The Poverty of Context: Historicism and Nonmimetic Fiction

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Historians undertake to arrange sequences—called stories, or histories—assuming in silence a relation of cause and effect. These assumptions, hidden in the depths of dusty libraries, have been astounding, but commonly unconscious and childlike. . . .

—Henry Adams (362–63)

“A History of Causes and Effects”

WHERE WOULD LITERARY HISTORY BE—OR GO—WITHOUT SEQUENCES? Divided into periods and fields, such history brings order to disparate material, crediting events with significance “over and above whatever comprehension they provide by appeal to putative causal laws.” The results are satisfying and seductive, explain philosophers of history, because they sort random, inchoate details into familiar narratives (White, esp. “Historicism,” “Value,” and “Question”; Ankersmit 29–74; Gossman 244–45). Sequences make possible arguments about causality and antecedence and sanction the idea that what determines political events is comparable to what determines literature.

The popular refrain that we must “adequately historicize” literature builds on this idea while turning contextual analysis into an ethical demand. If literature and history are veiled representations of the social, critics reason, then both promise information it would be reprehensible to ignore. Hayden White critiqued older, idealist forms of historicism that hid their reliance on narrative and contingency. But oddly this “need” surfaced with renewed intensity after criticism’s historicist turn, which Fredric Jameson inspired by calling narrative “socially symbolic” and by exhorting readers, in a now-famous imperative, “Always historicize!” (9). Although for mythologists, formalists, and folklorists “socially symbolic” is close to an oxymoron, for Jameson and other materialists it is largely a
redundancy. Accordingly, he found literature and history, arguing that "the perspectives of Marxism are necessary preconditions for adequate literary comprehension"—are in fact the "ultimate semantic precondition for the intelligibility of literary and cultural texts"—since Marxism alone reveals "the sequence of modes of production and the succession and destiny of the various human social formations" (75).

Jameson’s stress on what sequences integrate turns historical blind spots and narrative aporias into crypts yielding the right sociopolitical meaning, if we can but find the appropriate interpretive key. For many critics these days, context is that key, creating a fresh variant of the repressive—or, rather, expressive—hypothesis, which can view factor x (in this instance, fiction) only in hydraulic relation to context y (nineteenth-century society in my chosen examples). The greater the literary or cultural enigma, the more the signifier "context" promises interpretive leverage and revelation. And, by corollary, the more critics question the deterministic priority of context, the more they—and the works they study—are said to promote a form of retreat that tries to forget, suspend, or eviscerate the political realm. Departing slightly from Jameson and such simplistic conclusions, critics may speak profusely about multiple causality and overdetermination, insisting on a work’s "relative autonomy" from society (Montrose 23, quoting Althusser 130). Still, they differ widely in their understanding of that key adjective “relative,” and when push comes to shove, “context” invariably overrides it. In this dominant paradigm, which includes various forms of new historicism, cultural materialism, and cultural studies, the principal determinant, historical context, is chosen in advance (McGann, Beauty 344 and “Scandal” 128–29).

Witness the premise that art’s “relative autonomy” is itself historically circumscribed, a condition of social and ideological arrangements (Eagleton 8–9; Mulhern, Culture/Metaculture, esp. xxi, and “Beyond Metaculture” 103; Sprinker 13–15). Nothing, apparently, can escape this deterministic net. As Francis Mulhern declared, summing up this thesis, “[C]ultural politics is not a position, or even a demarcated set of practices; it is an inescapable field of forces whose dynamism is constantly renewed by the non-identity of its constituent terms” (“Beyond Metaculture” 103). Umberto Eco called such arguments variants of “the referential fallacy” (58), “the belief that an actual state of the world must underwrite the functioning of every semiotic entity” (Lewis 460; for different appraisals, see de Man 11; Ellis 104–21; Knapp 97–98). The deterministic models irritating Eco are paradoxically limited, however, because the elements they try to integrate are already internal and comprehensible to them (Copjec 6). So while materialists may agree that literature’s truth claims are semantically complex—and while they may argue, like Mulhern, that metacultural impulses are inseparable from culture’s willingness to “speak . . . of its own generality and historical conditions of existence” (“Beyond Metaculture” 86)—they tend to recast or ignore extradiscursive, nonreferential, and unreadable factors, including but not limited to sublimity, fantasy, memory, filtering, pretense, impossibility, and nothingness. Invoking causality while often sidestepping means of verifying it, they argue that the above terms, especially “emptiness” and “impossibility,” indicate not that the literary and nonliterary are noncontiguous but that the former for ideological reasons displaces or expunges the latter.

New historicism emerged as a response to such functionalism. It overcame empiricism on the one hand and economics on the other by using anecdotes, seemingly trivial cultural artifacts, and contingent links between politics and representations to create “thick description.” "Where history of ideas straightened the world pictures," argued Alan Liu, "New Historicism hangs those pictures anew—seemingly by accident, off any hook, at any angle" (722). Yet although traditional historians and orthodox
Marxists objected to the ensuing readings, in arguments rehearsed and relayed many times in humanities departments, their caveats obscured points of convergence among these approaches. In "Towards a Poetics of Culture" Stephen Greenblatt criticized Jameson’s reductiveness, and in Marvelous Possessions he referred to "wonder" as an element situated partly in economies that nonetheless "seems to resist recuperation" (17), yet in Practicing New Historicism, co-authored recently with Catherine Gallagher, he modified these claims and echoed Jameson’s statement about sequences, saying we now need "a wholly integrated and sequential account, a history of causes and effects" ("Touch" 33). Despite Greenblatt’s, Gallagher’s, and Liu’s arguments to the contrary, in other words, much new-historicist work proceeds in tandem with older forms of historicism, as well as with cultural materialist and Foucauldian criticism. For each attributes to fiction an "expressive character" that can voice ideological tensions (Foucault, "Functions" 309; Krieger 42–47). And it is but one step from here to arguing that literature is a veiled representation of the social, a "paradigm" whose "obliqueness" new historicism redefines as political meaning (Liu 722). What such approaches ignore—so breaking with Michel Foucault’s own approach to works by Maurice Blanchot, Pierre Klossowski, Georges Bataille, and others—are literature’s nonmimetic aims, its defamiliarizing techniques, rhetorical difficulty, and, most important, its frequent "intransitivity" to reality (309). Fiction is often at odds with, not divorced from, society and history; it "is intransitive," Roland Barthes asserts, to the degree that it "does not deliver a product" (trans. and qtd. in Gossman 5; see the essays in Burwick and Pape and in Clark).

