

History in the Discursive Condition: Reconsidering the Tools of Thought

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In *History in the Discursive Condition* (2011) – a follow up to her (for me) ground-breaking *Realism and Consensus* (1), and *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (2) – Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, a student of interdisciplinary cultural history and theory, explores the practical implications for history of the discursive condition, the condition which in her view has been created (or at least is in the process of being created) by the so called ‘postmodern’ challenge to modernism. (Readers who would like to know more about Ermarth might like to read her strangely reticent ‘Invitation to historians’ (3)).

Ermarth, it may be noted, does not much like the terms ‘postmodernism’ and ‘postmodernity’, which in her opinion have ‘lost value from too little specificity or too much contradictory or careless usage’ (p. xii). In North America, in particular, treatment of the term ‘post-modern’ by a variety of generally unnamed intellectuals and others has been too often ‘trivialising’, ‘dismissive’ and ‘inadequate’ (p. xii). Where possible, we should avoid using the term. Following the precedent set by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition*, she personally prefers to use the terms modern condition and discursive condition.

In part one of *History in the Discursive Condition* (made up of two chapters, on the modern condition and on the discursive condition), Ermarth explains in some detail how the modern condition (modernism) arose out of the ‘discontinuous’ medieval background; and how it became accepted as the established order of understanding. In part two (made up of four further chapters, on individuality and agency in the discursive condition; discursive times: phase, phrase, rhythm; method and the tools of thought; and action and art) she explains how, in the late 19th and 20th centuries, the modern condition (modernism) was challenged by a

variety of artists, scientists, philosophers and others, with the result that a paradigmatic shift (a 'tectonic' shift, a 'sea-change, a 'second Reformation') occurred in the process of understanding, a development which, in her opinion, has not yet been fully accepted by the academic community.

The medieval (Christian) world out of which modernism emerged was, in Ermarth's opinion, one in which time and space were seen as being static and discontinuous. In this static and discontinuous world, narrative was not based on a meaningful distinction between past, present and future, but on 'interpretative generalisations of typological paradigms' (p. 7), essences united only in the mind of God. The successful French king, for instance, was one who 'approximated the type represented by Charlemagne, however remote from any French king Charlemagne's immediate concerns might have been' (p. 7). Objects in space were identifiable merely in themselves, not in their mutual relationships with each other. Even in cases where time had some thematic value, it was given a ritual rather than a formal importance. The emphasis was always on difference and incompatibility, not on continuity.

Modernism, the successor to the medieval perspective on things, or rather lack of a perspective, according to Ermarth (here she draws on her earlier work on the subject) started in the period of the Renaissance, when artists such as Masaccio, Piero della Francesca, Leone Battista Alberti, Michelangelo and Raphael, created a new 'perspective technology', a development that led effectively to a revolution in human consciousness. In this new world, objects (and people) were/are no longer thought of as being static and discontinuous, as in the medieval period, but as interconnected, wrapped in an envelope of neutral, homogeneous and infinite space and time (Newton's absolute time, ultimately God's time), subject to mutually informative measurement. It was this interconnectedness of objects in space and time, in Ermarth's opinion, that enabled the discovery of scientific laws (and generalisations), the creation of realistic art and literature, and the invention of historical representation.

Finally, out of the modern condition – so Ermarth believes – arose the discursive condition, one created, mainly in the 20th century, by a series of revolutionary artists (Manet, Cezanne, Picasso, Braque, Breton), scientists (Einstein), writers (Woolf, Joyce, Beckett), philosophers (Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault), and students of linguistics (de Saussure), who individually and collectively challenged the principal assumptions of the modern condition, in particular the neutrality of space and time, the objectivity of the 'real', the common denominator of measurement and generalisation (except in the most limited of circumstances), the transparency of language, as a vehicle for understanding the world, and the concept of individuality and its associated concept of individual agency. No longer, it seems, in this new world of surrealism, relativity theory, quantum mechanics, the stream of consciousness and modern linguistic analysis, can we depend on space and time to provide the common denominators that make possible mutually informative measurement. No longer can we reconcile difference, using a 'consensus apparatus' to bridge the gap between irreconcilable modes of understanding. No longer, in other words, can we identify and observe a real and objective world, out there, awaiting our description.

