

Studies in Renaissance Literature



Neo-Historicism

Edited by
ROBIN HEADLAM WELLS, GLENN BURGESS
and ROWLAND WYMER

Studies in Renaissance Literature

Volume 5

NEO-HISTORICISM
STUDIES IN RENAISSANCE LITERATURE, HISTORY
AND POLITICS

The interdisciplinary studies of *Neo-Historicism* make a major contribution to the modern debate on historical method. Contributors approach English Renaissance culture from different gender perspectives and a variety of political standpoints, but all share a commitment to understanding the past in terms of its own beliefs and theories and (while acknowledging that many of the assumptions we bring to the study of history inevitably derive from our own culture) reject the current scholarly tendency to identify early modern thinkers as postmodernists *avant la lettre*. Topics include the specifically literary and the more widely historical, from Ben Jonson and the monarchy to the political culture of early modern England; all contribute in practical ways to a closer understanding of Renaissance culture.

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HISTORY AND POLITICS

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Robin Headlam Wells, Glenn Burgess and Rowland Wymer

D. S. BREWER

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PREFACE

Marc Bloch, co-founder of the *Annales d'histoire économique et sociale*, once wrote: 'Misunderstanding of the present is the inevitable consequence of ignorance of the past.' There is a widespread assumption among New Historicists and Cultural Materialists that older forms of historical thinking, at least in literature departments, were naive and unsophisticated, and that it took 'the clarity of focus provided by the new critical paradigms of our own day', as one recent critic puts it, to make us aware of the problems involved in reconstructing the past. In our Introduction we trace the history of historicism in the first half of the twentieth century. We show that historicist thinking, in literature as well as history departments, was a good deal more subtle than New Historicists and Cultural Materialists have been generally willing to acknowledge. While accepting some of the recent postmodern critique of traditional historical empiricism, we argue that there are rational criteria for adjudicating between rival historical narratives and interpretations. We also claim that, while literary scholars and historians may share a common methodology, there is a role for literary criticism which goes beyond historical reconstruction and which includes a continuing responsibility for making aesthetic, moral, and political judgments. Finally, we argue that, in the light of the current wealth of neo-Darwinian studies of all political complexions, it is time to reconsider the anti-essentialism that has become a *sine qua non* of much New Historicist and Cultural Materialist scholarship.

To signal our recognition of the importance both of the historicist tradition and of recent work in postmodern historiography, we have chosen the term 'neo-historicism' for our title. Neo-historicism embraces the following principles:

that there is an historical dimension to all valid acts of textual interpretation; that there is no unifying principle (such as the will of God or the laws of economic determinism) that will explain the course of history; that there will always be multiple histories of any age, reflecting the complexity of the past (though this does not mean that there are no rational grounds for preferring one narrative over another); that while the questions we ask about the past are inevitably driven by present needs and concerns, a sense of historical perspective is best achieved, not by recruiting past thinkers as precursive spokesmen and women of modern values, but by recognising the otherness of the past.

Preface

Contributors to *Neo-Historicism* approach Renaissance culture from different gender perspectives and a variety of political standpoints, and individual scholars may not necessarily subscribe to all of these tenets. However, each chapter exemplifies some features of what might be regarded as good neo-historicist practice.

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Introduction

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IN the final two decades of the twentieth century the study of early modern English culture was revitalised in two ways: by new methodologies; and by the revision, employing a largely traditional methodology, of conventional thinking about Elizabethan and Stuart England. Broadly speaking – we will consider some exceptions later – it was literary critics who could claim credit for new theoretical approaches, while historians worked within a more conventional methodological framework to challenge a Whig view of the early modern period. There has been surprisingly little contact between the two disciplines.¹

The beginning of a new century is an appropriate time to consider the future direction of historical scholarship, and at the same time to ask what historians and literary critics can learn from each other. But as any historicist would argue, in order to evaluate the present we need to understand the history of our own disciplines. ‘To judge rightly of the present,’ wrote Samuel Johnson, ‘we must oppose it to the past.’² We will

¹ David Bevington’s and Peter Holbrook’s recent claim that the ‘New Historicist approach to Jacobean court politics needs to be seen as part of a larger revolution in historiography of the period’ (Introduction to *The Politics of the Stuart Court Masque*, ed. David Bevington and Peter Holbrook (Cambridge, 1998), p. 7) is misleading. It is true that a number of revisionist historians have engaged critically with postmodern literary theories (see, for example, David Armitage, ‘Literature and Empire’, *The Origins of Empire: British Overseas Enterprise to the Close of the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Nicholas Canny, *The Oxford History of the British Empire* (1998–1999), general ed. W. Roger Louis and (Oxford and New York, 1998), 5 vols, I.99–123; Glenn Burgess, ‘Revisionist History and Shakespeare’s Political Context’, *Shakespeare and History*, ed. Holger Klein and Rowland Wymer, *Shakespeare Yearbook* vi (1996), pp. 5–36; Kevin Sharpe, ‘The Politics of Literature in Renaissance England: Review Article’, *History* lxxi (1986), pp. 235–47; Malcolm Smuts, ‘Court-Centred Politics and the Uses of Roman Historians c.1590–1630’, *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, ed. Kevin Sharpe and Peter Lake (Basingstoke and London, 1994), pp. 21–43). But New Historicists, Cultural Materialists, and materialist feminists have on the whole ignored early-modern revisionist and post-revisionist history. See also note 79 below.

