

New Literary History: Pages from a Memoir

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

IT IS HARD TO THINK *NEW LITERARY HISTORY* without Ralph Cohen. I have already experienced the meticulous editorial practice of Rita Felski and Susan Stanford Friedman, and it makes me certain that they will understand and appreciate what I mean. A sober and general literary journal of superior quality, not confined to an identifiable political position, yet touching the radical edges of the profession as well, and lasting forty years! Ralph, with his extraordinary flexibility, combined with some fairly tenacious convictions, was ideally suited to launch and support such a phenomenon. I did not meet him and Libby until 1982. So let me describe the impact of *NLH* upon me when it burst upon my intellectual horizons, more than ten years before that meeting.

I was a year short of tenure when *NLH* first appeared. In 1966, one year into my assistant professorship, young U.S. instructors with my sort of training were astounded by the appearance of Roland Barthes's "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits" in the pages of *Communications*.¹ What struck us as readers was that Barthes, providing a fairly careful system, quickly dismantled and destroyed it in another epistemic idiom at the close of the essay. I was already deeply committed to the importance of the double bind as method, and this was an uncanny example of it. You provide a "scientific" system for analysis, but must also situate and provide a symptomatic reading of the need for such systems.

Upon such ground, in my case prepared by Tarak Nath Sen at the University of Calcutta, Paul de Man at Cornell University, and Jacques Derrida, to whom I introduced myself impersonally in institutional solitude, appeared *New Literary History*. At the University of Iowa, where I was teaching, the conflict between George Lyman Kittredge and René Wellek, the history of literature and literary criticism, was alive in the person of E. P. Kuhl, an altogether vocal emeritus member of the Department of English, then in his eighties. It was deeply important for me that this new journal asked us to look at the prospect of a new literary history, not a new history of literature. I was beginning to teach Antonio Gramsci at that time—the Gramsci who felt that history and sociology

must take a literary turn if they were to track the subaltern in an inventory without traces. It is all over his *Notebooks*, but most particularly in his notes on the historiography of the subaltern, the subaltern being the group that has no access to the “state.” Thus, the idea that history should be literary, with the best gifts of criticism, seemed to this young professional a great gift—even if the intention of the title may not have been just that. It was no surprise, then, that I read Hayden White, Jacques Derrida, Hélène Cixous, and Jacqueline Rose in its pages. Looking at the list of contributors to prepare myself for these few remarks, I am astounded at the diversity: Ernst Gombrich, Alicia Ostriker, and Stanley Fish under the same roof. Took some doing.

And then that meeting with Ralph and Libby, in 1982, at the School of Criticism and Theory, in Evanston, Illinois. That was the last time I saw de Man, although I spoke to him a few weeks before his death in December 1983. I was terrified at my own daring at having proposed “Varieties of Deconstructive Practice” as my topic, when I knew that de Man would be in the audience. The entire day before the event I drove around in Evanston and Chicago, coming back to the apartment in the early evening, and deciding, in desperation, simply to write down themes that I had articulated to my students over the fifteen previous years (I opened *Grammatologie* in 1967).² That was my talk, and Ralph and Libby sat centrally in the audience in the third row, I think. As you know, when you are nervous about a presentation, you tend to focus on persons who seem to be moving with your presentation and appreciating what you think are the good moments. Ralph and Libby, before I spoke a word to them, served this benign purpose—and I was never at a loss subsequently when I had controversial discussions with them.

As far as I recall, I published two pieces in the pages of *NLH*, one more “historical,” and the other more “literary”; more political, more ethical. They remain important pieces for me, and retain relevance for me in an era of globalization: “The Making of Americans, the Teaching of English, and the Future of Culture Studies,” *New Literary History* 21, no. 4 (1990): 781–98; and “Echo,” *New Literary History* 24, no.1 (1993): 17–43. The first was about a new way of perceiving ourselves as epistemologues and the second was a new way of perceiving ourselves as women in postcoloniality. My small contribution to a new literary history. Under the new editorship, I have contributed “Rethinking Comparativism,” a piece that thinks about a new way of being in the discipline—a piece that has gained from instructions received from members of the discipline of Comparative Literature around the world.

I am honored that I was asked to contribute to this issue. I close with my genuine gratitude to Ralph and Libby and to *New Literary History*. I

had a good introduction to it and want to continue to inhabit its pages as long as I can.

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY

NOTES

1 Roland Barthes, "Introduction à l'analyse structurale des récits," *Communications* 8 (1966): 1–27.

2 Derrida endorsed the piece in 2000, at a lovely event in a synagogue on the Lower East Side of New York, to celebrate his seventieth birthday. It is now embedded in "Touched by Deconstruction," *Grey Room* 20 (2005): 95–104.