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Use, Value, Justification: On History and Historicism in Nineteenth-Century French Studies

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ABSTRACT

The ‘historical turn’ has been particularly fruitful and enabling in nineteenth-century French studies, and methodological approaches that might broadly be described as ‘historicist’ remain dominant within the subfield. Yet these approaches inevitably privilege certain types of literary critical thinking over others, and may even obscure some of the ways in which literary texts have, or can be given, meaning. They also tend to posit the audience of work in nineteenth-century French studies as being composed primarily of other specialists. I suggest that ‘taking a break’ from historicism might facilitate new conversations about nineteenth-century French literature, with new interlocutors.

KEYWORDS

Historicism; Flaubert, Gustave; Barthes, Roland; methodology; literary criticism; literary history

Seuls les romans historiques peuvent être tolérés parce qu’ils enseignent l’histoire.
Flaubert, *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*

‘State of the field’ reflections can be optimistic, or they can be anxious; in the humanities, they tend towards the latter.¹ When academics in our disciplines step back and talk in the abstract about what they do and why, they invariably do so out of a sense of defensiveness, guilt, or threat. ‘The humanities have become self-reflexive’, writes Rónán McDonald, ‘because they are under threat, blocked, and queried by neoliberal, econometric ideologies of higher education’ (2015, 1). At the 2021 MLA Convention, at which I presented an early version of this article, the Nineteenth-Century French Studies Association’s sponsored panel at which I spoke asked its participants to expand on the topic of ‘Nineteenth-Century French Studies for the Twenty-First Century.’ An optimistic title, we might wryly say: while the invitation it extends presumably reflects a belief that nineteenth-century French studies *might* be ‘relevant’ to the present century, it is nevertheless fairly obviously rooted in the anxiety that that relevance is not obvious, and does not go without saying. Lurking within the hypothesis of a nineteenth-century French studies ‘for’ the twenty-first century, moreover, is the larger question of what nineteenth-century French studies is, or has ever been, ‘for’ – itself a subset of the fundamental question of the use and value of literary study of whatever sort, if not indeed of the use and value of literature itself. Although that question, and some

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recent (and less recent) attempts to answer it, will inform what I have to say in this article, I do nevertheless intend to confine myself to our immediate subfield of nineteenth-century French studies. Responding at once to *Dix-Neuf's* invitation to think about the state of our subfield and to NCFS's interrogation of how that subfield might exist 'for the twenty-first century', I want to think about the use, or the value, or the justification of nineteenth-century French studies—that is, about what it's 'for'. And as a corollary of, rather than as a rejoinder to, the implied presentism of the phrase 'for the twenty-first century', I also want to think about the role something called 'history' has been called upon to play in establishing that use, value, and justification. In brief, I want to suggest that 2021 might be the time for scholars in nineteenth-century French studies to consider taking a break from history and from historicism.

In making this suggestion, I risk appearing rather presumptuous, for a couple of reasons. First, because much of what I say below is already being said (or has, simply, already been said) in the wider sphere of anglophone literary studies—meaning, inevitably, by scholars of literature in English. Over at least the last decade, scholars such as Paul Armstrong, Rita Felski, and more recently Michaela Bronstein (not to mention many others, of course) have reflected on the dominance of the historicist or more broadly contextualist paradigm in literary studies, and wondered what aspects of our object of study, and what other ways of studying it, that paradigm might obscure or obstruct. I draw extensively on their work here in thinking about the specific situation of nineteenth-century French studies. I risk seeming presumptuous, second, because as the other contributions to this special number demonstrate, not everyone in nineteenth-century French Studies has been waiting for my approval before trying out something new. To this latter objection, my reply is straightforwardly to acknowledge that in this article, I am to a certain extent talking to myself: what follows is nothing if it is not a reflection on my own past and present work, on what I think I've been doing and why, and what I'd like to try to do in the future. It should equally be understood, then, that when I highlight the limitations of certain ways of doing nineteenth-century French studies, I am highlighting the limitations of my own previous work as much as—indeed, more than—anyone else's. It is not my intention to belittle, trivialize, or dismiss historical or historicist work, and still less the work of any individual scholar; I refrain from naming or quoting anyone (other than myself) as an example of what I mean, and I do not even have individuals 'in mind' whose names have been politely redacted. Indeed, it is not even my intention to argue that there is anything 'wrong' with historicism *per se*. Rather, I am thinking about some very broad methodological tendencies within our subfield; and this article should be read as an invitation to greater methodological diversity within it.

For—and this is also my response to the first objection, that the dominance of historicist methodologies is already being challenged—I do think that a vague historicism remains the dominant currency of nineteenth-century French studies as a subfield; and I say a 'vague historicism' because I also think, more tendentiously, that that historicism is not always very self-reflexive, and has come to be taken largely for granted. The sorts of conversations about the nature of literary texts, the purpose of literary study, and the relationship of historicism to both that have recently flourished in English studies are far more rarely and far less formally addressed in our own field. Moreover, and despite my debt to that prior work within English studies, I do not think that we in nineteenth-century French studies can simply borrow answers to these questions from our colleagues

