"FROM CELEBRATION TO REBELLION TO SUBVERSIVE SUBMISSION": THE PROBLEM OF HISTORY AND LITERARY INTERPRETATION

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> This book is the result of a necessarily incomplete study. I know in advance that its conclusion will be examined, discussed, and replaced by others, and I am glad of it. That is how history progresses and must progress.
>
> \- Fernand Braudel[1]

William Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy (*Richard II*, *1 & 2 Henry IV*, and *Henry V*), which retells the bloody story of the Lancastrian rise to the English throne, has attracted not only the attention of literary critics, it has also attracted the attention of other scholars interested in history and politics. It is these interests which have dominated the study of the plays since they were first staged.[2] And as time has passed and the critics have become estranged from the world of Elizabeth and Shakespeare, the use of historical information to interpret the literary texts has increased. Unfortunately, tangled up with this information were the preconceptions and limitations of the discipline of history. In particular, there is the belief that a well defined hegemonic culture exists at all times. The belief that there is a set of ideas and assumptions held as true by everyone at the time that the plays were written and staged has kept critics in a "Cold War" of sorts, with their commentary gravitating around two interpretive poles: one that sees the tetralogy as a morality play and one that sees no morality in the tetralogy, only the poetics of politics. This polarization very clearly responds to historical periodization, with one pole originating in a *medieval Christian* perception of the play and the other originating

[1] *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Phillip II*. Trans. Siân Reynolds. New York: Harper and Row, 1972. Page 18.

[2] *Richard II*, the first play of the tetralogy, was first staged in 1595.

in a *modern secular* perception. Which of these realities do the plays belong to? What assumptions can we make about Shakespeare and his audience?

The problem with periodization is that time does not have any natural frontiers to delineate when one period ends and the other begins. While George Holmes, editor of *The Oxford History of Medieval Europe*, and C. Warren Hollister, author of *Medieval Europe A Short History*, place the end of the Middle Ages near the year 1500, leading medievalist Norman F. Cantor argues that in England the Middle Ages ended a hundred years before, around the time that John of Gaunt, "the last of the medieval knights," died and his son deposed the anointed king. And even as Cantor provides this date, arguing for the importance of the political, intellectual and cultural focus of history, he points out that there are those who focusing on the economy seem to stretch these historical boundaries even further (217-219). Indeed, as seen above, the periodization of history is inaccurate and to a certain degree arbitrary. Despite criticism, the problem has persisted in the literary disciplines. Why does this problem persist?

The answer to this question is found in Cantor's last observation: that by emphasizing a specific aspect of society, politics, culture or economy, the length and content of the period can change. The problem persists because most literary critics are only concerned with the symptom and not with the condition. They still view periodization as a problem with the division of historical time and have to a great degree neglected the historiographical problem of selecting the material that should be studied. What aspects or artifacts from the past do we consider historical? While we might not realize it, the selection of the material to be studied can predetermine the interpretation by highlighting certain aspects and elements of the literary text. Whichever may be the case, the ultimate answers as to what is historical are as diverse as the resulting interpretations.

The problem of periodization and the selection of material were made worse by the existence of the historicist dichotomy which gives theoretical grounds to the interpretative polarization of the tetralogy. This article dismantles the dichotomy and proposes an alternative to it based on the confrontation of opposing material. Even though my discussion concentrates on the Renaissance and the works of William Shakespeare, the problems and the solution given here, I hope, will be pertinent for the study of any literary text.

Historicism

Historicism, the English translation of the German “historismus,” refers to the historiographical movement that developed in nineteenth-century Germany as a reaction to the expansion of the revolutionary ideas of the Enlightenment. In particular, this movement opposed the “Enlightenment Mechanism” (White 70). While the historians of the Enlightenment provided their readers with a succession of human types (something like historical periods), classified according to categories such as rational and irrational or positive and negative (67), the historicists, starting with protohistoricist Johann Gottfried von Herder, maintained that all historical periods are distinct. For them each person is unique and no moment repeats itself in the same way. It is in this complete heterogeneity that the historicists see true unity emerge: the unity of a process in which each phase—each individual person or event—contributes equally to the whole. The task of the historian was to address the particular by describing the formal cohesion that it shows with the whole (74-75). Historicists did this by empathetically assuming the position of their subjects and reconstructing their picture of reality (Gilderhus 43). These basic assumptions as proposed and defended by Herder inform to varying degrees the enterprise of historicists throughout the nineteenth century and most of the twentieth century.

