity. If the novel articulates the problem of history as time that offers up no possibility of resolving dissonance, then it is what Lukacs now calls "the standpoint of the proletariat" that sees the central problem of reification (reification as dissonance, or disparity and distance between facts or objects hardened into separate irreconcilable identities or antinomies) as resolvable in time through a collective apprehension in consciousness of human history as the history of processes. "History", he says in a famous sentence, "is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the objective forms that shape the life of man." *(History and Class Consciousness, 186).*

My reason for going through all this is to illustrate how in Lukacs the whole issue of temporality, or rather the temporal apprehension of reality, is given the fullest and most complex philosophical treatment. In the trajectory of his thought from *Die Seele und die Formen,* through *The Theory of the Novel,* to *History and Class Consciousness,* we can read not only a more and more clear philosophical articulation of the problematization of temporality in all its immense pathos and complexity, but also a coming to terms with it in Marxism. Lukacs's early Marxism was later repudiated by him as far too radical and dynamic, but for my purposes it expresses a sense of how at least

in consciousness it might be possible to treat temporality as a fact at the most fundamental epistemological level: as form, as process, and as putative reconciliation, in which some satisfaction can at last be achieved between the knowing subject and the resistant object through the category of totality. Theodor Adorno attacked Lukacs's revolutionary optimism in his essay entitled "Reconciliation Under Duress", the duress being the one provided by Lukacs's Marxist faith, which Adorno, more skeptical and radical, did not share. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the grandeur of Lukacs's criticism is that it is the metaphysical culmination of the Hegelian synthesis applied both to aesthetics and politics as essentially temporal activities, activities unfolding in time, which while it ironizes and accentuates the dissonances of modern life views them redemptively, as overcoming and resolving them at some future date.

In all sorts of explicit and implicit ways most modern Western literary histories, Auerbach's included, share a similar temporal and redemptive optimism with Lukacs. Most of them, however, miss the underlying messianic, and ultimately destructive quality of Lukacs's vision; what they retain in the way of a sense of concordance between literature and history--the two ultimately supporting and reinforcing each other in a benign temporality--has enabled at least three generations of Western scholarship. It is to be found equally in works directly influenced by Lukacs like Lucien Goldmann's *Le Dieu caché* and those equally powerful and influential Anglo-American works like Ian Watt's *The Rise of the Novel* for whom Lukacs is at most a shadowy, unacknowledged presence. For all its privacy and complexity, the novel as described by Watt is always contained and in the end is perfectly congruent with a history of the bourgeoisie, which itself is congruent with the ascendancy of a new class whose world view is mercantile, individualistic, and enterprising. Goldmann's more directly theoretical work, no less empirically based than Watt's, is in effect a theory of correspondences by which the jagged fragments of Pascal's *Pensees* are carefully and laboriously inserted in an extremely specific and dense history of the Port Royal community, as well as that of the *noblesse de robe.* In both Watt and Goldmann the literary form we are left with is in effect an irreplaceable cornerstone of the general history of the periods in question, one in which all sorts of possible disruptions and dissonances between individual and general are resolved as part of the overall advance of the dominant mainstream.

I am perfectly aware that what I am saying may sound too systematic and reductive, since after all the house of literary history has many windows. But looking at it in this way, it seems to me that a great deal about recent trends in theory and scholarship becomes considerably clearer. Take, as another instance, the whole notion of identity, which is the animating principle of biography, for example, Richard Ellman's famous series of books on Wilde,

