

The Activist and the Actor: The Re-Authorization of Historical Criticism in New Historicism*

Let me start by pointing out what I find exciting and suggestive about New Historicism. As somebody working in cultural and literary studies, I see it as the first approach in a long time to offer a new way of dealing with what, methodologically speaking, remains one of the major challenges in the writing of cultural and literary history, namely the question of the representativeness of one's material. This, in turn, may be called the key problem of authorization in Cultural Studies. Only if we establish a convincing claim that our material is telling us something significant about the culture from which it is taken will it become relevant for cultural analysis. There is no reason why we should be interested in the thick description of a cockfight in Bali unless we think that we can draw conclusions from it that go beyond its mere self-contained presence.¹ It may be argued in fact that the history of a discipline, such as literary or Cultural Studies, might be most fruitfully rewritten as the history of the changing ways in which the cultural representativeness of interpretive objects is determined.

In American Studies, due to its origins in intellectual history, such representativeness was for a long time promised by the belief that the work of art functions as a condensed expression of its culture and therefore enables us to gain an insight into the true nature of American society. Subsequent stages in American Studies have tried hard to shed this legacy. In the ideological criticism of the 1970s and 1980s, the American myth, which for the so-called myth and symbol school of the 1950s still defines American national identity, was redefined as ideology; the best way to understand American society no longer lies in intellectual but in social and economic history. Accordingly, a

* Published first in the journal *Monatshefte* 84 (1992) as part of a special issue on the New Historicism. A German version appeared in *New Historicism. Literaturgeschichte als Poetik der Kultur*. Ed. Moritz Baßler. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1995. 229-50. The text has been slightly revised for this volume.

1 The reference is, of course, to the essay "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight" by Clifford Geertz. Geertz and his key concepts of "thick description" and "local knowledge" had a major influence on New Historicism, together with the work of Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault.

text is identified as representative not by validating it as myth or symbol but by defining its relation to a subtext of social or economic analysis. There is a price to be paid for this critique, however, namely the potential deauthorization of cultural expression as a source of oppositional identity. Moreover, cultural differences are obscured by the homogenizing pressures of a national consensus. Hence a more recent shift: What makes a text representative in this third stage still depends on the authority of a given subtext of social analysis. But the relations between culture and society are redefined. Instead of a mimetic relation between base and superstructure, however elaborately modified, we encounter a horizontal refiguration of social relations as that of center and margin – a refiguration in which those texts are considered culturally most meaningful which express this marginality most authentically. Thus, if one wants to understand the true nature of American culture and society, one has to go to forms of cultural expression that stand in some kind of opposition to the center or unmask the center's repressive dominance. Victims have become actors, and "representativeness" is seen as an ideologically suspicious claim for a national unity by which difference is suppressed. However, as a methodological problem, the question of representativeness cannot be evaded. It crops up again when the resisting subcultures have to make choices about the texts that articulate their situation best. Ironically, these choices remain pre-determined by the center-margin frame within which they are made: those texts will be most representative that resist the hegemonial pressures of the center most forcefully and effectively.

What New Historicism has contributed to this development is to eliminate, at least in theory, the dominance, or, if you want, the tyranny of a historical subtext in Cultural Studies by suggesting new and more flexible ways of linking culture and society. As is well known by now, New Historicists prefer images of exchange and circulation over metaphors of reflection and replication. In consequence, there is no longer a fixed model of relation but a new freedom of linkage, or, in the words of Catherine Gallagher, "no fixed hierarchy of cause and effect as [the New Historicists] trace the connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of subjectivity" (37). In this context, it seems very much to the point to enrich the term New Historicism by the concept of a cultural poetics, as Stephen Greenblatt himself suggests, because the new mode of establishing relations bears, at least to a certain degree, resemblance to the freedom the poet has in bringing together signs in an unforeseen and pleasantly surprising way. Fittingly, Greenblatt's own texts are characterized by a dramatic structure of surprise and suspense, drawing a great deal of their interest and impact from an unexpected and highly creative linkage of discourses. The gain can be seen not only in new ways of relating a diversity of cultural material but also in the successfully realized goal of making this material newly relevant. One of the exciting prospects about this practice lies in its opening up of new possibilities in the

