

Introduction

This book is probably more in need of an introduction than most: two authors, two chapters on anecdotes, two on eucharistic doctrine in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and two on nineteenth-century materialism. Or, to put it somewhat differently, two chapters on anecdotes, and four on bread, potatoes, and the dead. The underlying coherence of all this may not be self-evident.

We began by wanting to explain how new historicism had changed the field of literary history. The project was, on our part, a belated act of recognition. When years ago we first noticed in the annual job listing of the Modern Language Association that an English department was advertising for a specialist in new historicism, our response was incredulity. How could something that didn't really exist, that was only a few words gesturing toward a new interpretative practice, have become a "field"? When did it happen and how could we not have noticed? If this was indeed a field, who could claim expertise in it and in what would such expertise consist? Surely, we of all people should know something of the history and the principles of new historicism, but what we knew above all was that it (or perhaps we) resisted systematization. We had never formulated a set of theoretical propositions or articulated a program; we had not drawn up for ourselves, let alone for anyone else, a sequence of questions that always needed to be posed when encountering a work of literature in order to construct a new historicist reading; we would not be able to say to someone in haughty disapproval, "You are not an authentic

new historicist." The notion of authenticity seemed and continues to seem misplaced, for new historicism is not a coherent, close-knit school in which one might be enrolled or from which one might be expelled. The term has been applied to an extraordinary assortment of critical practices, many of which bear little resemblance to our own. This book will not attempt to capture that rich variety; here we will speak only for ourselves, to whom "new historicism" at first signified an impatience with American New Criticism, an unsettling of established norms and procedures, a mingling of dissent and restless curiosity.

To be sure, we talked constantly about our methodological principles. We eagerly read works of "theory" emanating principally from Paris, Konstanz, Berlin, Frankfurt, Budapest, Tartu, and Moscow, and met regularly with a group of friends to argue about them. At this distance we remember best the heated discussions of Althusser and Lacan, but, for all of our passionate interest, terms like "Institutional State Apparatus" or the "*objet a*" have not found their way comfortably into our own teaching or writing. One of the recurrent criticisms of new historicism is that it is insufficiently theorized. The criticism is certainly just, and yet it seems curiously out of touch with the simultaneous fascination with theory and resistance to it that has shaped from the start our whole attempt to rethink the practice of literary and cultural studies. We speculated about first principles and respected the firmer theoretical commitments of other members of our discussion group, but both of us were and remain deeply skeptical of the notion that we should formulate an abstract system and then apply it to literary works. We doubt that it is possible to construct such a system independent of our own time and place and of the particular objects by which we are interested, and we doubt too that any powerful work we might do would begin with such an attempt.

The group of friends who had been meeting to discuss theory began to read each other's work, probing with genial ruthlessness the underlying assumptions of each paper we ventured to submit. It turned out to be important that the participants in these bracingly frank discussions were not only theoretically diverse but also came from a range of disciplines, since it quickly became apparent

that positions that served as stable footing in one disciplinary inquiry were shifting sands in another. There was no requirement, of course, that we all find common ground; the historical evolution of the disciplines made and continues to make such uniformity inherently unlikely. But we had to explain ourselves to colleagues who did not necessarily share our enabling assumptions and who did not feel constrained by propriety to take on faith what we could not effectively justify.

The group came to understand also that there was, in interdisciplinary studies, a tendency to invoke, in support of one's own positions, arguments from other disciplines that sophisticated thinkers in those other disciplines had in fact been calling into question. We had, as it were, been complacently dressing ourselves in each other's cast-off clothes, until, looking around the room, we erupted in laughter. The spectacle was not entirely grotesque: some of the intellectual hand-me-downs looked surprisingly good on our friends, and we experienced the odd sensation one might feel at seeing one's own discarded possessions sold at auction for a handsome profit. In a few cases, such as the formal analysis of the inner structure of literary works, we wanted to take back what we had been rather too hasty to give away. The effect on the two of us was to underscore the difficulty of constructing an overarching theory, prior to or independent of individual cases, that would integrate historical and literary interpretation, generate powerful new readings, and survive the withering critiques leveled at it from outside. We became rather good at slipping out of theoretical nooses.

