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# Foucault and the New Historicism

*Geoffrey Galt Harpham*

*The New Historicism*  
Edited by H. Aram  
Veesser  
Routledge, 1989

*After Foucault:*  
*Humanistic Knowledge,*  
*Postmodern Challenges*  
Edited by Jonathan  
Arac  
Rutgers University  
Press, 1989

“People are always shouting they want to create a better future,” Milan Kundera writes in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*. “It’s not true. The future is an apathetic void of no interest to anyone. The past is full of life, eager to irritate us, provoke and insult us, tempt us to destroy or repaint it. The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past” (22). Not only is the historical record largely an archive of domination and rebellion, force and counterforce, but our very relation to the past is overshadowed by issues of power; for, as Kundera suggests, the past—as prod, ideal, judge, warning—stands paradoxically as that which can never be controlled and consequently as that which must always be contested. The historian especially understands this paradox, for, oddly enough, the systematic and purposive study of history typically produces the subjective effect of weakening the grip of the past; it is as though knowledge of the past generates the sense that one has the power to escape it. On the basis of this sense, a program of historical investigation could be tied to renovatory or emancipatory aspirations.

The paradoxical circumstance of trying to control the uncontrollable is played out in the New Historicism, whose central, internal theoretical debate reproduces the question of “containment” or “subversion”: the New Historicism insistently raises the question of whether dominant forces in culture are essentially totalizing, producing their own pre-co-opted subversions, or whether culture’s power is incomplete and vulnerable to genuine destabilization.

As several commentators have noted, the New Historicism has taken the professional form of an ’80s West Coast, politically savvy and even earnest rival to what many saw as the apolitical, ahistorical, basically East Coast school of deconstruction that flourished especially in the ’70s. It is, however, easy to deconstruct this opposition between two avant-garde movements within the academy. Both practices claim to represent the real, and both define the real as the textual. Both, that is,

attend to representations as surface, concentrating, as Joel Fine-  
man puts it in his essay in H. Aram Veese's *The New Histor-*  
*icism*, on the "textuality" of texts, and treating representation  
as a nonreferential and nonreflective practice. Both enjoin a  
renewed and liberational attention to detail and to energies and  
voices previously marginalized, dominated, suppressed, or triv-  
ialized. Both generally avoid texts of the past half-century. The  
politics of both are disputed: generally perceived to be politically  
left, both have been accused of being covertly right. The mutual  
enemy is liberal humanism, especially as expressed in the idea  
of the freely self-constituting and autonomous subject. Both  
resist thinking in unquestioned binary oppositions, preferring a  
figure of mutually constitutive processes. Both promote as the-  
oretical models the idea of an "unsettling circulation," whether  
within the text, between texts, or between texts and cultural  
contexts. Both refuse on principle to observe strict boundaries  
between "literary" and other texts. Both promise a greater flex-  
ibility and analytical complexity than the idealizing practices  
against which they define themselves. Both see the canon as the  
deposit of false or unfounded idealizations of the historical past.  
Both typically, although not always, take the outsider's point  
of view in relation to some system of totalizing control, whether  
textual, capitalistic, or colonial. Both purport to cut across dis-  
ciplinary boundaries in a form of antiprofessionalism that is  
the contemporary profession's most cherished form of self-an-  
nulment and self-congratulation. Both, it naturally follows, have  
been professionally successful. And both appear to be dying as  
polemical vanguards.

All this indicates something that neither school might wish  
to acknowledge, that the profession of literary studies as cur-  
rently constituted has a permanent place for a certain kind of  
"movement" which would serve as the setting for issues, con-  
troversies, crises, and for the conferences, panels, articles, dis-  
sertations, and volumes that would represent and try to explain  
them. This structural hospitality to crisis suggests the issue of  
"co-optation" and the possibility of an orthodoxy of heresy, an  
expectation of aberrance that has come to define advanced  
literary study. Partly because new practices are never wholly  
new and partly because the profession of literary study requires  
a sense of sequential progress, change is institutionalized, and  
to some extent the state of the art is always already business as  
usual. In the case of the New Historicism, students of literature  
were always already prepared to believe that texts and their  
authors were historically and culturally embedded and products

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of historical circumstances, however these circumstances might be “transcended” by genius. From this perspective, “The New Historicism” is not a “phrase without a referent” as Veeseer suggests in the introduction to his book, for the referent could be the profession itself, for whom all knowledge is, to be sure, a constantly changing knowledge of the past. Whatever its claims and practices, one thing that the New Historicism indisputably does is generate discourse; indeed, one of its characteristic effects is the review-essay.

