BOOK REVIEW FORUM

History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn. By **Elizabeth A. Clark**. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005. x + 325 pp. $39.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

Elizabeth Clark's *History, Theory, Text:* A (Somewhat) Confessional Reading

Throughout her enormously productive career, Elizabeth Clark has devoted herself to promoting interdisciplinarity within the field of late ancient Christian studies. Clark's latest book—*History, Theory, Text*—represents a kind of culmination of this long-standing (even long-suffering) effort not only to open her own field to new approaches but also to render it more accessible and relevant to scholars in other disciplines. Like all of her work, this book is as noteworthy for its discipline as it is for its deliberate transgression of disciplinary boundaries. Even more than her prior work, it draws her well beyond the borders of early church history. Here Clark's primary objective is to take account of the implications for the present practice of history-writing of a century or so of theorizing about historiography, undertaken mostly by nonhistorians and, alas, ignored by most historians. The major chapters of the book launch readers on a whirlwind tour that winds from the nineteenth-century German historians' attempts to defend an objective or "scientific" view of history, to the historiographic reflections of Anglophone analytic philosophers and French structuralists, to the lingering positivism of the *Annalistes*, microhistorians, and British Marxist historians, to literary critics' challenging interrogation of the narrativity of history-writing, to the emergence of a "new" intellectual history that is complicated and enriched by a multidisciplinary debate regarding the relation of "texts" and "contexts" as well as the centrality of power and ideology in the processes of textual production.

Underlying Clark's critical reflections throughout these chapters is a particular concern with the current status of the study of premodern history. Focusing in the final chapter on the example of her own field, she traces a shift from a theologically based patristics to a history of Christianity that turns aside from theology to engage the questions, methods, and arguments emanating from the social sciences—most notably perhaps, cultural anthropology. Clark suggests that this strong (and in many ways productive) turn to the social sciences is partly responsible for historians' relatively late-dawning awareness of the implications of text-focused poststructuralist theories for the practice of historiography. This neglect has been especially unfortunate, she argues, for historians studying premodern cultures, the surviving traces of which consist overwhelmingly of sophisticated literary texts that call for equally sophisticated interpretation. "A more theoretically oriented intellectual history," proposes Clark, "offers an especially welcoming disciplinary home for students of premodernity" (5).

The book should be recognized and received as an offering of exceeding generosity as well as passion, written in response to an anti-theoretical and more generally isolationist intellectual tendency among historians that one senses Clark has often found exasperating—not least because she has inevitably found herself frustratingly limited by such disciplinary constraints. An

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autobiographical voice surfaces lightly. "My own education—both formal and 'self education'—likewise passed through these developments," she confesses. "'Patristics,' in my own graduate education, was a theologically oriented discipline that centered largely on the Church Fathers' Trinitarian and Christological expositions against 'heretics.' To bring ancient philosophy into relation with theology was as broad a disciplinary reach as I could then imagine would be professionally viable." Clark's central involvement in the subsequent shift toward social and cultural approaches that "aimed at undercutting the dominance of theology in the study of early Christianity" is so well known as to require no explicit act of authorial self-location. Still, something was lacking, she reflects in closing this brief survey of the past, even as she draws near the end of her book: "What was largely missed along the way were precisely the issues on which this book has centered"—namely, the profound implications of "the textuality of early Christian writings" (160–61).

As Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida have taught us, to confess is also to excuse oneself, to beg pardon. Post-Clark, let there be no more excuses! No more confessions, then? At least the excuses and confessions should not be the same ones. Clark has now done our homework for us; we can no longer simply beg pardon for ignorance. She has gathered the relevant sources and voices; with impressive breadth of vision, not to mention sheer hard work, she has placed them on chronological and geographical maps, traced the contours, and highlighted the overlaps of their various distinctive arguments and claims. This map is not the territory; it is finally no substitute for reading the various "theorists" she introduces. But it is an awfully helpful guide. As Clark herself puts it, with notable modesty: "This book aims to provide an instructive, historically oriented, and user-friendly survey of some important moments in the late nineteenth- and twentieth-century debates surrounding history, philosophy, and critical theory" (1). (Have you been wondering why some people keep citing Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida, for example? Well, if so, consult chapter 7.) Although its own situatedness in relation to the study of early Christianity is clearly marked, Clark's work nonetheless addresses itself to a readership at least as broad as the field of history. Just skip the last chapter if late ancient Christianity is not your bag.

