

# *The New Historicism*

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## Introduction

H. Aram Veesper

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"I began with the desire to speak with the dead."<sup>1</sup>

Thus begins a book recently published by the first scholar to name as "a new historicism" the emerging emphasis in literary and American cultural studies. Although he now prefers the phrase "poetics of culture," for reasons explained in his essay in this volume, this sentence manages—brief as it is—to capture a good part of the New Historicism's appeal. Personal, even autobiographical, the sentence challenges the norm of disembodied objectivity to which humanists have increasingly aspired. Far from invisible, this writer's desires and interests openly preside: the investigative project proceeds from an unabashed passion. Nor is that passion bland or banal.

Conventional scholars—entrenched, self-absorbed, protective of guild loyalties and turf, specialized in the worst senses—have repaired to their disciplinary enclaves and committed a classic *trahison des clercs*. As the first successful counterattack in decades against this profoundly anti-intellectual ethos, the New Historicism has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people's practical lives—matters best left, prevailing wisdom went, to experts who could be trusted to preserve order and stability in "our" global and intellectual domains.

New Historicism threatens this quasi-monastic order. In response, the platoons of traditionalists have predictably rushed to their guns. Announcing a state of emergency, institutional guardians over literature and the humanities have denounced the "new historicism" they consider hostile to Great Books and American values. Former Secretary of Education William Bennett struck first with his landmark address, "To Reclaim a Legacy" (*American Educator* 21 [1985]), and new traditionalists—including Allan Bloom, Gertrude Himmelfarb, E. D. Hirsch and others—lent covering fire. When women, ethnic minorities, and radicals at Stanford claimed their part of the cultural inheritance, Bennett carried the attack to Palo Alto. Meanwhile, however,

from the opposite side of the academic-ideological divide, J. Hillis Miller, then-president of the largest professional organization of English professors, decried the "turn away from theory toward history," and the journal *PMLA* published Edward Pechter's charge that "the specter of a new historicism—a kind of 'Marxist criticism' " is haunting the humanistic disciplines: the New Historicism put even liberals on red alert.

Accusations of canon-bashing and "the lunge toward barbarism," reiterated in *The Wall Street Journal*, *NYRB*, the *New York Times*, *Newsweek*, and *Harper's*, have projected a New Historicism unambiguously Left in its goals, subversive in its critique, and destructive in its impact. Big-ticket defense systems make costly mistakes, however. Contrary to middlebrow conservatives, some contributors to this volume contend that New Historicism is itself a conservative trend. Leftists are alarmed, for example, at the New Historicists' reluctance to speak of facts. Progressives can accept, for example, one New Historicist's fabrication of a fictitious Oxbridge graduate's British Honduras diary as an illuminating way to open his study of Colonial encounters in *The Tempest* (Malcolm Evans, *Signifying Nothing* [Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1986]). But cannot such methods, they ask, at the same time justify specious propaganda masquerading as scholarship, such as Joan Peters' *From Time Immemorial*, where fabricated data "proves" that Palestinians are a "fairy tale"? Or Clifford Irving's biography of Howard Hughes? Or French neofascist tomes revealing that the Jewish Holocaust never occurred? Contributor Hayden White concedes that the New Historicism leaves intact no theoretical basis on which to call to account even the most spurious historical revisions.

Whereas these critics worry that New Historicism may incapacitate the scholarly armature of proof and evidence, others on the left distrust the culturalism and textualism that New Historicism seems to nourish. "Right New Historicists," in Gerald Graff's phrase, unwittingly join Bennett in idolizing community norms. Even oppositional New Historicists use the critical methods they question and so, Terdiman, Spivak, and Pecora suggest, replicate the authority they suspect. Contributor Frank Lentricchia avers that they revive liberalism and the postromantic sentimentalization of the arts. These conflicting readings prove if nothing else that far from a hostile united front or a single politics, "the New Historicism" remains a phrase without an adequate referent. Like other such phrases—from Action Painting to New Model Army—the rubric offers a site that many parties contend to appropriate.

This collection reflects that heterogeneity and contention. Although Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Catherine Gallagher are recognized practitioners of New Historicism, others in the book would locate themselves outside the group. The volume was not designed as a formal debate, but frequent encounters allowed many contributors to respond to each other's

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work, lending unusual coherence to the collection as a whole. The contributors traverse the spectrum of cultural critique and highlight the internal fractures that make current academic cultural criticism so intriguingly various. Contrary to the Bennett-Pechter Red scare, New Historicism is as much a reaction against Marxism as a continuation of it. Avowed New Historicist Gallagher ruffles graying New Leftists by arguing that good criticism embodies no necessary politics, but is constitutively driven by fierce debate and contest. Far from a single projectile hurled against Western civilization, New Historicism has a portmanteau quality. It brackets together literature, ethnography, anthropology, art history, and other disciplines and sciences, hard and soft. It scrutinizes the barbaric acts that sometimes underwrite high cultural purposes and asks that we not blink away our complicity. At the same time, it encourages us to admire the sheer intricacy and unavoidability of exchanges between culture and power. Its politics, its novelty, its historicity, its relationship to other prevailing ideologies all remain open questions. The present volume offers no definitive answers to these questions, but rather establishes the range and urgency of New Historicist inquiry.

A newcomer to New Historicism might feel reassured that, for all its heterogeneity, key assumptions continually reappear and bind together the avowed practitioners and even some of their critics: these assumptions are as follows:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. finally, as emerges powerfully in this volume, that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe.

