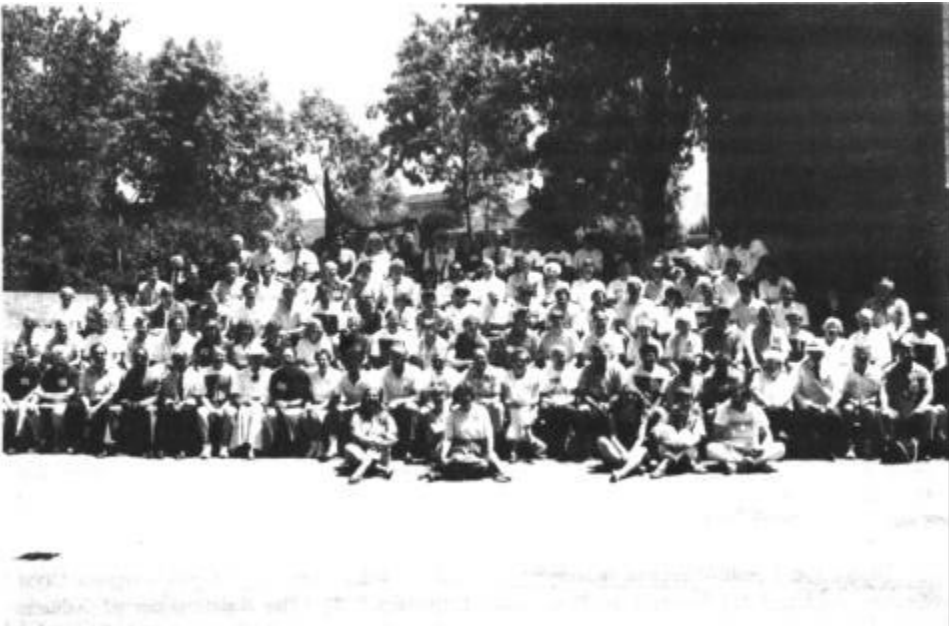


# History and Literature: The Historical View

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Despite their obvious similarities, history and literature have for centuries courted contentious, sometimes exclusive audiences. Those who have taken up an argument for one or the other have often done so in terms of one or the other's ability to present a superior picture of reality and truth. They have, however, missed an essential point: that reality and truth do not necessarily translate to meaningful observations on the human condition. History and literature are equally tissues of lies.



**All of Us?**

Further, history's unavoidable ties to past events does not separate the two. Human existence dictates that all observations of the human condition, both in literary and historical terms, depend upon the past. For as Bergson asked in *Laughter*, "...how many of our present pleasures, were we to examine them closely, would shrink into nothing more than memories of past ones! What would there be left of many of our emotions, were we to reduce them to the exact quantum of pure feeling they contain by subtracting them from all that is merely reminiscence?" Fiction and history both take the dead past and convert it into something else. Still, it is the past and the built-in defense it provides to the insistence of historians for distance that differentiates history from literature. History is distance; literature is intimacy.

If life boils down to existential issues - death, isolation, and meaninglessness, and how we manage to pass our days, indeed sometimes celebrate our days, with knowledge of them - then history is by and large a ruse to help disguise this. And therein is history's greatest strength. Distance offers the illusion of control, the belief that we can impose meaning on existence. History places distance between ourselves and chaos. This is no minor comfort.

Literature, on the other hand, despite its illusion of escapism, buries us in introspection. It does not provide escape from reality, but it does free us from the scrutiny of others, the demand for meaning, the lessons of history. This, too, is no small comfort.

The question, then, becomes this: does one tissue of lies - history or literature - serve us better? The answer, of course, is that both are necessities. Laughter, exhilaration, and sensual engagement - the measures by which some gauge a life well lived - most often arise spontaneously; they can't be willfully pursued. History deals stiffly with all of them, particularly exhilaration which requires an uncertainty that a certain past can't supply. Order, meaning, chronology - the measures by which we gauge our connection to something greater than ourselves - require a faith that demands to be grounded in something more tangible than fiction. History is experience you can touch. Only together do literature and history offer a reasonably full vision of human existence.