² *Rasselas, The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, ed. Gwin J. Kolb (New Haven, Conn. and London, 1958–1990), XVI.112.

begin this Introduction with a survey of historicism in literary and historical studies.

I

It is a widely held view among early modern literary scholars that New Historicism and Cultural Materialism represent a significant advance on earlier forms of historicism which were, it is claimed, naive and theoretically unsophisticated. 'What now seems the central problem of historicist interpretation,' writes Hugh Grady in a recent book on Shakespeare,³ – how to deal adequately with the otherness of the past, given the unavoidability of perceiving it through our own epistemological "lenses" – was barely recognized by the earlier historicists.³ In view of the long history of debate among historians and literary critics on precisely this question, Grady's assertion is a a puzzling one.

Historicism is a confusing term because it has been used by different writers to mean diametrically opposite views of history. For Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) and his eighteenth-century predecessors such as Herder and Winkelmann, the historian should not allow his own assumptions, attitudes and beliefs to enter into his judgment of the past: every epoch, each cultural moment, is unique and must be interpreted in terms of its own values. By the middle of the nineteenth century the term *Historismus* had come to be used to describe this approach to history. When the historical profession formed itself towards the end of the century in Europe and America, it was von Ranke's combination of objectivist methods and a culturally relativist outlook, together with his emphasis on the critical study of primary sources, that were adopted as the founding principles of the discipline. However, in *The Poverty of Historicism* (published in 1957, but originating in the 1930s) Karl Popper used the term historicism in a sense that was the opposite of what had become its received meaning. As Popper used the term, historicism referred to any deterministic, theoretical and predictive historical science, such as Marxism or Christianity, dedicated to uncovering general laws of historical development (what would now be called 'grand narratives') and extrapolating from them. Popper contrasted this speculative theory of history with what he called 'historism'. By this he meant an approach that aimed to understand different doctrines and ideas by referring to 'their connection with the predilections prevailing in a particular historical period'.⁴ Popper's historism was the English equivalent of the German *Historismus*.

Since the 1950s the word historism has largely fallen out of use, and has been replaced with historicism.⁵ Thus for the Italian philosopher Benedetto

³ *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf: Studies in Early Modern Reification* (Oxford, 1996), p. 5.

⁴ Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, 2nd edn (London, 1960), p. 17; see also Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London and New York, 1996), p. 17.

⁵ An exception is Perez Zagorin who, in a recent article, uses the term historicism in a

Croce, historicism (Popper's historicism) involves a recognition of the fact that since such notions as natural law are the product of particular societies, any attempt to interpret the past in terms of what he called 'abstract rationalism' is mere illusion: 'final and fixed systems of philosophy or whatever passes as such into common usage and belief, refer, so far as they are alive and true, to certain determined, contemporary and historically definite problems, and therefore have no value with reference to all the other problems of the past and the future'.⁶ Echoes of von Ranke's relativist legacy could be heard as recently as 1983 when Sir Geoffrey Elton asserted 'the right of every age to be studied for its own sake', and the historian's duty 'not to confuse a right to arrive at conclusions about people and events with a right to deliver judgments based on some universal principle'.⁷

However, that is not to say that there was a consensus among historicists about Rankean principles. Quite the reverse. Though Croce endorsed the relativism that was the founding principle of nineteenth-century historicism, he rejected von Ranke's emphasis on scientific objectivity. Croce's insistence on the practical impossibility of safeguarding historical analysis from the contaminating influence of the historian's own interests and prejudices is summed up in the famous claim that 'All history is contemporary history'.⁸

The reaction against von Ranke had begun in the late nineteenth century. Following Karl Lamprecht, the first volume of whose *Deutsche Geschichte* appeared in 1891, historians of various persuasions attacked the Rankean emphasis on political and diplomatic history, narrative form, and research in official government archives. Most notable of these were Marxist historians and members of the French *Annales* school writing from the inter-war period onwards. In different ways, these groups tended to portray themselves as *more* scientific, objective and impartial than Rankean historians, and to be uncovering deeper, more fundamental truths about the past.⁹ But some aspects of the Rankean legacy remained largely untouched. Views about what constituted evidence and how it might be handled had widened; but historians remained on the whole firmly committed to the view that evidence, properly interrogated, could yield truths about the past.

A more radical challenge to Rankean principles came from the 'New Historians' of the 1920s and 1930s. Through their presidential addresses to

Popperian sense to defend a 'global sense of the past' ('Historiography and Postmodernism: Reconsiderations', *History and Theory* xxix (1990), pp. 263–74). It should also be noted that 'historism' was used to translate Meinecke's great book on the subject (Friedrich Meinecke, *Historism: The Rise of a New Historical Outlook* (London, 1972), from *Die Entstehung des Historismus* (Munich, 1959)).

⁶ *History as the Story of Liberty*, trans. Sylvia Spriggs (London, 1941), p. 66.

⁷ G. R. Elton, *Studies in Tudor and Stuart Politics and Government*, Vol IV: *Papers and Reviews* 1982–1990 (Cambridge, 1992), p. 272.

⁸ *History as the Story of Liberty*, p. 19.

