

*Peapec i e , connec ion & objec :  
ha ' happening in hi o no ?*

In 1997, Princeton University Press published a volume, *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, which rang with alarm.<sup>1</sup> Even contributors such as Francis Oakley, Carla Hesse, and Lynn Hunt, who tried to warn against despair by explaining how the current situation had come about, provided only a fragile defense against fundamental and deeply threatening change, while others such as Denis Donoghue and Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote in palpable fear of the future. As Frank Kermode, author of an earlier, brilliant study of our need for literary endings, phrased it in his essay for the volume, "If we wanted to be truly apocalyptic we should even consider the possibility that nothing of much present concern either to 'humanists' or to their opponents will long survive."

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And it was clear from his essay that he was more afraid of the end of literature than of the demise of those who, as he put it, "mistrust or despise" it.<sup>2</sup>

Returning ten years later— and from the perspective of a historian— to the scenarios feared or envisioned in 1997, what strikes me is how wrong they were, but for reasons quite different from those given in the spate of recent publications alleging some sort of new "turn" (narrative, social, historical, material, eclectic, or performative, to name a few) "beyond" the earlier turn (linguistic, cultural, post-structural, postmodern, and so forth)

1. Caroline W. Bynum, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997).

2. Frank Kermode, "The End of Literature," in Bynum, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997), 121.

3. Frank Kermode, *Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction: With a New Epilogue* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

Caroline W. Bynum on the humanities that supposedly caused all the trouble in the 1/2rst place. For as Keith Thomas remarked in an astute and upbeat assessment in 2006, historical scholarship has become broader, more nuanced and more creative over the past

new topics. Such professional pressures seem to me to constitute the real threat we face, and some aspects of a postmodern (in particular, deconstructive[ c-

however, encountered unmediated) are not. Such awareness also entails the understanding that the past is not transparent to us; all evidence (whether manuscript or inscription, fossilized pollen or the light from a distant star) is mediated, perceived and analyzed from the point of view of a particular actor, instrument, or interpreter. Hence the “something” a postmodern historian encounters in research— whether termed facts, data, experience, or meaning— is fragmentary, heterogeneous, discontinuous, partial, and always interpreted and interpretable.

Where these accounts of the so-called linguistic turn have departed from each other is in their descriptions of what comes “beyond” it. Describing recent fears that the linguistic turn, somewhat illogically, both makes “culture” deterministic (the world becomes a set of symbols that determines individuals) and yet deprives historians of an “objective” past (there is “no there there” beyond the symbols), they depict and seemingly applaud a turn to something else. But what? Some think they see a turn to narrative, even mega-narrative; others see rather a retreat to microhistory. Some cling to unmediated “experience”; others predict a “revitalized and transformed . . . objectivity.”<sup>10</sup> For some, what we have now is a material turn— recourse to “the primacy of the object.” For others, the new turn is psychological.<sup>11</sup> For yet others, the turn is

historical, although at least one surveyor of the contemporary scene treats the linguistic turn itself, not the retreat from it, as a sort of historical turn.<sup>12</sup>

Probably the most common description of the retreat characterizes it as a return to social history; but a number hedge their bets by seeing it as a kind of eclecticism of method, a “bricolage,” or what Gabrielle Spiegel, in a recent volume devoted to the turn from the turn, calls “practice theory” (about which designation she is noticeably unenthusiastic).<sup>1</sup> It thus seems clear that, for all the unease the theorists of theory articulate concerning certain understandings of where history was a decade ago, there is in fact no new theory of theory that has swept the *æld*— or even commanded much attention from professional historians. And this leads me to a second point.

The amount of theorizing about theory— that is, descriptions of the linguistic turn and what lies beyond it— is actually quite limited. A good deal of it has been done by a small group of essayists, many of whom are not practicing historians. In the volume *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (1999), edited by a historian and a sociologist, almost half of the essays were written by sociologists, political scientists, or those with joint appointments in several of the social sciences.

<sup>10</sup> . . . , *Telling the Truth about History* ( . . . , 1 . . . ), 2 . . .

<sup>11</sup> . . . , *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences* ( . . . , 2002), 1 . . .

. . . , *The American Historical Review* 10 (1) (2000), 11 . . . 12, 12 . . .

<sup>12</sup> . . . , *The American Historical Review* 10 ( ) (2002), 1 . . . 1 . . . 1 . . . 2 . . .

<sup>1</sup> . . . , *Practicing History*, . . . , 22 . . . 2 . . .

