

'AVOIDING THE AGREEABLE': LITERATURE AFTER THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

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Letters from an American Farmer was published in London in 1782, the year after its author, Michel-Guillaume Jean de Crèvecoeur, had deposited the manuscript with the printer as he passed through the city en route from America to France. The book consists of twelve chapters — called letters although the epistolary convention is employed only as a general framework— eleven of which combine to provide the most memorable of all literary images of eighteenth-century rural America as well as a classic discussion of the promise of America, what came to be called the American dream. Crèvecoeur appears to have worked consciously to elevate his work to the definitive status it was accorded since in addition to providing descriptions of occupations, manners and landscapes from Massachusetts to South Carolina, he also related the physical to the social and economic scene in a consideration of the way the new world conferred a new identity. He was the first writer to raise the question, "What is an American?" in exactly those words, and in his third letter, devoted exclusively to the topic, he reconceptualized national identity in terms of the shaping power of material and political opportunity rather than, as was more common in his age, in terms of race, religion, or political allegiance.

The governing irony of Crèvecoeur's life, we now see, was that although his concept of America as a social force capable of erasing old-world distinctions came to be the dominant element in the self-image Americans held for more than a century after he enunciated it, his own experience was more strongly and more darkly marked by the dissolution of such an America back into

the conflicting parts he claimed it would blend into a new identity.

Born into the gentry of Normandy, Crèvecoeur migrated to Canada where at the close of the French and Indian Wars he served under Montcalm. But attracted by the relative liberality of British rule, he readily accepted if not actually welcomed its extension in North America and after the defeat of the French he traveled in Pennsylvania and New York, gained naturalization as a British subject, and, in 1769, married, purchased land in Orange County, New York, and there began to improve a farm that he named Pine Hill. By this time he had anglicized his name to J. Hector St. John a sign of the new identity he was crystallizing as the farmer of Pine Hill and idealizing in the book upon which he worked while improving his lands. In the seven years following his marriage, St. John fathered three children, saw his prosperity increase with the increase to his family, and established warm social relations with his neighbors on both sides of the nearby Hudson River. French ancestry, British liberties, and an ample land's provision of bread for labor and leisure for writing combined to make him neither French nor British but what he called "this new man," the American.

As colonial discontents gathered into a revolutionary war, however, St. John found himself unable to take sides. His idealization of America was based on a personal freedom he regarded as secured by British rule and threatened by the rebellious populace. At the same time, he could not contemplate continued residence on his farm as a loyalist because his idealization of America was also based on his sense of community and he was, as a consequence, repelled by the notion of being opposed, and that perforce violently, to his neighbors. With the American condition disintegrating, he concluded that his wisest move would be to return to France and there secure for his children whatever was theirs by birthright as Crèvecoeurs. Accordingly in 1778 he made his way to British-occupied New York City in order to find passage back to France.

But as his distrust of his revolutionary neighbors had impelled Crèvecoeur to New York, so the British authorities distrust of him detained him there. Not until September 1780 was he allowed to embark, and then he encountered yet another obstacle in the form of the blockading fleet of his fellow Frenchmen. So completely had his literary conflation of personal with social identity been destroyed by events that it is not surprising that he suffered a breakdown in 1779. Contrary to his most cherished

belief, French, British, and American proved, after all, to be distinct entities, each opposed to the others and all opposed to him. Finally Crèvecoeur did get back to France, on the way leaving the *Letters* with a London publisher, and when he returned to New York in 1783, he did so as Louis XVI's counsel, an eminent man not because he held that post, but the holder of that post because of the eminence he had gained as the author of the *Letters*.

The biographical account provides a strong extratextual explanation for the radical unevenness that all readers and admirers of Crèvecoeur's book detect in it. A work that pleasantly and persuasively combines pastoral idyll, shrewd social observation, and charming proto-mythic details of natural history suddenly and violently collapses at its very close into a nightmare that, in formal literary terms, has not been prepared. The penultimate letter begins with the expansive and relaxed tone characteristic of the greater part of all the preceding ones: "Examine this flourishing province in what light you will, the eye as well as the mind of an European traveller are equally delighted because a diffusive happiness appears in every part, happiness which is established on the broadest basis"¹. It closes with the same glow, mentioning "golden days," "gratitude," and "immeasurable kindnesses"². Yet we turn the page to the final letter and begin, "I wish for a change of place; the hour is come at last that I must fly from my house and abandon my farm"³. and we are plunged into the horrors of a civil war that the loyalist farmer, not wanting further to exasperate his republican neighbors, displaces into the terms of the terrors of the Indian warfare that has erupted as consequence of the political conflict. In the twelfth letter, both physical and mental scenes are places of torment. The reader feels suddenly dislocated because nowhere earlier was there a discussion of the political differences that led to the war, and, indeed, even in the final letter political issues are so buried that it takes a while to locate the cause of the extreme psychic distress of the writing farmer.

