one of the ambiguities, paradoxes, or perverse effects of the paratext in general, which we will find again in the preface. Procurer or not, the paratext functions as a relay, and like any relay, it may, if the author insists too much, make a screen or an obstacle for the reception of the text. Moral: let us not be excessively careful with our titles; or, as Cocteau used to say, let us not overperfume our roses.

Literary Criticism and the Return to “History”

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I

No reasonably attentive reader of the major journals in literary criticism and theory will be unaware of the current interest in something called “history,” whether under the specific rubric of a “new historicism” or as part of a commitment to the development of polemical and political applications, in the present, of scholarly research done about the past. Books of literary criticism that have politics or history in the title are beginning to proliferate—I am myself guilty of both—as if the publishing houses too have acknowledged the winds of change. One well-known university press not hitherto noted for its commitment to the new has recently been claiming, in the boldest of typefaces, that “Literary History Returns,” and that three of its books “Impel the Revival.”

This new enthusiasm for a rhetoric of referentiality and relevance would be hard to attribute to any grand shift in the social or political culture at large. It might be explained more locally as the result of a leftward leaning in the liberal subculture of the academy, in reaction to the near stampede to the right on the part of government in the early 1980s. The growth of the Rainbow Coalition, the largely unreported but significant efforts of various native American rights movements (Navajo, Hopi, Lakota, Ashnishinabe, among many others), and the local orga-

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nizations set up to defend, for example, the rights of Central Americans and the integrity of the environment, all suggest such a reaction. In departments of English, it is the women's movement that has most obviously upset our peace of mind. It could then be that a return to "history" on the part of some professors (and many graduate students) reflects a general increase in countercultural activity across a broad national spectrum.

Such, at least, would be one version of a rational explanation for the appeal of a historical consciousness, one assuming some reactive continuity between the general condition of our culture and the more local behavior of the academic profession. A different theory of cultural production might, however, find itself emphasizing the discontinuous, uncontingent autonomy of the academic subculture, seen now as responsive not to the larger movements of history (whose very existence might indeed be disputed) but to the mere demand for change. After a period of twenty years or so during which it has been fashionable to deny or avoid the credible use of anything called history, it may be that deconstruction and relativism have become tyrants rather than rebels, so that a profession which requires for itself a ritual of radical change must now search for a new source of energy. Suddenly it is sexy to plead for referentiality, and fashionable even to be called a Marxist, so long as one does not insist on too close a relation between practice and preaching by "misbehaving" on university property.

Between these two explanations of the return to history, the one integrating the intellectual class into some progressive, Hegelian whole, the other stressing, whether joyously or gloomily, only the amoral opportunism of consumer culture, there are surely a multitude of complex mediations that might describe particular texts, individuals, or movements. Since we can hardly even speak of a unitary class of academic intellectuals within a single so-called discipline—witness the degree to which deconstruction, for example, has yet to happen in some departments while being already old hat in others—then we can hardly contend that there is a general, consensual return to history, or that the word will mean the same thing to all its users. Like many flags of allegiance, that of history may work best as the symbol of a vague collectivity among those who consider themselves oppressed or excluded; as soon as they are given parliamentary status, then the disputes about whether one man's history is another woman's fiction are bound to begin. Those running for office on the history party ticket are going to have to sharpen their wits and give some thought to their advertising campaign.

In the meantime, it seems clear that the opposition to the history party is by no means routed, nor even in a state of intellectual discomfort. One of my students recently professed original excitement at the idea, attributed to Jacques Derrida, that "history is actually fiction." As the avant-garde requires the passage of time for its reappearance as the platitudinous, so the "common sense" created thereby will tend to curb the totalizing ambition of any new avant-garde, especially one not comfortably conformable to the practices and assumptions of the subculture. English departments have not in any sense been taken over by Marxists, feminists, or new historicists, and certainly not by minorities; the argument that they have been is most often advanced by those anxious to preempt further inroads, or any inroads at all. And, while some of our colleagues are still secure in the notion that there can be no such thing as history, others, refusing any measure of the deconstructive therapy, are unwilling to recognize any problems at all in practicing a historical method. Between the Scylla of Manian skepticism and the Charybdis of positivist self-assurance (still common enough to make one suspicious of any mere "return" to "literary history," in the manner of the advertisement described above), there is an enormous space calling for careful redescription.

If this redescription has indeed begun, it has certainly not ended. The process is attended with risks that are both intellectual and institutional. It is, for example, both aided and inhibited by the prevalent ethics of pluralism within the profession. Pluralism allows that there is always room for more, and this entirely worthy respect for individual rights will probably mean that the history party will be welcomed to the fold. But that welcoming may well entail certain limitations upon what the history party can lay claim to. A frequent practical assumption of pluralist ethics is that no one perspective or approach can or should make greater claims than any other. This makes for good manners and good collegiate politics, but it does not necessarily govern the requirements of an analytic method wherein some perspectives may be argued to matter a good deal more than others, and others to matter hardly at all, or to matter adversely. A policy of civil rights for critics need not obviously result in a description of the production of writing or culture, although it may provide the materials for such description. For there is no clear consensus that the task of literary criticism is to teach an analysis of the historical production of writing. English departments contain a variety of practices and are still very much centered in the teaching of writing skills and of close reading. A historical consciousness is not necessarily either an intention or a result of either of these activities.

