Caroline W. Bynum

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

In 1997, Princeton University Press published a volume, *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, which rang with alarm.[1] Even contributors such as Francis Oakley, Carla Hesse, and Lynn Hunt, who tried to warn against despair by explaining how the current situation had come about, provided only a fragile defense against fundamental and deeply threatening change, while others such as Denis Donoghue and Gertrude Himmelfarb wrote in palpable fear of the future. As Frank Kermode, author of an earlier, brilliant study of our need for literary endings, phrased it in his essay for the volume, "If we wanted to be truly apocalyptic we should even consider the possibility that nothing of much present concern either to 'humanists' or to their opponents will long survive." And it was clear from his essay that he was more afraid of the end of literature than of the demise of those who, as he put it, "mistrust or despise" it.[2]

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

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1 Alvin Kernan, ed., *What's Happened to the Humanities?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). For helpful discussion of the issues raised in my article and for bibliographical suggestions, I am grateful to Patricia Crone, Nicola di Cosmo, Jeffrey Hamburger, Jonathan Israel, Peter Jelavich, Joel Kaye, Barbara Kowalzig, Glenn Peers, Joan Scott, Heinrich von Staden, and Stephen D. White.

2 Frank Kermode, "Changing Epochs," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 162 – 178, especially 177. On literary endings, see Kermode, *Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction: With a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

that supposedly caused all the trouble in the first place. For as Keith Thomas remarked in an astute and upbeat assessment in 2006, historical scholarship has become broader, more nuanced and more creative over the past decade.[3] It has done so exactly because the insights of the linguistic turn have been absorbed and utilized; and this has happened because those insights coincide in great part with what historians have always known.

I do not dismiss or ridicule the fears of the mid-1990s. What Alvin Kernan calls "reading to find the villain" did threaten both sensitive literary criticism and thoughtful historical account.[4] Moreover, we can all remember statements (better now left unattributed) about the footnote as instrument of patriarchal domination, or the violence of the meta-narrative, that confused scholarly prose with the physical abuse of persons and communities (although if my memory serves, such opinions were more characteristic of the 1970s than the 1990s). There were times in the past three decades when I, too, felt that literary criticism tended to barricade, behind the barbed wire of jargon, the poetry and fiction to which I had always turned when I wanted to imagine something different from myself or to explore, in some resonant yet also quiet place, the complexity of my human hopes and fears. Attention to the stance and perspective of the historian, critic, or anthropologist did lead to a sometimes tiresome narcissism, even solipsism, in scholarly writing.[5] But little of this seems to me to have been postmodern or poststructuralist *per se*. As a contributor to *The Three Penny Review* said recently, there have always been bad books,[6] just as there have always been envious, defensive, and silly scholarly responses to other scholars. And if, as Lynn Hunt pointed out in 1997, the growth of new subjects such as feminism, gender, postcolonialism, and cultural studies was a response to changing demographics, it is unreasonable not to expect an increase in the sheer number of bad books in such burgeoning fields, since nothing suggests that brilliance is characteristic of a larger percentage of today's undergraduates, graduate students, or professors than it was earlier.[7] Moreover, as publishers are increasingly willing to review and publish manuscripts in only those areas they think will sell, and department chairpersons and senior professors put greater and greater pressure on young scholars to produce what Jonathan Beck has cynically called work that counts, is countable, and is counted, it will require courage (as indeed it has always done) to tackle genuinely

3 Keith Thomas, "History Revisited," *The Times Literary Supplement*, October 11, 2006.

4 Alvin Kernan, "Change in the Humanities and Higher Education," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 9.

5 As Merry Wiesner-Hanks puts it, quoting a colleague: "We used to do Dante's life and works, then with New Criticism we did 'the work,' then with New Historicism we did Dante's works in their historical location, then with post-structuralism we did Dante and me, and now we just do me"; "Women, Gender, and Church History," *Church History* 71 (2002): 600 – 620, especially 600.

6 Dan Frank, "Symposium on Editing," *The Three Penny Review* 29 (1) (Spring 2008): 16.

7 Lynn Hunt, "Democratization and Decline? The Consequences of Demographic Change in the Humanities," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 17 – 31.

new topics.[8] Such professional pressures seem to me to constitute the real threat we face, and some aspects of a postmodern (in particular, deconstructive) stance toward scholarship may provide a partial defense against them. I shall return to professional pressures at the end of this essay. First, a consideration of where the writing of history is today.

The past three decades have seen a number of discussions of the application of what is known generically as "theory" to historical scholarship. With minor differences, they have told the same story up to the late 1990s.[9] Social historians and sociologists have tended to emphasize the rejection of, or evolution beyond, Marxist history; intellectual historians have tended to lay more emphasis on literary and psychoanalytic criticism. But with remarkable unanimity, they all begin the account with Saussure and the development of semiotics, circa 1916, and understand the great shift of the late 1960s to early 1980s as away from social history (in both its Marxist and cliometric, or quantitative, forms – the latter touted in the 1960s as the wave of the future) and toward cultural history, influenced both by French intellectuals, above all Foucault and Derrida, and American anthropologists, especially Clifford Geertz.