If literature is frequently intransitive, as Barthes, Foucault, and many others contend, then attempts at demystifying it are largely beside the point. One cannot obviate this problem by defining all writing as socially embedded, historically determined, and politically motivated. Nor, as Victor Shklovsky noted decades ago, echoing well-known dicta by John Ruskin, James Abbott McNeill Whistler, Walter Pater, Oscar Wilde, and T. E. Hulme, can one transpose this issue by calling the aesthetic a function of class interests and other external phenomena (12, 18). That literature troubles assumptions about historical causes calls for a subtler approach to imaginative writing and its aesthetic effects.

In the light of Barthes’s and Foucault’s principles, which clash with the expressive aims of materialists and some traditionalists, what does Greenblatt’s phrase "wholly integrated" really mean? To engage this question, I will address how three works—Friedrich Nietzsche’s "On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life," Erich Auerbach’s Mimesis, and Greenblatt’s recent essay "The Touch of the Real"—point to the aesthetic realm’s tenuous relation to historical reality. In doing so, I shall ask several hermeneutic questions: Is the "asynchronous character of written literature" (Gossman 22) incommensurate with cultural politics? Does the aesthetic realm—with its emphasis on fantasy, play, and imagination—resist empiricism and discursive understanding? And does it thereby violate the patterns shaping literary history? Henry Adams claimed that his "historical neck [was] broken by the sudden irritation of forces totally new" (363). The new physics apparently introduced a "break of continuity amount[ing] to abysmal fracture for a historian's objects" (361). Adams found these forces in electromagnetism and entropy; Nietzsche and Auerbach, in literature. Let us consider why.

The problem of "adequately historicizing" a text begins with the banal and routine practice of noting publication dates in parentheses. Editors of journals and presses now request this information so commonly that not providing it seems remiss, a sign of historical indifference or evasion. The date has become a fetish, however, stressing one form of meaning at the expense of others, including the possibility that the object
does not sustain or mask meaning but opens instead onto nothingness. Granted, publication dates appear benign in the information they seem to convey, though lags of course exist among inspiration, composition, and publication (more on which below). Yet many critics use a literary work’s publication to initiate—and sometimes to authorize—a set of lateral cultural comparisons, based on events that might have influenced the writer in question. The difficulty of verifying influence—centrally important to traditional historians—proves secondary, for new historicists, to what the comparison enables.4

Whether one celebrates or laments the ensuing readings, they stem from narratives with frequently a noncontiguous relation to society. So although critics like Tony Bennett think we should consider literature merely a “particular, historically determined form of writing,” delimited (he helpfully emphasizes) “as one practice of writing amongst others” (Formalism 14, 15), we cannot convincingly “re-define” nonmimetic fiction, in his recent words, “as an institutionally ordered field of textual uses and effects” (jacket blurb to Outside Literature). It is odd to conceive of literature as “institutionally ordered,” as if, say, the Victorian state demanded (one sense of Bennett’s phrase) that Charles Dickens parody it in Bleak House and Little Dorrit. It is equally reductive to represent aesthetic effects as interchangeable with ideological tensions, as if Dickens wanted—or was able—to organize them in this way (the other sense of Bennett’s phrase).

Bennett is refreshingly candid in trying to “shift” literature “from the terrain of aesthetics to that of politics where it belongs” (Formalism 3). But let us displace the ensuing questions about value, which could mire the argument in canonical debates, and focus instead on analogous concerns about perspective and temporality. Can works of art really represent the past transitively and mimetically? And are their aesthetic effects discursive, extradiscursive (inimical to meaning), or something in-between? We may contextualize fiction, these questions imply, when its perspective is referential. But Bennett and others place such literarist expectations on fiction that they “equate the ‘object of the text’ with the ‘real object’” (Lewis 459). In works surpassing these coarse expectations, by contrast, fiction is often at odds with context. Making possible what some early Victorians called “anorthoscopic perception,” whereby we view an entity aslant or obliquely, these works proffer an “alien vision” that fouls up Bennett’s and others’ notions of convergence and sequencing (Johnson; see also Smith 138; Rock; Marx and Engels 47). This is but one reason the intellectual historian Pierre Nora extended the insights of many Victorian psychologists, painters, and photographers in opposing memory to history (3). Accordingly, our quarrel with Jameson, Liu, Bennett, Gallagher, and Greenblatt, who after all advanced an anamorphic reading of Hans Holbein’s Ambassadors in Renaissance Self-Fashioning, is not whether fiction promotes such obliquity but whether in doing so it necessarily refers to a wider context.

**‘History Is the Antithesis of Art’**

Partly alluding to this obliquity, Henry James comments in The American Scene, “I draw courage from the remembrance that history is never, in any rich sense, the immediate crudity of what ‘happens,’ but the much finer complexity of what we read into it and think of in connection with it” (136–37). I will return to comparable observations in nineteenth-century fiction, since critics often mischaracterize this writing as realist or naturalist in perspective, but we should note that the only connection James can establish to history’s “finer complexity” is one he cobbles together belatedly, based on “remembrance,” and proleptically, stemming from inference and projection. Where then is the correspondence—the synchronic alignment—between narrative and event so crucial to new-historicist argument (Montrose 17)?
Since historicists and materialists of all stripes must first try to situate a text in a social setting before gauging its cultural intervention, let us continue with James before turning to nonmimetic fiction. His preface to *The Aspern Papers* confounds situatedness, indicating why "literary history" veers so close to oxymoronic status that for it he requires quotation marks. The first half of his opening paragraph also begins with a confident assertion that subsequent sentences swiftly undermine:

I not only recover with ease, but I delight to recall, the first impulse given to the idea of *The Aspern Papers*. It is at the same time true that my present mention of it may perhaps too effectually dispose of any complacent claim to my having "found" the situation. Not that I quite know indeed what situations the seeking fabulist does "find": he seeks them enough assuredly, but his discoveries are, like those of the navigator, the chemist, the biologist, scarce more than alert recognitions. He *comes upon* the interesting thing as Columbus came upon the isle of San Salvador, because he had moved in the right direction *for* it—also because he knew, with the encounter, what "making land" then and there represented. Nature had so placed it, to profit—if as profit we may measure the matter!—by his fine unrest, just as history, "literary history" we in this connexion call it, had in an out-of-the-way corner of the great garden of life thrown off a curious flower that I was to feel worth gathering as soon as I saw it. I got wind of my positive fact, I followed the scent.