After several years of regular meetings, acknowledging the transforming importance that the informal discussions had had for each of us and the vital energy that they had contributed to our work, the group began to think about ways of extending its existence, for we knew from prior experience that the charismatic moment that bound us together, though in this case unusually intense and prolonged, could not endure. We would need a structure that would provide a set of ongoing challenges and hence a *raison d'être*. We settled on the idea of a journal,¹ for we could constitute ourselves as the editorial board and hence continue as well as broaden our discussions, but we needed to come up with

an idea and a title. After considerable debate, we settled on representation as the central problem in which all of us—literary critic and art historian; historian and political scientist; Lacanian, Foucauldian, Freudian, neopragmatist; deconstructor and unreconstructed formalist—were engaged. It was tempting then to call the proposed journal “Representation,” but the uneasiness some of us felt with theoretical abstraction, our skepticism about the will to construct a unified theory, led us to adopt the plural. Whatever progress we were likely to make in grappling with the contested status of representation would occur, we were convinced, only in close, detailed engagement with a multiplicity of historically embedded cultural performances: specific instances, images, and texts that offered some resistance to interpretation.

About a year after launching *Representations*, the group decided that it would be good to have an editorial statement, as many journals do, staking out our theoretical position, but we found once again that we could not agree on a satisfactory unitary formulation. If a literary critic came up with something that sounded plausible, the historians would sharply dissent, while the historians’ terms would in turn be challenged; nor were the disagreements strictly disciplinary. There were fracture lines everywhere, and yet we were convinced that we were wrestling with a shared set of issues and that it was important to continue the inquiry; to continue the inquiry but not to conduct a system: a few of us at least were beginning to extol the methodological eclecticism of our intellectual climate as salutary in itself. Attempts to systematize deconstruction provided a cautionary example, for they seemed to us a betrayal of its Pyrrhonian energy (as if someone in the early seventeenth century had tried to rewrite Montaigne in order to make him sound like Thomas Aquinas). Each of us, it turned out, still held unshared convictions that we could not sacrifice for the sake of an editorial statement. Several of us particularly wanted to hold on to our aesthetic pleasures; our desire for critical innovation; our interest in contingency, spontaneity, improvisation; our urge to pick up a tangential fact and watch its circulation; our sense of history’s unpredictable galvanic appearances and disappearances. The editorial statement went unwritten.

The issues could all be traced in some sense back to the explo-

sive mix of nationalism, anthropology, poetry, theology, and hermeneutics that found originary expression in Giambattista Vico and was recombined by the German historicists of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Brooding on the wild variety of environments in which human societies have evolved, Johann Gottfried von Herder posits what he calls a principle of diversification that ensures the widest possible variety of adaptations to the natural world: “The practical understanding of man was intended to blossom and bear fruit in all its varieties: and hence such a diversified Earth was ordained for so diversified a species.”² The observation, at first glance modest enough, entails a radical departure from centuries of speculation about the optimal climatic conditions for the emergence of the optimal society (speculation that had a pronounced tendency to locate those conditions within a narrow compass, usually in the vicinity of the city where the writer happened to be sitting).³ It entails as well the abandonment of the project of charting the *translatio imperii*, the great westward trajectory of civilization from Athens to Rome to, say, London.