in English. Scholars in modern languages, with the prickly *ressentiment* that comes with acute disciplinary precarity, often have occasion to note a certain parochial universalism at work in the way ‘big questions’ are asked within English studies; and while one might suppose that there are some questions about *literature* that may be susceptible of universal answers, there can surely be no such answers where the obviously institutional and cultural question of literary *studies* is concerned. At the very least, the study of English Literature, and even of literature in English, in the English-speaking countries can and must position itself—even if antagonistically—vis-a-vis received ideas of heritage, tradition, and civilization that have historically been the only justification English as a subject has needed in the English-speaking world (however unsatisfactory a justification that might seem to those who actually teach it). In this sense, the study of foreign literature—the study of French literature, say—offers a rather more pointed illustration of the apparent gratuitousness of literary study, and we therefore owe it to ourselves to think periodically about what we’re doing and why. More importantly, however, I cannot shake the feeling that our understanding of what literature and literary studies are, and are for, *is* at least somewhat specific, and shaped to some extent by the kind of literature that we as scholars, or simply as readers, are most accustomed to thinking about. As I shall attempt to show in this article, our particular object of study as *dix-neuviémistes*—the literary culture of nineteenth-century France—has some uniquely pertinent, if not exactly encouraging, things to say about the use, value, and justification of literature.

Always Historicize!

Although in this essay I shall use the term ‘historicism’ as a necessary and unavoidable shorthand, I should acknowledge from the outset that this term is deeply problematic: it’s impossible to generalize about a single ‘historicism’, in French studies or anywhere else. In discussion of the ‘historical turn’ in literary studies, it is common to hear quoted Fredric Jameson’s imprecation, as the very first words of 1981’s *The Political Unconscious*, to ‘Always historicize!’, what Jameson calls ‘the one absolute and we may even say “transhistorical” imperative of all dialectical thought’. Less commonly noted, however, is Jameson’s immediate identification of two distinct ‘paths’ whereby that imperative might be pursued: ‘the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things’ (1981, 9). Jameson, he explains, has chosen to pursue the second path, though other types of literary history might and do tread something more like the former. Jameson’s epochal work, with its avowed Marxism and psychoanalytical emphases, seems moreover at loggerheads with other emblematic representatives of ‘historicism’ in the English and French-speaking scholarly traditions. Michel Foucault fiercely rejected both these theoretical models, of course, and indeed devoted a good deal of time to demonstrating, precisely, the historicity of psychoanalysis and thus debunking its claims to speak fundamental truths about human nature. The Anglophone ‘New Historicism’, its pioneers Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt explain, strove to moderate the ‘hermeneutical aggression’ of Marxist ideology critique (2000, 9), and has also tended to be impatient with psychoanalysis, which New Historicists regard as inescapably anachronistic. And yet the grand diachronic impulse of Foucauldian genealogical and archaeological

thinking sits oddly alongside the synchronic concentration of New Historicist ‘thick description’; while New Historicism has always been a mode of reading literary texts (even as it massively increased the range of what could be considered ‘texts’ for reading), where Foucault’s writing avoided literary texts and had little to say about the literary as a category.

How, then, to make sense of the range of work, in nineteenth-century French studies and elsewhere, that appears to emerge from these diverse but overlapping influences? I want to suggest three traits—though the list is certainly not exhaustive—that characterize (I hope fairly) the historicist approach as it’s commonly encountered in articles, conference papers, and so on, in our subfield, and as I myself have practised it in previous work: its anti-canoncity, its contextualism, and its specificity.

- *Anti-canoncity*. In keeping with the earliest articulations of the New Historicist project, historicist work tends explicitly or implicitly to challenge received canons and ‘national traditions’, especially as these have been conceived through metaphors of inheritance and lineage. New Historicism effected what Gallagher and Greenblatt call a ‘drastic broadening of the field’ by treating entire historical cultures as texts to be read, made up of disparate ‘traces’ that were continuous with each other and could be read together as a never-totalizable whole; in such an optic, high/low distinctions are blurred and ‘works that have been hitherto denigrated or ignored can be treated as major achievements’ (2000, 10). Where historicism treats canonical works, it invariably seeks to relativize their status with respect to other non-canonical works within their contemporaneous literary field, as well as non-literary discourses. Historicism is sceptical of, or even hostile to, evaluative considerations, especially where these appear to treat the aesthetic as a free-standing or timeless category.
- *Contextualism*. Historicist work tends to assume that the primary frame of relevance within which the critic should apprehend the meanings of a text is a contemporaneous social, political, economic and cultural (etc) moment that can be abbreviated as the text’s ‘historical context’—or even its ‘context’ *tout court*. Good historicist work is not naïve in its understanding of context, and recognizes that the ‘context’ is only ever really *more texts* (New Historicism’s ‘traces’), and that analysis of the text/context relationship is therefore infinite or circular, and is inescapably hermeneutic in nature. But most historicist work supposes that the basic meanings of texts, and of the words that make up texts, emerge from and are in some sense limited by the meanings conceivably available to contemporaneous readers; texts may have unconscious or latent meanings, but these too are to be understood in relation to beliefs, values and ideologies prevalent ‘at the time’. Historicism asks, ‘what did this text mean *then*?’ and while this does not preclude the question ‘what does this text mean *now*?’ historicist critics tend to disparage such questioning as ‘presentism’, and are apt to reject interpretations arrived at through this sort of enquiry as ‘anachronistic’. Historicism is nothing if not anti-anachronistic.
- *Specificity*. Historicism, relatedly, values specificity. The Editorial statement of the journal *Representations*, founded in 1983 as the flagship journal of the nascent New Historicism, still calls for work that is ‘theoretically sophisticated but with a high degree of social, historical, and textual specificity’. This pursuit of specificity may well grow out of the early New Historicist tactic of ‘thick description’, a method

which recognizes that cultures and cultural phenomena are, as it were, fractally complex, and could always be described with greater precision, at a higher degree of ‘zoom’. Historicism regards generalizations about a given culture as provisional, and comparisons between cultures and contexts as at high risk of being ‘reductive’. Historicism is anti-reductive.

