JENNIFER RICH

"The Part is the Whole:" The Rhetoric of Historical Form in New Historicism

In an attempt to clarify their critical practice, Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher collaborated on a manifesto of new historicist practice in 2001, *Practising New Historicism.* In their first chapter, they set out the tenets of new historicist practice. Anxious to recuperate what Greenblatt calls "the touch of the real" in literary methodology, they announce a critical stance that resolutely valorises the particular at the expense of theoretical comprehensiveness:

> The task of understanding [a text or other form of cultural artifact] depends not on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but rather an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual.[1]

Gallagher and Greenblatt's introduction is striking for the way in which it refuses theory. Theory, for them, appears to threaten the heart and soul of their project—what they would characterise as the resurrection of those liminal moments in literary texts that "conjure" the early modern "real."[2] This avoidance of theory led Greenblatt and Gallagher to a love affair with the anecdote, a historiographical particularity that like Gilles Deleuze's rhizome, rootlessly burrows in and around the theories—Marxism,

historicism, psychoanalysis—that attempt to capture it. Eager to recover the "history of things that did not happen," Gallagher and Greenblatt proclaim the anecdote as that which enables "foveation in cultural interpretation."[3] As Greenblatt explains in his chapter "The Touch of the Real,"

> What we are calling the effect of compression enabled a literary historian like Erich Auerbach to move convincingly from a tiny passage to a sprawling, complex text (and finally, to "Western Literature")…. Geertz did something similar with cultural fragments, small bits of symbolic behavior from which he could widen out into larger social worlds…. The interpreter must be able to select and fashion, out of the confused continuum of social existence, units of social action small enough to hold within the fairly narrow boundaries of full analytical attention, and this attention must be unusually intense, nuanced and sustained.[4]

By virtue of its isolatability and particularity, the anecdote serves as the ideal site for foveation, and thus provides the mechanism by which the new historicist critic may "call up" and "speak with the dead:" "We wanted the touch of the real in the way that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of the transcendent," proclaim Greenblatt and Gallagher in their conclusion. Unfortunately, calling up and speaking with the dead is not immune to problems of form and rhetoric. How do you call up and speak with the dead? In what ways does the mechanism—the telephone so to speak—for such conjuring compromise the call itself? What this study proposes is to examine issues of rhetoric in Greenblatt's historical project. While many critics have examined issues of content,

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In what follows, I will contend that the anecdote is an epistemological synecdoche: it relies on the part to conjure the whole. To provide a theoretical context for my discussion of one of Greenblatt's most famous and symptomatic essays, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," I will need to descend into one of the darkest circles of Greenblattian hell and use theory—particularly, Marxist analyses of historiography—to provide the template for my analysis of new historicist rhetoric.

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> The correctness of such an attitude is evident, inasmuch as it is opposed to the hypostatization of general concepts—although this does not include universals in all their forms. But it is a quite inadequate response to a Platonic theory of science, whose aim is the representation of essences, for it fails to appreciate its necessity…. As far as historical types and epochs in particular are concerned, it can, of course, never be assumed that the subject matter in question might be grasped conceptually with the aid of ideas such as that of the renaissance or the baroque….
>
> Konrad Burdach[6]

Writing in his highly cryptic work *The Origin of German Tragic Drama,* Walter Benjamin discusses the dialectic of particularity and totality in the Western epistemological tradition. Responding to the German philosopher Hans Burdach's dismissal of modern historiography as an exercise in totalisation, Benjamin attempts to provide a philosophical middle-ground between particularity and totalisation:

> As ideas, however, such names perform a service they are not able to perform as concepts; they do not make the similar identical, but they effect a synthesis between extremes.[7]

> Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other. The harmonious relationship between such essences is what constitutes truth. Its oft-cited multiplicity [see Burdach] for discontinuity is a characteristic of the 'essences . . . which lead a life that differs utterly from that of objects and their conditions; and which cannot be forced dialectically into existence by our selecting and adding some….'[8]

Through Burdach, Benjamin instantiates an uneasy amalgamation of two historically competing conceptions operating in Marxist theory and historiography. Refusing to align himself either within a Hegelian Marxist conceptualisation of epistemology or within a more modern ("these are the fragments which I shore against my ruin") epistemology of the particular, Benjamin prefers to suggest a mediating element—the "Idea" as distinct from the "conception" and the various phenomena which serve as the concretion of the particular concept. Ideas for Benjamin exist within the mediation of the element and its concept—they are both the (indirect) determination and consequence of the momentary consummation of the two. As he notes, "ideas are not represented in themselves, but solely and exclusively in an arrangement of concrete elements in the concept: as the configuration of these elements…. Just as a mother is seen to begin to live in the fullness of her power only when the circle of her children, inspired by the feeling of her proximity, closes around her," writes Benjamin in a surprisingly homey metaphoric redaction of the "Idea,"

