

Torn Halves: Political Conflict in Literary and Cultural Theory

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Chapter 7

New Historicism: History and the Counter Culture

Some time ago I was sent a poster for a Higher Education Teachers of English (HETE) conference, the topic for which was boldly proclaimed as *The End of the Grand Narratives*. I put the poster up outside my office door, and after a few days noticed that someone, no doubt a post-modern pedant, had scored out the final 's' of the title, correcting it to *The End of the Grand Narrative*. The graffiti-writer's point was presumably that for the Grand Narrative to be plural is by definition a contradiction in terms. I assumed at first that correcting the typo concluded the matter. But on reading more closely I realized that that extra 's' was a symptomatic slip. For the blurb for the conference read as follows: 'The shift of "English" to "Literature" and/or "Cultural Studies" signals just one "grand narrative", one totalizing discourse, which has been fragmented in the course of the last two decades'. If the grand narrative of English has shifted to Literature and/or Cultural Studies, then all that has happened is that there are now simply two

narratives instead of one, each if anything even grander than the last—except that if it is indeed a question of ‘*just one* “grand narrative”, one totalizing discourse, which has been fragmented’ then, if it was merely one of them, it can’t have been that grand or that totalizing in the first place. This contradiction, which had seeped into the title of the conference, is not just a question of semantics: rather it touches upon a characteristic difficulty in the contemporary theorization of culture whereby totalization or fragmentation apparently cannot be thought, celebrated or denounced, without the admission that their opposite also simultaneously holds true. The poster presented a perfect example of the synchronous oscillation of subversion and containment within the institution, whereby subversive texts simultaneously generate (or repeat) the orthodox positions that they are supposed to disrupt but which continue to contain them safely—a structure which in turn calls into question the usefulness of the distinction between subversive and orthodox texts.

The cultural-institutional motif of subversion and containment is most often identified with New Historicism, already yesterday’s vogue literary theory. Why should this be the particular narrative that it tells? New Historicism proclaims a return to history, and with it, therefore, comes the end of the long imagined antithesis between history and theory. As if history had not always been theoretical, or theory was not always historical: but their opposition has been a necessary critical fiction of our times. Institutionally, at least, New Historicism has shown that theory need not be anti-historical: indeed its great attraction lies in the fact that it

seems to have avoided the problems of historicity altogether, achieving an apparently effortless movement from the writing subject to the historical domain outside. As a form of historical criticism, its focus has been upon the articulation of history and culture, a new kind of cultural politics that resituates canonical literary works in relation to other, non-literary, writings of their historical period and also to the practices of contemporary social and political institutions. Rather than assuming history to be a somehow self-evident 'background' for literature, new historicists consider literary texts to be embedded within the cultural system. The question remains, however, of New Historicism's relation to history. For some, it seems, any mention of 'history' is enough to count someone as a new historicist—but as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes, 'when people talk about history, that proper name is generally not opened up'.¹

The problem begins with the name, 'New Historicism'. Historicism as a term has a complex range of meanings and historical references; the diversity of definitions of the New Historicism obviously arises from different assumptions as to what historicism signifies. Sometimes it is used simply as a way of emphasizing the importance of history in the understanding of events or texts, with the implicit presupposition that such events or texts must therefore be to some extent historically determined. But more usually, 'Historicism' implies a theory in which history itself is considered to be governed by general laws, and involves a philosophical scheme imposed as an underlying form upon events. Condorcet, Herder, Hegel, and Marx, for example, are some of the more notable philosophers of history who

saw history as a teleological narrative of a progressive emergence of civilization, nation, reason or socialism. The term 'New Historicist' might then seem to set up a return to a historicist legacy in this second sense of the term, comparable to its current limited versions in the Frankfurt School and Cultural Materialism. The latter, although often associated and sometimes even identified with New Historicism, is concerned to trace examples of the conflict between hegemonic and subversive forces in historical texts, identifiable as parallel to the forms of political struggle in our own day. It can therefore represent a new version of the long tradition of Marxist reflection theory, although at its most radical cultural materialists would see history as, in Ernst Bloch's phrase, 'the persistently indicated', inciting and inspiring the political objectives of the present.

Given the sustained theoretical critique of historicism since the end of the nineteenth century, and the low standing of the historicism of twentieth-century historians such as Spengler or Toynbee, its apparent reaffirmation by the latest mode of criticism might seem surprising. In this respect, the term 'new historicist' may be misleading, for in many ways the critical movement continues the anti-historicist tradition, eschewing grand causal or narrative schemas in favour of the tracing of synchronic links between different cultural practices, showing the processes of circulation and exchange between them, and emphasizing in particular the intricate, though not simply causal, relation between capitalism and aesthetic production. In the background here is the Foucault of *The Order of Things*, who argues that knowledge is constructed according to certain

historical limits, and that rather than progressing and evolving it is simply transformed from *episteme* to *episteme*. This brings us to the third meaning of historicism, in which it amounts to a claim for historical enquiry as an understanding of events in their unique particularity, as in the radical historicism of Ranke and Droyson. The German historicists, often linked to nineteenth-century positivism, combined a new cultural relativism with an identification of history with freedom. It has been argued that by eschewing any totalizing theory of history, they remained passive before its incomprehensibility, and thus sustained a certain conservatism.² Foucault himself is sometimes described as a radical positivist, so it is inevitable that the passivity often alleged in his accounts of both *epistemes* and power should be compared to the inertia of historicism in this third sense. Critics such as David Norbrook have asked to what extent New Historicism, in which history is presented as a plurality of moments, with no theory of change or of transitions, endorses the same resignation.³ It is certainly the case that New Historicism frequently espouses history as a series of punctual incidents, a 'succession of modernities', and tends to see culture and history in synchronic terms, setting aside its relation to any linear processual schemas, and eschewing meaning except in so far as it is made in each instant—or in the analogies drawn by the new historicist's own analyses.