Yet skipping the last chapter would also be a mistake, perhaps. It is there that the sleek rubber of theory meets the rough road of historiographic practice, there too that the meticulous invocation of theory reveals its initiating motives. Reading Clark through to the end, I found that I was repeatedly turned back on myself and forced to contemplate unexamined habits. In so doing, I also found myself provoked to raise a number of questions in response, three of which I offer here for the purpose of further exploratory conversation.

First question: Does Clark's challenge in fact apply only, or even especially, to the writing of premodern histories? Is the nature of the available sources—for example, documents versus literary texts—in fact the crucial issue? From a strictly "theoretical" perspective, I do not think that the distinction will hold. Of course, Clark knows this as well as anyone. Her reluctance to address the practices of historians of modernity must be at least partly strategic. It is also admirably modest: she will speak finally most directly and decisively of what she knows best. Nonetheless, I will confess (not without a

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twinge of amusement at my own discomfort, I hasten to assure you) that I prefer not to have it even *hinted* that I write the kind of history I write as an ancient historian simply because my limited sources allow me to do no better. Rather, I would *like* to think that both the limited number and the particular character of those sources give rise to significant insights into the complexities and ambiguities of historiographic practice as such. Surely any historian (of whatever era or culture) writes not only into the gaps of texts or other artifacts but also into the gaps between texts and artifacts, no matter how numerous or of what sort they may be. As an interpretive and also a writerly practice, history is always both inventive and tendentious. We are ever catching fragments of an alien past up into the weave of our own texts, texts that in turn warp and fray at the edges as we tug selectively at strands of causality, the complexity of which quite literally defies comprehension. At this point, I begin to suspect that I have just stumbled, somewhat clumsily, into apprehending the audacity of Clark's seemingly modest proposal: where we have so often in the recent past been taking our cues from the historians of modernity, trying to ape their social-scientific methods as best we can, perhaps now historians of premodernity may have something to offer back in the form of a subtle critique of the ongoing temptations represented by a naïve positivism or a simplifying reductivism (to put the case, alas, not so subtly after all).

Second question: Is "intellectual history" the best name for the kind of history Clark is calling for—or at least (to be honest) for the kind of history I want her to be calling for? As Clark details, the term is by now endowed with an impressive revisionist pedigree (see chapter 6), yet I remain somewhat wary nonetheless. It is of course at some level silly to quibble over terminology—"intellectual history" versus "history of ideas" or "thought" or "mentalities" or "discourses," and so on—especially given that particular labels can function very differently in different contexts, as Clark shows. My concern is with what any of these terms might seem to exclude, or what pernicious binaries might be inadvertently reinstated. Ideas versus practices? Elite versus popular culture? Surely we do not want to go *there* again. I do not think Clark does.

Yet, by the same token, I am concerned with what might *not* be excluded by "intellectual history"—namely, a fairly traditional version of patristics focused primarily (if not exclusively) on the close study of the writings of the so-called Fathers, even if it is a version now newly and critically tuned to issues of power. Let me speak, more than ever, confessionally: I live somewhat ambivalently with the turn my own work has taken in the past decade or so, as I have moved away from more explicitly social-historical approaches directed to the analysis of more marginal sources and drifted instead toward more literary-theological readings of classic or conventionally authoritative texts. Such "readings" are nontraditional, even explicitly (sometimes extravagantly) subversive of the traditional, to be sure; they surface and engage dynamics of power and resistance; they gesture toward the texts' embeddedness in broader social, cultural, and political formations. Nonetheless, it is precisely to the extent that I seem now to be writing "theoretically oriented intellectual history" that I worry about the politics of my own practice. Or rather, I worry about the potential loss of a *certain kind* of political traction. Perhaps as an obscure act of scholarly penance, I recently agreed to edit a volume in a series entitled *A People's*

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History of Christianity that is explicitly focused on all that *might* seem excluded by "intellectual history." As Clark contributed a wonderful social-historical essay to this volume, I feel all the more emboldened to reframe and reiterate my (perhaps after all rather simple) question: Where does "intellectual history" sit in relation to the admittedly elusive history of everyday religious practices or of the lives of the non-elite or culturally marginal, for example? How firm, moreover, is its grip on the material? What is lost if and when that grip is loosened?