> so do ideas come to life only when extremes are assembled around them. Ideas—or to use Goethe's term, ideals—are the Faustian 'Mothers.' They remain obscure so long as phenomena do not declare their faith to them and gather round them.[9]

The idea may be considered the *ur-epistemology*—or using Fredric Jameson's more appropriate spatial terminology, the *ur-horizon*—within which the "conception," the linguistic representation of the particular, takes shape.

"Idea," it is incorrect to consider "Ideas" as either a direct result or determination of empirical and philosophical "concepts." To belabour Benjamin's cosmology, a sun, for example, provides at best a gravitational context for the planets that circle it. In other words, it constitutes the astronomical ordering system under which planets exhibit their own particular orbiting behaviour. In a similar way, the "Idea" can be seen as an epistemological ordering system; rather than the cosmos, the universe is here the theoretical conditions of possibility for the generation of conceptualisations of the concrete phenomena under examination.

Despite Greenblatt's declaration of critical independence from theory, new historicism nevertheless bears the traces of a peculiarly Marxist problematic: the dialectic of particularity and totalisation which, as we have seen, Benjamin attempts to mediate in rt me rte]4(t)- 324 a

> 'circulation'—but one that has been sealed off from any continuing historical process.[10]

Earlier in the same article, Felperin notes that "research" for a new historicist signifies

> a cool, disinterested (indeed, invisible) interpreter bracketed off in the here and now, and an objective body of 'data' sharply visible in the there and then, each standing in a self-contained space and separated from the other by enough distance to enable independence and objectivity in their scrutiny.[11]

Benjamin's "answer" to this positivist posture was an ironisation of linearity in writing and thought. The goal of philosophy was not, as Martin Jay explains in *Marxism and Totality*, to construct a "spider's web between separate kinds of knowledge in an attempt to ensnare the truth as if it were something which came flying in from outside:"

> Benjamin contended that philosophy's 'representation of truth' best proceeds by immersion in the most minute details of subject-matter.' Such an immersion was not, however, that of the empiricists' 'acquisition of knowledge' through inductive generalization. The traits of the proper philosophical style were rather 'the art of interruption in contrast to the chain of deduction'…. [12]

New historicism engages in this "art of interruption" through its use of historical synecdoche; through this device, historicism attempts to mediate historiographically between the particular (the anecdote) and the total (the world "picture").

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that were threatening, both in their own time and to recent traditional historiography. "Materialist criticism," Jonathan Dollimore notes in his introduction to the seminal work of cultural materialism, *Political Shakespeare*, "refuses what Stephen Greenblatt calls the monological approach to historical scholarship, of the past, one 'concerned with discovering a single political vision, usually identical to that said to be held by the entire literate class or indeed the entire population.'"[13] Part and parcel of this rejection of monological historiography was the idea that a more complex history, one that was both multilogical and multivocal, would be more able to recover "the truth" still hidden behind the screen of the dominant social and historical ideologies of the early modern period and today.

The presumption of a recoverable and accurate picture of the Elizabethan world(s) served as both motivation and rationalisation of the way in which cultural materialists engaged with history in their critical exegesis. Convinced of the suspiciousness of narratives that purported to encompass the breadth and process of historical movement, critics such as Jonathan Dollimore, Stephen Greenblatt, Alan Sinfield and Leonard Tennenhouse confined themselves to what they saw as true historical moments—*petites histoires*—which, like Michel Foucault's famous anecdotes, seemed to escape containment within the hegemonic ideological practices of the early modern period and today. Alan Liu describes the new historicist approach as the construction of a *bricolage* of historical moments

> historicism hangs those pictures anew—seemingly by accident, off any hook, at any angle.[14]

Thus, where E. M. W. Tillyard[15] and others attempted to "speak with the dead" through the methodology of the *grand récit*, new historicism contended that such a connection with history was only possible through a process of critical sedimentation of the liminal: only through an examination of many little moments, of many sites of the social in the early modern period, could a properly multivocal, multilogical early modern social be resurrected.