The dissonance in the term 'historicism' operates in the different positions taken by the New Historicists themselves, in which some return to Greenblatt's more Foucauldian or anthropological account of the historical relation of literature to other cultural practices and others

to the historicism of cultural materialism.⁴ In practice, therefore, New Historicism hovers uncertainly, if productively, between being a return to history in its positivistic singularity and particularity, and a return to the long tradition in which history is formulated as an overall narrative with its own meaning and necessary development.

The complex theoretical and political problems involved in historicism have not, however, for the most part been addressed by New Historicists, which is not to say that the achievements of individual analyses have not been remarkable. What is unusual is that with New Historicism the theory has followed rather than preceded the examples—itsself a good indication of the kind of thinking that distinguishes it from certain precepts of structuralism and many a tedious theory-and-practice textbook. As H. Aram Veesper remarks, while new historicists show a characteristic tendency to critical self-scrutiny, there has been little systematic discussion of their methodology. Veesper's anthology, entitled *The New Historicism*, might therefore have been expected to provide a substantial theorization of the new historical method, but in fact it does not, despite its promise to do so. A number of contributors voice various forms of anxiety with respect to its complex and productive relationship to Marxism and poststructuralism; of these, the account by Stephen Greenblatt, who can justly be said to be the founder of New Historicism, is the outstanding example. Greenblatt makes much of the disinclination of new historicists to establish a theoretical position before proceeding with their analyses. New historicists don't theorize history, so the saying goes, they prefer to do it—

a position which silently (and tellingly) repeats the anti-propositional theories of New Criticism such as 'poetry isn't about experience, it is experience', or 'a poem should not mean, but be'. This substantiates Fredric Jameson's claim that New Historicism is a form of immanent criticism.⁵ But as Hayden White observes, 'to embrace a historical approach to the study of anything entails or implies a distinctive philosophy of history'.⁶ If the implicit politics of New Criticism are anything to go by, these silent presuppositions of New Historicism about history ought to be articulated so that they can be examined critically. What is it, therefore, that the New Historicists do? And what is new about it?

Greenblatt characterizes New Historicism's difference from positivist historical scholarship by its 'openness to theory', while admitting at the same time that its relation to Marxism and poststructuralism (though not, apparently, to anthropology) is 'unresolved and disingenuous'. He seeks to situate New Historicism's theoretical position by specifying its critical relation to these two dominant theoretical camps, which he analyses through the metonymic device of an analysis of Jameson ('Marxism') and Lyotard ('poststructuralism'). The positing of the two theorists in this antithetical way allows Greenblatt to assume a separation between them which he then proceeds to undo. He begins by citing Jameson's argument that 'privatization' constitutes one of capitalism's most enervating effects:

the convenient working distinction between cultural texts that are social and political and those that are not becomes something worse than an error: namely, a symptom and a

reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life.⁷

A typical instance of this sort of process would be Kant's account of the aesthetic in which art is defined as everything that the market is not. Such a demarcation, Greenblatt argues, is not specific to capitalism as such: the separation of cultural from social and political discourses can be found in European society before the seventeenth century, and in many other societies besides. For Jameson, however, the enforcement of this division represents the specific maiming force of capitalism, an argument which Greenblatt suggests

has the resonance of an allegory of the fall of man: once we were whole, agile, integrated ... politics and poetry were one. Then capitalism arose and shattered this luminous, benign totality. The myth echoes throughout Jameson's book, though by the close it has been eschatologically reoriented so that the totality lies not in a past revealed to have always already fallen but in the classless future. A philosophical claim then appeals to an absent empirical event. (3)

As Greenblatt observes, this Biblical vision, so fundamental to a Marxist teleology, has been a prime focus of questioning by poststructuralism which has shown how such an argument must work by a supplementary, always deferring structure which posits the absent plenitude of both an origin and end in order to provide the basis for its own dialectical 'materialist'

schema. But if this has been the basis of the poststructuralist challenge to Marxism, Greenblatt argues that, in his example of Jean-François Lyotard, disagreement simply takes the form of an exact reversal.

