

CHAPTER 6

Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics
and Politics of Culture

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In this key essay of the "New Historicism," published in 1989, Louis Montrose outlines some of the important assumptions of this body of work. He emphasizes the role of Post-Structuralism, especially deconstruction, in influencing the New Historicist concern with what Montrose calls the "textuality of history."

There has recently emerged within Renaissance studies, as in Anglo-American literary studies generally, a renewed concern with the historical, social, and political conditions and consequences of literary production and reproduction: The writing and reading of texts, as well as the processes by which they are circulated and categorized, analyzed and taught, are being reconstrued as historically determined and determining modes of cultural work; apparently autonomous aesthetic and academic issues are being reunderstood as inextricably though complexly linked to other discourses and practices – such linkages constituting the social networks within which individual subjectivities and collective structures are mutually and continuously shaped. This general reorientation is the unhappy subject of J. Hillis Miller's 1986 Presidential Address to the Modern Language Association. In that address, Miller noted with some dismay – and with some hyperbole – that "literary study in the past few years has undergone a sudden, almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such and has made a corresponding turn toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, the material base."¹ By such a formulation, Miller polarizes the linguistic and the social. However, the prevailing tendency across cultural studies is to emphasize their reciprocity and mutual constitution: On the one hand, the social is understood to be discursively constructed; and on the other, language-use is understood to be always and necessarily dialogical, to be socially and materially determined and constrained.

Miller's categorical opposition of "reading" to cultural critique, of "theory" to the discourses of "history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender" seems to me not only to oversimplify both sets of terms but also to suppress their points of contact and compatibility. The propositions and operations of deconstructive reading may be employed as powerful tools of ideological analysis. Derrida himself has recently suggested that, at least in his own work and in the context of European cultural politics, they have always been so: He writes that "deconstructive readings and writings are concerned not only with . . . discourses, with conceptual and seman-

tic contents. . . . Deconstructive practices are also and first of all political and institutional practices."² The notorious Derridean aphorism, "*il n'y a pas de hors-texte*," ["there is no outside of textuality"] may be invoked to abet an escape from the determinate necessities of history, a self-abandonment to the indeterminate pleasures of the text; however, it may also be construed as an insistence upon the ideological force of discourse in general and of those discourses in particular which reduce the work of discourse to the mere reflection of an ontologically prior, essential or empirical reality.

The multiplicity of unstable, variously conjoined and conflicting discourses that may be said to inhabit the field of post-structuralist theory have in common the problematization of those processes by which meaning is produced and grounded, and a heightened (though, of course, necessarily limited) reflexivity concerning their own assumptions and constraints, their methods and their motives. Miller wholly identifies "theory" with domesticated, politically eviscerated varieties of Deconstruction, which he privileges ethically and epistemologically in relation to what he scorns as "ideology" – that impassioned and delusional condition which "the critics and antagonists of deconstruction on the so-called left and so-called right" (p. 289) are said to share. Although his polemic indiscriminately though not unintentionally lumps them with the academy's intellectually and politically reactionary forces, the various modes of sociopolitical and historical criticism have not only been challenged and influenced by the theoretical developments of the past two decades but have also been vitally engaged in their definition and direction. And one such direction is the understanding that "theory" does not reside serenely above "ideology" but rather is mired within it. Representations of the world in written discourse are engaged in constructing the world, in shaping the modalities of social reality, and in accommodating their writers, performers, readers, and audiences to multiple and shifting subject positions within the world they both constitute and inhabit. Traditionally, "ideology" has referred to the system of ideas, values, and beliefs common to any social group; in recent years, this vexed but indispensable term has in its most general sense come to be associated with the processes by which social subjects are formed, re-formed and enabled to perform as conscious agents in an apparently meaningful world.³ In such terms, our professional practice, like our subject matter, is a production of ideology: By this I mean not merely that it bears the traces of the professor's values, beliefs, and experiences – his or her socially constructed subjectivity – but also that it actively instantiates those values, beliefs, and experiences. From this perspective, any claim for what Miller calls an "orientation to language as such" is itself – always already – an orientation to language that is being produced from a position within "history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions."