The New Historicists combat empty formalism by pulling historical considerations to the center stage of literary analysis. Following Clifford Geertz, Victor Turner, and other cultural anthropologists, New Historicists have evolved a method of describing culture in action. Taking their cue from Geertz's method of "thick description" they seize upon an event or anecdote—colonist John Rolfe's conversation with Pocahontas' father, a note found among Nietzsche's papers to the effect that "I have lost my umbrella"—and re-read it in such a way as to reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the behavioral codes, logics, and motive forces controlling a whole society.

Suspicious of any criticism predetermined by a Marxist or liberal grid,

New Historicists eschew overarching hypothetical constructs in favor of surprising coincidences. The essays in this book are less concerned to project long-range trajectories than to note bizarre overlappings: of window-smashing Suffragette street actions and the "hobble skirt" presented by the Parisian fashions house of Worth (Jane Marcus); of Arthur Schlesinger's expansive New Frontier rhetoric and explosive anti-war and inner-city riots (Jon Klancher); of the end of an asphalt road and the beginning of Yosemite's regulated, policed terrain, its "wilderness" (Greenblatt); of a seventeenth-century hermaphrodite's criminal trial, Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, and leather and rubber gloves (Joel Fineman); of an ancient Roman tax bracket and the track-system in modern high schools (Richard Terdiman); of Charles Dickens, patriarchy, and literary incest in a popular '40s novel (Jonathan Arac); of Balinese gambling customs, mass political murder, and the C.I.A. (Vince Pecora); of Zuni tribesman eating offal and scatology in writings by Sir Thomas More and Luther; of Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* and a stabbing death in New Orleans; of anodized aluminum plaques depicting waterfalls posted beside a primordial "unspoiled" cascade. Such examples support one contributor's charge that New Historicists perform amazing contortions in order to avoid causal, deterministic equations.

The motives are clear. By forsaking what it sees as an outmoded vocabulary of allusion, symbolization, allegory, and mimesis, New Historicism seeks less limiting means to expose the manifold ways culture and society affect each other. The central difficulty with these terms lies in the way they distinguish literary text and history as foreground and background: criticism bound to such metaphors narrows its concern to the devices by means of which literature reflects or refracts its contexts. New Historicism renegotiates these relationships between texts and other signifying practices, going so far (Terence Hawkes has observed) as to dissolve "literature" back into the historical complex that academic criticism has traditionally held at arm's length.<sup>2</sup> It retains at the same time, those methods and materials that gave old fashioned literary study its immense interpretive authority.

Is any of this really new? New Historicists have conducted truly novel parlays with the past. Their efforts evoke unsuspected borrowings and lendings among activities, institutions, and archives—metaphors, ceremonies, dances, emblems, items of clothing, popular stories—previously held to be independent and unrelated. As Brook Thomas's contribution reminds us, one can find as many sorts of "new" history as one can find historians, and an introduction is no place to summarize them all. But in the most general terms, New Historicists argue that earlier literary historiographers tended to use totalizing or atomizing methods—a Tillyard might read one Shakespearean speech as exemplifying views embraced by every Elizabethan, a Lukács might read the demise of feudalism in the death of Hamlet. Or, alternatively, a Frances Yates might minutely disclose the occult number symbolism in an



Elizabethan tournament plan, or the influence of Giordano Bruno on George Chapman. New Historicism sets aside the potted history of ideas, the Marxist *grand récit*, the theory of economic stages, the lock-picking analysis *à clef*, and the study of authorial influence. By discarding what they view as monologic and myopic historiography, by demonstrating that social and cultural events commingle messily, by rigorously exposing the innumerable trade-offs, the competing bids and exchanges of culture, New Historicists can make a valid claim to have established new ways of studying history and a new awareness of how history and culture define each other.

The arrival of a new poetics of culture was neither unscheduled nor unwelcome. Stephen Orgel, Roy Strong, and D. J. Gordon, whose studies of Renaissance texts showed connections between cultural codes and political power, were doing New Historicism before anyone thought to give it a name, and the still earlier Warburg-Courtauld Institute in England had influenced these pioneers. But the New Historicism surfaced as an identifiable tendency in academic literary and cultural criticism a scant ten years ago with Greenblatt's English Institute Essay, "Improvisation and Power," Montrose's path-breaking studies of power and Renaissance poetry, and a spate of articles and MLA sessions centering on ideology and English Renaissance texts. Greenblatt's own *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and the journal *Representations* founded by Gallagher, Walter Benn Michaels, Greenblatt, and others consolidated the New Historicism, not as a doctrine but as a set of themes, preoccupations, and attitudes. Even the rubric "New Historicism" came belatedly, coined in an aside in Greenblatt's introduction to a special issue of *Genre* in 1982.

In a decade the New Historicism has mustered able cadres across several periods and disciplines and produced a substantial body of publications but it has been Renaissance scholars who have evolved the fundamental themes and concerns. These have included the idea that autonomous self and text are mere holograms, effects that intersecting institutions produce; that selves and texts are defined by their relation to hostile others (despised and feared Indians, Jews, Blacks) and disciplinary power (the King, Religion, Masculinity); that critics hoping to unlock the worship of culture should be less concerned to construct a holistic master story of large-scale structural elements directing a whole society than to perform a differential analysis of the local conflicts engendered in individual authors and local discourses.<sup>3</sup> Subsequently New Historicism has enlarged its range beyond the Renaissance to regions as far afield as the American Renaissance, British Romanticism, Victorian Studies, and Latin American Literature, so that today no bastion of literary scholarship has managed to exclude New Historicism.

