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History and Literature: “After the New Historicism”

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IN A PAPER I delivered well over a year ago at the University of California, Irvine, I addressed some of the problems I saw with new historicism under the title “Are We Being Historical Yet?” The answer was a provisional no.¹ In calling my remarks here “After the New Historicism,” I may seem unduly optimistic, or pessimistic, as if in the brief interval of a year or so, new historicism had become “history.” Clearly this is not the case. So let me gloss my title for a moment.

In alluding to Frank Lentricchia’s *After the New Criticism*, I have in mind in particular the point Lentricchia made in his preface when he noted that even though New Criticism as a movement was officially “dead,” its formalist legacy remained virulent in contemporary theory. Finding the “traces” and “scars” of New Criticism in the “evasive antihistorical maneuver[s]” by which various literary theorists accomplished an “often extremely subtle denial of history,” Lentricchia made clear the marked extent to which a state of affairs “after the new criticism” had still to be reached. Indeed, his book was itself offered as a mode of transportation to get us under way, at least, toward that promised land. Coming as I do from what a visitor to Berkeley once called “the land of the new historicism,” I can report that it is not that promised land. Lentricchia predicted that the fate of that “heavily contested and abused term,” history, might well “determine the direction of critical theory in the years just ahead,” a prophecy whose partial fulfillment has taken an ironic turn with new historicism.² For if some of us have found it necessary to go “after” the new historicism, it is partly because this movement has generated forms of critical practice that continue to exhibit the force of a formalist legacy whose subtle denials of history—as the scene of heterogeneity, difference, contradiction, at least—persist.

My title, then, like Lentricchia’s expresses a wish, and indeed the same wish, for a genuinely historicized critical practice. In addition to its temporal meaning (“subsequent to in time or order”) and its aggressive meaning (“to go after x”), however, “after” can also be

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used to state resemblance, as in "after the manner of, or in accordance with x." My title is intended to carry this third meaning as well, since new historicism has forced me to reformulate questions in accordance with the terms it has used and the models it has deployed.

Let me begin by briefly elaborating on the point I have already mentioned about the persistence of formalism. Needless to say, any model of literary studies carries with it a set of political implications, and New Criticism was no exception. In particular, as an academically institutionalized critical practice, New Criticism generated politically resonant contradictions that are still with us. For example, in its capacity to provide a pedagogically functional solution to the problems posed by the numbers and kinds of new college students poured into the American academy by the G.I. Bill after World War II, the New Criticism legitimized—and was in part legitimized by—its power to focus exclusively on the literary text, to detach it from the literary history that had traditionally formed the disciplinary field of philological studies. If New Criticism's isolation of the text from its context enabled the techniques of "close reading" to be taught—if not to "the masses" then at least to increasing numbers of them—it also installed an ahistorical ideology of the autonomous text at the center of literary studies in the United States. This ideology clearly, if indirectly, served the interests of a nation now well-positioned to reaffirm—after 1945, in a newly ironic sense—its long-held belief that America's mission was to bring an end to history. For Americans approaching what Daniel Bell called the end of ideology, history became, in Toynbee's words, something unpleasant that happened to other people. Literature, meanwhile, was something pleasant that could happen to us, if we accepted the formalist proscriptions of various "fallacies" which served to sever text from context, sanctioning a view of the poem as verbal icon infused with tension and ambiguity, the canonical author as unknowable genius, and the reader as passive and awestruck worshipper of literature. Whether conceived as Joyce's escape from the nightmare of history, or as Stevens's supreme fiction, literature served as the repository of the transcendent, among whose functions was to silence or to marginalize any political imagination inclined to roam beyond the liberal consensus.

This contradiction—incribed in a critical model that facilitates mass education and at the same time fosters a dehistoricized and apolitical vision of literature—remains sedimented in our critical practice and teaching today. For more than two decades now, the formalist isolation of the text on which New Criticism based its critical practice has been relentlessly attacked and discredited. Yet

close reading remains the central skill taught in most undergraduate literature classes. More directly pertinent to my concerns here is the degree to which graduate programs in literature by and large continue to be structured by demands that derive from a formalist model awkwardly grafted onto a residue of old-fashioned literary history. Such programs compel students to read a large body of canonical literature, to read the major "readings" in the critical canon, and to suppose for themselves a literary history linking it all up. Somewhere along the way, on the momentous occasion of specialization, they are to grasp the chain of this literary history firmly at two proximate and prespecified points bounding a historical field, and hang on for dear—that is, professional—life.

Two points are worth making about this disciplinary structure. First, the "mastery" of the canon of English and American literature from Beowulf to Faulkner is sustainable, even as the illusion it is, only because what "mastery" actually means is a trained and sophisticated reading ability. (The specific version of the good scholar—who may not know the answer, but knows how to find it—which graduate programs in English are designed to produce is someone who may not have read some specific text, but is trained well enough to know *how* to read it on demand.) In short, reading has remained the heart of the critical enterprise.

Secondly, as far as the curriculum was concerned, once formalism became dominant, literary history soon became functionally little more than a practical means of dividing literary studies into manageable segments. The literary academy has until very recently relied on T. S. Eliot's "Tradition and the Individual Talent" as an adequate sanction for studying the talents and letting the tradition fend for itself, opting for what the late Henry Nash Smith used to call the well-placed oriental carpet approach over the wall-to-wall carpet school of curriculum revision. As for nonliterary history, until recently, and except in marginalized fields like American Studies, it has played a role in literary studies only as a backdrop—a series of "world views" magisterially unfolding from the fourteenth to the twentieth century, a base you could pretend to touch whenever you realized you were stealing them all, but of no direct consequence to the main enterprise of reading the text.