If readers treat this remarkable statement as historical, they might address James's retrospective glance—that he is writing in the first decade of the twentieth century for his supposedly definitive New York Edition (1907–09) about a tale that first appeared in the *Atlantic* twenty years earlier, between March and May 1888. But the timing raises more questions than it answers. Is James reenacting the creative impulses he felt in the 1880s or acknowledging what happened in the interim—what returned to his conscious-
not dissolved—that “[a]esthetic production is a reflection of material, historical and social reality” (“Problems” 53; see also Eagleton 8–9 and Sinfield 49–50). And the issue surpasses the suggestion that narrative obliquity can fashion literary history (Liu 722). In such models, as Foucault observed, the relation between society and art remains at bottom transitive, defined by literature’s “expressive” purpose. What of works whose relation to society is intransitive, or even ones whose referential difficulties stymie their capacity for verisimilitude (Tallis 214)?

In “The Art of Fiction,” James sought explanations for fiction’s “testimonial superiority to history” (Dean 308). Joseph Conrad later modified and extended this argument when insisting, paradoxically, that fiction “stands on firmer ground, being based on the reality of forms and the observation of social phenomena, whereas history is based . . . on second-hand impression[s]. Thus fiction is nearer truth” (17). If Conrad were uninterested in fiction’s “firmer ground,” critics might dismiss his claim as idealist. But “the reality of forms” shapes the “impression[s]” informing his and others’ fiction; he links but does not conflate fiction with “the observation of social phenomena.” To that extent, as Tim Dean remarks, “we are compelled to conclude” with Conrad “that fiction is more historical than history” (308).

Readers of Heart of Darkness, Nostromo, and many other works by Conrad regularly affirm that his paradox has oblique political consequences, but these arise from both “the reality of forms” and “the observation of social phenomena” rather than, as some critics assume, from the observation alone. We could add that psychoanalysis, through its commitment to forms and its unorthodox grasp of perception, recasts our understanding of time and socially orchestrated sequences in ways similar to Conrad’s and James’s endeavors yet different from the popular misconception that psychoanalysis is ahistorical. For instance, that consciousness experiences events belatedly (nachträglich) sig-
Nietzsche’s eyes, such an aim misses what is most stimulating, threatening, and emancipatory about modernity’s “strange and incoherent forces” (78), among which we must count modernity’s interest in nothingness. The historicists’ error apparently is to dismiss or, commonly, to miscast the “barbaric and violent things that press” on us “with overwhelming power” (98). Hence the following observation from Franz Grillparzer, the Viennese dramatist, which Nietzsche reproduces:

What is history but the way in which the spirit of man apprehends events impenetrable to him; unites things when God alone knows whether they belong together; substitutes something comprehensible for what is incomprehensible; imposes his concept of purpose from without upon a whole which, if it possesses a purpose, does so only inherently; and assumes the operation of chance where a thousand little causes have been at work. (qtd. in Nietzsche 91)

The challenge that inchoate material poses to culture and society increases, moreover, if one accepts that humanity alone bestows meaning retroactively on what is ineffable and senseless, whether by calling the result formally discrete or historically revelatory. Indeed, for Nietzsche, God’s death vacates the space that Grillparzer reserves for a primum mobile; once freed from history, these “thousand little causes” circulate in the culture unfettered by metaphysical agents. According to Nietzsche, we would be wiser to explore some of the effects of these causes—as James arguably did in his preface and elsewhere—by asking whether art and aesthetics elaborate them and, if so, how.

Because Nietzsche calls history “the antithesis of art,” the “malady of history” proves curable only when we adopt a position that is un- or suprahistorical (95, 120). Creativity ruptures connections between our culture and its traditions. Art does not stabilize antecedents, does not shore up meaning or sustain reparation, is not contiguous with society. Nietzsche’s argument also surpasses the notion, prevalent in academia today, that the “suprahistorical” is a synonym for bogus transcendence, pure negation (or presence), lofty surveillance, perfect timelessness, false consciousness, reification, immaturity, nostalgia, and other suspect ideas. Yet, as Isobel Armstrong asserts, “[e]volving another poetics means . . . changing the terms of the argument. It does not mean returning to a pretheoretical innocence” (2). There are options other than hagiography and the eternal verities of William Bennett—options making clear that the “suprahistorical,” bordering on nothingness, exposes the fragile constituents of cultural meaning, while pointing formally, ethically, and democratically to what confounds symbolization. In The Political Unconscious, by contrast, Jameson recasts (without revoking) this issue, saying he conceives of Marxism as an “untranscendable horizon” that subsumes [all] apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations, assigning them an undoubted sectoral validity within itself, and thus at once canceling and preserving them” (10). One might plausibly view such “undoubted sectoral validity” as synonymous with religion, which makes the standard materialist disdain for traditionalism somewhat misplaced, but Nietzsche discredits arguments like Jameson’s by asserting that “the unhistorical is like an atmosphere within which alone life can germinate” and that the suprahistorical recasts the past as a “transfigured form” (63, 69; my emphasis).

**Figura and the Event**

We best grasp the ramifications of Nietzsche’s argument, in my opinion, by focusing on the reception of hermeneutic alternatives like Auerbach’s *Mimesis*, itself a “history of the literary conquest of modern reality” from Homer to Virginia Woolf (331, also qtd. in Greenblatt, “Touch” 33). Partly for that reason, Greenblatt engages extensively with Auerbach’s work in “The Touch of the Real,” his introduction to *Practicing New Historicism*, lamenting that
Auerbach reveals not contiguous ties among literature, the social, and history but "a sequence of specters, the specters of mimetic genius" (37). Since Auerbach’s chapters are thematically self-contained, ostensibly they lack a sense of historical movement. Auerbach “makes almost no gestures toward a wholly integrated and sequential account, a history of causes and effects” (33).