It seems a propitious time to bring forward a volume that assesses the state of the art in the New Historicism. For while New Historicists have made critical self-scrutiny their *sine qua non*, there has been no systematic

discussion of the methodology and implications of the tendency. Its sheer success has made the task difficult, since the volume and variety of the work done and the blurred boundaries of the concept makes a fully representative selection impossible. Given the purpose of this book—to define, illustrate, and raise questions about New Historicism—it seemed a sound idea to explore limits and differences.

Circulation, negotiation, exchange—these and other marketplace metaphors characterize New Historicists' working vocabulary, as if to suggest the ways capitalism envelops not just the text but also the critic. By making that entanglement their premise, Catherine Gallagher suggests that New Historicists echo the edgiest, uncomiest Marxist voices—those of Benjamin, Adorno, and others who sense the difficulty of liberating themselves, much less humankind. In Greenblatt's words, "Society's dominant currencies, money and prestige, are invariably involved." So insistently do New Historicists spotlight their own compromised motives—Montrose enacts one such exemplary confession below—that they become targets of Frank Lentricchia's charge that such *mea culpas* have become ritual gestures.

The moment of exchange fascinates the New Historicists. Circulation involves not just money and knowledge but also, for New Historicists, prestige—the "possession" of social assets as evanescent as taste in home furnishings or as enduring as masculinity. Their point is that such social advantages circulate as a form of material currency that tends to go unnoticed because it cannot be crudely translated into liquid assets. One New Historicist study of *As You Like It* shows that Rosalind profits by exchanging gender-roles. While such transactions are most visible in literature, the New Historicist point is that such exchanges happen all the time. Everyone's sexual identity, not just Rosalind's, remains in ceaseless upheaval, but our society rewards those who choose one gender or other. Symbolic capital accrues in the ruses used to enhance one's social standing in the marriage mart, or in the symbolic meal given in the mason's honor when a house is built—a bonus disguised as a gift. All such practices have cash equivalents and aim, even if unconsciously, at material advantages.

For Greenblatt the critic's role is to dismantle the dichotomy of the economic and the non-economic, to show that the most purportedly disinterested and self-sacrificing practices, including art, aim to maximize material or symbolic profit. Such a critic would not conduct symptomatic readings—so called for their focus on traces, margins, things left unsaid, and other tell-tale signs of all that a text represses. The New Historicist rarely practices criticism as a physician, as though, after the manner of Macherey, Althusser, or Eagleton, one could diagnose the absences or self-deception "in" a text. (Gayatri Spivak argues below that critics should regard texts as their accomplices, not as their patients.)

Rather the New Historicist will try to discover how the traces of social

circulation are effaced. The degree to which a text successfully erases its practical social function matches the degree to which it secures autonomy as a poetic, purely cultural, unmarketable object; on its ability to sustain this illusion depends its privileged status in a zone that supposedly supersedes market values.

By challenging this traditional aesthetic claim and showing that symbolic exchanges have cash value, New Historicists also challenge the assumptions that help to compartmentalize the disciplines. Often cited as exemplary New Historicism is Montrose's early paper, "The Place of a Brother" in *As You Like It: Social Process and Comic Form* (in *Shakespeare Quarterly* 32 [1981], 28-54). This study entails evidence taken from the literary and autobiographical subgenre of "advice to a son"; a social historian's data on the endowments, inheritances, and marriage patterns of younger brothers; the rites of pastoral sequestration and initiation performed by tribal adolescents, as reported by ethnographers and anthropologists: all these may be summoned to contextualize the Shakespearean comedy. A seemingly fixed social given like masculinity reemerges as a tenuous value that its possessors must unendingly strive to keep in place. The enduring condition of gender becomes the volatile act of gendering.

In this way, New Historicists muddy the formal walkways that criticism has up to now generally followed. They refuse to apportion the discussion of character, language, and theme to literary scholars, of primitive customs to anthropologists, of demographic patterns to social historians. By redistributing this disciplinary legacy, New Historicists threaten all defenders of linear chronology and progressive history, whether Marxists or Whig optimists. Those who would jealously enclose their private gardens against communal interference may well lock arms against a criticism that mingles disparate periods and upsets the calculus of Left and Right politics.

As the tenor of debate in this volume amply demonstrates, crisis not consensus surrounds the New Historicist project. Instead of condensing into the latest academic orthodoxy, as in 1986 Montrose feared it might, New Historicism has been kept off-balance by internal stresses, and has had to plunge ahead just to keep itself erect.<sup>4</sup> Few of the feminist, Marxist, Third World, and cultural materialist critics included here would accept, for example, the New Historicist account of the way symbolic capital circulates. From Richard Terdiman's Marxist point of view, it is important to give the concept of "circulation" a class reference: the privileged classes guard their symbolic capital as jealously as they manage their pelf. Marxist-feminist Judith Newton acidly notes that New Historicists often counterfeit earlier feminist ideas and claim them as their own. The pragmatist with a politics, Frank Lentricchia, charges that New Historicists not only fail to show how traces of social circulation are effaced by art, but also place art over against the degraded marketplace of life. For Spivak, coming from her Third World,

feminist, Marxist, and deconstructionist background, culture and criticism circulate too peaceably already; instead they should interrupt and push each other to crisis. Graff contends that Right New Historicists border on installing a new complacency, and Pecora argues that "thick description" screens off the world and halts intellectual traffic.