exploration of that elusive dimension of our life which stands at the center of Cultural Studies: the search for connections between seemingly isolated signs and events. Such a “poetic” mode of linkage has important political consequences. According to New Historicists, it is the best (perhaps the only remaining) way to uncover the hidden connections and thus the secret complicity of a wide variety of discourses which, on the surface, appear to belong to entirely different spheres of life (such as, for example, law and literature). One implication clearly is that one reason for the power of the system lies in the fact that this complicity has remained hidden until now.

It would be a mistake, then, to discuss New Historicism merely as another method or practice of cultural analysis. No method exists for its own sake; it always serves a purpose or goal that is to be realized by it. And so it is with new historicist interpretations. They, too, whether in English Renaissance Studies or in American Studies, do not simply explore a variety of new relations for the sake of plurality. Rather, their exploration of this variety and the forms of “poetic” linkage at which they arrive in this process show, as all texts do and certainly all good poetry does, a certain pattern and direction. This is merely another way of saying that despite New Historicism’s rhetoric of dehierarchization there clearly is a set of assumptions that governs its attribution of meaning.² If, in keeping with their own antifoundationalist claims, new historicist approaches have successfully challenged certain historical subtexts that have shaped and often strangled historical interpretations, they also reveal that it is difficult, if not impossible, to completely dispense with a subtext that provides meaning and significance.³ The difference among various approaches in historical criticism may therefore lie not as much in the presence or absence of a subtext as in the role a subtext plays in authorizing specific forms of cultural analysis.

Seen from this perspective, the major theoretical problem New Historicism raises is how a deliberately dehierarchized interpretation can be authorized

² When Anton Kaes, one of the scholars who enthusiastically propagated the New Historicist agenda, writes, for example, that New Historicism stresses (and, by implication, “rescues”) the “non-systematic, contradictory, contingent, even accidental” [das “Nicht-Systematische, Widersprüchliche, Kontingente, ja Zufällige” (Kaes 263)], this is only half of the truth. For clearly, these elements are not randomly chosen, as Kaes suggests. They have their common denominator in their potential to obstruct the (idea and reality of a) systemic order. An anecdotal mode or representation, for example, makes sense only in the context of a theory about a particular function of the anecdotal – for example, to retrieve aspects of history that have remained unknown so far, because the hegemonial system has suppressed them. Besides Geertz, Williams, and Foucault, the social historian Carlo Ginzburg has therefore been a strong influence on Greenblatt’s version of New Historicism.

³ As Heather Dubrow has pointed out, New Historicists even have a philosophy of history which consists of a “narrative of succeeding hegemonies” and provides an interpretive frame within which key concepts of New Historicism acquire their function and significance (Dubrow 219).

as valid, relevant, or at least interesting. To be sure, this is by no means a particular problem of a new historicist procedure. It is a problem any approach faces in which meaning is no longer to be derived from, and made representative by, the authority of an (explicit) master narrative. In this sense, I am interested in New Historicism not as a fellow historicist (which I am not) but as an observer of American culture who regards this new mode of cultural analysis as an ingenious response to, as well as a manifestation of, certain developments of cultural dehierarchization that challenge established ways of assigning meaning and significance to cultural material. The most intriguing of these challenges lies in the paradox that, as the result of a strange dialectic, cultural dehierarchization creates a fresh need to find new forms of authorization. One of the most interesting aspects about New Historicism, it seems to me, is that in order to achieve this end it goes in two directions simultaneously, reflecting its mediating stand between a radical political criticism and a more personal mode of individual self-assertion, or, to put it differently, its mediation between the scholar as activist and the scholar as actor.