As if to reinforce Miller's sense of a general crisis in literary studies with the arraignment of an egregious example, the issue of PMLA which opens with his Presidential Address immediately continues with an article on the "politicizing" of Renaissance Drama. The latter begins with the ominous warning that "A specter is haunting criticism – the specter of a new historicism."⁴ Edward Pechter's parody of *The Communist Manifesto* points toward his claim that, although the label "New Historicism" embraces a variety of critical practices, at its core this project is "a kind of 'Marxist criticism'" – the latter, larger project being characterized in all its forms and variants as a view of "history and contemporary political life as determined, wholly or in essence, by struggle, contestation, power relations, *libido dominandi*"

(p. 292). It seems to me that, on this essentialist definition, such a project might be better labeled as Machiavellian or Hobbesian than as Marxist. In any event, Pechter's specter is indeed spectral, in the sense that it is largely the (mis)construction of the critic who is engaged in attacking it, and thus also in the sense that it has become an object of fascination and dread.

A couple of years ago, I attempted briefly to articulate and scrutinize some of the theoretical, methodological, and political assumptions and implications of the kind of work produced since the late 1970s by those (including myself) who were then coming to be labeled as "New Historicists."⁵ The focus of such work has been upon a refiguring of the socio-cultural field within which canonical Renaissance literary and dramatic works were originally produced; upon resituating them not only in relationship to other genres and modes of discourse but also in relationship to contemporaneous social institutions and non-discursive practices. Stephen Greenblatt, who is most closely identified with the label "New Historicism" in Renaissance literary studies, has himself now abandoned it in favor of "Cultural Poetics," a term he had used earlier and one which perhaps more accurately represents the critical project I have described.⁶ In effect, this project reorients the axis of inter-textuality, substituting for the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history the synchronic text of a cultural system. As the conjunction of terms in its title suggests, the interests and analytical techniques of "Cultural Poetics" are at once historicist and formalist; implicit in its project, though perhaps not yet adequately articulated or theorized, is a conviction that formal and historical concerns are not opposed but rather are inseparable.

Until very recently – and perhaps even now – the dominant mode of interpretation in English Renaissance literary studies has been to combine formalist techniques of close rhetorical analysis with the elaboration of relatively self-contained histories of "ideas," or of literary genres and topoi – histories that have been abstracted from their social matrices. In addition to such literary we may note two other traditional practices of "history" in Renaissance literary studies: one comprises those commentaries on political commonplaces in which the dominant ideology of Tudor–Stuart society – the unreliable machinery of socio-political legitimation – is misrecognized as a stable, coherent, and collective Elizabethan world picture, a picture discovered to be lucidly reproduced in the canonical literary works of the age; and the other, the erudite but sometimes eccentric scholarly detective work which, by treating texts as elaborate ciphers, seeks to fix the meaning of fictional characters and actions in their reference to specific historical persons and events. Though sometimes reproducing the methodological shortcomings of such older idealist and empiricist modes of historical criticism, but also often appropriating their prodigious scholarly labors to good effect, the newer historical criticism is new in its refusal of unproblematic distinctions between "literature" and "history," between "text" and "context," new in resisting a prevalent tendency to posit and privilege a unified and autonomous individual – whether an Author or a Work – to be set against a social or literary background.

In the essay of mine to which I have already referred, I wrote merely of a new historical orientation in Renaissance literary studies, because it seemed to me that those identified with it by themselves or by others were actually quite heterogeneous in their critical practices and, for the most part, reluctant to theorize those practices. The very lack of such explicit articulations was itself symptomatic of certain eclectic and empiricist tendencies that threatened to undermine any attempt to distinguish a new historicism from an old one. It may well be that these very ambiguities rendered

