
Literary History: A Systematic Approach

Lecture 14: Literature and Literary History Today: The Uses and Limitations of a Systematic Approach

1) And What About American Literature

2) English Literary History as a Paradigmatic Case

3) The Parameters of Literary History

4) The Grid

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1) And What About American Literature?

Periods of American Literature:

	(extrinsic) <----->	(intrinsic)
1607-1775	Colonial Period (Revolutionary Age 1765-1790)	
1775-1830/ 1865	Early National Period	
1830-1860		⊗ Romantic Period in Am./ Transcendentalism (American Renaissance)
1860-1900		Realism
1900-1914		Naturalism
1914-1945		Modernism
1945-		Postmodernism

The Writing of America: Keywords

- puritanism + immigration
 - > the uneasy construction of American identity
- Paradise™

Individualism:
the Body Electric/the Subversive Imagination
vs.
Crises in Representation:
Politics, Mediality, and 'the people'

[Geoff Ward, *The Writing of America: Literature and Cultural Identity from the Puritans to the Present*. Oxford/Malden, MA: Blackwell 2002.]

German Standard Reference:

Hubert Zapf, ed., *Amerikanische Literaturgeschichte*. 3., erw. und akt. Auflage, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2010 (1996).

Useful Survey:

Martin Middeke et al., eds., *English and American Studies: Theory and Practice*. Stuttgart: Metzler, 2012: 99-161.

Recent Revisionist American Literary History:

Marcus, Greil & Werner Sollors, eds., *A New Literary History of America*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2009.

America is a nation making itself up as it goes along—a story of discovery and invention unfolding in speeches and images, letters and poetry, unprecedented feats of scholarship and imagination. In these myriad, multiform, endlessly changing expressions of the American experience, the authors and editors of this volume find a new American history.

In more than two hundred original essays, *A New Literary History of America* brings together the nation's many voices. From the first conception of a New World in the sixteenth century to the latest re-envisioning of that world in cartoons, television, science fiction, and hip hop, the book gives us a new, kaleidoscopic view of what "Made in America" means. Literature, music, film, art, history, science, philosophy, political rhetoric—cultural creations of every kind appear in relation to each other, and to the time and place that give them shape.

(Blurb on <http://www.hup.harvard.edu/catalog.php?isbn=9780674035942>)

Arthur Krystal, “What is Literature? In Defense of the Canon.” *Harpers Magazine* (March 2014): 89-94.

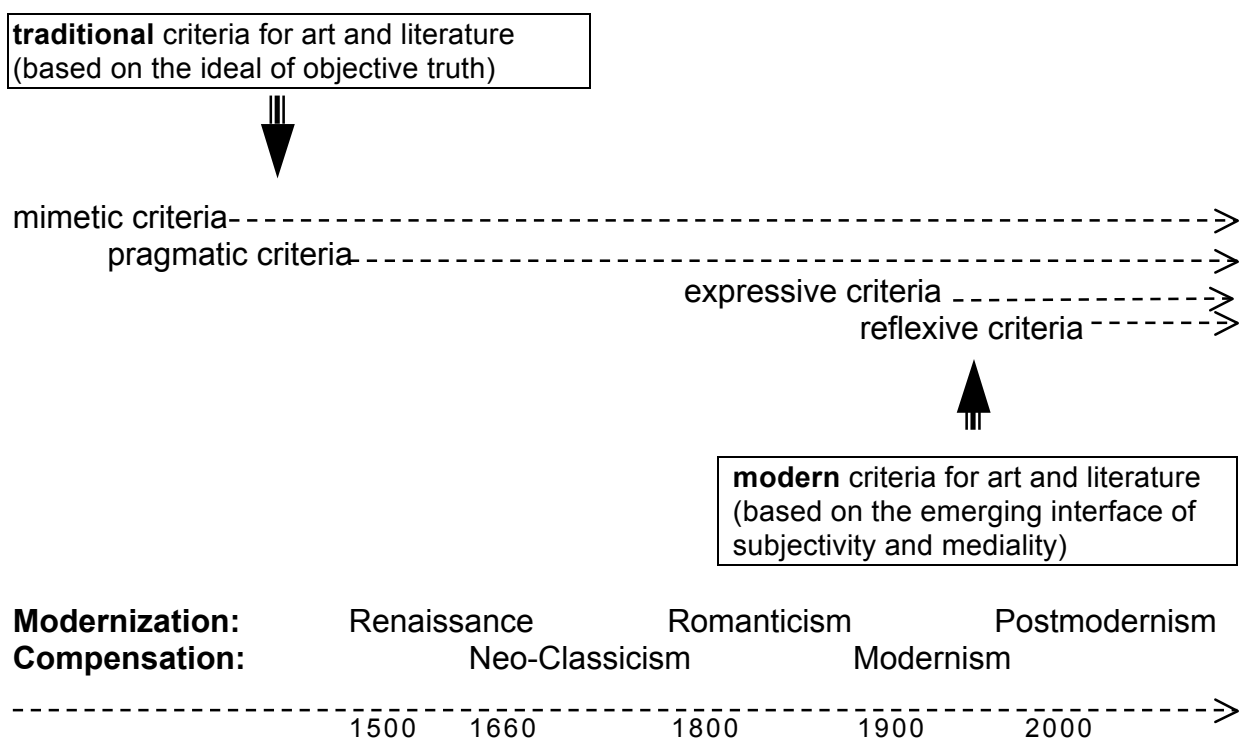
There’s a new definition of literature in town. It has been slouching toward us for some time now but may have arrived officially in 2009, with the publication of Greil Marcus and Werner Sollors’s *A New Literary History of America*. Alongside essays on Twain, Fitzgerald, Frost, and Henry James, there are pieces about Jackson Pollock, Chuck Berry, the telephone, the Winchester rifle, and Linda Lovelace. Apparently, “literary means not only what is written but what is voiced, what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form”—in which case maps, sermons, comic strips, cartoons, speeches, photographs, movies, war memorials, and music all huddle beneath the literary umbrella. Books continue to matter, of course, but not in the way that earlier generations took for granted.

[...]

Marcus and Sollors are wrong. “Literary” does not refer to “what is expressed, what is invented, in whatever form,” and literature does not encompass every book that comes down the pike, however smart or well-made. [...] Although examples of imaginative writing arrive in all sizes and degrees of proficiency, literature with a capital L, even as its meaning swims in and out of focus, is absolutist in the sense that all serious writers aspire to it. Although writers may be good or bad, literature itself is *always* good, if not necessarily perfect. Bad literature is, in effect, a contradiction. One can have *flawed* literature but not bad literature; one can have something “like literature” or even “literature on a humble but not ignoble level,” as Edmund Wilson characterized the *Sherlock Holmes* stories, but one can’t have dumb or mediocre literature. (89/94)

2) English Literary History as a Paradigmatic Case

The Basic Outline Revisited:



The Dialectics of Modern Literature:

