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Review of Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History.*

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Robert Holton, *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998. 301 pp. ISBN 0745012833 (cloth).

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Self-reflective awareness of the subjectivity of point of view constitutes one hallmark of twentieth-century fiction, ranging from such modernist works as André Gide's *The Counterfeiters* and James Joyce's *Ulysses* to such postmodern novels as Thomas Pynchon's *V* and Christa Wolf's *Cassandra*. The undermining of an objective, omniscient point of view, a perspective virtually ubiquitous in the realist novels of the nineteenth century, formed part of a more comprehensive questioning and experimentation with other staples of realism such as character development and a fictional setting grounded in a recognizable world. If historical novels generally did not undermine the realist conventions of a believable fictional reality and credible characters, they did, at times, focus on and question the authority and alleged objectivity of perspective.

In particular, historical novels, as Robert Holton claims, often problematize the issue of point of view as a struggle among social groups "over the power and authority to narrate" (251). This struggle generally includes the attempts of a marginalized group to assert its narrative authority over a traditional narrator, usually a representative of the ruling race/class. Not surprisingly, this struggle reflects a time in which old empires were crumbling or obliterated by World War I or other historical developments. In *Jarring Witnesses: Modern Fiction and the Representation of History*, which focuses on point of view in narrative historiography, Holton convincingly traces the transformation of the voices of "jarring witnesses" from silenced, repressed groups in modernist works to legitimized narrators in postmodern Western fiction.

First published in 1994, this lucid, thorough investigation into the elusive goal of constructing a coherent, comprehensive historical narrative contains material familiar to those versed in theories of history and fiction. Nevertheless, it can serve as a valuable reference tool for scholars interested in modern literature insofar as it provides an encyclopedic, though not updated, bibliography, a substantial overview of theories of history, and an insightful analysis of major literary works such as Joseph Conrad's *Nostromo*, William Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*, Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and Pynchon's *V*, as well as lesser-known novels.

The study is divided into three sections, which follow a logical progression from theory to analysis of fictional works and a chronological sequence from early twentieth-century modernist works to more contemporary novels. In the introductory section entitled "History and Narrative," Holton offers an excellent overview of modern Anglo-American philosophy of history and point of view in the writing of history. He applies ideas culled from this discussion in his subsequent analysis of analogous problems in fiction. The novels analyzed all concern themselves with history in both senses of the term--they focus not only on events in the past, but also on the narrative discourse about those events.

Starting with F.H. Bradley and running through to Hayden White, Holton discusses in Part I how each theory regarding the recording of historical events explains the process of making an intelligible narrative out of chaos, of creating order and causal logic out of disparate events. All

theorists agree that a specific orientation or point of view that imposes order onto chaos is the sine qua non of coherent narrative historiography, which makes all truly "objective" history a delusion. Once one accepts the subjective nature of any interpretation of history, one must, according to Bradley (*The Presuppositions of Critical History* [1874]), invoke some rule to regulate who among the many "jarring witnesses" may have the authority to narrate. Similarly, R.G. Collingwood stresses the subjectivity of historical narrative when he states in *The Idea of History* (1946) that the imagination of the historian is framed by *a priori* structures of thought and that the historian bridges the gaps between stable facts to give the narrative its continuity. Bradley dismisses "jarring witnesses" whose discrepant narrations remain outside the boundaries of "legitimate" history, while Collingwood appears sympathetic to marginalized groups rendered "speechless" by the historian.

Holton's overview of theories of history continues with W. H. Walsh (*Philosophy of History* [1951]), who has replaced the idea of a universal, transcendent point of view with a more limited idea of "common sense," and W. B. Gallie (*Philosophy and the Historical Understanding* [1968]) who argues that rational, objective knowledge remains subservient to the narrator's sympathy with a certain character. Louis O. Mink, who defines narrative as a form of cognition rather than mimesis, echoes these ideas when he states in "Narrative Form as Cognitive Understanding" (1987) that "common sense of whatever age has presuppositions which derive not from universal human experience but from a shared conceptual framework, which determines what shall count as experience for its communicants" (qtd. in Holton 28). Similarly, Hayden White argues in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987) that the narratorial point of view organizes the significance of historical events from a perspective that is culture-specific, not universal. In his comparison between chronicle forms and narrative history, White points out that the former lack "a notion of a social center by which to locate them [events] with respect to one another and to charge them with ethical and moral significance" (qtd. in Holton 33). Citing Hegel, White asserts that the state and its laws provide this center.