Furthermore, as I have already hinted, there may be no such thing as a history party in existence, and no clearly conceived popular front
mean instead to demonstrate, through a reading of those methodologies that have become authoritative, that the status of historical inquiry has been so eroded that its reactive renaissance, in whatever form, threatens to remain merely gestural and generic. "History" promises thus to function as legitimating any reference to a context beyond literature exclusively conceived, whether it be one of discourse, biography, political or material circumstance. In particular, given the current popularity of discourse analysis, it seems likely that for many practitioners the historical method will remain founded in covertly idealist reconstructions.

I begin with a brief placing of the influence of Paul de Man, who is perhaps more responsible than Derrida himself for the notion that history is really fiction in disguise. Inasmuch as it can be separated from personal and institutional factors, de Man's notoriety has depended largely upon his claim that all analysis of cultural and historical forms is limited by the same impasses of textuality as characterize the formal dimensions of literature. His passionate request that we put our own houses in order was aimed against what he saw as the uncritical eclecticism of those who tried to explain texts by way of other forms of information. Such information, he contended, itself textual. The weaker version of this caveat is indeed useful, though not at all original to de Man: it is that we should not regard as factual the conclusions of such disciplines as "anthropology, linguistics" or "psychoanalysis" without subjecting their own particular rhetorics to skeptical analysis. But de Man would not have made a reputation by merely doing a milder version of what Roland Barthes and Walter Benjamin and many others had done so much better. His initiative was a quite different one, seeking to head off the credibility of a long tradition of European left-of-center culture criticism by claiming that "literature is everywhere" (B, p. 18), with the result that no differences can remain after the skeptical analysis: there is nothing that can withstand the deconstructive inspection and provide a place to stand.

When the history of the criticism of the 1970s comes to be written with even more hindsight than we can already claim, its authors will surely wonder why de Man found such a ready audience for his campaign against those who pursued the "fresh air of referential meaning," those accused of wishing to "shy away from" the impasses of textuality. What

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1. We are aptly admonished by Hayden White ("Historical Pluralism," Critical Inquiry 12 [Spring 1986]: 490–93) for our tendency to see in "history" a comfortably established alternative to the insecurities of literary criticism.

de Man called “closed reading” was indeed under attack in the late 1960s, when he put together his model of literature. But the appeal of his theories into the 1980s needs to be explained in reference to the ideological needs of an academic avant-garde apparently seeking to defend the integrity of inertia and corporate disbelief. In September 1969, after Prague and Paris and in the heyday of Vietnam, de Man said (and published) that “the bases for historical knowledge are not empirical facts but written texts, even if these texts masquerade in the guise of wars or revolutions” (B, p. 165). It is not controversial to insist that much of what we know about the past is known in textual form, and thus requires textual analysis; but it is simply absurd to claim or imply that wars and revolutions cannot be thought about except as texts, especially when the comment is framed by the assumption that all texts limit knowledge in exactly the same ways. It would be possible to imagine here a humane irony designed as much to encourage resistance to the draft laws as to disparage the student and antiwar movements. But those who favor such an explanation must ponder also the relation of first-world hermeneutic skepticism to the fates of those outside the professoriat, both near and far.

Similarly, those who celebrate de Man as the rigorous antagonist of a humanist establishment—and this he certainly was—would do well to remind themselves of a century-old tradition of anti-humanist criticism from the left, a tradition which included and indeed depended upon historical methods. De Man's appointed place as antagonist thus effectively displaced this tradition from itself playing the role of the exemplary alternative to the humanist tradition. In an interview published in 1986, de Man explained his preference for America over Europe in terms of the “bad faith” involved in being, in Europe, “much closer to ideological and political questions.” In the American university, which has “no cultural function at all,” he found himself freer to concentrate upon “the profession,” where he thought he could be “really and effectively subversive.” What might it mean to be “subversive” in a subculture that has “no cultural function”? We are left with the prospect of a mandarin class that has reenvisioned history as the chronicle of its own renovated languages. The pseudophilosophical attempt to think away the events of 1968–74 is cognate in de Man's work with the methodological conclusion that it is not possible for rigorous inquiry to sustain the belief in any connection between textuality and a world in which difference and choice bring about critical change.

The definitive analogue and perhaps the source of de Man's argument is Derrida's famous pronouncement in Of Grammatology: “il n'y a pas d'hors-texte.” As part of his reading of Rousseau and the “supplement,” Derrida denies access to “a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.,” to anything that is not writing, and thus part of the pattern of “substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references” (G, pp. 158, 159). Thus, as he puts it elsewhere, all histories must be written from within the schemas that they purport to challenge: “we can pronounce not a single destructive proposition which has not already had to slip into the form, the logic, and the implicit postulations of precisely what it seeks to contest.” In this spirit, Foucault is gleefully convicted of having imagined that he could escape “historical guilt” in putting on trial the “rational or political order which keeps madness captive” without himself having to “reiterate the crime” (WD, p. 35).

In this fastidious insistence that there can be no place to stand, no position from which an authentically objective understanding of the past can be derived, together with his apparent desire to discredit a referentially based critique of culture, Derrida's early work is very close to de Man's. But Derrida differs from de Man in at least one way that is important to the subject of this essay. Here I introduce a distinction that will be used again and again in what follows: the distinction between an “analytic” and a “prescriptive” history. By the first, I mean a reconstruction of the past (whether text or event) that aspires to the status of objectivity; by the second, I designate an attitude to the present and the future, a directive about how we are behaving or should behave in the world. These two categories are not usually subject to an absolute distinction. Advice about the present may be based upon an analysis of the past, and much of orthodox Marxism assumes a scientific continuity between the two. Alternatively, various reductive versions of hermeneutic theory presume a past that can only be known as a projection of the present. The degree to which these terms are and are not distinguished will be a major preoccupation of my argument, which will contend that assumptions about the identity of or difference between the analytic and the prescriptive have disabled the emergence of a comprehensive historical method.