In short, formalism has remained institutionally inscribed, despite the fact that we ritualistically denounce it at every opportunity. In view of the serial ordeal that literary studies have experienced as a result of all the "new-isms" and "post-isms"—as Derrida recently called them—it is rather disheartening to note that the formalist agenda, as well as the politics of containment it represents, have

remained hegemonic at least as an institutional framework for graduate training in literature.

No doubt one reason for this is that proposed by Frank Lentricchia: the American brand of "deconstruction" centered at Yale defanged the monster of Derridean theory, anesthetizing its political threat and appropriating its fertile analytic power for a reproduction of the formalist program. But this story, which has itself gained virtually canonical status in recent years, needs to be amplified and revised in the light of another. For if formalism has been able to absorb and appropriate certain kinds of poststructuralist theory, it has also had to marginalize other forms of critical practice, notably those oppositional, alternative, and sometimes strongly antagonistic forms which have emerged since the 1960s, first from Marxist, then from Afro-Americanist and feminist, and finally from Third World Studies. This story has yet to be told, and I will not try to tell it here. But I think that once it is told, it will reveal how the growth of these oppositional and antagonistic practices, both within and without departments of literature, has exercised a mounting pressure on the formalist framework of literary studies. Once told, this story may help to account for the present scene, in which such oppositional critical practices have now repositioned themselves so as to undermine the boundaries beyond which they have been marginalized.

In short, it seems to me we have reached a moment at which the anti-formalist projects emerging from within the dominant quarters of literary studies (new historicism, cultural criticism, and so on), and the oppositional critical practices marginalized by formalism (Marxist, feminist, Afro-Americanist, and Third World studies) have found themselves occupying a common ground, a ground we have come to call "discourse" or "the social text." In calling this a "common ground," I am of course ignoring the fact that it is also currently a battleground. Among both feminist and Afro-Americanist critics, for example, there are major debates going on right now about whether they want to share this ground at all. Many do not, since they regard it as the property of a colonizer called "Theory" which they have good reason to suspect as a tyrant and usurper. Meanwhile, in its most general and diffuse sense, the "new historicism" is regarded by many as affording us at last the weaponry to clear the field of deconstructionists, and Derrida himself has, in response to certain insidious forms of attack on his political credentials, found it necessary to remind us of the political stakes implicit in his approach to language.³ The battlefield is large and it is not a pretty sight. If it sometimes displays what Barbara Christian has called a "race for theory" among the previously marginalized, it also reveals

scenes of colonization in progress.⁴ For example, having finally compelled the attention of dominant groups of literary critics, feminist criticism becomes part of gender studies, where it can readily sanction the remarginalization of women. As Afro-American, ethnic, and Third World Studies present new applicants for the status of subjects, they are collectively reified as the "other," licensing what Houston Baker has called the study of the "dynamics of 'othering' engaged in by a self-indulgent Western soul."⁵

Nevertheless, it seems to me that we have no choice about where we are, unless we want to retreat to the traditionalist encampments that still dot the landscape. We confront what Raymond Williams has called "language in history, that full field."⁶ The question before us is not whether or not to explore this field, but rather how it should be constituted and framed for analysis. If from the standpoint of oppositional critics there is risk, there is also enormous promise in this moment. We confront a virtually horizonless discursive field in which, among others, the traditional boundaries between the literary and the extraliterary have faded, so that those trained to "read" a text need no longer be constrained by the canon. The "document" and the "archive" are open wide to them, not as the repository of background materials but as texts in their own right. Herein, I think, lies the danger of a short circuit, in the shape of a license which authorizes literary critics to explore this discursive field by announcing, "Worry no more about how the text is related to reality. Reality *is* a text and you may read it at will." As I shall try to illustrate in a moment, in the practice of some kinds of new historicism, this can mean that the social text turns out to be read as we have been trained to read a literary text, that is, in traditional formalist terms.

I want, then, first to address new historicism, or at least a certain widely recognized tendency in this movement, in order to focus more specifically on how the discursive field can be framed so as to produce a "historicized" critical practice that serves finally to rescue a formalist agenda and the politics of containment it serves. My aim is to clarify the grounds as well as the need for an alternative model, one which would take seriously those multiple and heterogeneous "others" which oppositional forms of scholarship and critical practice have made visible.

One way of approaching the new historicism is to understand it as emerging from the contradiction it purports to overcome—that between a formalist agenda and an "old historicist" framework. Louis Montrose, for example, opposes his own work as a new historicist to that of a formalist view of literature as "an autonomous

aesthetic order that transcends the shifting pressure and particularity of material needs and interests," and Stephen Greenblatt describes the old historicism he rejects as "monological" in that it posits an "internally coherent and consistent" "vision" which then "can serve as a stable point of reference, beyond contingency, to which literary interpretation can securely refer."⁷ Rejecting both of these approaches, new historicism instead wishes to explore, in Greenblatt's phrase, "both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text."⁸ In the process, however, new historicism has brought upon itself the opprobrious charge of being Marxist. This is not surprising, since Marxist criticism has for many years flown a flag saying "Only Historicize." But whatever form this historicizing procedure has assumed in the work of Marxist critics, its leftist political orientation has remained clear. The same cannot be said for the new historicism. That is, although there may be for Marxist critics a political necessity to historicize, in and of itself to historicize literary studies is not necessarily to foster or support either a Marxist or a more generally leftist politics. Both Montrose and Greenblatt have insisted that their kind of new historicism, at least, is also opposed to Marxist criticism. The point here is that although new historicism may well foster what Edward Pechter calls a "new politicization" of literary studies, it is by no means a given that its alliances will lie on the left.⁹

If new historicism, then, at least in the hands of some of its practitioners, is opposed to Marxism, to formalism, to old historicism, what makes its project distinctive, and distinctively historicizing? What most clearly legitimizes its claim to being a literary historicism is that it addresses nonliterary, marginal, and often quite esoteric documents as well as canonical texts. But what new historicists then do with such documents can sometimes be disquieting.