The most influential of these historicists was German historian Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886). According to Hayden White’s study of the historiographical writing of the nineteenth century, Ranke’s historical vision could be characterized as following a comedic pattern, a series of conflicts that finally resolved themselves into harmony (167-168). In order to reach this resolution Ranke, like Herder, had to search for the unity that existed in the diversity of things. He achieved this through the establishment of two points of integration, the first was the nation and the other was Europe. The idea of the nation provided a governing mechanism for the internal adjustment of the relations between the State, the Church and the people, and the idea of Europe provided a governing mechanism for the adjustment of the relations between the nations (171). In other words Ranke argued for the existence of two frames that would allow the historian to study the different nation-states of Europe on their own and as part of an imaginary European totality. This freedom from the borders of any particular national history gave Ranke the chance to remain focused on the achievements of each century. He could avert his eyes from the failures of any particular nation-state and celebrate the achievements of European totality. While the reassuring aspect of his comedic vision

certainly contributed to its acceptance in a century filled with revolutions, it was the authority with which he endowed his historical works that left a lasting mark on the understanding of history.

Ranke and his followers through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries lived for the demands of absolute realism that were best expressed in Ranke's infamous remark that even though the historian's mission was to judge the past and instruct the present in benefit of the future, he did "not aspire to such a high office…[he]…only want[ed] to show how it had really been—wie es eigentlich gewesen" (qtd. in Gilderhus 44). The historian's detachment from the material of his work provided the growing discipline of history with a claim to objectivity that made historical tracts a valuable means for explaining the world. It was not long before this objective history rose to a position that was on a par with religion. Ranke himself reintroduced a moralistic perspective to historiography, arguing that "the finger of God" could be perceived in all the decisive moments of history (Fontana 129). By turning history into a discipline that satisfied the scientific sensibilities of the time without giving up the powerful sense of order provided by beliefs, historians were doing more than talking about what had happened with total precision, they were talking about what was supposed to happen, what had to have happened.

Acutely aware of the potential power of history as a discipline, the European states were quick to incorporate it into their systems of coercion. Even Ranke found himself directly under the service of the Prussian government when he was made editor of a short-lived, government-sponsored periodical published explicitly with the aim of attacking progressive ideas (Fontana 128-129). Yet, notwithstanding any deviation or protestation, Ranke and his numerous disciples continued to assume the role of high priests for the modern European states, creating their myths which were upheld as true and unquestionable by their authors' claim to an impartial approach and their privileged access through it to the divine. These constituted the "teleological narratives of progressive emergence," as Brook Thomas describes them, which justified European imperialism as well as the victories of individual nations (189). It was this form of historicism that provided the principal assumptions of historians during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century.

Despite its apparent dominance of the field of historical studies in the first half of the twentieth century, Ranke's historicism was struggling to survive the brutal historical negations of its principal assumptions. The tragic resolution of years of international and ethnic tensions in two catastrophic world wars marked the end of the

European era, an unquestionable reality that disproved the optimistic belief in the comedic pattern of history and rendered the idea of Europe unfeasible. After 1945 Europe found itself in ruins; the European nations that had once been the principal political powers of the world now had to concede that position to the United States and the Soviet Union. And the division of the continent finally found an undeniable physical representation in the Berlin Wall. It was impossible for the historian following Ranke's assumptions to provide a satisfactory explanation for the post-war conditions of Europe and the European nation-states. Yet, it wasn't the collapse of the *status quo*, the idea of nation-states and Europe, which they had once served, that broke the historians' faith in their traditional approach: it was the horrifying acts of aggression witnessed in the last war.

In 1953 Isaiah Berlin gave a lecture, later published under the title of *Historical Inevitability*, where he condemned the condition in which historical studies found themselves at that time. Berlin points out the dangers of advancing empirical arguments for historical determinism: the belief that impersonal forces (like the so-called spirit of the age) curve human action relieves us from all responsibility. If the men and women in our past were the product of their milieu; if they acted in accordance with the system of values of their generation, then it would be unfair for the historian either to criticize or to praise them. And so the work of the historian has been reduced to the description of facts. Before this logic that tells historians not to "judge Charlemagne or Napoleon, or Genghis Khan or Hitler or Stalin for their massacre," or even Harry Truman for the atomic holocaust in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Isaiah Berlin responds: "to accept this doctrine is to do violence to the basic notion of our morality, to misrepresent our sense of our past, and to ignore the most important concepts and categories of normal thought" (76-77). It is clear from Berlin's lecture that objectivity had become a luxury that historians no longer had. Ranke's historicism had failed.

The Influence of Historicism on Literary Criticism

Relying on the assumptions of this influential form of historicism, the literary critics of the nineteenth century began to see literature as the reflection of an ordered reality provided by history. Among these critics the best known figure is Matthew Arnold. In his essay "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time," Arnold places the influence of the context at the center of the creative act and charges the critics with the responsibility of creating an environment that is conducive to the birth of literary genius of the stature of Pindar, Sophocles, or

Shakespeare. English critics, according to him, needed to leave the pragmatism of the time in favor of the ideal (822). They needed to seek out objectively the best that was known in the "great confederation" of Europe to make it accessible (824). The function of criticism was to construct the milieu in which the artists could find inspiration and material for their work. Without this milieu of excellence the artist would not be able to create a masterpiece, no matter how talented he might be. For example, the difference between Goethe and Byron, two poets with great productive power, was the environment to which they had been exposed. Goethe had been "nourished by a great critical effort" that had allowed him to come to know "life and the world…much more comprehensively than Byron" and which had ultimately resulted in his poetry having much more endurance (809).