There is no longer a unitary story, a supreme model of human perfection, that can be securely located in a particular site. Any individual culture, no matter how complex and elaborate, can express and experience only a narrow range of the options available to the human species as a whole, a species that is inherently—that is, abstracted from any particular historical manifestation of its being—without qualities. “Born almost without instinct,” humans are astonishingly malleable; our identity is formed “only through lifelong training toward humanity, and this is the reason our species is both perfectible and corruptible.”⁴ Though there are instances in which particular social adaptations are dismaying, Herder eschews the Enlightenment project of finding a universal norm for the realization of human potential. To be sure, for Herder enlightenment exists, just as beauty exists—his vision is fueled by faith that history is essentially progressive and that “the increased diffusion of true knowledge among people has happily diminished their inhuman, mad destroyers”⁵—but it cannot be fixed in any single place or time: “The chain of culture and enlightenment [*Kette der Kultur und Aufklärung*] stretches to the ends of the earth.”⁶

Herder finds in the phenomenon of extreme human diversity not an incoherent Babel or the breeding ground of murderous conflict but rather a principle of hope:

Man, from his very nature, will clash but little in his pursuits with man; his dispositions, sensations, and propensities, being so infinitely diversified, and as it were individualized. What is a matter of indifference to one man, to another is an object of desire: and then each has a world of enjoyment in himself, each a creation of his own.⁷

Hence the goal should never be to reduce the variety of human adaptations to a single triumphant form or to rank the cultures of the earth as if they were all competing for the same prize. To the question posed by the Berlin Academy—"Which was the happiest people in history?"—Herder replies that all comparison is disastrous:

Happiness does not depend on a laurel wreath, on a view of the blessed herd, on a cargo ship, or on a captured battle flag, but on the soul that needed this, aspired to this, attained this, and wanted to attain nothing more. Each nation has its own *center* of happiness *within itself*. . . .⁸

The task of understanding then depends not on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but rather on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual.

Much of this resonates in powerful ways with the impulses and perceptions that lay behind the journal *Representations*: the fascination with the particular, the wide-ranging curiosity, the refusal of universal aesthetic norms, and the resistance to formulating an overarching theoretical program. Moreover, Herder found a way to justify and to integrate our simultaneous obsession with history and art:

In poetry's gallery of diverse ways of thinking, diverse aspirations, and diverse desires, we come to know periods and nations far more intimately than we can through the misleading and pathetic method of studying their political and military history. From this latter kind of history, we rarely learn more about a people than

how it was ruled and how it was wiped out. From its poetry, we learn about its way of thinking, its desires and wants, the ways it rejoiced, and the ways it was guided either by its principles or its inclinations.⁹

Poetry, in this account, is not the path to a transhistorical truth, whether psychoanalytic or deconstructive or purely formal, but the key to particular historically embedded social and psychological formations. The first questions to be asked about an art such as drama, Herder writes, are "When? Where? Under what circumstances? From what sources should a people do this?"¹⁰ The deepest sources of art lie not in the skill of the individual maker but in the inner resources of a people in a particular place and time: "A people will wherever possible," Herder writes, with a hostile glance at French neoclassicism, "invent its drama according to its own history, spirit of the times, customs, opinions, language, national biases, traditions, and inclinations."¹¹ This approach accords well not only with our anthropological and cultural interests, but also with our rather conservative interest in periodization (for each of us had been trained to be a specialist in a given area and to take its geographical and temporal boundaries seriously). More important still, Herder's brilliant vision of the mutual embeddedness of art and history underlies our fascination with the possibility of treating all of the written and visual traces of a particular culture as a mutually intelligible network of signs.

The problem with this vision, as with roughly comparable observations by Schiller, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher, is that we were inclined to argue over each of its key terms, just as we argued over our own attempts to formulate what was roughly the same insight. What is the nature of the "*volk*" that Herder invokes, or the "spirit of the times"? In what sense is any era ever truly finished—who sets the boundaries and how are they patrolled? Do we not have overwhelming evidence, in our own time and in every period we study, of an odd interlayering of cultural perspectives and a mixing of peoples, so that nothing is ever truly complete or unitary?

What are the consequences of treating all of the traces of an era, even if its boundaries could be successfully demarcated, as a

single cultural formation? To what extent can bubonic plague, infant mortality, or venereal disease be regarded as cultural? And what is the status, for Herder or for ourselves, of individual makers?