For example, in "Invisible Bullets," Stephen Greenblatt delivers a compelling analysis of Elizabethan culture by deploying Foucault's model of power to argue that power produces the very subversion it contains. The essay's title comes from Thomas Harriot's *A Brief and True Report of the new Found Land of Virginia* (1588), which Greenblatt describes as a "tract for potential investors in a colonial scheme."¹⁰ In making his pitch, Harriot records the "alien voices" and "interpretations" of the Algonkian Indians, among which is the report's most riveting revelation, the natives' belief that the massive deaths which follow in the Europeans' wake are caused by "invisible bullets" floating in the air. Greenblatt suggests that "the recording of alien voices, their preservation in Harriot's text, is part of the process whereby Indian culture is constituted as a culture and thus

brought into the light for study, discipline, correction, transformation" and concludes that this "momentary sense of instability or plenitude—the existence of other voices—is produced by the power that ultimately denies the possibility of plenitude" (51).

Now clearly enough, the Europeans did not "constitute" the Algonkian culture "as a culture," nor—just as clearly—does Greenblatt mean to deny that the Algonkians existed as a culture before the arrival of the English. He makes a point of the fact that he is only addressing "events as reported by Harriot" (47). But although such a disclaimer helps to account for the textualization of "the existence of other voices" as identical to a "momentary sense of instability or plenitude" (or ambiguity and tension?) in a text, it also excludes the very discursive space of "English Algonkian relations" which has served to accord the analysis its claim to being historicist (51).

In effect, what happens here is that the cultural domain of "English Algonkian relations" is rhetorically invoked only to be itself marginalized. Foregrounded by the colonial encounter between Harriot and the Algonkians, the paradox of power is not treated as an expression of colonial power. Rather, the drive to focus in on a set of texts in which subversive elements are both produced and contained effectively marginalizes the very site of the essay's most vividly "historicizing" discourse.

A more extreme version of this problem may be found in Steven Mullaney's essay "Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance." Mullaney's procedures suggest that if the colonized other is not at least recognized as having a separate existence, as in Greenblatt's essay, then it is all too easy for the analysis to reenact the discursive practice of effacement and appropriation it is ostensibly disclosing. For Mullaney, the alien, the marginal, the other, is an already constituted category of analysis, and a remarkably commodious one at that. The "strange things" of his title refer not only to the "curiosities gathered from around the world" which are collected and exhibited in Walter Cope's "wonder-cabinet," but finally to everything and everyone "perceived as alien, anomalous, dissimilar, barbarous, gross, or rude" at the time.¹¹ The marginal is, in short, always already a cultural product of a dominant discourse: "What the period could not contain within the traditional order of things, it licensed to remain on the margins of culture" (44), where it was "maintained and produced, as something Other" (43).

The crux of Mullaney's argument concerns the means by which this production and maintenance of the other is effected, namely, through a "process of cultural production synonymous with cultural

performance" (43), which he designates as a "rehearsal of cultures" (48), whose purpose is accomplished when the "distinction between the alien and its representation . . . virtually cease[s] to exist" (45). An extended anecdote serves to describe what is meant by "rehearsal." At Rouen in 1550, a highly elaborate and detailed reproduction of Brazil was erected but then destroyed during the dramatized enactment of tribal battles performed for Henry II and Catherine as they entered the city. Thus Rouen tells the same story as the wonder-cabinet: "The New World is both recreated in the suburbs of the Old and made over into an alternate version of itself, strange but capable of imagination" (46). Further, it adds a dramatic new element to the picture of the "rehearsal of cultures," for the "consumption of Brazil," as Mullaney calls it, demonstrates not only the re-presentation of an "alien culture," but its "erasure" as well (48).

Just as Greenblatt moves from Harriot's *Report* back to Elizabethan England and Shakespeare's stage, Mullaney promptly notes that Rouen's treatment of Brazil "was by no means reserved for New World cultures" (49) and shifts the scene to England, where the "genealogy" of the "rehearsal of cultures" is traced to "the reign of Edward I, whose colonization of Wales in the thirteenth century" is described as a rehearsal of the "subcultural excursions of sixteenth-century England" (49). Despite the rather breathtaking leap back in time, this transition felicitously accomplishes at once two strategic imperatives: it shifts the focus from the "merely colonial" to English domestic culture, and it regrounds the analysis in "the larger dramaturgy of power" (49) which we will eventually learn is "being performed, as it were, by history itself" (61).