Returning to Derrida and de Man: it would seem that de Man offers no prospectus for either an analytic history, for which some recognition of difference is a basic prerequisite, or a prescriptive history, apropos of which his advice is that we cultivate our own gardens, gardens that are very much smaller and less productive than many of us like to think. Derrida has almost the same view of an analytic history, with some qualifications which will be registered in a moment, but a much more excited
attitude toward a prescriptive history. Of Grammatology, at least, contains an apocalyptic rhetoric that foresees the “end of linear writing” and of the “vulgar and mundane concept of temporality” that is its analogue in the familiar understanding of history (G, p. 86). Seeing himself as living in a moment of “suspense between two ages of writing” (G, p. 87), Derrida finds himself searching for clues to a future that he cannot by his own logic—the logic he applies to Foucault—conceive as open to rational prediction. Thus he argues not for a describable future configuration but for signs or glimpses of a breakdown in the present culture of “linear writing.” He isolates from Rousseau’s texts “a certain exteriority in relation to the totality of the age of logocentrism” (G, p. 161), and sees in aspects of Freudian psychoanalysis things “which can only uneasily be contained within logocentric closure,” and which will collaborate with “a graphematics still to come” (WD, pp. 198, 220). With an apocalyptic excitement, Derrida finds that developments are under way “in philosophy, in science, in literature” that will make “all the rationality subjected to the linear model appear as another form and another age of mythography” and “leave man, science, and the line behind” (G, p. 87).

This was, of course, Paris in 1967, and reading these words now should remind us why a genuinely interventionist, countercultural enthusiasm for Derrida and for Tel Quel was possible in Europe at that time. To anyone interested in film, television, rock music, and so forth, these were fighting words. But Derrida cannot give the future a cognitive identity, and if he is trapped by his own logic it is yet a logic that he consents to reproduce, indeed clearly intends to reproduce as a challenge to certain tendencies within French political life. Thus he can only “glimpse the closure” of the epoch of writing by pushing it to “develop its positivity as far as possible,” to the point of articulating the incumbent “form of an absolute danger” (G, pp. 4–5). Something was slouching toward Paris to be born, something that would overturn everything that had “for at least some twenty centuries” (G, p. 6) been described as language. But what it would be, he knew not.

The prescriptive model of history could in this way only be open to description in an anarchistic or negating language: things will not be as they are and have been, and for now we can only clear the ground, make space, and give time. But there is an energy here that makes very clear, by contrast, de Man’s pursuit of a more rigorous inertia for the American market. Derrida had one foot in the future, though he could not put much weight on it, and could not presume that we would still stand on the same feet; but de Man, who would become increasingly important for the Americanization of Derrida—and it must be said that Derrida has not at all distanced himself from this process—saw no glimpses of a new dawn, only a light burning late in the study. Indeed, in one of his most compelling essays, de Man set out to read Rousseau more closely than Derrida himself, in order to make the case that the very breakdown or exteriority that Derrida claimed to discover was itself already within the play of the writing, already contained by a structure that we must understand as ironic and paradoxical, rather than historically fissured and prophetic of change. In this way, de Man set about closing all the doors that might have led out into the world of referentiality, of historical crisis, or to a world yet to come. An efficient grand inquisitor, he sought to block off the opening in Derrida’s reading that led to time and change as categories for possible attention, and thus to a plausible use for such a term as “history.”

The potential in Of Grammatology for a prescriptive history was left largely undeveloped by Derrida himself, and by most of his American interpreters. The same can be said of another motif of the book, one that might have been made the basis of both an analytic and a prescriptive history. Of Grammatology contains an incipient critique of ethnocentrism. Derrida notes that “logocentrism is an ethnocentric metaphysics,” one specifically “related to the history of the West” (G, p. 79). Much of the force of his account of Saussure and Lévi-Strauss depends upon this understanding. But the analysis of ethnocentrism is arrested by an order of thought that prescribes that metaphysics is somehow exclusively constitutive of world-views-in-language, and that within the language of metaphysics the “privilege of the phone does not depend upon a choice that could have been avoided” (G, p. 7). What does it mean to have no choice, to have been within (until the crisis of the present of 1967) a system of thought that determined that all gestures of deviation must remain surreptitiously conformist? Why is the language of metaphysics given causal priority, rather than the extralinguistic textures of a material, technological, and political world whose energies register in language largely as false consciousness? Is it not an impacted form of first-world melancholia to contend for a principle of entrapment that has made it impossible fully to recognize the integrity of a non-Western human nature? The history of colonialism, whether within or outside a nation state, is not a history of the uncontested superimposition of a coherently unitary metaphysic upon an opposition inevitably perceived as inarticulate. It only looks that way when the winners have time to relax and write their


8. In Memoires: for Paul de Man (trans. Cecile Lindsay, Jonathan Culler, Eduardo Cadava [New York, 1986], pp. 125–92) Derrida discusses without deciding the difference of opinion about Rousseau. He also endorses de Man’s position as skeptically beyond “the academism of the right and the left,” beyond “the conservation that apolitical traditionalists and activists share in common” (Memoires, p. 149). Derrida does not entertain the idea that activists who are not bound by a belief in unmediated referentiality might find de Man irrelevant.