When the *American Historical Review* devoted a Forum essay in 2002 to a review of the volume, it commissioned pieces from, respectively, an anthropologist, a political scientist, and a literary critic. *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (2005), edited by Gabrielle Spiegel, is composed of essays by four sociologists, four historians, two anthropologists, and a professor of English. (Several of the authors, admirably, wear more than one hat.) There is nothing particularly worrisome about those who are not professional historians theorizing history, of course. As postmodernism would have it, a kaleidoscope of views can only help. But one notes in reading these essays that they often generalize about what historians are doing, without giving any examples of historical writing. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that articles about the turning and re-turning in which historians are said currently to be engaged may not be the best place to go to see what's happening in history.

I have thus decided to turn for evidence to the last ten years of the *American Historical Review* (*AHR*), not only its articles, review articles, and Forum discussions, but also, to the extent possible, a sample of the books reviewed. One might of course argue that the *AHR*, especially under the leadership of Michael Grossberg, its editor from 1995–2005, was not typical of the historical profession in the United States, since the journal strove to foster work the Association thought of as broad-ranging, comparative, and interdisciplinary, and also endeavored to broaden its base of contributors in terms of gender, ethnicity, *Welt* studied, and type of institution represented. If one is trying to discern what the new directions in scholarship are, this is not, however, a disadvantage.

A survey of recent work in the *AHR* and elsewhere<sup>1</sup>

*Perspectives, connections & objects: what's happening in history now?*

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on the  
humanities*

cause of disregard of ecological conditions, one is in the presence of theorized historical analysis in which lives, in their suffering and their fullness, are glimpsed through the always-fragmentary and in-

individual action and responsibility.<sup>1</sup> A recent tendency to talk of transitions rather than epistemes or paradigm shifts reflects a determination to pay more attention to how cultures move from one set of dominant symbols to another— in other words, to what is always for a historian the fundamental challenge: explaining change. Moreover, recent historical writing is clearly going in some directions that seem to be reactions to, even implicit rejections of, a cultural or linguistic turn. I now consider some of them— without, however, suggesting that any is truly “beyond” the cultural.

here are two very different ways in which historical work of the last decade may be seen as a retreat from the tex-

Although such arguments need not – and sometimes do not – draw on deeply embedded psychological, evolutionary, cognitive, or sociobiological structures, they tend to, in part because their accounts frequently rely on repeated historical patterns or have recourse to claims about perduring “human nature.” One sees this in a book such as Robert McElvaine’s *Eve’s Seed* or even the recent work of Jared Diamond.<sup>22</sup> Art historians have been particularly interested in such explanations, whether in the more psychologically reductive work of John Onians, which applies neurobiology to art-making and viewing, or in the more anthropological work of Hans Belting and David Freedberg, which is attempting to tease out non-reductive ways of understanding cross-cultural human responses to the “power of images.”<sup>2</sup> Scholars at work in the relatively new *Weld* of the history of the emotions – although they tend to reject theories of universal psychobiological processes which emotion-words reflect – are nonetheless drawn to cognitive science and brain studies,

arguing that there is something bodily as well as verbal in more than one culture to which the word *anger*, for example, applies.<sup>2</sup>

Searching for deep structures and large patterns seems located at the opposite pole from the postmodern sense of history-writing as fragmentary, fragile, and, so to speak, under perpetual construction. Nonetheless, in the hands of most professional historians, even cognitive science and parallels from the older *Weld* of ethology (animal behavior) tend to be used analogously rather than reductively. When Rachel Fulton, for example, understands premodern prayer practice through theories of psychological response and employs parallels between present-day sports and medieval metaphors of spiritual combat, she does not reduce the rituals and experiences we *Weld* described in texts to physiological patterns in the brain, just as she does not argue that we have any access to the devotee’s inner feelings. Cognitive structures lie deep below and hence are accessed only through behaviors that differ culturally; analogies are exactly that: analogies not equations.<sup>2</sup> Even “deep history” at its best involves understanding that physical or physiological structures are always mediated through our ways of knowing them, and hence through culture.

A far more pervasive trend – the interest in objects – might also be under-

<sup>22</sup> Robert McElvaine, *Eve’s Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History* (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Jared Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Random House, 2000).

stood as a flight from postmodern textuality. Material culture, understood as archaeology, has of course been a major element in historical scholarship for almost two centuries, especially for areas of history such as the classics, the ancient Near East, early China, or meso-America, for all of which textual evidence is scanty or lacking. Since the 1970s, however, it has not only become more important in fields such as the European Middle Ages, for which it was formerly less used, but has also expanded significantly beyond the excavation and dating of human-made objects to the use of new techniques and the posing of more wide-ranging cultural questions.<sup>2</sup> Dendrochronology, for example, is now used to date architecture and devotional objects as well as settlement locations; zooarchaeological evidence sheds new light on diet (animal and human) and hence on the movement of peoples; analysis of glacial ice to determine mineralogical emissions at far distant sites reveals new facts about mining techniques and hence radically new conclusions about the technological sophistication of cultures whose texts talk little about technology.