Obviously, one way of authorizing dehierarchization in cultural analysis is to draw on a philosopher who makes a convincing case for that very same procedure. For New Historicism this appears to be Michel Foucault, whose lectures at the University of California in Berkeley seem to have provided the main theoretical inspiration for New Historicism. The relation is not a simple one, however, and certainly not one of mere replication. What is notable about Stephen Greenblatt's work in this context is that he is not just trying to affirm the authority of this subtext but that he is using it as a point of departure for an ongoing investigation into its usefulness as a mode and model of cultural analysis. More than a method, then, it is used as a heuristic device. Still, there is a pattern and common theme by which these explorations are tied together. It is striking, for example, that New Historicism does not seem interested in Foucault's wide-ranging reconstruction of the discursive formation of a period. Instead, the main interest lies in the conclusions Foucault draws from this work on the possibility (or rather impossibility) of an oppositional stand in society. His work, then, is used for special purposes. It provides the main source of inspiration for assessing the dilemmas of radical resistance in a social system that seems to assimilate and contain dissent all too easily and is suspected of producing opposition as one of its effects. If, despite its somewhat misleading name, New Historicism is not as much in the business of providing historical knowledge as in using historical material to support its claims about the relationship between literature and politics, then its main source of authorization must depend on the status and desirability of the political role staged in, and confirmed by, its own interpretations. The use of Foucault for a discussion of the problems and pitfalls of radicalism may serve as an explanation why almost all critical comments on New Historicism center on its usefulness and effectiveness as an oppositional gesture, that is, on

its credentials as the correct political stand or form of oppositional criticism. And this, in turn, may explain why some of these discussions are so strikingly emotional and unpleasantly aggressive. A crucial question of the self-definition of the 1960s generation is at stake here, and therefore the debate touches on notoriously difficult, emotionally charged matters of identity and identification, of self-image and self-esteem.

If there is a new paradigm in Cultural Studies, then, it would seem to be one that is primarily concerned with the challenge of developing a new and different kind of oppositional criticism, one that would go beyond the “exhausted oppositional criticism” (Fisher 180) whose demise Philip Fisher has envisaged somewhat prematurely on the dust jacket of Walter Benn Michaels’s book *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism*. In this difficult task, New Historicism attempts to strike a complicated balance that, because of its attempt to acknowledge the complexity of the problem, appeals to some, including myself, but is clearly not radical enough for others. On the one hand, there is a reluctance to idealize oppositional gestures because, following Foucault, “one of the most powerful themes of this New Historicism has been the idea that societies exert control over their subjects not just by imposing constraints on them but by predetermining the ways they attempt to rebel against those constraints ...” (Graff 168-169). On the other hand, this clever containment also provides the subversive and the marginal with a voice and thus, strangely but plausibly enough, functions as a mode of empowering it as an expressive cultural force.

Generally speaking, one may say that New Historicism offers a more moderate and compromising version of Foucault which, despite its refusal to regard literature as a site of resistance, leaves at least some room for considering elements of subversion. The modification may be attributed to the different contexts in which these two perspectives were developed. While Foucault’s theory of power is clearly influenced by the need to outradicalize the structuralist Marxists (who, in turn, had already outradicalized the orthodox Marxists), the New Historicists had to locate themselves in a primarily academic field at the moment of the movement’s inception. They are no longer speaking for a political or cultural avantgarde but are concerned with the task of launching a professional elite. In fact, one of the reasons for the appeal of New Historicism may be that it successfully combines two crucial and sometimes conflicting sources of self-esteem which in other approaches often seem to present the critic with a painful choice: that of the radical and that of the successful professional. Ironically enough, one may even argue that within a professional context a strict application of Foucault creates its own unforeseen necessity to re-empower literature, at least to a certain extent, for if one denies the idea of a special potential of literature altogether, one also risks having no object left at all for one’s own professional work. In this sense, it is fitting to speak of an Americanized Foucault, that is, a

Foucault rewritten for the needs of a professional culture.⁴ It does not seem exaggerated to say that this fine-tuning of our generation's oppositionalism leads to the best of both worlds. As its reception shows, New Historicism is very much a part of the political agenda of the 1968 generation, but in a much more conciliatory and "conservative" way than other approaches, and thus it does not antagonize to the same degree as some of its more radical competitors.