9. That such potential existed in French post-structuralist thought is indicated by what may be the most brilliant of the “least known” books of the 1970s, Anthony Wilden’s System and Structure: Essays in Communication and Exchange (London, 1972).
histories. Derrida clearly intends to open up the dominant mythology for critical negation, but he presents that mythology in an implausibly totalized form. In “The Ends of Man,” a lecture delivered in 1968, he speaks out clearly against the American presence in Vietnam and powerfully exposes the consolidating function of the rhetoric of internationalism, itself perhaps a response to an imminent and menacing “enclosure of Western collocation.” But he also repeats again the formally constructed impasse of Of Grammatology, that the necessity for a “change of terrain” is compromised by the complicity of the negation within what it negates, by a replication of “the inside one declares one has deserted.” A solution is proposed: to “speak several languages and produce several texts at once.” But even Glas does not project itself beyond the domain of “western metaphysics” to the point of registering the strange signs of a non-Western language, one we might witness even as we could not understand or translate it.

Derrida’s argument in Of Grammatology, and much of its appeal to those who have taken it up, depends upon the positing of part as whole, the identification of a particular tendency in the history of philosophy with the whole of what he tends to call “the West” or “Western culture.” To claim that philosophers since Aristotle have tended to think that “the voice . . . has a relationship of essential and immediate proximity with the mind” (G, p. 11) is arguable enough; but it is further claimed that this syndrome is also “the greatest totality . . . within which are produced . . . all the Western methods of analysis, explication, reading, or interpretation” (G, p. 46). Totality was at this time one of Derrida’s favorite concepts, as if he sought to rediscover in metaphysics a continuity that most Western Marxists (Georg Lukács excepted) had come increasingly to disavow. He speaks, for example, of linearity as “intrinsic to the totality of the history of the Occident,” and as that which “unites its metaphysics and its technics” (G, p. 72). His view is very much that of an outsider, one who sees as a whole, “the West,” that which insiders often experience as a struggle between parts. The totality remains intact only as the empty shell of a language no longer inhabitable by Geist, but it remains intact nonetheless. In this way Of Grammatology methodologically discourages an analysis of difference, whether of the class or interest relations within a culture, or of the relations of one culture to others. The role of ideology as that which governs perception and description is taken over by a negatively imaged metaphysics, “Western metaphysics,” so that the normative totality is reaffirmed even as it is attacked.

11. Ibid., p. 135.

Among the exemplary critics of the late 1960s, it is probably Foucault rather than Derrida or de Man who has emerged as the most important precursor of a revivified historical method. In reading what Foucault has to say about his own project, one sees much that he appears to hold in common with Derrida. In The Archaeology of Knowledge, which I take here as my example even though it does not adequately summarize the whole of Foucault’s work, he too seeks to counter any reliance upon “the plenitude of living speech, the richness of the Word, the profound unity of the Logos,” and to cleanse our vision of any legacies of “transcendental narcissism.” He too sets out to leave “no privilege to any centre” (A, p. 205), and to assault the linear model of history as an unearned form of metaphysical self-assurance, and as “the indispensable correlate of the founding function of the subject” (A, p. 12). He means to refrain from “reference to a cogito” (A, p. 122), from the language of “genesis, continuity, totalization” (A, p. 138), from both the “linear model of speech” and “the model of the stream of consciousness” (A, p. 169). There is no unity to conscious subjectivity, and no explanatory access to the unconscious. Just as Derrida is adamant that deconstruction is not a demystification in the manner of institutional psychoanalysis, an exposing of coherence beneath the appearance of disorder, so Foucault insists that the practice of archaeology remains focused on the surface, on the “discontinuities, ruptures, gaps” (A, p. 169) that neither require nor enable reference to what might be within or beneath.

But here the similarities, largely, end. Where Derrida is interested in an immanent contradiction that repeats itself through some twenty centuries, Foucault sees a “multiplicity of contradictions” (A, p. 155), a series that he wishes to expand rather than reduce (A, p. 171). In The Archaeology of Knowledge, Foucault regrets any impression of “cultural totality” (A, p. 16) that a reading of The Order of Things, published three years before, might have given. Not only does he break down Derrida’s twenty centuries into radically distinct periods, each governed by its own episteme; but he also refuses any historically local totality within the episteme.

Nothing would be more false than to see in the analysis of discursive formations an attempt at totalitarian periodization, whereby for a certain moment and for a certain time, everyone would think in the same way, in spite of surface differences, say the same thing, through a polymorphous vocabulary, and produce a sort of great discourse that one could travel over in any direction. (A, p. 148)

On the contrary, he insists, there are always a number of discourses at work at the same time—for example medical, economic, biological (A, p. 108)—and they have their own characteristics and durations. To analyze the classical period is therefore not to construct “a mentality that was general in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries” (A, p. 158). There is no Weltanschauung (A, p. 159); every analysis is “limited and regional,” and “valid only in the domain specified” (A, pp. 157, 158). Synchronic totality is thus denied, and so too is diachronic totality. The “fragmented figure” (A, p. 125) of one moment does not evolve within a “developing totality” (A, p. 119); the “tangle of interpositivities” (A, p. 159) that is the present does not anticipate a future simplification or coordination. When general transformations do occur, they do not produce “a whole world of absolutely new objects, enunciations, concepts, and theoretical choices” in some “homogeneous process” (A, pp. 173, 175). The Order of Things might then have been an unfortunate English translation of Les Mots et les choses, which actually composes a highly disordered paradigm. The épistéme does not have a “sovereign unity” but is only a “set of relations” (A, p. 191); it is an accumulation, not a whole. Archaeological analysis thus has a “diversifying” rather than a unifying effect (A, p. 160), and should make it more difficult to produce general analytical schemas, “more difficult to pass from one thing to another” (A, p. 170).