Although at a certain point Arnold claims that "for the creation of a master-work of literature two powers must concur, the power of the man and the power of the moment," the premise that he pursues through his discussion is that a masterpiece "is a work of synthesis and exposition, not of analysis and discovery"; the artist's work consists of capturing the essence of an age (808-809). In other words, the ultimate goal of the artistic enterprise is to integrate a "current of ideas" found at a specific time and place. If the artist's final product is essentially a condensed, heightened reflection of reality, then the best way to interpret great works of art is through the examination of the historical moment where the source of inspiration and the material can be found.

Walter Pater, who wrote *The Renaissance* some years after Arnold published his lecture, carries on a similar argument in which he explains with greater clarity what this conception of artistic endeavor implies for the critic. The function of the critic is to separate and analyze the means through which the personality of a character in a book produces pleasure, "to indicate what the source of that impression is, and under what condition it is experienced" (xxi). In order to accomplish this, the critic must not only examine the prominent personalities and their aesthetic charm or the results of the intellectual and the imaginative effort (the actual works of art) he must also attend to the general spirit and the character of the time. Pater was well aware that there are eras of "favorable conditions" in which "artists and philosophers…do not live in isolation, but breathe a common air and catch the light and heat from each other's thought," forming "one complete type of general culture" (xxiii-xxiv). The Renaissance was one of those periods where a unity of spirit affected all products and the study of any product called for the study of this unity. It is in this manner, through the views of critics like Arnold and

Pater, that the assumptions of historicism were introduced into the literary criticism of the nineteenth century. Their influence was so strong that even as the popularity of this historiographical school of thought waned among historians, they continued to influence literary criticism. E.M.W. Tillyard's *Shakespeare's History Plays* (1944) and Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946) provide examples of the less and most efficient uses of this tradition in the twentieth century.

Following the traditional assumption that great art is a work of exposition that captures the essence of the age, E.M.W. Tillyard performs an extensive survey of the intellectual material during the time of Shakespeare in order to paint what he calls the "Elizabethan World Picture," the picture of how Elizabethans saw the world, how Shakespeare represented this common vision of reality in the history plays. This picture included a medieval conception of the order of the world, the universe as the perfect creation of God, a unity in which everything had its place, and which was often found represented by images of a chain, a series of corresponding planes, or a dance to music (11). In Shakespeare's work, Tillyard points out, this conception of order is represented most clearly in Ulysses' speech to Agamemnon in his tragedy *The History of Troilus and Cressida*. Even though there is no matching acknowledgment of the harmonious order of the universe in the history plays, Tillyard argues that being part of the "thought-idiom of his [Shakespeare's] age," there is no way that he can avoid it; the "only way that he could have avoided that idiom was by not thinking at all" (8). In other words, a different conception of the world was inconceivable for Shakespeare and his contemporaries, and even if it were conceivable, to include such a perspective in his play would make them incomprehensible for his audience. Following the medieval conception of an orderly world, it becomes evident that Shakespeare's history plays, in particular the second tetralogy, which seemed to be ruled by disorder, are really an illustration of the movement towards a natural order. Hence, the cycles of history follow a moral pattern beginning with prosperity and ending with a renewal of prosperity and the disorder that is only found in between is the result of human actions (261-269).

While reconstructing the world in which the author wrote by performing an extensive survey of the intellectual material of his age seems like a legitimate use of history, Tillyard demonstrates the opposite. A significant part of *Shakespeare's History Plays* is spent discussing the historical material and here is where most of the argument takes place as he constructs a picture of the medieval inheritance of Elizabethan England. Unfortunately the discussion of

the historical material is fraught with inconsistency and prejudice. As we mentioned before Tillyard states that it is impossible to avoid the “thought-idiom” of the age, that to avoid it is “not to think at all.” However he later corrects himself by explaining that there exists an alternative to the “thought-idiom” that Shakespeare could have used, the doctrine of Machiavelli. He also admits that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were more than familiar with this doctrine and they very likely used certain elements of it (22). The very possibility that Shakespeare might have integrated Machiavellian thought into his work threatens Tillyard’s interpretation. The Machiavellian doctrine, which proposes that disorder is the natural state of man and that civilization is a matter of expediency, diametrically opposes the medieval concept of order that he contends the history plays reflect. Hence here is where there is the greatest need for argument, but surprisingly he withdraws from this topic after fewer than five pages of discussion, resting his case on the fact that Machiavellian thought was relatively new and was not institutionalized; consequently there is no need to pay much attention to him. In Tillyard’s own words, Machiavelli’s “day had not yet come” (21-23).

