I

Though literature and history have traditionally been seen as two separate disciplines with 'literature' usually being privileged over history, of late the lines of demarcation have blurred. Before the advent of 'theory' in the social sciences (- theory in the form of post structuralism, Marxism, feminism, etc.) 'literature' was seen as the vehicle for eternal truths, an area which posited overarching verities, which in richness of language and metaphor, in its attention to details of style, stood alone. Other social sciences dealt with facts, in factual language - literature occupied a separate (and superior) arena. Literature dealt not with ephemeral temporary facts but with lasting truths; it depicted 'Life' independent of the constraints of actual times and places; it was universal. Though most of 'literature' was situated in a specific time and place, that was merely the context from which the great truth arose, towering over them, dwarfing them, making them, on the whole, of little value: "history if acknowledged at all, is seen as inessential or a constraint transcended in the affirmation of a transhistorical human condition" (Dollimore 4). Even historical literature, works of historical fiction, were evaluated not so much on their historical accuracy as their presentation of universal truths.

Historical literary criticism has been a distinct tradition in literary criticism, standing slightly apart from the latter. Wesley Morris in Toward a New Historicism identified four major types of historical criticism: the metaphysical, the naturalistic or positivistic, the nationalistic, and the aesthetic. In the metaphysical type, which was
derived from Hegel's transcendental philosophy, a literary work was understood as the poetic expression of a moment in the unfolding narrative of history as the self-realisation of the absolute. The positivistic/naturalistic treated the literary text as a medium through which a given period in history could be viewed by scholars who considered themselves scientific observers. The nationalistic type of historical criticism discovered in the text the native spirit of a given culture or race. The fourth type identified by Morris, the aesthetic, least resembles the other three in that it considers the literary work not as expressing or reflecting an existing cultural domain but as a way of creating cultural meanings and value (Morris 3-13).

Though each of the four types of historicism identified by Wesley Morris differs from the others, they are as historicism alike in being “monological; that is, they are concerned with discovering a single political vision, usually identical to that said to be held by the entire literate class or indeed the entire population” (Greenblatt, Introduction 5). Greenblatt goes on to describe this ‘vision’ which is accorded “the status of an historical fact” and which is usually seen as both coherent and consistent in itself: “It is not thought to be the product of the historian’s interpretation, nor even of the particular interests of a given social group in conflict with other groups” (Greenblatt, Introduction 5). The work of the historical critic thus involved melding the disparate and even contradictory parts of a literary text into an organic whole - a master narrative that unified dissenting voices, and presented a “seamlessly unified system of meaning” (Selden 161).

With the advent of post-structuralism in the 1960s and 1970s this version of historicism was challenged and threatened by new perceptions and ideas originating in the fundamental work of Ferdinand de Saussure on the nature of language. Saussure's
work suggested that there could be no direct access to reality through language because language itself is based on the essential difference between the *signifier* and the *signified* i.e. the sound or appearance of the word and the meaning or concept of the word held in the mind. Signifier and signified are not the same: the former represents the latter, but is not identical to it, and in the process of representation there is always inherent the possibility of distortion, opaqueness and confusion. Language works not on the basis of a direct correspondence to reality, but on the relationship of the signifier to the signified, of words to each other. From this it follows that reality is never directly accessible - reality or a version thereof is conveyed through language, and language offers only representations or approximations of reality.

The word 'history' has two meanings: (a) the events of the past and (b) telling a story about the events of the past. From the foregoing discussion of language and reality, it follows that history is always narrated and therefore the past can never be available to us in pure form, but always in the form of 'representations' (Selden 162). These representations differ from historian to historian - no version of history can claim to be detached and objective: the historian creates it from already written texts which are sorted and chosen and construed in line with his/her particular concern. This is a position which, though it gained currency following the poststructuralist revolution, had been posited as early as the 1930s by the American Progressive historians Carl Becker and Charles Beard. They raised the issue of historical relativism by insisting that every person would write his/her own history. In a radical change from conventional ideas of objective scholarship, they argued that the ideal of a definitive, objective reconstruction of the past was chimerical. Facts did not present themselves directly to the
historian: the historian picked and chose among them, guided by his ideological presuppositions (Appleby 216).

Long ago, in 1752, the German theologian Johann Martin Chladenius had remarked we cannot avoid that each of us looks on the story according to his point of view and that therefore we also retell it according to that point of view . . . . A narration wholly abstracted from its own point of view is impossible . . . (qtd. in Gossman 230).

Yet another consequence of the postmodernist intellectual revolution was the realisation that to speak of an over-arching world view or of the spirit of an age was to propagate a myth. Any period had innumerable ‘histories’ and each of these propounded its own versions and came to its own conclusions. To claim, in this atmosphere of multiplicity, that a historical period was characterised by a single vision was to try to perpetuate an ideology - usually one that benefited the dominant/ruling classes and endorsed their beliefs, for their own interests. The tendency of earlier types of historicism to emphasise the unifying function of culture, to resolve the plural into the singular spirit of the age/nation/civilisation/race/etc. was questioned. Historians and theorists on the lookout for any imposing of ideology by a dominant group were quick to seize on this tendency “to contain plurality within a higher unity” (Wayne 795), as one more instance of the “ideological legitimisation of an existing social order” working to “efface the fact of social contradiction, dissent and struggle” (Dollimore 5,7).