Let us here identify two straw theories often associated with the name of Foucault in the present debate. The first suggests exactly the synchronic totality that Foucault himself so insistently denies, even as the method of the Order of Things has seemed to many readers to affirm it. This straw theory articulates the most reductive form of discourse analysis in which everything is like everything else: sex is like economics is like taxonomical is like classical scholarship. It argues, not for the particular interdeterminations that may go on between discourses as a result of empirical and ideological distributions of power, in the spirit of what Frank Lentricchia has described as Foucault’s own sense of “the violent hierarchization of social realities,” but for a necessary homology between them, resulting from a momentarily universal human subject mysteriously primed to see the world in this and in no other way. This version of the theory does appear in the popular understanding of what “historical” consciousness might mean, though it clearly does not obey the rules that Foucault himself lays down. It is the simplest form of discourse analysis, and has become quite common.

The second straw-theory argument is more interesting, and more closely consequent upon the ambiguities in Foucault’s own position. This argument associates with Foucault the idea that the individual subject within history is inevitably bound within the limits of the vision imposed by his own local discursive order, to which he is committed by virtue of living within a world of divided labor. Even as there is no historical whole to society, which is nothing more than an accumulation of asymmetrically juxtaposed micropractices, the subject’s own micropractice yet imposes itself totally upon him. In its application to the world of ivory towers, where it suggests that the “profession” is an autonomous, self-developing community, this position has, reasonably, often been attributed to Stanley Fish. There is something in Foucault’s argument that might seem to lead to such a view, because Foucault is emphatic in his refusal to discuss or implicate subjective agency within his analysis of history. The question that is not posed is how the subject (or a subject) might operate or identify itself within a world made up of mutually independent (and also interdependent) discourses. But if we try to locate a space for subjective agency within a model of history, as I think we must, then we do have to ask questions about the limits of its obedience to and possible deviation from the parameters of discourse. This question becomes critical if one refuses the notion of discursive entrapment and allows for the possibility that an individual can respond to more than one discourse at a time; can, indeed, see and think beyond the paradigms governing a particular subculture (a movement that Derrida allows only in the form of negation or disruption, prophetic of an “outside” that cannot be defined).

This problem of subjective agency is not by any means insoluble given the terms of Foucault’s analysis. We could, for example, explain a large degree of subjective behavior in reference to a particular individual’s selection and recombination of various elements from the generally available discourses. But Foucault, who shares with almost all of the formative thinkers of the late 1960s a complete avoidance of the traditional language of subjectivity, does not himself explore this formulation. It remains, then, something of a problem for a finely tuned analytical history, and tends to lead us to a paradigm composed of disconnected autonomous structures whose subsurface connections are never hypothesized.

An even more widely recognized problem for the archaeological method is that of transformation in general, and the unavailability (in Foucault’s terms) of causal explanations. Foucault admitted that the Order of Things had only managed to “locate” concepts, without accounting for their “formation” (A, p. 65). The “later study” in which he promised to do this never, as far as I know, came along. The “concentric circles” (A, p. 114) that schematize his analysis—the metaphor will recur significantly in Jameson’s work—are never set into any complex transformational perspective. The various detailed accounts of the histories of madness,

15. Lentricchia, After the New Criticism, p. 197.

16. Lentricchia (ibid., pp. 199–210) argues for a development in Foucault’s thoughts on this subject, whereby the model of “genealogy” comes to provide a more flexible and analytical paradigm for describing change. See also, more skeptically, Nancy Fraser, “Foucault on Modern Power: Empirical Insights and Normative Confusions,” Praxis International 1 (1981): 272–87.
medicine, and so forth, do chronicle the terms of their specific transformations, but Foucault never took on the task of constructing a model for the interaction of these discourses with one another through time. Archaeology admits that statements may develop "in correlation" with external events; that they may "move to the rhythm of events." (A, p. 168.) But it can only properly describe the surface changes, the "temporal vectors of derivation." (A, p. 169.) Disdaining any reference to either a social or a political history, the two disciplines that Foucault seems to have regarded as polluted on the one hand by Marxism and on the other by idealism, the archaeological method can only describe the formal aspects of transformation. By its own logic it cannot hypothesize any empirical, determining forces. To have done so, indeed, would have involved the abandonment of what made it most appealing to academic readers of the 1970s, its avoidance of the classic problems of causality and subjectivity. Foucault has, however, gone well beyond de Man and Derrida in that he clearly assumes a place to stand, a place from which some objectively analytic history can begin. If we cannot plot the causes of the past, nor speculate about how it might have been different, we can at least be sure of its pastness. This is then a quite different version of the hermeneutic self-insulation so popular among deconstructionists. While they mostly propose an analytically disabling continuity of past and present, Foucault assumes an absolute difference. What is recovered is only a surface, a rendering archaeology "nothing more than a rewriting," a "preserved form of exteriority," and not a "return to the innermost secret of the origin" (A, p. 140). But it is different, absolutely so. Indeed, its difference is the necessary condition for its description. We have no objective idea of the rules of our own enunciations, since "it is from within these rules that we speak." (A, p. 130.) Foucault is even less willing than the early Derrida to "sketch out in advance the face that we will have in the future." (A, p. 131.) The small space open for analytic history—a space that can indeed be opened up by reading Foucault against himself—is thus purchased at the price of the complete denial of a prescriptive history. (This seems likely to guarantee his continuing appeal to academics, who are traditionally resistant to connections between the two.) Foucault has done much for a future model of history by denying the fashionable agnosticism that denies a describable existence to what is truly "past" in the past. To have done this is to have done a good deal in the present intellectual climate. The distanced formal identity of Foucault's history never invites interpretation as the rewriting of the past after one's own image, a syndrome probably argued to be inevitable only by those who find it desirable. But it remains a somewhat crystalline mechanism wherein amoral but omniscient armies clash by night, without quite knowing why; indeed without "knowing," in any conventional conscious or unconscious sense, at all.