This cultural or linguistic, poststructuralist or postmodern turn is usually understood to hold that language does not reflect the world but precedes it and makes it intelligible by constructing it: in other words, there is no objective universe independent of language and no transparent relationship between social organization and individual self-understanding. Such awareness entails, for historians, the realization that the categories and periods they use are expository devices that need constant reformulation exactly because they are always based in political and social assumptions that may, because inherited, be very hard to detect. The past does not come in economic, social, or military chunks, nor in centuries; wars and renaissances, like "resistance" and "corruption," are created by historians, although aggression, power, and creativity (which are not,

8 Jonathan Beck, "After New Literary History and Theory? Notes on the MLA Hit Parade and the Currencies of Academic Exchange," *New Literary Theory* 26 (1995): 695 – 709, quoted in Margery Sabin, "Evolution and Revolution: Change in the Literary Humanities, 1968 – 1995," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Kernan, 85.

9 Among many accounts I might cite, see John E. Toews, "Intellectual History after the Linguistic Turn: The Autonomy of Meaning and the Irreducibility of Experience," *The American Historical Review* 92 (4) (1987): 879 – 907; Victoria E. Bonnell and Lynn Hunt, eds., *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Elizabeth A. Clark, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004); Joan W. Scott, "Against Eclecticism," in "Derrida's Gift," special issue, *Differences* 16 (3) (Fall 2005): 114 – 137; Joan W. Scott, "History-writing as critique," in *Manifestos for History*, ed. Keith Jenkins, Sue Morgan, and Alun Munslow (New York: Routledge, 2007), 19 – 38; Peter Jelavich, "Cultural History," in *Transnationale Geschichte: Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, ed. Gunilla Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006), 227 – 237; Gabrielle M. Spiegel, ed., *Practicing History: New Directions in Historical Writing after the Linguistic Turn* (New York: Routledge, 2005); Lisa M. Bitel, "Period Trouble: The Impossibility of Teaching Feminist Medieval History," in *Paradigms and Methods in Early Medieval Studies*, ed. Celia Chazelle and Felice Lifshitz (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 203 – 220.

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

Where these accounts of the so-called linguistic turn have departed from each other is in their descriptions of what comes "beyond" it. Describing recent fears that the linguistic turn, somewhat illogically, both makes "culture" deterministic (the world becomes a set of symbols that determines individuals) and yet deprives historians of an "objective" past (there is "no there there" beyond the symbols), they depict and seemingly applaud a turn to something else. But what? Some think they see a turn to narrative, even mega-narrative; others see rather a retreat to microhistory. Some cling to unmediated "experience"; others predict a "revitalized and transformed...objectivity."[10] For some, what we have now is a material turn – recourse to "the primacy of the object." For others, the new turn is psychological.[11] For yet others, the turn is historical, although at least one surveyor of the contemporary scene treats the linguistic turn itself, not the retreat from it, as a sort of historical turn.[12]

Probably the most common description of the retreat characterizes it as a return to social history; but a number hedge their bets by seeing it as a kind of eclecticism of method, a "bricolage," or what Gabrielle Spiegel, in a recent volume devoted to the turn from the turn, calls "practice theory" (about which designation she is noticeably unenthusiastic).[13] It thus seems clear that, for all the unease the theorists of theory articulate concerning certain understandings of where history was a decade ago, there is in fact no new theory of theory that has swept the field – or even commanded much attention from professional historians. And this leads me to a second point.

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

10 Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacobs, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York: Norton, 1994), 237.

11 See Patrick Joyce, ed., *The Social in Question: New Bearings in History and the Social Sciences* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 14, as well as note 27 below. For what some might call a psychological turn, see Rebecca Spang, "Paradigms and Paranoia: How Modern Is the French Revolution?" review essay, *The American Historical Review* 108 (1) (2003): 119–147, especially 127–129.

12 Ronald Grigor Suny, "Back and Beyond: Reversing the Cultural Turn?" in "Review Essays: Beyond the Cultural Turn," *The American Historical Review* 107 (5) (2002): 1476–1499, especially 1482.

13 Gabrielle M. Spiegel, "Introduction," in *Practicing History*, ed. Spiegel, 22–26.

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

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

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A survey of recent work in the *AHR* and elsewhere[14] suggests to me that much of the most subtle and energetic recent historical writing has absorbed what is thought-provoking and innovative about the linguistic turn. To be sure, there is a certain amount of what one might call labeling rather than leveraging. We have all read too many pieces in the last twenty years in which Geertz is cited to convince us there is culture, or Foucault mentioned as if his point were that everything reduces to power. The anxious decorating of footnotes with labels is, however, nothing new; Max Weber, for example, used to be – and sometimes still is – cited at any mention of bureaucracy or charisma. Moreover, some recent articles may, to some tastes, go on at unnecessary length about theories, especially about theories not utilized. Nonetheless, when one reads Priya Satia on how the British understanding of the area they knew as "Arabia" influenced military policy in Iraq just after World War I; Sarah Knott on the differently gendered ideals of "sensibility" found on two sides of the Atlantic during the Revolutionary War; Gadi Algazi on rituals between medieval lords and peasants that articulated mutual but asymmetrical obligations, always filtered through remembering; or Andrew Zimmerman on how an identity constructed for peasants in German Togo on the model of American self-help became a trap, and not only be-