But the contributors can speak for themselves. Their essays cut a wide swath from thick description to severe pragmatism through far-ranging cultural critique. Readers should be pleased to find that the contributors to this book have written in accessible language, clearly summarizing the issues raised by New Historicism and explaining the debates within and around it. Though the volume leaves questions still open about the novelty of New Historicism, about its politics, influences, and relationship to competing methods and ideologies, it offers provisional and suggestive answers. At the very least, critics should now have to pause before they dismiss New Historicist inquiry as the latest lunge toward barbarism.

#### Notes

1. Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1988), 1.
2. Terence Hawkes, "Uses and Abuses of the Bard," *Times Literary Supplement* (10 April 1987), 391-93.
3. See *Shakespearean Negotiations*, "The Circulation of Social Energy," 1-20.
4. It is instructive to compare Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," (*English Literary Renaissance* 16:1 [Winter 1986], 5-12) with Montrose's essay in this volume.

## Towards a Poetics of Culture

*Stephen Greenblatt*

I feel in a somewhat false position, which is not a particularly promising way to begin, and I might as well explain why. My own work has always been done with a sense of just having to go about and do it, without establishing first exactly what my theoretical position is. A few years ago I was asked by *Genre* to edit a selection of Renaissance essays, and I said OK. I collected a bunch of essays and then, out of a kind of desperation to get the introduction done, I wrote that the essays represented something I called a "new historicism." I've never been very good at making up advertising phrases of this kind; for reasons that I would be quite interested in exploring at some point, the name struck much more than other names I'd very carefully tried to invent over the years. In fact I have heard—in the last year or so—quite a lot of talk about the "new historicism" (which for some reason in Australia is called Neohistoricism); there are articles about it, attacks on it, references to it in dissertations: the whole thing makes me quite giddy with amazement. In any case, as part of this peculiar phenomenon I have been asked to say something of a theoretical kind about the work I'm doing. So I shall try if not to define the new historicism, at least to situate it as a practice—a practice rather than a doctrine, since as far as I can tell (and I should be the one to know) it's no doctrine at all.

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. On the one hand it seems to me that an openness to the theoretical ferment of the last few years is precisely what distinguishes the new historicism from the positivist historical scholarship of the early twentieth century. Certainly, the presence of Michel Foucault on the Berkeley campus for extended visits during the last five or six years of his life, and more generally the influence in America of European (and especially French) anthropological and social theorists, has helped to shape my own literary critical practice. On the other hand the historicist critics have on the whole been unwilling to enroll themselves in one or the other of the dominant theoretical camps.

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. In the 1970s I used to teach courses with names like "Marxist Aesthetics" on the Berkeley campus. This came to an inglorious end when I was giving such a course—it must have been the mid-1970s—and I remember a student getting very angry with me. Now it's true that I tended to like those Marxist figures who were troubled in relation to Marxism—Walter Benjamin, the early rather than the later Lukács, and so forth—and I remember someone finally got up and screamed out in class "You're either a Bolshevik or a Menshevik—make up your fucking mind," and then slammed the door. It was a little unsettling, but I thought about it afterwards and realized that I wasn't sure whether I was a Menshevik, but I certainly wasn't a Bolshevik. After that I started to teach courses with names like "Cultural Poetics." It's true that I'm still more uneasy with a politics and a literary perspective that is untouched by Marxist thought, but that doesn't lead me to endorse propositions or embrace a particular philosophy, politics or rhetoric, *faute de mieux*.

Thus the crucial identifying gestures made by the most distinguished American Marxist aesthetic theorist, Fredric Jameson, seem to me highly problematic. Let us take, for example, the following eloquent passage from *The Political Unconscious*:

the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life. Such a distinction reconfirms that structural, experiential, and conceptual gap between the public and the private, between the social and the psychological, or the political and the poetic, between history or society and the "individual," which—the tendential law of social life under capitalism—maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself.<sup>2</sup>

A working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not—that is, an aesthetic domain that is in some way marked off from the discursive institutions that are operative elsewhere in a culture—becomes for Jameson a malignant symptom of "privatization." Why should the "private" immediately enter into this distinction at all? Does the term refer to private property, that is, to the ownership of the means of production and the regulation of the mode of consumption? If so, what is the historical relation between this mode of economic organization and a working distinction between the political and the poetic? It would seem that in print, let alone in the electronic media, private ownership has led not to "privatization" but to the drastic communalization of all discourse, the constitution of an ever larger mass audience, the organization of a commercial sphere unimagined and certainly unattained by the comparatively modest

attempts in pre-capitalist societies to organize public discourse. Moreover, is it not possible to have a communal sphere of art that is distinct from other communal spheres? Is this communal differentiation, sanctioned by the laws of property, not the dominant practice in capitalist society, manifestly in the film and television industries, but also, since the invention of movable type, in the production of poems and novels as well? Would we really find it less alienating to have no distinction at all between the political and the poetic—the situation, let us say, during China's Cultural Revolution? Or, for that matter, do we find it notably liberating to have our own country governed by a film actor who is either cunningly or pathologically indifferent to the traditional differentiation between fantasy and reality?

For *The Political Unconscious* any demarcation of the aesthetic must be aligned with the private which is in turn aligned with the psychological, the poetic, and the individual, as distinct from the public, the social, and the political. All of these interlocking distinctions, none of which seems to me philosophically or even historically bound up with the original "working distinction," are then laid at the door of capitalism with its power to "maim" and "paralyze" us as "individual subjects." Though we may find a differentiation between cultural discourses that are artistic and cultural discourses that are social or political well before the European seventeenth century, and in cultures that seem far removed from the capitalist mode of production, Jameson insists that somehow the perpetrator and agent of the alleged maiming is capitalism. A shadowy opposition is assumed between the "individual" (bad) and the "individual subject" (good); indeed the maiming of the latter creates the former.