Tillyard’s almost desperate dependence on the monological “thought idiom” reveals the major problem of the historicist practice: that there is no complete general culture. In order to create the unified essence of an age the critics must favor the traditional conservative ideas and exclude any potentially subversive idea that might have existed at the time. For example, the ideas of Machiavelli had become accessible to educated Englishmen since 1560, when the works of the Italian were translated into Latin (Adams 237) and to the less educated class in the latter years of the century when unpublished English translations of *The Prince* circulated in England (Clegg 185). Shakespeare had the opportunity to read either one of these versions long before he wrote his first history play, *1 Henry VI* (1589),[3] yet Tillyard excludes them effortlessly. The arbitrary delimitation of the intellectual milieu in which the author worked makes this survey suspicious to present day critics and historians who are very conscious of their intervention in the constructions of history. Indeed, the disregard shown here to a crucial counter-discourse calls into question the authority that the “Elizabethan World Picture” is supposed to have. From here it becomes obvious that Tillyard’s extensive historical survey is too limited, expressing only his own conservative view of the historical world, not the view held by those

[3] The date for the first performance of 1 Henry VI comes from Blakemore’s “Chronology and Sources” in the *Riverside Shakespeare* (48).

that lived in it. What is worse, his use of history is not only arbitrary, but, since he does not give the same level of importance to all of the material in his survey, it is also misleading. Thus he also falls into the historicist trap of turning motivated world views into a simulacrum of historical background.

Although the works of many historicists are afflicted with these problems, not all of them illustrate so clearly the flaws of their practice. In all fairness many historicists are able to deal with the problems inherent in creating this unified vision of age and construct strong arguments around it. For example, we find a more confident and efficient use of the historicist ideas of a spirit of an age in the interpretations of Eric Auerbach.

Eric Auerbach's *Mimesis* was written in Istanbul during the Second World War, but it was clearly shaped by the historicist's ideas that had circulated in Germany since the previous century. In his "Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition" of *Mimesis*, Edward Said takes note of these ideas, in particular those found in the works of Giambattista Vico and Wilhelm Dilthey. Vico, an eighteenth-century proto-historicist, argued that each age shared a set of features that was "appropriate to their appearance," and which determined the way—the metaphors through which the members of this society view and describe reality. For example, the knowledge of "primitive times" "is the projection of the barbaric mind—fantastic images of gods based on fear, guilt, and terror." This mentality had to be fully outgrown and a greater degree of abstraction and rational discursivity had to exist before it was possible for Plato to develop his thought. Therefore, to interpret the products of any particular age, to understand the expressions of the men and women of that time, we have to assume the mentality—the world view of the author: "living the author's reality, undergoing the kind of life experiences intrinsic to his or her life" (xii-xiii). Dilthey, who had a particularly important role in the historiography of the first half of the twentieth century, added a special emphasis on literature, explaining that in the world of the written text, the literary masterwork was preeminent. The lived experience of the age found so intensely in its literature could be recovered through erudition and a subjective intuition of the inner sprit of the work (xi).

Auerbach explains how this change in the academic vision of the time, a shift from politics to literature—to the mundane, made his massive work possible. He describes this shift as:

> a transfer of confidence: [that] the great exterior turning points and blows of fate are granted less importance; they are credited with less power of yielding decisive information…[while]…in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life…the totality of its fate is

> contained and can be portrayed. There is greater confidence in syntheses gained through full exploitation of an everyday occurrence than in a chronological well-ordered treatment which accompanies the subject from beginning to end…[confidence]…that the interpretation of a few passages from Hamlet, Phèdre, or Faust can be made to yield more information about Shakespeare, Racine, or Goethe and their time than would a systematic and chronological treatment of their lives and work. (547-548)

This approach was translated into a very specific "essayistic style": beginning with a long quotation from a work cited in the original language followed immediately by a translation, from which "a detailed *explication de texte* unfolds at a leisurely and ruminative pace" that eventually develops into an insightful commentary about the relationship between the rhetorical style of the text and its socio-political context (Said ix-x). The approach and the consequent style that Auerbach followed in all the Chapters of *Mimesis* (and which New Historicism later adopted) allowed him to address the specific motifs directly in the literary text that he wants to talk about, without having to reconcile contradicting material or risk turning his study into a historical tract; without entering into arguments that might cost him the reader's trust.

Relying then on the careful reading of principally primary sources and the use of his particular "essayistic style," Auerbach was able to complete an extensive study of the representation of reality in literature, covering texts from Homer and the Bible to Virginia Woolf. *Mimesis*, Auerbach's study, hinges on the change in the world view and the subsequent mixing of literary styles in the Renaissance, two changes that have a significant importance to the development of historicism and of course this project. In Chapter 13 ("The Weary Prince") Auerbach explains that during the sixteenth century the Christian-figural view of human life receded, the belief that as part of an all embracing scheme of events that includes the Fall, Christ's birth, the passion and the Last Judgment all earthly actions find their resolution in heaven was losing its power. The confidence that human conflict resolved itself on Earth brought a dignity and significance to human action that allowed it to be represented as tragic (317-318). However, the conception of the "everyman" as tragic is abandoned and tragedy is reserved for the aristocracy (314 & 328). Even in *2 Henry IV*, a play in which the coexistence of the tragic or epic and the comic is the most evident and where, according to Auerbach, Shakespeare directly satirizes the strict separation between the sublime and the mundane, the characters from the lower classes are only represented in the comedic style (312-313, 328). Indeed, Shakespeare and his work are seen here as modern yet conservative.