If, then, the *Letters from An American Farmer* is, as many have observed, the first and in some ways still the definitive expression of the American dream, it also expresses an American nightmare. The stuff of dream is the identical stuff of nightmare

1 J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur, *Letters from An American Farmer and Sketches of 18th-Century America*, ed. Albert E. Stone (New York, 1981), p. 187.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 199.

3 *Ibid.*, p. 200.

because the dream proceeds from the perception that in America one's lot in life is not governed by a principle extrinsic to the will -one can emerge from what in Europe was inherited poverty and powerlessness into substance and authority, and in so doing not only make oneself but make the society in which such opportunity is constantly available. Correspondingly, however, since there is no American world other than that one makes, the failure of that world represents the collapse of the self.

The standard reading of Crèvecoeur's *Letters* was established in 1897 by Moses Coit Tyler who saw the book as a mirror of colonial life on the eve of the revolution and first called attention to those vignettes that make the book an enduring pleasure and seem to be cited whenever it is mentioned. He recognized the force Crèvecoeur's prose derived from his conflicting attachments to a self-governing rural community and a royal authority centered in an overseas metropolis, and remarked that "By its inclusion of... [some] sombre and agonizing aspects of life in America, the book gains, as is most obvious, both in authenticity and in literary strength"⁴. But, Tyler insisted, despite the nightmare chapter with which the *Letters* conclude "the reader is tempted to infer that, after all, felicity is the permanent fact there, and that suffering is but a temporary accident"⁵.

One cannot quarrel with this account if it is read in the light of Tyler's assumption that literary history is the inner history of outward events; that it measures texts in terms of their relation to a reality external to them. Although the horrified vision of widespread ruin in the farmer's last letter is sharply different from most of what precedes it, our knowledge of what actually happened historically after the moment at which the book closes can lead us, if we follow Tyler's assumptions, to subordinate the nightmare to what he calls a permanent felicity. If, however, we entertain the hypothesis that the *Letters* constitutes a reality for us rather than reflects one that existed independently of it⁶, then we are alert to a concern that is psychologically and intellectually present from the book's earliest pages. We can then see that the eruption of physical conflict at the close is an externalization of irreconcilable differences within the writer's position rather than the intrusion of public events into an otherwise felicitous private

4 Moses Coit Tyler, *The Literary History of the American Revolution, 1763-1783* (New York, 1957), 2:357.

5 Ibid.

6 My notion of linguistic reality derives from that of J. G. A. Pocock in *Politics, Language and Time* (New York, 1973).

life. We can, that is, see one kind of division within the self that contributed to a division within the state and so can narrow the gap that all too often yawns between private circumstance and public events.

I

Crèvecoeur's essays descriptive of American life are called "letters" because in a fiction established in the first of them they are written in Pennsylvania by a farmer named James to a Mr. F. B. in London at F. B.'s request. He is, we learn, a great man who has traveled widely in Europe as well as having made a tour to America at which time he met James. This epistolary fiction sharpens the actual contrast between the cultured farmer, Crèvecoeur, and his European readership into one between a far simpler husbandman and a specific European reader who is wealthy and cosmopolitan, the better to point up the capacity of American conditions to elevate the character. Although the convention of letters from the country to the city had a long history, within that convention it had previously been understood that the countryman or farmer who wrote to the city was an educated person who knew the city well, had visited if not lived there, and now resided rurally from preference rather than necessity. James, however, is a laboring not a gentleman farmer and he is, accordingly, less certain than the author who guides his pen that he is capable of the task assigned him. "Who would have thought," his first letter begins, "that because I received you with hospitality and kindness, you should imagine me capable of writing with propriety and perspicuity? Your gratitude misleads your judgment"⁷. He goes on to disqualify himself: his heart, it is true, is warm but his mind is limited; his knowledge does not extend beyond farming; he has had little education and what few books he owns he has not because he purchased them but because he inherited them from his father who, in turn, inherited them from *his* father who brought them from England when he emigrated; he never has written and can summon up no language appropriate to the task of writing. Moreover, when told of F. B.'s request, James's wife, "and I never do anything without consulting her," he tells us, laughs in his face at the idea that he would "pretend to letter it" with a man who studied at

7 Crèvecoeur, p. 39.

Cambridge and traveled so widely that he has even, as she says, "seen the factory of brimstone at 'Suvius'"⁸.