14 To *The American Historical Review* I add a survey of recent issues of *History and Theory* and, of course, my reading, a large part of it written by Europeans, in my own field of European history. I am also influenced by my review over the past five years of an average of three hundred applications a year for memberships in the School of Historical Studies at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton.

cause of disregard of ecological conditions, one is in the presence of theorized historical analysis in which lives, in their suffering and their fullness, are glimpsed through the always-fragmentary and interpretable texts and objects that mediate them to us.[15] When one reads Brooke Holmes on the ways in which ancient Greek discussions of the symptoms of illness take us into a place where a new understanding was being formulated of what it means to be in, and to be, a body, one encounters historical writing that delivers what, in my judgment, history should always strive to do: tell us something of the difference between the past and the present while remaining aware that the present descends from the past and that their differences cannot have been so great as to render all our language useless.[16]

In this writing, theory is not merely present; it enables insights of sophistication and subtlety, and its authors tell us quite explicitly how it does this. Such work seems to me both more grounded in the evidence it explores and more nuanced in its understanding of genre, symbol, and idea than some of the sterile opposing of text to experience that characterized the early 1990s. In my own area of medieval religious history, for example, the previous two decades saw futile and sometimes acrimonious debate by German scholars about whether women "really" saw visions or scribes simply "made up" visionary accounts because the genre expected them; in contrast, recent work, such as that of Dyan Elliott, Nancy Caciola, and Barbara Newman, understands, without needing to belabor the point, that scholars have no direct access to the experience of visionaries, but that the presence of expectations of their behavior on the part of those, male and female, who wrote about them is evidence about their lives and not merely an opportunity for us to read and interpret.[17]

There are, to be sure, both new emphases and new buzz words, and these can be understood in part as a response to, even a departure from, some of the scholarship inspired by the linguistic turn. Explorations, and assertions, of agency – a buzz word very popular in article titles over the past two decades – are reactions to a fear that analysis of the constituents of culture eclipses

15 Priya Satia, "The Defense of Inhumanity: Air Control and the British Idea of Arabia," *The American Historical Review* 111 (1) (2006): 16 – 51; Sarah Knott, "Sensibility and the American War for Independence," *The American Historical Review* 109 (1) (2004): 19 – 40; Gadi Algazi, "Lords Ask, Peasants Answer: Making Traditions in Late Medieval Village Assemblies," in *Between History and Histories: The Making of Silence and Commemoration*, ed. Gerald Sider and Gavin Smith (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 199 – 229; and Andrew Zimmerman, "A German Alabama in Africa: The Tuskegee Expedition to German Togo and the Transnational Origins of West African Cotton Growers," *The American Historical Review* 110 (5) (2005): 1362 – 1398.

16 Brooke Holmes, "Medical Analogy and Ethical Subjectivity in Plato," in *When Worlds Elide*, ed. J. P. Euben and Karen Bassi (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, forthcoming), and "Medical Knowledge and Technology," in *A Cultural History of the Human Body, Volume 1: Ancient Greece to Early Christianity*, ed. Daniel H. Garrison (Oxford: Berg Publishers, forthcoming).

17 Nancy Caciola, *Discerning Spirits: Divine and Demonic Possession in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Dyan Elliott, *Proving Women: Female Spirituality and Inquisitional Culture in the Later Middle Ages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Barbara Newman, "What Did It Mean to Say 'I Saw'? The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture," *Speculum* 80 (1) (2005): 1 – 43.

individual action and responsibility.[18] A recent tendency to talk of transitions rather than epistemes or paradigm shifts reflects a determination to pay more attention to how cultures move from one set of dominant symbols to another – in other words, to what is always for a historian the fundamental challenge: explaining change. Moreover, recent historical writing is clearly going in some directions that seem to be reactions to, even implicit rejections of, a cultural or linguistic turn. I now consider some of them – without, however, suggesting that any is truly "beyond" the cultural.

There are two very different ways in which historical work of the last decade may be seen as a retreat from the textual: the renewed interest in material culture and physical objects, on the one hand, and, on the other, a new enthusiasm for what one might call deep structures, represented both by an upsurge of so-called "big" or "deep" history and by a renewed recourse to sociobiological and cognitive explanations for human behavior. To take the latter first, there has recently been a flurry of interest in what one might call "really big" or "really long" history, some of which attempts to trump mere "world history" by going all the way back to the big bang.[19] Daniel Lord Smail, in a recent AHR article, for example, proposed taking the story of human origins back to the emergence of *homo sapiens* in Africa rather than to the emergence of writing in Mesopotamia, his argument being that the latter narrative instantiates a Judeo-Christian perspective on world history.[20] David Christian and Fred Spier tout even bigger history. Even if it does not place the roots of history in astronomical events, such interpretation sees the evolution and extinction of species, the drift of continents, climate change, volcanic eruptions, and disease as more important for understanding the course of human development than short-term events such as wars, treaties, or elections; as such it not only provides a provocative counter to traditional political narratives, but also ascribes genuinely new causes for events historians thought they had long understood.[21]