The whole passage has the resonance of an allegory of the fall of man: once we were whole, agile, integrated; we were individual subjects but not individuals, we had no psychology distinct from the shared life of the society; politics and poetry were one. Then capitalism arose and shattered this luminous, benign totality. The myth echoes throughout Jameson's book, though by the close it has been eschatologically reoriented so that the totality lies not in a past revealed to have always already fallen but in the classless future. A philosophical claim then appeals to an absent empirical event. And literature is invoked at once as the dark token of fallenness and the shimmering emblem of the absent transfiguration.

But, of course, poststructuralism has raised serious questions about such a vision, challenging both its underlying oppositions and the primal organic unity that it posits as either paradisaical origin or utopian, eschatological end.<sup>3</sup> This challenge has already greatly modified, though by no means simply displaced, Marxist discourse. I could exemplify this complex interaction between Marxism and poststructuralism by discussing Jameson's own most recent work in which he finds himself, from the perspective of postmodernism, deploring the loss of those "working distinctions" that at least enabled

the left to identify its enemies and articulate a radical program.<sup>4</sup> But to avoid confusions, I want to focus instead on the work of Jean-François Lyotard. Here, as in *The Political Unconscious*, the distinction between discursive fields is once again at stake: for Lyotard the existence of proper names makes possible

the co-existence of those worlds that Kant calls fields, territories, and domains—those worlds which of course present the same object, but which also make that object the stakes of heterogenous (or incommensurable) expectations in universes of phrases, none of which can be transformed into any other.<sup>5</sup>

Lyotard's model for these differentiated discourses is the existence of proper names. But now it is the role of capitalism not to demarcate discursive domains but, quite the opposite, to make such domains untenable. "Capital is that which wants a single language and a single network, and it never stops trying to present them" (p. 55). Lyotard's principal exhibit of this attempt by capital to institute a single language—what Bakhtin would call monologism—is Faurisson's denial of the Holocaust, and behind this denial, the Nazis' attempt to obliterate the existence of millions of Jews and other undesirables, an attempt Lyotard characterizes as the will "to strike from history and from the map entire worlds of names."

The problem with this account is that the Nazis did not seem particularly interested in exterminating names along with the persons who possessed those names; on the contrary, they kept, in so far as was compatible with a campaign of mass murder, remarkably full records, and they looked forward to a time in which they could share their accomplishment with a grateful world by establishing a museum dedicated to the culture of the wretches they had destroyed. The Faurisson affair is at bottom not an epistemological dilemma, as Lyotard claims, but an attempt to wish away evidence that is both substantial and verifiable. The issue is not an Epicurean paradox—"if death is there, you are not there; if you are there, death is not there; hence it is impossible for you to prove that death is there"—but a historical problem: what is the evidence of mass murder? How reliable is this evidence? Are there convincing grounds for denying or doubting the documented events? And if there are not such grounds, how may we interpret the motives of those who seek to cast doubt upon the historical record?

There is a further problem in Lyotard's use of the Faurisson affair as an instance of capitalist hostility to names: the conflation of Fascist apologetics and capitalism would seem to be itself an instance of monologism, since it suppresses all the aspects of capitalism that are wedded to the generation and inscription of individual identities and to the demarcation of boundaries separating those identities. We may argue, of course, that the capitalist insistence upon individuality is fraudulent, but is is difficult, I think, to keep



the principle of endlessly proliferated, irreducible individuality separate from the market place version against which it is set. For it is capitalism, as Marx suggested, that mounts the West's most powerful and sustained assault upon collective, communal values and identities. And it is in the market place and in the state apparatus linked to the circulation and accumulation of capital that names themselves are forged. Proper names, as distinct from common names, seem less the victims than the products of property—they are bound up not only with the property one has in oneself, that is, with the theory of possessive individualism, but quite literally with the property one possesses, for proper names are insisted upon in the early modern period precisely in order to register them in the official documents that enable the state to calculate and tax personal property.<sup>6</sup>

The difference between Jameson's capitalism, the perpetrator of separate discursive domains, the agent of privacy, psychology, and the individual, and Lyotard's capitalism, the enemy of such domains and the destroyer of privacy, psychology, and the individual, may in part be traced to a difference between the Marxist and poststructuralist projects. Jameson, seeking to expose the fallaciousness of a separate artistic sphere and to celebrate the materialist integration of all discourses, finds capitalism at the root of the false differentiation; Lyotard, seeking to celebrate the differentiation of all discourses and to expose the fallaciousness of monological unity, finds capitalism at the root of the false integration. History functions in both cases as a convenient anecdotal ornament upon a theoretical structure, and capitalism appears not as a complex social and economic development in the West but as a malign philosophical principle.<sup>7</sup>

I propose that the general question addressed by Jameson and Lyotard—what is the historical relation between art and society or between one institutionally demarcated discursive practice and another?—does not lend itself to a single, theoretically satisfactory answer of the kind that Jameson and Lyotard are trying to provide. Or rather theoretical satisfaction here seems to depend upon a utopian vision that collapses the contradictions of history into a moral imperative. The problem is not simply the incompatibility of two theories—Marxist and poststructuralist—with one another, but the inability of either of the theories to come to terms with the apparently contradictory historical effects of capitalism. In principle, of course, both Marxism and poststructuralism seize upon contradictions: for the former they are signs of repressed class conflicts, for the latter they disclose hidden cracks in the spurious certainties of logocentrism. But in practice Jameson treats capitalism as the agent of repressive differentiation, while Lyotard treats it as the agent of monological totalization. And this effacement of contradiction is not the consequence of an accidental lapse but rather the logical outcome of theory's search for the obstacle that blocks the realization of its eschatological vision.

