Since the mid-1980s, attempts to think history and literature together have provided a focal point for much exciting work in the Humanities. Indeed, an under-theorized historicism can be said to inform most of the current scholarship in literary studies, including work in poetics. This volume draws together an array of distinguished scholars of ancient and modern literatures to consider the ways in which historicism in literary studies can and should be construed and pursued today. By recovering the traditional nexus of philology and history, the volume seeks to reinvigorate poetics as a theoretical discipline that would enter into a productive dialogue with such recent critical and intellectual developments as New Historicism, “formalist” Marxism, the study of world literature, practices of distant reading, and a renewed attention to ritual, oral poetics, and genre.

Specifically, the contributors to the volume seek to challenge and complement the historicism that stresses proximate socio-political contexts as well as the more recent and salutary concern with understanding literary production and reception on a global scale with the perspective of the longue durée of literary forms and institutions. Thus, the approach advanced in these essays would complement the world-geographical with the world-historical perspective on the literary process, and where a more traditional historicism would see unified or, at best, “polyphonic” responses to concrete historical dilemmas, the contributors to this volume uncover deep-historical stratifications and non-synchronicities, in which certain formal solutions may display “elective affinities” with other, chronologically distant solutions to analogous problems.

Furthermore, the volume seeks to renew the discussion of formal change as it relates to historical change. Arguably, even as literature – particularly in the Modern period globally, but also in the Graeco-Roman world – is a medium that is highly responsive to social and cultural conditioning, a property that makes it distinct – as verbal art – from other kinds of cultural production is its commitment to inherited forms, which are subject to incessant adaptation and modification. Although these processes of formal change are often not perceived by contemporaries as historically symptomatic, Historical Poetics approaches them as potential evidence of the history of mentalities, cultural attitudes, dominant, residual or emergent worldviews, large-scale changes in political orientation, and changing conceptions of the self. The persistence of forms thus emerges as a fundamental hermeneutic precondition for assessing historical change and historical difference.

In their quest for a revitalized and more expansive historicism in literary study, the contributors to the volume build on the tradition of Historical Poetics, pioneered by Alexander Veselovsky (1838-1906) and developed in various fruitful directions by the Russian Formalists, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Olga Freidenberg (among others). The volume
also seeks to place this critical tradition in dialogue with such thinkers as Ernst Cassirer, Northrop Frye, Fredric Jameson, and Walter Burkert, who all have approached literature in a globally-comparativist and evolutionary-historical spirit.

In addition to interrogating the methodological legacies of these thinkers, contributors to the volume explore literary texts in light of the following insights: that literary evolution includes mechanisms that are immanent to literature as well as those that are historically motivated; that literary forms represent sedimented sociohistorical content and that therefore literary texts are open to a stratifying rather than unitarian approach; that through cross-cultural import literary texts are central to maintaining and disseminating cultural meaning in space and time; that a history of forms such as style and genre is both an arena of sociocultural contestation and a repository of historically specific views on poetics that are broadly shared and implicit.

Particular topics discussed by the contributors include the formation and evolution of genres (Homeric epic, Attic tragedy, Russian novel), period styles and modes of historical consciousness (Greek classicism, Sentimentalism, Realism), and particular literary forms (commentary, metaphor, narrative omniscience). It is through rigorous analyses of literary artifacts and traditions that the authors seek to address the issues that have long loomed large in the Humanities: the nature of historical continuity and change, cross-cultural borrowing and hybridity, the historicity of literary form, and the viability of typological and historical comparison.

This volume will be of interest to scholars and students from a wide array of fields, including Comparative literature, Classics, Russian literature and history, cultural and intellectual history and literary theory. Given its focus on the limits and benefits of interdisciplinarity as well as on the historical predicament of meaning-making, it will also attract readers who are interested in the intersections of literature with the other arts, as well as history, religion, philosophy, and anthropology.

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