Careful readers of Auerbach disagree, recalling his fondness for figura, a trope linking people and events (“Figura”; see also Green, esp. 29-35). Amplifying the consequences of this trope for literary interpretation, Auerbach repeats in Mimesis that figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons in such a way that the first signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second involves or fulfills the first. The two poles of a figure are separated in time, but both, being real events or persons, are within temporality. They are both contained in the flowing stream which is historical life, and only the comprehension, the intellectus spiritualis, of their interdependence is a spiritual act. (73, quoting “Figura”; 53 with slightly different phrasing)

Compare Auerbach’s account with Greenblatt’s gloss on this trope—that it “allows . . . for the overarching divine order in which everything that exists is ultimately fulfilled”—despite Greenblatt’s conceding, in the same sentence, that figurae also designate “the historical specificity of each particular event, phenomenon, and personality” (“Touch”; 34). This is classic rebuttal by exaggeration, in which “interdependence,” likened to a “spiritual act,” metastasizes into “an overarching divine order.”

Part of Greenblatt’s mistake is to assume he is paraphrasing Auerbach’s thoughts on figura, when Auerbach makes clear he is summarizing “figural view[s] of history” from Origen, Tertullian, and Augustine to Dante, Vico, and beyond (“Figura”; 60). Echoing his earlier signposting, Auerbach concludes, “Our purpose was to show how on the basis of its semantic development a word may grow into a historical situation and give rise to structures that will be effective for many centuries” (76). Nowhere in “Figura” does Auerbach literalize this “semantic development” or turn it into an implicit manifesto, and only a dramatic misreading could suggest otherwise.

Greenblatt then shifts from discussing Auerbach’s putative “overarching divine order” to noting that Auerbach had to flee from German anti-Semitism before World War II, so hinting that figurae and literary “specters” are his intellectual compensation for the ensuing crisis (“Touch”; 36-37, 42). Such arguments reproduce the determinism that Greenblatt censures elsewhere, reducing intellectual history to personal experience. Given Auerbach’s readings of Augustine, Dante, and others; his remarks in Mimesis; and Greenblatt’s concession about figura’s reliance on “historical specificity” (34), one could plausibly argue that “figural structure[s]” fascinate Auerbach, precisely because they “preserve . . . the historical event while interpreting it as a revelation” (“Figura”; 68). As F. R. Ankersmit notes, Auerbach eschews allegory because it “misses the realist dimension of figura” (306-07n18)—that is, because it eclipses figura’s partial reliance on real events. What is significant about Auerbach’s model, in other words, is that it does aim to connect events and people in time and “historical life,” while acknowledging that literary impressions push us into a different experiential register (“Figura”; 54).

Greenblatt’s complaint that “Auerbach makes almost no gestures toward a wholly integrated and sequential account, a history of causes and effects” also warrants commentary, because Catherine Gallagher admits in “Counterhistory and the Anecdote,” one of her chapters in Practicing New Historicism, that she and Greenblatt use anecdotes jarringly, hoping thereby to dislodge Auerbach’s and others’ method of adopting epigraphs supposedly to encapsulate a work’s argument (51-52). Why, then, would either new historiestic mind elsewhere that Auerbach avoided “wholly integrated . . . gestures”? Their point is especially
odd, because Greenblatt earlier concedes, “The new historicist anecdote as many of us deployed it is an Auerbachian device” (“Touch” 35). Stranger still, Gallagher and Greenblatt begin their diffuse book by admitting that its “underlying coherence . . . may not be self-evident” (1). And they conclude a sketchy introduction by declaring that if any reader could “say what it all adds up to,” then both authors “would have failed” (19)! What are readers to conclude, then, about their commitment to “wholly integrated and sequential account[s],” to say nothing of the actual “practice” of new historicism, their titular concern? When Greenblatt complains that Auerbach offers his reader “no programmatic statement of purpose” (“Touch” 33), one might say that the pot is calling the kettle black. Certainly, one could infer—as have David Chandler, Hillis Miller (286), Edward Pechter (293–94, 298), White (“New Historicism” 294–95, 302), Linda Woodbridge (693), and others—that there is considerable distance between new-historicist theory and practice.

Ten pages later, Greenblatt’s complaint shifts once more. He concedes that Auerbach’s “grasp is sequential” yet adds that the sequences give “a museum effect in which one passes serenely from room to room, each organized neatly by period” (43; my emphasis). But this objection skirts the crucial interpretive question: how does one define the sequences organizing literary history? If “passing serenely” sounds like another mischaracterization, it is because Greenblatt claims in his next sentence that Auerbach balks at James Joyce’s and Woolf’s “simultaneous grasp of conflicting and/or non-contiguous representation systems,” both modernists viewing such effects with “something close to nihilistic despair” (43). Auerbach’s indictment of a “radical and fanatical urge to destroy” does not by my reckoning sound very serene (Mimesis 551), which may explain why Greenblatt writes, in classic understatement, “We suspect that Auerbach would have disliked this characterization of his work” (37). Though Auerbach does not embrace modernist eruptions of contingency, formlessness, and asymmetry, his response is more nuanced than Greenblatt allows. He observes adroitly that a “kind of uninterpretable symbolism” flourishes in modern fiction, making such works “hostile to the reality which they represent.” This augurs for him a “method [that] is not only a symptom of the confusion and helplessness, not only a mirror of the decline of our world. There is, to be sure,” adds Auerbach, “a good deal to be said for such a view” (551; my emphases). Let me explain why.

