

*Response to Symposium on
Post-Structuralism and American History*

The Poverty of Post-Structuralism: An Historian's Point of View

Cushing Strout

Anyone who challenges the validity, style, and influence of French post-structuralism in American academic culture is bound to be suspected of being old-fashioned, anti-theoretical, or nativist, whether or not the shoe fits, as it sometimes does. Deconstructionists in particular have tended to reply not to the arguments but to “the credentials and motives of opponents.” Skeptics know in advance that they will be cast in the role of the unsophisticated “person of common sense and received opinion.”¹ Unlike literary critics, however, practicing artists and historians are likely to have strong aversions to “deconstructionists, politically correct busybodies and agenda—driven theorists.”² The novelist Cynthia Ozick described in 1987 what was happening in academia: “English departments have set off after theory, and use culture as an instrument to illustrate doctrinal principles, whether Marxist or ‘French Freud.’” What could any canon mean but “reactionary, racist, sexist, elitist closure?”³

The identity of the author or of the nation was increasingly subject to deconstructive skepticism, while paradoxically at the same time identity politics of race, ethnicity, and sex were uncritically celebrated. Jonathan Arac in his comment on the “Symposium on Post-Structuralism and American History,” speaking in the lingua franca of his movement about his own work, is proud of “exercising suspicion against the great modern figures of wholeness, such as author, nation, and literature itself.” He is relieved that at least none of the papers

“reinforces the national definition of ‘American’ history even if none highlights it as a problem that poststructuralism might alter.”⁴ He appears to confuse cultural nationalism with national identity, which historians must take seriously. Three feminist historians have recently recognized the problem for writing a national history that is posed by the fragmenting enthusiasms for group pride. They understand sympathetically the genesis of this identity politics, but they nevertheless call for the need to see that “the nation exists as a powerful unifying force in American public life. People who call for pride in the group often minimize the importance of engendering pride in the nation, but the two stand or fall together. It is the nation that sustains and protects the array of particular identities in the United States.”⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb has pointed out that the father of social history, Marc Bloch, affirmed that he had made France’s past his own, breathed freely only in her climate, and done his best along with others to defend her interests.⁶ Why should not American historians be just as confident of the legitimacy of their own national identities and commitments?

I hope I shall avoid responding to the “Symposium on Post-Structuralism and American History” in *American Studies* by attacking the motives or credentials of its participants, which I respect, but I do have to challenge vigorously their points of view because of their affiliation with a French anti-humanism that is contrary to all my thinking about history, biography, and literature. That broad front will have to justify my several references to my own work. Whatever its flaws, it has been engaged with action and imagination, persons and ideas, analysis and narrative. Current critics of it might accuse me of American “exceptionalism,” but I would admit to it only in Tocqueville’s comparative sense of appreciating the distinguishing characteristics of America’s Puritan and Revolutionary origins. He has a modern French supporter in the late Jean-Claude Lamberti’s penetrating *Tocqueville and the Two Democracies*.

The Symposium is unintentionally revealing about the status of French theory in American academe. “The practical problems faced by historians,” Saul Cornell observes, “seem to have prompted little if any useful speculation on the part of theorists.”¹⁷ He has been reading the wrong theorists. Devotees of French “anti-humanism” always ignore those French thinkers who have had much to say about written history—Raymond Aron, Paul Veyne, and Paul Ricoeur. The latter has the distinction not only of dealing with Aron and Veyne but also with the Anglo-American philosophers R. G. Collingwood, William Dray, W. B. Gallie, Maurice Mandelbaum, and Louis Mink.⁸ These philosophers have had pertinent things to say about written history with more lucidity and more knowledge of actual historical work than anything in the fashionable and thornily obscure French post-structuralists, whose appeal has mainly been to literary critics rather than to historians.

Characteristically, the Symposium does not include any dissenters, though Saul Cornell does have the merit of at least recognizing criticisms by Jürgen Habermas and by the neo-Marxists Elizabeth Fox Genovese and Terry Eagleton.