In its production of a multivocal and multilogical "picture" of the early modern period, new historicism participates in a dialectic of particularity and totalisation that I refer to above. The "Idea" of new historicism—to go back to Benjamin's idea for a moment—is, in the last analysis, the "Idea" of traditional enlightenment thought, reconfigured in a literary universe. It is the totalisation of the "fragment" and the creation of fictional homologies between text and context. Through its rhetoric of historical representation, new historicism instantiates a mutually ordering orbit between text and context and between anecdote (fragment) and historical/social totality.

Reification

Theodor Adorno is perhaps the most important Marxist theorist of totality and reification. Influenced by Benjamin's writings on totality, Adorno nevertheless refused the notion of a mediating "Idea" which could—if indirectly—provide an ontological universe for the abstract concretions of the concept. In opposition to Benjamin and Georg Lukács, Adorno instantiated the notion of a negative dialectics. Instead of moving toward an ultimately resolving dialectics of totality, a negative dialectics resists the negation of the negation,

and instead preserves the nonidentity of identity: “Totality is to be opposed by convicting it of nonidentity with itself—of the nonidentity it denies, according to its own concept.”[16] Although notoriously inactive in everyday political life, Adorno nevertheless saw negative dialectics as the only philosophical resistance to the colonisation of a totalising

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predicated upon such a hermeneutics of definition, particularly what Adorno called its "tyranny of identity." As Martin Jay explains in *Adorno*,

> In philosophical terms, the domination of the object by the subject is expressed both in positivism and idealism. In the former, a subjectivity stands coolly apart from its object in order to manipulate it; although seemingly passive, the positivist subject really has an instrumental relationship to the world, a world on which it

extrapolation from the part, and it is this process of extrapolation for the constitution of a "universal" (of normative relations) that is the thought-process of a reifying epistemology.[21] Reification may be pinpointed as the methodological basis of an enlightenment epistemology precisely because such an epistemology is, in a sense, a paralysed materialist dialectic—one that in its very ontology must *not move*, but purposely stays within isolation/abstraction and through this creates an illusion of the "whole." It is this illusion of the whole that is precisely the forgetting of the whole.

In tracing the processes of reification, it is necessary to consider the methodology of historical engagement, precisely because, as we will see later, the two become—in the end—the same thing. As will become clear during the examination of "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," reification is both a process and an effect—reification in process effects reification in representation. It is through the processes of reification (abstraction and its concomitant counterpart, erasure) that the effect of reification (the creation of a false totality and its representation as a totality) is brought about. My analysis of Greenblatt's work will thus centre on the representational "effects" of his particular engagement with certain historical data and his use of this data in his examination of *King Lear*. What I will be contending is that Greenblatt's methodology of historical engagement depends upon the reification of the particular historical data under consideration and this data's supposed correspondence to the dramatic text. In other words, Greenblatt in "Shakespeare and the Exorcists" is constructing two fictions. He is constructing a fiction of history, or more accurately, he is representing historical data in fictionalised form, and he is constructing a fiction of the historical data's correspondence with the dramatic text.

This is not to say that Greenblatt means to do this. He is not out to "con" us with some neat historical trickery. Nor do I wish to suggest that readers of Greenblatt's critical work view his historical anecdotes as telling the whole story

paradigm under which the historical event is abstracted—rendered separable from the socio-historical context of its production.

this ritual functions as a residual and oppositional ideological site to the consolidation of the Anglican Church. The moveable feast of Harsnett's denunciation of one group of recusants becomes the banquet of early modern religious history—a banquet that Greenblatt never manages to leave.

Reflection

A critical consideration that avoids positing a monological relation of the historical and textual event is, in the last instance, impossible within a methodology that is predicated upon a relation of reflection between the historical and textual event.[30] In "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," this reflective positioning between the historical event and the textual event is indicated at a number of critical points, perhaps most vividly by this note: "in 1603 when Harsnett was whipping exorcism toward the theater, Shakespeare was already at the entrance of the Globe theater to welcome it."[31] In the course of the article, this reflective correspondence is everywhere and necessarily reproduced. Referring to the way in which Harsnett's text provides models for Edgar's mad personage, Greenblatt writes,

> Shakespeare *appropriates* for Edgar a documented fraud, complete with an impressive collection of what the *Declaration* calls 'uncouth, non-significant' names that have been made up to sound exotic and that carry with them a faint but ineradicable odor of spuriousness. [*Emphasis added*][32]

The sense of a reflective correspondence between historical textual event and dramatic text is further heightened by Greenblatt's consistent use of passages from Harsnett's *Declaration* to comment on certain dramatic scenes in *Lear*.

