Introduction: posing the question

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Every mere ‘ism’ is a misunderstanding and the death of history –
Heidegger, What is a Thing?

It could be argued that the only common factor in the various attempts that have been made to define structuralism and post-structuralism and their difference lies in the admission of the difficulty of any such definition and the questionableness of any such difference. A provisional description might, however, state that structuralism involves a method of analysis in which individual elements are considered not in terms of any intrinsic identity but in terms of their relationship within the system in which they function. A system is regarded as constituted by the differences between the elements that operate within it: structuralism attempts to examine the structure of such systems from a more ‘impersonal’ or ‘scientific’ perspective than that of the perceiving or intending subject. Post-structuralism might be said to be suspicious of the apparent ease with which this ‘decentering’ of the subject is carried out, and to submit that operation to more rigorous consequences of difference: the first casualty of this being the very possibility of the closed system on which structuralism is predicated.

One crucial difference between structuralism and post-structuralism involves the question of history. At first sight, the structuralist use of Saussure’s distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic appears to allow for the effacement of history altogether. It is no accident that the essentially spatial model of structure seems to work well for a phenomenon such as myth, where the usual historical perspective is unavailable. But if the analysis of myth, a universal ‘grammar’ of narrative, and even perhaps Foucault’s famous epistemes, can avoid the question of their own historicity, it could be said that the ‘post’ of post-structuralism contrives to reintroduce it. Thus Derrida, for instance, calls attention to the process by which difference operates temporally as well as spatially, introducing his well-known neologism ‘différance’ with the comment that:
if the word 'history' did not carry with it the theme of a final repression of difference, we could say that differences alone could be 'historical' through and through and from the start.1

But as this quotation indicates, if post-structuralism reintroduces history into structuralism (or, more accurately, shows that effects of history have been reduced) it also poses questions to the concept of history as such.

The question of the relations between structuralism, post-structuralism and history is therefore an extremely complex one, and the purpose of this volume is to begin to situate and untangle its complexities by engaging with it in a number of interrelated ways: by considering the claims made, especially within Marxism, for the historical determination of all literary and other discourses; by following through the operation of difference upon historical absolutes; by re-reading the aesthetic tradition within which post-structuralism (and its alleged anti- or a-historicism) is often located; and by presenting examples of close textual criticism which demonstrate the subtler interpretation of history (whether literary or extra-literary) made possible by post-structuralism. By way of introduction, it will be helpful both to examine afresh the question of history as it arises in classic structuralism and to consider a currently influential argument which, in contrast to the brief account we have just given, opposes post-structuralism to history.

I

Even though structuralism might at first sight appear to be very much more vulnerable to the charge of eliding the historical dimension, it has been against post-structuralism that 'history' has most insistently been paraded as if it were a definitive objection or a compelling answer to all possible questions. Structuralists, following Saussure's distinction between synchronic and diachronic modes of analysis and his emphasis on the importance of the former, often seemed quite content to ignore the existence of history, yet were less subject to attack than post-structuralists on these grounds. The reason for the reluctance to pose the question of history to structuralism may have been simple: it was in many cases Marxist thinkers, such as Goldmann, Althusser, Macherey, or Jameson, who were most actively involved in exploring structuralism's potential. Indeed, Barthes's seminal Mythologies, which could be read as broadly Marxist in orientation, combined structural analysis of bourgeois
myth with a constant invocation of history as the repressed of naturalising mythical discourse. According to the title of a well-known anthology, Marx himself was the first structuralist, while Lévi-Strauss, the anthropologist whose work was instrumental in introducing structuralism as a method of analysis in the social sciences, claimed that that work constituted nothing other than a reintegration of anthropological knowledge into the Marxian tradition.

On the other hand, although we shall go on to suggest that a fundamental complicity allowed structuralism to cohabit with the history it apparently ignored (see also Derek Attridge's essay on Saussure in this volume), it would be an over-simplification to assume simple mutual tolerance. We might say that structuralism addressed questions to history even as it tended to repress the question of history. We might take as an example Barthes's 1967 essay, 'The Discourse of History', which attacks that discourse's pretension to deliver 'the facts' guaranteed by 'the real'. Barthes's essay argues that the discourse of history performs a sleight of hand whereby a discursive operator, the referent, is projected into a realm supposedly beyond signification, from which position it can be thought to precede and determine the discourse which posits it as referent. Barthes claims that this 'paradox' 'governs the entire question of the distinctiveness of historical discourse': 'the fact can only have a linguistic existence, as a term in a discourse, and yet it is exactly as if this existence were merely the “copy”, purely and simply, of another existence situated in the extra-structural domain of the “real”. This type of discourse is doubtless the only type in which the referent is aimed for as something external to the discourse without it ever being possible to attain it outside this discourse' (17). Barthes goes on to propose an eminently structuralist account of this operation: the discourse of history is guilty of reducing the three-term structure of signification (signifier-signified-referent) to a two-term structure (signifier-referent), or rather of smuggling into this ostensibly two-term structure an illicit signified, 'the real in itself, surreptitiously transformed into a sheepish signified. Historical discourse does not follow the real, it can do no more than signify the real, constantly repeating that it happened, without this assertion amounting to anything but the signified “other side” of the whole process of historical narration' (17-18).