He sees a world in which the idea of divine intervention has receded but where the values and the actions of the dominant class are still the only ones worth noticing, only the actions of the aristocracy are consequential enough to be deemed tragic.

As we have seen through the discussion of these examples the critics who practiced the older form of historicism in the twentieth century continued to see literary works as a reflection of their age. As a consequence, the major problems with this approach remained, especially the impossible task of establishing what constituted the spirit of the age was composed. In this lengthy process the critics favored the conservative values of the dominant class. In particular, Tillyard performed extensive historical surveys in order to demonstrate that the Elizabethans were essentially living in a medieval society and therefore the interpretation of Shakespeare's plays should take into account the presence of Christian doctrine and divine intervention. Here Auerbach differs significantly.

While Auerbach staunchly believes that literary works are a result of their age and an age is composed primarily of the conservative values found in the ruling class, he views Elizabethan theater and Shakespeare's plays as modern. This shift in the categorization of the age very likely comes as a result of the influence of a Marxist conception of history. The Marxist's emphasis on class relations and capital rather than in our relation to the divine saw a momentous change during Elizabeth's reign that loosely connected the men of that period with the men in the modern era. This change in the conception of the Elizabethan Age, from medieval to modern, reveals a very clear connection between Auerbach's work and that of the newer forms of historicism.[4]

Indeed, the reliance of *Mimesis* on periodization and its faith in the unifying spirit of each period connect it with the older form of historicism, but many of its distinctive characteristics are also present in the new forms that appeared during the 1980s: the view of the Elizabethan Age as early modern, which I have already mentioned, the essayistic style with its use of an opening fragment, later an anecdote, the scarce use of secondary sources (literary criticism), and even Auerbach's apologetic tone, starting with Andrew Marvell's line, "Had we but world enough and time…," revealed a self-awareness of the shortcomings of his work which can easily be seen as the antecedent of the New Historicists' scrutiny of their own academic effort.

[4] In his Introduction to *The New Historicism Reader* (13-14) Veeser explains the various reasons why the Renaissance is the focus of the first new historicist and why it is viewed as modern by them.

In *Practicing New Historicism* Greenblatt himself acknowledges the influence that this work had had on those writing literary history in the 1970s, noting that they had felt an affinity for both its existential pessimism and its method, which they "self-consciously emulated" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 35). This connection makes Auerbach a transitional figure in historicism, providing the link between the old and new forms of historicism. However, this transition was not immediate; the conditions for newer forms of historicism to appear would not be present for another twenty or thirty years.

A New Form of Historicism

Like the older forms of historicism, the new forms which developed in literary studies during the 1970s and 1980s present such a diverse group of practices that when one makes an attempt to define them, to provide a definition that can explain what one refers to when using the term "new historicism," we can only come up with a set of shared characteristics, such as the five key assumptions that Veeser provides in the introductions to his two anthologies, *The New Historicism* and *The New Historicism Reader* (1994).[5] Yet these assumptions do not provide a method or a theory that a critic might follow. To discover this methodology we need to limit our discussion to one specific form of new historicism, the form that is considered by most to be the referent of the term "new historicism," Stephen Greenblatt's *poetics of culture*.

On more than one occasion Stephen Greenblatt has made it clear that new historicism or the *poetics of culture* came about as a result of "an impatience with American New Criticism, an unsettling of norms and procedures, a mingling of dissent and restless curiosity" (Gallagher and Greenblatt 2). For this reason there is a need to designate a particular point of origin. Even though the restrictiveness of formalist methodology was the force that pushed him (as well as others) to search for an alternate approach towards literature, the theoretical principles and methodology that they transformed into a new practice found their origins in a series of historiographical and historical changes that preceded this critical "impatience" with

[5] These assumptions are: 1) That every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; 2) That literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably; 3) That no discourse gives access to unchanging truths or expresses unalterable human nature; 4) That a critical method and language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participates in the economy they describe; 5) That every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes.

formalism. Probably the most important change was the fall from prominence of Rankean historicism in 1955 and the raise of other historical practices.

In *Main Trends in History* Geoffrey Barraclough describes 1955 “as the year in which the ‘battles for history’…were finally won” by the French school of the Annales, which replaced German historicism and set the agenda that future historians were to follow (35). French historian François Furet described the situation of those who worked in the field of history as amenable: historians constituted a homogeneous group; they easily found positions that gave them the time to read and write and their work was well received both at home and abroad. During the 1950s and 1960s the discipline became liberated, claiming that “history was to be freed to wander in every field” (1-2). This brought the topics and methodologies of the social sciences, economics, demography, and ethnology, to history (8).