⁹ Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover N.H., 1997), Chapters 2, 3, 5 and 7.

the American Historical Association, Charles Beard and Carl Becker initiated a lengthy and complex debate on historical objectivity.¹⁰ Beard and Becker have been widely misrepresented. In *The Problem of Historical Knowledge* (1938) Maurice Mandelbaum accused the New Historians of a cognitive relativism so uncompromising as to deny any possibility of an accurate account of the past. 'The values which are held to determine the historian's selection and sythesis of his materials are in turn held to be determined by the personality of the historian and by the age in which he lives,' wrote Mandelbaum. 'According to this analysis, they are determined by the present or future, and the very idea that they can give an accurate objective account of the past is thereby rendered absurd.'¹¹ It is ironic that Beard and Becker should have been attacked for claims they had never made, since they themselves were challenging an exaggerated version of von Ranke's empiricism. Indeed, Beard had actually exposed the futility of the very position that the New Historians were accused of promulgating. 'If all historical conceptions are merely relative to passing events, to transitory phases of ideas and interests,' wrote Beard in 1934, 'then the conception of relativity is itself relative. When absolutes in history are rejected the absolutism of relativity is also rejected.'¹²

The target of Beard's criticism was not objectivity as a mode of inquiry – little he says would trouble a present-day defender of methodological objectivity – but what might be called *scientism*, that is to say, the claim that historians using scientific methods can produce complete and definitive accounts of the past. The phrase that for historiographers epitomises von Ranke's scientism is '*wie es eigentlich gewesen*'. 'The task of history,' said Ranke, is 'only to show what actually happened.'¹³ Beard reminded his readers that Ranke's empiricism had long since been discarded. He conceded that 'historians recognise formally the obvious, long known informally, namely, that any written history inevitably reflects the thought of the author in his time and cultural setting'.¹⁴ But he argued that, while recognising that our reconstruction of the past can never achieve the status of scientific objectivity, we must not abandon scientific *methods*. As the only means we have of acquiring accurate knowledge of the past, scientific methods of inquiry are our most powerful weapons against mystification and exploitation: 'the inquiring spirit of science, using the scientific method, is the chief safeguard

¹⁰ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The 'Objectivity Question' and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge, 1988), Chapter 9.

¹¹ *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: An Answer to Relativism*, revised edn (New York, 1967), p. 36.

¹² Charles A. Beard, 'Written History as an Act of Faith', *American Historical Review* xxxix (1934), p. 225.

¹³ *Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494–1514*, trans. Fritz Stern, *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Stern (New York, 1973), p. 57.

¹⁴ 'Written History as an Act of Faith', p. 221.

against the tyranny of authority, bureaucracy, and brute power'.¹⁵ The corollary of Beard's combination of cognitive scepticism and methodological rigour was the need for historians to interrogate and declare their own ideological positions. 'The supreme issue before the historian now,' wrote Beard,

is the determination of his attitude to the disclosures of contemporary thought. He may deliberately evade them for reasons pertaining to personal, economic, and intellectual comfort . . . Or he may proceed to examine his own frame of reference, clarify it, enlarge it by acquiring knowledge of greater areas of thought and events, and give it consistency of structure.¹⁶

Beard's sceptical rationalism has entered into the normal conversation of historians, and today's defenders of the truth claims of history are likely to find themselves as close to him as they are to his critics. The point is an important one, for, just as traditional literary historicists have been uniformly characterised by their opponents as naive empiricists confident in their ability to reconstruct an unbiased picture of the past, so traditional historians have been portrayed as blind to the limits of empiricist historicism. But, as Lawrence Stone has remarked, 'we did not at all resemble the positivist troglodytes that we are often accused of being'; one of the things that historians have long known, and which Beard spelled out, was 'that historical truth was unattainable, and that any conclusions are provisional and hypothetical'.¹⁷

The vitality of a qualified historicism has remained strong. In a recent analysis of Sir Geoffrey Elton's discussions of historical method, Quentin Skinner took care to distance himself from empiricist attitudes.¹⁸ Yet his own work in intellectual history is an exemplification of historicist principles. Indeed his famous 1969 article on the subject can be read as a plea for the proper application of historicist principles to the understanding of ideas in time. Skinner charged many of those who wrote about the history of ideas with failing to be truly historical, either because they judged past thinkers by modern standards, or because they studied them in relation to trans-historical abstractions like capitalism or liberalism.¹⁹ Skinner's argument that understanding the meaning of an idea meant reconstructing the intentions of its author within a specific historical context closely paralleled E. D. Hirsch's major contribution to literary hermeneutics, *Validity in Interpretation*, published two years previously. Hirsch's impact on the

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 227.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁷ 'History and Postmodernism', *Past and Present* cxxxi (1992), pp. 190, 189.

¹⁸ 'Sir Geoffrey Elton and the Practice of History', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* vii (1997), pp. 301–16.

¹⁹ 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas', *History and Theory* viii (1969), pp. 3–53.

practice of literary criticism has been considerably less than Skinner's on the writing of intellectual history, something which points to significant differences between the two disciplines. 'Meaning' (whether conceived historically or not) is always likely to be a more problematic concept when considerations of aesthetic form are involved.