The professional functionality of the New Historicism actually helps explain certain of its most idiosyncratic or apparently novel features. In perhaps the most brilliant of the half a dozen or so (out of 20) extraordinary essays in *The New Historicism*, Fineman draws attention to what is in effect another paradox, not about power but about knowledge: not only is the past the reservoir of the knowable, but it is also that which, as itself, can never be fully known. Fineman notes “the cheery enthusiasm with which the New Historicism, as a catchy term or phrase, proposes to introduce a novelty or an innovation, something ‘New,’ into the closed and closing historiography of successive innovation, ‘Historicism,’” and comments with a genial skepticism that the name of the movement itself appears to be “witness to or earnest of an impulse to discover or to disclose some wrinkling and historicizing interruption, a breaking and a *realizing* interjection, within the encyclopaedically enclosed circle of Hegelian historical self-reflection” (60). A “new” historicism promises knowledge of the past that really is knowledge, that discloses the object as in itself it really was, that is not simply a reflex or internal mirroring of contemporary self-awareness; and it does so, in this case, in impressively full awareness that, in the now-“closed” past, knowledge characteristically represented itself in this way.

The claim for the “*realizing* interjection” is often made implicitly by the choice of materials, which Hayden White characterizes as “what appears to be the episodic, anecdotal, contingent, exotic, abject, or simply uncanny aspects of the historical record” (Veeseer 301). Certainly the striking effect achieved by the essays of Stephen Greenblatt, to take the most prominent example, owes a great deal to the highly detailed and suggestive novelty of the often arcane anecdotes with which they begin. But Fineman argues that the anecdote as a form is the common narrative kernel of both literature and history, and thus the most minimal, fundamental, and primary form taken by Being in Time. So while the “new” historicism announces itself as dashing and advanced, it necessarily attaches itself to primary,

even formally primitive, materials as a way of going outside official channels, of grasping the almost prenarrativized past.

On the evidence of Veese's collection, the "interjection" promised by the New Historicism has already assumed the fate of all narrative and historical events: it has become historical. Indeed, Veese's text itself tracks a debunking narrative in its very organization, which suggests the defeat of a once-glittering force by the massed forces of principled objections, self-righteous thuggery, scholastic quibbling, and debonair condescension.

It certainly does not help that the general is manifestly unwilling to prosecute the struggle. Greenblatt begins his contribution, the volume's first essay, entitled "Towards a Poetics of Culture," by swearing that he is no theoretician, that his invention of the term "New Historicism" was virtually accidental, and that he is now "quite giddy with amazement" at the hullabaloo that has followed. What he was naming when he coined the phrase in an introduction to a 1982 issue of *Genre* was "a practice rather than a doctrine, since as far as I can tell (and I should be the one to know) it's no doctrine at all" (1). As a "practice," the New Historicism appears, in Greenblatt's account, to be constructed on the principle of a resistance to self-definition, an avoidance of positive theoretical assertion that even extends to the name itself, in which Greenblatt himself has virtually no interest, having switched years ago to "cultural poetics."

This strategy might seem like a kind of mimicry defense, an effort to disappear into the foliage, to seem so inoffensive as not to be worth the price of buckshot. But Greenblatt swiftly moves onto the offensive, arguing against both the Marxist account of the effects of capital as productive of "privatization" or of rigidly demarcated discursive domains (Fredric Jameson of *The Political Unconscious*) and the postmodern account of capital as the destroyer of privacy, psychology, and the individual (Jean-François Lyotard). For Greenblatt, both versions represent capital as a "unitary demonic principle" and thus fail to understand the "complex historical movement" of force and signification "in a world without paradisaic origins or chiliastic expectations." He points out that capitalism "has characteristically generated neither regimes in which all discourses seem coordinated, nor regimes in which they seem radically isolated or discontinuous, but regimes in which the drive towards differentiation and the drive towards monological organization operate simultaneously, or at least oscillate so rapidly as to create the impression of simultaneity" (6).