So James attempts to transfer the task to the only lettered person he knows, his minister, and it is the minister's response that persuades him to undertake it himself. Write as you speak, the minister advises, and talk only about what lies within the reach of your experience because that is what F.B. wants to hear. His extensive travels to places such as Italy will not lead him to be disappointed with the less exotic details of American life. Quite the contrary, says the minister, who then launches into an argument on behalf of the superiority of America to Italy as an object of contemplation. The farmer is persuaded and resolves upon the letters despite his wife's continuing objections which, significantly, switch from contentions about James's being unqualified to write the letters to forebodings of the dire consequences that will follow when news spread among their neighbors that he is engaged in such foolishness.

With these preliminaries out of the way the descriptive letters commence and wife and minister disappear as characters. James's style is not markedly colloquial and he ranges beyond his immediate experience in the spectrum of topics that follow his consideration of the situation of the typical American farmer: descriptions of life in New England fishing communities and on southern, slave-owning plantations: an extended description of the character of the noted botanist John Bartram, a Pennsylvania farmer who did, in fact, "letter it" with the great of Europe; and, famously, a discussion of the question "What is an American?" The fiction of the opening scene served to get things going and seems no longer to be insisted upon by James or the J. Hector St. John who stands behind him. Since, however, my interest is in the reality constituted by the text rather than any reality presumed to be external to and reflected by it, I am concerned with the centrality of the seemingly peripheral and so will return to James's minister and wife who do not, I feel, disappear from the subsequent letters without leaving behind them the powerful specters of their views.

If James's lack of schooling and total inexperience as a writer are conventional fictions, the main problem the minister persuades him to face is not so artificial. Indeed, it is one that will continue to harry American writers throughout the following century. America is an undeveloped land, settled by a people who however

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

heterogeneous in origin are monotonously alike in social condition, and its landscape is tiresomely devoid of the traces of notable incidents or of human interchange with nature. What, then, is there to write about?

The question had a particularly sharp edge at the time Crèvecoeur wrote because in that day travel and related descriptive writing derived its most powerful appeal from the international craze for ruins stimulated by the excavations at Herculaneum and Pompeii and the publication in 1764 of Johann Winckelmann's archeological masterpiece⁹. The production and circulation of prints depicting ruins became an active industry and in F. B.'s England noblemen were arranging for the construction on their estates of made-to-order ruins - crumbling towers and decayed walls built on demand. "A piece of Palladian architecture may be elegant in the last degree," the landscape architect William Gilpin wrote in 1794, "but it lacks picturesque beauty. To attain this," we must use the mallet, instead of the chisel: we must beat down half of it, deface the other, and throw the mutilated members around in heaps. In short, from a *smooth* building we must turn it into a *rough* ruin." And he went on to suggest the same procedure for landscape: "Make it *rough* and you make it also *picturesque*"¹⁰.

Clearly, the American scene could not feed such an appetite. The landscape was wild enough, but wildness was at two removes from roughness: first wildness; next its reduction to the order of beauty; and then the roughening that makes the beauty picturesque in both architecture and landscape.

James's minister proposes a revision of taste based on a revision of social attitudes —ponders a literary problem— when he says to James:

I am sure I cannot be called a partial American when I say that the spectacle afforded by these pleasing scenes may be more entertaining and more philosophical than which arises from beholding the musty ruins of Rome. Here everything would inspire the reflecting traveller with the most philanthropic ideas; his imagination instead of submitting to the painful and useless retrospect of revolutions, desolations, and plagues, would, on the contrary, wisely spring forward to the anticipated field of future cultivation and improvement, to the future extent of those generations which are to replenish and embellish this boundless continent. There the half-ruined amphitheatres and the putrid fevers of

9 For a discussion of the cultural consequences in America of this neoclassical interest in ruins, see Kenneth Silverman, *A Cultural History of the American Revolution* (New York, 1976), pp. 25ff.

10 William Gilpin, *Three Essays on Picturesque Beauty: on Picturesque Travel; and on Sketching Landscape* (London, 1794), pp. 7-8.

the Campania must fill the mind with the most melancholy reflections whilst he is seeking for the origin and the intention of those structures with which he is surrounded and for the cause of so great a decay. Here he might contemplate the very beginnings and outlines of human society which can be traced nowhere but in this great part of the world¹¹.

Accordingly, the novel task Crèvecoeur undertakes is a travelogue across a relatively featureless present where social conditions must be read as the signs of a prominent future, rather than across a monument-strewn present where ruins can be read as signs of a mighty past. It demands that the observer infer from rude appearances a meaning that resides in his mind rather than respond emotionally to the fragments of social life before him.

The aesthetic preference for ruins was part of the advent of Romanticism. In his study of the forms of ruin in Romantic literature, Thomas McFarland observed that "the pervasive longing of the Romantic for an absent reality was at the same time an index to a prevailing sense of incompleteness, fragmentation, and ruin"¹². The fascination with ruins, that is, was the corollary of a yearning for absent wholeness. In America, we observe, the matter was opposite. Crèvecoeur (and others) saw the reality of wholeness as present and the longing for ruins as an acquired taste that need not arise amidst American conditions.

II

When James's wife shifts her objections to his letter writing from remarks about his lack of qualification for the task to concern about the harmful consequences that can ensue, she centers first on the danger to the family's financial stability should he neglect his work for his pen. She tells him that had his father "spent his time in writing epistles to and fro, he never would have left thee this godly plantation, free from debt"¹³. She then anticipates the social censure that will come from his differentiating himself from his neighbors: "If this scheme of thine was once known, travellers as they go along would point out to our house, saying, 'Here liveth the scribbling farmer.' Better hear them as usual observe, 'Here liveth the warm substantial family'"¹⁴.

11 Crèvecoeur, p. 43.

12 Thomas McFarland, *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton, 1981), p. 11.

13 Crèvecoeur, p. 48.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

This latter objection does not proceed just from a sense that writing is financially unprofitable, it also offers a more fundamental challenge to the enterprise suggesting that it is a function that occurs only in societies in which natural avenues to self-fulfillment are blocked. The remark that James's home may come to be known as that of the scribbling farmer rather than of the warm, substantial family points up not only the economic danger of writing—scribbling can destroy substance—but also the social danger - The scribbler detaches himself from community and his home becomes that of an individual, the farmer, rather than society, the family.

The emphasis on family is not a matter of gender with the wife representing the cliché of female concern for domestic matters, but is political because it stands for an insistence upon the incomparability of individual identity, biological continuity, and social community which, the *Letters* shows, is the shaping condition for the American. The James who works on his farm and attends church and town meetings is known to himself and others through his personal presence. To put in the place of this James one who is abstracted onto paper in language is to fragment a present, natural wholeness:

"Great people over sea," says Mrs. James, may write to our townfolk because they have nothing else to do. These Englishmen are strange people; because they can live upon what they call bank notes, without working, they think that all the world can do the same... But if they have no trees to cut down, they have gold in abundance, they say, for they rake it and scrape it from all parts far and near. I have often heard my grandfather tell how they live there by writing. By writing they send this cargo unto us, that to the West, and the other to the East Indies¹⁵.

Here, of course, the writing that is so distrusted is extended to commercial paper and all the attendant documents of trade. But it is not distinguished from the kind of uncommercial epistles James is being asked to compose because the abstraction of James's written self from his present self parallels the translation of the farmer's labor into the paper wealth of the merchant. Writing can overcome distance as speech cannot and it does so at the expense of the community knit together by personal presence. In writing letters James takes a crucial step toward the destruction of the kind of society he intends to celebrate. The only books he owns his grandfather brought from England and the principal knowledge of writing his wife has is what her grandfather told her about it. James's writing means the end of

15 Ibid., pp. 48-49.

the world he will glorify in his letters because it disrupts the relation of vocation to writing on which that world's harmony is based and asserts the American yeoman's ability to represent himself beyond his everyday presence. Although James is consciously a sincere loyalist—hence his distress in the final letter—he unconsciously contributes to the demise of colonialism by permitting the advantages of his situation to lead him to translate them into the written words that are the province of others, and thus to assume an authority that disrupts the established order, reducing it eventually to ruins.