18 See Spiegel, "Introduction," in *Practicing History*, ed. Spiegel, 11 – 18. One should also note that some now see agency as the importation of constraining nineteenth-century liberal categories; Cornelia Hughes Dayton, "Rethinking Agency, Recovering Voices," *The American Historical Review* 109 (3) (2004): 827 – 843. Rebecca J. Scott, "Small-Scale Dynamics of Large-Scale Processes," in "AHR Forum: Crossing Slavery's Boundaries," *The American Historical Review* 105 (2) (2000): 473, dubs the concept "a little shop-worn."

19 Fred Spier, *The Structure of Big History from the Big Bang until Today* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1996); David Christian, *Maps of Time: An Introduction to Big History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004); Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008). See also "The Return of Science: Evolutionary Ideas and History," special issue, *History and Theory* 38 (1999), and Gale Stokes, "The Fate of Human Societies: A Review of Recent Macrohistories," *The American Historical Review* 106 (2) (2001): 508 – 525.

20 Dan Smail, "In the Grip of Sacred History," *The American Historical Review* 110 (5) (2005): 1337 – 1361.

21 For example, Michael McCormick, "Rats, Communications and Plague: Toward an Ancient and Medieval Ecological History," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 34 (1) (2003): 1 – 25, and Michael McCormick, Paul Edward Dutton, and Paul Mayewski, "Volcanoes and the Climate Forcing of Carolingian Europe, A.D. 750 – 950," *Speculum* 82 (4) (2007): 865 – 895.

Although such arguments need not – and sometimes do not – draw on deeply embedded psychological, evolutionary, cognitive, or sociobiological structures, they tend to, in part because their accounts frequently rely on repeated historical patterns or have recourse to claims about perduring "human nature." One sees this in a book such as Robert McElvaine's *Eve's Seed* or even the recent work of Jared Diamond.[22] Art historians have been particularly interested in such explanations, whether in the more psychologically reductive work of John Onians, which applies neurobiology to art-making and viewing, or in the more anthropological work of Hans Belting and David Freedberg, which is attempting to tease out non-reductive ways of understanding cross-cultural human responses to the "power of images."[23] Scholars at work in the relatively new field of the history of the emotions – although they tend to reject theories of universal psychobiological processes which emotion-words reflect – are nonetheless drawn to cognitive science and brain studies, arguing that there is something bodily as well as verbal in more than one culture to which the word *anger*, for example, applies.[24]

Searching for deep structures and large patterns seems located at the opposite pole from the postmodern sense of history-writing as fragmentary, fragile, and, so to speak, under perpetual construction. Nonetheless, in the hands of most professional historians, even cognitive science and parallels from the older field of ethology (animal behavior) tend to be used analogously rather than reductively. When Rachel Fulton, for example, understands premodern prayer practice through theories of psychological response and employs parallels between present-day sports and medieval metaphors of spiritual combat, she does not reduce the rituals and experiences we find described in texts to physiological patterns in the brain, just as she does not argue that we have any access to the devotee's inner feelings. Cognitive structures lie deep below and hence are accessed only through behaviors that differ culturally; analogies are exactly that: analogies not equations.[25] Even "deep history" at its best involves understanding that physical or physiological structures are always mediated through our ways of knowing them, and hence through culture.

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

22 Robert S. McElvaine, *Eve's Seed: Biology, the Sexes, and the Course of History* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001); Jared M. Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies* (New York: Norton, 2005). For an argument against the invasion of literary studies by cognitive and neuroscience, see Raymond Tallis, "License my roving hands: Does neuroscience really have anything to teach us about the pleasure of reading John Donne?" Commentary, *The Times Literary Supplement*, April 11, 2008.

23 John Onians, *Neuroarthistory: From Aristotle and Pliny to Baxandall and Zeki* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007); Hans Belting, *Bild-Anthropologie: Entwürfe für eine Bildwissenschaft* (Munich: W. Fink, 2001); David Freedberg and Vittorio Gallese, "Motion, Emotion and Empathy in Esthetic Experience," *Trends in Cognitive Science* 11 (5) (2007): 197 – 203. For reservations, see Robert Suckale's review of Belting in *Journal für Kunstgeschichte* 11 (4) (2007): 351 – 360.

24 See the sophisticated effort to deal with these issues in William I. Miller, *Humiliation and Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort and Violence* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 12 – 13, and also in Barbara Rosenwein, *Emotional Communities in the Early Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006).