The strategic function in the essay of those "strange things" brought home from abroad thus becomes clear. That is, the use made here of the colonial as a resource for telling anecdotes reveals that such choices serve to constitute the "marginal" as always already subordinated, dominated, othered. It matters not in the slightest whether the "alien culture" being "represented" and "effaced" (48) at Rouen occupies some discursive space of its own or has resisted the European's domination, since what is true of the Europeans being analyzed is also true of Mullaney's analysis—for both, that is, the "distinction between the alien and its representation" has "ceased to exist" (45). The Europeans' "rehearsal of cultures," after all, amounts finally to a discursive practice of appropriation and effacement aimed at the "erasure or negation" of the alien cultures they were trying to subordinate (48). Properly speaking, it is part of what will produce and sustain a colonialist ideology. But in

Mullaney's essay, a similar discursive "erasure or negation" of the heterogeneous cultural spaces in which those being subordinated may also have been engaged in their own discursive practices (both resistant and collaborative, no doubt) is not only presupposed, as a historical inevitability, but also reenacted, at least in the sense that the entire discursive space of the colonial is raided for cultural examples and then marginalized as "merely colonial" (49). This anecdotal procedure, then, enables him at once to exclude from his frame and to appropriate as exemplary of the "historical" the already muted other.

The tendency of some new historicists to deploy riveting anecdotes has been widely noticed. By no means all such anecdotes are drawn from colonialist discourse, but when they are, the results tell us something about both the methodological limits and the political import of new historicist practices. Here, for example, colonialist discourse provides anecdotes which serve as a "marginal" upon which literary analysis itself operates in very much the same way that Mullaney's argument operates on the events at Rouen—to appropriate the "strange things" to be found outside the "literary," while effacing the social and historical realm that produced them, at once plundering and erasing the discursive spaces to which the argument appeals for its historicist status. But since this operation effectively retextualizes the extraliterary as literary, its results seem to me more properly designated as Colonialist Formalism than as new historicism.

I am suggesting, then, that insofar as new historicist work relies upon the anecdotalization of the discursive field now opened for interpretation, it can only expand the range of the very formalism which it so manifestly wants to challenge. According to Walter Cohen, this anecdotal technique reflects a principle of "arbitrary connectedness" at work in new historicist criticism in which "the strategy is governed methodologically by the assumption that any one aspect of a society is related to any other."¹² If such a principle serves to legitimate a suspect functionalism in the social sciences, in literary studies it serves to legitimate an equally suspect formalism which can treat the social text in much the same way it has been accustomed to treating the literary one, that is, as the scene of tension, paradox, and ambiguity. Further, it is not only marginal groups and subordinated cultures that can be occulted, whether by exclusion or incorporation, by effacement or appropriation, but the "social" itself as well. Insofar as this happens, the "social text" remains a text in the formalist sense, rather than the literary being historicized as itself a form of social discourse.

In some cases, however, it is clear that what informs these procedures is less a general principle of "arbitrary connectedness" than a specific model of power derived from Foucault. In "Invisible Bullets," Greenblatt obviously constructs his analysis on the basis of certain of Foucault's discussions of power. For example, when Greenblatt says that "theatricality . . . is not set over against power but is one of power's essential modes" (56), he echoes the Foucault who says that power is not simply "a law which says no," but rather something that "traverses and produces things," something that "induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse."¹³ In *The History of Sexuality*,¹⁴ Foucault undertakes to transpose sexuality from something against which power works, as a negative, proscriptive, censoring force, to something which he describes in "Truth and Power" as "a positive product of power" (120). Greenblatt invokes the same logic of inversion from negative to positive when he transposes "theatricality" from the site of opposition to "power" to the site of "one of power's essential modes" in the process of rejecting formalism's belief in the "self-referentiality of literature" (56). But if theatricality, literature, or art in general is understood as *either* "set over against power" *or* "one of power's essential modes," and if, as here, this "either/or" allies the first choice with a formalist belief in literature's autonomy, then only formalists can believe that literature might harbor any socially resistant or oppositional force. Meanwhile, to believe that literature might have social or political weight as a form of cultural agency entails also believing that such agency as it has is by definition already co-opted by "power." What is thus excluded is the possibility that literature might well—at least occasionally—occupy an oppositional cultural site at specific historical moments. It is this possibility which has been foreclosed by the reading of Foucault at work here, a reading in which power is absolutized as a transhistorical force which relentlessly produces and recontains subversion, so that any resistance or opposition to such power always presents itself as already contained and thus neutralized.

This reading of Foucault is credible, although not inevitable. Foucault's work can certainly authorize this essentialized model of power, one which serves not to historicize the object of analysis but rather to dehistoricize it as one mode in which power is manifested. But Foucault can also be read quite differently, especially if we attend to the political conditions in and against which his project took shape. I am not prepared to offer such an alternative reading of Foucault here, but I do want to address more fully the debilitating choice offered us by Greenblatt's "either/or" as a means both of

evoking this alternative Foucault and of moving us forward to the question of how we might begin to formulate an alternative approach to the discursive field.

The choice between a formalist view of the literary as "set over against power" versus a putatively historicist view of the literary as "one of power's essential modes" readily invokes the ideologically charged constellation of values clustered around the formalist construction of the literary as transcendent, that is, as a medium in which the creative imagination of a supposed author operates to emancipate us from the constraints of social reality and thereby to secure and legitimate a realm of aesthetic pleasure outside history, impervious to power, and untouched by the material conditions of production, consumption, and exchange. But this somewhat caricatured view of the literary and the aesthetic more generally has a history, and a fairly well-documented one. According to Raymond Williams, for example, among the manifold ways in which the dominant culture of nineteenth-century Britain established and maintained hegemony was to "specialize as aesthetic" those "visibly alternative and oppositional" elements it could not readily incorporate within "the ruling definition of the social."¹⁵ Foucault alludes to a similar process when he refers to "all those experiences which have been rejected by our civilization or which it accepts only within literature."¹⁶