This raises the question of how, i.e. on what grounds, New Historicism can authorize itself and its interpretations as more adequate, plausible, or representative than those of its radical competition? One possibility would be to enter into a discussion of the merits of the different social theories underlying these competing approaches. Clearly, this is the level on which cultural materialists would like to lead the discussion. In a way, however, they are missing the point, because, as I have tried to show, New Historicism is not merely a replication of Foucault that could be countered with Marx or Althusser. But if Foucault's authority is kept, as it seems, deliberately "soft," a second, complementary source of authorization is needed. This brings us to an important point, for if New Historicists avoid validating their own interpretations by relying on the authority of a subtext or master narrative, then the only remaining source of authorization is how well they bring across their own interpretation of a text and its historical function. Or, to put it differently, what emerges as a second major source of authorization is the element of interpretive performance. Again, this view seems to be confirmed by the critical reception New Historicism has found. As a rule, critics show themselves somewhat skeptical and uneasy about the evidence the New Historicists present, but nevertheless they praise many of their interpretations for their performative qualities.⁵

What can be witnessed here is a shift from method to performance as a source of authorization. It has not come about because New Historicists have found a clever way of getting around strict methodological demands, but because such a shift is a logical consequence of cultural dehierarchization. Inevitably, in a radically dehierarchized cultural field new modes of authorization have to be developed, because a situation in which everything is accepted as equally valid or true cannot be imagined and would be anthropologically unbearable. These new modes, however, will most likely be of

4 This is not to say that American society has a monopoly on professionalization which is, of course, a characteristic feature of modernity. However, in American academic life, the professionalization of the humanities was developed much earlier than anywhere else. The so-called Bologna process of the European community is an attempt to catch up with these developments.

5 One example is the, on the whole, generous review of Greenblatt's book *Shakespearean Negotiations* by Frank Kermode, which contains a phrase that can be taken as something like the definite brief summary of New Historicism: "This strikes me as more engaging than plausible ..." (Kermode 32).

an aesthetic kind because, in the final analysis, they have to convince by and through themselves. Ironically enough, the project of cultural dehierarchization in which, among other things, the work of art loses its privileged position within a culture leads to a far-reaching aestheticizing of all aspects of life, including acts of interpretation. This also provides an answer to our initial question about criteria of representativeness, for if we can no longer assign representative qualities to a single text by pointing out its exemplary relation to a cultural whole, then poetic linkage must provide this representativeness in an act of metonymization. Whatever is presented in new and “powerful” patterns of combination is likely to result in a *Gestalterfahrung*, that is, in an experience of unexpected insight that convinces as evidence by the sheer impact of its physical appearance and presence.

Such a mode of authorization must also affect the historical knowledge New Historicism provides. For if interpretive performance becomes a primary source of authorization, it follows that historical knowledge is an effect of how well and how convincingly it has been created in the act of “poetic” linkage. This “poetic” authorization may be grasped more clearly by comparing Foucault’s typical procedure with that of the New Historicists. In Foucault’s case, we have the attempt of a systematic mapping of the discursive field because the whole formation has to be reconstructed if one sign or event can no longer represent the others. Dehierarchization thus leads to an almost unlimited expansion of the field of investigation. In New Historicism, on the other hand, historical knowledge emerges as the result of a metonymic procedure in which a single text or event stands in place of a whole discursive field.⁶ The loss of systematic linkage, however, has to be made up by means of interpretive performance. Yet if the decision whether we accept something as plausible historical analysis or not depends on the performative quality of the argument, then history is not only textualized, which is a word for the mere act of encoding it, but also aestheticized, which, in contrast, is a mode of authorization, that is, a mode of establishing value and validity. The activist, we may say, needs the actor to step in and help out.