Since the 1930s historicist principles have been the subject of continuous debate. As historians became increasingly aware of the problems of bias, selectivity and incompleteness, confident empiricism gave way to a qualified relativism that recognised the otherness of the past, while at the same time retaining a belief in the viability of objective methods of inquiry. It is important to be clear about this point, because it is commonly alleged by postmodern historiographers that traditional historians believe in objective reconstruction as a realisable goal. Very few modern historians have supposed that certain and complete knowledge of the past is attainable; what they *have* supposed is that accounts reached as a result of an attempt at the impartial weighing of evidence, and a willingness to be proved wrong by that evidence, are likely to be better than those produced in some other way. As long ago as 1925 J. M. Thompson put the matter in a way that betrays his distance from the late twentieth century, but captures a principle to which many of today's professional historians would be happy to subscribe: 'Historical truth, if that means a complete account of an event as it really occurred, is hardly ever attainable. But historical truthfulness is much more important, and is within reach of us all.'²⁰ It is also the case that the possibility of truth should not be confused with the possibility of certainty, something which is rarely achievable in the human sciences. As E. D. Hirsch puts it: 'We can have the truth without being certain that we have it, and, in the absence of certainty, we can nevertheless have knowledge – knowledge of the probable.'²¹

II

As might be expected, the terms of the New Historians' debate on the limits of historical objectivity were echoed by literary critics in the first half of the twentieth century. In 1942 René Wellek and Austin Warren explained that, with historicist principles well established in literature departments, scholars like Hardin Craig, E. E. Stoll, and Rosemond Tuve were arguing that we must 'enter into the mind and attitude of past periods and accept their standards,

²⁰ J. M. Thompson, *Lectures on Foreign History 1494–1789* (Oxford, 1925), p. 2. This was essentially the position taken by Mr Justice Gray when rejecting David Irving's claim that he had been libelled by Deborah Lipstadt in her 1994 book *Denying the Holocaust*. The judge argued that 'it is no part of my function to attempt to make findings as to what actually happened during the Nazi regime' but that, nevertheless, Irving's treatment of the available historical evidence 'fell far short of the standard to be expected of a conscientious historian' (*The Guardian*, 12 April 2000, p. 6).

²¹ *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven and London, 1967), p. 173.

deliberately excluding the intrusions of our own conceptions'.²² However, Wellek and Warren also made it clear that the first three decades of the century were a period of active debate: nineteenth-century empiricism had been questioned by Ernst Troeltsch and others from the earliest years of the twentieth century. Following New Historians like Beard and Becker, Wellek and Warren asserted that, although the past must be judged in terms of its own values and principles, it is impossible in practice to exclude the critic's own attitudes and assumptions:

It is simply not possible to stop being men of the twentieth century while we engage in a judgment of the past: we cannot forget the associations of our own language, the newly acquired attitudes, the impact and import of the last centuries . . . There will always be a decisive difference between an act of imaginative reconstruction and actual participation in a past point of view . . . If we should really be able to reconstruct the meaning which *Hamlet* held for its contemporary audience, we would merely impoverish it. We should suppress the legitimate meanings which later generations found in *Hamlet*. We would bar the possibility of a new interpretation.²³

In saying that the escape from our own prejudices was undesirable as well as impossible, Wellek and Warren were aligning themselves with a continental hermeneutic tradition, most famously represented by Heidegger and Gadamer, which has proved more attractive to literary critics than Hirsch's rigorously intentionalist approach to interpretation. Gadamer thought that a text could only speak to us from its historical otherness if we encountered it with 'prejudice'; historical difference can only become apparent in relation to something else, something which we ourselves initially bring to the text:

The historicity of our existence entails that prejudices, in the literal sense of the word, constitute the initial directedness of our whole ability to experience. Prejudices are biases of our openness to the world. They are simply conditions whereby we experience something – whereby what we encounter says something to us.²⁴

Like Wellek and Warren, Gadamer saw meaning as perpetually made new in the encounter between text and reader rather than as an historically fixed event or object which can be recovered by the appropriate methods.

Wellek and Warren's concern to distance themselves from the literary empiricists who were still working in the Rankean tradition was shared by a number of English critics. For them it was E. M. W. Tillyard who represented the dangers of uncritical assumptions about our ability to reconstruct the past. Tillyard's influential *Shakespeare's History Plays* was published in 1944.

²² *Theory of Literature* (New York, 1942), p. 32.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

²⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, 'The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem', *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, trans. and ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley, 1976), p. 9.

With his claim that Elizabethan political thought was ‘so simple that there is not much to do beyond stating the obvious and trying to make it emphatic’, and his belief that Shakespeare’s history plays were doctrinally ‘entirely orthodox’,²⁵ Tillyard was exceptional even in the 1940s: no modern historical scholar had previously offered quite such a schematic view of Shakespeare. Four years earlier, in *The State in Shakespeare’s Greek and Roman Plays*, James Phillips had made it clear that the later sixteenth century was a period of vigorous intellectual and political debate in England: ‘In learned treatises and popular pamphlets alike a variety of theories and attitudes were developed concerning such individual political problems as the authority of the king, the function of the law, the duties of subjects and the right of rebellion.’²⁶ That intellectual complexity had now been reduced to a set of axiomatic principles in which every educated Elizabethan was supposed to have believed. Not surprisingly, Tillyard’s contemporaries objected to the new simplified version of Elizabethan intellectual life. Reviewing *Shakespeare’s History Plays* in 1945, Geoffrey Tillotson wrote: ‘I do not think Dr Tillyard’s Elizabethans are human enough. He has become interested in certain notions of theirs, and he tends to think of them as repositories of those notions.’²⁷ In 1950 Hiram Haydn argued that if there was a ruling principle in Elizabethan writing it was not hierarchical order but paradox: ‘inconsistency runs through all their work’.²⁸ In the following year a lecturer in Tillyard’s own college challenged the notion of an intellectually orthodox Shakespeare acting as spokesman for the Elizabethan establishment. ‘To me,’ wrote A. P. Rossiter in a lecture entitled ‘Ambivalence: The Dialectic of the Histories’, the pattern of these plays ‘is obscure, ironic, and – as far as Shakespeare shows us the scheme of things – seemingly endless.’²⁹ Two years later Helen Gardner also lectured on the issues raised by Tillyard’s brand of empiricist scholarship, warning that ‘the “Elizabethan World Picture” tidily presented to us as a system of thought cannot tell us how much of that picture had truth and meaning for any Elizabethan’.³⁰

Gardner’s 1953 lecture was titled ‘The Historical Approach’. In it she challenged the empiricist claim to objective knowledge of the past: since ‘the historical imagination . . . is itself historically conditioned’,³¹ any attempt to define the past will inevitably reflect the historian’s own prejudices and

²⁵ E. M. W. Tillyard, *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (London, 1944), pp. 64, 261.