Between Herder's time and our own, historians of culture have answered these questions in a variety of ways, and most recently the hoarier issues, such as the nature/culture distinction or the status of the individual, have, it seems, been rendered obsolete by conceiving of cultures as texts. This conception, too, has a venerable history, but the linguistic turn in the social and humanistic disciplines has heightened its appeal. What becomes newly interesting about the nature/culture distinction, for example, is the very fact that it cannot be fixed because the boundaries between the terms and the significance of those boundaries vary too widely in different contexts. Like other crucial distinctions, the nature/culture divide should be read, in the manner of structural linguistics, as a key binary opposition, loaded with information for deciphering the various social codes one encounters in historical studies. Not that this new textualism solves all of our problems. Are the cultural texts imagined to be coherent? Does it make sense to assimilate visual traces to textual traces? What happens to such phenomena as social rituals and structures of feeling when they are textualized? We found that the harder we pushed on the terms of any prospective programmatic statement for our journal, the further we seemed to get from actually doing the work that drew us together in the first place.

Still, the notion of a distinct culture, particularly a culture distant in time or space, as a text—a notion we got more from Geertz and the structuralists than from the historicists—is powerfully attractive for several reasons. It carries the core hermeneutical presumption that one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves could not have articulated. Explication and paraphrase are not enough; we seek something more, something that the authors we study would not have had sufficient distance upon themselves and their own era to grasp.

Does this mean that we have constituted ourselves as, in the words of a detractor, "the School of Resentment"? Not at all: we

are, if anything, rather inclined to piety. Nonetheless, any attempt at interpretation, as distinct from worship, bears a certain inescapable tinge of aggression, however much it is qualified by admiration and empathy. Where traditional "close readings" tended to build toward an intensified sense of wondering admiration, linked to the celebration of genius, new historicist readings are more often skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial.

This hermeneutical aggression was initially reinforced for many of us by the ideology critique that played a central role in the Marxist theories in which we were steeped, but, as we were from the beginning uncomfortable with such key concepts as superstructure and base or imputed class consciousness, we have found ourselves, as we will discuss at some length in this book, slowly forced to transform the notion of ideology critique into discourse analysis. Moreover, no matter how thoroughgoing our skepticism, we have never given up or turned our backs on the deep gratification that draws us in the first place to the study of literature and art. Our project has never been about diminishing or belittling the power of artistic representations, even those with the most problematic entailments, but we never believe that our appreciation of this power necessitates either ignoring the cultural matrix out of which the representations emerge or uncritically endorsing the fantasies that the representations articulate.

The notion of culture as text has a further major attraction: it vastly expands the range of objects available to be read and interpreted. Major works of art remain centrally important, but they are jostled now by an array of other texts and images. Some of these alternative objects of attention are literary works regarded as too minor to deserve sustained interest and hence marginalized or excluded entirely from the canon. Others are texts that have been regarded as altogether nonliterary, that is, as lacking the aesthetic polish, the self-conscious use of rhetorical figures, the aura of distance from the everyday world, the marked status as fiction that separately or together characterize belles lettres. There has been in effect a social rebellion in the study of culture, so that figures hitherto kept outside the proper circles of interest—a rabble of half-crazed religious visionaries, semiliterate political agitators, coarse-faced peasants in hobnailed boots, dandies

whose writings had been discarded as ephemera, imperial bureaucrats, freed slaves, women novelists dismissed as impudent scribblers, learned women excluded from easy access to the materials of scholarship, scandalmongers, provincial politicians, charlatans, and forgotten academics—have now forced their way in, or rather have been invited in by our generation of critics.