III

What we found embodied in Crèvecoeur's text as a controlling condition of the act of writing was transformed soon after the American Revolution into an expressed principle of political economy. Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville proclaims it, for example, in his report on the travels he made in the United States in 1788 in order to learn how men living in liberty regulated their society so that the lessons might be applied in post-revolutionary France. His principal guidebook as he journeyed in America was Crèvecoeur's *Letters*. Contemplating the absence of high culture in the United States, de Warville wrote:

When riches are centred in a few hands, these have a greater superfluity; and this superfluity maybe applied to their pleasures, and to favour the agreeable and frivolous arts. When riches are equally divided in society, there is very little superfluity, and consequently little means of encouraging the agreeable arts. But which of these two countries is the rich, and which the poor? According to the European ideas... it is the first that is rich; but, to the eye of reason, it is not; for the other is the happiest. Hence it results, that the ability of giving encouragement to the agreeable arts, is a symptom of national calamity¹⁶.

The outlook was shared by American thinkers. So, for example, John Adams wrote to Thomas Jefferson:

Every one of the fine arts from the earliest times have been enlisted in the service of superstition and despotism. The whole world at this day gazes with astonishment at the grossest fictions because they have been immortalized by the most exquisite artists, Homer and Milton, Phidias and Raphael. The rabble of the classic skies and the hosts of Roman Catholic saints and angels are still adored in paint, and marble, and verse¹⁷.

¹⁶ Jacques Pierre Brissot de Warville, *New Travels in the United States of America* (New York, 1970), 1:112.

¹⁷ *The Adams-Jefferson Letters*, ed. Lester J. Cappon (Chapel Hill, 1959), 2:502. Spelling and punctuation modernized.

And Jefferson writing to Adams stressed the enormous importance for a modern republic of widespread literacy but did not believe that this condition would or should necessarily lead to the emergence of a literary rather than a literate culture¹⁸. Indeed, democratic idealism held such an emergence to be dependent upon the rise of luxury which, in turn, it regarded as the corrupter of the civic virtue without which a republic could not survive.

In 1787, Noah Webster, whose name was to become synonymous with the American as opposed to the English language, founded a magazine which was intended, he said, to gratify every kind of reader in America. He meant his journal to be a means of instructing his fellow citizens, as a means, that is, of preserving the civic virtue essential to their political well being. There he published a piece that comes close to being an unconscious caricature of the potential contradiction inherent in joining a republican rage for literacy to a distrust of belles lettres. After noting that the authors of belles lettres are motivated by anti-social desires for fame or wealth rather than the laudable purpose of giving information, he comments: "It is much to be lamented that those who write purely with a view of investigating truth and serving mankind, commonly want that liveliness of thought, and eloquence of expression, which so peculiarly grace the work of those who have dedicated their labors to the pursuit of fame: perhaps the defect may be attributed to the constant habit which they have acquired of checking the sallies of their imagination, and of examining every thing by the strictest rules of reason and propriety, or to that contempt for ornament which truth generally inspires"¹⁹.

In writing a work that attempted to offer the present as an object of contemplation without reliance on the trappings of tradition that, inevitably, validated the ideology of outdated feudalism, Crèvecoeur's farmer found he was a revolutionary despite his conscious loyalties. Those who embraced the principles of the revolution recognized that the act of writing had to continue to address the reason: that an address to the passions was not a mere literary entertainment but a return, deliberate or not, to the values of a society hostile to republicanism, and so must be guarded against. A free people, as Webster rather

¹⁸ Ibid., 2:575.

¹⁹ Noah Webster, "Remarks...before the Philological Society...", *The American Magazine* (May 1788), p. 404.

clumsily revealed, had to learn to like inelegant writing despite themselves.