It will be noted that, the variousness of the influences shaping historical work in our field notwithstanding, these three characteristics as I’ve described them are most closely associated with the New Historicism. I think this is broadly accurate, though of course, most of us probably practice some blended form of historicism that combines these features with (for instance) a Foucauldian attention to the play of power and resistance, or a Jamesonian interest in the ‘unconscious’ work of literary forms.

Perhaps the most striking and long-lasting effect of the historical turn in nineteenth-century French studies, and perhaps also the most valuable, relates to the first of these three points. A cursory glance at the programmes of past SDN or NCFS conferences reveals the extraordinary range of authors, genres, discourses, and practices that the historicist challenge to the canon has made available for scholarly enquiry. This is to be sure a general gain for us, but the broadening of our textual field has been of particular importance in one respect: as the work of Naomi Schor, Margaret Cohen and Alison Finch (among others) demonstrates, the historicist displacement of the canonical was essential to the recovery of the vast swathes of nineteenth-century French women’s writing that had been marginalized by a belletristic canon whose conditions of entry were defined—accidentally on purpose, as it were—to do precisely that (see Schor 1993; Cohen 1999; Finch 2000). It’s nevertheless remarkable that the effect of this shift has been less the complete destruction of the canon, and more the (re)integration of certain women writers (Sand, Rachilde, Duras, to name only the most prominent) into it. Some will deplore this as evidence of an incomplete revolution, and that view is fair enough. My point, however, is this: the historicist challenge to the canon has not, as is sometimes suggested, stripped us of our aesthetic sense and ground up the textual traces of the past into so much relativistic sausage meat. The canon still exists; we know, more or less, who is in there; we teach those authors, with some twists and additions, to our undergraduates. But historicism has taught us to be always alive to the silent political work performed by the canon, to question its exclusions, and to approach what is included without unhelpful reverence. In other words, historicism has in this respect expanded what we can do with literature.

My growing sense of dissatisfaction with the historicist approach, then, is rooted in the last two points: what I’m calling its contextualism and its specificity. Some of the problems I want to point to have already been raised—indeed, raised rather more polemically than would be my inclination—in the context of Victorian studies, by the group of scholars who have come together as the V21 Collective (‘Victorian Studies for the Twenty-First Century’). I share with these scholars the sense that the problem is not so much historicism *in theory*, but rather the way that historicism has come to be practised in our discipline as it has settled down over the years into a familiar approach—what one might call the ‘habit’ of historicism. Of particular interest are the first two of the ‘Ten Theses’ that make up the collective’s confrontational manifesto. Here is the first:

1. Victorian Studies has fallen prey to *positivist historicism*: a mode of inquiry that aims to do little more than exhaustively describe, preserve, and display the past. Among its symptoms are a fetishization of the archival; an aspiration to definitively map the DNA of the period; an attempt to reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*; an endless accumulation of mere information. At its worst, positivist historicism devolves into show-and-tell epistemologies and bland antiquarianism. [...] ('Manifesto of the V21 Collective')

The 'reconstructive' scholarly attitude described here is a sort of deformed descendant of thick description. It resembles the New Historicist pursuit of ever-greater specificity, but appears to have forgotten or bracketed the New Historicist practice of self-problematization, its insistence on the hermeneutic and indeed anachronistic nature of all historical enquiry (beginning with the identification of a 'period' of study in the first place). This habit is, I think, rather less common in nineteenth-century French studies than in Victorian studies, but it does exist. While Gallagher and Greenblatt envisage the historicist critic seeking to 'identify, out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, which are the significant ones, either for us or for them, the ones most worth pursuing' (2000, 15), more recent historicist work exhibits a tendency not to distinguish between the 'interpreting detail' and the rest; facts, texts, 'discourses' are adduced *because they existed*, rather than because they matter. As this tendency becomes more pronounced and unquestioned, greater specificity of description begins to stand in for interpretation and argument: a paper may identify its purpose, often quite explicitly, as being to show that *x* is 'more complicated' than we thought. It is of course trivially true that any cultural phenomenon becomes more complicated as one considers it in greater detail, but that greater complication may not matter very much if it doesn't help us understand something we previously couldn't.

Even more important is the V21 Collective's second 'Thesis':

2. Positivist historicism is enabled by and sustains a situation in which Victorianists are our own and only interlocutors. It fails to imagine paths of argument compelling to scholars who do not care about Victorians as Victorians. ('Manifesto')

This critique, I believe, may very fairly be addressed to the subfield of nineteenth-century French studies, insofar as that subfield's dominant mode is a historicist one. The insistence, be it explicit or a matter of received practice, on contextualist interpretation and high-specificity description limits the range of arguments that can be made about texts; where that insistence is on *historical* contextualism and *historical* specificity, it limits the pool of interlocutors who might be receptive to those arguments to those who are already interested in the nineteenth century (or the July Monarchy, or whatever) as an object of study in its own right. I consider this to be a risk even in historicist work that is 'presentist' insofar as it is avowedly motivated by present-day political commitments. To be sure, there exists a rich abundance of excellent feminist, or queer, or anti-racist historical criticism in nineteenth-century French studies. Yet with the notable exception of the feminist expansion of the canon mentioned above, I do not believe that there is a necessary sympathy between the methodology and the politics of this body of work; on the contrary, it seems to me that the historicist frame is as likely to militate *against* the political work that such criticism sets out to do, and the best critics working in this vein are those who are already willing to risk the sort of anachronistic or 'reductive' claims that the historicist habit reflexively poo-poops. Such work in fact draws its power, I would suggest, from the vast potential for meaning-making of literary

texts, of texts *read as literature*, which can never truly be constrained by a specific contextual frame. Its overriding impulse, as the authors themselves might well agree, is analogical, or dialogical, or genealogical, rather than narrowly *reconstructive*.