Of these artistic and other discoveries and innovations, the most important, in Ermarth's opinion, was undoubtedly Ferdinand de Saussure's radically new theory of language, in which language is identified, not as a transparent vehicle for the description of meaning and value in the world, but as a differential system of meaning and value, in effect a code or semiological system, finite, arbitrary, and autonomous. (Ermarth's analysis of the implications for knowledge of de Saussure's innovations in the field of linguistics, which she clearly considers fundamental to her understanding of the discursive condition, is excellent, well worth the purchase price of the book). According to de Saussure, meaning in language is enabled, not by its association with the world it supposedly describes, but by 'system', a subliminal code of discursive rules (*langue*) that enables speech (*parole*). Any actual enunciation of the code is understandable only systematically and negatively, never positively, as both the code and its enunciation lack any referential anchor in the 'real' world. This is true, not only of verbal languages, but also of all other systems of meaning and value that operate like languages in the world, such as body language, garment language, traffic control language, and the languages of diplomacy and history. What this means is that 'everything is language, everything is writing, and in the expanded sense Saussure sponsors, in which language and writing are things we do in non-verbal ways as well as in verbal ones: in this sense everything is discourse' (p. 39). Such

discursive systems are the condition of our consciousness and knowledge. They determine what we think and what we say (though the creative scope of enunciation is considerable; occasionally an exceptional speaker of the code, such as Shakespeare, may extend the code, but for the most part it is fixed: we do not speak, we are spoken). In other words, as Ermarth puts it, we inhabit not the modern condition, but the discursive one.

What does this mean for history? Effectively, as Ermarth makes clear, at the very least its destruction as an objective portrayal of what happened in the past. In the discursive condition, history takes its place as just one more (language) system amongst many, no longer *the* system that contains all systems. The historian (and for Ermarth we are all in one way or another historians) cannot simply carry on as usual, assuming individual identities and causalities as if time were an envelope, unproblematic and even neutral. In the discursive condition, process is conceived anew as a semiological (sign system) process, based on a semiological system, not a historical one. Time is a dimension of events, phrased, discontinuous or rhythmic. Things are not objects, 'objectively' there, but merely the sites of acts of attention. The individual, the so-called 'founding subject of history', is what Ermarth refers to as a 'palimpsestuous' multiplicity, evident only in enunciation, not in system (p. 56). The historian, by an act of enunciation, can remain creative (more so perhaps than ever), but he or she cannot represent or reconstruct the past, except as a sort of fiction.

That does not mean that, in Ermarth's opinion, the historian is finished. In the discursive condition, he or she can, if he or she wishes, practice history as an art, a coded possibility of enunciation, engaging genuinely in cross-disciplinary work (as opposed to a mere splicing activity that preserves the disciplinary status quo), and renewing individuality, agency and causality in terms, not of neutrality, as in the modern condition, but of multiplicity (multiple semantic systems). Moreover, he or she might (Ermarth provides a useful list of suggestions for this on pp. 111–2): develop themes based on iterative details and patterning rather than on plot-and-character; employ sequences and series that are inflected rather than plotted; emphasise difference rather than resemblance; employ a narrative line constituted by a process of digression and return; emphasise fabrication and not representation; and use pasts as dimensions of present experience (of present enunciation). He or she might even, if brave enough, attempt to decipher, from particular acts of enunciation, the differential systems of meaning and value the new paradigm implies – something ruled out, I would have thought, in de Saussure's system. By this means the historian would create, or at least attempt to create, something that would reflect more accurately the multiplicity of human experience and consciousness in the present world.

To illustrate the potential of the discursive condition for the arts, Ermarth cites a number of what she considers to be exemplary cases of artists who succeeded in using or shaping that condition, including the novels of Virginia Woolf, Jorge Luis Borges, Julio Cortázar and Vladimir Nabokov (extended discussions of which appear in *Sequel to History*), the paintings of Pablo Picasso and René Magritte, and the films of George Clooney and Alexander Payne. Though surprisingly (or maybe not) she includes few if any works of 'postmodern' history in her citations, mainly perhaps because they are as yet so few and far between – a fact that should give even the most enthusiastic advocate of the discursive condition some pause for thought.

Ermarth clearly expects that, in the near or distant future, modernist historians will respond positively to the discursive condition, and adapt their histories to its exigencies – this despite the fact that she fully recognises the deep-seated conservatism of the historical profession. That, in other words, we historians, as she puts it, will 'get over it' (it being presumably the paradigm shift she identifies); (the phrase 'get over it' is Ermarth's, p. xiv). I am not so sure – though a number of theorists, including Roland Barthes, Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Keith Jenkins and Hayden White have apparently already made considerable progress in that direction. This is because, as I understand it, history is a cultural practice that, consciously or unconsciously, follows (reflects, participates in, responds to) the mainly spoken culture of the age in which it is written (in our case English). It can therefore only employ the words and phrases (terms, concepts, ideas) generally accepted by the language concerned, such as, in our case, time and space (Newtonian and subjective), things (objects), individual identity (I, you, we, they), cause and effect (because), story (plot and drama) and picture (representation). History, in other words, is fundamentally unsuited to the construction of a new paradigm, as science and possibly philosophy are not. True, from time to time a quisling word from