Once again, as in Jameson, the question focuses on the differences between the discursive realms of the aesthetic and the political. For Lyotard the problem rather amounts to the way in which capitalism has broken down the distinctions between them, creating a homogeneous totality which no longer allows differentiation and disparity. Greenblatt cites Lyotard's claim that 'Capital is that which wants a single language and a single network, and it never stops trying to present them'.⁸ Yet this, Greenblatt argues, now apparently more sympathetic to Jameson's argument, is a 'monologic' description of capitalism—for it is also capitalism that so insistently inscribes individual identities and demarcates the boundaries that separate them; it is capitalism that undoes the collective identities and values of the community. Both Jameson and Lyotard, he concludes, present monologic descriptions of capitalism, which, in their different ways, amount to equally totalizing arguments—of absolute detotalization and totalization:

Jameson ... finds capitalism at the root of the false differentiation; Lyotard ... finds capitalism at the root of the false integration. History functions in both cases as a convenient anecdotal ornament upon a theoretical structure, and capitalism appears not as a complex social and economic development in the West but as a malign philosophical principle. (5)

Both theorists, therefore, are necessarily oversimplifying, and the question that they ask, which amounts to 'what is the historical relation between art and society?', cannot be answered by a single theoretical formula of the kind that they provide. The clear inference is that empirical history is more complex than theory. It cannot be collapsed into a moral philosophical imperative.

And yet Greenblatt's response is not to attempt himself a mapping of that historical complexity, but rather to provide a dialectical resolution of such Marxism and poststructuralism in strictly theoretical terms. For Greenblatt the problem is not so much the incompatibility of the two theories as their inability 'to come to terms with the contradictions of capitalism'. Although he concedes that in principle both theories define themselves by their focus on such contradictions, he argues that in practice they nevertheless efface it through their production of monological principles, themselves the result of 'theory's search for the obstacle that blocks the realization of its eschatological vision' (5). A new historicist enquiry into the relation of art and society, free of both Marxist nostalgia and post-structuralist paranoia, would, Greenblatt suggests, be able to address the terms of both the contradictory paradigms, of totalization and detotalization, through which capitalism operates. So capitalism's 'complex social and economic development' has been characterized not through empirical history but through a more complicated model.

There is a further disingenuousness at work here in so far as Greenblatt implies that the individual

monolithic stance of two particular arguments of Jameson and Lyotard accurately describes the positions of Marxism and poststructuralism—when both are in their different ways dialectical forms of thought. The combined movements of totalization and detotalization that he delineates as new historicist can easily be found in both Marxism and poststructuralism, and the theorization of their relation to each other is certainly not exclusive to New Historicism as such. Indeed all philosophies of history have been riven by such tensions between since at least the end of the eighteenth century, vacillating between a Rousseauistic pessimism in which history constitutes the force of fragmentation and alienation and a Hegelian-Marxist optimism in which it comprises an emancipatory force for progress. It is worth noting the salutary fact in this regard that while philosophers of freedom produce pessimistic accounts of history, determinists are also generally optimists. In the terms of the opposition he sets up, Greenblatt claims that New Historicism is distinguished from all its predecessors by its ability to see that the two processes operate synchronously. He comments:

For capitalism has characteristically generated neither regimes in which all discourses seem coordinated, nor regimes in which they seem radically isolated or discontinuous, but regimes in which the drive towards differentiation and the drive towards monological organization operate simultaneously, or at least oscillate so rapidly as to create the impression of simultaneity. (6)

This antithetical whirling, he suggests, provides a better foundation for an analysis of the 'relation between art and surrounding discourses in contemporary capitalist culture' which plays upon a 'complex dialectic of differentiation and identity' (7). For Greenblatt this cashes out in a demonstration of the ways in which aesthetic and capitalistic discourses intermingle and flow from one to the other, a circulation that takes the form of a continual movement of flows and blockage, an unending and unresolved struggle between subversion and containment. So the alleged totalizations of Marxism and poststructuralism are set against a Nietzschean schema of an irresolvable oscillation between immanent and transcendent forces.

Greenblatt himself in effect produces a third model here, a whirl of contraries which invokes Bakhtin's paradigm of a continuous warring between centripetal and centrifugal forces. It omits, however, the destabilizing energy of differentiation that to be found in the dialectical doubleness of Bakhtin's dialogic principle. Although, as he demonstrates, Greenblatt avoids the trap of identifying exclusively with one of the torn halves that are the product of capitalist society, his move is restricted to that: he stands above contemplating and comprehending the two antithetical processes without reversing and reinscribing them as Adorno does to enable the development of a new form of cultural criticism of society. To the extent that they are presented as antithetical, the crucial difference is that for Greenblatt the two are complementary: they *add up*. For Greenblatt, capitalist society is ultimately one, at peace with itself.

In Greenblatt's historical criticism, it might have been expected that any critical move would involve time. What distinguishes Greenblatt's 'melodramatic polarities of absolute autonomy or absolute dissolution' from other binaries with which they might be compared—Arnold's Hebraic and Hellenic forces, Freud's clash between Eros and Thanatos, or even Derrida's account of history as a form of supplementary excess, is indicated by his description of how the processes work 'simultaneously'.⁹ There is only a homogeneous empty time here, with no dislocating delay between the drives towards differentiation and identity, or between subversion and containment.¹⁰ There is difference, but not deferral. Such simultaneity means that the forces of centralization and decentralization must necessarily be complementary; as perfectly matching ambivalent halves, there can only be an endless oscillation of subversion and containment. The problem with Greenblatt's account therefore is that he follows the Nietzschean assumption that these agonistic forces work in a relation of binary opposition of attraction and repulsion to each other, or, as in Bakhtin's primary schema, an unceasing antithesis of monoglossia and heteroglossia. In short, Greenblatt's account of history has written out the disjunction of time. Its dialectic is simultaneous, at a standstill in an eternal return. This suggests the possibility that a certain dislocating time interval needs to be allowed into the New Historicist account of the subversion-containment process which would then open up—by not adding up—its assumption of a static (if dynamic) totality and at that point paradoxically reintroduce history, temporality, and therefore change.