The Lure of the Concrete

The V21 Collective's manifesto does not indicate how or why it is, in the group's view, that Victorian Studies has 'fallen prey' to 'positivist historicism'; the implication seems to be that, as I've suggested, a more reflexive practice declined by habituation and familiarity into a shadow of itself. (I nevertheless suspect members of the Collective would be less keen than I am to distinguish a 'good' New Historicist impulse from its degenerate offspring.) An intriguing moment in the Third Thesis, however, suggests in an offhand way that, having seen through and then abandoned positivist historicism, Victorianists 'must seek new justifications for our work' ('Manifesto'). Now this idea of 'justification' is not otherwise directly thematized in the manifesto, but the sentence appears to imply (or rather: it assumes) that 'positivist historicism' has hitherto played—or been thought to play—some sort of justifying role in Victorian Studies. Yet how, we might well ask, could an approach so allegedly given to fetishism, antiquarianism, and games of show-and-tell possibly serve to justify anything?

The beginnings of an explanation may be found in an unexpected moment of Roland Barthes's 'L'Effet de réel' (1968). Barthes has been considering Flaubert's evocation of Rouen in *Madame Bovary*, and has acknowledged that it possesses what he calls a 'fin esthétique' and thus sits in a long literary tradition of descriptive-ekphrastic set-pieces (1968, 86–7). But this aesthetic purpose, Barthes explains, is overlaid by a new set of 'contraintes', those of *referentiality*; indeed, the two principles exist in tension:

La 'représentation' pure et simple du 'réel', la relation nue de 'ce qui est' (ou a été), apparaît ainsi comme une résistance au sens; cette résistance confirme la grande opposition mythique du vécu (du vivant) et de l'intelligible; il suffit de rappeler que dans l'idéologie de notre temps, la référence obsessionnelle au 'concret' (dans ce que l'on demande rhétoriquement aux sciences humaines, à la littérature, aux conduites) est toujours armée comme une machine de guerre contre le sens, comme si, par une exclusion de droit, ce qui vit ne pouvait signifier—et réciproquement. [...] Ce même 'réel' devient la référence essentielle dans le récit historique, qui est censé rapporter 'ce qui s'est réellement passé': qu'importe alors l'infonctionnalité d'un détail, du moment qu'il dénote 'ce qui a eu lieu': le 'réel concret' devient la justification suffisante du dire. (1968, 87)

Barthes is making a number of intriguing moves here; the essay's velocity suddenly seems to increase, its intended conceptual reach to broaden considerably. The passage turns on an opposition between reference and meaning, or between referentiality and signification. Towards the end of the essay, we recall, Barthes will theorize the *effet de réel* as involving the illusory reduction of the literary detail to a sign comprising only a signifier and a referent, thus cutting out the signified that might allow the sign to have meaning (for instance) symbolically and confining it instead in the connotative mode as an example of 'the real'. In building towards this theorization, Barthes posits an antagonism between referentiality and what he calls *le sens*, by which I understand him to mean not simply abstract meaning (especially without concrete reference—the inverse of the *effet de réel*), but more broadly everything that emerges from interpretation and

from reading: sense as ambiguous, undecidable, provisional, deniable and so on. At issue once again is a tension between the descriptive and the hermeneutic.

This passage makes clear that the specific form taken by 'realist' description in the mid-nineteenth century is at least in part a matter of ideology; but to illustrate his point, Barthes immediately reaches for an analogy with 'l'idéologie de notre temps', and an unexpected allusion to the predicament of the academic humanities ('les sciences humaines'). The rather loosely defined 'ideology of the day' allegedly demands of the humanities that they refer—as that ideology itself apparently does, obsessively—to 'the concrete'; this would, indeed, appear to be at least in some sense the *same* ideology that is shaping nineteenth-century realism, imposing this additional set of constraints (those of 'referentiality') alongside the historic aesthetic canons governing literary description. And as elsewhere in Barthes's essay, this demand is a matter of usefulness and function (or the lack of it), as well as of justification. The power of 'the concrete' as an ideological category, Barthes suggests, is to obviate the question of use or value: the discourse that can claim to give an account of 'the real' is not required to give an account of itself. Already in his discussion of Flaubert's use of description, Barthes has posited its pseudoreferentiality as an 'alibi' for what would otherwise be its aesthetic gratuitousness—its *luxe*, in the economic language he uses elsewhere in the essay. Flaubert's literature 'gets away' with being literature, Barthes implies, by paying this tribute to the concrete. And the vulnerability of the modern humanities, he suggests, is that they pre-occupy themselves exclusively with *sens* in a historical era enamoured of the concrete; why can't they deal in concrete things, asks *l'idéologie de notre temps*?