In the arena of literary criticism prior to the intellectual revolutions of the 1960s and 70s, the literary text was privileged as possessing a gifted exclusivity. It was thought to be ‘sublime’, a ‘transcendent’ expression of the human spirit, a “treasury in which value, truth, and beauty had been piously stored” (Gossman 229). It was far
removed from ‘mundane’ documents and ‘factual’ texts such as those on which history based itself: “History used to mean the hard facts to which one could turn in order to support softer interpretative work” (Smarr 2). Indeed, literature was foregrounded upon the background of history. But with the changes of the 60s and 70s literature and history could no longer be related in such simple hierarchical modes of thought. History itself had become “as soft, subjective, textual, and interpretative as the literary criticism that had hoped to find there a solid foundation” (Smarr 2). Put in the words of Louis Montrose’s convenient formulation: “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (Montrose 20), the relationship between literature and history, is simultaneously both simplified and complicated. Distinctions between the two are collapsed, lines of demarcation blurred, and there is a refusal to prioritise one over the other. But there also arise questions such as, is there no difference between literature and history? Can there be no recovery of the referent? Is all history to be considered a construction “written by the winner” so to say?

II

In the 1980s some literary critics started a line of critical enquiry which has come to be known under various rubrics, amongst them ‘critical historicism’, ‘cultural poetics’, ‘new history’, and ‘new historicism’. For the following discussion, I shall employ the term ‘new historicism’, first used by Stephen Greenblatt, one of the leading proponents of this new critical trend (Greenblatt, Introduction 5). Critics such as Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Jonathan Goldberg and Catherine Gallagher, to name just a few, are usually identified as exponents of new historicism, but the task of defining ‘new historicism’ is not nearly as easy - in fact it is said to be “notoriously difficult”
Indeed Don E. Wayne, yet another of the critics usually identified as new historicist, remarks that

there are at least several versions of new historicism coexisting in the present. As far as I can tell, in most recent usage the term ‘new historicism’ does not pertain to a school or to a coherent theory of cultural history. Rather, it designates a fairly diverse body of scholarship with some common attributes (Wayne 793).

The ‘new historicism’ remains “a phrase without an adequate referent . . . a site that many parties contend to appropriate” (Veeseer x).

New historicism does not approach the study of literary texts with a single methodology or a single theoretical approach. The term covers a wide range of approaches to the study of literature and history, a diverse set of practices, many of which have their origins in the work of Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, Mikhail Bakhtin and Hayden White, among others. The critics considered to be new historicists themselves try to avoid identifying their approaches with a single methodology, for they consider the multidimensionality of new historicism to be one of its strengths. And so the range of work called ‘new historicist’ includes a type of literary criticism that situates a text in its local, political and social context to better understand it; a type of cultural history influenced by the work of anthropologist Clifford Geertz; and cultural critiques that are sometimes Marxist or feminist or owe their origin to the work of Foucault or the history of institutions, sexuality, etc. (Wayne 793).

New historicist criticism differs from older types of historicist criticism in that it rejects outright the “monological” visions, “the teleological and totalising conceptions of ‘History’” (Cox and Reynolds 4), which characterised the latter. Critics
no longer try to posit a coherent, consistent frame into which all aspects of a period can be contained. Instead they try to analyse the contradictions and modifications, the subversions and challenges that exist along with an ideological dominant and see how these cancel and modify each other.

Another area of difference between the old and the new types of historicism lies in the way in which the poetic act/ the literary text is viewed. The old type of historicism started out with the conviction that all literature “reflected or expressed the human subject”. The more recent historical critics find it difficult to sustain this belief: they “have shrunk from making broad claims as to the efficacy of a human subject as the agent of history” (Wayne 794). Greenblatt offers an example of this when he writes that intending to explore “the role of human autonomy in the construction of identity” he found that “the human subject itself began to seem remarkably unfree, the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society” (qtd. in Dollimore 3-4).

Crossing over the boundaries which traditionally separated literature on the one hand from history, cultural studies, politics, anthropology and economics on the other, critics such as Louis Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt, amongst others, produced a substantial body of work on Renaissance literature and society. With the founding of the journal Representations in 1982, by Greenblatt and others, the production of new historicist scholarship in a number of other periods and fields came to be encouraged. American literary studies and the Romantic period of English literature were among two of the new areas into which new historicism ventured, along with feminist new historicist studies. Though new historicism does not have a political agenda of its own, there are Marxist new historicists as well as right wing ones; there are also those who remark that new historicism, being a method rather than
a school, belongs to neither left nor right. “A method, like a style, has no innate politics; the politics of a work are to be elicited by exposing its function in its own literary series, by revealing the questioner it is answering” (Butler 43).

For all its heterogeneity, there are certain key assumptions that “continually reappear and bind together the avowed practitioners and even some of their critics” (Veeser xi). The following list of assumptions was first put forward by H. Aram Veeser in his ‘Introduction’ to the collection of essays entitled The New Historicism which provides an overview of this school of criticism while also presenting dissenting voices and arguments. Veeser’s list of assumptions includes:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary “texts’ circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses unalterable human nature;
5. . . . that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe (Veeser xi).