If capitalism is invoked not as a unitary demonic principle, but as a complex historical movement in a world without paradisaic origins or chthonic expectations, then an inquiry into the relation between art and society in capitalist cultures must address both the formation of the working distinction upon which Jameson remarks and the totalizing impulse upon which Lyotard remarks. For capitalism has characteristically generated neither regimes in which all discourses seem coordinated, nor regimes in which they seem radically isolated or discontinuous, but regimes in which the drive towards differentiation and the drive towards monological organization operate simultaneously, or at least oscillate so rapidly as to create the impression of simultaneity.

In a brilliant paper that received unusual attention, elicited a response from a White House speech-writer, and most recently generated a segment on CBS's "Sixty Minutes," the political scientist and historian Michael Rogin recently observed the number of times President Reagan has, at critical moments in his career, quoted lines from his own or other popular films. The President is a man, Rogin remarks, "whose most spontaneous moments—('Where do we find such men?' about the American D-Day dead; 'I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green,' during the 1980 New Hampshire primary debate)—are not only preserved and projected on film, but also turn out to be lines from old movies."<sup>8</sup> To a remarkable extent, Ronald Reagan, who made his final Hollywood film, *The Killers* in 1964, continues to live within the movies; he has been shaped by them, draws much of his cold war rhetoric from them, and cannot or will not distinguish between them and an external reality. Indeed his political career has depended upon an ability to project himself and his mass audience into a realm in which there is no distinction between simulation and reality.

The response from Anthony Dolan, a White House speech-writer who was asked to comment on Rogin's paper, was highly revealing. "What he's really saying," Dolan suggested, "is that all of us are deeply affected by a uniquely American art form: the movies."<sup>9</sup> Rogin had in fact argued that the presidential character "was produced from the convergence of two sets of substitutions which generated Cold War countersubversion in the 1940s and underlie its 1980s revival—the political replacement of Nazism by Communism, from which the national security state was born; and the psychological shift from an embodied self to its simulacrum on film." Both the political and the psychological substitution were intimately bound up with Ronald Reagan's career in the movies. Dolan in response rewrites Rogin's thesis into a celebration of the power of "a uniquely American art form" to shape "all of us." Movies, Dolan told the *New York Times* reporter, "heighten reality rather than lessen it."

Such a statement appears to welcome the collapse of the working distinction between the aesthetic and the real; the aesthetic is not an alternative

realm but a way of intensifying the single realm we all inhabit. But then the spokesman went on to assert that the President "usually credits the films whose lines he uses." That is, at the moment of appropriation, the President acknowledges that he is borrowing from the aesthetic and hence acknowledges the existence of a working distinction. In so doing he respects and even calls attention to the difference between his own presidential discourse and the fictions in which he himself at one time took part; they are differences upon which his own transition from actor to politician in part depends, and they are the signs of the legal and economic system that he represents. For the capitalist aesthetic demands acknowledgments—hence the various marks of property rights that are flashed on the screen or inscribed in a text—and the political arena insists that it is not a fiction. That without acknowledgment the President delivers speeches written by Anthony Dolan or others does not appear to concern anyone; this has long been the standard operating procedure of American politicians. But it would concern people if the President recited speeches that were lifted without acknowledgment from old movies. He would then seem not to know the difference between fantasy and reality. And that might be alarming.

The White House, of course, was not responding to a theoretical problem, but to the implication that somehow the President did not fully recognize that he was quoting, or alternatively that he did realize it and chose to repress the fact in order to make a more powerful impression. In one version he is a kind of sleepwalker, in the other a plagiarist. To avoid these implications the White House spokesman needed in effect to invoke a difference that he had himself a moment before undermined.

The spokesman's remarks were hasty and *ad hoc*, but it did not take reflection to reproduce the complex dialectic of differentiation and identity that those remarks articulate. That dialectic is powerful precisely because it is by now virtually thoughtless; it takes a substantial intellectual effort to *separate* the boundaries of art from the subversion of those boundaries, an effort such as that exemplified in the work of Jameson or Lyotard. But the effect of such an effort is to remove itself from the very phenomenon it had proposed to analyze, namely, the relation between art and surrounding discourses in capitalist culture. For the effortless invocation of two apparently contradictory accounts of art is characteristic of American capitalism in the late twentieth century and an outcome of long-term tendencies in the relationship of art and capital; in the same moment a working distinction between the aesthetic and the real is established and abrogated.

We could argue, following Jameson, that the establishment of the distinction is the principal effect, with a view towards alienating us from our own imaginations by isolating fantasies in a private, apolitical realm. Or we could argue, following Lyotard, that the abrogation of the distinction is the principal effect, with a view towards effacing or evading differences by

establishing a single, monolithic ideological structure. But if we are asked to choose between these alternatives, we will be drawn away from an analysis of the relation between capitalism and aesthetic production. For from the sixteenth century, when the effects for art of joint-stock company organization first began to be felt, to the present, capitalism has produced a powerful and effective oscillation between the establishment of distinct discursive domains and the collapse of those domains into one another. It is this restless oscillation rather than the securing of a particular fixed position that constitutes the distinct power of capitalism. The individual elements—a range of discontinuous discourses on the one hand, the monological unification of all discourses on the other—may be found fully articulated in other economic and social systems; only capitalism has managed to generate a dizzying, seemingly inexhaustible circulation between the two.