My basic point is obvious, I suppose. I am suggesting that, whether we admit it or not, at least part of the historical turn in nineteenth-century French studies was driven by this tyranny of the concrete, by a sense of embarrassment about what is indisputably at the core of our discipline—meaning, and the making of meaning through reading, which 'l'idéologie de notre temps' positions as gratuitous and in need of some external justification. I agree in this with Jessica Tanner, who has recently observed that 'the turn to cultural history in literary studies marked a return to referentiality' that was primarily 'defensive' in nature, a response to attacks on theoretically oriented literary criticism's perceived formalism and lack of referential grounding (2020, 199). 'L'Effet de réel' makes clear that a turn to the historical is not simply one way among others of responding to such attacks, of seeking some 'concrete' justification, but on the contrary the most logical (that is, symptomatic) within this ideological framework, since the conception of historical narrative as merely relaying 'ce qui s'est réellement passé' simultaneously grants that type of discourse a unique self-justifying power. The urge to 'reconstruct the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen*' that the V21 Collective find at work in 'positivist historicism' would thus, according to these lights, be enough to justify the entire project of Victorian studies; conversely, interventions that fail to manifest this impulse will appear unjustified, insufficient, somehow naked. I recall an incident when, following some non-historicist conference paper on some work of nineteenth-century French literature, an audience member objected that what the speaker had offered was 'just a reading'. And I remember nodding in agreement, knowing exactly what that colleague meant. Where was the plus-value, the graft, the facts? Where was the concrete? Yet that objection, and in particular its telling phraseology, now strikes me as symptomatic of something very problematic. Indeed, a number of recent scholarly interventions have insisted on

the importance of reading, and of thinking about reading, in our disciplines. In response to the phrase ‘just a reading’, one thinks first perhaps of Sharon Marcus’s notion of—*justement*—‘just reading’, which while in no way an anti-historicist intervention is nevertheless oriented towards a more open-handed, face-value encounter with texts of the past, and recognizes that, whatever our approach, ‘we are always only—or just—constructing a reading’ (2007, 75). Paul Armstrong also offers a robust account of ‘why reading still matters in a contextualist age’, which I draw on in the final section of this article (2011, 87). Perhaps most instructive, however, is Dominick LaCapra’s 2000 *History and Reading*. For it will of course be obvious that the discourse of ‘ce qui s’est réellement passé’, of the past ‘*wie es eigentlich gewesen*’, is an impossibly simplistic version of history as a discipline. On the contrary, the discipline of history itself is ‘just reading’; as LaCapra points out, the ‘self-sufficient research paradigm’ of history prior to the so-called ‘linguistic turn’ depended upon a ‘denial or repression of reading’, of reading qua problem, that became untenable in the latter decades of the twentieth century, at least partly under the influence of thought that entered the academy through French departments (2000, 30). One might almost fear that the conjunction of the ‘historical turn’ in literary studies with the ‘linguistic turn’ in history represents less two disciplines drawing near to each other in some Hegelian synthesis, and more one discipline losing what the other gained in self-awareness and self-knowledge.

It will be objected that no one in our field is actually this naïve: no one supposes that there is a historical ‘real’ beyond the realm of text and representation; everyone recognizes the hermeneutic dimension of every act of context-reconstruction. Perhaps. But I do believe that history as a discipline retains a kind of prestige among literary scholars as being somehow harder, more real, more concrete than what we do; I admit that I still feel a twinge of inferiority when LaCapra notes that his preferred, reconstructed version of the historical disciplinary paradigm will retain its positivist predecessor’s ‘insistence on extensive (ideally exhaustive) research’ (2000, 31–2, 33). And I would also remark that even if we realise that this prestige is an illusion, we do not always *behave* as if we do. More precisely, we often behave as if certain others ‘out there’ in the world where we are called upon to justify our doings—committees, managers, funding bodies, publishers and so on—*do* believe in the greater concreteness of history. A thought experiment: think how many times you’ve read a scholarly blurb or book prospectus that has described the project it plugs as being ‘based on extensive archival research’; now imagine replacing that phrase with ‘based on multiple very attentive re-readings of a handful of very important novels’. My point is certainly not to disparage extensive archival research. Yet there can surely be no doubt that the second descriptor is as essential to good work in literary studies as the former, though it enjoys none of the former’s self-justifying power. That the value of close (re-)reading should be so much less plausibly articulable in these contexts is ultimately just one example among myriads of how, as Stefan Collini argues so eloquently, public discourse *about* academic research in general so often ends up ‘employing categories and descriptions which we know, or ought to know, misrepresent the true purpose and value of much of what is done in universities’ (2012, 100). This, to be sure, is a depressing thought, and a much larger problem than the one I am trying to address in this essay; and I do still believe that it ought to be possible to advance a public discourse valuing reading on a qualitative rather than a quantitative basis.

In any case, and even supposing that our pursuit of the historicist ‘concrete’ were purely strategic, a disciplinary defence mechanism in the face of difficult ideological circumstances, I fear it would still be misguided. Put simply, turning to ‘history’ as a way of justifying our acts of reading by grounding them in an illusory real has never worked well and may never work again—just ask a historian. For as Barthes puts it, the demand that *l’idéologie de notre temps* makes of the humanities is, precisely, a *rhetorical* demand—‘ce que l’on demande rhétoriquement aux sciences humaines’. Barthes names here what twenty-first century humanities scholars recognize all too well, and what Collini continues to do battle against: the test one is supposed to fail, the question-begging metric based on an alien value system. It is a demand made in the certain knowledge that the addressee can never deliver.