Joyce and Yeats, including his symptomatically entitled *The Identity of Yeats.* If we think of literary history as incorporating the lives of major artists, then we must also understand those lives as reinforcing, consolidating, clarifying a core identity, identical not only with itself, but identical in a sense with the history of the period in which it existed and flourished. In other words, we don't read biography to deconstruct, but to solidify, identity, and where but in temporality does an identity unfold? Trilling's Arnold, Edgar Johnson's Dickens, Bate's Johnson, Painter's Proust, Ehrenpreis's Swift, Martin's Hopkins--all these plus many others too numerous to mention are parts of the finally integral, integrated general structure of historical periods, which the biographies, no matter how complex, rich and detailed, are enfolded within. Much the same applies to the interpretive studies of poets and novelists, regardless of how revolutionary and innovative they may be, for instance, Harold Bloom's study of Wallace Stevens, or Geoffrey Hartman's pioneering work on Wordsworth. Identity, which is non-contradiction, or rather contradiction resolved, is the heart of the enterprise, and temporality its sustaining element, the essence of its constitutive structure.

I said a moment ago that these trends become clearer if we look at all the immense variety and richness of these studies as belonging to a fundamentally similar way of conceiving the relationship between history and literature. The principal reason for being able to do so, I want now to suggest, is because this particular formation whose most articulated paradigm comes from Lukacs as the culmination of a generally Hegelian tradition of focusing on temporality as resolving the threats to identity can be contrasted with a radically different tradition, one for whom Antonio Gramsci serves me here as a great prototype. I'd like to make the case here for Gramsci as having created in his work an essentially geographical, territorial apprehension of human history and society, although like Lukacs he is irrecusably attached to the notion of dissonance as a central element in modern consciousness. Unlike Lukacs, however, Gramsci seems completely to have escaped the clutches of Hegelianism. Much more of a fox than a hedgehog, he seems to have reveled in particular, an unaccommodated, unhoused rebelliousness against systems. On the other hand, far more than Lukacs, he was political in the practical sense, conceiving of politics as a contest over territory, both actual and historical, to be won, fought over, controlled, held, lost, gained. Nevertheless Gramsci, unlike Lukacs whose early *oeuvre* is academic and metaphysical in the best sense, presents truly severe interpretive problems at the level of his text itself.

What are the interpretive problems? They can be broken into two main categories, each reinforcing the other. First, there is the doctrinal one. Some critics argue that because he was so immersed in bourgeois culture and its study, because also in general he seems to have opposed the left-wing of the PCI in its frequent ambitions to take state power, because also his attitude

seemed to be one of perhaps reflection and preparation and study (an insufficiently insurrectionary attitude that is), Gramsci was, or expressed, a reformist rather than a revolutionary, Leninist philosophy or praxis. Others have gone so far as to say in this vein that Gramsci was essentially a new Crocean. Still others argue that Gramsci was a real insurrectionary revolutionary, and that his views, translated onto the Italian scene, perfectly convey the sense made of contemporary history and praxis by the Comintern. The other category of problems is, for the literary scholar, what we can call the philological one, that is, the condition, the state, and from there, the signifying system of Gramsci's texts.

Gramsci's writings are of three different types: 1) the large set of occasional pieces written by him as a journalist during the period when he was editor of *Ordine nuovo* and additionally when he was a regular contributor of cultural, dramatic, and political criticism to other journals and magazines such as *Avanti* and *II Grido del Popolo.* 2) Gramsci's writings on questions and topics and writers that preoccupied him throughout his life, and which can be said to form a whole despite the fact that they are distributed more or less all over the place, and cannot really be said, in any one instance, to form a complete or finished work: among these works are the study of Croce, Prodiga, and Machiavelli, the analyses of culture and intellectuals, the great work on the southern (meridionale) question. 3) Gramsci's prison notebooks and letters, a vast collection of fragments, linked, as I said, by Gramsci's powerful and compelling intellect, by his involvement in the working-class movement, by the European resistance to fascism, by his unique fascination with the modern state and its "civil society", by his really almost incredible range of miscellaneous reading, by his family and party affiliations, loves, problems, by his own--I believe this is a central--determination to elaborate, to grapple with, to come to clearer and clearer formulations of the role of mind in society. Cutting through the large and fundamentally disjunct edifice of his work is the never-to-be forgotten fact that Gramsci's training was in philology, and that--like Vico--he understood the profoundly complex and interesting connection between words, texts, reality and political/social history or distinct physical entities.