²⁶ *The State in Shakespeare’s Greek and Roman Plays* (New York, 1940), p. 20.

²⁷ Review of Tillyard’s *Shakespeare’s History Plays*, *English v* (1944–5), p. 160.

²⁸ *The Counter-Renaissance* (New York, 1950), p. 7.

²⁹ *Angel with Horns: Fifteen Lectures on Shakespeare*, ed. Graham Storey (1961); repr. with an introduction by Peter Holland (London and New York, 1989), p. 43. ‘Ambivalence’ was delivered at the Shakespeare Summer School, Stratford-upon-Avon in 1951 and first published in *Talking of Shakespeare*, ed. John Garrett (London, 1954).

³⁰ Helen Gardner, *The Business of Criticism* (Oxford, 1959), p. 34.

³¹ *The Business of Criticism*, p. 32.

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preconceptions. 'In the last hundred years the conception of "the Elizabethans"' has been as unstable as the conception of *Hamlet*', she wrote,

To Froude and Kingsley they were God-fearing, Protestant, and patriotic. In the nineties they were Italianate and much less manly and God-fearing. In the twenties they were subtle, sensual, and sceptical. Recently they have become pious again, but in a different way, obsessed with the idea of hierarchy, the Great Chain of Being and Natural Law.³²

She went on to argue that although notions of period are too unstable and too conjectural to provide us with an objective field of reference, this does not mean that we should abandon the quest for historical understanding. The important thing is to avoid letting our sense of history 'harden into a fixed background': 'We are rightly sceptical when we read statements about modern man and the modern mind and dismiss both as figments of journalism. We ought to be at least as sceptical about statements about "the Elizabethan mind"'.³³ If, Gardner argued in another lecture, we simply impose our own critical paradigms on the past we are in danger of 'emptying it of its own historical reality';³⁴ historical scholars have a responsibility to safeguard their own age against the chronological 'provincialism'³⁵ that inevitably results from recruiting past writers as spokesmen and women for their own beliefs and theories.

By the 1950s literary critics on both sides of the Atlantic were familiar with the debate on relativism that had begun with the New Historians two decades earlier. While there were certainly exceptions, there was widespread scepticism regarding a literary-historical empiricism, exemplified in its most exaggerated form by Tillyard, that seemed old-fashioned even by Troeltsch's standards.³⁶ After the Second World War a long line of critics including Rossiter, Rabkin, Elton, McElroy, Jones and Grudin³⁷ replaced Tillyard's unified 'Elizabethan World Picture' with a more complex view of the relationship between the writer and his world. 'The kind of vision I have tried to point at,' wrote Rabkin in *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (1967) 'is what puts Shakespeare's plays out of the reach of the

³² Ibid., p. 33.

³³ Ibid., p. 34.

³⁴ 'The Historical Sense', *The Business of Criticism*, p. 135.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 156.

³⁶ For discussion of Tillyard's influence see Robin Headlam Wells, 'The Fortunes of Tillyard: Twentieth-Century Critical Debate on Shakespeare's History Plays', *English Studies* lxi (1985), pp. 391–403.

³⁷ A. P. Rossiter, *Angel with Horns*; Norman Rabkin, *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding* (1967; repr. Chicago and London, 1984); W. R. Elton, 'Shakespeare and the Thought of his Age' (1971), *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare Studies*, ed. Stanley Wells (Cambridge, 1986), pp. 17–34; Bernard McElroy, *Shakespeare's Mature Tragedies* (Princeton, 1973); Emrys Jones, *The Origins of Shakespeare* (Oxford, 1977); Robert Grudin, *Mighty Opposites: Shakespeare and Renaissance Contrariety* (Berkeley, 1979).

narrow moralist, the special pleader for a particular ideology, the intellectual historian looking for a Shakespearean version of a Renaissance orthodoxy.³⁸ The post-war view of what it meant to be a literary historicist is summed up in Peter Milward's introduction to his *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (1973). The following is a summary of his argument: critics sometimes deal with great works of literature without reference to the historical circumstances in which they were written; to some extent this approach is justifiable; after all, the value of great works seems undiminished by time and may even gain something from the varied interpretations of successive ages; but while masterpieces may be 'monuments more lasting than bronze', they are also 'abstracts and brief chronicles of the time'; present critical fashions need to be complemented by historical knowledge and an understanding of the possible meanings the text may have had for its contemporary readers; though we can never achieve complete objectivity – the choices and selections we make are bound to be affected by modern assumptions and preferences – nevertheless, as historicists we must strive for as much objectivity as we are humanly capable of if we are to rise above the mere voicing of personal prejudice.³⁹ Milward himself, as a Catholic priest and Jesuit, approached the historical problem of Shakespeare's religious background with a very obvious 'personal prejudice', one which led him to address the relevant texts in a particular way. However, his conclusions about Shakespeare's Catholic background and sympathies remain subject to normal evidential criteria and have, in fact, recently gained considerable support from critics who are not themselves Catholics.