25 Rachel Fulton, "Praying with Anselm at Admont: A Meditation on Practice," *Speculum* 81 (3) (2006): 700 – 733.

stood as a flight from postmodern textuality. Material culture, understood as archaeology, has of course been a major element in historical scholarship for almost two centuries, especially for areas of history such as the classics, the ancient Near East, early China, or meso-America, for all of which textual evidence is scanty or lacking. Since the 1970s, however, it has not only become more important in fields such as the European Middle Ages, for which it was formerly less used, but has also expanded significantly beyond the excavation and dating of human-made objects to the use of new techniques and the posing of more wide-ranging cultural questions.[26] Dendrochronology, for example, is now used to date architecture and devotional objects as well as settlement locations; zooarchaeological evidence sheds new light on diet (animal and human) and hence on the movement of peoples; analysis of glacial ice to determine mineralogical emissions at far distant sites reveals new facts about mining techniques and hence radically new conclusions about the technological sophistication of cultures whose texts talk little about technology.

Material culture has also come to include museum studies, as it does in Randolph Starn's *AHR* review essay of 2005, or areas such as the history of fashion or domestic interiors, often previously understood as social history. See, for example, Leora Auslander's 2005 article, "Beyond Words." To both Auslander and Starn, objects are understood as having their own "agency," so to speak; an iron or a typewriter, for example, shapes the roles and experiences of the woman who uses it even as her needs and desires (and the needs and desires of others thrust upon her) shape its creation and use.[27] Indeed both authors tend to oppose the material to the cultural. Starn writes, "It is quite possible to imagine some future version of this Brief Guide suggesting that museum studies had turned – or returned – from the primacy of discourse to the priority of object."[28] Nonetheless, it is hard not to notice that the extended example of material culture Auslander gives – a discussion of the reconstitution of domestic interiors by Jewish survivors after the Holocaust – is based on inventories, that is, on texts.

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

26 For examples of innovative work in archaeology, see the many works of Colin Renfrew, as well as Stanley H. Ambrose and M. Anne Katzenberg, eds., *Biogeochemical Approaches to Paleodietary Analysis* (New York: Academic Kluwer/Plenum Press, 2000).

27 Randolph Starn, "A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies," *The American Historical Review* 110 (1) (2005): 68 – 96; Leora Auslander, "Beyond Words," *The American Historical Review* 110 (4) (2005): 1015 – 1045. On the agency of objects, see Daniel Miller, "Materiality: An Introduction," in *Materiality*, ed. Daniel Miller (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 1 – 50; Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Lorraine Daston, ed., *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004); and the many works of Bruno Latour.

28 Starn, "A Historian's Brief Guide to New Museum Studies," 84.

fore: paint is painted over; varnish deteriorates and changes color; objects (like documents) are forged, reused, and misused.[29] Despite Auslander's title "Beyond Words" or Starn's claim to return to the priority of objects, these essays show not so much a move beyond culture, discourse, or textuality as what one might call a move beyond binaries – to a sense of both text and object as always interpreted and interpretable because they are always imbedded in culture. The study of "the material" is not, it turns out, beyond the cultural turn.

If we look at what today's historians are actually doing, we find that in addition to what is sometimes claimed to be a retreat from the textual, there is another major and multifaceted move that may at first glance seem "beyond" the postmodern. This is the move to stress connections and transitions rather than borders, boundaries, and breaks.

One might, perhaps, put under the rubric of "connections and inclusions rather than boundaries" the tendency of today's scholarship to treat what are known as "identity groups" not as racially or genetically given but as constituted by complex cultural circumstances. The focus is apparent not only in the titles of recent publications, but also in the many courses on, for example, gender studies, gay and lesbian studies, ethnic studies, and postcolonial studies offered in university curricula. To mention only a single example: recently there has been much sophisticated work on ethnogenesis – work which, at least sometimes, asks whether ethnicity is an appropriate category at all for premodern history.[30] Such new emphases are an obvious and welcome consequence of the turns of the 1980s and 1990s; there is no need for me to underline them here. What I mean by connections and transitions are two trends that are somewhat less apparent, if only because a little more recent.

Once again, I take the second (the stress on transitions) first. Recent historical work can be seen, in some ways, as a retreat from poststructuralist emphasis on paradigm shifts or epistemes – that is, on periods understood to have characteristic cultural configurations, an escape or even transition from which may be hard to discern or explain. One result of such supposed retreat is an attitude we might tag, only slightly in jest, "nothing declines." Current scholarship tends not only to be drawn to classic periods of collapse and deterioration – the end (once the "fall") of the Roman empire now understood as late antiquity or "the birth of Europe," for example – but also to find within such periods both a creativity of their own and the origins of new cultural configurations. Byzantine culture of the middle period, the Ottoman empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, meso-America just before the coming of the Spaniards, late Qing dynasty China, the European Dark Ages (a designation once understood to refer to the seventh to ninth centuries,

29 For astute comments, see Tim Ingold, "Materials against Materiality," *Archaeological Dialogues* 14 (1) (2007): 1 – 16.