The drastic broadening of the field that results from the consideration of whole cultures as texts leads in several directions:

- Works that have been hitherto denigrated or ignored can be treated as major achievements, claiming space in an already crowded curriculum or diminishing the value of established works in a kind of literary stock market. Shares in Sir John Davies, say, decline, as capital shifts to Aemilia Lanyer and Lady Mary Wroth; John Denham gives way to Lucy Hutchinson and Gerard Winstanley; Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats rub shoulders in anthologies and course assignments with the recently revalued Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson.
- The newly recovered authors are of interest in themselves, but they also inevitably change the account of those authors long treated as canonical. Achievements that have seemed like entirely isolated monuments are disclosed to have a more complex interrelation with other texts by “minor” authors. New historicism helps raise questions about originality in art and about the status of “genius” as an explanatory term, along with the status of the distinction between “major” and “minor.” The process by which certain works achieved classic status can be reexamined.
- In the analysis of the larger cultural field, canonical works of art are brought into relation not only with works judged as minor, but also with texts that are not by anyone’s standard literary. The conjunction can produce almost surrealist wonder at the revelation of an unanticipated aesthetic dimension in objects without pretensions to the aesthetic. It can suggest hidden links between high cultural texts, apparently detached from any direct engagement with their immediate surroundings, and texts very much in and of their world, such as documents of social control or political subversion. It can weaken the primacy of classic works of art in relation to other competing or surrounding textual traces from the past. Or, alternatively, it can highlight the

process by which such works achieve both prominence and a certain partial independence.

It is hardly an accident that this broader vision of the field of cultural interpretation, which had been mooted for more than a century, took hold in the United States in the late 1960s and ’70s. It reflected in its initial period the recent inclusion of groups that in many colleges and universities had hitherto been marginalized, half hidden, or even entirely excluded from the professional study of literature: Jews, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and, most significantly from the point of view of the critical ferment, women. Women’s studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, has served as an important, if little acknowledged, model for new historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects for study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate place in the curriculum. It has also served to politicize explicitly an academic discourse that had often attempted to avoid or conceal partisan or polemical commitments, and it unsettles familiar aesthetic hierarchies that had been manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, to limit the cultural significance of women.

This unsettling of the hierarchies does not seem revolutionary—we are not inclined to confuse a change in the curriculum with the fall of the state—but it does feel democratizing, in that it refuses to limit creativity to the spectacular achievements of a group of trained specialists. The risk, from a culturally conservative point of view, is that we will lose sight of what is uniquely precious about high art: new historicism, in this account, fosters the weakening of the aesthetic object. There is, we think, some truth to this charge, at least in relation to the extreme claims routinely made by certain literary critics for the uniqueness of literature. Works of art, in the more perfervid moments of celebration, are almost completely detached from semantic necessity and are instead deeply important as signs and embodiments of the freedom of the human imagination. The rest of human life can only gaze longingly at the condition of the art object, which is the manifestation of unalienated labor, the perfect articulation and realization of human energy. The art ob-

ject, ideally self-enclosed, is freed not only from the necessities of the surrounding world (necessities that it transforms miraculously into play) but also from the intention of the maker. The closest analogy perhaps is the Catholic Eucharist: the miracle of the transubstantiation does not depend, after all, on the intention of the priest; it is not even the consequence of the institution that celebrates the Mass. Rather the institution is itself understood to be the consequence of the miracle of the Sacrament.

When the literary text ceases to be a sacred, self-enclosed, and self-justifying miracle, when in the skeptical mood we foster it begins to lose at least some of the special power ascribed to it, its boundaries begin to seem less secure and it loses exclusive rights to the experience of wonder. The house of the imagination has many mansions, of which art (a relatively late invention as a distinct category) is only one. But the new historicist project is not about "demoting" art or discrediting aesthetic pleasure; rather it is concerned with finding the creative power that shapes literary works *outside* the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as *within* those boundaries. The risk, from a radical point of view, is a wholesale aestheticizing of culture, and in the formative years of new historicism we often had Walter Benjamin's polemical words quoted at us, as if they were the revelation of a theory crime that we had committed. Fascism, Benjamin writes at the end of his great essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," has made war the consummation of the principle of art for art's sake: humankind is invited to experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure. "This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic," he concludes grimly; "Communism responds by politicizing art." Taken out of context and treated as a piece of prescriptive dogma (and a summary judgment), this formula seems to us misguided and absurdly reductive, for our effort is not to aestheticize an entire culture, but to locate inventive energies more deeply inter-fused within it. To do so is hardly to endorse as aesthetically gratifying every miserable, oppressive structure and every violent action of the past. Rather, it is to imagine that the writers we love did not spring up from nowhere and that their achievements

must draw upon a whole life-world and that this life-world has undoubtedly left other traces of itself.