The inclusion of ethnology in history was quite a radical change since the two disciplines were believed to have studied contradictory subjects. Ethnology studies primitive societies that do not have a written language while history studies humanity at a stage of civilization in which the written language allowed them to leave records that became the authoritative voice of the past. Yet with the realization after the war that modern civilization had lost its sense of superiority over the rest of the world, French intellectuals like Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Foucault undermined these authoritative voices and began to approach their own society as ethnologists had approached “primitive societies.” For example, Foucault set out to consider European culture from a Jivaro angle in an attempt to dispel its presence, any preconceptions and prejudices that he had of it, and turn it into a scientific object (Furet 31-35). Ultimately it was this perspective, the marriage of these two formerly opposed disciplines, which rejuvenated historical studies and caught the attention of the literary critics, who were looking for alternatives in approaching the literature that western culture had already canonized. Thus the French historians and critics of this time had a huge influence on new historicism and especially the poetics of culture. Among these scholars, the one who seems to loom the largest in the new history is Michel Foucault.

According to *The Archeology of Knowledge*, the summation and reformulation of his methodology, Michel Foucault makes it clear that the main objective of his career is not to impose a structuralist methodology on historical studies, but to uncover and fully apply the tools and concepts of structuralism that have naturally emerged as useful in this field. The use of structuralist analysis in the history

of knowledge would allow him to escape the anthropologism (or anthropocentrism) and the cultural totalities of history, to refrain from the use of world views or the spirit of an age (15-16). Foucault avoids the use of these concepts—concepts that traditionally predetermine the study of history, and so is able to break through the superficial layer that they created and examine the complex structure, the world of contradictions, beneath it. Unlike Ranke and his followers who only wanted to show how things had really been, Foucault wanted to discover how things could have been how they were. Consequently (as we said before) he ignored the authority of the document, of the content and the voice in it, as the final resource for historical research, and focused instead on the "archive," "the system that governs the appearance of statements as unique events," and determines which of these statements and/or discourses is preserved longer. For him this system is the appropriate object of historical study. Here is where the discursive rules that explain the very existence and significance of any document, the reason and effects of the things said in it, are found (128-129). Then it is through the exploration of these archives that one can unearth the deep structure of discursive power as it comes into view, justified by tradition and reason, to regulate desire and define individuals within an age or any other totality. In traditional history, Foucault explains, contradictions are suppressed within a unity, a world view, with only unattended residuals of them left, which are then negatively described as "accidents," "defects," "mistakes." Whenever they are mentioned in history, these moments of subversive individuality are contained, presented as the exception that proves the rule so that there really seems to be nothing outside the totality. A good example of this is Tillyard's "Elizabethan World Picture," which can only conclude that Shakespeare viewed the ideas of Machiavelli as abhorrent, trapping the creative genius of the playwright within the parameters of the dominant world view or discourse. Foucault, who knows that it is impossible to describe exhaustively the archive of a culture or a period (130), concentrated on the neglected irregularities, the contradictions that have been discussed above. His approach views these contradictions as ruptures in the continuity of traditional, causal history and attempts to ascertain the extent and form of the gap that these ruptures create between discourse practices. Through these fractures one can determine the form that each practice assumes and the relation that they have with each other (150-156). The result of Foucault's "archeology," the product of this method, is what Catherine Gallagher calls "counterhistories."

"Counterhistories" refer to the attacks on master narratives and the historiographical methods that construct them. These attacks

presented themselves in a variety of forms during the 1960s and 1970s, from poststructuralist negativity, the recovery of the *longue durée* and the history of the losers, to the envisioning of counterfactuals and provisional worlds (Gallagher and Greenblatt 52-53). As we discussed above, Foucault's "counterhistories" in particular were created through the examination of the archive, the system that governs appearance and assimilation of contradictions within the traditional unity, yet the contradictions have received as much attention as the concept of the "archive." These contradictions, found very often in the form of anecdotes, are fragments that exist complete unto themselves without the need for history and so defy the historical successivity on which the master narratives of progress are established (49-50). More noteworthy perhaps is the fact that the chosen fragments are characteristically subversive. They are endowed with a sensation of terror and awe and pushed forward with the intention to shock. In Foucault's own words his works are "not a collection of portraits: they are snares, weapons, cries, gestures, attitudes, ruses, intrigues for which the words have been the instruments" (qtd. in Gallagher and Greenblatt 69). Hence the Foucauldian anecdote not only contradicted the totalities of historicism by its existence outside the master narratives, but, by virtue of its status as marginal discourse, its content as well, which evidenced a break with the social norms. Foucault never really seems content with just discussing daily life, which many other "counterhistories" do; he searches for those things that leave an indelible impression, and this is probably one of the reasons for the popularity of his work.