Greenblatt's exemplary parables include the oscillation of commodified representation and real murder that tacks back and forth across a grisly trail from Gary Gilmore's viewing of the film version of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* to his murder of two men, to Norman Mailer's book about Gilmore, to Jack Henry Abbott's letters to Norman Mailer (themselves assembled into a book), to Abbott's release from prison and subsequent murder of a waiter, and finally—one hopes—to a play about Abbott called *In the Belly of the Beast*, which, Greenblatt notes, “recently opened to very favorable reviews” (11). The transferences and conversions from one discursive domain to another which these events bear witness to cannot be adequately explained in terms of such traditional concepts as symbolization, representation, or mimesis. Instead, Greenblatt proposes an explanatory model that “pulls away from a stable, mimetic theory of art” and from a “monolithic” view of culture, and replaces them with an idea of the artwork as a “set of manipulations,” themselves manipulable by a restless cultural productivity, a model based on figures of “appropriation,” “exchange,” and “negotiation” that will “more adequately account for the unsettling circulation of materials and discourses” that lies at the heart of “modern aesthetic practice” (11, 12).

Greenblatt's ambivalent parables are edged closer to the “doctrine” he eschews in the collection's next essay, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” by Louis Montrose. The coupling of “politics” and “poetics” indicates succinctly Montrose's contribution to the New Historicism. Through a series of stimulating essays, Montrose has carried the New Historicism not only beyond Berkeley but beyond the kind of political inertia many have seen in Greenblatt's work. Here he elaborates on his now-famous slogan, “the historicity of texts, the textuality of history,” by spelling out the premises of a practice whose “content” may be historical knowledge but whose telos is clearly cultural and political change. Focusing on the way in which representations “are engaged in constructing the world, in shaping the modalities of social reality, and in accommodating their writers, performers, readers, and audiences to multiple and shifting subject positions within the world they both constitute and inhabit,” the New Historicism has, Montrose says, successfully “demystified claims that scholarship and the academy stand apart from or above the interests, biases, and struggles of material existence” (26). His own work engages in the “re-invention” of the texts of Renaissance culture in an effort to enable those texts to “participate in the re-formation of our own” (30). The issue of political activism in fact

appears to constitute a fault line insidiously dividing southern California New Historicism from its northern California counterpart. Almost invisible, buried indeed in a footnote, the rift is nevertheless deep. Greenblatt's nonideological empiricism suggests, Montrose writes, "that the practice of cultural poetics involves a repudiation of cultural politics. My own conviction is that their separation is no more desirable than it is possible" (32–33).

Nor, he concedes, is it possible for those cultural politics to be "pure." One of the most unsettling effects of the theory of the culturally constituted subject is that it unsettles the very "facts" adduced on its behalf by implicating the historian-theoretician in processes beyond his or her conscious control. "Impurity" becomes an issue when Montrose considers the possibility that all his claims might be attributable to "my partly unconscious and partly calculating negotiation of disciplinary, institutional, and societal demands and expectations" (30). Such a confession earns the scorn of Frank Lentricchia and the ridicule of Stanley Fish, whose peppy "Commentary: The Young and the Restless" concludes the volume. "He is nervous," Fish writes of Montrose, "at the thought that his career may be going well" (315).

Fish tracks a persistent disquiet among New Historicists in the concern that their "textualist" theory of history will disempower their actual practice of historical writing, reducing their own texts to the same ambivalent status of a nonmimetic set of manipulations as the texts they describe. On this point Fish is reassuring, arguing that an epistemology predicated on shifting, provisional configurations and subjectivities does not produce shifting or provisional facts; indeed, it has no effect at all on one's ability to tell what happened. The theory produces, as Fish says here and elsewhere, "no consequences" on historians' essentially, and doggedly, empirical practice, which will, as long as certain conventions of scholarship remain in force, continue to rest on a bedrock of traditional practices—in a word, on facticity. In their undeflected narrative production, New Historicists virtually enact Fish's "no consequences" argument; and the beauty part, for Fish, is that they do so without being aware of it, indeed while claiming not to be doing so—claiming, that is, that from their theory of openness and difference flow different kinds of (open and different) facts. But in fact, Fish asserts without apology, New Historicists purchase their freedom to do history—to say what happened—at the expense of their claim to be doing it differently.