This apparently powerful questioning in fact proves either too little or too much: too little if it simply points to problems in a certain way of writing history as narrative; too much in that such a critique of the operation of reference applies well beyond the confines of
history. Moreover, although Barthes’s essay opens up promising avenues of analysis (which can lead, for example, to the refined rhetorical studies of Hayden White), it still necessarily presupposes a history ‘in’ which such discursive formations take place: Barthes’s essay ends with the claim that the decline of narration in ‘current historical science’ implies a ‘real ideological transformation: historical narration is dying because the sign of History is henceforth less the real than the intelligible’ (18, translation modified). This change, says Barthes, is marked by a concern with structures rather than with chronologies. Whatever the empirical truth of such an observation, it is clear that it defers the question of history and cannot resolve it: the ‘current’ and ‘henceforth’ and the ‘transformation’ mark very precisely a historical opening in the structure of Barthes’s essay, and this is an opening it can never understand. A similar point might be made about Foucault’s ‘archaeologies’, which may, in principle at least, be able to explicate everything within the epistemes, but can say nothing more powerful than ‘it happened’ about the shift from one to the next. Any attempt to write a history of the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism would be subject to the same difficulty.

II

In view of these complications, it is surprising to find that the attack mounted on post-structuralism in the name of history should be so confident in its reliance on precisely what is in question. Undoubtedly the most influential critique in the field of literary theory has been that of Frank Lentricchia, who first raised the problem of post-structuralism and the question of history by organising his entire history of modern criticism around the premise of a ‘repeated and often extremely subtle denial of history by a variety of contemporary theorists’. Lentricchia’s argument was quickly endorsed by Terry Eagleton, who claimed first that post-structuralism represented a ‘hedonist withdrawal from history’ and, a year later, that it amounted to a more menacing holocaust-like ‘liquidation of history’. Similarly, though moving beyond the confines of the literary, Perry Anderson has recently dismissed all post-structuralism on the grounds that it represents ‘the randomization of history’.

One reason for this mobilisation of hostility against post-structuralism by writers claiming to speak in the name of history, when structuralism had escaped relatively lightly, could lie in the fact
that ‘difference’, as understood by post-structuralism, is incompatible with orthodox formulations of the dialectic as much as it is with traditional absolutes, and therefore necessarily comes into conflict with classical Marxism in a way in which structuralism did not. As Mark Cousins argues in this volume by means of a comparison between the historian’s use of evidence and that of the law-court, history cannot provide an unquestionable ground once the working of difference is appreciated: and both non-Marxist and Marxist history are subject to this critique. Such a critique, however, also suggests that post-structuralism, with its description of history as difference, should now enter into dialogue with Marxism and show how such a concept of difference would affect it from within. Some of the consequences of that reworking can be seen in a number of essays in this volume, such as Tony Bennett’s ‘Texts in History’, or Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s essay on Marx’s texts on political economy.

Unlike later commentators such as Perry Anderson who wish to dismiss post-structuralism *tout court* in the name of Marxism and history, Lentricchia’s account remains a more powerful critique precisely because it raises many of the key questions about post-structuralism and history without proposing a simple rejection of the former in favour of the ‘reality’ of the latter: instead *After the New Criticism* constitutes a subtle attempt to hold on to some of the most fundamental aspects of the Marxist position without rejecting Derrida or Foucault out of hand. The questions that it raises are taken up and extended or redefined by the contributors to this volume who demonstrate that Lentricchia’s formulations are not always themselves unproblematical. Lentricchia contends that in the course of transportation to the USA the historical and political dimensions of European theory have disappeared, dissolving in the face of the continuing strength of the neo-Kantian aesthetics of the New Criticism. His argument, which has since been widely echoed, is that it is only American post-structuralism that denies history: to make this claim he contrasts it to the work of Derrida and Foucault. Persuasive though this thesis has been, it involves serious difficulties. The assertion that Derrida and Foucault are ‘broadly’ (191) or ‘roughly’ (209) compatible, that the agreement between the two on the subject of history is ‘extensive’ (192), and that they show a common ‘understanding of history’ (208), elides very substantial differences between the two articulated in Derrida’s 1963 discussion of Foucault’s *Madness and Civilisation* (1961). That that disagreement should take
place over the question of history suggests an incompatibility of some moment for Lentricchia's thesis, as Ann Wordsworth shows in her detailed examination of the debate in this volume.