The Lure of the Aesthetic

To be sure, one could find many eloquent denunciations of this phenomenon in the umpteen jeremiads written in defence of the humanities in the last few years. What is unique about how Barthes makes the same point in ‘L’Effet de réel’ is that he essentially asserts a straightforward continuity between this ideological scrutiny of the mid-twentieth-century academic humanities (which, we can all agree, has only become more urgent and distressing in 2021) and what is at stake ideologically in Flaubert’s aesthetics. As we have seen, Barthes seems to assume that the ideology of the concrete that nags the humanities is the same ideology that sets those additional, non-aesthetic constraints on Flaubert’s descriptive practice, the same ideology to which referential lip-service must be paid if the artist is to ‘get away with’ being an artist at all. Whether this sameness is a matter of literal continuity, or genealogy, or mere coincidence is left unclear. But Barthes’s collapsing of historical layers here, his superimposition of the high realist literary moment and the high structuralist critical one, seems to me suggestive, not least as an apparently completely offhand instance of a dialogical approach to literary texts. It is also somewhat troubling. Supposing the relationship between the ideology of 1857 and ‘l’idéologie de notre temps’—1968, 2021—were indeed one of continuity or genealogy, that we are living in some sense *in the same moment* as Flaubert; might this help us explain why—or indeed, help us realise that—when we as *dix-neuviémistes* think about the ‘use’ and the ‘value’ of what we do, we find ourselves, in a curious mise-en-abyme, acting out the very debates that vexed those whom we think we ‘study’?

Here is that same Gustave Flaubert, writing to George Sand, in the autumn of 1871:

Est-ce que la Critique moderne n’a pas abandonné l’art p[ou]r l’histoire? La valeur intrinsèque d’un livre n’est rien dans l’école Ste-Beuve-Taine. On y prend tout en considération sauf [illegible] le talent. (Flaubert/Sand 12 Oct. 1871)²

I began this article, perhaps glibly, with an epigraph from Flaubert’s *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*, in which the voice of bourgeois common sense exempts historical novels from the moral condemnation directed at the rest of the genre, on the basis that historical novels at least have the concrete use of teaching history, the justification of recounting ‘ce qui s’est réellement passé’. One might suppose, reading the above quotation, that I adduce it here to support my own argument: here in 1870, Flaubert grumbles, just as I might seem to be doing, that ‘criticism’ has lost its way, focusing excessively on the

historical circumstances that *produce* art, rather than on its ‘valeur intrinsèque’. This was indeed a common gripe with Flaubert in this period, one often associated for him with the critical work of Sainte-Beuve and latterly Taine. In 1863, in response to Edma Roger des Genettes’s evident enthusiasm for Taine, Flaubert had noted that ‘il y a autre chose dans l’art que le milieu où il s’exerce et les antécédents physiologiques de l’ouvrier’ (Flaubert/Roger des Genettes, 20 Oct. 1864). The critical view advanced in this letter might well sound, *mutatis mutandis*, spookily close to my own; in the new, Tainean, determinist-relativist-contextualist school, Flaubert continues, ‘on nie toute volonté, tout absolu’, and ‘le chef-d’œuvre n’a plus de signification que comme document historique’.

This uncanny convergence would be explainable if, as Barthes suggests, ‘l’idéologie de notre temps’ is also that of Flaubert’s. Post-revolutionary France might well be the pivotal historical moment at which the shifting social, economic, and political circumstances of modernity made the use, value and justification of literature *and* literary criticism appear almost exactly as problematic as they would in 1968, and as they still do today. This was, relatedly, the moment when those who made literature, independent ‘producers’ in Bourdieu’s autonomous literary field, came to define its ‘intrinsic value’ (as Flaubert puts it here) as, precisely, that which escaped capture by the value system of the wider culture. If the uselessness of art had been confidently asserted since Schiller at least, the nineteenth-century French version of this idea, what we have come to call *l’art pour l’art*, tended as we know to conceive of art as necessarily incomprehensible to and scorned by a philistine mass culture and its attendant ideology of economic success and social utility. Flaubert puts the idea pithily in another letter to Sand, from December 1872:

Or je maintiens qu’une œuvre d’art – (digne de ce nom & faite avec conscience) est inappréciable, n’a pas de valeur commerciale, ne peut pas se payer. Conclusion: si l’artiste n’a pas de rentes, il doit crever de faim! – ce qui est charmant. (Flaubert/Sand 12 Dec 1872)

The situation of literary studies in the twenty-first century academy, in which as Collini puts it ‘any invitation to *characterize* the work of scholars in the humanities is almost immediately construed as a demand to *justify* it’ (2012, 67)—an invitation, I would add following Barthes, that is only ever rhetorical in nature—seems to me continuous with the situation of art as imagined within a nineteenth-century French *l’art pour l’art* frame, in which the only valid characterization of art is precisely as that which *cannot* be justified, or at least, not in any terms other than its own. To be sure, the latter position is as seductive and paradoxical as the former is anxious and paranoid; but what we might call the ‘regime of knowledge’ in operation is the same in both cases.

