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## Reflections on the New Historicism

Marjorie Levinson\*

*Department of English, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, USA*

In this essay, I describe my practice of historicism circa 1986 by setting it into a field of distinctions and affinities gathered from the annals of intellectual history, literary history, critical theory, and critical practice. Under “critical practice,” I set my own developing thought over the past two decades, the new resources on which it draws, and its overall shape as an immanent critique of commitments informing the ideas and methods of my earliest work. I offer this vantage on what was lacking in my historicism in order to bring out a double irony: one, that my critique of my work goes deeper than the many attacks on it, and, two, that in surpassing that practice of historicism, I see it realized and validated.

I’ve been stewing all morning about my cross-purpose exchange with Frances Ferguson yesterday, trying to figure out why I feel conceptual continuity rather than disconnect between her formalism and my historicism. I’ll try saying what part of the Kantian paradigm I claim for my practice, and in that way encourage a scholarship more inclined to synthesize its viewpoints than polarize them.

We all know where to go for Kant’s analysis of aesthetic experience – the *Critique of Judgment* – and we also know that what we learn there is that the key feature of such experience is its indifference as to the existence of the object, the natural object being Kant’s chief example. When we shift the application to object-as-artwork, I believe we generally interpret that indifference as pertaining to the object represented in or by the painting, poem, etc. (Elaine Scarry’s brief for the ethics of beauty is a good place to go for the distinction between our investment in the object that *is* the work of art as compared with our detachment re the objects represented.) Anyway, because of that indifference, we feel a distinctive kind of pleasure, a formal pleasure: the pleasure of thought at its least sensuous.

But before Kant gets to the problem of aesthetic experience, he poses the more basic question: how is it possible to have experience in the first place, or of any kind at all? This takes us back to the first Critique, where Kant makes his famous Copernican turn, his solution to the Hume-Leibniz, subjectivism-rationalism standoff. With the transcendental synthesis of apperception, Kant establishes that our experience is always already constructed through the pre-cognitive workings of concepts and categories on our empirical intuitions. Although Kant denies any sort of access to these structures, many of the subsequent discourses and poetics of the sublime do include a direct intuition of those a prioris. I refer to that moment within the narrative schema of the sublime when, for a second or two, those structuring concepts suspend their shaping spirit and

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\*Email: [cecily@umich.edu](mailto:cecily@umich.edu)

our sudden sense of vacancy or vertigo alerts us to their otherwise ceaseless and invisible operation (e.g., “Fallings from us, vanishings; / Blank misgivings of a Creature / Moving about in worlds not realized . . .” [Wordsworth, 146–48]). It’s a moment that alerts us to, as Frances said, the supersensible ground of perception.

Kant’s synonym for “supersensible” is “transcendental,” a logical term, not a qualitative one (as in, otherworldly, or non-rational). In my Wordsworth book, I called my materialism “deconstructive” in order to emphasize my interest in that same kind of transcendence, the logical kind: i.e., the un-derived or constitutive conditions of *having* experience at all. Where I depart from the Kantian account is in locating this transcendence at a different level from where Kant puts it. In so doing, I follow on Marx and Freud, just as they take their cue from both the transcendental deduction and from Hegel’s historicization of that model. That genealogy positions us to apply Kant’s insight about the constructed nature of experience to historically inaccessible conditions – functionally, another set of a prioris. From a purist’s perspective, the move represents a corruption of Kant; from another viewpoint, a syncretic one, it could look like an homage to the central claim of the first Critique.

In a nutshell, then: Frances focuses on our indifference as to the object represented by the artwork, whereas I set my sights on an earlier moment or a logically prior one: namely, the object that *is* the artwork, and I ask how it gets configured “transcendentally” at different moments. Hence, my fondness in the Wordsworth book for that buzzword of that era – “problematic” – a near-synonym for other coinages of roughly that vintage, e.g., Foucault’s “episteme,” Kuhn’s “paradigm,” Althusser’s “structure-in-dominance,” and Gadamer’s “interpretive horizon.” All these terms name systems of concepts and routines that enable experience rather than follow from it, and that enable different *fields* of experience at different historical moments and for different cultural milieus and groups.