In addition to these assumptions, new historicism is also characterised by certain methodological features. Where earlier critics used to focus on ideas as the basic units for analysis in cultural history, new historicists focus on power relationships and this puts the spotlight on issues such as patronage, patriarchal authority, the role of culture in the formation of the modern nation-state, etc.. New historicists also refuse to accept hierarchies among texts of various kinds: canonical /non-canonical; documents/fictions; etc.. In addition they proceed on the assumption that in a historical moment/period,
different modes of discourse (such as law, literature, theology, art, etc.) are not autonomous and that by studying the permeable boundaries of the discourses of a given cultural field, it is possible to arrive at an understanding of the broader ideological codes that order all discourse in that culture. Related to all these is the governing belief that discourse and representation form consciousness rather than merely reflecting or expressing it - culture is therefore an active force in history (Wayne 793).

Basing itself upon these assumptions new historicist criticism "reorients the axis of inter-textuality, substituting for the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history the synchronic text of a cultural system" (Montrose 17). Greenblatt in "Resonance and Wonder" phrased it differently when he wrote that the idea is not to find outside the work of art some rock to which literary interpretation can be securely chained but rather to situate the work in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment in both its history and our own (Greenblatt, "Resonance" 80).

The new historicist critic works to uncover the resonance of any object/text, its power "to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged . . . (Greenblatt, "Resonance" 79). It is the interweaving of text and context, of literature and history (not to mention politics, economics, trade, science, etc.) that interests new historicist critics and they work to lay bare that interweaving.

Even as the new historicist critics work to find "significant links between social and aesthetic forms", they explore "ways of bridging the historical and the aesthetic order, of locating the aesthetic forms shaping social phenomena as well as the social meanings inherent in aesthetic expression" (Lindenberger 198). In the process, as they
study a particular period, they analyse the ways in which the many discourses legitimate or subvert, consolidate and contain the dominant social order. Where earlier types of historical criticism identified a single "metaphysic of order" (Dollimore 5) or a dominant "spirit of the age", new historicist critics look at discourses as shaping or contributing towards dominant ideologies or subverting them. They differ from earlier historical critics in that they refuse to ascribe a "seamlessly unified system of meaning" (Selden 161), a neatly patterned world order, to a particular culture which is historically situated. They prefer to describe how texts and other agencies reinforce dominant cultures, work to shore up ideological grids or contest and subvert these, working to undermine them. The cultural unity that was inscribed by earlier historical critics is examined by the new historicist critics with the aim of seeing the actual plurality which exists within and which often has a destabilising influence, contradicting or cancelling the ideological dominant. They also concentrate, not just on the plurality within the unity, but also on the strategies and tactics by which the plurality is contained, often made invisible. To quote Greenblatt on what interests new historicist critics:

They have been more interested in unresolved conflict and contradiction than in integration; they are as concerned with the margins as with the centre; and they have turned from a celebration of achieved aesthetic order to an exploration of the ideological and material bases for the production of this order (Greenblatt, "Resonance" 78).

In the new historicist critics’ work, though there is visible everywhere the consciousness that there are limits upon individual intervention in historical processes, there is also simultaneously an
insistence on agency, for even inaction or extreme marginality is understood to possess meaning and therefore to imply intention. Every form of behaviour, in this view, is a strategy: taking up arms or taking flight are significant social actions, but so is staying put, minding one’s business, turning one’s face to the wall. Agency is virtually inescapable (Greenblatt, “Resonance” 74).

But while agency is ‘inescapable’, power is seen as bound up with collective, social energy. No action is isolated - they all partake in a larger process either as legitimating and stabilising the order of things or as resisting and subverting it. New historicist critics are particularly interested in how gestures of dissent and resistance are often appropriated by authority, thus containing their subversive force. They have also studied not only the ways in which dissenting forces are co-opted but also the way in which they are produced by the dominant/authority for its own ends and then contained, the ways that the dominant institutional culture “produces subversion in order to contain such ‘threats’ to itself” (Guerin 325). In doing so, in containing the oppositional energy of the resistant forces, the dominant takes unto itself their vitality as well - thus strengthening itself at the expense of what may have been a weakening agent. New historicism also works to show how when dissenting elements cannot be co-opted, the dominant demonises them as attempts to subvert the social order and then represses them while eliciting society’s consent for this action (Dollimore 7).

Through their work the new historicists have also questioned the received canon of literary works, often in alliance with feminist and post-colonial criticism. Critics of the new historicism claim however that the latter’s work leaves the canon intact while throwing the received texts into a new perspective. But challenges to the canon do not come only through the positing of alternative texts to replace previously
privileged canonical ones - the canon is also resisted through non-canonical readings, alternative readings which render the concept of canon “a site of contestation” (Cox and Reynolds 10). As Lindenberger wrote, “a striking change of interpretation is itself a form of canon change” (Lindenberger 209). In addition to non-canonical readings, new historicist critics such as Jane Tomkins and Cathy Davidson have also made their contributions to canon-change by positing that popular and genre fiction offer devastating and accurate criticisms of the society they depict, more so than received canonical texts by, say, Hawthorne or Melville.