In citing Flaubert complaining about the abuse of historical criticism, then, my purpose is *not* to support my own argument from an august antecedent, but rather to point out a risk, even a temptation. In trying to work out what our discipline is ‘for’, we cannot fall back on some idealist notion of the transcendent, transhistorical, shimmeringly auratic artwork, and its ‘intrinsic value’, because we of all people know that that notion is itself a historical object and not an eternal truth. More importantly, we understand that the emergence of that particular idea of the artwork as more or less dominant was due not to the unfathomable workings of the *Geist*, but to the rise in France of an authoritarian regime that was intolerant of dissent and suspicious of literature’s habit of saying one thing and meaning something else. The decontextualized

artwork that exists, in Flaubert's memorable phrase of January 1852, 'sans attache extérieure' (Flaubert/Colet 16 Jan 1852), is to a significant extent the product of the *coup d'état* that was consummated the previous month, the very 'ouragan / Qui fouettait mes vitres fermées' that the speaker of Théophile Gautier's 'Préface' to *Émaux et camées* studiously ignored, he tells us, as he burnished his precious poetic *bijoux* (1981, 25). The image of an apolitical artwork is not a primordial fact, but the result of a strategic *depoliticization* of art, mutually agreed upon by authors and authority; and even then, one suspects that the former group did not quite mean what they said.

These details, familiar to all *dix-neuviémistes*, are worth rehearsing in this context because scholars who question the dominance of historical-contextualist reading in literary studies are frequently accused of wanting to rehabilitate an apolitical aestheticism; and because, at least some of the time, that accusation is well founded. To be clear then: my intervention here is not in defence of some naïve notion of the 'merely aesthetic'. I am not arguing for a return to evaluative criticism (though I believe we might be more honest on this score: we are *always* thinking evaluatively in one way or another, though we seldom make explicit how). Indeed, the identification of some 'properly literary' approach to literature that would be preferable to historicism does not seem to me to be a very promising avenue—though many are tempted in this direction. In May 1870, Flaubert complained to Sand that there was no decent literary conversation to be had in Paris anymore, and observed that 'quand [la littérature] se trouve abordée incidemment, c'est toujours par ses côtés subalternes & extérieurs, la question de succès, de moralité, d'utilité, d'à-propos, etc!' (Flaubert/Sand 21 May 1870). Success, morality, utility, apropos: Flaubert, we know, considers all of these distractions from the 'intrinsic value' of literature which is self-sufficient and supposedly speaks for itself. Compare this intervention to one by Derek Attridge, defending in 2015 a literary criticism based unrepentantly on 'readings' (to which I am to at least some extent sympathetic). 'Readings', including when advanced by professional critics, Attridge recommends, should convey what he calls 'literary experience'; they should be accounts of a reading encounter that 'deploy a critical methodology no more powerful than is absolutely necessary for the purpose of conveying the singularity of the reader's response to the work' (in McDonald 2015, 261). Attridge conspicuously brackets vast swathes of criticism, what he calls 'suspicious reading', as being useless to such an approach. 'The exposure of a work's ideological predispositions, its complicity with the dominant class, race, gender, or sexual preference [...] has little or nothing to contribute to the experience of literature in the way I have described it', he explains, adding—slightly disingenuously—that 'its importance lies elsewhere'; moreover, even non-suspicious modes of literary scholarship such as literary history, stylistics, editorial work and so on can contribute to the communication of literary experience, but only 'in an ancillary way' (in McDonald 2015, 259–60). Again, there is an eerily direct continuity here between the nineteenth-century author and the twenty-first-century critic, in the sheer audacity with which both dismiss well-established ways of talking about literature as 'subaltern', 'external' or 'ancillary', in the name of an eminently modernist (which is to say historical) understanding of 'true' literary appreciation. Update Flaubert's 'moralité', 'utilité' and 'à propos' to more modern-sounding 'ethics', 'politics' and 'relevance', and one gets a sense of how limiting this prescriptive approach to literary appreciation would be. Why exactly one's reaction to a work's ideological predispositions and complicities

cannot be part of one's 'literary experience' is unclear; it's an easy point to score, but some people will be more likely than others to experience those things as *utterly* integral to their encounter with a work. But nor is that the point. The point is rather that, if our concern is to advocate for the 'value of literary studies', or even just to persuade people to read more, that cause is not advanced by narrowing the types of sense that one can find in, make of, and talk about, literature. If indeed there is anything 'intrinsic' to literature at all, I would venture to suggest—at the risk of sounding banal—that it is its very resistance to such narrowing.

Conclusion

So what am I actually suggesting? First, I am not seeking to replace Jameson's maxim *Always historicize!* with an injunction to *Stop historicizing!* I'm not even sure how we'd do that. Just as Jameson follows up his imperative by acknowledging that it is, paradoxically, 'transhistorical', so my own argument in favour of 'taking a break' from historicism has been made through considerations about the specificity of nineteenth-century French literature that are obviously historical in nature. When, moreover, I spoke a few pages ago of 'the meaning-making power of literary texts, of texts *read as literature*', I drew a distinction that could only make sense within a historicist-informed critical field. I am not, then, advocating a pointlessly anachronistic approach to texts; or the wilful bracketing of contextual knowledge; or the retrenchment of our primary field to an unreconstructed canon; still less, as I hope is now clear, the fetishization of nineteenth-century literary works as decontextualized aesthetic masterpieces. But I do believe that, as Rita Felski puts it, 'we cannot close our eyes to the historicity of art works, and yet we sorely need alternatives to seeing them as transcendently timeless on the one hand and imprisoned in their moment of origin on the other' (2015, 154).