Moreover, because the pleasure of aesthetic experience lies in our awareness of its difference from the more familiar, externally directed, sensuous, interested kind, wouldn’t it follow that the more specific and extensive one’s knowledge of the differential between the artwork and the life-world, let’s call it, the greater the pleasure? How can we take pleasure in the disinterest incurred by the artwork without first establishing as best we can the order of things that we set aside? We restore to the poem its reality principle, so to speak, so that we may more finely appreciate its pleasure principle – certainly *not* to collapse the difference between the two, as we are accused of doing, but rather to see their interdependence.

In my twenty minutes, I’ll say two things as clearly as I can. First I’ll say what my historicism *was* and give two reference points for it: one, a tradition of thought dating back to the nineteenth century; the other, a critical genre in play in the 1980s when I wrote the Wordsworth book. I’ll then say what my historicism was *not*, once more offering two points of view. The first is that of readers hostile to my work, much of that from the first decade after the book’s publication, but relevant now due to a resurgence of this offensive in the past five years. Same thrust, same language, same righteous indignation.

The second negative perspective on my historicism – i.e., what it was not – is given through my own work from 1989 through the present, a labor of self-criticism straight through (and what I once called, quoting Sartre, a “progressive-regressive” method). I offer these two vantages on what was lacking in my historicism to bring out a double irony: one, that my critique of my work goes deeper than the many attacks on it, and, two, that in surpassing that practice of historicism, I see it realized and validated.

My historicism was “new” with respect to two existing models. The first was a literary history that recovered contexts of reference and reception considered external to the artwork and useful in clarifying its aesthetic values, its position within larger cultural narratives, and also within genre study. New historicism challenged this model’s a priori distinction between internal and external domains, pressing for an integral and also a generative relationship between text and context, and between form and content, in this way grafting a core thesis of the formalist paradigm onto traditional historical scholarship.

The method took its concept of the aesthetic from Adorno and read its genealogy along with its best practice in all of Fredric Jameson’s work. In *Marxism and Form*, Chapter 4, Jameson traces a line running from Schiller through Hegel, Marx, the Frankfurt School, Sartre, and Surrealism. On Jameson’s reading, Schiller’s *Spieltrieb* – the play impulse, or art – is not the free-zone between the realm of matter and that of idea but the determinate form of their opposition, the two forces resisting, invading, in a word, defining each other. For this intellectual tradition (Blake is its ancestor), the form of the artwork is understood as the form of some particular content, a content that the artwork *itself* makes present, and, *for the first time*. My emphases are there to rule out reflection as modeling the form-content relationship. With apologies for stating the obvious, the thinking is dialectical; for a logo, picture Blake’s bounding line, its oxymoronic pun denoting “both the boundary and the leap over it,” to borrow Tom Mitchell’s excellent phrase (65).

I had also distinguished our practice from the historiography of late nineteenth-century figures such as Ranke and Dilthey, founders of historicism proper. That movement rejected the presentism of various Whig models of history popular at the time, insisting on the absolute difference of the past – its essential character, in and of itself uncontaminated by retrospect. Of course, to deliver this difference, scholars must suspend their own historicity, entering into the spirit of the age they narrate. New historicism, unlike old, demanded reciprocity; it applied to itself what it claimed of the past, namely, its own historicity, too defining a condition to be fully known, much less suspended. If old historicism was an oracular model of history – the historian channeling the past to give voice to its own self-knowledge, taken for an abiding truth – then new historicism was conjunctural, its knowledge arising at the intersection between the past and that past’s future, namely, the historian’s present. This model of history is organized by a spatial metaphor, such that past and present can collide in the “now” time, Benjamin’s *jetztzeit*. At this flash-point, or in this dialectical image, the historian “grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one” (263). A “definite” past, Benjamin insists: not some randomly chosen past, but the past of one’s particular present, the past which, as I said in the Wordsworth book, gives back an echo when we call its name.

The result and also the test of this brief co-incidence of past and present is reciprocal illumination, Benjamin’s two-way street. Even as the present disturbs the past’s understanding of itself by revealing the conditions of that knowledge, so the past disturbs the present, creating an opening onto the limits of our own philosophy. In that spirit, I concluded the introduction to my Wordsworth book reflexively, saying of my readings that “what is truth today may not be truth tomorrow.” Likewise, three years later, I oriented my re-thinking of historicism around Wallace Stevens’s three injunctions in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction” – his, directed to the poet, mine to the critic: *one*, “it must be abstract” (as in, abstracted from empirical immediacies, which are always a

fiction of what never was); *two*, “it must change” (meaning, undergo change and promote it); *three*, “it must give pleasure” (Stevens; Levinson, “Back to the Future”).