My use of the term *circulation* here is influenced by the work of Jacques Derrida, but sensitivity to the practical strategies of negotiation and exchange depends less upon poststructuralist theory than upon the circulatory rhythms of American politics. And the crucial point is that it is not politics alone but the whole structure of production and consumption—the systematic organization of ordinary life and consciousness—that generates the pattern of boundary making and breaking, the oscillation between demarcated objects and monological totality, that I have sketched. If we restrict our focus to the zone of political institutions, we can easily fall into the illusion that everything depends upon the unique talents—if that is the word—of Ronald Reagan, that he alone has managed to generate the enormously effective shuttling between massive, universalizing fantasies and centerlessness that characterizes his administration. This illusion leads in turn to what John Carlos Rowe has called the humanist trivialization of power, a trivialization that finds its local political expression in the belief that the fantasmatics of current American politics are the product of a single man and will pass with him. On the contrary, Ronald Reagan is manifestly the product of a larger and more durable American structure—not only a structure of power, ideological extremism and militarism, but of pleasure, recreation, and interest, a structure that shapes the spaces we construct for ourselves, the way we present “the news,” the fantasies we daily consume on television or in the movies, the entertainments that we characteristically make and take.

I am suggesting then that the oscillation between totalization and difference, uniformity and the diversity of names, unitary truth and a proliferation of distinct entities—in short between Lyotard's capitalism and Jameson's—is built into the poetics of everyday behavior in America.<sup>10</sup> Let us consider, for example, not the President's Hollywood career but a far more innocent California pastime, a trip to Yosemite National Park. One of the most popular walks at Yosemite is the Nevada Falls Trail. So popular, indeed, is this walk that the Park Service has had to pave the first miles of the trail in

order to keep them from being dug into trenches by the heavy traffic. At a certain point the asphalt stops, and you encounter a sign that tells you that you are entering the wilderness. You have passed then from the National Forests that surround the park—forests that serve principally as state-subsidized nurseries for large timber companies and hence are not visibly distinguishable from the tracts of privately owned forest with which they are contiguous—to the park itself, marked by the payment of admission to the uniformed ranger at the entrance kiosk, and finally to a third and privileged zone of publicly demarcated Nature. This zone, called the wilderness, is marked by the abrupt termination of the asphalt and by a sign that lists the rules of behavior that you must now observe: no dogs, no littering, no fires, no camping without a permit, and so forth. The wilderness then is signaled by an intensification of the rules, an intensification that serves as the condition of an escape from the asphalt.

You can continue on this trail then until you reach a steep cliff on to which the guardians of the wilderness have thoughtfully bolted a cast-iron stairway. The stairway leads to a bridge that spans a rushing torrent, and from the middle of the bridge you are rewarded with a splendid view of Nevada Falls. On the railing that keeps you from falling to your death as you enjoy your vision of the wilderness, there are signs—information about the dimensions of the falls, warnings against attempting to climb the treacherous, mist-slickened rocks, trail markers for those who wish to walk further—and an anodized aluminium plaque on which are inscribed inspirational, vaguely Wordsworthian sentiments by the California environmentalist John Muir. The passage, as best I can recall, assures you that in years to come you will treasure the image you have before you. And next to these words, also etched into the aluminium, is precisely an image: a photograph of Nevada Falls taken from the very spot on which you stand.

The pleasure of this moment—beyond the pleasure of the mountain air and the waterfall and the great boulders and the deep forest of Lodgepole and Jeffrey pine—arises from the unusually candid glimpse of the process of circulation that shapes the whole experience of the park. The wilderness is at once secured and obliterated by the official gestures that establish its boundaries; the natural is set over against the artificial through means that render such an opposition meaningless. The eye passes from the "natural" image of the waterfall to the aluminium image, as if to secure a difference (for why else bother to go to the park at all? Why not simply look at a book of pictures?), even as that difference is effaced. The effacement is by no means complete—on the contrary, parks like Yosemite are one of the ways in which the distinction between nature and artifice is constituted in our society—and yet the Park Service's plaque on the Nevada Falls bridge conveniently calls attention to the interpenetration of nature and artifice that makes the distinction possible.

What is missing from this exemplary fable of capitalist aesthetics is the question of property relations, since the National Parks exist precisely to suspend or marginalize that question through the ideology of protected public space. Everyone owns the parks. That ideology is somewhat bruised by the actual development of a park like Yosemite, with its expensive hotel, a restaurant that has a dress code, fancy gift shops and the like, but it is not entirely emptied out; even the administration of the right-wing Secretary of the Interior James Watt stopped short of permitting a private golf course to be constructed on park grounds, and there was public outrage when a television production company that had contracted to film a series in Yosemite decided to paint the rocks to make them look more realistic. What we need is an example that combines recreation or entertainment, aesthetics, the public sphere, and private property. The example most compelling to a literary critic like myself is not a political career or a national park but a novel.