One can see, even from this very cursory survey of what, in dealing with Gramsci, one has to take into account interpretively speaking. But there are some--no more than a small handful of rules, it seems to me--that can guide our reading of his work as a whole and especially here and there in the *Prison Notebooks.* Let me try now to enumerate them schematically, as they have to do with a reading of Gramsci, and not with some of the larger, and yet more regional, issues of whether or not he said one thing or another about his party's policy, about gradualism, reformism, etc. I am concerned with Gramsci that is as having produced, as being the producer of a certain type of critical

consciousness, which I believe is geographical and spatial in its fundamental coordinates.

1) Gramsci is sensitive to the fact that the world is made up of "ruler and ruled", that there are leaders and led, *(The Prison Notebooks,* 144) and that nothing in the world is *natural (The Prison Notebooks,* 157-8), and that when it comes to ideas, "they are not spontaneously 'born' in each individual brain" *(The Prison Notebooks,* 192 and ff). Therefore, everything he writes is based on the presumption that politics and power and collectivity are always involved when culture, ideas and texts are to be studied and/or analyzed. More importantly, this also applies to the writing of texts--such as his own, which are always *situated.*

2) Gramsci is programmatically opposed to two things, from one end to the other of his career: a) the tendency to homogenize, equalize, mediatize everything, what we can call the temporalizing and homological function by which the whole problem of specificity, locality and or identity is reformulated so as to make equivalence; b) the tendency to see history and society as working according to deterministic laws of economics, sociology or even of universal philosophy.

3) A great deal of what Gramsci is concerned with is not only the history of an idea or a system of ideas in the world of ruler and ruled: but also, the connection between ideas and institutions and classes; and more important, ideas as productions producing not only their coherence and density, but also--and this is where Gramsci is most compelling—producing their own "aura" (the word is Benjamin's) of legitimacy, authority, self-justification. In other words, Gramsci is interested in ideas and in cultures as specific modes of persistence in what he calls civil society, which is made up of many often discontinuous *areas.*

4) In everything he writes, Gramsci breaking down the vulgar distinction between theory and practice in the interest of a new unity of the two--namely, his notion of concrete intellectual work. Thus, everything Gramsci wrote was intended as a contribution to praxis and as a self-justifying theoretical statement: here we can see the consistency of his view in 3) above, that all ideas, all texts, all writings are embedded in actual geographical situations that make them possible, and that in turn make them extend institutionally and temporally. History therefore derives from a discontinuous geography. To a certain extent, and here I speculate, the radically occasional and fragmentary quality of Gramsci's writing is due partially to his work's situational intensity and sensitivity; it is also due to something that Gramsci wanted to preserve, his critical consciousness, which for him, I think came to mean not being coopted by a system, not in prison, not being coopted even by the system, the history, the density of one's own past writing, rooted positions, vested interests, and so forth. The note, the article in a newspaper, the meditative

fragment, the occasional essay, all have their generic constitutive nature going in two opposed directions so to speak. First, of course, the writings address an immediate problem at hand in all its situational complexity, as an uneven ensemble of relationships. But second, and going away from the situation out there to the situation of the writer, these occasional disjunctive acts dramatize the physical contingency of the writer himself, that that too is undercut by the momentary nature of his position, that he cannot write for all time, but that he is in a situation compelling him to "prismatic" expression. Gramsci chose these forms then as ways of never finishing his discourse, never completing his utterance for fear that it would compromise his work by giving it the status of a text both to himself and to his readers, by turning his work into a body or *resolved* systematic ideas that would exercise their dominion over him and over his reader.