But if New Historicists can do history (in the usual linear-

narrative-empirical way), they cannot “do” sheer opposition, openness, or sensitivity to difference as social or political practices. The “no consequences” argument that enables their practice of historical narrative disables their assertions about the political effects of their practice. There are two reasons why this is so. First is the simple impossibility of a subjective stance of, say, openness itself. To resolve to be open is to beg the question, “Open with respect to what?” And the answer to this question will exclude many possibilities. Second, and perhaps more important for Fish, is the bounded nature of institutions and discourses. New Historicism has already produced numerous institutional changes, but these cannot justify ambitions outside the institution. Fish is not arguing here that academic events produce no ripple effects beyond the academy, only that these effects are necessarily indirect and etiolated, and cannot be programmed or controlled. Fish goes after Montrose (“anti-foundationalist theory hope”) but leaves Greenblatt alone, perhaps because Greenblatt displays a qualified respect for the discursive boundaries he shows to be so porous, arguing not for unsettlement writ large, but for specific unsettling effects in the circulation of force from discourse to discourse.

The third essay in the Veese collection, Catherine Gallagher’s marvelously rich and illuminating meditation on the relations between Marxism and the New Historicism, virtually concedes and restates Fish’s point about the unpredictability of cross-discursive migrations. This principle is stated with such force and conviction as to confirm, in a way that Greenblatt’s indifference to theorizing and general descriptions does not, the theory that the New Historicism itself consists of separate, though adjacent, discourses, one (southern Californian) politically ambitious and committed to openness, difference, and emancipation as social values, and the other (northern Californian) politically left in its orientation but scrupulous about the principled independence of scholarship from political values and projects. While Gallagher is responding to critiques in *Diacritics* and the *Wall Street Journal*, her comments apply equally well to Montrose when she says that the demand that literary criticism be “a site of intellectually and socially significant work” (as Montrose puts it) cannot be translated into a “single, unequivocal political meaning” (37). Although the New Historicism, Gallagher writes, can be seen as the genealogical descendent of the New Left of the ’60s, with mid-course adjustments in response to traditional Marxism, deconstruction, feminism, Foucault, and other social forces and events, no literary criticism, including the New Historicism, contains its own politics

as an essence. So while the institutional effect of Gallagher and her colleagues—challenges to the canon, interrogations of the idea of “literature,” a renewed awareness of literature in history, an insistence on issues of race, empire, class, and gender—may have been generally left, Gallagher disowns any notion of a political bias inherent in her practice.

It sometimes appears that Gallagher positions herself between contending ideological positions, in a neutral and hence ineffectual middle ground. But, like Greenblatt, she occupies the middle like Samson between pillars. On the right, she notes the view that literature transcends and neutralizes ideological contradictions; on the left, that literature automatically activates subversive social energies. The very symmetry of these positions almost compels a position that both transcends and subverts them, the position she claims for herself, that literature can be one factor in the circulation and exchange by which social and psychological formations are variously made and unmade. In another display of the power of the neutral middle, Gallagher notes a suspicious-looking consensus between all the parties that recently have attacked the New Historicism: liberal humanists, deconstructionists, and Marxists all hold that literature is destabilizing, that it shakes us up and disturbs our moral equilibrium. Pointing out, and demurring from, this consensus, New Historicists challenge especially the left to see how the “moral narrative of literature’s benign disruptions” (46) works as a feel-good for all parties and is therefore a smoothly functioning part of the overbearing cultural mythologies that eagerly appropriate it.