Yet however much temporality may be missing, Greenblatt still proposes a historicism of sorts after all, in the sense of a philosophical schema imposed as an underlying form upon events, even if the model for history is that of the oscillating dynamics of the market-place rather than one of progressive evolutionary struggle.

History as an Egg

Let us leave Greenblatt with his simultaneous, perfectly matched antithetical forces whirling on the spot for the moment, to turn to the other essay in *The New Historicism* which discusses New Historicism's theoretical basis—that by Joel Fineman.¹¹ Fineman's essay is distinguished by the fact that he makes a genuine effort to address the theoretical paradox implied in New Historicism's own name. In the course of a somewhat laboured opening, he describes how he wishes to establish a more philosophical placing of the theoretical position of New Historicism through an enquiry into what might appear to be its most trivial aspect, its fondness for anecdote. Fineman's investigation is to be

concerned both with the formal operation of the anecdote, understood as a specific literary genre, with peculiar literary properties, and also with a practical literary history of the anecdote in so far as the formal operation of the anecdote bears on the history of

historiography, *i.e.* on the history of the writing of history. (50)

Here at last the question of New Historicism's formal relation to historicism is broached, albeit anecdotally.

Fineman argues that it is possible to relate the apparently disordered and amorphous practice of New Historicism to 'an historical tradition of historicity or historicizing within which ... the New Historicism can be understood to occupy a coherent time and place' (52). He specifies its intervention in terms of what amounts to the major conceptual problem for any theorization of history, a version of the more general question of how to produce a concept that can conceptualize the non-conceptual, to include the non-conceptual 'within' the concept (Adorno), or the outside in the inside without its losing its identity as outside: for history this becomes the question of the relation between the historical particularity, the singular event, and the overall framework of a concept of history as a 'metahistory', in Hayden White's term. If it is through its affiliation to the latter that the particular takes on meaning and historical significance, the same process also necessarily has the effect of usurping and undoing its singularity. Fineman characterizes the troubled interrelation of event to history in terms of the opposition of the 'this' to the 'meta'.¹² He argues that the anecdote can play a special part in the continuing philosophical labour that has ensued in the face of the dominance of Hegel's philosophy of history. For Hegel, because the purposeful unfolding of the Spirit can let nothing happen by chance, because History is, in a sense, already written, then paradoxically history cannot

be historical. Fineman suggests that the question ever since has been how:

to find some way to introduce into the ahistorical historicity of Hegelian philosophy of history some break or interruption of the fullness and repletion of the Spirit's self-reflection, so as thereby to introduce to history the temporality of time. (57)

He charts the history of such attempts, from Dilthey to Husserl, from Heidegger to Derrida, as a labour in which the 'self-completing self-reflecting of Hegelian historicity' has been turned around, prized open, shifted out of the precepts of identity thinking, so as to reintroduce into it the punctual moment of the temporality of time. The history of philosophy thus becomes the history of endeavours to insert an opening into the totality of the self-enclosed circle of Hegelian history.¹³

It is in the context of this scenario that, according to Fineman, New Historicism makes its theoretical intervention:

The oxymoron, if that is the right word for it, embedded in the rubric—the cheery enthusiasm with which the New Historicism, as a catchy term or phrase, proposes to introduce a novelty or an innovation, something 'New', into the closed and closing historiography of successive innovation, 'Historicism' ... this oxymoron is witness to or earnest of an impulse to discover or to disclose some wrinkling and historicizing interruption, a breaking and a *realizing* interjection, within the encyclopedically

enclosed circle of Hegelian historical self-reflection.... As a title, the New Historicism strives to perform and thereby to enable the project it effectively entitles, and thus to earn thereby its access to the real through the excess of its name.¹⁴

For Fineman, it is the anecdote that can open up history in so far as it amounts to the narration of a singular event which uniquely exceeds its literary status and any narrative schema, and so achieves a referential access to the real. The anecdote introduces an aperture into the schema of history, 'by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity, *i.e.* it does so only in so far as its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports' (61). Fineman's anecdote thus succeeds in breaking down the inside/outside duality of concept and event, and opens up the potential for a form of history that is able to do justice to both. As long, that is, as it maintains its somewhat precarious status as anecdote—which lasts only so long as it avoids sliding into the metonymic status of the example (as in Greenblatt's use of Jameson and Lyotard, or indeed my use of Greenblatt and Fineman), in which the relation of the part is to illustrate and comprise the whole. For Fineman the anecdote must work in a non-metonymic excessive relation to a history formulated as a historicist totality. New Historicism's use of anecdote, he argues, bespeaks not methodological and theoretical indifference but is itself a means by which to open history's self-enclosed immediacy. Fineman's antithesis of anecdotal event to metahistory therefore assumes without question that the Hegelian self-enclosed

history is indeed self-enclosed: he concludes that his task is to puncture the totality of History, to make an opening with the can-opener of time. In doing so, however, he has shifted from a problem of the relation of event to concept to the model of an outside to a totality. Although he could be said to be seeking to reintroduce time into Greenblatt's self-enclosed dialectical immobilization, he has, like Greenblatt, produced a spatial model where in this case all that is required is that the egg-like history be punctured by an outside agent in the name of retrieving the singularity of the event.