There are, to be sure, specialized skills in writing, as in the other arts, but these linguistic skills, worthy of being admired, are not independent of a much broader expressive power in language, just as skill in drawing is not independent of what Michael Baxandall (in *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*) calls "the period eye." We are intensely interested in tracking the social energies that circulate very broadly through a culture, flowing back and forth between margins and center, passing from zones designated as art to zones apparently indifferent or hostile to art, pressing up from below to transform exalted spheres and down from on high to colonize the low.

Here is another less visible feature of treating cultures as texts, once again traceable to German romanticism: the triumph of an expressivist and creative notion of language, and with it a fascination with the entire range of diverse expressions by which a culture makes itself manifest. That range is in the abstract virtually limitless, but in any given instance it has a shape, a complex individuality by which we come to identify the peoples who live together in a particular time and place. To wall off for aesthetic appreciation only a tiny portion of the expressive range of a culture is to diminish its individuality and to limit one's understanding even of that tiny portion, since its significance can be fully grasped only in relation to the other expressive possibilities with which it interacts and from which it differentiates itself. Hence even if one's interests were exclusively with high culture, it would be important to cast one's interpretive net broadly, to open the windows to the culture at large. That is at least by implication one of Herder's insights about the relation of an aesthetic form to the life-world of the people from which it arises. As with the aestheticization of culture, there is much to argue with here, since such views could be (and were) the basis for a singularly nasty *volkisch* nationalism, but they also lead to an interest in cultural individuality, a respect for diverse expressive solutions to perennial problems, and a vast broadening of aesthetic interest.

We are trying, in other words, to deepen our sense of both the invisible cohesion and the half-realized conflicts in specific

cultures by broadening our view of their significant artifacts. This ambition to specify the intriguing enigmas of particular times and places distinguishes our analyses from the contemporary pan-textualism of the deconstructionists, who have their own version of the proposition that a culture is a text. Stressing the slippages, aporias, and communicative failures at the heart of signifying systems, linguistic or otherwise, their cultural textualism has no historicist ancestry. For them, written language is the paradigmatic form in which the problems of making meaning become manifest, and a culture may be said to be "textual" because its meaningful signs are inherently ambiguous, paradoxical, and undecidable. Deconstructionist literary analyses thus continually turn up textuality itself as the source and structure of all enigmas. Although maintaining that there is nothing outside of the text, no place of simple and transparent meaning where the slipperiness of the sign system can be escaped, deconstructionists nonetheless tend to draw their examples from the literary canon. While we frequently explore other kinds of texts, they urge that literary language uniquely exposes to scrutiny a textuality that operates everywhere and throughout history. Hence, in addition to skipping the levels of analysis that interest us most—the culturally and historically specific—deconstructionism also seems to reerect the hierarchical privileges of the literary.

The deconstructionists have clear methodological directives to stick to the literary despite their putative pan-textualism, but we have no comparable protective regulation. Having impetuously rushed beyond the confines of the canonical garden, we stand facing extraordinary challenges and perplexing questions:

- Out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, the identification of units suitable for analysis is problematized. If every trace of a culture is part of a massive text, how can one identify the boundaries of these units? What is the appropriate scale? There are, we conclude, no abstract, purely theoretical answers to these questions. To a considerable extent the units are given by the archive itself—that is, we almost always receive works whose boundaries have already been defined by the technology and generic assumptions of the original makers and readers. But new historicism undertakes to call these assumptions into

question and treat them as part of the history that needs to be interpreted.