I called up Stevens just now and I make my language Romantic throughout because I want you to feel the kinship my problematic shares with many poetries of our period and also with readings of that poetry from a certain era. The “strong” critics of the 1960s and 1970s (Frye, Abrams, Bloom, de Man, Erdman, Hartman) took their cue from the “strong poets” (not just the Big Six but particular works from each of those canons). They organized their readings around prolific contradiction and the workings of sublimity, as in, intuitions in excess of concepts, the excess played out over time, until such time as the concept takes shape, captures the intuitions, and normalizes them, at the selfsame moment, projecting a new excess and renewing the dialectical process. This is the process denoted by Hartman’s memorable title, “The Romance of Nature and the Negative Way.”

My teacher Jerome McGann seceded from that visionary company when he made Byron the subject of his first book, reflecting on Byron’s fate in the post-war academy and on *Don Juan* in particular. McGann developed a worldly rather than an ideational method, borrowing from Ernst Curtius what became his own signature statement: “I paint for myself pictures of great detail.” For better or worse, I did not paint such pictures; mine were another Laocoön, with history, on my account, as *das ganz Andere*, “the entirely Other,” an understanding and a phrase I took from Adorno. My pictures sought to revive a once generative conflict between fact and value, between Coleridge’s “it is” and his “I am,” and to do so by showing how much more formidable the “it is” really was, and in what ways. My aim, and I believe my accomplishment, was to bring out the enormity and complexity of the poetry’s achievement by showing the odds against it, and by showing that creative opposition at work inside the world of the poem, at its beating heart. Influenced by Derrida and de Man, and in the spirit, I thought, of Frances Ferguson, I conceived language as counter-spirit, a redundant energy vexing its own creation, a creation which owes its existence, however, to that selfsame contrariness, more familiar terms for which are *différance* and *aporia*.

My Wordsworth, as opposed to the caricature I have been joined to, is a paragon of authenticity, the exact opposite of the hypocrite I am said to depict. I argued no “choice” for Wordsworth, no easy escapism, and above all, no bad faith (as in, erasing the evidence of contemporary life). What there was, in “Tintern Abbey” and the other poems I discussed, and what I argued, was *representation*, which by the traditions I’ve cited is always and by definition mis-representation – “misprision,” as Bloom put it. The very idea that, as one critic suggested, “one’s very perceptions lie within one’s control” and are therefore subject to moral judgment (Ferguson 152), is incoherent for the epistemic model I was using. There was only “seeing,” within and by means of a problematic. The seeing was unique to a position, not a person, or rather to a position embodied (“instantiated,” as we then said) in a person at some moment, in some place, and having those conceptual, affective, and discursive tools. I stress the latter, the tools, to indicate that the position I explored was as much poetical (as in the genre of both the seventeenth-century prospect poem and the greater Romantic lyric) as it was political.

My term “problematic” came from Althusser’s cross-grained reading of Marx; I flagged that, but I also expected readers to recognize the epistemic claims. Althusser was a theorist of our time, nearly as defining as Derrida. A problematic is a field of vision, without which seeing/knowing cannot happen. By the same token, for those who see through that problematic – as in, by means of it – its outlines and workings

cannot be discerned. It's your *way* of seeing, your constitutive categories, invisible if you're inside them (i.e., if they're inside you).

The bulk of the "Tintern Abbey" essay went into parsing the poem's problematic, reading it as consisting of folkways histories of the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, of Cartesian excluded middles, of anxieties linked to Britain's and to Wordsworth's posture toward the French Revolution, of anxieties about poetry and patronage in an age of free-market print capitalism, and many other things. *That* was what "Tintern Abbey" was "about," I said; that was what mediated its philosophic themes. I assumed readers would know that "mediated" means shaped, anchored, filtered, delivered. Like the verb "to cleave," it means divide *and* connect, and it is a major theme within Hegel and Marx and in the scholarly commentary on both. The picture of the mind did not abolish the picture of the place; to the contrary, each brought the other into being. The pictures are a dynamic relationship, not two separate items; just as in Freud, the unconscious is not a deep truth trumping the false consciousness of consciousness itself, but a process through which different kinds of knowledge are related to each other. And so with Althusser, for whom ideology is the way that individuals live their relation to the Real, a Real that becomes such only in that relationship, rather than standing outside of and prior to it. The subject of my reading was that relationship, that process of mediation – not the vagrants and the war.