In short, if the values of transcendence relegitimated by formalist ideology themselves emerge from a historically specifiable set of developments in a hegemonic process, then the need of a dominant culture to displace the literary from the "social," to locate it in a marginalized space of the aesthetic, could not have arisen in the first place had literature posed no threats to that culture. "Transcendence," in other words, is not equivalent to, but in fact—historically speaking—is an ideological defense against, literature's potential as a discursive site of subversion, resistance, or antagonism. We cannot, therefore, ally the belief in a transcendent realm of a literature "set over against power," in autonomous isolation from history, with a belief that literature harbors culturally resistant or oppositional forces. Of course, this is not to say that literature cannot also serve to support and legitimate the dominant culture's power. It is only to insist that once stripped of its ideological function as transcendent, it is by no means, in principle, stripped of its active force within the discursive field.

The confusion of transcendence with opposition might be explained in the light of post-nineteen-sixties critical discourse, in which the vocabulary of transcendence seems to have been cross-

fertilized with that of liberation. That is, once the politics of liberation proved inadequate, and particularly in reference to the French case of May, 1968, a whole body of political and cultural theory was thrown into doubt—not merely that which supported a liberal humanist ideology, but also that which offered a Marxist or broadly leftist critique of bourgeois liberalism and state power. Certainly among the most radical participants in the rethinking of politics and critical theory to emerge from these events was Foucault, whose project was centrally concerned with finding a means to work our way out of a thoroughly discredited politics of liberation—a politics, to designate rather than to define it fully, which promised to liberate the repressed humanity of the individual from the bourgeois state and family. Closing all the escape hatches offered by the theoretical framework supporting such a politics, Foucault charted the new territory of the discursive by means of a “genealogy” he once described as a form of “tactics” designed “to emancipate” “subjugated knowledges,” to “render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggle against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal and scientific discourse.”¹⁷ Characteristically, Foucault here translates emancipation into the radically different register of “opposition” and “struggle,” activities taking place within a discursive field from which there is no escape. Foucault’s work is rich with the vocabulary of war and politics—insurrection, resistance, domination, opposition, struggle, tactics—a vocabulary itself deployed in a concerted attack on the discourse of liberation politics, with its vocabulary of repression, subjects, truth, humanism, and freedom. Thus for Foucault, at least, the possibilities for resistance, opposition, subversion must lie in a different register than that which liberation politics occupied. Whether such possibilities in fact emerge in the course of Foucault’s work, the point to be underscored here is that he pursued these possibilities without benefit of liberation as a value or as a viable political program.

I am suggesting, in other words, that to cancel out transcendence or liberation is by no means to eliminate the potential for subversion and resistance in the discursive field. Foucault mapped this field as a circulatory system of power relations that can be tracked across the boundaries imposed by the discursive regimes he identified in order to discredit. The “insurrection of subjugated knowledges” he fostered exposed the “memory of hostile encounters” he found still “confined to the margins of knowledge” (81, 83). What makes his work indispensable to us in literary studies is that it undermines the boundaries dividing the literary from the extraliterary, the canonical from the popular, the dominant from the marginal and

subjugated. His account of power as omnipresent and immanent throughout the discursive field can, as we have seen, open the “trap” he recognized when he remarked on the “danger of ourselves constructing” a “unitary” discourse capable of annexing the marginalized and subjugated knowledges whose history of struggle it has revealed (86). But if Foucault’s work can be used to limit the very possibilities it makes visible, it also sanctions the effort to find new ways of keeping those possibilities in sight.

How then, could we construct the discursive field so as to avoid a relapse into formalism, which remarginalizes both the social and the “others” whose voices it should make audible? I want merely to offer some suggestions that might prove helpful in such a project, whose accomplishment would obviously entail a collective effort.

Cultural and political analysis has in recent years provided us with a variety of theoretical means for constructing an alternative model of the discursive field. In addition to the work of Foucault and Raymond Williams, we might look to that of Michel de Certeau, to the critique of everyday life associated with the work of Henry Lefebvre, to feminist film theory, and to LaClau and Mouffe’s post-Marxist interpretation of hegemony.¹⁸ Drawing on some of these sources, I want here very briefly to hypothesize a continuous, but continuously heterogeneous discursive field in which dominant and subjugated voices occupy the same plane, as it were. Indeed, the first point to be made about this construction of discursive space is that it can be most immediately figured, if only for heuristic purposes, as flat.

Fredric Jameson’s discussion of the postmodern may be useful here. Jameson argues that the entire range of conceptual models dependent on depth (for example, essence/appearance, latent/manifest, authenticity/inauthenticity, signifier/signified) has given way to a “new kind of flatness or depthlessness” which he finds characteristic not only of postmodernist art, but of contemporary theory as well.¹⁹ In constructing the discursive field as flat, we could usefully imagine ourselves reenacting the process of looking at a cubist painting, as John Berger has described it. That is, according to Berger, we recognize a spatial relation on the surface which sends the eye into the depths of the painting, only to be returned again to the surface, where we deposit the knowledge gained from our passage.²⁰ Whatever the value of this description in regard to cubism, it can figure for us a crucial feature of our situation as readers of the social text. The process by which we look into the depths, as it were, only to be returned to the surface where, as it turns out, we always were, teaches us to rescore depth as surface. We learn, that is, that what

seems to lie in the "depths" must be restored to the surface, deposited there as new knowledge—a maneuver very much like that "genealogy" which Foucault describes as a tactic for restoring subjugated knowledges to the visible space of discourse. To envision this space as effectively depthless is a means at least of defending against a set of problems arising from the residual belief in transcendence, liberation, and so on. We thereby might guard against the tendency that Tony Bennett identifies in certain strains of deconstruction and that we have found in certain strains of new historicism—the tendency to "keep alive the demand for transcendence simply by neverendingly denying its possibility—a criticism of essentialism which can rapidly become a lament for its loss, a consolation for the limitations of the human condition which is simultaneously a recipe for political quietism."²¹