To move beyond an abstract objectivism whose purity is only finally guaranteed by the number of questions it does not ask or make space for, we might expect to turn to the Marxist tradition. Foucault himself has much in common with Louis Althusser, his teacher and colleague, and arguably the most influential Marxist theorist of the late 1960s. Althusser also minimized the place of the subject as conscious agent and emphasized the power of structurally independent social institutions only tentatively or loosely tied to the traditional Marxist bases in the economy or the class struggle. Althusser himself did not write literary criticism, though he did publish a seminal essay on the subject. Here, he refers to the work of Macherey as the designated exponent of his views on the relation of art to ideology. Of all the protagonists of this essay, Macherey is the least known in the United States. His one book, A Theory of Literary Production, was not translated until 1978, twelve years after its original publication in French and, significantly, without the tentative qualifier of the French title, Pour une théorie de la production littéraire. Its lack of impact on mainstream American literary criticism in the 1970s may be partly attributed to the negative associations of the hammer and sickle: Althusser and his colleagues preserved close relations with the "official" French Communist Party. But the details of Macherey's argument were also out of line with the dominant skepticism of the times. There are significant continuities between Macherey and the writers discussed so far: he too is committed to the model of a discontinuous history, to a decentralized or dispersed subjectivity within which individual agency becomes implausible or irrelevant, and to an avoidance of simple vocabularies of cause and effect. But there are even more fundamental differences. First, Macherey completely avoids any recognition of the hermeneutic predicament. He does not propose, with de Man and Derrida, that the past is taxonomically indistinguishable from the present; nor does he argue for the verifiability of the past as past by declaring its absolute discontinuity with the present, in the manner of Foucault. He simply does not raise the issue. In not mentioning, let alone discussing, this question, Macherey could not but have appeared hopelessly naïve to a critical generation for whom hermeneutic anxiety was a basic condition of self-consciousness. In this way, his book represents an alternative but not an answer to the major debate in American criticism in the 1970s—an alternative that would now, as it was then, be hard to endorse without fear of lapsing into naïve positivism. The scientific self-confidence of Macherey's method is such that it argues for the recoverability of a process of text-production that is "precisely determined at every moment and at every level." If a revivified historical analysis must indeed aspire toward some sense of what is objective about the past—as I think it

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must—it clearly cannot hope to do so by ignoring the hermeneutic question altogether.

There is another problem with the emphasis of Macherey's analysis: that it relates literature principally to ideology, and not to any other formative forces that might exist alongside ideology. Literature is in this way imaged as determined by discursive configurations at the possible expense of material configurations. Such, at least, is the general tenor of his book. But he does declare, as if in the form of a memo, that literature "must be studied in a double perspective: in relation to history, and in relation to an ideological version of that history."¹⁹ This seems to me to be the most positive message that Macherey bequeaths to a new historical method—for we must suspend any a priori commitment to the idea of all art as expressive contradiction, even if such a model describes much of what was written in the period of capitalist efflorescence. In noticing the question of the relation of both literature and ideology to something arguably independent of both (for example, the technology of printing and distribution), Macherey has opened up the analysis to a larger field of determinations than those emphasized by Foucault. He has suggested how we might expand our vision beyond discourse, and thus beyond what has often tended to remain just a finely tuned version of the history of ideas.²⁰ To replace the vocabulary of creation by that of production is an important step. But production itself needs to be analyzed as a process that includes the technological, the biographical, and even the coincidental as well as the discursively ideological determinants. Only when these distinctions are admitted can the question of their ultimate integration within a synchronic totality be properly formulated.

With Macherey, I end my account of the generic texts of the late 1960s. None of them seems able to offer a satisfactory resolution of the problems of either analytic or prescriptive history. For de Man there is no history at all, of either kind; one can only pass aside as others argue about their variously illusory references to authorities that will not stand the test of reading. Derrida offers a totalized past and an unpredictable present-future; Foucault, a past frozen into local symmetries with no sense of how individuals might have imagined the struggles between them, and thus of how differences of interest or determination might have combined in the emergence of events. Only Macherey hints at a world outside ideology or discourse, a world never of course totally disconnected from these forces, but nonetheless interacting with them in ways that are not to be assumed as reflectively symmetrical. Between histories of ideas, in their various forms, and merely vulgar materialism, there are a host of hitherto largely unexplored possibilities.

With this question in mind, we may move to a discussion of Jameson's Political Unconscious, first published in 1981, and perhaps the most inspected and respected example of American Marxist literary criticism. If there is indeed to be a new interest in history, then it seems likely that Jameson's work will move closer to the center of attention and become the object of mainstream rather than minority concern. Here I shall suggest that, whether in reaction to or by participation within the inherited priorities identified above in the texts of the 1960s, Jameson's book inhibits as well as assists the emergence of a comprehensive historical method.

Along with the work of Mikhail Bakhtin, Jameson's book makes a major contribution to a refined understanding of the asymmetrical chronologies whereby particular literary syndromes—genre, style, form, and so forth—persist through the histories by which they are also modified. It is crucial for a sophisticated literary history that it recognize and explain the appearances of limited autonomy in these metamorphoses. Within this context Jameson's model of "perpetual cultural revolution" fits very well with a close literary focus.²¹ And no one offers a more trenchant alternative to a new historicism that threatens to remain anecdotal and episodic, envisaging material determinations only as instances unintegrated within any larger historical patterns.