A further move in Lentricchia's attempted assimilation of Derrida and Foucault is a silent metamorphosis of the former's écriture into the latter's 'discourse'. He substantiates this by arguing that, unlike the Yale critics, both acknowledge 'some form of the principle of determinacy' (190). Accordingly, in his description of Derrida, Lentricchia turns the 'trace' into a form of determination. But as Marian Hobson's essay in this volume shows, the 'trace' in Derrida is introduced explicitly to account for the production of the effects of difference without positing a determining cause which escapes its play. Lentricchia's history, formulated in terms of the social, the ethical and the political, is always, by contrast, posited as existing outside writing and determining it.

His criticism of the Yale critics takes the form of a repeated accusation of 'aestheticism': Lentricchia argues that post-structuralist 'solipsism' (141) and 'hedonism' (145) are the logical conclusion of the Kantian aesthetics of disinterestedness. This charge has subsequently been disputed by Paul de Man, who points out that, for Kant, aesthetics, far from being 'free from cognitive and ethical consequences', functions as the articulation of the entire Kantian philosophical system. De Man contends that 'the treatment of the aesthetic in Kant is certainly far from conclusive, but one thing is clear: it is epistemological as well as political through and through'.9 The Kant invoked by Lentricchia, he suggests, is that of a traditional misreading, and by bringing this to our attention de Man implies the need for a re-examination of the category of aesthetics itself, inaugurated in this volume by Rodolphe Gasché's account of the complicity of aesthetics and history in the texts of the founder of what has come to be thought of as the Kantian tradition, A. E. Baumgarten.

It is, finally, in the historical and institutional perspectives of Foucault that Lentricchia locates what he considers to be the necessary corrective to American post-structuralism. His use of Foucault takes the form of outlining a genealogical model of literary history extrapolated from the essay ' Nietzsche, Genealogy, History'. Setting aside the question of whether such a Foucauldian model can be, as Lentricchia claims, 'resolutely dialectical',10 any appropriation of Foucault for literary criticism ought also to encounter the problem that it is possible to distinguish two almost antithetical positions in
his writings on literature. In the early essays Foucault celebrated certain kinds of literary texts as a transgressive force comparable to madness itself. Here literature is the space in which the articulation of the other has had ‘no other law than that of affirming – in opposition to all other forms of discourse – its own precipitous existence’: \(^{11}\) as such it does indeed escape history’s manacles. As Foucault’s position changed, however, towards that outlined in *The History of Sexuality* (*La Volonté de Savoir*, 1976) in which madness no longer exists outside history but, like sexuality, becomes a focus for the exercise of social control, his attention in the literary sphere was increasingly directed to the way in which both the production and consumption of literature show it to be a writing practice constituted within the terms of a restrictive discursive formation.\(^{12}\) While this argument directly contradicts Foucault’s earlier position, its claims have far-reaching implications. As Jonathan Culler demonstrates in his essay ‘Criticism and Institutions’, one effect must be that any analysis of the conventions of reading and writing has to be extended to include the history and operation of the literary institution that enforces such discursive rules.

Perhaps an indication of such restraints operating within Lentricchia’s own discourse can be detected in his suggestion that American post-structuralist criticism retreats from ‘a social landscape of fragmentation’ to become ‘something like an ultimate mode of interior decoration’ (186). ‘Fragmentation’ is here still totalised as a ‘landscape’, and the dismissal of what Lentricchia calls the ‘interior’ in fact works as an exclusion of all that such a totalisation marginalises (e.g. the domestic). That post-structuralism facilitates the examination of differentiated and customarily marginalised histories – of phallogocentricism, of the fantastic structures of colonialism and of fascism – is a measure by which its interrogation of a dialectical history’s transcendence can be assessed. The essays here by Mary Nyquist, William Pietz, and Maud Ellmann exemplify its capacity to engage with such ‘marginal’ histories by means of textual analysis.