The 'break' from historicism I am imagining would work towards undoing this binarism through a loosening of strictures and an opening out of frames of reference and relevance. So I *am* keen to abandon the idea that 'anachronism' necessarily *invalidates* a reading—the notion, that is, that as a scholarly matter, a text cannot mean *now* what it 'couldn't have' meant *then*. 'To reduce meaning to "meaning then"', writes Paul Armstrong, 'by privileging the contexts governing the moment of production is to rob the situation of writing of its historicity by suppressing its futurity' (2011, 94). For us as French scholars, this might be as simple as relearning—or better, reclaiming—some of the theoretical insights that were until not that long ago so influential within French studies as a whole; of reminding ourselves, for instance, that 'un signe écrit comporte une force de rupture avec son contexte, c'est-à-dire l'ensemble des présences qui organisent le moment de son inscription' (Derrida 1990, 30), and thinking aloud about what that means for us and our work as *dix-neuviémistes*. Indeed, one way of describing what I'm advocating might be a substantial broadening of our sense of what 'contexts' are—beginning by recognizing (as Derrida, *une fois n'est pas coutume*, appears to fail to do in this quotation) that the word 'context' is *not* synonymous with 'historical context' or 'original context', and that every act of reading is itself a context to a text, as well as (obviously) a text with a context. Working with this wider, more dynamic conception of context will require a refocusing on the act of reading. But as I've already suggested, this need not imply a reversion to an apolitical aestheticism: the act of

reading is, in Armstrong's words, 'the site of the aesthetic experience', but also precisely 'the locus where form and history, literary value and cultural contexts, artistic aims and political interests interact' (2011, 89).

Contrary to Attridge's opposition of second-level 'suspicious reading' and authentic 'literary experience', then, I would suggest that renewed attention to the constant recontextualizing effects of reading, and to the 'futurity' of writing, can enhance our ability to do work we consider politically meaningful *and* ease the apparent tension between political aspirations and aesthetic considerations. This argument has been persuasively articulated by Michaela Bronstein, following Felski and Armstrong. 'Literature', Bronstein writes, 'is embedded in history, but not always and only the history of its moment of production':

It makes an aesthetic appeal to the future, but an appeal that has political uses. And sometimes, in order to see the transhistorical uses of a text, it's necessary to allow it to break free of its context, so that a new context can take shape. (2018, 8)

The 'use' of literature, in other words, is in its appeal to the future; its 'context' of production, as Armstrong points out, is necessarily 'open-ended in its orientation towards a future of readers' (2011, 94), and incomplete if considered in isolation from those potentially infinite and unpredictable moments of 'consumption'. Another way of thinking about this transhistorical appeal is through the rather bland idea of 'conversation': I am interested to see the variety of conversations into which nineteenth-century texts can be meaningfully inserted if they are allowed to speak across time, if we are willing to explore more programmatically what Tanner calls 'the uncanny synchrony' or 'out-of-phase contemporaneity' of literature and reading (2020, 200). It strikes me that, if we are in search of some non-aestheticist justification for our work—if we seek, despite Flaubert's grumbling, to demonstrate the 'utilité' and 'à-propos' of what we do—this widening of contexts and multiplying of conversations might be a better way of going about it.

A final observation. A few years ago, a prospective graduate student explained that, while they proposed to work on exclusively nineteenth-century literary texts, they were not particularly interested in 'the context'. To which I, then in historicist-policeman mode, scoffed: well, if you're not interested in the context, why work on exclusively nineteenth-century texts? What was a rhetorical and rather unfair question then strikes me as a more interesting one now. If the members of the V21 Collective are 'Victorianists not for their own sake', we might reasonably ask, why are they Victorianists at all? The same would go for 'post-historicist' *dix-neuviémistes*: why identify oneself with a historically delimited literary corpus if one's interest in literature isn't historical? These questions are ultimately avatars of the more fundamental question, unanswerable but not therefore unaskable, of the role of something like taste, sensibility, or affinity in why scholars do what they do. This role is typically repressed, dismissed, or bracketed in our formal discussions as being somehow not rightly scholarly. We consequently don't have much of a language in which to think about what draws us to texts; as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick notes, 'the vocabulary for articulating any reader's reparative motive'—as opposed to paranoid, sceptical or critical motive—'towards a text or a culture has long been so sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary that it's no wonder few critics are willing to describe their acquaintance with such motives' (2003, 150). Given a completely free choice, why do we want to have these conversations with these particular texts? Of all

the works of literature that project from the past their ‘aesthetic appeal to the future’, why do we respond to these ones? Or even: of all the works of the past with insidious ideological blind spots, why do I most enjoy revealing the insidious ideological blind spots of these particular texts? These questions do not strike me as peripheral, but as properly central to the work of literary critics of whatever stripe; by integrating them more fully into our work, I believe we can make a clearer case for the value of an encounter with nineteenth-century French literature *as we actually experience it*. Of course, students, funding bodies, the public or whoever will not necessarily be persuaded by our assertions that nineteenth-century French studies is, or can be, *relevant* to the twenty-first-century, that it exists ‘for’ the twenty-first-century. But we will at least not have begun by insisting on principle that it definitely isn’t and doesn’t—which is a start.

Notes

1. The author would like to thank Elizabeth Emery, Jessica Tanner, and Marco Wan for their help in the preparation of this article.
2. I give references to Flaubert’s correspondence in this form only; they may be easily found in Yvan Leclerc and Danielle Girard’s online edition of the letters, listed in the Works Cited.

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