In 1976, a convict named Gary Gilmore was released from a federal penitentiary and moved to Provo, Utah. Several months later, he robbed and killed two men, was arrested for the crimes, and convicted of murder. The case became famous when Gilmore demanded that he be executed—a punishment that had not been inflicted in America for some years, due to legal protections—and, over the strenuous objections of the American Civil Liberties Union and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, had his way. The legal maneuvers and the eventual firing-squad execution became national media events. Well before the denouement the proceedings had come to the attention of Norman Mailer and his publisher Warner Books which is, as it announces on its title pages, “a Warner Communications Company.” Mailer’s research assistant, Jere Herzenberg, and a hack writer and interviewer, Lawrence Schiller, conducted extensive interviews and acquired documents, records of court proceedings, and personal papers such as the intimate letters between Gilmore and his girlfriend. Some of these materials were in the public domain but many of them were not; they were purchased, and the details of the purchases themselves become part of the materials that were reworked by Mailer into *The Executioner’s Song*,<sup>11</sup> a “true life novel” as it is called, that brilliantly combines documentary realism with Mailer’s characteristic romance themes. The novel was a critical and popular success—a success signaled not only by the sheaves of admiring reviews but by the Universal Product Code printed on its paperback book cover. It was subsequently made into an NBC-TV mini-series where on successive evenings it helped to sell cars, soap powder, and deodorant.

Mailer’s book had further, and less predictable, ramifications. While he was working on *The Executioner’s Song*, there was an article on Mailer in *People* magazine. The article caught the attention of a convict named Jack H. Abbott who wrote to offer him first-hand instruction on the conditions

of prison life. An exchange of letters began, and Mailer grew increasingly impressed not only with their detailed information but with what he calls their "literary measure." The letters were cut and arranged by a Random House editor, Erroll McDonald, and appeared as a book called *In the Belly of the Beast*. This book too was widely acclaimed and contributed, with Mailer's help, to win a parole for its author.

"As I am writing these words," Mailer wrote in the Introduction to Abbott's book, "it looks like Abbott will be released on parole this summer. It is certainly the time for him to get out."<sup>12</sup> "I have never come into bodily contact with another human being in almost twenty years," wrote Abbott in his book, "except in combat; in acts of struggle, of violence" (63). Shortly after his release, Abbott, now a celebrity, approached a waiter in an all-night restaurant and asked to use the men's room. The waiter—Richard Adan, an aspiring actor and playwright—told Abbott that the restaurant had no men's room and asked him to step outside. When Adan followed him on to the sidewalk, Abbott, apparently thinking that he was being challenged, stabbed Adan in the heart with a kitchen knife. Abbott was arrested and convicted once again of murder. The events have themselves been made into a play, also called *In the Belly of the Beast*, that recently opened to very favorable reviews.

Literary criticism has a familiar set of terms for the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to which it refers: we speak of allusion, symbolization, allegorization, representation, and above all mimesis. Each of these terms has a rich history and is virtually indispensable, and yet they all seem curiously inadequate to the cultural phenomenon which Mailer's book and Abbott's and the television series and the play constitute. And their inadequacy extends to aspects not only of contemporary culture but of the culture of the past. We need to develop terms to describe the ways in which material—here official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth—is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property. It would, I think, be a mistake to regard this process as uni-directional—from social discourse to aesthetic discourse—not only because the aesthetic discourse in this case is so entirely bound up with capitalist venture but because the social discourse is already charged with aesthetic energies. Not only was Gilmore explicitly and powerfully moved by the film version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, but his entire pattern of behavior seems to have been shaped by the characteristic representations of American popular fiction, including Mailer's own.

Michael Baxandall has argued recently that "art and society are analytical concepts from two different kinds of categorization of human experience . . . unhomologous systematic constructions put upon interpenetrating subject-matters." In consequence, he suggests, any attempt to relate the two must first "modify one of the terms till it matches the other, but keeping note of

what modification has been necessary since this is a necessary part of one's information."<sup>13</sup> It is imperative that we acknowledge the modification and find a way to measure its degree, for it is only in such measurements that we can hope to chart the relationship between art and society. Such an admonition is important—methodological self-consciousness is one of the distinguishing marks of the new historicism in cultural studies as opposed to a historicism based upon faith in the transparency of signs and interpretative procedures—but it must be supplemented by an understanding that the work of art is not itself a pure flame that lies at the source of our speculations. Rather the work of art is itself the product of a set of manipulations, some of them our own (most striking in the case of works that were not originally conceived as "art" at all but rather as something else—votive objects, propaganda, prayer, and so on), many others undertaken in the construction of the original work. That is, the work of art is the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society. In order to achieve the negotiation, artists need to create a currency that is valid for a meaningful, mutually profitable exchange. It is important to emphasize that the process involves not simply appropriation but exchange, since the existence of art always implies a return, a return normally measured in pleasure and interest. I should add that the society's dominant currencies, money and prestige, are invariably involved, but I am here using the term "currency" metaphorically to designate the systematic adjustments, symbolizations and lines of credit necessary to enable an exchange to take place. The terms "currency" and "negotiation" are the signs of our manipulation and adjustment of the relative systems.

Much recent theoretical work must, I think, be understood in the context of a search for a new set of terms to understand the cultural phenomenon that I have tried to describe. Hence, for example, Wolfgang Iser writes of the creation of the aesthetic dimension through the "dynamic oscillation" between two discourses; the East German Marxist Robert Weimann argues that

the process of making certain things one's own becomes inseparable from making other things (and persons) alien, so that the act of appropriation must be seen always already to involve not only self-projection and assimilation but alienation through reification and expropriation. . . .

Anthony Giddons proposes that we substitute a concept of textual distanciation for that of the autonomy of the text, so that we can fruitfully grasp the "recursive character" of social life and of language.<sup>14</sup> Each of these formulations—and, of course, there are significant differences among them—pulls away from a stable, mimetic theory of art and attempts to construct in



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