In the particular context of the problems identified in this essay as those besetting a historical method—chiefly, problems about the hermeneutic dimension of analysis and the totality or nontotality of descriptive paradigms—Jameson's book seems, however, less convincing as a model for future development. Rather than allowing for an unpredictable plurality of differences, Jameson offers "three concentric frameworks" (PU, p. 79), each more capacious than the one(s) it contains, for the schematizing of literary history.²² The first is the "punctual event" or single text; the second the "tension and struggle" between the classes (whose literary manifestation is something called the "ideologeme"); and the third is history "as a whole" and "in its widest sense" (PU, pp. 75–76). This

¹⁹. Ibid., p. 115.
²⁰. Terry Eagleton argues that the task of criticism "is not to study the laws of ideological formations, but the laws of the production of ideological discourses as literature" (Criticism and Ideology: A Study in Marxist Literary Theory [1976; London, 1978], p. 97). I am uncomfortable both with the implication that nothing can be said about a nonideological material base, and with the idea that what will emerge from such study is a set of laws.

²². This recalls not only Foucault (A, p. 114) but also Fernand Braudel, On History, trans. Sarah Matthews (Chicago, 1980), p. 3.
schema seems quite out of phase with what we might have derived from Foucault or Macherey (who gets only one brief mention in Jameson’s book); not three concentric circles, but an unpredictable (though always determinate and describable) number of irregularly shaped geometric forms, no one of which should be assumed to share a center with anything other, even if analysis should discover as its result that some of them do. In comparison, Jameson’s scheme is uncomfortably reliant upon a preordained numerology and an a priori confidence in the descriptive sufficiency of such terms as “class” and “modes of production.” These are precisely the terms that must be inductively reassembled and perhaps modified by the recognition of local detail.

This is not, however, the biggest problem with Jameson’s model. We have seen that de Man, Derrida, and Foucault all raise radical questions about the hermeneutical relation of past to present. This question has been perhaps the most urgent of all those raised by post-structuralism about the possibility of an analytic history, and it is one to which any such aspiring history must have an answer. Macherey answers by silence: there is no foregrounding of the relation between where he stands and what he sees when he looks back. Jameson does raise this question, but not in a way that clearly resolves the focus of an analytic method. He begins his book by expressing a commitment not to the study or the “objective” structures of a given cultural text but to a foregrounding of the “interpretive categories or codes through which we read and receive the text in question” (PU, p. 9). Jameson is obviously convincing in his claim that “our readings of the past are vitally dependent on our experience of the present” (PU, p. 11). If we take this seriously, we must either do away with all claims to analytic objectivity (as Fish says he does); or come up with a way of distinguishing between what is objective and what is projected; or, alternatively, explain how we might continue to inhabit a worldview that is continuous with a past that we can still perceive objectively (as Foucault, for one, was clear that we cannot), so that there remains no distinction between things as they were and as they are now seen.

Jameson’s solution of this question is very unclear. Faced with the choice between a “positivistic conception of philological accuracy” and the model of interpretation as a “Homerian battlefield” upon which we can only embrace a preference for “strong misreadings over weak ones” (PU, p. 13), he prefers the second. For Jameson, “no interpretation can be effectively disqualified on its own terms by a simple enumeration of inaccuracies or omissions.” If this mode of verification is discredited, does it follow that the strong interpretation that can “overthrow” whatever is “already in place” (PU, p. 13) is itself just another misreading? Jameson would clearly not wish to imply such a conclusion, and he must therefore offer an account of why some particular facts are not relevant to a logic of history whose essence is dynamic and transformational, always creating a diachronic order that will itself prove the redundancy of these “inaccuracies and omissions.” To avoid being accused of a merely polemical Marxism, one that is content to reconstruct the past simply as a function of present needs, he must devise a model that explains the dialectical unity of theory and history. Thus he affirms that “the human adventure is one,” with the result that the “vital claims” of the past upon the present persist within “the unity of a single great collective story” (PU, p. 19); they are “vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot” (PU, p. 20). In the Hegelian manner, what we see in the past must then be part of ourselves, objectified; our projectional capacity does not distort the past but brings it, and ourselves, into objective focus. The tensions and struggles that the past records are, at least formally and structurally, the same as the tensions and struggles that we experience now and can see afresh through the analysis of history.

I do not know whether Jameson would confirm this interpretation of his own logic, or offer some alternative explanation. But we can now see how he might have thought that he had effectively reckoned “the very method itself, along with the analyst,” into the “phenomenon to be explained” (PU, p. 47), without falling victim to accusations of relativism, and without having to confess that he is appealing only to present consensus and not to truth. This solution, if such it be, seems to absolve him from what is always the greatest source of anxiety for any Marxist critic working in the period of the apparent failure or at least temporary arrestation of the proletarian revolution: the gap between past and present, analysis and praxis (or, at the very least, between analytic and prescriptive history). Jameson here seems to feel that he has offered a way of doing both at once, in finding an objective form for subjective practice. But the vulnerability of this solution, if such it is meant to be, becomes clear when it is compared with its exemplary ancestor in the writings of Lukács.