And yet, again like Greenblatt, despite the attempted cracking of the egg, there is a failure to relate this move to any critical, as opposed to philosophical, intervention. Here Fineman's argument contrasts to Walter Benjamin's account of history, where all developmental schemas, including that of Marxism itself, are associated with totalization and domination. Benjamin's emphasis on moments that break and blast open history's continuity is designed not to reintroduce time as such but rather to open up history so as to effect the work of cultural and political transformation.¹⁵

Immanence and Transcendence

Given that they both offer theoretical descriptions of New Historicism, what is the relation is between Greenblatt's subsumption of Marxism and poststructuralism into a dialectical irresolution of centripetal and centrifugal forces and Fineman's anecdote which chisels into the global totality of history so as to prize it open? The

difference between the two would be that for Fineman the totality is closed and it is a question of the anecdotal event levering it open; whereas for Greenblatt the point is that the antithetical totalizations of Marxism and poststructuralism are never actually achieved—what he offers instead is an irresolvable oscillation of the two which New Historicism is somehow uniquely able to comprehend in a new totality.

Are these models reconcilable? They involve two modes of thinking incommensurability dynamically. Fineman's prizing open the totality involves an injection of time and chance into theory, and is thus anti-totalizing and anti-historicizing. With respect to historicism, he is, therefore, 'subversive'. By contrast, Greenblatt projects a new totalizing model, albeit of a non-totalizing process, in a strategy of 'containment'. The two thus reproduce exactly the dialectic of subversion and containment, the dissolving forces of Thanatos and the binding forces of Eros, that they find operating within and between historical texts.¹⁶ These two positions complement each other, indeed require each other to function in their bizarre economy of life and death. Greenblatt's argument, that New Historicism contains both Marxism and poststructuralism and therefore constitutes a higher form, itself declares a totalization which goes counter to the whole new historicist emphasis on the discrete fragmented moments of history and which according to his own logic should be impossible—for, in the terms of his own argument, how can New Historicism comprehend and definitively encompass the other two through another single schema? Greenblatt asserts such a totalizing claim via the classic speculative formula of

transcendence whereby an outside is posited from which the observer can comprehend the totality of the phenomenon under discussion—for Hegel the position of the philosopher, or, as also for Arnold, of the State; for orthodox Marxism the dialectic as the law of nature; for Lukács the collective subject of history; for Gramsci, the party, etc. Fineman, despite the differences of his model, also positions himself in this way when he posits New Historicism as standing outside history in order to break into the totality of historicism. Despite the emphasis on temporality, this remains an essentially static, spatial model. Paradoxically, as with Greenblatt's argument, it also reproduces the totalizing gesture itself, for Fineman totalizes history in order to supplement it with the one thing that he has left out—by chance, himself. As Sartre discovered, in theory and in history, there can be no totalization without a totalizer. In both cases here the new historicist's own enunciative position contradicts his or her anti-totalizing stance by producing totalization. To put it another way, despite the apparent immanence of the new historical method, both new historicists theorize their own position in terms of models of transcendence.

New Historicism itself has always been distinguished by its awareness of the difficulty of the writer's role in the writing of history. Whereas historicist analysis tended to gravitate towards the most grandiose of objective sounding schemas, new historicists are almost painfully alert to their own relative limitations and introduce such qualifications explicitly into their writing. This self-consciousness, often amounting to a self-deprecatory advertisement of one kind or another, an excuse for a certain self-indulgent subjectivism, does

touch upon a substantial theoretical difficulty, namely, the position of the writing subject. This is not, however, theorized as a technical difficulty as it is in Hegel or Sartre. The problem of New Historicism is that although it recognizes the need to consider the position of the writing-subject, its hesitance towards theorization in general means that it does not theorize its own position of enunciation—and therefore finds itself repeating the totalizing gestures it seeks to undo.

Both Greenblatt and Fineman produce a position of exteriority, an outside to an inside, which rather than taking subjectivity into account in the manner of Sartre totalizes the very history that they seek to detotalize. At this point it becomes clear that the apparent irresolvability of the totalization/detotalization structure exactly repeats the paradigm of subversion and containment which is proposed as the interpretive political insight of New Historicism. The questions of subversion and containment, of agency and domination, that New Historicism likes to raise as a historical and textual problem re-enact the theoretical problematic determined by its own model.