New Historicism less a critique of dominant critical ideology than a subject for ideological appropriation, thus contributing to its almost sudden installation as the newest academic orthodoxy, to its rapid assimilation by the "interpretive community" of Renaissance literary studies. Certainly, some who have been identified as exemplary New Historicists now enjoy the material and symbolic tokens of academic success; and any number of New Historicist dissertations, conferences, and publications testify to a significant degree of disciplinary influence and prestige. However, it remains unclear whether or not this latest "ism," with its appeal to our commodifying cult of the "new," will have been more than another passing intellectual fancy in what Fredric Jameson would call the academic marketplace under late capitalism. "The New Historicism" has not yet begun to fade from the academic scene, not is it quietly taking its place in the assortment of critical approaches on the interpreters' shelf. But neither has it become any clearer that "the New Historicism" designates any agreed-upon intellectual and institutional program. There has been no coalescence of the various identifiably New Historicist practices into a systematic and authoritative paradigm for the interpretation of Renaissance texts; nor does the emergence of such a paradigm seem either likely or desirable. What we are currently witnessing is the convergence of a variety of special interests upon "New Historicism," now constituted as a terminological site of intense debate and critique, of multiple appropriations and contestations within the ideological field of Renaissance studies itself, and to some extent in other areas of the discipline.

If Edward Pechter dubiously assimilates New Historicism to Marxism on the grounds that it insists upon the omnipresence of struggle as the motor of history, some self-identified Marxist critics are actively indicting New Historicism for its evasion of both political commitment and diachronic analysis – in effect, for its failure to be genuinely historical; while some female and male Renaissance scholars are fruitfully combining New Historicist and Feminist concerns, others are representing these projects (and/or their practitioners) as deeply antagonistic in gender-specific terms; while some see New Historicism as one of several modes of socio-criticism engaged in constructing a theoretically informed, post-structuralist problematic of historical study, others see it as aligned with a neo-pragmatist reaction against all forms of High Theory; if some see New Historicist preoccupations with ideology and social context as threatening to traditional critical concerns and literary values, others see a New Historicist delight in anecdote, narrative and what Clifford Geertz calls "thick description" as a will to construe all of culture as the domain of literary criticism – a text to be perpetually interpreted, an inexhaustible collection of stories from which curiosities may be culled and cleverly retold.⁷

Inhabiting the discursive spaces traversed by the term "New Historicism" are some of the most complex, persistent, and unsealing of the problems that professors of literature attempt variously to confront or to evade: Among them, the essential or historical bases upon which "literature" is to be distinguished from other discourses; the possible configurations of relationship between cultural practices and social, political, and economic processes; the consequences of post-structuralist theories of textuality for the practice of an historical or materialist criticism; the means by which subjectivity is socially constituted and constrained; the processes by which ideologies are produced and sustained, and by which they may be contested; the patterns of consonance and contradiction among the values and interests of a given individual, as these are actualized in the shifting conjunctures of various subject positions – as, for

example, intellectual worker, academic professional, and gendered domestic, social, political and economic agent. My point is not that "the New Historicism" as a definable project, or the work of specific individuals identified by themselves or by others as New Historicists, can necessarily provide even provisional answers to such questions, but rather that the term "New Historicism" is currently being invoked in order to bring such issues into play and to stake out – or to hunt down – specific positions within the discursive spaces mapped by these issues.

The post-structuralist orientation to history now emerging in literary studies may be characterized chiastically, as a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history. By the historicity of texts, I mean to suggest the cultural specificity, the social embedment, of all modes of writing – not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them. By the textuality of history, I mean to suggest, firstly, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement; and secondly, that those textual traces are themselves subject to subsequent textual mediations when they are construed as the "documents" upon which historians ground their own texts, called "histories." As Hayden White has forcefully reminded us, such textual histories necessarily but always incompletely constitute in their narrative and rhetorical forms the "History" to which they offer access.⁸ . . .