Victorian Realism, Asymmetry, and Nonmimetic Fiction

Considering Auerbach’s emphasis on aspects of fiction that are “hostile to . . . reality,” we might add that Edward Bulwer Lytton anticipated this concern decades earlier, in his preface to Night and Morning. At the time, Bulwer sought a dimension to art that would not extend the purview of realism but would engage with what realism tried to skirt. “[I]n searching for new regions in the Art to which I am a servant,” he wrote in hindsight,

it seemed to me that they might be found lying far, and rarely trodden, beyond that range of conventional morality in which Novelists after Novelists had entrenched himself—amongst those subtle recesses in the ethics of human life in which Truth and Falsehood dwell undis turbed and unseparated. The vast and dark Poetry around us—the Poetry of Modern Civilisation and Daily Existence, is shut out from us in much, by the shadowy giants of Prejudice and Fear. He who would arrive at the Fairy Land must face the Phantoms. (viii)

One could invoke without difficulty all the Gothic motifs informing Bulwer’s growing interest in Rosicrucianism and the occult, as well as what he called, in articles named after these phrases, “the normal clarifyance of the imagination” and “the distinction between active thought and reverie.” Such elements partly un-
derscore the problems of convergence at issue here. But Bulwer championed this aesthetic to displace “that range of conventional morality in which Novelist after Novelist had entrenched himself”; he hoped to engage “[t]he vast and dark Poetry around us,” an oblique register embracing “subtle recesses in the ethics of human life.” Thus, he wrote elsewhere about “the absorbing tyranny of every-day life,” by which he meant policies and philosophies literalizing experience by corroborating only empirical observation (Strange Story 267). His fiction aims, mid-century, at dimensions of experience that such “tyranny” can neither recognize nor represent.

Note that Bulwer reached this argument after writing, in roughly two decades, Romantic verse (Ismael: An Oriental Tale and Weeds and Wildflowers) and a Romantic novel (Falkland); “silver-fork” fiction (Pelham and “Mortimer”) and fictionalized autobiography (The Disowned); historical romances (Devereux and The Last Days of Pompeii) and history (England and the English); Newgate novels and early incarnations of detective fiction (Eugene Aram and Paul Clifford); historical drama (The Lady of Lyons and Richelieu); and metaphysical fantasy (The Pilgrims of the Rhine and Ernest Maltravers). While realism allegedly prevailed as the dominant narrative form, Bulwer’s interest in the “vast and dark Poetry around us” indicates that we must jettison our assumptions about realism; even this cursory glance at Victorian fiction indicates that they are facile and misleading (Hardy 13). Often (though not always) eschewing familiarity, mid-Victorian fiction forges complex discrepancies between narrative voice and characterological development. Varied traits, personae, and modes of being present or absent in imaginary worlds indicate why those worlds are not coeval with society. This fiction also provides “complex hypotheses” of reality, whereby narrators signal repeatedly that their scenes bear on the reader’s understanding of the world but should not thereby be construed as identical with it (Levine, “Hypothesis” 7). As Shaw explains following an astute account of different narrative voices and techniques in Adam Bede, Felix Holt, and Middlemarch,

[R]ealism has nothing to do with “transparent representation.” We need instead to conceive of realist novels as creating a metonymical and rhetorical chain that runs from novel to reader to the world. If we view realism as a matter of rhetoric, not “transparency,” the issue of historicizing the narrator doesn’t disappear, but it becomes productive. What we would then reasonably require is that the realist narrator help to involve us in a dynamic mode of comprehension that will prove illuminating when we apply it to the realities around us. For this purpose, however, it might well be useful to place the narrator, like her characters, under the constraints of history. (238)

Certainly, this approach loosens the interpretive deadlock constraining much new-historicist, cultural materialist, and Foucauldian criticism, in which the Victorian novel is seen as coyly or perniciously elaborating strategies of power, subjection, and containment by implicating readers in the state’s machinery (see also Levine, “Reclaiming” 9). Nevertheless, I want to press even Shaw’s assumption that it is “reasonable” to “require . . . that the realist narrator help to involve us in a dynamic mode of comprehension that will prove illuminating,”” for the metonymic chain he describes so well does not lead readers transitively from the text to the world. Precisely because it relies on the reader’s imagination, the novel, as James and Bulwer show differently, creates multiple associative paths, some of which transform our understanding of the world while others point to our frequently incommensurate relation to it. The ensuing cognitive dissonance falls between our conceptions of nineteenth-century subjectivity and of nineteenth-century social structures (R. Adams 6–16; Finn 9–10; Lane, “Victorian Asymmetry”). Though Victorian poetry often intensifies this dissonance, given the liberties it takes with verisimilitude, before I turn to Robert
Browning’s work I want to show briefly that even examples of Victorian prose fiction can thwart our social bearings, impeding assumptions about its heuristic value.

Among relevant nonmimetic episodes, we might address swaths of Gothic, sensation, and impressionist fiction, to say nothing of works of “psychological realism” and texts by avant-garde writers “committed to the creation of non-worlds, dream-worlds, word-worlds or anti-worlds” (Tallis 2). Probably the best-known example of such Victorian defamiliarization is Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, with its oblique meditations on perspective and interpretation, its dreams and “nonsense” poetry, all extending the idea of Wonderland in *Alice’s Adventures* by re-releasing that realm from materialism. But my argument is better served by less fantastical works, in which there is still a split between social and psychic reality. That is why I focus on Bulwer rather than on, say, Ruskin’s arguments about the imagination; and on Dickens and James, not Carroll.

Consider, then, the opening words of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, where the narrator’s alternating questions and exclamations converge briefly with the visions of an opium-addled man we are later invited to identify as John Jasper, the “Lay Precentor” of Cloisterham:

An ancient English Cathedral town? How can the ancient English Cathedral town be here! The well-known massive grey square tower of its old Cathedral? How can that be here! There is no spike of rusty iron in the air, between the eye and it, from any point of the real prospect. What is the spike that intervenes, and who has set it up? Maybe, it is set up by the Sultan’s orders for the impaling of a horde of Turkish robbers, one by one. It is so, for cymbals clash, and the Sultan goes by to his palace in long procession. Ten thousand scimitars flash in the sunlight, and thrice ten thousand dancing-girls strew flowers. Then, follow white elephants caparisoned in countless gorgeous colours, and infinite in number and attendants. Still, the Cathedral tower rises in the background, where it cannot be, and still no writhing figure is on the grim spike. Stay! Is the spike so low a thing as the rusty spike on the top of a post of an old bedstead that has tumbled all awry? Some vague period of drowsy laughter must be devoted to the consideration of this possibility.