Gallagher’s essay concludes the thrust phase of the collection and, depending upon how decisive this volume proves to be as a representation of the New Historicism, perhaps of the movement itself. Almost all the other critics represented here have complaints. For the next 250 pages, the reader learns that New Historicism is ethically, ideologically, or logically defective. It is assailed as “philosophical cynicism about what can be known” (Jane Marcus), insufficiently “materialist” (Brook Thomas, Jon Klancher, Judith Lowder Newton), overly “aesthetic” (Vincent Pecora), a form of “sophisticated complacency” (Gerald Graff), preoccupied with “arcane trivia” (Elizabeth Fox-Genovese). The volume concludes with White’s remarkably compressed, authoritative, and sharply worded critique of the simplified ideas of “history” invoked both by New Historicists, especially Montrose, and by their materialist critics; and, finally, with Fish. The entire collection, as organized and arranged by Veaser, suggests a professional wrestling match in

which a “scientific” wrestler, a gentleman of style and craft, makes a few remarkable and ingenious gestures, only eventually to be clubbed senseless by an infuriated 450-pound brute. There is even a kind of primitivism about the text itself, with its gross flood of typos suggesting that the editor and authors regarded proofreading as an effete and sissified practice. Gayatri Spivak could not be troubled even to write her contribution out, offering instead her unedited notes made for an oral semi-improvisation at a conference (“‘What are we doing here, now?’ A quick recap of deconstruction-bashing at the MLA, 1977–86”) and the text of a rambling, fast-paced, but oddly angled telephone interview centered mostly on herself—how she “positions” herself, the ways in which she has been “constructed,” her dissatisfaction with her own “style,” and so on, with Veese rather unsuccessfully egging her on to take positions critical of the New Historicism.

Perhaps the most serious, in the double sense of solemn and threatening, criticism comes from Frank Lentricchia, who complains that in Greenblatt’s work “power” becomes a monolithic slab that recalls the Hegelian notion of the expressive unity of culture. Power’s all-aroundness suggests that every particle of social life is controlled and that “radicalism” is merely “a representation of orthodoxy in its most politically cunning form” (239). Contrasting the Marxian image of free historical self-determination with the New Historicist analysis of self-fashioning, Lentricchia sees in the latter not only a drastic reduction in scale, but a cynical assertion that genuine self-fashioning on any scale is illusory. Thus, Greenblatt stands as a prime example of the disappointed, co-opted, post-Watergate humanist intellectual. “The rebellious, oppositional subject,” Lentricchia asks almost desperately, “where has he gone?” (239).

The obvious, but not completely cheap or utterly irrelevant response to this is “off campus.” An English teacher writing in a publication to be read almost exclusively by other English teachers, Lentricchia charges that certain English teachers somehow do not allow for the theoretical possibility of “radical” literary criticism. Apparently, Lentricchia feels—as Gallagher, for example, does not—that both literature and “oppositional” critical activity have, or can have, a political “essence” and also—contra Fish—that such criticism can produce predictable effects in the larger cultural realm. Should an English teacher question these premises, all struggle for justice is “wholly and cruelly denied” (238). In one respect, Lentricchia’s argument recalls, say, a street-corner Marxist from the ’30s, insisting to a dwindling audience of passersby that “Ya gotta have a the-

ory.” But from that larger contemporary social perspective for which Lentricchia claims to speak, he himself is indistinguishable from all the other academics who, collectively, do not mind having things pretty much their way. From this point of view, Lentricchia himself is his own worst nightmare, the best evidence for the orthodoxy of radicalism.

In the post-socialist era, the term “left” is apparently being replaced by “oppositional,” the difference suggesting both a certain confusion on the left about goals and enemies as well as the local, specific, and nonaligned (in terms of global binaries) character of contemporary political struggle. Where the left spoke for a certain “class,” however fractious, “oppositional” critics generally treat race and gender (although not, for some reason, religion, language, or intelligence) as equally important determinants of identity and therefore of discrimination; they speak not for a class but for “voices” that have been “silenced,” “suppressed,” or “marginalized” in the texts and practices of the dominant culture. Lentricchia speaks as an “oppositional” critic with the fervor and us-against-them confidence of the old left. But in a provocative essay on co-optation in the Veesper volume, Gerald Graff makes the telling point that the apparent coherence of the term “opposition” only disguises “the absence of agreement on how oppositionality is to be measured, with respect to what larger vision of society.” Moreover, in “the overheated polemical atmosphere of cultural discussion, it becomes difficult,” Graff says, “for anyone to admit confusion and ask for clarification. So we go on putting labels like ‘transgressive,’ ‘reactionary,’ and ‘complicitous’ on texts, theories, and cultural practices, as if we actually knew what we were talking about” (180). Lentricchia, Graff might say, offers a “philosophy of ‘as-if.’”