To make this point in a different register, we could turn to Lukács's analysis of Kant's thing-in-itself as a formalized barrier of rationalist thought that serves to place off limits the irrational realm previously recognized as, and/or propitiated through, magic, ritual, or religion (as in "Fortune is a woman"). According to Lukács, Kant's thing-in-itself renders this realm unknowable, by definition, to the rational subject of modern science. The binary "phenomenal/non-phenomenal" henceforth functions to repress as unknowable all that cannot be comprehended within Kant's rational system.²² Functioning as an epistemological proscription, the thing-in-itself legitimates by exclusion the unitary discourse of science, rather like the "repressive hypothesis" Foucault attacked. Other binary oppositions, such as, *langue/parole*, *form/content*, operate in similar ways: that is, they serve to repress and occult the area designated by the second term as unknowable in itself. If this repression is a precondition for the coherence and luminosity of the first term, then seeing them both on the same plane would enable us to bring again into view the "memory of hostile encounters" such binaries serve to deny, to erase from memory. (Derrida's transposition of signifier/signified to the single plane of the text effects a similar shift; that is, to say that there is nothing outside the text because there is no transcendental signified is precisely to cancel depth in order to foreground a signifying process which operates in and constitutes a horizonless plane.)

Figuring the discursive field as a plane, however, is at best a crude approximation of the theoretical operation conducted by LaClau and Mouffe in their radical reconceptualization of hegemony as a "field of articulatory practices." In *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* their aim is "to dissolve" all forms of a "differentiation of planes"

which sanction that "topography of the social" presupposed not only by classical Marxist theories of base/superstructure, but by the "fundamentalism of [all] the emancipatory projects of modernity."²³ It would require another essay to address adequately the promise of, and the problems with, LaClau and Mouffe's poststructuralist revision of Gramscian theory, but I would suggest that, among its several theoretical advances, their project offers us some terms for working out rigorously the implications of Foucault's effort to shift from the register of repression and emancipation to that of opposition and localized struggle. In their analysis, a host of dualisms grounded in the essentialist logic of modernity's emancipatory projects are not merely erased or deconstructed, but redeployed as features of a "general field of discursivity." Rather than occupying "two different ontological levels," for example, "hegemonic and hegemonized forces" are understood to "constitute themselves on the same plane," a discursive field whose characteristics demand a vocabulary of unstable "frontiers" and "antagonistic forces" rather than one based on ideology and superstructure.²⁴ These discredited concepts, according to LaClau, are "essentially topographical." That is, they assume "a space within which the distinction between regions and levels take place" which "implies . . . a closure of the social whole" enabling "it to be grasped as an intelligible structure" with "precise identities" assigned to "its regions and levels." By contrast, the discursive field as it is construed by LaClau and Mouffe presents "practical-discursive structures" that "do not conceal any deeper objectivity that transcends them, and, at the same time, explains them," but rather "forms *without mystery*, pragmatic attempts to subsume the 'real' into the frame of a symbolic objectivity that will always be overflowed in the end."²⁵

What is at stake here is the possibility of "contingency" in the field of articulatory practices, a contingency which follows from the related claims that "power is never *foundational*" and that "no discursive formation is a sutured totality."²⁶ The tactical force of *suture*, it seems to me, is particularly notable, here as in the work of feminist film theorists. Not only, as it is deployed in film theory, does *suture* afford us a way to restore a recognition of what has been occluded from our view by the cinematic apparatus, but further, given its root meaning, *suture* enables us to view the social text as inscribed by wounds, by signs of those "hostile encounters" which Foucault describes as the "ruptural effects of conflict and struggle" that "functionalist and systematizing thought is designed to mask."²⁷

Finally, this approach to the discursive field might enable us to reexamine both those voices engaged in "othering" and the voices

of those "othered" in the process. This move might profitably begin with Bakhtin. If there is, at any historical moment, a heterogeneous array of discourses, it is also the case that the voices made audible by those discourses are themselves heterogeneous, "double-voiced" in Bakhtin's sense.²⁸ That is, since social discourses compose a heteroglossia, any discursive subject must revoice the multiple and contradictory discourses to which s/he has been subjected, and indeed by which s/he has been constituted as a subject.²⁹

Now if both "othered" discourses and "othering" ones exhibit what Bakhtin called double-voicedness, and both occupy the same heterogeneous discursive space at any given moment, two consequences follow. First, the voices of those "othered" by the dominant discourse acquire a new authority, no matter how marginalized or effaced they may have been. Further, because they are double-voiced, they may be understood not as always already neutralized by the ideologies they must speak through in order to be heard, but rather as inflecting, distorting, even appropriating such ideologies, genres, values so as to alter their configuration. Secondly, since the dominant voices engaged in "othering" are also double-voiced, heterogeneous voices in struggle with each other become audible even in the texts of canonical authors, texts which can therefore come unsutured, revealing the wounds left from the hostile encounters which "othering" requires.