Third and final question: What is the relation (historical or otherwise) of the broadly poststructuralist historiographic approaches advocated by Clark to the cultural heritage represented by late ancient Christianity? Clark remarks on the fact that "theorists have now registered considerable interest in writers of late antiquity" and goes on to suggest that scholars of late antiquity should return the favor by demonstrating livelier interest in "theory" (161). Left hanging is the question of what the basis or motivation for such interdisciplinary reciprocity might be. One possible answer arrives with the proposal that there is a particular affinity between some of the insights of critical theory and the perspectives of the ancient texts themselves and, furthermore, that this is not sheerly accidental but reflects the imprint of a certain legacy—in other (more or less Foucaultian) words, that our histories of late antiquity emerge precisely as genealogies of the present, even when we have (more or less) left theology behind. This is an intuition shared not only by some "theorists" but also by some historians—including (I confess) myself, with particular reference to late ancient and poststructuralist constructions and deconstructions of gender and eroticism. Similarly, the work of both Derek Krueger and Mark Vessey illumines the formation of late ancient cultures of writing and authorship that continue to shape literary practice and theory up to our own "postmodern" moment. Patricia Cox Miller demonstrates the deep resonances of poststructuralist literary theory with the texts of Valentinus and Origen, among others, and Clark herself in a prior book invokes contemporary literary theory to uncover the complexity of ancient Christian exegetical practices. (These few examples could, of course, easily be multiplied.) I wonder finally if we have yet thought hard enough about the ways that the practice of "church history" (as well as of other kinds of history-writing) continues to be shaped by its Eusebian genesis as a late ancient genre, complicated by the co-emergence of martyrology, hagiography, and other forms of prose narrative that confound (for both better and worse) the distinctions between fact and fiction, truth and testimony.

By this point, however, I am reading rather strongly into a gap in Clark's own text. It is a gap that I think she does not quite want to close, and perhaps for good reason. Resisting the (nonetheless inevitable?) collapse of the context of reading into the text being read may be a necessary discipline, if one is to sustain the kind of ideology critique that has arguably been among Clark's own greatest contributions, and which furthermore stands in greatest continuity with the social scientific approaches she discusses and has practiced (indeed continues to practice) as well. Clark's "theoretically oriented intellectual history" finally maintains a certain stern distance in relation to the texts it interprets. We can all find reason to be grateful—especially, perhaps, those of us who have deliberately let the distance collapse and may, thus,

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sometimes need a helping hand to haul us back to safety. Thankfully, there are many (intersecting) ways to connect history—theory—text.

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Reimagining Patristics: Theory's Vital Role in the Study of Premodern Texts

The study of premodern texts—in particular, the writings of the church fathers—stands poised to benefit from and contribute to a theoretically informed intellectual history. This claim lies at the center of Elizabeth Clark's important *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn,* which traces nineteenth- and twentieth-century developments in historiography and critical theory with special attention to poststructuralist thought. As she has demonstrated so clearly in all of her writings, Clark once again illustrates the vital role that theory must play in historical work. But if Clark's ostensible aim here is to call scholars of patristics towards theory, on another level her work here is part of a larger "crisis" in historiography more generally.

For anyone—like myself—who is already committed to the theoretical problems posed by postmodernism (and, more specifically, poststructuralism) to the work of historiography, Clark's book fits well with a range of current reflections on postmodernism and the humanities. Even in my rather haphazard summer reading, I found it telling that Clark's concerns were echoed elsewhere: perhaps not surprising, Dominick LaCapra attends to the theory-history debates in his most recent *History in Transit* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2004), wherein he suggests that psychoanalytic theory can be used profitably by historians. In a nonhistorical context (and his title notwithstanding), Terry Eagleton's *After Theory* (New York: Basic Books, 2003) in no way seeks to work against theory, but rather to reinvigorate it. His focus is less the literary and historical and more the ethical and political. A recent lecture given by Joan Wallach Scott at Cornell University, entitled "Against Eclecticism," approached the history-theory debate by similarly calling for renewed attention to theory; in particular, she argues for understanding deconstruction as one of the most helpful modes of critical thinking. This "syllabus" of reading (and hearing) helped to illuminate clearly for me the trajectories traced by Clark, the problems she poses of both critical theory and the project of history, and—even more strikingly—how the path through the either-or choice of deconstruction or historical positivism is not direct but full of possibility.

A full seven of the eight chapters in *History, Theory, Text* are devoted to tracing the developments in historiography since the nineteenth century. By beginning with the Rankean notion of "objectivity," Clark sets up the core problems for professional historians today: put simply, is "objectivity" possible in history writing? To what extent are the location, experience, and bias of the historian implicated in any project of history writing? Clark continues to work towards these central questions by turning to the role of philosophy (chapter 2) and then theory more broadly in historiography. By chapter 3, the theoretical development whose legacy will occupy the remainder of the book is that of structuralism and, in particular, the structural linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure's theory of the sign has had far-reaching implications in nearly every field of the humanities; here, what Clark high-

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