Material culture has also come to include museum studies, as it does in Randolph Starn's *AH* review essay of 2005, or areas such as the history of fashion or domestic interiors, often previously understood as social history. See, for example, Leora Auslander's 2005 article, "Beyond Words." To both Auslander and Starn, objects are understood as having

their own "agency," so to speak; an iron or a typewriter, for example, shapes the roles and experiences of the woman who uses it even as her needs and desires (and the needs and desires of others thrust upon her) shape its creation and use.<sup>2</sup> Indeed both authors tend to oppose the material to the cultural. Starn writes, "It is quite possible to imagine some future version of this Brief Guide suggesting that museum studies had turned— or returned— from the primacy of discourse to the priority of object."<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, it is hard not to notice that the extended example of material culture Auslander gives— a discussion of the reconstitution of domestic interiors by Jewish survivors after the Holocaust— is based on inventories, that is, on texts.

Moreover, as both historians recognize, objects are hardly objective. Neither the statue revered as living by a fourteenth-century peasant, nor the table polished by a nineteenth-century housewife, exists before the viewer as raw material from the past. Not only do we tend to understand that they are significant and why they are significant from texts, but, whether or not they are textually framed, they are not the same stuff they were centuries be-

2. ... *Biogeochemical Approaches to Paleodietary Analysis* ( ... , 2000).

2. ... *The American Historical Review* 110 (1) (2000). ... *The American Historical Review* 110 (1) (2000), 101–10. ... *Materiality*, ... ( ... , 2000), 1–10. ... *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* ( ... , 1985). ... *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* ( ... , 2000). ...

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When one surveys recent *AH* articles,

mies, such as Occident (in this case Russia) versus Orient. As Matthew Connelly comments, “[B]inaries are on the run,” a trend all the more surprising (yet perhaps, for academic culture, predictable) given the stark dichotomies in the political and polemical world since 9/11. For all its broad sweep, its rejection of abrupt shifts, and its stress on economic and geographical factors— which might seem anti- or non-postmodern— the new “entangled” history is inconceivable without a postmodern understanding that all units (whether geographical or cultural), like all exchanges (whether of values, social structures, objects, or D A), are mediated by categories constituted by the historians who study them, as well as by the people who create them in their ever-changing variety. Thus, in the new emphases I have chronicled here— on connectivity, transitions, material culture, objects, even in the best of the work that employs and queries “deep structures”— there seems to be a recognition that, pace the theorists of “turns,” for the historian there can be no “beyond” culture.

Hence, as I said at the beginning of this essay, the apocalyptic tone of the mid-1990s seems to have been misplaced. The writing of history is stronger and far more sophisticated than in 1995 and, as I have tried to show, this owes more to the absorption than to the rejecting of the so-called linguistic or cultural turn. Yet those of us who teach in American universities know that there is a crisis today. It is a crisis

not of the substance of historical and humanistic study, but rather of professional practice and formation, a crisis that goes to the heart of what we value as scholars at least as much as did the “culture wars” of the 1990s. It affects all practicing historians, but especially the young, and tends to be expressed in language similar to the cries of anxiety, even fear, that characterized the essays in the 1997 volume *What's Happened to the Humanities?*





archival research. But awareness that we all write from a particular perspective and with the aid of specific methods and interpretations does not mean that there is no difference between good and bad arguments; opposing the transparency of evidence— whether objects or texts— does not mean opposing evidence. Indeed, exactly the opposite is true. More attention to the complex and indirect ways in which evidence renders up the past leads to more attention to the cogency and accuracy of argument. But paying more attention means taking more time. What I suggest is that an enthusiastic acceptance (instead of a grim fear) that each of us writes from a partial perspective might free us from the pressures of speed-up and over-production. Hence an acceptance of our postmodern partiality might accord us more time to make our partial arguments well.

If I am right in this seemingly odd vision that connects the postmodern to the modest, then a recognition that we are not beyond the cultural turn might lead us not only to embrace fully the achievements of the past decade but also free new generations from pressures that may inhibit the achievements of the decades to come.