30 Florin Curta, "Some Remarks on Ethnicity in Medieval Archaeology," *Early Medieval Europe* 15 (2) (2007): 159 – 185. Similar questions are, of course, asked about race and sexual orientation: see Barbara J. Fields, "Of Rogues and Geldings," in "AHR Forum: Amalgamation and the Historical Distinctiveness of the United States," *The American Historical Review* 108 (5) (2003): 1397 – 1405; and Ruth Mazo Karras, "Active/Passive, Acts/Passions: Greek and Roman Sexualities," review essay, *The American Historical Review* 105 (4) (2000): 1250 – 1265.

then shifted to the tenth and eleventh centuries, now run off the stage entirely): such periods are often analyzed to find creativity percolating under a surface appearance of stagnation.[31] Moreover, the existence of radical and abrupt shifts in values, cultural forms, social arrangements, and political power tends to be suspect to today's historians; "revolutions" are denied across a wide swatch of history. Not only political revolutions, such as the French and American, or religious upheavals, such as "the Reformation(s) of the sixteenth century," but also cultural breakthroughs, such as the scientific revolution, or social and military reconfigurations, such as the feudal revolution, are vigorously questioned by a large body of current historical analysis.[32] Several recent articles on topics ranging from plague in fourteenth-century Europe to the breakup of the Soviet Union assert in their titles the end of paradigms.[33]

Driven by many impulses and circumstances, such a new interpretative focus clearly owes something to discontent with what is perceived to be a postmodern sense of the fragmentary and discontinuous, as well as what is perceived to be a poststructuralist understanding of discourse as a set of cultural symbols and practices so powerful that change within them is difficult to conceptualize or account for. At a deeper level, however, analyses that stress transition rather than rupture draw on many postmodern techniques for tracing the genealogy of concepts, institutions, attitudes, assumptions, and actions. For example, what it means for a text to be "new" or a ritual to be "traditional" has become a far more complex question now that genre, audience, the circumstances of composition or transcription, and the complexities of reception (including long-term reception) are understood to be intrinsic to discourse.[34] Rather than a retreat from the poststructural, the current tendency to stress transition, continuation, cultural borrowing, and the construction of identities and paradigms by the historians who employ them is at least as much an extrapolation from the theoretical moves of the 1980s and 1990s as an effort to overcome the limitations of those moves.

31 For one example, see Joanna Waley-Cohen, "The New Qing History," *Radical History Review* 88 (Winter 2004): 193 – 206.

32 See, for example, Spang, "Paradigms and Paranoia"; Thomas N. Bisson, "The Feudal Revolution," *Past and Present* 142 (1994): 6 – 42, with responses by Dominique Barthélemy, Stephen D. White, Timothy Reuter, and Chris Wickham in *Past and Present* 152 (1996): 196 – 223, and 155 (1997): 177 – 225; Margaret J. Osler, ed., *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), and Stephen Gaukroger, *Emergence of a Scientific Culture: Science and the Shaping of Modernity, 1210 – 1685* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006). A related example is Charles S. Maier, "Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era," *The American Historical Review* 105 (3) (2000): 807 – 831, which rejects the twentieth century as a natural unit.

33 For example, Samuel K. Cohn, Jr., "The Black Death: End of a Paradigm," *The American Historical Review* 107 (3) (2002): 703 – 738; Mark von Hagen, "Empires, Borderlands and Diasporas: Eurasia as Anti-Paradigm for the Post-Soviet Era," *The American Historical Review* 109 (2) (2004): 445 – 468.

34 See, for example, Daniel Hobbins, "The Schoolman as Public Intellectual: Jean Gerson and the Late Medieval Tract," *The American Historical Review* 108 (5) (2003): 1308 – 1337; Philippe Buc, *The Dangers of Ritual: Between Early Medieval Texts and Social Scientific Theory* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

When one surveys recent *AHR* articles, the books on new acquisitions shelves in scholarly libraries, and the job advertisements in The American Historical Association's *Perspectives*, the most striking contemporary emphasis is on what I am calling *connections*, described in 2006 by C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Isabel Hofmeyr, and others as "movement, flow, circulation" and as long ago as 1999 in the *Journal of American History* as "transnational" currents.[35] The most graphic illustration of this might appear to be the recent trend toward study of bodies of water as connecting, rather than land masses as sites of boundaries and division (geographical as well as political): the Mediterranean history, North Atlantic history, Pacific Rim history, Indian Ocean history, and South China Sea history, for example, surveyed in a recent issue of the *AHR* under the title "Oceans of History."[36] But the trend cuts deeper. For even land masses are, in current research, treated as sites of connectivity and mutual influence. Rather than the older world history or global history, understood as a comparison of given units (whether regions, nation-states, or empires), the new emphasis on connectivity, which one recent symposium perceptively labeled *entanglement*, seeks places below the surface of borders and boundaries where economic and cultural connections and mutual influences flourish. Welcomed by some as an end to the area-studies mentality,[37] such work emphasizes diasporas, mobility, diversity, cultural borrowing, and the porousness of borders, and as such, clearly owes something to an actual opening up of boundaries since the fall of the Berlin Wall and the opening of China (however partial) to the West.