**III**

Post-structuralism and the question of history then, far from being a matter of the absence of history, involves nothing less than what Fredric Jameson has called ‘the crisis of historicity itself’.\(^{13}\) It is precisely this problem which is already picked out in some of Derrida’s earliest essays, especially ‘Force and Signification’, dating from 1963,
but already in the 1959 paper, "Genesis and Structure" and Phenomenology, where the affirmation that:

it is always something like an opening which will frustrate the structuralist project. What I can never understand, in a structure, is that by means of which it is not closed.

opens the question of history and adds the 'post' to structuralism before many of its major works were written. To this extent it is already a historical simplification to assume that post-structuralism simply comes after structuralism.

For Derrida's arguments in these essays are not simply historical: he begins 'Force and Signification' with the observation that structuralism would or will be (and perhaps now we could say has been or is) a problem for any historian of ideas, insofar as it involves, beyond any empirical difficulties of periodisation, 'a conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us, to historical objects... in particular'. This implies that 'the structuralist stance, as well as our own attitudes assumed before or within language, are not only moments of history. They are an astonishment, rather, by language as the origin of history. By historicity itself.'

The question of history is, in this description, excessive with respect to history: this worrying excess no doubt accounts for the repeated calls to 'get back to history', and for the accusations that history is what post-structuralism lacks. Such attacks invoke history, or History (the capital letter transforming a problem into a magic word) as a given which post-structuralism has somehow, culpably, managed to ignore. 'Language as the origin of history' (implying, as all of Derrida's analyses in Of Grammatology and elsewhere show, that this is no 'origin' at all), and no longer as discourse 'in' history, exceeds the History invoked by all Marxisms and historicisms. Structuralism, read in this way, not only emphasises that history is constructed as a discourse that will inevitably be contaminated by the operations of language that can no longer be historical in any simple sense, but also draws attention to a historicity inhabiting the very presupposition that history is the fundamental mode of being. Derrida's stress on structuralism's 'conversion of the way of putting questions to any object posed before us, to historical objects... in particular' can be compared to Heidegger's comment that 'every report of the past... is concerned with something that is static. This kind of historical reporting is an explicit shutting down of history, whereas it is, after all, a happening. We question historically if we ask what is still happening even if it seems to be past. We ask what is still happening and whether
we remain equal to this happening so that it can really develop. 16

Against this shutting down of history, then, we ‘question historically’
only from the opening or the historicity which is Derrida’s concern.

Once this question is opened, it is possible to discern the funda-
mental complicity which allowed structuralism to cohabit with
history: for just as the identification and description of structures
require the operator of closure, so history is organised only by a
certain closure, a ‘shutting down’, of historicity. This can be illustrated
by the differing arguments of Jameson and Lyotard. The former
passionately advocates the need to historicise, but grounds his call in
a transcendental notion of History as ultimate closure on relativising
and perspectival analysis. 17 This History turns out to be that provided
by the Marxist ‘Grand Narrative’ of the modes of production, the
privileged status of which cannot be non-dogmatically demonstrated.
Lyotard’s interrogation of the notion of the Grand Narrative 18 allows
him to avoid such dogmatism (which is probably implicit in any
recognisable philosophy of history) and to rephrase the historical in
terms of names and signs (in a Kantian rather than a Saussurean
sense, as explained in his essay in this volume). This takes seriously
‘language as the origin of history’, and opens post-structuralist perspec-
tives on ethics and politics which the closing of the question of
history had tended to reduce to unargued polemic.

Such resistance to totalisation and synthesis is perhaps the major
difficulty posed by post-structuralism, understood in this sense, to both
traditional and dialectical accounts of history. The logic of the
‘always already’, the notions of ‘originary repetition’ and of ‘strategy
without finality’, which occur in Derrida’s work are sufficient to
unsettle archè and/or telos which all such accounts of history pre-
suppose. Insofar as Derrida’s différence names the historicity of
history, then any attempt to explain différence historically (in terms
of the recent political and intellectual history of France, for example)
is condemned to misunderstand the question opened by post-
structuralism. It is the effects of that difficult opening that the essays
collected in this volume attempt to address.

NOTES

1 Jacques Derrida, Speech and Phenomena, and Other Essays on
Husserl’s Theory of Signs, trans. Newton Garver (Evanston: North-
2 The Structuralists: From Marx to Lévi-Strauss, eds. Richard and


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18 Especially in The Postmodern Condition, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester UP, 1984): any traces the body of the book may retain of linear or dialectical history are corrected in the essay published as an appendix to it, ‘Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?’, trans. Régis Durand.
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