The only dissenting paper from a participant is the intramural one from the feminist historian Nancy Isenberg, who thinks that Joan Scott, who appealed to post-structuralism as an aid to feminist history, has failed to take sufficiently to heart Foucault's "critique of universals, neutrality, objectivity, and the will to truth embodied in the humanist approach to history."⁹ She might note, however, that he called his own work "fictions," but said he did not mean to say "that truth is therefore absent."¹⁰ Just how it can be present in a fiction he never makes clear, nor do his acolytes. Isenberg, in a move characteristic of poststructuralism, lumps together neutrality and objectivity, but it is a confusion to do so. To show that a historian is not neutral about an issue or problem, or indulges in praise or blame, is not a criticism, but it is a criticism to show that a historical account fails to treat its material fairly or ignores evidence that is pertinent to the issues discussed or damaging to the historian's preconceptions or hopes.

The school of French "anti-humanism" (whether Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Lacan, or Derrida) has a common theme, the denigration of the self-conscious subject. Lévi-Strauss, for example, defines structuralism as a reintegration of man into nature that makes it possible to "disregard the subject--that unbearably spoilt child who has occupied the philosophical scene for too long now..."¹¹ It is the denial of the power of agency, whether individual or collective. Nevertheless, for historians Foucault at least has the advantage of writing about actual institutions, such as hospitals, prisons, and asylums, and he affirmed the need to be empirically particular about "who is engaged in struggle, what the struggle is about, and how, where, by what means and according to what rationality it evolves."¹² These are genuine historical questions, and he had the historical merit of knowing that "what happens now is not necessarily better or more advanced, or better understood, than what happened in the past."¹³ Nor did he think, as campus leftists often do, that "everything derives from the market economy, or from capitalist exploitation, or simply from the rottenness of our society," or that "everyone is responsible for everything"—all these recourses being "displacements that are glibly practiced today." He was, in fact, no friend of "the whole relentless theorization of writing which we saw in the 1960s," and he saw its use of linguistics, semiology, and psychoanalysis, for example, as proof that "the activity of the writer was no longer at the focus of things."¹⁴

This Foucault is congenial to historians, but his antihumanism, like that of the structuralists and poststructuralists, ultimately dismisses agency, for power in his view "is not built up out of 'wills' (individual or collective), nor is it derivable from interests."¹⁵ It then becomes as unhistorical as any other totalistic form of explanation, whether it be the Marxian dialectic or the feminist patriarchy, which explain everything in general and therefore nothing in particular. French historians, inspired by Fernand Braudel as editor of *Annales*, have emphasized "the long durée" in a structural way, in contrast to a narrative of political events. They have done so to such an extent and for so long that the current editor of *Annales*, Bernard Lepetit, has been developing a revisionary reflection that is

implied in the title of the lecture he gave at Cornell University this past May: "Do French Historians Take Agency Seriously?" He might well ask.

The denial of agency was linked to the collective political opinion in Paris that joined Marxists, structuralists, and poststructuralists in dismissing liberalism as mere bourgeois ideology. The tide, however, has changed since the late 1980s, though most American devotees of French anti-humanism seem not to know it. One sign of the new times is the favorable reappraisal of Raymond Aron about the time of his death in 1983, and there is now an institute in his honor, and its current head, François Furet, has furthered the study of Tocqueville, which Aron had kept alive in Paris during the long domination of Marxists and the anti-humanists. The welcome series on New French Thought, edited by Mark Lilla and Thomas Pavel, includes Pierre Manent's *An Intellectual History of Liberalism*, showing that the topic of liberalism has become legitimate in Paris again, as it was when Tocqueville first made his reputation in the 1830s.

This new climate in Paris was developing by 1985 when Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut made their critique of anti-humanism, *French Philosophy of the Sixties*. In America, however, criticizing the fashionable French theorists still made one vulnerable to charges of nativism. Criticizing structuralists for dehistoricizing literature and fictionalizing history, I defended in 1981 what George Eliot called "the veracious imagination," as opposed to what I called "the voracious imagination" by which everything becomes grist for its mill. The lion and the lamb are thus made to lie down together by feeding a lamb of fact to the lion of the imagination every day. See, for example, Saul Cornell's citation of Stanley Fish for the view that text and context are both "mere rhetorical constructions."¹⁶ Similarly, for Barry Shank the great advance of post-structuralism is the insistence that "reference to the real becomes a rhetorical tool used to justify and buttress a particular mode of interpretation of already existing textualized interpretation, with the aim of producing persuasive argument."¹⁷

It is rather like *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*. When Tweedledum claims that Alice exists only in the red king's dream and will vanish if he wakes up, she protests through her tears that she wouldn't be able to cry if she didn't exist. "I hope you don't suppose those are *real* tears?" Tweedledum interrupts her in a tone of great contempt. It should be noted that even Richard Rorty (to whom Saul Cornell appeals), while he rightly emphasizes that specifying a referent is always going to be in some vocabulary, is careful to add that he does *not* think that "we can't think or talk except about what has been created by our thought or talk."¹⁸

Yet Rorty fails to make room for historical thinking when he limits the vocabulary of the social sciences to descriptions that facilitate "prediction and control" or descriptions which "help one decide what to do."¹⁹ Neither seeking scientific prediction nor deciding what to do is appropriate to the historical problem of the understanding of an agent's action in the context of a process in which it actively participates.

