

Loving Literature and Historicist Critical Practice

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Deidre Shauna Lynch provocatively opens her recent book, *Loving Literature: A Cultural History*, by highlighting a double-bind confronting scholars of literature: “those of us for whom English is a line of *work* are also called upon to *love* literature and to ensure that others do so too” (1). Few professions make such explicit demands that their practitioners not only bring their work home but also carry their private passions into public spaces, here the classroom and published scholarship. The expectation is that they be professional amateurs, a contradiction in terms.

For Lynch, this double bind in part explains the current crisis over whether literary scholars truly love literature. Detractors of literary studies argue that in the zeal scholars have adopted over the past 30-40 years for the public, scholarly legitimacy offered by sophisticated theoretical methodologies, such scholars have not fulfilled their responsibility to profess the love of literature. Defenders of theory respond that publically professing love represents a contradiction in terms; as professionals, scholars need not just the rigor but the distance and objectivity offered by the theoretical –isms. Compounding this longstanding dispute, current trends towards an instrumental view of university studies as jobs training rather than liberal education puts pressure on a field whose practitioners are told that given that selfless love is the proper attitude to take in relation to a work of literature, “what literature isn’t, is something to be used” (Lynch 8).

Lynch's purpose is not to argue for or against whether literary scholars sufficiently love literature, but rather to tell the story of how we got to the current impasse. Her book provides a cultural history regarding how the love of literature left the domestic, amateur space it occupied in the eighteenth century and entered the public spaces of journals, magazines, the marketplace, and the university. If anything, she implies that because literary love's migration to the public sphere created a contradictory pressure for literary scholars to publically love literature, our current polemics are wrongheaded. Putative failures of literary love are products of the structure of our discipline rather than individual failures.

While I agree that historical perspective suggests that caution is warranted in such debates, I would argue that literary love is not opposed to scholarly objectivity or even a broadly instrumental view of literature. This need can be observed via discussion of recent trends in historicist literary studies. I speak from my perspective as an Americanist, although what I am about to describe, as I understand it, pertains to the study of British literature, as well. After the field's agenda was set by a flurry of groundbreaking scholarship in the 1980s, the study of American literature in the 1990s was dominated by a New Historicist brand of ideology critique sometimes referred to as the New Americanism. Heavily influenced by Michel Foucault's illustrations of how apparently revolutionary individuals and movements could be complicit in the maintenance of power structures as well as Frederic Jameson's admonition to "always historicize," the New Americanism questioned the celebration of canonical American authors such as, to give just one example, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Emerson was no longer a revolutionary prophet who through his aesthetically rich, thought-provoking prose celebrated the universal truth of the infinity of the individual. Rather, this very enthusiasm blinded him to the excesses of American capitalism and its endemic structural inequalities. Rejecting such authors

and their compromised ideological loyalties, many authors looked to what they argued was the more authentically transformational work of female and minority writers who questioned American sexism, racism, capitalism, and expansionism. These authors, it was argued, had been previously denied admission to the canon because racist and sexist critics had resented their failure to comply with dominant ideological imperatives.

The New Americanists produced immensely valuable criticism that convincingly demonstrated that American literature is a site of ideological conflict. Of particular importance, I would argue, has been the expansion of the canon allowed by their work. The inclusion of writers such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, Frederick Douglass, and María Ámparo Ruíz de Burton in the canon has allowed for a fuller, more dynamic understanding of American literary history.

Yet I would argue that the suspicious attitude exhibited towards traditionally canonical writing exhibits a lack of love of literature that, in turn, undermines the historicist aspirations New Americanism held dear. The New Americanism sought to correct presentist celebrations of the American Renaissance by examining its relationship to antebellum ideology. However, condemning Emerson's complicity in the excesses of capitalism makes most sense not in a historicist perspective but when we consider how his rhetoric of self-reliance has been assimilated into neoliberal defenses of contemporary supply-side economic policy, defenses Emerson could not have foreseen. In other words, this mode of ideology critique operates on presentist premises.

What the lover of Emerson or any other seemingly compromised writer might recognize is that while we may, of course, disagree with the morality of their arguments, such writers approached issues of ideological conflict with what Robert S. Levine usefully describes as "unknowingness" (2). After all, any careful reader of Emerson immediately notes that while his

aphorisms may individually suggest certainty, his essays on the whole are full of reservations, qualifications, contradictions, and paradoxes regarding their subject matter. His career tells the story of a man who was not set in his ways: While in “Self-Reliance” Emerson rejected philanthropy as conformity and disloyalty to self, he later devoted much time to speaking out against slavery. The “wise bafflement” (Levine 2) such writers exhibit towards conflict suggests their struggle to make sense of issues that undoubtedly seemed much more complex and perplexing at the time than they do now, hindsight being 20/20. Recognizing this bafflement entails attempting as critics to inhabit and, to whatever extent possible, to empathize with the perspectives of these authors. In this sense, an act of critical love results in a more powerful account of the authors’ relation to his/her historical milieu.

I would further argue that loving literature may not simply offer better grounds for historicist scholarship than New Historicist hermeneutics of suspicion but, also, that doing so might inspire greater confidence in our ability to change our present for the better. As Lynch describes in chapter six of her book, advocates of the institutionalized love of literature called for engagement with not just literary texts but with the author as a personality (235-75). A loving respect for the “wise bafflement” of authors of literature has much to teach us. We live in a time of mounting income inequality, political corruption, and global conflict. Many feel powerless to solve these problems. Yet the study of literature teaches us that repeatedly throughout history, writers have worked through challenging circumstances through their intellectual work. We gain a sense of possibility from studying such literature. We can access this universal lesson via a historicist practice based on loving literature.

Works Cited

Levine, Robert S. *Dislocating Race and Nation: Episodes in Nineteenth-Century American Literary Nationalism*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 2008.

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