- Similarly, we ask ourselves how we can identify, out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, which are the significant ones, either for us or for them, the ones most worth pursuing. Again it proves impossible to provide a theoretical answer, an answer that would work reliably in advance of plunging ahead to see what resulted. We have embarked on what Ezra Pound in an early essay calls "the method of Luminous Detail" whereby we attempt to isolate significant or "interpreting detail" from the mass of traces that have survived in the archive, but we can only be certain that the detail is indeed luminous, that it possesses what William Carlos Williams terms "the strange phosphorus of the life,"¹² in the actual practice of teaching and writing.
- If an entire culture is regarded as a text, then everything is at least potentially in play both at the level of representation and at the level of event. Indeed, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear, unambiguous boundary between what is representation and what is event. At the very least, the drawing or maintaining of that boundary is itself an event. *representations + event.*
- In the larger perspective of the cultural text, representations similarly cease to have a settled relationship of symbolic distance from matter and particularly from human bodies. The way bodies are understood to function, the difference between men and women, the nature of the passions, the experience of illness, the border line between life and death are all closely bound up with particular cultural representations, but they cannot simply be reduced to those representations. The body functions as a kind of "spoiler," always baffling or exceeding the ways in which it is represented. ✓
- The unsettling of the relation between imitation and action, between background and foreground, and between representation and bodily reality gives rise to a sense of archival and interpretive inexhaustibility. There is always something further to pursue, always some extra trace, always some leftover, even in the most satisfyingly tight and coherent argument. Moreover, works that are at first adduced only in order to illuminate a particular cultural object develop an odd tendency to insist upon themselves as fascinating interpretive enigmas.

• If a whole culture is regarded as a text—if all the textual traces of an era “count” as both representation and event—then it is increasingly difficult to invoke “history” as censor. That is, for new historicism, history cannot easily exercise that stabilizing and silencing function it possessed in analyses that sought to declare the limits of the sayable and thinkable. Of course, certain things are easier—and certainly safer—to say and to think, at a given time and place, than other things, and it is important to know and to keep in mind the relative ease. But in any culture that has left a complex record of itself—and certainly in any culture that we study—there turn out to be virtually no boundaries that are not transgressed by someone or other (or imagined by those in power to be transgressed in some dark corner). Against the determinism that attempts to insist that certain things in a given period were beyond conception or articulation, new historicism invokes the vastness of the textual archive, and with that vastness an aesthetic appreciation of the individual instance.

Because of this very lack of a given set of objects, new historicism becomes a history of possibilities: while deeply interested in the collective, it remains committed to the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, the transient sketch. From the beginning we thought it was crucially important to have it both ways: we wanted to delve as deeply as possible into the creative matrices of particular historical cultures and at the same time we wanted to understand how certain products of these cultures could seem to possess a certain independence. In our scholarship, the relative positions of text and context often shift, so that what has been the mere background makes a claim for the attention that has hitherto been given only to the foregrounded and privileged work of art, yet we wish to know how the foregrounding came about. We suspect that it occurred through no very peaceful process, and hence we seek to place an emphasis on the tension between certain artifacts (including many of the works that have been regarded as canonical works of art) and their cultures. That is, our work has always been about resistance as well as replication, friction as well as assimilation, subversion as well as orthodoxy. We are fascinated by the ways in which certain texts come to possess some limited immunity

from the policing functions of their society, how they lay claim to special status, and how they contrive to move from one time period to another without losing all meaning. Accordingly, we mine what are sometimes called counterhistories that make apparent the slippages, cracks, fault-lines, and surprising absences in the monumental structures that dominated a more traditional historicism.

This characteristically double vision of the art of the past—at once immersed in its time and place and yet somehow pulling out and away—is deeply related to our understanding of our own aesthetic experience. We never feel that we can simply put off all our historically conditioned longings, fears, doubts, and dreams, along with our accumulated knowledge of the world, and enter into another conceptual universe. But at the same time we do not experience works of art—or indeed any significant textual trace of the past—as confirmation of what we already know. In a meaningful encounter with a text that reaches us powerfully, we feel at once pulled out of our own world and plunged back with redoubled force into it. It seems arrogant to claim such an experience for ourselves as readers and not to grant something similar to the readers and the authors of the past.