In the ensuing chapter, Holton relates the ideas that emerge from this discussion to concepts of the heterodoxic and heteroglossic in the works of Pierre Bourdieu and Mikhail Bakhtin and refers to these concepts in his subsequent analysis of historical fiction. In *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu argues that social groups are blind to the arbitrary nature of their interpretations of history and attempt to naturalize that arbitrariness. At one extreme, doxa, this sense of reality is absolute and the social world appears self-evident; the possibility of a range of opinions is denied. Cross-cultural contact or a social crisis, however, can change these presuppositions and allow for heterodoxy.

In his "Discourse in the Novel," Bakhtin states that although the novelist, like the historian, produces a coherent narrative from a specific viewpoint, the fictional narrative also includes voices of a heteroglot reality. Consequently, a potential tension exists between the heteroglot nature of the genre, particularly of the historical novel, and the refracting imagination of the author, who may be neither willing nor able to represent adequately alternative viewpoints. Bakhtin argues that despite the author's imposition of stylistic unity, the prose cannot be confined to a single language. No matter how well the writer has eliminated jarring witnesses, traces of the heteroglot remain, if only as an absent presence to which the authorial point of view must respond. As Holton observes, Bakhtin's relativism closely resembles Bourdieu's description of

culture as arbitrary when Bakhtin states that fictional discourse acknowledges the plentitude of social languages and recognizes that any one has the capacity to utter a "language of truth," since the novel is based on a presumption of a decentred, ideological world. This decentering occurs, according to Bakhtin, when a culture "becomes conscious of itself as only one among other cultures and languages" (qtd. in Holton 51).

Thus, the novel serves as an arena for the struggle of language groups over who narrates, which coincides with the dawn of modernism at the beginning of the twentieth century, a time that witnessed the crumbling of old political power structures such as the domination of the upper classes, the gradual disintegration of colonial empires, and World War I, which marked the demise of a way of life. Holton points to the relation between narrative coherence and social power already noted by White and observes that "it is not coincidental that the erosion of the once self-evident ability of European and American historiographic perspective to render 'the whole story' is roughly contemporaneous with a decline in that culture's confidence in its ability to rule the world" (53).

In the second section, "Modernism and Orthodoxy," Holton applies the theories discussed in his analysis of representative modernist texts from the Anglo-American canon, all of which depict times of social upheaval: Conrad's *Nostramo* (1904), which portrays the problems of European (post)colonial expansion in Latin America, Ford Maddox Ford's *Parade's End* (1924-8), which traces the demise of England's increasingly obsolete aristocracy, and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), which depicts the cruelty of slavery and its aftermath in the South. Holton argues that although the authority of the central characters or narrators in these texts is questioned in terms of their narrative privilege, the "jarring" voices of marginalized groups do not assert their historicity or authority.

For example, in *Nostramo*, which represents the violent political conflict between an indigenous guerrilla group and European settlers in nineteenth-century Latin America, the latter group's Eurocentric worldview constitutes the novel's social center, while the former group is denied a voice and becomes, in Eric Wolf's phrase, people without history. As Frantz Fanon notes, the colonizer makes history. Indeed, in *Nostramo*, history appears to begin only with the introduction of modern capitalism, while the colonized are relegated to the margins of the narrative. Holton observes that Conrad's critique of imperialism in his ambivalent depiction of the settlers and his use of irony are outweighed by a more virulent hostility towards their opponents as portrayals of them occur only through a European perspective. Consequently, white protagonists are portrayed as complex characters with strengths and flaws while the "natives" lack complexity and have no authority either as historical agents or narrators.

Similarly, in *Parade's End*, Ford indicts the ruling aristocracy through his main narrator Tietjens whose idealistic, feudalistic perspective is ridiculously anachronistic, yet Ford allows no other class to play a central role as historical subject or narrator. As Holton points out, Tietjens's increasing inability to create a coherent narrative not only undermines his authority, but also reflects his class's loss of political and narrative power. In the final volume of the tetralogy, in which Tietjens serves as an "absent center," there is no dominant character or perspective.

Faulkner's *Absalom! Absalom!*, like Ford's novel, depicts the waning of the authority of a privileged, white upper class, yet the narration remains within the orthodox boundaries of that group. Although the narrative stability of epic history is undermined and relativized in Faulkner's work by the use of multiple narrators, the various images of black voices do not contribute to a heterodox representation of historical reality. In short, the novel admits a range of voices into its discursive arena, but significantly limits which voices may dominate. Thus, although slavery is condemned as evil at the end of the Civil War, the black experience is, unfortunately, virtually nonexistent in this novel.