Given the familiarity among earlier twentieth-century literary critics with the terms of the debate on historicism, and the very clear sense they had of the limitations of Rankean empiricism, it is puzzling to find it so widely asserted over the past two decades that traditional literary-historical scholars were scarcely aware of the problems involved in recovering the past. Indeed it is even claimed that traditional literary criticism was not interested in socio-historical considerations *tout court*. In the Introduction to *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* Stephen Greenblatt set up an opposition between his own form of politicised historicism (based on Geertz's version of the constructionism that dominated social studies for much of the twentieth century), and a caricature of traditional criticism. Greenblatt claims that the latter involves either 'a conception of art as addressed to a timeless, cultureless, universal human essence' or else a conception of it as 'a self-regarding, autonomous, closed system'. In both forms of traditional criticism 'art is opposed to social life'.⁴⁰

It might be supposed that unfounded generalisations of this kind would have had little impact in the academy. In practice the opposite has happened.

³⁸ *Shakespeare and the Common Understanding*, p. 12.

³⁹ *Shakespeare's Religious Background* (Bloomington and London, 1973), pp. 7–8.

⁴⁰ *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Chicago and London, 1980), p. 4.

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Greenblatt is probably the most influential critic currently working in the field of early modern literature. His characterisation of traditional criticism as sealed off in its own world of timeless verities and indifferent to social reality has been echoed by materialist critics on both sides of the Atlantic. 'The New Historicists combat empty formalism by pulling historical considerations to the center stage of literary analysis', writes H. Aram Veeser.⁴¹ 'The traditional literary critic . . . imaginarily occupies a transcendent, virtual point outside of history', claims Scott Wilson.⁴² Inevitably these misrepresentations find their way into student primers. In a recent textbook entitled *Beginning Theory* students are taught that, before the advent of 'Theory', 'liberal humanist' criticism eschewed contextual considerations of any kind, and focused instead on literature's 'timeless significance'.⁴³

Even those materialists who do acknowledge the existence of an historicist tradition in twentieth-century criticism seem to be unaware that since the Second World War criticism had moved on from naive empiricism, or that what was being produced in literature departments in the 1920s and 1930s was not as simplistic as modern caricatures of this work suggest.⁴⁴ Graham Holderness claims that,

Where the old historicism relied on a basically empiricist form of historical research, confident in its capacity to excavate and define the events of the past, New Historicism drew on post-structuralist theory, and accepted 'history' only as a contemporary activity of narrating or representing the past.⁴⁵

Jeffrey Cox and Larry Reynolds similarly argue that New Historicism 'rejects the idea of "History" as a directly accessible, unitary past, and substitutes for it the conception of "histories", an ongoing series of human constructions'.⁴⁶ Hugh Grady asserts that traditional historians of Renaissance culture posit a 'single-minded authoritarian culture' in which cultural documents have 'stable, affirmative, and unitary meanings'. But now, he argues, thanks to the 'clarity of focus provided by the new critical paradigms of our own day' we have left behind such notions as 'the transcendent author . . . and transparent, single-levelled meaning'.⁴⁷ But perhaps most remarkable of all

⁴¹ H. Aram Veeser, ed., *The New Historicism* (New York and London, 1989), p. xi.

⁴² *Cultural Materialism: Theory and Practice* (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass., 1995), p. 5.

⁴³ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester, 1995), p. 17.

⁴⁴ Lilian Winstanley might be said to typify pre-Second World War literary historicism. In the Introduction to *'Hamlet' and the Scottish Succession* (Cambridge, 1921) she wrote: 'We (cannot) judge Shakespeare completely by the effect produced on our own minds; . . . the psychology of the sixteenth century is bound to differ from that of the nineteenth century, and it is important to show in what its differences consist' (pp. 2, 31).

⁴⁵ *Shakespeare Recycled: The Making of Historical Drama* (Hemel Hempstead, 1992), p. 32.

⁴⁶ Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, eds, *New Historical Literary Study: Essays on Reproducing Texts, Representing History* (Princeton, N.J., 1993), p. 1.

⁴⁷ *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, pp. 7–8.

is John Drakakis' claim in 1996 that the ideological bias of Tillyard's Elizabethan World Picture had been revealed '*over the past decade*'.⁴⁸

Taken together, these remarks represent a striking phenomenon: the history of twentieth-century historicism has in effect been rewritten so that credit for the revision of Rankean empiricism is now accorded not to the historians and critics of the 1930s and 1940s, but to 'the new critical paradigms of our own day'. In a widely cited article on New Historicism Jean Howard writes:

it seems to me that the historically-minded critic must increasingly be willing to acknowledge the non-objectivity of his or her own stance . . . [and to] acknowledge as well that any move into history is an . . . attempt to reach from the present moment into the past.⁴⁹

Ivo Kamps writes with a similar sense of missionary urgency in *Materialist Shakespeare*: 'The critic's task, as it is currently defined, is . . . a difficult and paradoxical one: to study a distant past that is shrouded in/by the present.'⁵⁰ Hugh Grady agrees, arguing that, 'at the present juncture' in Renaissance studies, we must 'define an adequate dialectic' between past and present.⁵¹ The same arguments are rehearsed by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin in *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*: 'we read the past to understand our own lives, and equally, our own commitments direct us to the "truth" about the past'.⁵² The puzzling thing about all these statements is not their content – they contain little that would surprise a traditional literary historicist like Gardner or Wellek – but their evangelical tone. In calling for a recognition of the fact that the empiricist's belief in objectivity is an unattainable ideal, that our view of the past is unavoidably coloured by the present, and that in writing history we are in effect commenting on our own world, Howard, Kamps, Grady, Loomba, and Orkin seem to be unaware of the fact that all these things have been said many times before, or indeed that they have been said by the very traditionalists against whom these critics are in reaction.