Much of Lentricchia’s criticism is aimed at the shadowy figure of Michel Foucault as the power behind New Historicism’s “power.” Foucault’s influence is well known. In the late ’70s and early ’80s he lent his encouragement as well as his prestige to a group of younger scholars at Berkeley, among whom were the founders of *Representations*, the journal in which the New Historicism is centered. They have gratefully acknowledged their indebtedness, and for his part, he seemed to have learned from them as well in a generally happy and mutually profitable situation. But for Lentricchia, Foucault is a “cynic” who offers a “depressing” image of an “eternally oppressive” power structure engaging its subjects in a “totalitarian narrative” (235). The strong implication is that Foucault’s analysis of monolithic power, especially in his institu-

tional histories such as *The Birth of the Clinic* and *Discipline and Punish*, indicates a kind of approval, or at least toleration, of monolithic power per se, whose sheer massive and complex effectiveness compelled Foucault's admiration. But there is another way of reading Foucault or, perhaps, another voice in Foucault's later texts. After the mid-1970s a strikingly different cultural narrative emerges in Foucault's analysis of power. In the interview called "Truth and Power" (1977), for example, Foucault strikes a tone that would resonate through all his subsequent work: "If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good . . . [is that] it doesn't only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things; it induces pleasure" (119). Elsewhere, as John Rajchman and David Hoy ("Foucault: Modern or Postmodern?" Arac 12–41) have argued at length, Foucault invokes what Hoy calls "the intransitivity of freedom" as the necessary condition of power. Both pleasure and freedom declare themselves in no uncertain terms when, as in much New Historicist work, "capitalism" is the name for the all-around system. But Lentricchia seems unwilling to hear this second voice and insists on regarding "opposition" and "power" as structurally at odds, with all value, as well as all the pleasure and freedom, on the side of the former.

The publication of *After Foucault: Humanistic Knowledge, Postmodern Challenges* provides an occasion to ask about the contribution of Foucault to New Historicism, his most identifiable legacy in American literary studies. Despite the publisher's claims that the essays collected here are "less expository and less general" than those in other collections, the volume lacks a mission or rationale, and most of the essays have little claim to distinction. Moreover, an unseemly measure of autocongratulation dominates the essays by Paul Bové and Daniel O'Hara, who cite themselves, each other, and the editor, their *boundary 2* colleague, Jonathan Arac, fifteen times, generally in terms of lavish praise. But one essay, Marie-Rose Logan's "The Renaissance: Foucault's Lost Chance?" does mention New Historicism as a neo-Foucauldian exploration of the representation of power in language; and another, Sheldon Wolin's "On the Theory and Practice of Power," raises issues crucial to assessing Foucault's contribution.

Wolin is impressed by an extraordinary limitation in Foucault's spacious imagination, which seemed unable to conceive of power in terms that were not either carceral or extremely diffuse. Wolin notes that Foucault rejected the ideas of state-

centered power and theoretical knowledge (what Wolin calls “classic theory”—objective knowledge untainted by worldly interests and forces) almost in the same motion, on the essentially ethical grounds that they were repressive. The nonrepressive analytical alternative was the elaboration of the structural interrelation of power and knowledge. The intention was to liberate forms of knowledge, to bring them into the world, but the effect, Wolin argues, was to create a new repressive force, the “discursive formation” imagined—unnecessarily—on the lines of the carceral institutions—prisons, clinics, asylums—Foucault had studied earlier in his career. The state may have forcibly suppressed insurrection, but the discursive formation as Foucault described it made insurrection unimaginable by eliminating any “theoretical” vantage point, any “outside.”