In all their work the critics of the new historicist school situate themselves firmly in the present and focus on past culture, the texts of the past as other. In doing so they gain “a more critical perspective on (their) own culture and its ideological constraints” (Wayne 796). New historicism recognises “the pastness of the past, the fact that its language and its purposes are distinctive” (Butler 44). Moreover the new historicist critic acknowledges his own position, the constraints of time and place that influence his modes of seeing and thinking. Earlier historical critics often proclaimed that their work stood apart from their own subject positions, that it avoided all value judgements dependent upon their own situatedness. But new historicist critics write directly and in straightforward terms about their own subject positions that they are incapable of offering any description or explanation that is located at some Archimedean point outside the history (they) study, in some ideal space that transcends the co-ordinates of gender, ethnicity, class, age and profession that plot (their) own shifting and potentially contradictory subject positions (Montrose 30).

Self-consciousness admittedly characterises the work of the new historicists.
New historicist criticism has changed in status - from a much criticised new movement in literary circles to an institutionalised phenomenon, possessing considerable authority. This is clearly manifested by the fact that one conference after another sports the name; journals such as *Representations* are associated with the movement; the intellectual reputation of the leaders of the movement is so firmly established that they can help publish the writings and enhance the academic rank of those who are members of the movement (Lindenberger 205-206, 209). Polemical essays for and against the new historicism abound and it continues to be under attack for its bizarre concerns; for its quietist tendencies, for not being leftist enough or for being too leftist!! But harsh criticism notwithstanding, the new historicism retains immense value as a new methodology for reading texts specially as it has "acknowledged and elucidated the textuality of history and the intertextual relations between canonical literary texts and other kinds of cultural data" (Wayne 801). Indeed, the new historicists changed the ways in which literary texts and documents were related. The earlier hierarchical relationships were rewritten and literature was seen as a participant in "historical processes and in the political management of reality" according to Jean E. Howard (qtd. Wayne 801). No less important is the fact that new historicism renewed interest among literary scholars in the resources of the archives. The 'Turn towards History' in literary criticism has caused critics to dirty "their hands with the dust of books nobody has touched in years" (Lindenberger 197), to 'historicise'.

III

The present overlapping of the spheres of history and literature in academia is only one more stage in the relationship between the two. Before setting out on a
discussion of whether ‘history’ is possible or not, what counts as historical evidence, etc. I shall briefly present an overview of what history has been defined as and what it does and the changing relationship between literature and history over time.

History deals with the past and implicit in the word are two distinct meanings: “history as that which happened in the past and history as the narratives we ourselves create to grasp the past” (Lindenberger 17). But this itself is a late twentieth century interpretation of the term. Earlier, history was seen as a reconstruction, a depiction, of past reality, mirroring the past ‘as it actually was’, a “resurrection of life in its totality” as Jules Michelet, a French historian of the 18th century, put it (qtd. in Gossman 203). And this was the distinguishing feature of history - it mirrored reality, was a true-to-life picture of the past and was intended to be so. The historian was not an interpreter (one among many, presenting his/her views) but more of a channel through which the past was relayed to another generation. History was held to be objective, untainted by the historian, his beliefs, his aims, positions, etc.: a disinterested telling of the past.

From these positions, today adjudged naive, the study of history has come to be a study of “power and exclusion, for any history is always someone’s history, told by that someone from a partial point of view . . . . All histories are provisional; none will have the last word” (Appleby 11). Relativism and scepticism have replaced the monolithic totalising history of the past with multiple ‘histories’. Any and all history is, according to Leigh De Neef, “the provisional effect of a certain arbitrary cut, a referential context willfully privileged at the expense of and excluding other contexts” (qtd. in Smarr 3).
Prior to the 19th century, historical writings belonged to that general realm of "letters" which could accommodate "such diverse genres as historical narrative, biography and the scientific treatise" (Lindenberger 7-8). History was a branch of literature where 'literature' referred to the practice of writing - whether epic, sermons, letters or history. Historians such as Voltaire, Gibbon and Hume were simultaneously literary artists and historians. The material which went into a poet's work and a historian's were different but the skills they employed were akin, the craft was the same.

Toward the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century, the term literature gradually came to be associated more with poetic and figurative writing. The "republic of letters" in which historians, novelists, poets, economists, political thinkers and statesmen had "mingled freely" was breaking up. Literature "took on the meaning of a corpus of privileged or sacred texts" as opposed to the "empirical world of historical reality and even, to some extent, to historiography as the faithful record of that reality." Literature, which had earlier included historical writings,

thus ceased to be thought of as an art by which ideas could be conveyed effectively and elegantly and which could be pursued with varying degrees of skill and success by all educated people. More and more it came to be regarded as a magical or religious mission, which only those endowed with the gift of prophecy or second sight could fulfil (Gossman 229-230).

In this separation of the realms of literature and history, a consequence was the conferring of a superior status on literature. Designated 'art', works which fell in the category of literature were imbued with a transcendental aura, a degree of universality. The term 'history' generally referred to "a realm distinctly beneath anything that could

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be labelled transcendent. History was the place of contingency, of nasty power politics" (Lindenberger 8). Where literature was imaginative and yet posited 'eternal truths', history was truthful, reality-focused and concerned with the major and minor concerns of life. No longer parts of one large whole, history and literature were opposed to one another and the latter established its hegemony over the former.