I'll make the terms of my historicism even clearer: it doesn't matter if the vagrants or the smoke didn't happen to be in evidence on the day Wordsworth did his looking any more than it matters for a reading of the Eton College Ode that fog might have obscured Gray's view of Windsor Castle; or, for that matter, whether he wrote en plein air or not. Neither does it matter if the river muck on July 13, 1798 came more from algae than from industry, as one due-diligence critic has recently proposed (Rzepka). Here's what matters: (a) what contemporary reports tell us about what could have been known or seen at that time, at that place, by persons so positioned. I'm no historian, of course, but I'm pretty sure that evidence of that kind is rarely uniform and never exhaustive. Therefore, what also matters is (b) what we can know from historical and critical reconstruction, which, to the extent that it seeks to understand its materials, will show how inconsistent reports (such as oozy weeds vs. pollution from the coal furnaces along the Wye) can both be objective. Finally, what matters most for the logic I've been tracing is (c) what the poem *shows* at a given moment in its reception history – what it shows by its style or form, by its body-language, as distinct from its discursive dimensions. Does our reading of the form-content relationship make *more* of the poem make sense (i.e., does it add to the set of things that signify)? And does it make *more* sense of the poem, as in a sense more precise, more vivid, more complex, more moving, more generative, more memorable, more intelligent, more liberating, etc.? Those three criteria are my test for historical validity in interpretation, not comparing one empirical record with another to see whose is bigger.

To the many critics who still feel compelled to remind me that "Tintern Abbey" is a poem and not an eyewitness report, let me state the obvious: the criteria I'm talking about are formalist, having to do with patterns and relations of language, thought, and feeling that come into focus when the poem's negative and positive spaces are both held in view.

Enough. More than enough. I said that my own work of self-criticism through the years strikes deeper than the critical hits I've taken, as immanent critique surpasses extrinsic. I haven't the time to do more than sketch the shape and list the highlights.

The contradictions organizing my practice of historicism started surfacing for me in the aftermath of *Keats's Life of Allegory* (1988). My account of Keats's relationship to the literary canon showed me something about the nature and origin of my own attachment to both the literature of knowledge (the strong critics I named earlier, and the philosophical traditions on which they drew) and the literature of power (that is, the poetry considered canonical in the 1970s). In my reading of Keats's style as classed and gendered in particular ways, I glimpsed aspects of my own institutional formation and of my investment in otherness and alienation. If my Wordsworth delivered a figure of the capable poem, heroically conflicted, suffering the creative contradictions of its age and thereby dying into life, my Keats mobilized a subject-form that fetishized those contradictions, capturing their productive energy by blocking the movement toward consummation and integration. With what aim, I inquired? To engender a kind of pleasant pain in the service of aesthetic and existential self-fashioning, a process of stationing rather than mastering and transcending, a style I associated with the middle class of Keats's day.

My own allegorizing of Keats's style had rescued his life of allegory and transformed its conditions of alienation into conditions of achievement. The hero of my allegory was writing itself, or writing under the conditions of modernity, with its power to double the negative and turn deficit into plenitude, hapless transgression into literary originality, everyday embarrassment into a high self-consciousness. Beyond the triumphalism, I felt the gender implications of the parallel between, on the one hand, the less-becomes-more, substitute-becomes-supplement devices I'd described as Keats's solution to his central social dilemma and, on the other, the logic subtending the many theory discourses that gave me my own critical grammar. With Keats, I had argued, a difference culturally coded as deficit (i.e., his unnatural, as it were, prosthetic access to the Tradition) gets made over into a signifier and simulacrum of presence. The gendering of this story that I'd traced in Keats brought out the overdetermination of my own ideas and methods. From this vantage, my Wordsworth assumed the look of a new Prometheus, to whom I had repeated his own early words, that they might be integrated into the amassing harmony.

What I learned in the aftermath of the Keats book was the error, which was also the truth of my reading (borrowing from Adorno, its own historical "commitment"): namely, that its concept of nature and the human, of art and critique, came right out of the profoundest arguments – I mean the formal arguments – of the poems themselves. Literature against and thereby for itself; writing *agonistes*: tempered in the crucible of its contradictions, strengthened by tactically deploying its weaknesses, perfected by giving itself over to the humanizing labor of reading. What was all this if not a lesson in the cunning of history, and topping that, the cunning of art, testifying to the human spirit, fashioning itself through and against its conditions of social being, at once negating and actualizing its reality principle and, in that complexity, achieving autonomy? This was the condition and the limit of my philosophy: this noble rider and the sound of words, this pressure of imagination rising up against and precisely calibrated to the pressure of its peculiar reality.