If in these modernist texts the stability of narrative point of view is thrown into question by jarring witnesses, then the more contemporary texts examined in Part III, "Postmodernism and Heterodoxy," offer perspectives from the still rather orthodox points of view of the earlier modernist novels. For instance, in a chapter on African-American women's fiction, Holton offers an insightful exploration of the obstacles repressed groups have in surmounting the silence imposed by a powerful, dominant language group, in retrieving suppressed history, in keeping it alive, in legitimizing their testimony, and in trying to live fully in the present despite the burdens of the past. This is a particularly relevant and valuable chapter, as these topics are applicable to most texts that deal with a traumatic past, whether it involves American slavery, the Holocaust or other instances of genocide, wars or civil conflict, or childhood traumas: all events that are the focus of many twentieth-century works, fictional or non-fictional, literary or cinematic. Bourdieu's statement that "Language is not only an instrument of communication or even of knowledge, but also an instrument of power" (qtd. in Holton 206), serves as the indisputable tenet of both these memorable works, and Holton's book as well. Whether in historical texts or fictional works, whether slave narratives or the diary of Anne Frank, the perspective that is preserved for posterity comes from those who have triumphed, if not politically, then morally.

Works discussed in this chapter include Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1988) as well as lesser known novels such as Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy* or *Shadows Uplifted* (1892), Paule Marshall's *The Chosen Place, The Timeless People* (1969), Gayle Jones's *Corregidora* (1975), and Sherley Anne Williams's *Dessa Rose* (1986). A recurring narrative strategy in these novels is defamiliarization, the attempt to publicly dispute conventional interpretations of history. For Holton, those works that depict racial injustice (such as segregation) as "natural" expose the arbitrariness of such social constructs and legitimize alternative versions of the past. Holton examines two common themes of these works: the power of creating a legitimate identity, whether individual or collective, through language and through naming, and the analogous power of narrative to bear witness to a traumatic past. Morrison refers to the powerful role of literature in bearing witness by dedicating *Beloved* to "the sixty million and more" whose names and testimonies have not been recorded (qtd. in Holton 215).

Irony and the relativizing of objective truth serve as other means in fiction of subverting the stability and authority of one central perspective. Holton observes that Pynchon's postmodern, historical relativism can be seen in his fragmentation of the traditional Western historical narrative, often through a parody of the great Western metanarratives, and through heterogeneous, often incommensurable, perspectives, which thwart any final interpretation of history or his novels. Diverse, contradictory points of view, however, appear frequently in modernist works (as well as those of some German Romantics) and put into question a strict

distinction between the modernist and the postmodernist. Rather, the use of irony, multiple perspectives, and parody in postmodernist texts suggest a continuity of the modernist tradition.

Holton points out, however, that the ironic postmodern style of Pynchon's *V* (1963) not only conveys a wholesale skepticism toward the very possibility of adequate narrative representation, but also problematizes the very existence of an objective reality. As his protagonist Sidney Stencil in *V* muses: "He had decided long ago that no Situation had any objective reality: it only existed in the minds of those who happened to be in on it at any specific moment" (qtd. in Holton 226). Holton relates this problem of unrepresentability to White's notion of the historical sublime, the view of history as an incomprehensible spectacle. Holton argues that White's statement "that the conviction that one can make sense of history stands on the same level of epistemic plausibility as the conviction that it makes no sense whatsoever" (qtd. in Holton 217) constitutes a recurring theme in Pynchon's works and, consequently, goes beyond the "modernist" problem of subjective point of view.

Overall, Holton's study presents an appropriate balance between theory and its application in literary analysis. His arguments are clearly and convincingly presented, although at times redundant. This reviewer would like to have seen more diversity in the contemporary texts discussed. Novels such as Louise Erdrich's *Tracks* (1988), a compelling portrait of the Native American experience in the early twentieth century, or Joy Kogawa's *Obasan* (1981), a story of the maltreatment of Japanese Canadians during World War II, would have been welcome additions. As in the African-American narratives discussed, both works bear witness to past trauma and offer alternative versions to conventional histories. Although some of the issues Holton discusses are somewhat dated (a frequent hazard of reissued books) such issues also serve as uplifting reminders of how far we have come. At the close of this violent century, an era of genocide, apartheid, the fight for civil and gay rights, and *Roe vs. Wade*, jarring witnesses are no longer on the margins, but have taken center stage.