If Lacanian theory posits the "other of discourse," this approach suggests the possibility of an other *in* discourse, one that can erupt from the sutured fabric of the dominant culture's discourses. As I hope to demonstrate in another place, Mark Twain's *Pudd'nhead Wilson* can be read as the scene of such an eruption, specifically one which occurs on the site of the central black female character, Roxana. Similar analyses could be made, I believe, of Melville's *Pierre* and Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*, where Isabel and Rosa Coldfield, respectively, function less as characters than as sites of disruption, where the wounds inflicted and sutured over by a white patriarchy come unsutured. If such analyses prove viable, they might, incidentally, provide a way of addressing formalism itself as a kind of critical suture, for the texts such an approach would probably valorize are either those, like *Pierre* and *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, which have never made it to canonical status because of their failure to achieve organic form, or those, like chapter 5 of *Absalom, Absalom!*, which have until quite recently been marginalized as incomprehensible.³⁰

As for those "othered," the American slave's narrative is widely seen as rehearsing the dominant white culture's ideologies, such as

the self-made man's rise to fame and fortune. But this does not necessarily mean that the subversive agency of such voices is contained by the ideologies they deploy. *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane* (1842),³¹ for example, is not unique in sounding Franklinesque in its record of how self-discipline and an enterprising inventiveness can foster the accumulation of money and independence, although it is a more detailed account than most. Lane reports that he acquired the \$1000.00 necessary to buy himself out of bondage by selling peaches at \$.30 a basket to begin with, and then escalating his commercial enterprise by selling pipes of his own design and tobacco mixed to his own special formula, both at prices that undercut his competitors. But the central fact of Lane's entrepreneurial career is that it is motivated by the desire not to *make* but to *buy* himself. In the voice of the ex-slave narrator, the harsh facts of a commodified society are blurred out. Lane's narrative internalizes the authority of his white audience by speaking within the terms of its ideology; at the same time, it refracts that ideology through a language peculiar to a man who has been a slave—a language in which both manhood and freedom have a precisely stated price.

The point is that there is a difference made when the voice rehearsing the dominant culture's ideology is that of an ex-slave. I don't mean to suggest that these oppositional discourses are pure expressions of resistance; they are, rather, multivoiced discourses in which both dominant and oppositional ideological strains are at work. By no means are they invulnerable to the neutralizing forces of incorporation and recontainment. But once they are seen as belonging to the same heterogeneous discursive field as their dominant opponents, while they may finally be contained, they cannot be denied agency.

I am keenly aware that I have provided little more than some notes toward an alternative model. I am even more keenly, and painfully, aware that the necessarily collective task of addressing Williams's "full field" of "language in history" within the current framework of literary studies, not to mention the current political context of the academy itself, poses formidable problems. On the one hand, it seems melodramatic to take ourselves and our tasks so seriously as to believe that it matters that much how we approach them. On the other hand, to use the readily available tools that modernism has granted the intellectual for ironic self-effacement in order to refuse a responsibility whose measure we cannot take with any certainty poses other kinds of risks. The dilemma was posed by Henry Adams when he remarked, "A parent gives life, but as parent, gives no more. A murderer takes life, but his deed

stops there. A teacher affects eternity; he can never tell where his influence stops."³² Adams himself resolved the problem by using self-effacement as a mask for a hubris he could neither tolerate nor escape. In his recent testimony regarding "Paul de Man's War," Jacques Derrida addresses, and reveals, the costs and the implications of the same dilemma.³³ It is very easy to regard Derrida's treatment of "responsibility" as a display of astonishing hubris; the opening pages of the article elevate the "war" over de Man's early journalism to the rather improbable level of a world-historical event. But it is less easy, and more important, to recognize that such a dismissal of Derrida's response can serve to relieve us of the kind of responsibility he is urging us to confront, the kind of responsibility Paul de Man evaded. We may not experience ourselves as agents, but as Derrida puts it, we may still "have to answer [repondre] for what is happening to us" (594).

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NOTES

- 1 This paper reprises and tries to move beyond the argument conducted in "Are We Being Historical Yet?" *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 87 (1988), 743-86.
- 2 Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Historicism* (Chicago, 1980), xiii.
- 3 See Jacques Derrida, "Racism's Last Word," *Critical Inquiry*, 12 (1985), 290-99; and "But Beyond . . ." (Open Letter to Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon), *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), 155-70.
- 4 See Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory," *Cultural Critique*, 6 (1987), 51-64.
- 5 Houston Baker, "Caliban's Triple Play," *Critical Inquiry*, 13 (1986), 183.
- 6 Raymond Williams, *Writing and Society* (London, 1984), p. 189.
- 7 Louis Montrose, "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History," *English Literary Renaissance*, 16 (1986), 8; Stephen Greenblatt, Introduction, *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance* (Norman, Okla., 1982), p. 5.
- 8 Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (Chicago, 1980), p. 6.
- 9 Edward Pechter, "The New Historicism and its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama," *PMLA*, 102 (1987), 292.
- 10 Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion," *Glyph*, 8 (1981), 49; hereafter cited in text.
- 11 Steven Mullaney, "Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance," *Representations*, 3 (1983), 43; hereafter cited in text.
- 12 Walter Cohen, "Political Criticism of Shakespeare," in *Shakespeare Reproduced: The Text in History and Ideology*, ed. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor (New York, 1987), p. 34.
- 13 Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and*

Other Writings, 1972-1977, ed. and tr. Colin Gordon (New York, 1980), p. 119; hereafter cited in text.