New historicism adopted all of these assumptions. It rejected anthropocentrism and the traditional periodization in favor of an "archival" system and the subversive gestures it contained. For the literary critics who have adopted this practice the author's personality did not play a major role in his creation of the text, he was nothing more than an impersonal medium channeling the social energies that exist in his culture. And the "period" had ceased to exist as a source of condensed, comprehensive information that could explain everything. Explanations for the literary texts came from the examination of the system, the network, what Greenblatt describes as "a shared code, a set of interlocking tropes and similitudes that function not only as the object but as the conditions of representation" (86). And like Foucault, new historicists paid special attention to anomalies in literary texts and in historical realities, following the circulation of energies from one zone (non-artistic/real) to another (artistic/fictional) (Greenblatt and Gallagher 12-13). The main deviation from Foucault's approach is in the way that the poetics of culture accesses the real in

the anecdotes, through the use of “thick description.”

“Thick description” is a term often used by anthropologists to refer to the sorting out of structures of signification, the process of locating any particular act within a network of cultural meanings. Among the anthropologists using this technique, Greenblatt identifies Clifford Greetz as a major influence on his critical approach. In *Practicing New Historicism*, he explains how the acceptance of distant cultures as texts, a written, narrative representation of an event, which allowed them to assume a privileged position over the members of that culture, came to them through Geertz and the structuralists rather than the historicists. And it was precisely this view of culture as a text that made it possible for them to discover through the interpretative strategies of literary criticism meanings that the members of that culture “could not have articulated” (8). Indeed, the use of “thick description” creates and discloses what Greenblatt calls the “effect of compression,” which is what allowed Auerbach “to move convincingly from a tiny passage to a sprawling complex text.” The anthropologist and/or the critic takes “bits of symbolic behavior” found in the anecdotes that he collects and branches out into the vast intricacies of the culture (26), the network: the complex system of meanings and life patterns. It is this technique, “thick description,” with its claim to reality—the reality of the mundane, that the poetics of culture uses to destabilize and reopen the readings of canonical works of literature.

Hence the poetics of culture is a combination of the Foucauldian perspective, Foucault’s sensibility—his attraction to the subversive, the “Geertzian” methodology of thick description, and Auerbach’s essayistic style. In practice, this new forms of historicism consists of mapping the circulation of social energy that enters and leaves the literary text at specific points, points that can only be described as anomalies: elements, events and experiences that cannot be explained through authorial intent or the influence of the spirit of the age. Critics like Greenblatt locate these instances in the artistic text and try to find a potential place of origin in the non-artistic texts by contextualizing and exposing its cultural significance through “thick description.” Let us consider an example from Stephen Greenblatt’s *Shakespearean Negotiations* that will both illustrate the practice and illustrate the new historicist’s characteristic view of the Renaissance as modern.

In “Invisible Bullets” Greenblatt explains the existence of untraditional governmental practices in William Shakespeare’s 1 & 2 *Henry IV* and *Henry V* by tracing them from the plays through Thomas

Harriot's "A Brief and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia" to a "Machiavellian hypothesis" about the origins and nature of the relation between the divine and the state in Europe. Here he begins with a "thick description" of "A Brief and True Report" (an anecdote), connecting it with other texts that reveal how Harriot was inadvertently testing (and proving) with the Algonquian Indians one of the most subversive beliefs of his culture, that in every society, including those of Europe, the lawgivers resorted to divine authority to assert their laws. The true goal of religion was not salvation but civil discipline and thus the people who articulated these beliefs were jugglers and actors, an idea that is prominently found in the writings of Machiavelli (21-39). After showing the significance of this anecdote, the meaning that this document has in the context of its culture, he explains how this "significance" circulates through the plays featuring Prince Hal (or Henry V). This highlights the (hypocritical) performative nature of power and the recording of alien voices (40-56) found in both the anecdote and the literary text that ultimately question orthodoxy. Yet, according to Greenblatt the questioning of monarchical power in the plays is subsumed with the final rise of Henry V as an ideal king. It is impossible for *Henry V* to be "successfully performed as subversive…[since]…the very doubts that Shakespeare raises serve not to rob the King of his charisma but to heighten it, as they heighten the theatrical interest of the play"—an element that was also key in the reign of a monarch whose principal instrument of power was "privilege visibility" (63-64). Hence, through these plays Shakespeare confirms the disturbing hypothesis proposed by Machiavelli, while at the same drawing his audience to an acceptance of it (65), thus shattering the picture of Elizabeth's England that Tillyard had created for readers of the Second Tetralogy.