Recent years have seen one more shift in the relations between history and literature. History has been re-situated within the domain of literature and literature has been emancipated from the myth of 'Literature'. Language is itself under attack as the carrier of encoded ideologies and as such incapable of presenting 'objective reality'. Historians are held to present a discourse about the past - history is not a reflection of truth but a reflection of the politics of the historian: "One man's truth is another woman's falsity" (Appleby 244). Neither the omniscient point of view found in most histories nor the authoritative voice of the historian serves any longer to posit a belief in the disinterestedness of the historian. The postmodernist disillusionment with all categories of knowledge extends to history:

Evicting history from the category of knowledge, these doubters prefer to lodge it along with poetry and novels in the expansive domain of literary constructions, thus turning a grand pillar of objective knowledge into a literary genre (Appleby 245).

History and literature, according to Lionel Gossman, have both rejected the ideal of representation that dominated them for so long - the representation of the past and the representation of the timeless verities. "Both now conceive of their work as exploration, testing, creation of new meanings, rather than as disclosure or revelation of meanings already in some sense "there", but not immediately perceptible" (Gossman 255).
The last two decades have seen a gradual linking of history and literature and the common spaces between the two are now termed 'culture'. Literary critics of the new historicist school have turned to history to illumine literary texts reading across social history, anthropological studies, economy and politics. Historians have in their turn drawn on literature and literary criticism. Thus Hayden White, drawing on Northrop Frye, put forward the idea of a few basic myths of which all other tales including historical narratives are versions. La Capra urged his colleagues to consider how works of literature, not just in their documentary but in their 'work-like' or performative aspects are a natural part of historical study, one that opens for the historian a way into the field of unrealised possibilities from which events have emerged. Others have attempted to access mentalities of the past, for example, through analyses of folk tales or through reader responses to Rousseau's novels. The implications are that history and literature help to explain each other and share the common field of experience (Smarr 4).

IV

Though the lines of demarcation between history and literature have been blurred by relativism, scepticism and of course, postmodernism, some questions remain to be asked about the two. First, is history possible anymore? i.e. can there be any recovery of the past at all? Can historians hope to make contact with the reality of the past and give a reasonably true description of it? Is all history to be seen as a "form of fiction" (L.Lerner 338) because it is subjective, coloured by the historian's frames of mind and ideology? Is there any difference between history and literature, or are they indeed one? Do all texts share the character of both literature and history, or can they be differentiated? Finally, does the fact of multiple histories mean that there is no real
retrieval of the past, only different versions, none of whose veracity can therefore be trusted?

Before trying to answer the other questions, there is the problem of whether history and literature can be collapsed into one. Aristotle in the *Poetics* wrote that the difference between the two lay “in the fact that the historian speaks of what happened, the poet of the kind of thing that can happen”, that “poetry speaks more of universals, history of particulars” (qtd. in Gossman 231). The historian R.G.Collingwood, writing in 1946, said that both the historian and the novelist “construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters, the difference being that the historian’s picture is meant to be true” (Collingwood qtd. in L.Lerner 336-337). But since the 1960s this position is viewed as both untenable and naive. History is no longer considered to be about truth but rather a construction of the historian in accord with his/her politics.

But though the scepticism of the post-modernists, dominates the academic and intellectual milieu currently, it is almost fanatical to posit that all history is a construction and that it is impossible to “convey knowledge of an extra-textual referent” (L.Lerner 335). To refute the scepticism of the critics, Collingwood’s description of a historian’s craft is useful. The historian’s picture “must be localised in space and time”. Second, all history “must be consistent with itself... there is only one historical world.” Finally “the historian’s picture stands in relation to something called evidence” (qtd. in L.Lerner 337). The first two requirements are disputable - often in literature too the author’s picture is localised in space and time, specially historical fiction. The second condition - that there is only one historical world, is one which has been damaged by the relativism which has invaded history. But however damaged the claim
is, to the responsible historian, there is only one historical world and different histories present various aspects of this world. The third condition is crucial in that the historian builds his edifice on evidence from the past that he reads, interprets and puts together, into a text. The evidence of the past is not accepted blindly but nor is its validity questioned ceaselessly: the data is seen as such until its veracity is questioned and maybe in some cases disproved. Collingwood notes a crucial difference between the critic and the sceptic in their attitude to history: the critic accepts the evidence and the conclusions drawn from it as settled unless (s)he suspects the settling: this implies that he does not question every single piece of data nor every conclusion drawn therefrom. The sceptic, on the other hand, does not take the trouble to examine which conclusions can stand testing and which cannot - as all can be questioned (s)he regards none as settled and hence proclaims that there can be no knowledge of the past. In doing so “the doubters seem oblivious to the danger of inventing a new absolutism based upon subjectivity and relativism” (Appleby 247).

Fiction often fulfils the criteria of history: being localised in time and space, being consistent with one historical world and even being based on data. There can be an overlap between literature and history - and this is specially so between social history and realistic fiction. Fiction differs from history in not claiming to be a truthful representation of the past but in much of realistic fiction what is dismissed as ‘background’ or ‘historical detail’ or ‘local colour’ is “continuous at one edge with the fictitious elements of the novel, at the other with the work of the historians” (L.Lerner 341).