- 14 See Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, tr. Robert Hurley (New York, 1978).
- 15 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford, 1977), p. 125.
- 16 Michel Foucault, "Revolutionary Action: 'Until Now,'" in *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice*, ed. Donald F. Bouchard, tr. Donald F. Bouchard and Sherry Simon (Ithaca, 1977), p. 222.
- 17 Michel Foucault, "Two Lectures," in *Power/Knowledge*, pp. 81, 85; hereafter cited in text.
- 18 See Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, tr. Steven F. Rendall (Berkeley, 1984); and *Heterologies: Discourse on the Other*, tr. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, 1986). On the critique of everyday life, see the excellent collection edited by Alice Kaplan and Kristin Ross for *Yale French Studies*, 73 (1987). The recent work in feminist film theory is especially rich, too much so to do justice to it here, but among the many excellent sources are Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender* (Bloomington, 1987), Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror* (Bloomington, 1988), and Mary Ann Doane, *The Desire to Desire* (Bloomington, 1987). Good collections are *Studies in Entertainment*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington, 1986) and *Feminism and Film Theory*, ed. Constance Penley (New York, 1988). The central text by Ernesto LaClau and Chantal Mouffe is *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, tr. Winston Moore and Paul Cammack (London, 1985). See also "Building a New Left: An Interview with Ernesto LaClau," *Strategies*, 1 (1988), 10-28. Paul Smith's *Discerning the Subject* (Minneapolis, 1988) provides a useful argument and overview in relation to the issue of the discursive subject.
- 19 Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review*, 146 (1984), 60.
- 20 John Berger, "The Moment of Cubism," in *The Look of Things*, ed. Nikos Stangos (New York, 1971), pp. 150-59.
- 21 Tony Bennett, "Texts in History: The Determination of Readings and Their Texts," in *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, ed. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge, 1987), p. 66. Such a lament, for example, emerges in Greenblatt's rephrasing of Kafka: "There is subversion, no end of subversion, but not for us" ("Invisible Bullets," p. 53).
- 22 See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, 1971), p. 111ff.
- 23 LaClau and Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, pp. 134, 139; "Building a New Left: An Interview with Ernesto LaClau," p. 20.
- 24 LaClau and Mouffe, pp. 134-35, 136.
- 25 "Building a New Left: An Interview with Ernesto LaClau," p. 17-18.
- 26 LaClau and Mouffe, pp. 142, 106.
- 27 Foucault, "Two Lectures," p. 82.
- 28 See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin, 1981).
- 29 In *Discerning the Subject*, Paul Smith has refocused the vexed issue of the subject from a related vantage point, arguing that "ideological interpellations may fail to produce 'a subject' or even a firm subject position. Rather, what is produced by ideological interpellation is contradiction, and through a recognition of the contradictory and dialectical elements of subjectivity it may be possible to think a concept of the agent" (p. 37). See also Teresa de Lauretis's description of a "heterogeneous and heteronomous" "identity" that might be usable as a "strategy" for a feminist critical practice, in *Feminist Studies, Critical Studies*, ed. Teresa de Lauretis (Bloomington,

1986), p. 9. But see also Kaja Silverman's questioning of these pluralist models in *The Acoustic Mirror*.

³⁰ For a provocative treatment of Rosa Goldfield's chapter in *Absalom, Absalom!*, see Linda S. Kauffman, *Discourses of Desire* (Ithaca, 1986), pp. 241-78.

³¹ See Lunsford Lane, *The Narrative of Lunsford Lane* (Boston, 1842).

³² Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams*, ed. Ernest Samuels (Boston, 1974), p. 300.

³³ Jacques Derrida, "Like the Sound of the Sea Deep within a Shell: Paul de Man's War," tr. Peggy Kamuf, *Critical Inquiry*, 14 (1988), 590-652.

Response to Professor Carolyn Porter

Rena Fraden

HISTORY AND LITERATURE have made the headlines recently. The middlebrow press—*Newsweek*, *The Nation*, and *The New Republic*—have all printed articles concerning the de Man affair, scandal, or crisis, depending on your point of view.¹ In the face of revelations about de Man's historical past—he seems to have written about 100 articles and book reviews for Nazi collaborationist journals in 1940 and 1941, a small number of which were explicitly anti-Semitic—the reconstruction of the meaning of deconstruction is underway. Friends of de Man and enemies of deconstruction are hotly debating what connections there are, if any, between de Man's history, his politics, and his theory.

Geoffrey Hartman in *The New Republic* defends deconstruction from the charges of historical amorality at least in the realm of theory. Hartman also offers a reading of de Man's later, theoretical writings that is rhetorically remarkable for its generosity toward his ex-colleague, its sympathy with de Man's particular historical burden. Hartman is careful not to assert but only to suggest that it "may yet turn out that in the later (de Man) essays we glimpse the fragments of a great confession" (30). What emerges is a new reading of de Man, the allegories turned into the confessions. Hartman sees now in his work something that was not there before because he now knows something about de Man's history. Another voice, an oppositional voice comes into the record.

David Lehman in *Newsweek* skewers de Man and deconstruction and trumpets de Man's theories as nothing but a highfalutin' cover-up of historical immorality. With deconstruction defeated, what will be attacked next? Lehman writes:

Opponents of deconstruction think the movement is finished. As one Ivy League professor gleefully exclaims, "deconstruction turned out to be the thousand-year Reich that lasted 12 years." What's next? Berkeley professor Frederick Crews sees the rise of "the new militant cultural materialism of the left." That school prescribes the study of books not because of their moral or esthetic value but because they permit the professor to advance a political, often Marxist agenda. Crews contends that there's more than