Shaking from head to foot, the man whose scattered consciousness has thus fantastically pieced itself together, at length rises, supports his trembling frame upon his arms, and looks around.

(37)

This passage cleverly fuses before disentangling the narrator’s and Jasper’s musings—as, for comparable effect, it blends then differentiates a cathedral spire and a rusty nail—so permitting Dickens many jokes about the plausibility of his own imaginative leaps (“How can that be here!,” “who has set it up?”) and the reader’s possible impatience with his games (“Stay!”). Just as Carroll’s narrator asks, “Which Dreamed It?” at the end of *Through the Looking-Glass*, referring to Alice and her cat, as well as the Red King of the book’s vertiginous chessboard, so Dickens’s opening gambit in his last, unfinished novel lets him meditate on the “scattered consciousness” that “fantastically piece[s] . . . together” its imaginary world. Both works and writers rely on opium to transform their characters’ conception of the world (Carroll is widely suspected of having been an opium user; Dickens took laudanum medicinally during his last years and visited an opium den with James Fields as part of his research for the novel). More important, such fiction “tumble[s] all awry” its protagonists’ and readers’ ontological status by extending it beyond materialism’s purview. When, for instance, the narrator describes Jasper as “becoming a breathing man again without the smallest stage of transition between [his] two extreme states” (49), he points to a deductive error sparked by an earlier exchange between the Dean and Canon Crisparkle: “And Mr. Jasper has gone home quite himself, has he?” asks the Dean. ‘Your Reverence, he has gone home quite himself’” (41). Having witnessed—in-
deed, briefly inhabited—Jasper’s “scattered consciousness” at the start of this novel, we cannot reliably establish whether he is “quite himself” when he is on opium or off (see also Carroll 41).

Contextualist readings of The Mystery of Edwin Drood note, among other things, that the 1868 Pharmacy Act—largely ineffective but passed roughly a year before Dickens began writing the novel—tried restricting the sale of opium in Britain to professional pharmacists, so confirming a growing distinction in Victorian culture between opium’s medicinal qualities (as laudanum) and its addictive, poisonous effects as a narcotic (Jacobson 21–22). Such information may account for some of Dickens’s unease with opium, especially since Edwin Drood later alternates between hallucinogenic inspiration and violent aggression, but legislative measures alone cannot account for, or convincingly determine, how his vision estranges the material world, making it briefly unrecognizable. Assuming otherwise impoverishes literature’s and history’s complexity by insisting, against contrary evidence, that these registers are isomorphic and thus interchangeable (Knapp 98).

Another work complicating new-historicist and cultural materialist claims about sequences and situatedness is Browning’s “By the Fire-Side” (1: 552–61), for the poem renders so indeterminate the position and perspective of its characters that it is difficult to view these figures as “situated” or “embedded” in more than the speaker’s fantasies. The poem begins by representing a couple sitting quietly by a glowing fire—possibly in Casa Guidi, the Brownings’ home in Florence. The man imagines them repeating similar quiet evenings in old age, then reminisces from such futurity about their present tranquillity before delving into their past, in vivid recollection, apparently, of their emotional and physical intimacy near a remote chapel in northern Italy. But the issue of what happens where and when is subordinated, in the poem, to how the mind anticipates, recalls, and transforms events, especially when one is in love.

The situation leads us first to consider whether the poem is fictional or autobiographical, or something in-between, before we assess how it modifies our relation to the external world.

William Irvine and Park Honan, two of Browning’s biographers, called “By the Fire-Side” “transparently autobiographical” (311), because Browning traveled through the Italian Alps with Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1853, two years before publishing the poem in Men and Women. The assessment is precipitous. In September 1853, the Brownings, William and Emelyn Story, and possibly two other couples made an excursion to Prato Fiorito, ostensibly setting for some of “By the Fire-Side.” Yet the poem’s relation to known events remains unclear. Though the Brownings visited the same part of the Alps four years earlier, the speaker does not indicate which trip he recalls or whether he is contemplating either. The editor John Pettigrew explains that Browning and Barrett also consulted a guidebook of the region in 1847, while hearing descriptions from friends of the Lake of Orta, though they later abandoned plans to visit that lake (Browning 1: 1113n). Accordingly, Browning may have drafted the poem in that year, based on a preleptic fantasy of intimacy in that chapel, rather as Hector Berlioz composed in 1830 his tumultuous Symphonie fantastique for the Irish actress Harriet Smithson, whom at that point he had yet to meet. As Browning remarked with hindsight in April 1888, in a letter that also may be unreliable or simply of limited relevance, “[A]ll but the personality [of Leonor in the poem] is fictitious—that is, the portraiture only is intended to be like—the circumstances are a mere imaginary framework” (qtd. in George 62). Especially given Browning’s renowned interest in impersonation—that personality is the fictitious element in his dramatic monologues and lyrics—the first lesson here is that calling anything in his work “transparently autobiographical” is a mistake (see also Rose). The second is that the notion that for Browning’s poetry to be useful, it
must be referential, giving us new ways of rejoining the world, is false.

I am drawing deliberate analogies between the poem’s content and its unreliable architecture—the hermeneutic keys or scaffolding it proffers and withholds—because both metaphors tell us much about our interpretive expectations. Since Browning’s speaker is interested in “[t]he sights . . . and the sounds” that “made up a spell” between the couple (188, 189), so echoing “Meeting at Night,” “Two in the Campagna,” and philosophical issues relayed in William Wordsworth’s “Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey,” he condenses these impressions before viewing them from various angles and temporal perspectives. After ranging from fireplace to old age and thence to children observing the poet “deep in Greek” as they “slip” out to collect twig ships for a nearby creek (12, 13), the speaker describes his past and proleptic associations as “branch-work” extending

To a vista opening far and wide,  
And I pass out where it ends. (19–20)

The links he establishes among twig ships, “branch-work,” and the fire that might burn them are associative, not causal. The speaker’s pun on “pass out” also encourages several interpretations: that he can emerge—perhaps come to life—only at the limit of such associations; that he expires when imagination ceases; that his path leads unavoidably to death; and, more prosaically, that he begins to snooze during such flights of fancy. Owing to this capricious path, the speaker can only get us—and Leonor, a possible allusion to Barrett Browning—to the chapel in the northern Alps by indicating that aesthetic bliss and the material world are not coeval. Since boundaries and geographic distance do not circumscribe his path, his imagination leaps into nebulous terrain:

The outside-frame, like your hazel-trees:  
But the inside-archway widens fast,  
And a rarer sort succeeds to these,

And we slope to Italy at last  
And youth, by green degrees. (21–25)

As the speaker transports us in this remarkable time machine, the figures become younger, more passionate. The “inside-archway” is his portal into the past, a Carrollian rabbit hole into an aesthetic and sexual Wonderland, into Italy as “woman-country” (28). The “inside-archway” connecting the lovers is partly yonic, the terrain seeming to expand as it becomes aroused, but the main point is that poetic reality for the speaker is boundless, occurring in “woodland-time” (201). By departing from verisimilitude and relinquishing conventional agency, as signaled by his repeated use of the passive voice (6, 26, 251), the speaker transfigures the world. The poem may close with him “watch[ing]” his beloved “sink by the fire-side now” (256), but this does not arrest his memories or return him conclusively to the present. Instead, through his complex understanding of space and time, the speaker indicates that the sequences we use to give sense to experience are associative, not literal. One cannot “slope” to Italy with Browning’s couple without passing through the condensed “branch-work” that, as the etymology of metaphor reminds us, transfers us there in our imaginations.

Browning’s speaker invokes then breaks with poetic tradition, forging a voice recognizable (if unreliable) yet impersonal, because it is tied to both particular and nonspecific ideas of the “moment, one and infinite!” (181; see also Brisman 39; Christ 119, 122–23; Korg 153). In general, Browning’s doubling effect, both abstract and intensely personal, thoroughly redefines rather than evades context. As Jacob Korg observes, the speakers of “By the Fire-Side” and Sordello (1: 149–296) discover that “the language of thought cannot depict a recognizable common universe; it has a piecemeal, diachronic character capable of presenting segments of experience in isolation, but it is incompatible with the integral, synchronous quality of physical perception”
(154). Thus, for Sordello "thought may take perception's place / But hardly co-exist in any case, / Being its mere presentment" (2.591–93). Yet a materialist conception of sequences and causality, as Browning's imaginary poet observes,

painfully . . . tacks
Thought to thought, which Sordello, needing such,
Has rent perception into; its to clench
And reconstruct—his office to diffuse,
Destroy.

(2.596–600)

Tearing holes in thought makes possible perception's full return. The speaker not only insists we simplify links between causes and effects but also revokes assumptions that art's relation to society is transitive. Among post-Coleridgeans not already discussed here, comparable passages and claims abound in poems by Emily Brontë, Alfred Tennyson, Algernon Charles Swinburne, the Rossettis, Thomas Hardy, and Gerard Manley Hopkins; in prose passages by Charlotte Brontë, Ruskin, Wilkie Collins, George Meredith, James, Wilde, and early Conrad; and, finally, in the "aesthetic historicism" of Thomas Carlyle, George Eliot, Browning, and Pater (Williams; Reilly). Consider how Tennyson's "Lotus-Eaters" renders the world foreign, unrecognizable, while Odysseus's men yearn not for home, as we would expect, but counterintuitively for nothingness; how the Lady of Shalott perishes when the aesthetic and social combine; and how Lucy Snowe wanders, hallucinating, into the streets of Villette near the end of Brontë's Villette. Assess too the conceptual force of Fancy in Dickens's Hard Times, the antirationalist emphases of George Macdonald's Phantastes, the ontological effects of prevision in Eliot's The Lifted Veil, and the almost literal shattering of the pretensions of verisimilitude in Meredith's House on the Beach. Finally, consider how, in a related field, Gustave Courbet left a "fault . . . an ambiguity [faut amphibologie]" at the heart of The Painter's Studio, subtitled A Real Allegory: as Delacroix noted in his diary, an otherwise well-executed and perspectively correct work looked, improbably, "as if it had a real sky in the midst of the picture" (Journal of Eugène Delacroix 479–80; Journal 1822–1863 529). (See the reproduction on p. 464, which in black and white sadly cannot do justice to Courbet's vivid, seemingly inappropriate use of color.) Each of these shifts in perspective and philosophy warrants the extensive commentary and debate they have elicited from literary critics and art historians. Browning adds to such different emphases the belief that we gain most, poetically and aesthetically, when we "diffuse" or "[d]estroy" "tack[ed]," literalized thoughts on society. In seeking to "clutch / And reconstruct" them, by contrast, materialist critics, hoping for a "final de-privileging of the realm of representation" (Gallagher, "Marxism" 44), miss the very perceptions that jangle thought in the first place.

New Historicism and "Luminous Detail"

These readings extend Auerbach's claim that modern fiction is asymptotic, because full of "uninterpretable symbolism." Let us reemphasize that this claim is a sign neither of political evasion nor of bourgeois mystification. Nor is it, in Jameson's words, "a symptom and a reinforcement of the reification and privatization of contemporary life . . . which . . . maims our existence as individual subjects and paralyzes our thinking about time and change just as surely as it alienates us from our speech itself" (20), an assertion Greenblatt wisely and pointedly rejected in "Towards a Poetics of Culture" (2). Instead, this asymptotic character is a measure of fiction's antimimetic sophistication, signifying not a "retreat" from the world but a supple capacity to transfigure it (Scarry, esp. 58–67; Stewart, "Preface" 201–05 and Poetry). Rejecting the net of determinism, countless modernists and their Victorian forebears explode the fantasy that society and history are an "'untranscendable horizon,'" as Jameson put it, "that subsumes [all] apparently antagonistic or incommensurable critical operations . . . "
Nietzsche for this reason viewed the historian as struggling “to detect traces almost extinguished, to read the past quickly and correctly no matter how intricate its palimpsest may be” (73). His argument is ironic, since he acknowledges the difficulty in making such interpretations. Compare this statement with Gallagher and Greenblatt’s seemingly clear-eyed objective in their recent collaboration, their “ambition to specify the intriguing enigmas of particular times and places” (14). This ambition might be laudable if one knew even after extensive research what such “intriguing enigmas” represent. But as the examples from Browning, Dickens, and James show—and as Nietzsche and Auerbach independently confirm—this knowledge is illusory, based on shaky, often facile suppositions.