"The Historicity of Texts and the Textuality of History": If such chiastic formulations are in fashion now, when the concept of referentiality has become so vexed, it may be because they figure forth from within discourse itself the model of a dynamic, unstable, and reciprocal relationship between the discursive and material domains.⁹ This refiguring of the relationship between the verbal and the social, between the text and the world, involves a re-problematization or wholesale rejection of some prevalent alternative conceptions of literature: As an autonomous aesthetic order that transcends the shifting pressure and particularity of material needs and interests; as a collection of inert discursive records of "real events"; as a superstructural reflexion of an economic base. Current practices emphasize both the relative autonomy of specific discourses and their capacity to impact upon the social formation, to make things happen by shaping the subjectivities of social beings. Thus, to speak of the social production of "literature" or of any particular text is to signify not only that it is socially produced but also that it is socially productive – that it is the product of work and that it performs work in the process of being written, enacted, or read. Recent theories of textuality have argued persuasively that the referent of a linguistic sign cannot be fixed; that the meaning of a text cannot be stabilized. At the same time, writing and reading are always historically and socially determinate events, performed in the world and upon the world by gendered individual and collective human agents. We may simultaneously acknowledge the theoretical indeterminacy of the signifying process and the historical specificity of discursive practices – acts of speaking, writing, and interpreting. The project of a new socio-historical criticism is, then, to analyze the interplay of culture-specific discursive practices – mindful that it, too, is such a practice and so participates in the interplay it seeks to analyze. By such means, versions of the Real, of History, are instantiated, deployed, reproduced; and by such means, they may also be appropriated, contested, transformed.

Notes

- 1 J. Hillis Miller, "Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base," *PMLA* 102 (1987), pp. 281–91; p. 283.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, "But, beyond . . . (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon)," trans. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry* 13 (1986), pp. 155–70; p. 168.
- 3 For a concise history of the term "ideology," see Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 55–71. Of central importance for the sense of "ideology" I am using here is the essay on "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 127–86. According to Althusser's well-known formulation, "Ideology is a 'Representation' of the Imaginary Relationship of Individuals to their Real Conditions of Existence," which "Interpellates Individuals as Subjects" (pp. 162, 170). Althusser's theories of Ideology and the Subject have provoked considerable commentary and criticism, notably for appearing to disallow human agency in the making of history. On this debate, with special reference to the anti-Althusserian polemic of E. P. Thompson, see Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London: Verso, 1980), pp. 15–58.
A concise clarification of relevant terms is provided in Paul Smith, *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988) – which was published too late for me to have made more use of it here:
"The individual" will be understood here as simply the illusion of whole and coherent personal organization, or as the misleading description of the imaginary ground on which different subject-positions are colligated.
And thence the commonly used term "subject" will be broken down and will be understood as the term inaccurately used to describe what is actually the series of the conglomeration of positions, subject-positions, provisional and not necessarily indefeasible, into which a person is called momentarily by the discourses and the world that he/she inhabits.
The term "agent," by contrast, will be used to mark the idea of a form of subjectivity where, by virtue of the contradictions and disturbances in and among subject-positions, the possibility (indeed, the actuality) of resistance to ideological pressure is allowed for (even though that resistance too must be produced in an ideological context). (p. xxxv)
- 4 Edward Pechter, "The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama," *PMLA* 102 (1987), pp. 292–303; p. 292.
- 5 Louis Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986), pp. 5–12. Much of that essay is subsumed and reworked in the present one. My thanks to Arthur Kinney, Editor of *ELR*, for permission to reprint previously published material; and to Roxanne Klein for her continuing encouragement and advice.
- 6 The term "New Historicism" seems to have been introduced into Renaissance studies (with reference to cultural semiotics) in Michael McCanles, "The Authentic Discourse of the Renaissance," *Diacritics* 10: 1 (Spring 1980), 77–87. However, it seems to have gained currency from its use by Stephen Greenblatt in his brief, programmatic introduction to "The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance," a special issue of *Genre* (15, 1–2 [1982], pp. 1–4). Earlier, in the Introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), Greenblatt had called his project a "cultural poetics." He has returned to this term in the introductory chapter of his recent book, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1988). Here he defines the enterprise of cultural poetics as the "study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices"; the relevant concerns are "how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption [and] how the boundaries were marked between cultural practices understood to be art forms and

other, contiguous, forms of expression" (p. 5). I discuss the relevance of anthropological theory and ethnographic practice – specifically, the work of Clifford Geertz – to the study of early modern English culture in my review essay on *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: "A Poetics of Renaissance Culture,"* *Criticism* 23 (1981), pp. 349–59.