the language of the new order may penetrate the language of the old (relativity, narrative, discourse, quantum and code spring to mind, though interestingly Ermarth views relativism as a part of the old, Modernist order, and not a part of the new), but for the most part we historians are not equipped to promote radical change; we are slaves of the old order, not advocates of the new. It will, therefore, I fear (I nail my colours to the mast here: I am more or less persuaded by the philosophical necessity of the discursive condition) be some time before we as historians feel confident enough to adopt the new paradigm in full, or even in part; though we may from time to time adopt some of its useful words and phrases. And (if and) when we do, the new order (paradigm) will have become so entrenched in our thinking (consciousness) that we will not even be aware of the extraordinary changes we have accomplished. We will simply employ the (mainly literary) devices proposed by Ermarth, and no doubt others, without even thinking about them, as if, as Ermarth puts it, such things were entirely natural.

One should not assume that the discursive condition, as defined by Ermarth, is above suspicion (though it would be a brave man or woman who enters the lists against Ermarth, a formidable adversary). How far, one wonders, in the medieval world, was time static and discontinuous mainly for the educated elite? For the peasantry, it might well have been rather a dimension of events – the rising and setting of the sun – as proposed by Ermarth in the discursive condition. Why should not modernist time (neutral, Newtonian, infinite) co-exist, admittedly as part of a different language system, with discursive time (discontinuous, finite, rhythmic)? May not all language systems be the product of common brain events that somehow produce consciousness – of which all language systems appear to be mere derivatives? Or is consciousness, perhaps, merely an integration of all language systems? How far, one wonders, could one survive in the ‘real’ world without some concept of the ‘real’ and the ‘objective’, or at least an awareness of the same? Why should not Modernist history survive, as a language system, enjoying its own autonomy, as an alternative to history in the discursive condition, its supposed successor? Finally, is not the discursive condition, that Ermarth proposes, itself just one more example of the capacity of the modernist condition to generalise the particular, a generalisation that Ermarth elsewhere condemns so vigorously? After all, we might speak and understand body language. We might speak and understand garment language. But it is doubtful if we will ever succeed in speaking and understanding the language of the discursive condition. These are some of the questions that Ermarth’s penetrating analysis of the discursive condition provokes, in me at least.

I might add that I am not entirely convinced of the differential and negative nature of language in the discursive condition. When I hear the word rabbit I cannot help thinking of the rabbit I used to keep (and lost) in my childhood – but I suppose that this is just a typical modernist error of understanding, subject to future correction.

Ermarth is understandably uncertain about how far we, the inhabitants of our contemporary culture and civilisation, will succeed in constructing (fashioning, creating, inventing) tools of thought appropriate to the discursive condition (it cannot be said that many of the instances of experimentation she cites in the field of the arts, the novel and cinema are particularly convincing). But she is in no doubt regarding the probable consequences of a failure to respond adequately to the changes brought about by the condition. Without a serious attempt to discover the new tools of thought appropriate to it, she believes, we will be unable to find practical ways of dealing adequately with practical problems such as, for instance, over-population, water shortage and global warming. Nor is she in any doubt regarding the probable consequences with regard to history (her main concern in this book). Without fashioning new tools of thought, appropriate to the discursive condition, she argues, it will prove difficult, if not impossible, for the historian to distinguish objective truth from lies. This is because, as Ermarth puts it (discussing a particular case of genocide in the Balkans): ‘There is little possibility of comparing objective truth with lies when the objective (historical) truth is “the lie”’ (p. 92). History performs a cultural function, and that function is ‘not so much to hold up a mirror to nature as to create and maintain the terms in which it is possible to see, and not see, the world’ (p. 93). As for the modernist historian, who continues to write modernist (standard) history, his work will, in Ermarth’s opinion, seem about as quaint an undertaking, as painting realistic landscapes: laudable, appealing, reassuring no doubt, but relatively useless in terms of cultural renewal.

Notes

1. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Realism and Consensus in the English Novel* (Princeton, NJ, 1983).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, *Sequel to History: Postmodernism and the Crisis of Representational Time* (Princeton, NJ, 1992).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Elizabeth Deeds Ermarth, ‘Invitation to historians’, *Beyond History*, 5, 2 (2001), 195-215.[Back to \(3\)](#)

The author will respond to this review in due course.

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