I started at this point to take an interest in what I called "poetries of indifference," or styles that seemed to confound rather than to resist (and thereby affirm) the protocols of critical re-writing: Hardy's poetry, for instance, on a reading cued by John Bayley's description of its "off-duty" quality, its "lukewarmness" (4). I turned toward subject-forms offering themselves as transitional states within a nature-culture continuum, uninterrupted by transfiguring moments of labor, desire, or self-positing.

I grappled for the first time with the work of a woman poet, Elizabeth Bishop, probably chosen because she had called herself “a minor, female Wordsworth” and I needed to learn what that might be. In Bishop’s counterpoint to the Immortality Ode – I mean “The Waiting Room,” a poem about reading and gender – I got to explore a poetics of resemblance rather than difference and to rethink the psychoanalytic frameworks that had organized my understanding up to that point.

I also sought out forms of critical writing sensitive to the winner-loses logic that criticism shares with capital: by and large, writers on the arts of modernity. Here is T. J. Clark (from his recent book, *The Sight of Death*) on the necessity and impossibility of art criticism: “one part of me goes to paintings precisely for their self-sufficiency, their removal from the world of wishes . . . This is the real pathos in what I am doing . . . I call on my pictures to do too much work – to stand for an ethics and politics I find I can state only by means of them” (5, 43).

Each of the essays I’ve written during the past 15 years tries to negotiate that dilemma. I’ve experimented with postures of ambivalence to generate an array of readings for a single work rather than a unified field. As substitute for interventional or resistance-oriented criticism I’ve ventured “incommensurability,” from Spinoza’s double-aspect monism and finding more recent purchase in Niels Bohr’s complementarity theory and David Bohm’s “implicate order.” Why Spinoza? I knew where Descartes led, so I started from a different place, depthless and undivided, and building identity from likeness and combination rather than difference and negation. I explain this in a 2007 *Studies in Romanticism* essay, “A Motion and a Spirit,” explaining too in a long footnote the insight/oversight ratios I had come to see in my 1986 reading of “Tintern Abbey.”

My way into Spinoza’s strange logic was through the so-called post-classical sciences, some of which state their resonance with Spinoza’s system of nature. You can see, though, from my recent and ongoing work that this body of thought now functions for me as a discourse of critical theory, peculiarly suited to exploring the present conjuncture with Romantic forms and ideas in its insistence on distinction without division re the body-mind, nature-culture, cause-effect problem at every level.

So far, I’ve been speaking mostly from an inner standpoint, the standpoint of *bildung*. To close, I’ll offer some generalizations on the thought-styles of the present. What were once (in my memory) strictly theoretical challenges to the nature/culture binary have become real-world and generally acknowledged facts. I’m thinking of worldwide climate and environmental change, of the now everyday reality of genetic engineering in our food, medical interventions, and research protocols, and the far more routine couplings of brains and digital technologies – in other words, genetic and techno-hybridity as facts of life. To hear Wordsworth’s phrase, “the mind of man and Nature” (*Five-Book Prelude*, Norton 497) now is light years different from what it was when I started teaching and writing in the late 1970s.

Also to be reckoned with: the much discussed shift toward “humanistic” thinking in even the hardest of sciences, featuring irreversible process, regularity arising from randomness, intentionality emerging from routine in complex systems, and flow rather than qualitative distinction between noise and information. The total forms that seemed exclusively and oppressively “totalizing” to us twenty five years ago look entirely different both from that perspective and in light of the “total” conditions and behaviors of our own time: e.g., transnational flows of labor, populations, trash, goods, credit, information; web-based technologies that extend the individual and the collective deep into one another, squeezing out those mediations that, in the old days, both linked and distinguished those two spheres of activity and analysis.

I'd maintain that there's a difference – a big one – between conditions that are analytically available (as some of these probably were back in the 1980s) and conditions that are lived as if unmediated. Exploring how such differences bear on ideas and methods of critical study and on our understanding of Romanticism seems to me what I've been doing all along. My version of historicism.

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