Two decades into the nineteenth century the issue that seemed to reside at the heart of American culture appears to have collapsed in an instant. Serially in 1819 and 1820, America's first successful belles lettrist, Washington Irving, published *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon, Gent.*, and that title word, "Gent.," was an affirmation of the leisured condition of the author, one that had been regarded as so dangerous to a democracy. Here was no working minister or statesman or farmer writing in connection with his vocation, but an idle observer amusing himself and so us. Moreover, as we attend to the introductory account the author gives of himself we are asked to participate in a view of the past as opposed to the present that flatly reverses Crèvecoeur ideals:

I visited various parts of my own country, and had I been merely a lover of fine scenery I should have felt little desire to seek elsewhere its gratification, for on no country have the charms of nature been more prodigally lavished. Her mighty lakes, like oceans of liquid silver; her mountains, with their bright aerial tints; her valleys, teeming with wild fertility; her tremendous cataracts, thundering in their solitudes; her broad, deep rivers, rolling in solemn silence to the ocean; her trackless forests, where vegetation puts forth all its magnificence; her skies, kindling with the magic of summer clouds and glorious sunshine - no, never need an American look beyond his own country for the sublime and beautiful of natural scenery.

But Europe held forth the charms of storied and poetical association. There were to be seen the masterpieces of art, the refinements of highly cultivated society, the quaint peculiarities of ancient and local custom. My native country was full of youthful promise: Europe was rich in the accumulated treasures of age. Her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every moldering stone was a chronicle. I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement - to loiter about the ruined castle, to meditate on the falling tower, to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past²⁰.

On analysis, this passage proves more sensitive to the cultural ideals it seems so sweepingly to ignore than might at first appear. We note, for example, that the governing trope is one of language or communication in terms of which authorship is a matter of translating an existing language rather than creating the language that will reveal the meaning of mute circumstances. American landscape, and by extension American society, is characterized as existing in silence - it has no voice - and in solitude - it has no audience - and accompanying modifiers such as "boundless" and

²⁰ Washington Irving, *The Sketch Book* (New York, 1961), p. 14.

"trackless" reinforce the sense of a situation that is so awesomely mute that all one can say is "sublime." At the same time, Europe has storied and poetical associations, has, that is, tales to tell, so that authorship, which is retelling not telling, is there possible. Thus, without express acknowledgment Irving implicitly recognizes the force of his culture's distrust of what Webster called "the sallies of the imagination," and moves around it by maintaining that he does not invent the situations about which he writes but merely records them.

Still, literary historians confronted with the dramatic contrast between Irving's accomplished, enormously popular book and the cultural ideals that just a moment before seemed so essential a component of American society must pause and ponder. How explain so dramatic a reversal? Where in the culture did the attitude represented by Irving reside when those who appear to have represented that culture's ideals spoke to the contrary? If, as was believed by Adams and many another in his day and ours, literary form itself is ideological, conveying the values of the societies that formed it, what social changes are signalled by Irving's popularity? Many related questions arise also, but behind them all looms the issue of the authority conferred by society upon the writer. The viewpoint of those who stressed literacy and distrusted literature was one that recognized literature's power. Did the rise of the professional author in the United States not so much signal a change in democratic ideology as it did a relegation of literature to the margins of consequentiality?

I cannot here and now supply the answers although I am convinced that if there is such a thing as literary history and I am a literary historian then I am charged with providing them. To close on this note is to disappear into a mist of questions rather than stand finally in the light of a well made conclusion, and I am aware that such a procedure is commonly regarded as bad expository form. But I think that there is a conclusion to be found at this point. Today literary history seems no longer to be attached to the kinds of concerns literary scholars find most pressing. At a time when the epistemological status of literature as opposed to other forms of discourse is severely questioned, traditional literary history appears to beg the question since it begins with an unquestioning acceptance of certain genres being within its realm and others, without. At a time when hermeneutic theory indicates that the interpretation of texts is independent of biography or the extra-textual data of reality, traditional literary history offers biography or social history, narratives that are no

more relevant to literature than they are to science or sports. Traditional literary history, that is to say, seems to be busy in the suburbs of our interests rather than in their marketplace.

In the face of this, I believe that literary history is pertinent to our concerns and rather than develop a theoretical program for its pertinence I have begun to practice it by offering an example of the kind of issue that is uniquely within its province. That issue requires one to move from the concerns a society manifests through the events that occur within it and the ideas expressed by its members to the reading of texts as constitutions of reality rather than reflections of it. To read a text in this manner is to interpret it, that is, to bring to it the skills of literary criticism, while to trace the events and ideas with which the text interacts as both cause and effect is to construct a history, that is, to employ the skills of a historian. Neither is adequate without the other and together they form a third thing. That third thing makes up the work of the literary historian.