Collapse of Form to Content

We have remarked that the anecdote is at once the tool of literary recuperation and the content of that literary recuperation in Greenblatt's critical exegesis. Harsnett's representation of recusant exorcism is that which is further dramatised—via the character of Edgar. At the same time, Harsnett's *Declaration* functions as the archival "tool" used for the recuperation of the allusive content of this particular dramatic section. In short, what it uncovers is itself. In Marxist terms, this narratological moment is produced for later consumption in the textual analysis of *King Lear*.[35]

Both Adorno and Lukács note this collapse of methodology and knowledge-production in the critical processes of Western social and natural science; as Lukács explains, "facts can only become facts within the framework of a system—which will vary with the knowledge desired." Greenblatt's critical exegesis falls into a similar problematic. The "system"—what we have called methodology—underlying his

content of the historical tool, in this case, the anecdote. To end with our key analogy, a key is made only to fit its corresponding lock. It cannot be expected to unlock any other door than the one for which it was produced.

[1] Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher, *Practising New Historicism* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 6.
[2] Of course, how we understand that "real" is left unanswered—lest Lacanians are quick to take credit, Greenblatt and Gallagher are quick to announce their non-indebtedness to Lacan's formulation of the "real."
[3] Greenblatt and Gallagher, 26.
[4] Ibid.
[5] Since new historicism's inaugural moments, such as the publication of such works as Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1989), commentators have critiqued the historiographical approach of this form of criticism. The analyses and objections range from a distrust of the newness of new historicism—critics such as Richard Strier (*Resistant Structures: Particularity, Radicalism and Renaissance Texts*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) posit a clear line of critical descent from old historicist literature and the supposedly revolutionary new historicism—to more politicised objections to new historicism's seemingly banal political commitment (Howard Felperin, "'Cultural Poetics vs. Cultural Materialism:' The Two New Historicisms in Renaissance Studies" in *The Uses of the Canon: Elizabethan Literature and Contemporary Theory*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), to profound distrust of the historiographical validity of the "anecdote" (Joel Fineman, "The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Friction" in Aram Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism Reader*, New York: Routledge, 1989; and Felperin). Few, if any, analyses attempt a sustained consideration of the epistemological ordering system(s)—the "deep structures" of thought—which are the preconditions for new historicist analysis in the first place.
[6] Konrad Burdach, quoted in Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (London: Verso, 1977), 29.
[7] Benjamin, 34.
[8] Ibid., 37.
[9] Ibid., 35.
[10] Felperin, 86.
[11] Ibid.,79.
[12] Martin Jay, *Adorno* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 248.
[13] Jonathan Dollimore, *Political Shakespeare* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 5.
[14] Alan Liu, "The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism" (*ELH* 56.4, 1989), 722.
[15] See E. M. W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture* (New York: Macmillan, 1942).
[16] Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 320.
[17] Ibid., 320.
[18] Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno, *The Complete Correspondence: 1928-1940* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univesity Press, 1994), 189.
[19] Theodor Adorno, "Subject and Object" in Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, eds., *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader* (New York: Continuum, 1994), 498.
[20] Jay, 63.
[21] It is important to note that Adorno's understanding of epistemology was bound up with an analysis of the effects of capitalist relations of production on epistemology. Thus, when Adorno discusses "enlightenment" epistemology, he is, at the same time,

seen carrying on the work—albeit with considerable variation—of Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

[22] It is important to note that the historical events that Greenblatt uses in many of his articles are narratives in their own right. Thus, Greenblatt's exegesis is in the most basic sense a comparison and contrasting of two narratives of different genres: historical and dramatic. Because of their positioning as the historical subtext of, for example, *King Lear* ("Shakespeare and the Exorcists") or *Henry IV* ("Invisible Bullets") or *Twelfth Night* ("Fiction and Friction"), etc., we forget these anecdotes' narrative derivation. All of these articles may be found in Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearian Negotiations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

[23] Greenblatt suggests these two methodological steps when he writes that Shakespeare in *King Lear* " ,

might be going a bit far), *King Lear*, the drama, consumes Harsnett's *Declaration* both in its incorporation of Harsnett into itself (its historical subtext) and in the literary critic's later use of Harsnett to apprehend the allusive subtext of *King Lear*.