So far, Wolin agrees with Lentricchia and does so by the same device of simply ignoring Foucault’s later work. But Wolin makes the positive point that Foucault missed his own best opportunity. Amazingly, for a postwar historian and analyst of power, Foucault committed himself to an analysis in which politics and power were imagined as “decentralized,” and never focused on the modern state. Nor did he attend to those modern social sciences such as economics, political science, and law. What a study of these, and of such phenomena as “policy,” in which a private space is created for deliberating public issues, might have taught Foucault, according to Wolin, is that the modern world is to an unprecedented extent the product of mind. Foucault’s rejection of theory disempowers the mind at precisely the historical moment when mind is most powerful.

The missed opportunity consists, then, in the failure not only to recognize numerous and powerful tendencies towards centralization, but also to imagine a function for a theoretical knowledge conceived as distinct in principle from practice. The inability of Moses to enter the promised land, Wolin says, enabled “theory to return as prophecy and criticize the Canaanizing of the desert religion” (193). Foucault’s critique of theory is incoherent, based as it is on the double and contradictory claim that theory is unworldly and that it is complicit with power. In fact, Wolin’s essay suggests, theory’s worldly power derives precisely from its distance from the practices it criticizes. Foucault sought to avoid the larger implications of theory by making it small, by promoting the idea of the “specific intellectual” who used a conceptual “toolkit” to make local “interventions.” This shrinking tendency culminates in the second and third volumes of the *History of Sexuality* series, in which the “care of the self” assumes the central position. But locality

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can only defend itself against state-centered power, Wolin counters, through a theory that is not so modest, a theory that, in addition to other services, would help to “overcome the autistic tendencies of localism and the self-centered preoccupation of the postmodern individual” (199).

Wolin’s image of Moses as theoretician is suggestive but a bit imprecise, failing to specify exactly what relation theory bears to practice. As I have argued elsewhere, however, the controversial term *resistance*, which circulates throughout much of Foucault’s later work, provides the most promising angle of vision on this difficult problem. The emergent referent of “resistance” in the late interviews, essays, and the *History of Sexuality* series is an internal division within power, with one aspect, force, or dimension of power opposing other aspects, forces, or dimensions. Resistance suggests a functional and effective difference as, perhaps, between two adjacent discursive domains within a larger category. From the point of view of resistance, “power” may be monolithic, but the monolith contains the potential for its own subversion. Resistance thus splits the difference, in a gesture Greenblatt and Gallagher might appreciate, between the “containment” and “subversion” factions of New Historicism, between those, that is, who see literature and literary criticism as already co-opted and those who see them as intrinsically emancipatory—and, incidentally, between Foucault-as-cynic and Foucault-as-radical. If, as Foucault suggests in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, power invariably meets and even generates its own resistances, this does not mean either that power always wins, staging its own doomed insurrections, or that resistance emerges as a heroic antipower. It simply means that “power” is that overriding circumstance or category within which contestation occurs. The concept of resistance also illuminates other relations, such as that between power and knowledge, relations that form a larger unit that is neither one nor two. Perhaps resistance is a difficult concept for those accustomed to thinking in binary oppositions, but it should not prove ultimately impossible for those who can get their minds around, for example, Milton’s rebellious angels.

To foreground resistance is also to bring out Foucault’s essential, although so far entirely unacknowledged, contribution to the New Historicism. Those who, like Logan, see this movement as an exploration of discursive power think of Foucault as an influence chiefly through the works from the ’70s collected in *Power/Knowledge*, the institutional studies, especially *Discipline and Punish*, some later interviews and essays on the constitution of the subject, and the first volume of *The History*

of *Sexuality*. What is never mentioned is the contribution of his very late work on ethics, especially certain interviews and the second volume of *The History of Sexuality*. In the latter text, Foucault develops the concept of a *pratique de soi* which, as Arnold Davidson has pointed out in a recent *Critical Inquiry*, owes a great deal to Pierre Hadot's work on "spiritual exercises" in antiquity—philosophy considered as, in Davidson's words, "a transformation of one's vision of the world and a metamorphosis of one's personality" (476). In a similar spirit, Foucault describes the Greek "ethic" examined in the second volume of the sexuality series as a kind of "asceticism," or self-government. Foucault certainly profited from the presence at Berkeley in the early '80s of Peter Brown, author of a biography of Augustine (*Augustine of Hippo*), *The Cult of the Saints*, *The World of Late Antiquity*, and other books on late Roman asceticism. But Foucault took Brown one step further by explicitly aligning, in the introduction to the second volume of the sexuality series, asceticism with the writing of history. Foucault's work provides, then, not only a historical account but a brilliant example of the founding concept of the New Historicism, "self-fashioning," an ascetic practice that stipulated, for the scholar, a nearly literal exercise of wisdom.