5) Connected to all this then, we must remember that most of Gramsci's terminology—hegemony, social territory, ensembles of relationship, intellectuals, civil and political society, emergent and traditional classes, territories, regions, regions, domains, historical blocks--is what I would call a critical and geographical rather than an encyclopedic, or totalizingly nominative or systematic terminology. The terms slide over rather than fix on what they talk about; they illuminate and make possible elaborations and connections, rather than holding down, reifying, fetichizing. Most of all, I think Gramsci is interested in using terms for thinking about society and culture as productive activities occurring territorially, rather than as repositories of goods, ideas, traditions, institutions to be incorporated as reconciled correspondences. His terms always depart from oppositions--mind vs matter, rulers vs ruled, theory vs praxis, intellectuals vs workers--which are then contextualized, this is, they remain within contextual control not the control, of some hypostasized, outside force like identity or temporality which supposedly gives them their meaning by incorporating their differences into a larger identity. Like Foucault after him, Gramsci is interested in hegemony and power, but it is a much more subtle understanding he has of power than Foucault because it is never abstracted, or even discussed as abstracted from a particular social totality; unlike Foucault, Gramsci's notion of power is neither occult, nor irresistible and finally one-directional. The basic social contest for Gramsci is the one over hegemony, that is the control of essentially heterogenous, discontinuous, non-identical and *unequal* geographies of human habitation and effort. There is no redemption in Gramsci's world, which true to a remarkable Italian tradition of pessimistic materialism (e.g. Vico, Lucretius, Leopardi) is profoundly secular.

What this all does to identity, which you recall is at the core of Hegelian temporality, is to render it unstable and extremely provisional. Gramsci's world is in constant flux, as the mind negotiates the shifting currents of the

contest over historical blocks, strata, centers of power and so on. No wonder then that in the *Prison Notebooks* he spends so much time talking about the different options offered by the war of maneuver and the war of position: an understanding of the historical-social world is so spatially grasped by Gramsci as to highlight the instabilities induced by constant change, movement, volatility. In the final analysis, it is this view that primarily makes it possible for emergent and subaltern classes to arise and appear, given that according to the strictly Hegelian model, the dominant mainstream absorbs dissonance into the problem of change that consolidates the new, and reaffirmed identity.

This Gramscian critical consciousness has had very important consequences for literary history and criticism. In the first place, it has been far more responsive to the real material texture of socio-political change from the point of view not of what Adorno calls identitarian thought but of factures and disjunctions that are healed or knitted up temporarily, as a matter of contingency. Take, as an instance, of this non-identarian viewpoint Raymond Williams's *The Country and the City*. Williams's beginning point is the distinction between two worlds, two geographical entities--urban and rural--whose relationships English literature negotiates, now concentrating on one, now on the other. Thus, the tension in romantic literature between rural nature and the emergence of the treat industrial metropolis is seen by Williams as going through a remarkable number of changes, from Wordsworth's early expressions of confidence in nature, to his later stress on lonely, dispossessed rural figures (Michael and the Old Cumberland Beggar) to a tense of how the poet of feeling is driven back on himself in order to create from within himself a new abstraction, Man or Humanity; and this movement gives rise to the new green language of country poetry as it is exemplified in Clare principally, but also in lesser poets like Bloomfield and Selbourne. On the other hand, Williams's analysis of rural writing is directly related to the emerging complex identity of the modern city, whose "contradictory reality" is composed "of vice and protest, of crime and victimization, of despair and dependence." This is glimpsed of course in Blake and Cobbett, but soon in Dickens, the various so-called industrial novelists, and later, in what Williams marvelously describes as George Eliot's attempts to create in her novels, those knowable communities not directly afforded people in the mid- to late-nineteenth century.