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1 My discussion of the categories ‘history’ and ‘literature’, of the text as literature and as historical document and of the possibility of history is based upon the work of Gossman, Appleby and Laurence Lerner.
All history, thus, cannot be read as fiction nor can all literature be read as history. There are, of course, texts which are both history and literature but the distinction lies in the uses to which they are put. The historians find a text interesting in so far as it helps (them) to understand events or informs (them) about events; for the historical critic, events are interesting in so far as they help (them) to understand a particular class of document, the work of literature, a text (De Jackson 74).

But now texts that have traditionally been viewed as literature are being reinserted into history, in spite of the fact that

(j)ust as historical narratives are not transparent representations of historical reality, however the historical meaning and testimony of literary texts does not lie . . . in their passively “reflecting” reality, but in their structuring of it, in the kind of the relation they establish with their readers, and in the different ways in which literature itself has been defined and institutionalised (Gossman 286).

So then, considering the fact that certain texts are claimed by both literature and history, which texts can be surveyed as historical evidence? Which text does a historian go to, to access the past? To answer this, it is important to accept that there did exist a past - evidence of which is found in physical traces from past living found in the present. The past is of course irretrievable in its entirety but traces of it always remain “where people left them in discarded trunks in attics, in inscrutable notations in ledgers, in the footings of abandoned buildings; sometimes they are collected in repositories and archives” (Appleby 155). Once it is accepted that there is a 'past' and that its evidences linger on, the historian has to decide what forms a valid text or texts for him/her to read and interpret the past. It is impossible for history to be independent
of the "potsherds and written edicts that remain from a past reality" (Appleby 155), but historians are not limited to written texts of the past either. Mary Poovey suggested that one way of solving the problem of what constitutes the material of history is to expand the field by construing everything - "events" like wars, continuing practices, like childrearing, and even social entities like people - as "texts"... (This) makes it clear that any human activity or artefact has meaning that can be "read" or interpreted. This approach also makes it clear that our only access to the past (as to all reality) is through representations. Events in the past undoubtedly "happened", but they are available to us only through the representational systems that also, and not incidentally, confer meaning (Poovey 44).

Thus any object, any writing can be (and today often is) a text for the historian. What it boils down to is that "without proof there is no historical writing of any worth" (Appleby 261).

Whether the proof is found in census records, memoirs, street directories, pamphlets or 'ephemera', such as newspapers and schoolbooks or in works of 'literature' in historical novels or realistic literature is immaterial: what matters is that it aids in recovering a displaced environment. Similarly by "reading" continuing practices and social entities, as Mary Poovey suggested, the historian is given something more inclusive than just written documents to read and interpret. And thus the work of the historian is to study the past through the texts available about it and finally to reconstruct and interpret it basing their work on "the detritus of past living, a melange of clues and codes informative of a moment as real as this present one" (Appleby 259).
In studying the past, historians may find their evidence in historical fiction and the literature of realism as well in which when it is "serious work there is a real attempt at accuracy and credibility". There is moreover "truth to the observed facts of life, . . . accurate documentation, sociological insight, an accumulation of the details of material fact . . ." (Historical novel; realism). Novelists such as Emile Zola have been "accused of reducing the task of the novelist to that of the mere social scientist . . ." because he was serious about the social world he studied and represented. As Laurence Lerner goes on to say "The view that accepts an overlap between fiction and history is likely to accept realism too, for that is a literary doctrine designed to encourage literature to step over the frontier" (L.Lerner 340).

Though historical evidence has to be present for historians to reconstruct a version of the past, there remains the problem of discriminating between false and faithful representations of past reality and, beyond that, to articulate standards which help both practitioners and readers to make such discriminations. Though the memories of the past contained in objects left over from the past restrain historians, it is only in the fact of history-reading and writing being a community practice that any checks can be put upon the historian. (Appleby 261). That is to say, for the veracity of any history to be accepted, it has to win the approval of other historians who have studied the evidence and accepted the conclusions drawn from it as possibilities which did, in all probability, occur. Historical narratives can only be evaluated "by being compared with one another" (Gossman 294). In addition to comparison there is also the check put by pragmatism - that any claim can be questioned; no privileged perspectives are recognised and all knowledge can be and often is provisional, (although there are some truths which have prevailed for centuries). The concept of pragmatic enquiry is
particularly useful to history-making, in its insistence upon practice, verifiability and rationality. But because "its notion of truth emerges from a consensus of practitioners, pragmatists are exposed to tyranny from that group" (Appleby 285). As with all concepts of knowledge, problems exist with pragmatism too, as a dominant group can silence or exclude other voices. But nonetheless, combined with a multicultural approach to history, a pragmatic approach is a workable solution.

The questions a historian asks determine the evidence that is chosen from the material remains of the past "for evidence is only evidence in relation to a particular account . . . . The bits and pieces of records left from the past can be arranged into different and contending pictures . . . one's point of entry into a past moment will always affect one's findings" (Appleby 261-262). The historian's "interests, whether personal, national, or professional" shape the history that (s)he writes and so each person "can see only as far as (their) particular vantage points will let (them)" (Butler 45). A scholar is the product of his/her times and thus

successive generations of scholars do not so much revise historical knowledge as they reinvest it with contemporary interest . . . . Because historical accounts always explain the meaning of events in terms relevant to the immediate audience, curiosity about the past is inextricably bound up in the preoccupations of the present (Appleby 265).