Although any new emphasis tends, alas, to bring with it its own buzz words, the stress on connectivity at its best (as in Mark von Hagen's 2004 article on Eurasia as "anti-paradigm") is an effort to break down tenacious older dichoto-

35 C. A. Bayly, Sven Beckert, Matthew Connelly, Isabel Hofmeyr, Wendy Kozol, and Patricia Seed, "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," *The American Historical Review* 111 (5) (2006): 1441 – 1464. The move has been from histories devoted to explaining Western exceptionalism (for example, David Landes, *The Wealth and Poverty of Nations: Why Some are so Rich and Some so Poor* [New York: Norton, 1998]; Alfred W. Crosby, *The Measure of Reality: Quantification and Western Society, 1250 – 1600* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997]) to a comparative world history approach (R. Bin Wong, *China Transformed: Historical Change and the Limits of European Experience* [Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997]; Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: Europe, China and the Making of the Modern World Economy* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000]) to so-called transnational history, which stresses what I call here (following Horden and Purcell) *connectivity*. See also "AHR Forum: Oceans of History," *The American Historical Review* 111 (3) (2006): 717 – 780 and two special issues of *The Journal of American History* on transnational history, 86 (2 – 3) (1999).

36 In this regard, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) – a critique of Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 vols., trans. S. Reynolds (London: Collins, 1972 – 1973) that owes much to it – has been powerfully influential. So much is this the case that there is now a project at the University of Munich on "the East Asian 'Mediterranean,'" sponsored by the Volkswagen Foundation and directed by Dr. Angela Scottenhammer.

37 See Gregory Mann, "Locating Colonial Histories: Between France and West Africa," *The American Historical Review* 110 (2) (2005): 409 – 434, and xv for the editor's comment on that essay. And see "AHR Forum: Entangled Empires in the Atlantic World," *The American Historical Review* 112 (3) (2007): 710 – 799.

mies, such as Occident (in this case Russia) versus Orient. As Matthew Connelly comments, "[B]inaries are on the run," a trend all the more surprising (yet perhaps, for academic culture, predictable) given the stark dichotomies in the political and polemical world since 9/11.[38] For all its broad sweep, its rejection of abrupt shifts, and its stress on economic and geographical factors – which might seem anti- or non-postmodern – the new "entangled" history is inconceivable without a postmodern understanding that all units (whether geographical or cultural), like all exchanges (whether of values, social structures, objects, or DNA), are mediated by categories constituted by the historians who study them, as well as by the people who create them in their ever-changing variety. Thus, in the new emphases I have chronicled here – on connectivity, transitions, material culture, objects, even in the best of the work that employs and queries "deep structures" – there seems to be a recognition that, pace the theorists of "turns," for the historian there can be no "beyond" culture.[39]

Hence, as I said at the beginning of this essay, the apocalyptic tone of the mid-1990s seems to have been misplaced. The writing of history is stronger and far more sophisticated than in 1995 and, as I have tried to show, this owes more to the absorption than to the rejecting of the so-called linguistic or cultural turn. Yet those of us who teach in American universities know that there is a crisis today. It is a crisis not of the substance of historical and humanistic study, but rather of professional practice and formation, a crisis that goes to the heart of what we value as scholars at least as much as did the "culture wars" of the 1990s. It affects all practicing historians, but especially the young, and tends to be expressed in language similar to the cries of anxiety, even fear, that characterized the essays in the 1997 volume *What's Happened to the Humanities?* Indeed, there is no exaggeration involved in applying terms such as *alarm* and *despair* to the attitudes of PhD recipients currently emerging onto the job market and to the approach of their mentors and professors. Stories abound of graduate students who fail to find jobs because their topics are not "trendy," of books that fail to find publishers because of "the decline of the monograph," of assistant professors who fail to gain tenure because they do not complete that ominously titled "second project." Mentors respond with exhortations to the young to produce ever more rapidly, while purveying alarmist tales of decreasing venues for publication and proliferating barriers to career advancement. The apocalyptic has gravitated, it seems, from the scholarly to the professional sphere.

Although statistics are notoriously useless in quelling fear, it is worth noting that statistics do not bear out such apocalyptic descriptions. As recent reports on publishing conclude, the monograph is still the key to humanities publishing; there has even been a modest increase in history publishing in the past few years, with a minimal increase in price.[40] New journals are constantly appearing, and e-publishing provides

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38 Matthew Connelly, in "AHR Conversation: On Transnational History," 1452.

39 As Richard Handler argues in "Cultural Theory in History Today," in "Review Essays: Beyond the Cultural Turn," *The American Historical Review* 107 (5) (2002): 1513 – 1520.