In this way then Williams is not a conventional historian of literature, tracking from one period to another with effortless succession. What interests him throughout is the social contest over territory—how estates were acquired so that, for instance, Ben Jonson and Jane Austen, each quite differently might write about them. And this will later give rise to the urban businessman, Dombey or Bulstrode, whose activities, as powerful impress,

attests to the presence of a financial or industrial or mercantile form of capitalism. To Williams, quite uniquely among major critics, there is this capacity for seeing literature not as a Whiggish advance in formal and aesthetic awareness, nor as a placid, detached, privileged record of what history wrought and which the institution of literature incorporates with sovereign, almost Olympian prowess, but rather literature as itself a site of contention within society, in which work, profit, poverty, dispossession, wealth, misery and happiness are the very materials of the writer's craft, in which the struggle to be clear or to be partisan or detached or committed is in the very nature of the text. Here is Williams on Hardy:

> It is not only that Hardy sees the realities of labouring work, as in Marty South's hands on the spars and Tess in the swede field. It is also that he sees the harshness of economic process, in inheritance, capital, rent and trade, within the continuity of the natural processes and persistently cutting across them. The social process created in this interaction is one of class and separation, as well as of chronic insecurity, as this capitalist farming and dealing takes its course. The profound disturbances that Hardy records cannot then be seen in the sentimental terms of neo-pastoral: the contrast between country and town. The exposed and separated individuals, whom Hardy puts at the center of his fiction, are only the most developed cases of a general exposure and separation. Yet they are never merely illustrations of this change in a way of life. Each has a dominant personal history, which in psychological terms bears a direct relation to the social character of the change. *(The Country and the City,* 210)

Note here the proliferation of spatial terms--the contrast between country and town, the interaction of class and separation, chronic insecurity, the exposed and separated individuals who are instances of a general exposure and separation. All this, Williams goes on a page later, is part of the "difficult mobility" that Hardy, more than most English novelists, tried to render in his work with a success, Williams adds that centers "his novels in the ordinary processes of life and work". *(The Country and the City,* 211). In his concluding chapters, Williams sketches the new geography of high imperialism and decolonization, with their re-figuring of the relationships between peripheries and metropolitan center.

Although one can be critical of his pronounced Anglo-centrism, it has always seemed to me that Williams's great virtue as a critic is that alone of his generation in the US and Britain, he was attuned to the astonishingly productive possibilities of the Gramscian critical consciousness, firmly rooted

as that was in the very landscapes, geographies, mobile spaces of a history conceived and interpreted as something more complex and uneven than the Hegelian synthesis had once permitted. I do not mean to say that the various interpretive modes grounded in temporality with which I have, as a form of shorthand, identified with Hegel are to be discarded, or in some way thrown aside. On the contrary, as my enormous interest in and respect for Auerbach testifies, I think it is an absolutely essential thing for us. But what I *do* want to add is that historically the world's geography has changed so definitely as to make it nearly impossible to attempt reconciliations between history and literature without taking account of the new and complex varieties of historical experiences now available to us all in the post-Eurocentric world. Hegel and Auerbach, and of course Lukacs, make no secret of their predilection, not to say prejudice for the centrality of Europe, at the same time that they argue for what they intend as a universal scheme of literary history. But what if the world has changed so drastically as to allow now for almost the first time a new geographical consciousness of a decentered, or multiply-centered world, a world no longer sealed within watertight compartments of art of culture or history, but mixed, mixed up, varied, complicated by the new difficult mobility of migrations, the new Independent states, the newly emergent and burgeoning cultures? And what if it is now possible for say a specialist in Indian or Arabic literature to look at Western literature not as if the center was Europe, but rather as if his/her optic needed also to include equally India, Egypt, or Syria *and* Europe and America as well? And finally, what if the concept of literature has been expanded beyond texts to the general category of culture to include the mass media and journalism, film, video, rock and folk music, each of which contains its own completely dissonant history of dissent, protest and resistance, such as the history of student movements, or women's history, or the history of subaltern classes and peoples, the records of whose experience are not to be found in the official chronicles and traditions by means of which the modern state compiles its self-image?