Historical writings show the evidence of the present upon the past and though they work with the records of the past they interpret those records in keeping with their interests and preoccupations in the present. This is not to say that all historical writing is relative - the interpretations offered, the stories told about the past, share the values
and beliefs of the historian but in the rigorous attention to the details of the evidence, of archival records they also give a reasonably true picture of the past.

The multiplicity of histories available today does not turn accuracy into a myth - a single past can be packed with a multitude of viewpoints each of which may offer a different interpretation. To read the past from one perspective does not necessarily obliterate all other perspectives - in the intellectual climate of the present day multiplicity is valued and a plethora of perspectives offers a more complete view of the past than earlier histories did with their ‘monological’ vision. Though different perspectives may offer histories/ reconstructions/ interpretations that are mutually exclusive, the validity of these would depend on the accuracy and the completeness of the observations, not on the perspective from which they are made (Appleby 255-257).

Conflict and lack of consensus among historians marks the present historical climate but that does not indicate the impossibility of history. Different histories only indicate the need for argument and discussion. The making of history ought to be an “evolving system of argument, exchange, criticism, and self-criticism, rather than . . . a collection of colliding, uncommunicating and incommensurable world views” (Gossman 324). Thus the historians of today recognise that their versions are not either final or universal, that, as the Dutch historian Peter Geye said, all history is an interim report but within those interim reports are “residues of research that would be studied long after the interim of the report had passed” (Appleby 266).
The preceding section's claims are that

1. history, a recovery of the past is possible;
2. history is created through an effort at consensus: a pragmatic approach that does not privilege any one viewpoint over others and leaves every premise open to debate;
3. in today's world, a multifocussed approach to history is valid, rather than a monologic one, and finally
4. that the sources for history are many and varied, ranging from statistical records to church register entries, from official documents to personal letters or journals, from demographical records to oral histories - history can be read in and through all these.

To gain a better understanding of these premises, and to further elucidate my views on what history is, how it is written today, and the sources for it, I shall conclude this chapter with a discussion of women's history.

"Women's history" - the very term marks it out as standing apart from 'History' which has always been "the history of activities of the men ordered by male values" - men's history (G.Lerner 168). In the history that has been traditionally recorded and interpreted by historians, women have been peripheral - the major space has been occupied by men and the only women who have figured are those who were related to important men, and rarely, those who performed exceptional tasks in exceptional circumstances. The vast majority of women - their lives, their doings, their contributions to society and civilisation have been grossly neglected. And it is this large vacuum that 'women's history' tries to fill. Women's history begins with the assumption that women are a separate, different but as significant segment of humanity as men and as such, must have a history.
The starting point for women's history, thus, illustrates the idea that history is relative - it is history viewed from a particular perspective, coloured by a particular ideology, and restricted in its scope. Where traditional history admitted of no gaps in its recovery of the past, in the last few decades, alternative histories have been unearthed, excavated from the mounds of debris under which they lay hidden: women's history, black history, working-class history, social history, etc. It is not that the earlier versions of history, the traditional recounting of wars and conquests, of governments and rules, were untrue or lacked factual evidence. The problem with them was that they were one-sided, and in being so they obscured the details of other lives and other activities which have an equal right to be included in any history.

The efforts by feminists and others to unearth women's history is one of many strands in the multicultural history that is being written today. Groups which were marginalised or rendered invisible in traditional histories are discovering their own pasts and writing them up, interpreting them and thus widening the scope of 'history'. Where history today is completely at odds with the history of yesteryears, is in the multifocussed approach which has been adopted by which it is not just political history that is valued, but also the history of mill-workers, of female slaves, of housewives, of coal miners - it is finally recognised that all sections of society, all activities have their own history and a consciousness of the past helps in shaping the present.

But even while the need for other histories is recognised and efforts are made to meet that need, there is the error of trying to fit a group’s past into the gaps left by traditional historical scholarship. Instead of treating the new area as such and exploring it to the utmost, there is often a tendency to view it restrictively, by investigating it in a limited manner, and adding it to the traditional history.
This can be illustrated by turning to women’s history once again. According to Gerda Lerner, a leading American historian and a pioneer in women’s history, the first effort by historians towards women’s history is to write “compensatory history”. They write the histories of “women worthies”, the “women of achievement”, “notable women”. In doing so they do not tell us much about those activities in which most women engaged, nor . . . about the significance of women’s activities to society as a whole. The history of notable women is the history of exceptional, even deviant women, and does not describe the experience and history of the mass of women (G. Lerner 145-146).

From compensatory history, the historian moves to the next level in writing women’s history: ‘Contributory history’ - focusing on the contribution by women to a particular movement - say abortion or the labour movement or the reconstruction of the South, etc. Though such histories - of compensation and contribution - do provide valuable insights, they are also limited by the very questions they seek to answer. The focus is either on a few outstanding women or on a particular movement while the ways in which the majority of women is affected, are ignored.

Another way in which initially women’s history limited itself was by pinpointing one area of women’s lives: their oppression. Questions were asked and answered as to how women were oppressed, who oppressed them, their responses to such oppression, the women’s rights struggle, its organisation, etc.

Essentially, treating women as victims of oppression once again places them in a male-defined conceptual framework: oppressed, victimised by standards and values established by men (G. Lerner 148).
Questions about oppression and victimisation do not elicit the full story of women - "the story of their ongoing functioning in (a) male-defined world on their own terms" (G.Lerner 148).