Rhetoric is the ultimate element in Hayden White's *Metahistory* with its linguistic determinism by which figurative tropes in the rhetorical design of

written histories are alleged to be more fundamental than anything evidential in them and more explanatory even than the major historians' ideas about society, politics, and history. Moreover, historians are said to mediate between alternative dramatic modes of emplotment and different tropological strategies, which are allegedly connected by kinship as well to certain political ideologies. White simply presupposes that experience has no order but mere sequence until historians cast it into a rhetorical design for some aesthetic-political reason. But, as William Dray has paraphrased David Carr's reply to White: "stories are not only told of *what has been lived*, but are told *in being lived*."²⁰ Narrating is a basic element in our continuing ordinary experience, which for that reason is not mere discrete sequence or bare chronology without any form until the historian gets a hold of it.

In elaborating White's complicated grid, in contrast to Northrup Frye's view of history as a series of repetitions within a framework of compulsion and fatality, I remarked that White had transformed Clio from "Frye's greasy Joan, keeling the pot as a drab housemaid of compulsive repetitions, to a dark lady who speaks with a charming if somewhat artificial French accent...(Appropriately, it was French thinkers who originally made everything a matter of language, according to the principle of *Pygmalion's* Professor Higgins that 'the French don't care what you do actually, so long as you pronounce it properly.')"²¹ Peter Novick in *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* charged me with having a "nativist tone." Aside from lapsing into a surprising literalism for a sophisticated writer, Novick forgets that if I were a nativist, I would hardly have said in 1958, as I did in my book, which he commends for being "the only treatment which offered a systematic evaluation of Becker's and Beard's epistemology," that they "worked under peculiarly American disadvantages," because they did not have the European tradition of "philosopher-historians, like Wilhelm Dilthey, Benedetto Croce, Ortega y Gasset, Raymond Aron, and R. G. Collingwood," all of whom had influenced my thinking.²²

My brief for the veracious imagination was offered as a way of taking seriously the problem of the historical novel, which in its best (infrequent because difficult) form occupies a kind of "border country" in which the fictive and the historical share some common territory without either element imperialistically absorbing the other. The philosopher Frederick A. Olafson shares my view (against White's) that assimilating history to literature, or the other way around, tends "to obliterate the most distinctive features of one or the other of them."²³ The order of histories contains too many consciousnesses and too many large-scale events, as he points out, to be compared closely with the unity of fictional forms; and the self-conscious recognitions by central fictional characters of the meaning (whether tragic, comic, or ironic) of their situations is most unlikely to be matched very often by actual historical persons in their public lives.²⁴

Enlarging the reach of the fictive tends inevitably to obscure its meaning for lack of any contrast with the nonfictive. White extravagantly assumes with

rhetorical overkill, for example, that “not only all interpretation, but also all language is politically contaminated.”²⁵ He gives no evidence because, whether they are describing or interpreting, scientists, historians, and literary critics characteristically say many things about their subjects that are not political, even as all of us do in ordinary life, no matter how politically committed we may be. White himself in developing his theory makes crucial assertions that have no evident political meaning whatever.²⁶

The participants in the Symposium make much of the fallacy involved in treating evidence by a naive realism as if it were simply an open window on the past, requiring no interpretation. But post-structuralists are latecomers to this argument and typically escalate it into a dogmatic and radical skepticism. The tradition of philosophical idealism, whether in F. H. Bradley, Croce, Ortega y Gasset, or Collingwood, has always challenged naive realism, as did the historians Carl Becker and Charles Beard in the 1930s. Saul Cornell in his final footnote recognizes that Richard Rorty has made the point that “the appeal of recent theory is rooted in an older philosophical debate among western intellectuals” about idealism.²⁷