Again, it is important to note that this tendency is not a particular problem of New Historicism. Rather, it is a logical consequence of a broad cultural development toward dehierarchization. It is, in other words, not the result of oversight or neglect but must be seen as an effect of a prior theoretical choice, the price one has to pay, so to speak, for certain gains made possible by that choice. Clearly, the interdependence between dehierarchization and the growing importance of performance is a phenomenon that affects not only historical knowledge but has begun to transform the role of political and social authority as well. These changes in modes of authorization can be seen as an outgrowth of an ever-accelerating process of modernization, and since it is a process that is most advanced in the United States, it seems justified to

⁶ See Walter Cohen’s text “Political Criticism of Shakespeare,” esp. 38.

use the term “Americanization” in describing it.⁷ That the “aestheticization” of political and social authority may have reached an advanced stage of development in the U.S. was of course dramatically accentuated in the Reagan years. In turning concepts such as theatricality or self-fashioning into key terms of analysis, New Historicism acknowledges these social developments much more perceptively than other recent approaches. It is therefore only another confirmation of a basic new historicist insight if one points out to what extent New Historicism may be embedded in the phenomenon it wants to analyze.

However, the problem may be even more complicated than that. An important part of the special interest Stephen Greenblatt’s work deserves lies in the fact that he is very much aware of the problem and responds to it in an ingenious way. In view of the observation that cultural authorization is increasingly dependent on, and staged as, performance, there is a wonderful logic in the fact that his work is mainly concerned with the theater because the theater allows him not only to acknowledge the cultural force and function of theatricality but also to authorize his own way of dealing with it. For Greenblatt, the theatrical is the cultural phenomenon in which the intricate interaction of subversion and containment is most clearly visible. Thus, it makes sense to endow the interpretation which is trying to capture this interaction without elevating itself to a meta-level above it (because this would contradict its own antifoundationalist premises) with a “theatrical” mode as well. In this way, the theatrical can become the *mise en abyme* for a specifically new historicist procedure. A critique of performance as a source of authorization may thus be beside the point. In rescuing an author like Shakespeare from a naive oppositional criticism and turning his work into a paradigmatic case for the interplay between seemingly opposed functions of literature, New Historicism also validates its own procedure.

Yet again, this brilliant move may have its price. By making Shakespeare the paradigm of the theatrical and its ambivalent function in society, the new historicist argument appears to remain tied to the topic and mode of the theatrical, at least as far as English Renaissance studies are concerned. This would explain Greenblatt’s almost exclusive focus on it. Its crucial role for his argument and position may become clearer by comparing his approach briefly with that of New Historicists in the field of American literature because it has always been part of the Americanists’ sorry fate and deplorable marginality in English departments that they do not have a Shakespeare at their disposal. For a New Historicist dealing with American literature the theater can thus hardly serve as the main source of methodological inspiration and cultural authorization. What, then, does a New Historicist do without Shakespeare? One answer – another brilliant one I think – has been the revival of Dreiser,

⁷ I have tried to describe some characteristic elements of this development in my essay on “The Americanization of Literary Studies.”

especially of his novel *Sister Carrie* and its redefinition from a melodramatic tale of victimization to that of a successful staging of the self. This “theatricalization” of Dreiser, it seems to me, is most effectively achieved by Philip Fisher (Fisher 1985), who has pursued a similar approach in an essay on “Appearing and Disappearing” in the culture of the Gilded Age, but also in Walter Benn Michaels’s well-known essay on “*Sister Carrie*’s Popular Economy.” Interestingly enough, in other essays on American naturalism in Michaels’s book on American literature at the turn of the century, a much more melodramatic version of the conflict between containment and subversion emerges. Where this conflict is conceptualized as an inner difference that is homologous to unresolvable contradictions of the period, the balance between subversion and containment tends to shift toward a scenario of containment which appears to be much more prevalent in new historicist approaches to American literature than in English Renaissance studies. It is striking, at any rate, to realize that New Historicism in American Studies appears to prefer realism, naturalism, or sentimentalism, that is, texts marked by strong control or melodramatic tensions, as the primary material (and thus source of authorization) for its interpretation of the political and historical function of art in American society. In a metonymic mode of argumentation that is dependent on its interpretive object to authorize itself such choices literally create the society one wants to describe. The point here is not to compare the respective merits of these approaches in Renaissance and American Studies but to draw attention to their dependence on the fiction that is to make their cultural analysis plausible.