When we began to try to impose some order on the tangled effects that new historicism has had on the practice of literary history, we designated four specific transformations that it helped to bring about: (1) the recasting of discussions about “art” into discussions of “representations”; (2) the shift from materialist explanations of historical phenomena to investigations of the history of the human body and the human subject; (3) the discovery of unexpected discursive contexts for literary works by pursuing their “supplements” rather than their overt thematics; and (4) the gradual replacement of “ideology critique” with discourse analysis. Initially, we thought we would address each of these transformations as a team, trading paragraphs back and forth and patiently reasoning together until we achieved a single voice and a single vision. But like all utopian voyages, this one foundered on the sharp rocks of reality. And it deserved to be shipwrecked: for not only did we recreate in miniature the many small and great conceptual disagreements that had emerged whenever the larger group of collaborators sat down together to try to work out a

difficult
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context

shared programmatic statement, but also once again (and more happily) we discovered that serious work only got done when each of us became passionately engaged with particular texts, images, archives, and problems. No progress can be made on methodological problems without total immersion in practice, and that immersion is not for us fundamentally collaborative: it is doggedly private, individual, obsessive, lonely. Only when we had drafted the bulk of the core chapters by ourselves—chapters 3 and 5 by Greenblatt, chapters 4 and 6 by Gallagher—could we begin again to exchange work, offer suggestions and counterarguments, and transform the first-person singular into the first-person plural.

In chapters 3 through 6 we are true, in our fashion, to our original fourfold scheme of new historicist transformations. Chapters 3 and 4 make a contrasting pair that examines how cultures erect collapsible distinctions between representations and what they wish to consider ultimate realities. The first of this pair, "The Wound in the Wall," examines the implicit assumptions about representation embedded in works of art and links these assumptions to institutional strategies. It explains how two Renaissance paintings both bear and efface the marks of the eucharistic doctrine of the Real Presence, especially its anti-representationalism. The second, "The Potato in the Materialist Imagination," jumps forward three and a half centuries to encounter an equally unsettled relation between "the real" and its licensed representations inside nineteenth-century materialism; along the way, it explicates the similarities and differences between historical materialism and the body history that has been new historicism's close intellectual kin. Chapters 5 and 6 form another pair, which juxtaposes two works of literature, *Hamlet* and *Great Expectations*, as well as the pressures to believe or disbelieve that shaped them. The first of this pair, "The Mousetrap," also illustrates the historical uses of supplementarity, since it gets from *Hamlet* to its unacknowledged "context" (the murderous disputes over eucharistic doctrine in England) by tracing God's body through the entrails of a mouse. The second of our literary chapters, "The Novel and Other Discourses of Suspended Disbelief," again fast-forwards into the nineteenth century both to encounter

literature's role in normalizing disbelief and to explore the origins and limits of the concept of "ideology."

The chapters route their theoretical and methodological generalizations through dense networks of particulars. As we had not at the outset foreseen that they would take such circuitous ways, we wrote two opening chapters—"The Touch of the Real" and "Counterhistory and the Anecdote"—to try to explain what had emerged as our most consistent commitment: a commitment to particularity. (Even here we had to pull in separate directions—Greenblatt in chapter 1 and Gallagher in chapter 2—before we were able to merge our texts.) Both chapters explore the new historicist attraction to the anecdote, the first by describing the influence of two writers who use anecdotes or fragments to produce the effect of a historical real, and the second by placing the new historicist anecdote inside the historiographical context of other contemporary counterhistorical methods. The book thus took the shape of two chapters *about*, followed by four chapters *of* new historicism.

Writing the book has convinced us that new historicism is not a repeatable methodology or a literary critical program. Each time we approached that moment in the writing when it might have been appropriate to draw the "theoretical" lesson, to scold another school of criticism, or to point the way toward the paths of virtue, we stopped, not because we're shy of controversy, but because we cannot bear to see the long chains of close analysis go up in a puff of abstraction. So we sincerely hope you will not be able to say what it all adds up to; if you could, we would have failed.