- 7 Two influential and generally sympathetic early surveys/critiques of New Historicist work are: Jonathan Goldberg, "The Politics of Renaissance Literature: A Review Essay," *ELH* 49 (1982), pp. 514–42; and Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies," *English Literary Renaissance* 16 (1986), pp. 13–43. A number of critiques of New Historicism from various ideological positions have subsequently been published, and more are on the way. In addition to Pechter's hostile neo-conservative essay, within English Renaissance studies these critiques include the following: from a generally neo-Marxist perspective, Walter Cohen, "Political Criticism of Shakespeare," in Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor, eds, *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), pp. 18–46, and Don E. Wayne, "Power, Politics, and the Shakespearean Text: Recent Criticism in England and the United States," in Howard and O'Connor, eds, *Shakespeare Reproduced*, pp. 47–67; from a liberal American feminist perspective, Peter Erickson, "Rewriting the Renaissance, Rewriting Ourselves," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 38 (1987), pp. 327–37, Lynda E. Boose, "The Family in Shakespeare Studies; or – Studies in the Family of Shakespeareans; or – The Politics of Politics," *Renaissance Quarterly* 40 (1987), pp. 707–42, and Carol Thomas Neely, "Constructing the Subject: Feminist Practice and New Renaissance Discourses," *English Literary Renaissance* 18 (1988), pp. 5–18; from a deconstructionist perspective, A. Leigh DeNeef, "Of Dialogues and Historicisms," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 86 (1987), pp. 497–517. I want to record here my thanks to Alan Liu and Carolyn Porter for sharing with me their as yet unpublished studies of Renaissance New Historicism from the perspectives of English Romanticism and American studies, respectively.

In a recent essay, "Towards a Poetics of Culture," *Southern Review* (Australia) 20 (1987), pp. 3–15, Stephen Greenblatt remarks that "one of the peculiar characteristics of the 'new historicism' in literary studies is precisely how unresolved and in some ways disingenuous it has been – I have been – about the relation to literary theory." Accordingly, the essay does not set out an explicit theoretical position but rather a demonstration of his resistance to theory: "I want to speculate on why this should be so by trying to situate myself in relation to Marxism on the one hand, and poststructuralism on the other" (p. 3). Greenblatt goes on to situate himself as a neo-pragmatist in relation to two totalizing discourses in each of which, "history functions . . . as a convenient anecdotal ornament upon a theoretical structure." What he seems to offer in opposition to such theoretical discourses, which collapse "the contradictions of history into a moral imperative" (p. 7), is essentially an empirical historical analysis that has not been fettered by ideology. By means of a striking personal anecdote, Greenblatt suggests that the practice of cultural poetics involves a repudiation of cultural politics. My own conviction is that their separation is no more desirable than it is possible.

- 8 On the constitutive discourse of the historian and the genres of history writing, see Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978).
- 9 Comparing Fredric Jameson's counter-Deconstructionist formulation of this relationship in terms of Marxism that is itself necessarily post-structuralist:

The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuring of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that "subtext" is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. . . . The whole paradox of what we have here called the subtext may be summed up in this, that the literary work or cultural object, as though for the first time, brings into being that very situation of which it is also, at one and the same time, a reaction. . . . History is inaccessible to us except in textual form. . . . It can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization. . . . To overemphasize the active way in which the text reorganizes its subtext (in order, presumably, to reach the triumphant conclusion that the "referent" does not exist); or

on the other hand to stress the imaginary status of the symbolic act so completely as to reify its social ground, now no longer understood as a subtext but merely as some inert given that the text passively or fantasmatically "reflects" – to overstress either of these functions of the symbolic act at the expense of the other is surely to produce sheer ideology, whether it be, as in the first alternative, the ideology of structuralism, or, in the second, that of vulgar materialism. (*The Political Unconscious*, pp. 80–1)

For another Marxist consideration of and response to recent theoretical challenges to historical criticism, see "Text and History: Epilogue 1984" in Robert Weimann, *Structure and Society in Literary History*, expanded edn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), pp. 267–323.

Introductions to materialist cultural theory include Raymond Williams's *Marxism and Literature*; Raymond Williams, *Culture* (London: Fontana, 1981); Janet Wolff, *The Social Production of Art* (London: Macmillan, 1981).