⁴⁸ John Drakakis, 'Afterword', *Alternative Shakespeares* 2, ed. Terence Hawkes (London and New York, 1996), p. 240 (our italics). In *Misrepresentations: Shakespeare and the Materialists* (Ithaca and London, 1993), p. 5, Graham Bradshaw took Hugh Grady to task for excluding one of the central strands in modern criticism from his historical study of Shakespeare in the twentieth-century (*The Modernist Shakespeare* (Cambridge, 1991)). Grady had claimed that it was only over the previous twenty years that Tillyard had been dethroned. Drakakis then halved that twenty years, thus effectively bringing the Great Deposition forward to the mid-1980s.

⁴⁹ Jean Howard, 'The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies', *English Literary Renaissance* xvi (1986), p. 43.

⁵⁰ Ivo Kamps, ed., *Materialist Shakespeare: A History* (London and New York, 1995), p. 3.

⁵¹ *Shakespeare's Universal Wolf*, p. 7.

⁵² Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin, eds, *Post-Colonial Shakespeares*, *New Accents* (London and New York, 1998), p. 6.

III

Irrespective of its claims to novelty, one thing New Historicism should certainly be credited with is fostering a renewed interest in history among literary critics. On both sides of the Atlantic the new work has taken both a moderate and a radical form. In its moderate form New Historicism shares many of the methodological assumptions of traditional historicism: a sense of the otherness of the past; a sceptical attitude towards generalisations about period mentalities; a recognition of the fact that our own attitudes, assumptions and opinions inevitably colour not just our judgment of the past, but our selection of the writers and the facts on which those judgments are based; an endorsement, despite the inadmissibility of empiricist claims to complete or entirely objective knowledge of earlier historical periods, of the value of disinterested pursuit of historical truth; a belief in the importance of historical knowledge as a means of providing a perspective on the present; a sense of the irreducibly complex nature of great art. The fact that these are all commonplaces of traditional literary historicism does not vitiate the work of the many distinguished scholars on both sides of the Atlantic who have either been responsible for, or who have responded to, the renewed interest in English departments in early modern history. What distinguishes moderate New Historicism from older historicist criticism is its insistence on the political nature of literature. An interest in the literary treatment of political issues is nothing new. But by asking new questions about the past New Historicism has opened up new fields of enquiry, showing that politics is not just a matter of palace coups or Privy Council arguments over foreign policy. The way we discuss gender for example – an issue of passionate interest to many early modern writers – is also inescapably political.⁵³ John Brannigan is probably right when he says that New Historicism is above all ‘a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds’.⁵⁴

This emphasis on power relations derives, of course, from the work of Michel Foucault, the tutelary spirit of New Historicism in its most radical form. In replacing the grand narratives of Marxism and other versions of ‘Progress’ with discontinuous microhistories, Foucault seemed to offer a more thoroughly historicist approach to past ideas and events, free from the impulse to see them only as stages in the emergence of the present. Yet in denying any meaningful connection between past and present, whether in the

⁵³ Two pioneering works in this field are Linda Woodbridge, *Women and the English Renaissance: Literature, and the Nature of Womankind, 1540–1620* (Brighton, 1984) and Constance Jordan, *Renaissance Feminism: Literary Texts and Political Models* (Ithaca and London, 1990).

⁵⁴ *New Historicism and Cultural Materialism* (Houndmills, 1998), p. 6.

form of a common human nature or something like Gadamer's 'tradition', and in asserting that what appear to be crucial distinctions are simply the product of different discursive rules, Foucault did as much to threaten historical methodology as he did to found a new historical practice. Perhaps for this reason, his direct influence has been mainly on literary critics rather than historians, though aspects of his cognitive relativism were taken up in Hayden White's structuralist philosophy of history, and elaborated by others into a fully fledged postmodern historiography.

In his seminal *Metahistory* (1973) Hayden White set out to explore the rhetorical nature of historical writing. Acknowledging his debts to Goldmann, Barthes, Foucault and Derrida, White argued that the traditional way of distinguishing between fiction and history was a false one since it obscured the extent to which invention plays a part in the writing of history. The problem of the fictional representation of reality cannot be confined to the worlds of literary theory and art-historical theory, said White; it is also a central concern of the historiographer. Where the art historian asks what part historical detail played in realistic art, White proposed that we should ask what part art plays in 'realistic' history. 'Literature' and 'history' – White uses inverted commas to indicate the problematic nature of these categories – are in important respects one and the same thing.⁵⁵ White returned to the question of the rhetorical character of historical narrative two years later in an essay called 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact'. 'In general,' he wrote, 'there has been a manifest reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences.'⁵⁶

Behind White's collapsing of the categories of fiction and history into one another are two major sources of inspiration: Foucault's Nietzschean view of history, and a theory of text developed by Barthes, Derrida, Kristeva and Sollers writing in the journal *Tel quel* in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In an article first published in 1973 White suggested that, insofar as Foucault rejected all the conventional categories of historical description and explanation, he could best be described as an 'anti-historian'. 'Foucault,' he said, 'writes "history" in order to destroy it.' Unlike the traditional historian, who sought to understand the past and to make it intelligible to his readers, partly by revealing the sequence of cause and effect in the unfolding of events, and partly by appealing to those constant elements in human nature that survive from one age to another, Foucault wanted to disrupt our false sense of coherence and defamiliarise the past. Because there is in reality no continuity in history, and no universal *humanitas*, the past can

⁵⁵ *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore and London, 1973), pp. 6–7; 2–3 n. 4.