The historicist schema of New Historicism therefore has specific consequences. Both Greenblatt and Fineman when theorizing New Historicism move into an inside/outside structure, and this in turn implies a duality of disempowerment and empowerment. In these terms, if the subject is outside the totality then it seems empowered, but if it's inside, then it seems disempowered. This inside/outside structure also stages the position of those subjects inside the institution, and, in Stallybrass and White's terms, reproduces the

institutional position of the academic subject, asserting an identity by looking out at the world beyond. Given that it is the production of the point of exteriority which conventionally empowers the transcendent critique, it might be expected that New Historicism posit the possibility of effective intervention in the processes which it analyses. Why then do new historicist texts characteristically imply disempowerment? For it is only if the subject cannot control and intervene, that the processes of culture and of history themselves assume an autonomous form—Weber's iron cage, or the alien forces of domination described in the cultural critique of Simmel, the Adorno of the culture industry, or Foucault. Greenblatt refuses this 'monological' view by positing the antimony of totalization and detotalization. But it is only the historian who is empowered by being on the outside, while the historical subject is disempowered by being caught inside, his or her actions always containable by the historical schema into which he or she is placed by the historian.

At the same time, such a schema repeats the dissonance within historicism as such, another improper name set against itself. So in its first meaning, it implies the existence of immanent laws through which history progresses and according to which its future can be predicted. Here both history, and the historian as knowing subject, can assume the position of exteriority. In the second, historicism becomes the very degree to which knowledge is itself entrenched in historical frameworks, culturally limited and, necessarily, relative. Here knowledge and the historical subject are constituted within a framework that has no outside. There is no point

of objectivity. There are thus two modes in operation: one of history containing everything and making it meaningful, the other of history constantly threatening non-meaning, or subverting any meaning that had been made—the two modes, in other words, of transcendence and immanence.

Subversion and Containment

Let us take a closer look at the notion of ‘subversion’ and ‘containment’. The New Historicists are concerned to track the circulating relations between aesthetic and other cultural forms of discursive production, assuming, it seems, that it is possible to take a kind of ‘essential section’ across society’s discursive productions at any particular historical moment in what Laclau calls ‘pure relations of interiority’.¹⁷ They thus challenge directly the cultural materialist’s practice of looking at an historical text for today’s political meanings. Greenblatt, in particular, argues that this is a self-confirming rather than in any way radical activity:

‘subversive’ is for us a term used to designate those elements in Renaissance culture that contemporary authorities tried to contain or, when containment seemed impossible, to destroy and that now conform to our own sense of truth and reality. That is, we locate as ‘subversive’ in the past precisely those things that are *not* subversive to ourselves.

By contrast, those elements which we identify with Renaissance principles of order would, if we took them

seriously, undermine our own contemporary assumptions (absolutism, hierarchies of class and gender, religious intolerance, etc.). They are not threatening, however, because our own values are strong enough for us not to regard them as real alternatives. Greenblatt suggests that exactly the same holds for the subversive elements of Renaissance texts—which could be articulated only because they could be effortlessly contained: ‘the subversiveness that is genuine and radical ... is at the same time contained by the power it would appear to threaten’ (30). This troubles, as will be obvious, the possibility of any radical reading; as Greenblatt puts it, adapting Kafka, ‘there is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us’.

Subversion’s radical Gramscian origins have thus themselves been subverted by New Historicism. Greenblatt’s argument sets up a significant general characterization of the function of literature and of culture within our society: at a textual level the radicalism of a text, whether literary, critical, or whatever, can only institute a form of subversion to the extent that it can already be accommodated—because it is not subversive. It is for this reason that Greenblatt emphasizes the ease with which the institution absorbs and contains whatever subversion radicalism can throw at it. Such as New Historicism itself, perhaps, for Greenblatt and Fineman’s theorizations of their own activity, as historians gazing upon the whirligig or egg of history, have placed themselves in the position of producing the containing gestures of totalization. Greenblatt and Fineman thus reproduce the antithesis which we have been charting in this book of immanent

and transcendent critiques. But whereas Adorno showed how it was possible to use this antithesis as a critical instrument, the new historicists separate it into the singularity of history set against the containing move of the historical analyst, and thus claim transcendence over all other forms of history and cultural criticism. In the same way, the way in which the new historicists use the paradigm of subversion and containment discounts the possibility of a dialectical criticism which can, in Bakhtin's terms, posit an organic and an intentional hybridization that work against each other.

An objection to the conservatism of the new historicist position has been made by Edward Said, Gerald Graff and Jerome McGann, among others, who complain that 'since every form of culture is destined to be co-opted, the very notion of oppositional criticism is nonsense'.¹⁸ I want to suggest that this position is because New Historicism is itself an example of what it describes. The New Historicism represents not only a theoretical but also an institutional repetition—posing as a form of cultural analysis—of the very failure that it portrays as inevitable.

Counter Culture

On 21st October 1967 a collection of anti-war protestors, students, hippies, pacifists, intellectuals, Norman Mailers, as well as, according to a report in *The East Village Other*, contingents of 'witches, warlocks, holy men, seers, prophets, mystics, saints, sorcerers, shamans, troubadours, minstrels, bards, roadmen, and madmen',

besieged the Pentagon.¹⁹ After the march, the speeches, and the protests, the shamans performed an exorcism, 'casting mighty words of white light against the demon-controlled structure', which, they hoped, would effect a levitation, and lift the whole of the Pentagon right off the ground into the air.