Women's historians have dealt with marriage and child-bearing, with the economic struggles of working-women, with educational opportunities for women, etc. But even as work on all these aspects continued, the search was on for a new conceptual framework. Historians of women's past became dissatisfied with old questions and old methods and started approaching historical material in new ways. The actual experience of women in the past came to be studied and this focused the spotlight on to women's consciousness, as revealed through women's letters, diaries, autobiographies and memoirs.

The ongoing effort to write and rewrite women's history throws light on the problems that historians face as they try to break free from the traditional models of history. The writers of alternative history have to find new conceptual frameworks within which to write the past. They have to rid themselves of the frames within which they had previously operated; to shed those and evolve new ones, demands a change in consciousness. To illustrate in feminist terms: to write women's history, it is first of all imperative that the historians shed the value systems and biases of their patriarchal society and stop viewing women as the 'weaker sex' or the 'oppressed minority' or even as 'militant feminists' - all of which are categories created by a male-dominated cultural system. Women cannot, should not be viewed as a sub-group, with the traditional, marginal status that goes with the title. Instead historians have to be aware that no single framework, no single methodology can fit the experience of all women through time - flexibility, the willingness to create new tools, new methods, these are
essential if women’s history is to be written in terms that do not imprison it in patriarchal assumptions and frames.

Re-writing history in such a way as to include alternative histories requires the asking of new questions: questions which are relevant to the group under discussion. The source material studied may be the same but it is the questions that are asked of it that determine the answers that are elicited. To illustrate: legal records of a particular time frame can be read for knowledge of legal matters by lawyers; can be read by socio-economic historians for the light they throw on, say, inheritance patterns of women, or by demographers and statisticians to plot statistical charts and maps. To return to women’s history: women and their lives and categories were missed out in traditional histories because the questions that were asked were irrelevant to, inappropriate to, women. To change this, women’s historians have turned the focus

on a woman-centered inquiry considering the possibility of the existence of a female culture within the general culture shared by men and women . . . . The central question (women’s history) raises is: ‘What would history be like if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define?’ (G. Lerner 178).

With the rise of alternative histories, traditional sources of historical evidence have been challenged. Previously neglected sources have been drawn upon, analytical techniques tried out. In the process, an entirely new methodology has been worked out for pursuing a search that cannot operate within the constraints of conventional historiography. It is not just the public sphere that is under investigation but also the private and this is revealed in the attention being paid to municipal tax lists, church membership records, property and tax records, and wills and census figures on the one
hand and to diaries, journals, letters and other personal documents on the other hand. The innovative use of both these avenues is providing a richer and fuller understanding of the past under discussion whether it is that of women or blacks, native Americans or Euro-American settlers.

The methodology involving the new sources of historical evidence reflects the problems that are inherent in trying to uncover the history of a previously marginalised group. The sources themselves present problems - records whether of county, church or court are rarely complete or even exhaustive. To analyse them, skills are required pertaining both to the subject and to quantitative analysis. Even with all this, it is still possible to read even quantitative data (supposedly value-free) in a manner which imputes biased assumptions to it (Wilson 9: G.Lerner 174). Historians who wish to use, say, legal records, for information about women have to develop legal and quantitative skills for analysing them as otherwise their conclusions can be biased due to ignorance of legal processes or of the limitations inherent in legal evidence.

Personal documents are rich with insights concerning the content and character of women’s lives in the past - letters, diaries, memoirs - offer a detailed recounting of an individual’s experience as well as her response to that experience. But for the historian, personal documents while providing a wealth of detail, can also cause confusion. The historian studying, say, diaries

must decide whether they are singular or whether they are part of a configuration encompassing disparate accounts. Historians must also try to determine why diaries do not explore particular issues (Schlissel, “Diaries” 53-54).
But in recent years it is not just personal and public documents that are being read for historical evidence: historians are ranging further afield reading history in paintings and in films (Kelley 93-126); employing oral history to document immigration patterns and homesteading experiences of the first decade of this century (Jensen and Miller 186, 212). Even literature is being studied by historians to elicit their source material: "The importance of domestic violence as a theme in the literature of western women alerts (historians) to look for its presence in other non-literary sources" (Armitage and Jameson 111).

With so many approaches to history floating around in the intellectual circles of the day, it is easy to adopt a sceptical attitude, towards the findings that constitute the new histories. But it has to be noted that random write-ups about the past are not accepted as history until they are tested and approved by a consensus of practitioners. The pragmatic answer to the problem of historical truth and its availability lies with a paradigm wherein consensus shares a decisive role with a multicultural, multi-focussed approach to history.

Thus, I believe that the past can be recovered through the evidence it has left, in whatever form: diaries, legal records, literature, letters, etc.. No one history can claim to be total in its recovery of the past - each history provides just one more strand in a skein that consists of numerous such strands. It is consequent on this, that I read the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder as history. Her work - a set of eight books about the pioneering experience - written for children - is historically accurate and as such deserves to be used as evidence for history just as diaries, journals and memoirs are. My argument rests upon the fact of the historicity of all texts and the textuality of all history (Montrose 20): it is this which serves as the foundation of my reading of the works of Laura Ingalls Wilder.