40 Humanities Indicators Prototype, http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIVD.aspx#topIV12: Part IV. *Indicator IV-*

many new outlets. Despite a disturbing increase in the number of people in adjunct or part-time positions who would prefer full-time employment, and an alarming tendency for women to suffer salary discrimination at later points in their careers and at elite institutions, the market for entering professionals looks good. About seven hundred PhD recipients gain jobs in history departments every year; most candidates in tenure-track positions acquire tenure; and the proportion of recently tenured historians who have published books is very high.[41]

The fear that lurks behind the scare stories propagated by graduate students and assistant professors to each other rests less in demonstrable trends than in rumors; but it rests above all in pressure to publish at an increasing rate inflicted on younger professionals by deans, department chairs, tenure committees, and senior colleagues. Pushed to speed up production beyond what is humanly possible and in ways that have the potential to injure scholarly excellence, even scholarly integrity, many candidates for tenure publish every chapter of their first monograph as a journal article, scramble to orchestrate an edited volume, to which all their friends contribute, in order to have a "second book" fast, and choose new research topics of a reach and apparently contemporary relevance that they are not fully equipped to pursue. Moreover, the pressures creep, insidiously and steadily, up the professional ladder to affect even tenured and mid-career professors. Frenzy for production then leads to a duplication of publishing that wastes paper; a frantic search for sellable, often trendy, and sometimes overly general topics that will be snatched up by publishers; and, most dangerously, to a deferral of creativity. For such frenzy defers the time necessary for finding genuinely new (and by definition un-trendy) topics, for editing long and hitherto unknown texts, for returning to the archives for research radically different from one's earlier forays there, for the painful rewriting and rethinking necessary for true innovation; it may postpone discovery and intellectual adventure so long that historians no longer remember the courage and curiosity that motivated their vocations in the first place.

I have no facile or immediate solution to such pressures, rumors, and fears. But since the problem appears to lie less in impersonal market factors than in the culture of the academy, I propose that what we need above all is a new understanding of what we are about as historians. To describe such an understanding is not, of course, to list a set of concrete proposals. But to outline proposals would be to write another essay and might in any case contribute to the impression, which I am attempting to counter (at least for the United States)

12: *Academic Publishing* (American Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2008). And see Patrick Manning, "Gutenberg-e: Electronic Entry to the Historical Professoriate," *The American Historical Review* 109 (5) (2004): 1505–1526, for a somewhat less positive assessment.

41 See Manning, "Gutenberg-e," 1513; Thomas Bender et al., *The Education of Historians for the Twenty-First Century* (Urbana: Published for the American Historical Association by the University of Illinois Press, 2004), 27; Robert Townsend, "History and the Future of Scholarly Publishing," *Perspectives* 41 (7) (2003); Francis Oakley, "Ignorant Armies and Nighttime Clashes: Changes in the Humanities Classroom, 1970–1995," in *What's Happened to the Humanities?*, 67; and Humanities Indicators Prototype, http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/content/hrcoIII.aspx: *Part III. The Humanities Workforce*.

that current professional anxieties are owing primarily to economic or institutional forces.[42] Instead, I hope that articulating a new self-understanding will encourage all historians, but especially the young (and their mentors on their behalf), to resist both the rumors of alarm and the pressures of speed-up. And I suggest that embracing this self-understanding will be easier for all of us if we note that it is based in where we actually are in the substance of our work as scholars.

Hence I propose that we adopt toward professional practices the same postmodern stance that has facilitated creative new work in the substance of our scholarship. For if we could really understand what we undertake as historians to be by definition partial and discontinuous, forever redone and in need of redoing because of our own cultural situated-ness, we – all of us, young scholars and old – would be able to slow down. If there is no goal at the end of the race – that is, if the point is the running not the goal – why sprint instead of stroll (especially if sprinting damages our knees forever)? No longer pressured to read everything, consider everything, account for every new turn and twist of scholarship, we would recognize that each of us is – and can be – only one perspective. Accepting the fragmentary and necessarily partial nature of our own contribution, we might become more truly collaborative – that is, more open to using, even seeking out, work different from our own. Instead of scrambling to compile ever more collections of essays on predictable topics in some false hope of "covering" a topic, or commissioning essays from different fields that talk past each other while claiming an "interdisciplinarity" that fails to recognize the radically different languages and techniques necessary from one expertise to another, we might relax into true collaboration, which is above all predicated on listening.

I do not mean by this to extol simply the recognition that historical interpretations are forever remade as generations change; historians have known that for a long time. Nor do I mean simply to point out that our accounts are constructed. I mean something more radical and more postmodern – something I have elsewhere called "history in the comic mode."[43] I propose a recognition that every stance is by definition on the margins, that every story or analysis has of necessity an arbitrarily imposed ending or conclusion, that there can be no so-called meta-narrative (that is, a narrative for something simply referred to as "us"), but that there is no shame in any choice of subject, as long as it is made with methodological self-awareness and attention to a range of relevant evidence, none of it treated as transparent.

After all, it will probably always be true that one person's buzz word is another person's discovery; one person's "over-theorizing" is another person's methodological self-scrutiny; one person's "under-theorizing" is another's

42 To say this is not to deny the deleterious effects that government-imposed standards and requirements can have. An example is the academic assessment procedures imposed in the United Kingdom. Awareness of such pressures, however, makes it all the more important that scholars resist rather than exaggerate or collude with them.

43 Caroline Walker Bynum, "In Praise of Fragments: History in the Comic Mode," in Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 11 – 26. See also Bynum, "The P Word," *Perspectives* 45 (7) (2007): 58.

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

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