It didn't budge. But no single incident of protest of this time better illustrates the style and inherent presuppositions of the politics of the late sixties. Ostensibly, at least, we have moved a long way today from trusting in magic and psychedelia for our political futures. But despite the reliance on shamanism, what is in retrospect remarkable about this event is its focus not on the conventional mode of political intervention, Congress or the House of Representatives, but on the institution of war. What was most characteristic of the politics of this time was its insistence that the political front line operated at the level of the institution as much as, if not more than, the technical seat of democratic control. Although certain aspects of the style may have changed, I want to pause to consider the concept that was used to describe the mode of unrest of this period: counter culture.

Despite its laughable unfashionableness, many of the tenets of the counter culture survive today. The distrust of technocracy could be said to have become the global paranoia of postmodernism; the ecological sympathy has developed into the Green movement; the relativism and accompanying interest in other cultures has become our contemporary espousal of the validity of 'cultural difference'; and, as I shall be arguing, the distrust of all institutional forms of organization, the

attempt to 'deschool society', has been mediated into forms of theory and practice of how to subvert the institution, founded on the work of institutional analysis produced by Althusser and, particularly, Foucault. The Laingian advocacy of the truth of experience over theory, the inside over the outside, has re-emerged in the form of identity politics. Only the mysticism, the shameless espousal of shamanism, has gone, its traces surviving only with the New Age travellers.

The roots of the counter culture could be, and indeed were, traced back to Romanticism. A dislike of the global and controlling networks of technocracy, a sympathy with nature and hostility to those human forces which degraded it, a religious emphasis on changing the world through a visionary imagination such as to be found in the poetry of Blake that takes radical issue with the scientific world view, an interest in the religion and cultures of non-Western societies, an anarchist (in its technical sense) distrust of all institutions—even those proclaiming a radical politics—and a belief in the justice of minimal, local forms of social organization. What interests me in the present context, however, is the sense that despite the wide diversity both of style and substance, it was widely accepted that there was a hegemonic unit, the singular 'counter-culture', which was opposed to the dominant forms of orthodoxy and institutional power.

This antithetical structure is very different from the circulating self-undermining structures of power traced in the work of Greenblatt. The accompanying suggestion that subversion can never be strong enough to effect substantial change, that it can always be

recuperated, can be traced to the keen awareness at this time of the possibility of what Marcuse called 'repressive desublimation'—that, as Theodor Rozsak put it, 'the technocracy does indeed seem capable of anabolizing every form of discontent into its system' (14). The constant Marcusian cry at that time was the warning that 'everything can be co-opted' (70-2). This fear of assimilation was doubtless the result of the fact that the counter culture itself co-opted the methods and oppositional stance of the Civil Rights movement which started on 1st December 1955, when Mrs Rosa Parks was arrested in Montgomery, Alabama, for refusing to give up her seat on a bus for a white man. The campaign of peaceful civil disobedience developed with the demand for integrated classes in schools at Little Rock, Arkansas, and the first 'sit-in' movement which sought to achieve integrated lunch-counters in Woolworth stores.²⁰ The last great campaign, the War on Poverty of 1968, during which King was assassinated, was structured round the march on Washington (starting symbolically from the poorest town in America, the appropriately named Marks, Mississippi). King had now moved the agenda from racial injustice to include the social injustice of poverty and inequality of wealth. The counter culture in many respects consisted of the appropriation by middle-class students of one aspect of this political campaign, the protest against the Vietnam War; its extension of the campaign of the Civil Rights Movement into a more general civil disobedience no doubt contributed to the narrow Democratic defeat in 1968 and the end of the Civil Rights movement itself. Despite its widespread achievements, immediately apparent in the integration

within the educational system, much of the social injustice to which that movement drew attention remains. Today the political emphasis has moved away from King's ideal of social integration, it often being claimed that it always had to take place on the terms of the dominant white culture. The drive now is for equal rights, social justice, and justice before the law, combined with the recognition and continuance of social and ethnic difference. The heterogeneity emphasized by modern theory is a reflection of that social ideal. In this context it is important to recall that other contemporary political movement, the rise of Black nationalism associated with the Nation of Islam and the Black Panther movement, was specifically excluded from the counter-culture on account of its 'orthodox' revolutionary politics. Today the muslim Malcolm X has become a more central cultural figure than the Christian Martin Luther King. The idolization of Malcolm X, the Franz Fanon of Black America, suggests that a new revolutionary militancy may be on the horizon, already reflected in the return to popularity of the Nation of Islam. Unless, that is, that idolization of Malcolm X has really been a process of aestheticization—and assimilation.

The current academic assimilation of the counter culture marks the very structure of incorporation that the counter culture decried but itself acted out and which today the new historicists warn of (or perhaps celebrate)—without acknowledging that they themselves could also be the very agents of such institutional recuperation. David Norbrook has pointed out how the context for New Historicism is that of a period of disillusion after one of political turmoil, a phase of

political conservatism combined with economic liberalism, a combination which repeats that which followed the alleged failures of the counter culture as a revolutionary movement (if indeed it did fail), and of May '68.