⁵⁶ *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1985), p. 82. 'The Historical Text as Literary Artefact' was first published in *Clio* xiv (1975).

have no more meaning for us than a theatre of the absurd. Foucault, he says, 'sought to show how we are isolated *within* our peculiar modalities of experience, so much so that we could not hope to find analogues and models for the solution of the problems facing us, and thereby to enlighten us to the peculiar elements in our present situation'. Insofar as he tried to show how all systems of thought are 'little more than terminological formalizations of poetic closures with the world of words, rather than with the "things" they purport to represent and explain', Foucault had more in common with the poet than the traditional historian.⁵⁷

Foucault's Nietzschean contempt for what he regarded as historians' false claims to objectivity and neutrality and his anarchic relativism had a number of connections with the textual theory of the *Tel quel* group. Barthes' concept of the polysemous text with its free play of signifiers not only authorised an infinite number of readings; it also abolished what was claimed to be an artificial distinction between discursive types and genres. Traditionally assigned to one discipline or another, each with its own object of reference, different forms of writing were now to be seen simply as undifferentiated text. Subject matter, or 'exteriority', had become irrelevant; genre had been 'subverted'; the possibilities for generating meaning had become limitless. As Barthes admitted, textual theory was frankly iconoclastic. It is a practice, he proclaimed, 'which is strongly transgressive in relation to the main categories which found our current sociality: perception, intellection, the sign, grammar, and even science'.⁵⁸ Foucault did not share Barthes' post-structuralist belief in the possibility of a free play of meaning, arguing instead that the kind of meanings which any text could yield up were determined by how it was categorised within the discursive rules to which it was historically subject. However, his insistence on the arbitrariness of these discursive rules achieved a similarly transgressive effect.

White's argument for the collapsing of the difference between literature and history is put in less sensationally apocalyptic terms than those Foucault had deployed in his celebration of Nietzsche's 'genealogy',⁵⁹ or that Barthes had used to announce his 'transgressive' theory of textuality. But the historiography he developed in *Metahistory* would not have disappointed either of them: the professed objectivity of the traditional historian is an illusion; so too is the historian's sense of order and continuity; since there is

⁵⁷ Hayden White, 'Foucault Decoded: Notes from Underground', *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, 1985), pp. 239, 234, 257, 259. 'Foucault Decoded' was first published in *History and Theory* xii (1973).

⁵⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Theory of the Text', trans. Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (London and New York, 1973), pp. 37, 43, 44.

⁵⁹ Foucault's most important exposition of Nietzsche's view of history is 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, ed. and trans. Donald F. Bouchard (Oxford, 1977), pp. 139–64. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History' was first published in *Hommage à Jean Hyppolite* (Paris, 1971).

no trans-historical *humanitas*, the past can have little relevance for the present; the distinction between literature and history is blurred since both are essentially to do with representation. White distinguishes history as story or narrative from chronicle and from the historical record. His key point was to assert that the narratives of history are not simply found in the record. '[T]here are no grounds to be found in the historical record itself for preferring one way of construing its meaning over another.'⁶⁰ The choices that historians make in selecting and ordering their materials are determined not by the nature of the record itself, but by the historian's own ideological, moral or aesthetic preferences. There is thus 'an irreducible ideological component in every historical account of reality'.⁶¹ White acknowledges that there *was* an historical reality that existed independently of the narratives that historians now construct about it,⁶² though the textualist view of history that now forms the core of postmodern historiography is sometimes less careful than he is. In this view of history, evidence is no longer privileged; its textuality merges with that of historical narratives, with the result that all historical writing is characterised primarily by its intertextuality. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is undermined. Keith Jenkins writes: 'we can never really know the past . . . there are no 'deeper' sources (no subtext) to draw upon to get things right: all is on the surface'. Traditionally, historians have always sought the truth about the past. But 'freed from the desire for certainty', writes Jenkins, we can be 'released from the idea that history rests on the study of primary / documentary sources (and that doing history is studying these alone and that from these originals we can adjudicate later historians' disagreements)'.⁶³

Hayden White's ideas have made an overwhelming impression on those historiographers searching for a 'new' rhetorical philosophy of history to replace that of the Anglo-American analytical tradition. Much of the best work in this vein reads as if it were a commentary on White's work. White himself goes too far when he claims that it is 'the dominant opinion among professional historians themselves nowadays . . . [that] narrative representations are to be accorded the status of literary, by which is meant "novelistic" or "fictional" accounts of the matters of which they treat';⁶⁴ but there is no doubt that, thanks to White himself, it is the dominant view among one grouping of historiographers.

The scholars who hold these views advance them with considerable sophistication, and many of the jibes and lazy responses that they have

⁶⁰ *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore and London, 1987), p. 75, see also *Metahistory*, pp. 6–7.

⁶¹ *Metahistory*, p. 21.

⁶² 'Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth', *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'*, ed. Saul Friedlander (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), pp. 37–53.

⁶³ Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History* (London and New York, 1991), pp. 47–8.

⁶⁴ 'Historical Pluralism', *Critical Inquiry* xii (1986), p. 486.