But the philosophers I have mentioned did not make the current mistake, which simply reverses the error of positivism. As the historian Carlo Ginsburg has pointed out, the recognition that historical evidence is not “a transparent medium,” or “an open window that gives us direct access to reality,” is a crucial contribution to historical understanding. But turning the idea of evidence into “a wall, which by definition precludes any access to reality,” is only “a sort of inverted positivism.”²⁸

Saul Cornell helpfully suggests the value to historians of “the concept of inter-textual reading,” for “every author is also a reader, and every text is also a reading of other texts,” but he attributes the idea to post-structuralist theory. Actually, its most notable exponent in literary history has been Harold Bloom. He has never believed in “the death of the author” according to post-structuralist dogma; on the contrary, he has taken the individuality of creators very seriously in showing how an author and a text are involved in “the anxiety of influence” with respect to a preceding author and text. Bloom’s original and unique position is, as he remarks, often considered deconstructive by traditionalists and traditionalist by Deconstructors, but his own intellectual affiliations are with Emerson, William James, Freud, and Richard Rorty rather than with French theorists.²⁹

His intertextualism is not merely a fruitful proposal for literary historians, particularly when it does not make as much as he does of the oedipal model, for authors and texts can be related to their predecessors by many feelings and attitudes besides anxious rivalry. I found Bloom’s intertextualism valuable, for example, not only for discussing many American novelists and their texts, when they deal with their predecessors, but also for understanding Lincoln’s revisionary relation to Jefferson, to whom he appealed as a basis for his own criticism of slavery, and William James’s pragmatic revision of Emerson’s idealism when he

reread him in preparing to celebrate him.³⁰ To deal with such relationships is to deal with matters of biographical context as well as of textual analysis.

Saul Cornell is anxious to conflate texts and contexts on the ground that both have to be “decoded and interpreted.” They do, but that does not eliminate the difference between a text (which is intended to be one, whether it is a letter, a public speech, a work of philosophy or of fiction) and the biographical circumstances (including intentions but not confined to them) in which the author produces it. Such an approach has the advantage, I argued, of subordinating critics to creators (the reverse of what literary critics have recently done) and also of subordinating theories *about* tradition to the practice of artists, philosophers, and statesmen in actually *making* tradition themselves by their encounters with their predecessors.

I had the misfortune of making my case concretely at a time when theorizing was the rage in American Studies. It is an obsession that the symposium in *American Studies* will, I fear, only further encourage. Jonathan Arac justly observes that by contrast psychohistory had “from the beginning the remarkable interdisciplinary foray of Erik Erikson’s *Young Man Luther*,” while the impact of post-structuralism on written history seems to be “discussed in advance of its occurrence,” for there are no landmark concrete historical examples to illustrate it.³¹ Even so, he thinks psychohistory has had much fuss and “small results.” Reviewing in 1976 the “psychohistorical work” on American topics over the past two decades, I was depressed by the gap between the theoretical pronouncements of promise and the paucity of convincing empirical studies.³² Even so, I found fruitful Eriksonian-style treatments of Jonathan Edwards, John Quincy Adams, Emerson, William James, G. Stanley Hall, Mark Twain, and Willa Cather. I will not be surprised or disappointed, however, if Arac’s phrase “a lot of fuss” will in the end be all that one can say about post-structuralism and American history. I don’t think its practice will be much influenced (unless it is for the worse) by post-structuralist absolutizing of rhetoric in the guise of a radical but dogmatic skepticism. The theorists in vogue in our country in recent decades, who are quoted or cited in the Symposium, talk about “decoding” so obsessively, as Kenneth Minoque has observed, that it is as if “communication involved a special form of scrambling to prevent its meaning being known to outsiders.”³³ Should historians respond to the Symposium’s invoking of this superiority of sophistication in theory, they risk picking up its “modish distortions,” just as they pick up other distortions whenever they let theory play too much of a part in their work.