The recognition of the power of the Machiavellian hypothesis suggests that the Elizabethans possessed a sensibility, a skepticism in matters of faith that came from what Greenblatt describes as the existing "crises of doctrine and church governance, of the social function of religious belief" (24), which is intrinsically characteristic of the contemporary man who lives in a secular society, and, consequently, reveals Greenblatt's view of the Renaissance as modern. Such an approach which confessedly studies the period by analogy to contemporary experiences (Veeser, "The New Historicism" 18) was common among most new historicists. In fact the reason that this period became the center of new historicist discourse may be found in the numerous potential connections that existed between it and the present. Critics saw in the Renaissance the origins of subjectivity and individualism, the origins of our disciplinary society, the moment

in which the rigid institutions and the hardship of the Middle-Ages gave way to new practices (13-14). This fascination with the potential modernity of the Renaissance and disregard of its continuity with medieval society soon created a new authoritarian totality that hides the former one. In the same way that Tillyard at some point avoided seriously discussing the potential influence of modern thought, Greenblatt avoids a serious discussion of the existence and potential use of the traditional material, so that for those who uncritically subscribe to new historicism the Renaissance becomes uniformly modern. Hence, notwithstanding their protest against the coercive totalities of traditional history, critics find themselves operating under similar restrictions as older forms of historicism did, unwittingly appealing to a totalizing world picture.

Albert Rolls exposes this problem in his book *The Theory of the King's Two Bodies in the Age of Shakespeare*, where he accuses the new historicists of arbitrarily imposing their beliefs on the Renaissance, arguing that all of the connections that Greenblatt makes in "Invisible Bullets" with the subversive elements of modernity can be made with the orthodox elements of the Middle Ages by substituting John Dee, the most famous English "magus" (magician) during Elizabeth's reign, for Machiavelli. Using Dee, who viewed science as a revival of the magical arts, Rolls is able to turn the correlation from early modern to late medieval (18-20). And even Machiavelli and the Machiavellian prince, Rolls goes on to argue, could be seen through the medieval perspective, as Bishop Gardener and Cardinal Reginald Pole did, the former praising him as an imitator of God who is both merciful and severe, and the latter by simply accepting his evil existence, which would inevitably facilitate the appearance of the Antichrist, in fulfillment of the scriptures (45-46). Yet, even after exposing the omissions of the new historicists and debunking its place of authority, he finds that he cannot return to the old forms of historicism and their orthodox perspective since they too are incapable of fully explaining Shakespeare's text—not to mention the fact that theoretically conscious literary critics today see this perspective as naïve. Here he gets to the real problem of his project and mine, the existence of an inadequate dichotomy of perspectives for the Renaissance from which the critic must choose. His solution promises a combination of perspectives—the acceptance of elements of both the modern and the medieval—yet it does not deliver. Even with its modern sophistication, the perspective he proposes remains essentially medieval and therefore it can only serve to illustrate the persistence of the dichotomy rather than to fracture it.

Rolls' attempt to combine perspectives and/or the elements of

different perspectives based on the traditional historical epochs in order to solve the problem of the dichotomy is naïve, since the very idea of an epoch, as we know from historicism, presupposes the existence of an all inclusive unity, a coercive spirit that denies the possibility of the contradictions that such a combination would create. Rolls' attempt here failed because he was looking for both the problem and the solution at the superficial level, discussing the result of the critical endeavor, in particular Greenblatt's "Invisible Bullets" and Tillyard's *Shakespeare's Histories Plays*, which are only the product of a very specific set of theoretical assumptions, a series of discursive rules that allowed their authors to come up with certain interpretations that would be accepted within their community. These rules and/or assumptions determine everything that the critics say or omit and it is here where both the problem and the solution lie. While at first glance the problem seems to be the result of historical periodization, we need to take notice that the newer forms of historicism have rejected the "period"—"the sprit of the times," as an inadequate form of organization, yet they have not been able to avoid the problem. New historicists have turned the Renaissance into a uniform part of the modern age. It is clearly not enough to consciously reject periodization, since the problem originates at the moment that the critic decides on the material that he will work with. Indeed, the principal characteristic of both schools of historical-literary criticism is the privileging of very specific sources and types of historical material: Rankean historicism privileged the State and the Church, while the new forms of historicism privilege the abnormal and the disagreeable: "accidents," "mistakes," and "defects." If we examine the examples discussed above, we will find evidence of this at the superficial level: Tillyard is able to present the Elizabethan society through their perspectives by paying more attention to the documents that supported such a view and marginalizing or completely omitting those that threaten it. Even the new historicists who reject the use of the spirit of an age end up creating a uniform Elizabethan world view through the uniform selection of the aberrant sources and the omission of others. Like the Renaissance authors[6] that Greenblatt examines in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, the book where he first articulates the practice that would be labeled new historicism, the literary critics of the nineteenth and twentieth century have gone through "a shift from celebration to rebellion to subversive submission" (8). They have not escaped the totalities of history, the idea of the spirit of the age.

[6] The "second triad" discussed in the book: Spenser, Marlowe, and Shakespeare.

If our understanding of the past and our understanding of the texts themselves is to "progress," we need to rebel again, to rebel against the totalities of new historicism.

Our rebellion lies above all in resisting the desire to privilege any particular type of historical material, using conflicting materials and honoring the contradictory systems of beliefs, giving equal or near-equal weight to each. Here, between the orthodox and the subversive, we will find the solution to the interpretative problem of William Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy and any literary text written in the distant past. Here, in the contradictions, the conflict between belief systems, we will find the power that emanates from the literary texts.

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