Only an ostrich could possibly ignore the challenges these interruptions and interruptions open up in the seamless web of an ongoing, and calmly unfolding temporal fabric of classical literary history, as for instance rendered in Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious*, which you recall is an effort to synthesize the findings of psychoanalysis, linguistics and Deleuzian philosophy within a vastly expanded conception of Marxism. I myself do not think that such attempts work, despite the heroism of the endeavor or the brilliance of Jameson's interpretive skills. What he ends up with are beautiful ideal structures, more medieval and scholastic than they are accurate soundings in the turbulence of our time. Neither do the various post-modern theories put forward by J.F. Lyotard and his disciples, with this disdain for the

grand historical narratives, their interest in mimicry and weightless pastiche, their unrelenting Eurocentrism.

What then are we to conclude, especially those of us from this part of the world, Arabs for whom the study of European and more particularly English literature has, I still think, a coherence and intellectual validity that should not dissolve in a nativist chorus urging us only to look at our own traditions and ignore all the others. Is there a way for us to understand the connection not simply between history and literature, but between several histories and several literatures? That I think is the first step: that even if our focus happens professionally to be English literature, there is no reason why the consideration on critical consciousness which I have been discussing here at length should not be of central concern: do we want to look at English history and literature as forming a closed world whose internal dynamics have gone on undisturbed over eight or nine centuries with no reference to anything but their own resolutely stable and *endlessly* self-confirming identity? Or rather do we choose to look at English literature and history in the first place as expressing a "difficult mobility" separated and exposed according to the different locals in which the literature actually takes place. Thus, the literature of the country house is different from that of the poor house, the factory or the dissenting churches. But not only do we emphasize the differences in locale, but we must also, I believe, bring to bear some sense of the counterpoint between England and the overseas territories--including this one--on which its activity, political, commercial, cultural also impinged. I do not mean, however, studying the image of the Egyptian in British fiction, or looking at travelers in the Middle East, or even Orientalists. Those kinds of study are interesting and important, but they have been done and represent only a beginning approach that is essentially like a first mapping, necessary but not infinitely rich in possibilities. I have in mind two things--although there are several others that one can think of--that strike me as more worth the effort, more likely to make a difference in our overall understanding of the relationship between history and literature.

One is to study the history and literature of England by highlighting, problematizing, emphasizing the outsider's perspective we bring to it by virtue of the fact that we *are* outsiders. In the first place this entails, I believe, stressing not the mainstream but resistance to it as provided not only by the dissenting tradition but by those forces, figures, structures and forms whose presence derives from outside the *establishment* mainstream. Two years ago, I was particularly impressed by Gaber Asfour's essay in *Alif* on the rhetoric of the oppressed in Arabic literature in which he reads texts for dissimulation, allusion, and oppositional strategies instead of for those affirmations of cultural identity furnished by the establishment, which tends to drive all underground and subversive energies to the margins. As a corollary to this we

should try very self-consciously to ask ourselves what a re-thought and re-appropriated canon of English literary history would be like for Arabs: what does growing up and belonging to a great tradition like Arabic specifically prepare us to read and interpret in English literature and history that might not be available to native-speakers? I am reminded of Borges's parable "Kafka's Precursors"; each writer creates his own antecedents, he says. What is the English history and literature that leads up not to an English, but to an *Arab* reader? What are the British antecedents for an Arab critic?

Finally, it seems to me that an awareness of history, literature and geography as I have been discussing them here raises the issue of whether it is culture as the struggle over modernity or over the past that we are struggling to comprehend. Both Lukacs and Gramsci saw dissonance and its resolutions as belonging to the present, not to a remote or ideal image of the past. This must also be urgently true for Arabs today, I believe. Modernity *is* crisis, not a finished ideal state seen as the culmination of a majestically plotted history. It is the hallmark of the modern that there are no absolutisms--neither those of power, nor of pure reason, nor of clerical orthodoxy and authority—and in this respect, we must be Arabs engaged with modernity, free of absolutisms.

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