Another monistic distortion is the supposition of Cultural Studies that all texts must be “decoded” in terms of “their contribution to the struggle between the hegemonic and counterhegemonic ideologies of a particular society.”³⁴ This is the contemporary version of the old binary polarity between “progressive” and “reactionary” that bedevilled the work of the Progressive historians, before they came under the criticism of Richard Hofstadter in America and of Herbert Butterfield in England. Moreover, this polarizing category tends to see conven-

tions onesidedly as limiting, constricting, and repressive, rather than as positively enabling, providing resources for speech and action.³⁵

Meanwhile, however, French intellectuals themselves have moved on well beyond the anti-humanism that emerged in the 1960s. It is an irony, whether comic or pathetic the reader can decide, that Barry Shank, believing that he is on “the cutting edge,” should now announce that for historians “the advances of poststructuralist theory are a necessary means toward achieving a sufficiently subtle and nuanced reference to a textualized real.”³⁶ Most historians will be as doubtful about what these “advances” are as Alice was when the White Queen explained to her that it was never jam today because it was jam every *other* day. The Queen had a kindly explanation for Alice’s confusion: “That’s the effect of living backwards; it always makes one a little giddy at first—” In this case it is the Symposium participants, however, who seem to me to be living backwards, as if French anti-humanism were still, as it once appeared to be, the wave of the future.

Notes

1. John M. Ellis, *Against Deconstruction* (Princeton, 1989), vii-ix.
2. Frank Conroy, “Stop Nitpicking a Genius,” *New York Times Magazine* (June 25, 1995), 30.
3. Cynthia Ozick, “Science and Letters: God’s Work—and Ours,” *New York Times Book Review* (Sept. 27, 1987), 3.
4. Jonathan Arac, “Post-Structuralism and the Contexts of History,” *American Studies* 36:1 (1995), 112.
5. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), 101.
6. Gertrude Himmelfarb, “Is National History Obsolete?” *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987), 132.
7. Saul Cornell, “Splitting the Difference: Textualism, Contextualism, and Post-modern History,” *American Studies* 36:1 (1995), 69.
8. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative* (Chicago, 1984), I, 111-206.
9. Nancy Isenberg, “Second Thoughts on Gender and Women’s History,” *American Studies* 36:1 (1995), 96.
10. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York, 1980), 193.
11. Quoted by Tzvetan Todorov, “Lévi-Strauss,” *New French Thought: Political Philosophy*, ed. Mark Lilla (Princeton, 1994), 50.
12. Foucault, *Power/Knowledge*, 164.
13. *Ibid.*, 50.
14. *Ibid.*, 127.
15. *Ibid.*, 188-89.
16. Cornell, “Splitting the Difference,” 62.
17. Barry Shank, “Conjuring Evidence for Experience: Imagining a Post-Structuralist History,” *American Studies* 36:1 (1995), 90.
18. Richard Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays, 1972-1980* (Minneapolis, 1982), 155.
19. “Method, Social Science, and Social Hope,” *ibid.*, 197.
20. William Dray, “Narrative and Historical Realism,” *On History and Philosophers of History* (Leiden, 1989), 137.
21. Cushing Strout, “The Fortunes of Telling,” *The Veracious Imagination: Essays on American History, Literature, and Biography* (Middletown, Conn., 1981), 13; Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York, 1988), 606.
22. Novick, 404; Cushing Strout, *The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl Becker and Charles Beard* (New Haven, 1958), 14.

23. Frederick A. Olafson, *The Dialectic of Action: A Philosophical Interpretation of History and the Humanities* (Chicago, 1979), 38.
24. *Ibid.*, 80-81.
25. Hayden White, "The Fictions of Factual Representations," *The Literature of Fact*, ed. Angus Fletcher (New York, 1976), 35.
26. His extravagant assertions may resonate at some much higher and more interesting level with the strident undebatable political rhetoric of the polarized time in which he was writing.
27. Cornell, 80, n. 69.
28. Carlo Ginzburg, "Checking the Evidence: The Judge and the Historian," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991), 87,83. For criticism of merging history and fiction see also Lionel Gossman, "The Rationality of History," *Between History and Literature* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990), 285-324; Cushing Strout, "Border Crossings: History, Fiction, and *Dead Certainties*," *History and Theory*, 31:2 (1992), 153-62.
29. For his critical comments on French theory and his favorable comments on Rorty and Freud, see Harold Bloom, *Agon: Towards a Theory of Revisionism* (New York, 1982), 38-44.
30. Cushing Strout, *Making American Tradition: Visions and Revisions from Ben Franklin to Alice Walker* (New Brunswick, 1990), chaps.5 and 9.
31. Arac, 105.
32. Cushing Strout, "The Uses and Abuses of Psychology in American History," *American Quarterly* 28:3 (1976), 342.
33. Kenneth Minogue, "Method in Intellectual History: Quentin Skinner's *Foundations*," *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and His Critics*, ed. James Tully (Princeton, 1988), 188.
34. Cornell, 66.
35. Minogue, 191-92
36. Shank, 88.