TAKING DIALECTIC WITH A GRAIN OF SALT: A REPLY TO McKEON

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Although it is true, therefore, that the categories of bourgeois economics possess a truth for all other forms of society, this is to be taken only with a grain of salt.
—Marx, *Grundrisse* 106

*[T]he title of this study [*The Origins of the English Novel*] is to be taken, as Marx would say, only with a grain of salt.*
—McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel* 19

If to take "with a grain of salt" means accepting a statement or idea with a certain amount of reserve, then my review essay of Michael McKeon's *The Origins of the English Novel* seeks to balance my sense of the inevitability of the dialectical aspect of most thought and narrative, with significant reservations. By characterizing McKeon's literary history as "realist" and by demonstrating the consequences of its programmatic deployment of the dialectic, I seek to take its horizon of inquiry, narrative structure, method, and findings with more than one grain of salt. If what results seems to him a "pale reflection" of what he has already achieved, this is because my review essay seeks to rescue the many valuable findings of McKeon's literary history from the confining dialectical "method" that structures and defends it. In response McKeon has written "A Defense of Dialectical Method in Literary History," published in the same issue of *diacritics* as my essay. A dialogue about dialectics between diacritics? Not exactly. McKeon finds I wander off course in comprehending his argument, and he then generalizes these "errors" into a critique of their "poststructuralist" tendency. This line of argument turns our exchange into yet one more chapter in the literary critical wars between the Partisans of History and the Partisans of Text, between those who have grasped the indispensable historical coordinates of literary study and those who, acting "upon the belated ambition to take history seriously" ["Defense" 37],[1] are only now trying to scramble together some idea of history. But alas, because of a disabling "skepticism," critics like myself are constantly lapsing back into poststructuralist notions of literature devoid of historical understanding.

At each point where McKeon and I diverge, there yawns a large gap between our understandings of the nature of literary history and its writing. For example, McKeon responds to my objection that much of history is "left

1. Page references to subsequent quotations from McKeon's "A Defense of Dialectical Method in Literary History: Response to Warner" are given in brackets.

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out" by his dialectical narrative by insisting that his study demonstrates nothing if not the way prenovelistic texts are "left behind" by the process of canon formation or the way religious beliefs are lost through the pressure of secularization [11–12]. But for me what history wastes and loses is more radically absent: like the plays of Euripides lost during the sack of Byzantium or the detailed letter of criticism of *Clarissa* sent to Richardson by Fielding but removed from the correspondence by a friend; like any episode in history that disappears as a conscious memory, perhaps through individual or collective repression. These fragments of history are lost to history as we know it, as McKeon writes it, or as anyone could write it, today. They have nonetheless borne their effects into culture at earlier times and places and, through a rediscovery or remembering of currently dormant traces of cultural archive, could live a ghostly afterlife.[2] Whether through my own imprecision or McKeon's inattention or polemical zeal, I find that he has misconstrued many of the coordinates of my argument. These include notions of genre [9], contingency [19], and a "historically conditioned problematic" [27–28], as well as canonicity [10] or the problems for the linear temporality of his historical scheme posed by *Don Quixote*. Rather than attempt to restate the basic terms of my argument, the thoughts that follow seek to remark what distinguishes my sense of the fruitful directions of literary history from his.

McKeon is quite right to see my critical exchange with his work as part of an effort "to develop methods of studying history" that will pass through rather than around "the radical skepticism about the possibility of historical study that has been a hallmark of poststructuralist thought" ["Response" 2]. But here our differences begin. For McKeon the term "radical skepticism" cancels the project of literary history before it can begin, while for me it means that a fundamental theoretical critique of the procedures of history must become an ongoing concomitant of literary history. Foucault's use of Nietzsche's concepts of genealogy to practice an archeology of knowledge is an exemplary instance of a self-consciously developed alternative to the dialectical patterning of conventional historical narratives. Foucault's example is playing no small role in the development of New Historicist alternatives to traditional literary history. There are moments when McKeon's own project seems to be understandable in this light. McKeon uses the Marx of *Grundrisse*, and Althusser's commentary on that Marx, to develop the idea of the "simple abstraction" as a useful way to think about the novel's emergence in the 1740s without succumbing to a metaphysical quest for origins. In addition I find much to agree with when McKeon describes the ideological formations plotted through his literary history as the means by which a culture extracts from "the contingencies of indefinite potentiality" simplifying forms with which to mediate and contain conflict [13]. But it was part of the work of my own review essay to demonstrate the ways McKeon's theory and practice of dialectical method end up effacing these postulated "contingencies of indefinite potentiality" from his history. Further, McKeon's use of dialectic and his rousing "defense of dialectic" in his published response to me discourage his reader from taking his investigation of the novel's origins with even the slightest grain of salt.