Although the associative leaps that Auerbach casts loosely as *figure* disappear after such leveling effects, most new historicists do not view the disappearance as a loss. On the contrary, they claim that it increases their interpretive purchase on historical material. Dissolving such boundaries between the figurative and the nonfictional apparently lets Gallagher and Greenblatt “recast... discussions about ‘art’ into discussions of ‘representations’” (17). Their quotation marks around these nouns seem by fiat to cancel category distinctions, turning fiction and nonfiction into comparable discourses. But while their approach obscures much literary intelligence, they confront fresh, far-reaching problems: how to “identify, out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, which are the significant ones, either for us or for them, the ones most worth pursuing” (15). Although I began by suggesting that dating texts is a limited attempt at escaping this morass, Gallagher and Greenblatt’s substitution leaves us rather in the thick of it:

Again it proves impossible to provide a theoretical answer, an answer that would work reliably in advance of plunging ahead to see what resulted. We have embarked on what Ezra Pound in an early essay calls “the method of Luminous Detail” whereby we attempt to isolate significant or “interpreting detail” from the mass of traces that have survived in the archive, but we can only be certain that the detail is indeed luminous, that it possesses what William Carlos Williams terms “the strange phosphorus of the life,” in the actual practice of teaching and writing. (15)

The invocation of two high modernists here is telling, not least because Pound and Williams refer to the aesthetic in almost iconic terms—in the same mode, that is, for which Greenblatt chastises Auerbach. Even more ironic, Miller began his 1986 Presidential Address to the MLA by calling Williams’s notion of “the radiant gist” a corrective to schematic materialist criticism (282), a move that Louis Montrose later criticized in his contribution to *The New Historicism* (15–16). In *Practicing New Historicism*, in other words, we have returned to aesthetics via Williams and luminosity but with none of Auerbach’s and Miller’s tolerance for what, of such radiance, belies sociopolitical implication. Yet, as Miller warned, what is to stop readers from turning “Luminous Detail” into a divine order, as Auerbach allegedly did? A host of related questions besets Gallagher and Greenblatt’s nebulous arguments: How could the “actual practice of teaching and writing” validate this antimethodological stance? Does such luminosity obviate relativism (Gallagher and Greenblatt obviously assume it does not) or surpass the formalist approaches they challenge but also adapt? And what interpretive grip can one have on the aesthetic when dissolving it and calling it a representation comparable in character to historically proximate writing and events—especially if one is concerned, as Gallagher and Greenblatt are, not “to reerect the hierarchical privileges of the literary” (14)? New historicists may set out to be Machereyans, but instead of tolerating the partial absence of meaning in literature, they end up trying to fill that absence for social and political gain.
The literary, I have argued, presents new-historicist, cultural materialist, and Foucauldian critics with an acute interpretive challenge, because for reasons exceeding politics and history it resists assimilation into their models of discourse. The farther such writing wanders from verisimilitude, the harder it is for these critics to square the writing with real events. An aesthetic remainder surfaces that is not reducible to the social. When engaging highly sophisticated fiction, not surprisingly, materialist critics are least adept at understanding its complexity, though similar hermeneutic problems arise in fiction that strives for resemblance. That is why I have stressed the poverty of context rather than its irrelevance: not to champion neoformalism or to evade the burdens of history but to insist that the aesthetic compels us to adopt new, unorthodox approaches to all events, past and present. For if art is bewilderingly imitational to conventional thoughts on history, as Nietzsche implied, then imaginative writing cannot mesh with "adequate historicization." Fiction, by definition, will never give historicists, new or old, a "sequential . . . history of causes and effects" adding up persuasively to the past.

NOTES

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1 White, "Historical Text" 91. Although the argument below sometimes alludes to Thompson’s famous critique of Althusser, “the Aristotelian of the New Marxist tradition” (196), and, for different reasons, to Pepper's Poverty of Historicism, my essay is a riposte to neither scholar.

2 When Roger-Pol Droit asked Foucault whether he “want[ed] to make [literary] texts express or reflect historical processes,” he responded, “No . . . [silence, thought]. We must approach the question at another level.” One page later, he remarked, “The main point is the importance of this prin-

ciple: the intrasitivity of literature. This was, indeed, the first step by which we were able to get rid of the idea that literature was the locus of every kind of traffic, or the point at which all traffic came to an end, the expression of totalities” (“Functions” 307–308, 309; 3rd interpolation in orig.).

3 See Whistler’s well-known objection in his lecture “Ten O’Clock”: “the people have acquired the habit of looking . . . not at a picture, but through it, at some human fact, that shall, or shall not, from a social point of view, better their mental or moral state” (138).

4 For different assessments of new historicism’s interpretive aims and limits, see Bauerclein 23–30; Chandler; Cobbrook; Copjec, esp. 4–6; Hamilton; Hawthorn; Jones; Levine, “Reclaiming” 8–9, 12 (but also 2); Litvak 121–27 (but also 139–45); Pechter; Steinor 79, 175; White, “New Historicism” 293, 298–301; and Woodbridge. See also Gearhart and Greenblatt’s exchange in New Literary History (Gearhart, "Taming" and "Reply"; Greenblatt, "Response"), as well as Greenblatt, “Psychoanalysis,” esp. 221. For a fascinating recent and apparently ongoing debate about similar issues, see Collini, “Culture Talk” and “Defending”; Mulhern, "Beyond Metaculture.”

5 See, e.g., White, Metahistory 345–56, and Gossman 6. Foucault asserts that “genealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality” (“Nietzsche” 139). For contrary elaborations on this argument, see Lentricchia; Lane, "Experience.”

6 I develop this argument in “Arnoldian Ideal,” esp. 284, 291–95.

7 Although Greenblatt refers to Auerbach’s “crucially important 1944 essay ‘Figura’” (Gallagher and Greenblatt, Practicing 212n10; see also Greenblatt, “Touch” 34), he includes no citation details and apparently does not realize the essay appeared six years earlier, in 1938. Can we still claim, then, that the essay is an implicit response to the Holocaust?

8 Simpson gives a brilliant overview of this problem; see also Perkins 125–28.

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