For the New Historicism, "history," arising at the conjunction of power and knowledge, is the focus of such an exercise. A submission to something larger and fundamentally other than oneself—something one can never get right—the study of history is an instrument in the construction of the scholar's subjectivity; it even has a certain display value in that it requires a conspicuous self-immobilization, a nearly visible "discipline." History as asceticism is the foundation of the ethics of knowledge.

I do not mean to trivialize the New Historicism, as represented by Veeder's book, by referring it to the concerns of various critics over their ethical status. Rather, I am trying, among other things, to account for the fact that not one word in this debate about historicism concerns history, that is, what happened. Nor is there serious disagreement concerning public policy, social practices or institutions, or basic values; where positions on these questions are indicated, they are invariably "liberal."<sup>1</sup> The issue, then, is not, as White suggests, ideological and political. The substance of the very real conflict enacted in these pages, the consistent concern both of New Historicists and their critics, is the integrity of the scholar's commitment to the real, as opposed—or as resistant—to what might be called the subjective. Nothing that Montrose says about the "impurity"

of his *questioning* of Renaissance texts extends to a concession about the purity of the answers he “receives.” Nor does any critic of the New Historicism, no matter how dedicated to a minority perspective or an emancipatory political project, give an inch on the question of the real. Moreover, virtually all writers represented here define the real in terms of the specific, the local, the material, in a consensus Fish calls a “shared commitment to difference.” Although the materialist account of the real is not uncontested—Fox-Genovese, for example, defines the real as “the structural”—the common enemy is idealization, which is to say, once again, the subjective: the mind, it appears, is treacherously complicit in producing the restless oscillation of things and ideas. But to repeat: the issue is no more epistemological than it is historical or ideological; it is ethical, in the Foucauldian sense of a *pratique de soi*.

Literature is traditionally said to produce an “ethical” effect through its ability to transcend its historical moment. “Great” literature, especially, displays what might be called a certain aspiration to speak to a multitude of contexts. For its part, history—the Ciceronian “trainer of the mind”—addresses a different crowd every night and in this respect transcends itself constantly. “History” works insistently against the specificity of history. Other putatively worldly practices, such as the capitalism interrogated so vigorously by New Historicists, do the same, containing still other forms of unworldliness, including, as Weber pointed out, money and reinvestment. The most stinging critique of materialism is provided, surprisingly enough, by capitalism. Much contemporary critical theory, as well as literary criticism, can be seen as a search for ways of conceptualizing the relation between the alien and irreducible particularities that seem to contain the real and the idealizing act that grasps or appropriates them for human use. It is in this respect that the discourse of ethics may prove to be most suggestive. For ethics is a practice undertaken by single subjects, whose legitimacy derives from its capacity to transcend and regulate, or at least escape traceable determination by, the local and singular. What all ethical theories—from Aristotle’s to Foucault’s, including Kant’s and Nietzsche’s—seek to provide is an account of the relation between the domain of the material, discrete, and mutable and that of the ideal, nonperspectival, and enduring. “Ethics” is not reducible to history. But as the example of the New Historicism suggests, it can be one name for a kind of display through which the claim to be able to tell what happened is supported.

## Notes

1. It might be thought that the ascetic practices of scholarship virtually produce, as compensatory reflexes, liberal social visions. But—as any ease-disdaining academic would say—the case is surely more complicated than that. A more promising hypothesis would be that scholarly practices explicitly based on principles of “specificity” and “materiality” typically accompany emancipatory social visions in which culture is seen as responsive to the mind; whereas those practices in which tendencies to abstraction or generalization are built in—such as the New Criticism, where poems were studied not precisely as themselves but as instances of “literary language,” or myth-criticism, or archetypal criticism—characteristically accompany social visions based on a principle of the recalcitrance of social arrangements and practices to changes originating in mind. This recalcitrance, of course, constitutes its own counterideal.

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