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2. In a 1931 article, Dugald Allen McKillop quotes a "tantalizing note" found in a crucial gap in the collection Richardson made of his own correspondence: "Copy of Mr. H. Fielding's Letter follows this. Oct. 15, 1748. Taken out to lend to Mr. A[ndrew] Millar, at his Request. A very exact one." Supposing that this absent letter would clarify Fielding's arguments for urging a happy ending of Clarissa, *McKillop declares that "it is a great pity that [Millar] did not preserve this important document" [428]. In 1948 E. L. McAdam announces the discovery of this letter indexed as absent from Richardson's correspondence, "a letter otherwise unknown for two hundred years" [301]. But this discovery is shadowed by a penumbra of new absences. This "find," because it carries a tone of familiarity few would have imagined possible between the rival novelists and focuses only upon Fielding's response to volume five of* Clarissa, *leads McAdam to speculate that Richardson and Fielding carried on a more extensive correspondence now lost [309].*

Why does McKeon see "dialectical method" as the royal road to historical knowledge? For McKeon the special virtue of dialectic comes from the way it enables an investigator to grasp the coherences and unities of a cultural history—formations like "naive empiricism" and "extreme skepticism," progressive and conservative ideologies—at the same time that dialectic allows us to apprehend their subtle interdependence, mutual implication, and thus only provisional unity. Dialectic discredits the ideological claims to autonomy and self-sufficiency made by each of these systems of thought at the same time that it accounts for the historical effects of these claims to wholeness and unity. Thus McKeon claims a special analytical power for dialectic: "all 'wholes' may be, on the one hand, divided into their constituent parts, and on the other, collected into more inclusive wholes of which they themselves constitute one part. Indeed, in its most general form dialectical method could be said to consist in nothing but the reciprocal deployment of division and collection" [6]. But though the tone of this description is modest, dialectical method can have almost magical effects: McKeon describes his book as a study "whose work is to crack the ideological nut of 'the novel' by discovering the disparate parts of which it was constituted" [9]. In this metaphor, history is assumed to be condensed into a hard and self-enclosed object, which dialectical method can seize and open. Dialectic becomes that flexible instrument which can find the object of analysis [for example, the novel], place it upon the analytical table for inspection, and perform the operation that discloses its constituents. Such a metaphor not only suggests the empiricist premises of McKeon's history; it also stabilizes the standing point for the practitioner of dialectical method. What becomes entirely absent from this use of dialectic is any way of putting into play the subject position of the analyst who makes use of dialectical method. How does this happen in McKeon? By locating dialectical thinking in the writers and period he studies—Swift, he insists, thinks dialectically [13]—and by using dialectical method to produce an historical narrative that repeats that thought, McKeon ends up annulling any alterity and difference between now and then, between the historical changes he meditates and the late modern epoch he writes within. Dialectic in McKeon's concrete practice of literary history—rather than allowing (as it does in Marx and Althusser, as well as Hegel) a subtle means of reflecting, within the project of historical knowledge, the position of the historically determinate subject—becomes the magical means by which the distance and difference between subject and object vanishes.[3] The result: McKeon's use of dialectic has the instrumental, practical, and antispeculative quality of Anglo-American thought.

The analytical fidelity McKeon claims for his dialectical representation of the early modern period leads me to characterize McKeon's literary history as "realist." This description of McKeon's practice is misunderstood by McKeon as a poststructuralist critique of what he calls the "illusion of referentiality" [24]. Reference is a pervasive and indispensable aspect of language, and it works successfully even in efforts at communication as fraught as that between McKeon and me. Alertness to the problem of reference does not mean going beyond referentiality (into a domain of pure text? pure facticity? or subjective impressions?). Rather, it means incorporating the issue or problem of self-reflexivity into one's own procedure, so that dialectic as method and dialectic as disclosed historical pattern do not produce that specular doubling which makes the positionality and motives of the subject vanish. In contrast with McKeon I understand every representation of the past as an act of interpretation that is motivated by a regress of terms that are never fully accessible to history's producers or consumers. In writing history, every lucid expression precipitates new opacities. An analogy to psychoanalysis is helpful. Literary

3. *For a discussion of the role of the speculative dialectic in Hegel and Derrida, see Rodolphe Gasché's discussion in chapters 3 and 5 of* The Tain of the Mirror: Derrida and the Philosophy of Reflection.

history is like the secondary revision of the memories of a dream: it continues in the minutes and hours after waking as an attempt at remembering *at the same time, and with the same motions,* that those memories are repressed.

"Realist Literary History" is part of an effort to support and develop alternative literary histories to the one McKeon practices and envisions. Thus two recent Foucaldian literary histories of the early English novel—Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction* and John Bender's *Imagining the Penitentiary*—describe the novel's emergence through exchanges with an influential and informing discursive system: the idea of the domestic woman and the idea of the penitentiary. What results is a literary history that is not realist but analogical: the emergences of the novel and the modern subject are analogized with the emergence of domestic ideology and the idea of the penitentiary. Both histories foreground the analytical procedures and selective biases that enable their historical interpretation. What is happening in these new historical experiments, as well as in my interpretation of both them and McKeon, is not the separation of literature and history McKeon scolds me for but a way of bringing them into a more intimate relation. It is one of the hallmarks of literary study to be concerned with the way form and meaning, the how and the what of the thing said, become entangled. My review essay of McKeon's book, by paying attention to the narrative form and aesthetic premises of McKeon's writing, develops a literary knowledge about his practice of history. In this way literary history can become as "literary" as it is historical.

In historical narratives of origins, the salt of doubt that provides a trace of difference comes not only from the ground (or the salt shaker) but from the self of a historically embodied historian: from the sweat glands or tear ducts of the subject's body, as it motivates and limits the projects of history. The salt is the trace of the subject in the object that complicates—adding spice and interest rather than annulling the possibility of—those projects of historical interpretation indispensable to human culture.

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