Those who were, say, eighteen in 1968 are today in the 1990s in their forties. The students of that era participated in what must have been one of the most serious attacks on the university system in the whole of its history: the Campus War.²¹ Where are those students now? We have colour supplement articles telling us what has happened to Cohn-Bendit; we can see Tariq Ali on Channel 4 virtually any day of the week. But a certain number of those students became academics, carrying on from the heady days of 'student power' to become lecturers and professors. It was this generation of academics who were to lead the inquiry into 'the institution', and who were to proclaim a general shift towards 'cultural studies' and 'cultural politics'. They achieved nothing more, and nothing less, than the institutionalization of the counter culture. At the same time, the paranoia that seems to accompany the preoccupation with postmodernism is nothing more than a reflexive anxiety that the counter culture has indeed been incorporated into the processes of the technocracy and its institutions.²² 'Pushed back and repressed, incarcerated within and finally able to discharge and vent itself only on itself':²³ in a gesture of *ressentiment*, New Historicism relates its own hidden story of the co-option of the 'Great Refusal' of the sixties and its 'culture of disaffiliation'.

That process goes on: if deconstruction and post-structuralism have been associated with the Reagan and Thatcher years by commentators, is it significant that with the dismantling of Marxism in the Soviet Union, the decolonization of Eastern Europe, and the consequent removal of the Communist threat, that Marxism is increasing its influence in the American academy? Here we might recall Greenblatt's argument that subversion is only admissible when the culture feels that it is not under threat. At the same time, it is worth recalling that however absurd the political project of levitating the Pentagon may appear to us now, it did form one of the decisive series of protest—the campus war constituted another, the development of feminism another—which helped to bring about the end of the Vietnam War. So the counter culture did achieve political successes before its subsequent assimilation, just as there were many political and institutional changes initiated in Western Europe as a response to May '68.

In any case the levitation of the Pentagon is a perfect example of Greenblatt's category of something that current ideology can contain so effortlessly that it doesn't appear to us today to be subversive at all. What has become equally unthinkable, in our contemporary world of sub-cultures, of the marginal, the subaltern and the deviant, in our affirmation of the incommensurability of cultural difference, is the very concept of a general *counter-culture*—the most sustained, but already devalued and almost forgotten, recent example of the production of a politically effective counter-hegemony in Western society. It's noticeable that the counter culture achieved its political effects to a large extent by challenging the

conventional forms and modes of political intervention. If the political argument of New Historicism is that the radically subversive can be exactly what we no longer recognize as subversive, then what has been institutionally assimilated is less the effectiveness of the counter culture's political intervention than the lesson of its effectiveness.

(1990)

Notes

1. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'The New Historicism: Political Commitment and the Postmodern Critic', in Veenser, *The New Historicism*, 281.
2. Grumley, *History and Totality*.
3. Norbrook, 'Life and Death of Renaissance Man', 89-93.
4. See the various contributions to Veenser, *The New Historicism*.
5. Graff, *Poetic Statement and Critical Dogma*; Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 188.
6. White, in Veenser, *The New Historicism*, 302.
7. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 20, cited by Greenblatt, 'Towards a Poetics of Culture', in Veenser, *The New Historicism*, 2. Further references to this essay will be cited in the text.
8. Lyotard, cited by Greenblatt, 'Towards a Poetics of Culture', 4.
9. Norbrook, 'Life and Death of Renaissance Man', 108. On history as excess, see my *White Mythologies*, 19, 66.
10. Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 263.

11. Joel Fineman, 'The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction', in Veese, *The New Historicism*, 49-76 (reprinted in Fineman, *The Subjectivity Effect in Western Literary Tradition*, 59-87). Further references will be cited in the text.

12. Here I pass over the problem that ensues when Fineman redescribes this as the relation of event to context—which is altogether a different matter.

13. Cf. D'Amico, *Historicism and Knowledge*, Grumley, *History and Totality*.

14. 60. Fineman continues: 'In this sense, if only in name only, the New Historicism amounts to a gesture which is the very opposite of Fredric Jameson's essentially ahistorical injunction in *The Political Unconscious* to "always historicize" '.

15. Cf. Arato, *Frankfurt School Reader*, 205-6.

16. We may make a comparison with Bakhtin here according to which these process remain undialogized until they enter the novel, i.e. they need a further totalization to be detotalizing.

17. Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 16.

18. Gerald Graff, 'Co-optation', in *The New Historicism*, 169-81.

19. Cited by Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, 124. This book is based on articles that originally appeared

in the Spring of 1968. Further references will be cited in the text. For analyses of the alleged failure of the counter-culture in the United States and Britain, see Bell, *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism*, and Martin, *A Sociology of Contemporary Cultural Change*.

20. Segal, *The Race War*, 246-9.

21. See Roszak, *The Dissenting Academy*; Searle, *The Campus War*.

22. Of course you could argue that the counter culture always was part of the culture to which it was nominally opposed. It's significant, for example, that Roszak, of all contemporary radical phenomena, excepts the Black Panther movement from the counter culture.

23. Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 214.

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