We seem to have arrived at a strange paradox: a political criticism that authorizes itself primarily by an aesthetic mode of argumentation.⁸ However, there is nothing to unmask here, since New Historicists not only acknowledge the fact but also provide good reasons why they proceed in that way. This is anything but a new formalism then, since its procedure is not the result of a flight from social theory. Quite on the contrary, it is its rather consistent application. In doing so, however, New Historicism may also reveal a problem, again not one of its own making, but of the general cultural development of which it is a part. That problem I see in a growing tendency to use history and culture as a realm of projection for the purpose of formulating and authorizing a satisfactory political role or self-image. Such a mirror-effect in which the interpreter uses the text to talk about him- or herself or his or her generation’s concerns is, of course, an inherent and inevitable element of any interpretive activity. In fact, it is one reason why considerations of theory and method were introduced into literary criticism in the first place, namely in order to establish principles that would be able to resist mere projection.

⁸ For an analysis of other examples of the same tendency in contemporary culture to fuse the political and the aesthetic, so that the aesthetic is (only another effect of) the political and the political is aestheticized, see my essay “Radical Aesthetics.”

The antifoundationalist redefinition of theory as the will to power, the transformation of method into performance, and the radical elimination of the aesthetic as a specific mode of communication with its own rules and criteria all work against such resistance – and so does a primarily metonymic mode of cultural analysis. The point here is not to criticize the work that emerges as a result. The point is to ask whether history should merely serve as a source of authorization for our generation's agenda or whether it should not also be reactivated as a source of resistance against the self-evident authority of this agenda. If discourse is inevitably historical, New Historicism must also have its own historicity. Its critical energy should thus not be limited to the project of a new authorization of historical criticism, but also to a clarification of the function that historical criticism has for the humanities at the present time.

Works Cited

- Cohen, Walter. "Political Criticism of Shakespeare." *Shakespeare Reproduced. The Text in History and Ideology*. Eds. Jean E. Howard and Marion F. O'Connor. London: Methuen, 1987. 18-46.
- Dubrow, Heather. "Friction and Faction: New Directions for New Historicism." *Monatshefte* 84.2 (1992): 212-19.
- Fisher, Philip. *Hard Facts. Setting and Form in the American Novel*. New York: Oxford UP, 1985.
- "Appearing and Disappearing in Public: Social Space in Late-Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture." *Reconstructing American Literary History*. Ed. Sacvan Bercovitch. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1986. 155-88.
- Fluck, Winfried. "The Americanization of Literary Studies." *American Studies International* 28.2 (1990): 9-22.
- "Radical Aesthetics." *REAL* 10 (1994): 31-47.
- Gallagher, Catherine. "Marxism and The New Historicism." *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. New York: Routledge, 1989. 37-48.
- Geertz, Clifford. "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight." *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books, 1973. 412-453.
- Graff, Gerald. "Co-optation." *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. New York: Routledge, 1989. 168-181.
- Greenblatt, Stephen. "Towards a Poetics of Culture." *The New Historicism*. Ed. H. Aram Veesser. New York: Routledge, 1989. 1-14.
- Kaes, Anton. "New Historicism: Literaturgeschichte im Zeichen der Postmoderne?" *New Historicism. Literaturgeschichte als Poetik der Kultur*. Ed. Moritz Baßler. Frankfurt/M.: Fischer, 1995. 251-63.
- Kermode, Frank. "Review of Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*." *The New Republic*, 29 February 1988: 32.
- Michaels, Walter Benn. *The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism. American Literature at the Turn of the Century*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1987.
- "Sister Carrie's Popular Economy." *Critical Inquiry* 7 (1980): 373-90.