With a persuasiveness now apparently limited by the historical events of the 1920s, Lukács argued that with the coming-to-power of the proletariat the particular interests of a class would emerge as the objective truth of history as a whole (now seen to have been dynamically evolving to this very point). Thus the emergent proletariat would “see society from the centre, as a coherent whole,” and it would be correct in what it saw: “The self-understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the subjective understanding of the nature of society.”23 Jameson cannot for obvious reasons offer this argument, but he is still committed to discovering something whereby, as Lukács put it, the “totality of history is itself a real historical power.”24 Lukács’s formula was thoroughly Hegelian, but it was rooted in his perception of a real movement in social history as well as in mind. Jameson’s history is really literary history, though he

24. Ibid., p. 152.
constantly adumbrates something that frames it ("the human adventure"), so that he ends up with a textual syndrome, that of narrative, as the guarantor of an objective continuity between past and present. Narrative as the "central function or instance of the human mind" (PU, p. 13) does for Jameson what the emergent proletariat did for Lukács. Thus, while particular narratives may come and go, narrativization remains as the structuring energy of that history which he describes as "the inexorable form of events," as "necessity" (PU, p. 102). While history can indeed be approached only "by way of prior (re)textualization" (PU, p. 82), the forms of such retextualization are latent in us all.

If Lukács is indeed Jameson's exemplary precursor here—and I am by no means the first to suggest that he is—then various difficulties arise in the translation of the sociopolitical momentum of History and Class Consciousness to the more formally limited sphere of literary criticism. Why should particular narratives depend principally upon a master narrative, rather than upon more immediate contingencies? What proves or determines the subsumption of these particular narratives within the general frame of narrativization? The Hegelian ghosts called up by this model, if I have understood it correctly, must surely remain vulnerable to the challenges both of post-structuralism and of nontotalizing Marxist or materialist analysis. The assumptions upon which it depends, those of a historically continuous structuring mind embedded within an immanent or steadily evolutionary series of cultural tensions, do not seem comfortably conformable to the models bequeathed by Foucault and Macherey. Lukács, like Marx and Engels before him, had solved the hermeneutic problem not by reference to an autonomous analytic logic but by invoking the declared existence of a radically changing world—a world in which the very questions of objectivity and subjectivity, analytic and prescriptive, would become redundant, not because of a revolution in ideas but because of a complete refiguring of the social infrastructures upon which ideas in the first place depend. In this way they were able to avoid both utopianism and nostalgia by specifying a scientific momentum at work in the world itself. Jameson, by contrast, has only the more limited world of literary criticism (and in this we all share his fate), whose continuity with some larger movement of history must be strenuously proven rather than totalistically assumed. Even if we were able to reconstruct the dynamics of the historical past by decoding the mediated evidence latent within its various narratives, there is no longer any clearly arguable guarantee of a radically emergent new world to legitimize the accuracy of those reconstructions. Hence the resort to narrative, to a principle posited in literature and indicative of a totality that is at best literary, and as such likely to raise precisely the hermeneutic questions that it had been designed to foreclose. This does not of course indicate any bad faith on Jameson's part; it suggests rather that the attempt to encompass the analytic and prescriptive within a single methodological gesture may be attempting too much, or attempting it in an implausible way.

What is strikingly negated in Jameson's paradigm is any place for empiricism, roundly dismissed as "the mirage of an utterly nontheoretical practice" (PU, p. 58). In his commendable reluctance to concede anything to what he calls "vulgar materialism" (PU, p. 82), has he perhaps gone too far in the other direction, to the point where no empirical constraints can be recognized to disturb the autonomous clarity of the theoretical model? Must not a genuinely "new" historicism look again at what might be meant by materialism, not by resurrecting an intransigent positivism but by seeking a method of discriminating ("theoretically," if you will) between various kinds of material determinations, depending upon the kinds and qualities of available forms of evidence? Is there a solution to what seems to be the besetting conviction of such authorities as de Man and Derrida, that there is no form of knowledge of the past that is not a projection of the present? Are there any forms of evidence that do not commit us to analytically disabling hermeneutic anxieties? Jameson's answer, if I have understood it, insists upon the objective continuity of past and present, as the ongoing class struggle is dramatized through recognizably familial modes of narrativization. This assumption of a linear history works best when it remains aloof from the close inspection of the particulars of any one moment or text. It does not, in its own terms, generate or account for the kinds of detail that literary critics are trained to respect and search out. Its institutional effect thus risks being diminished into something called "the Marxist approach," a problem of which Jameson showed himself to be very well aware as he regretted his book's emphasis upon the "great collective story" at the expense of the "concrete historical situation."

How, finally, might we go about addressing the challenges of the concrete historical situation, without giving up on the search for enframing structures that interact with or determine such situations? As promised, my concluding remarks are going to seem rather baldly elusive: the working out of any one example is well beyond the limits of this essay. Here I offer only pointers toward a historical method that might be more than just a history of ideas, toward a self-consciously skeptical analytical practice that takes account of a materialist world not assumed to be identical with or indistinguishable from general ideology or discourse, even as its data must always be set against or within such hypothetically general paradigms. We need no longer fear slipping back into vulgar materialism, or empiricism, or humanism, which have been, it seems to me, so thoroughly displaced by the writings of the last twenty years that


they are no longer a threat. This does not of course mean that they have disappeared from the world: quite the opposite, for the cultural conditions that sustain them have not changed so radically. But, in the limited sphere of literary theory, and as long as we remain alive to the cautionary messages of those writings, their absolutist rhetoric may be questioned without loss of intellectual control. For we now face another orthodoxy, that of discourse, to which Jameson’s complex totalized model remains a somewhat overgeneral alternative.

Useful beginnings may be found in the small and inadvertent details that are least susceptible to hermeneutic instability: the cost and format of books, the size of imprints, and the relations between authors, editors, and printers. These are forms of information that have traditionally been consigned to the specialties of textual editing and bibliography, but they can often tell us exactly how ideological and material pressures are incorporated into modes of production. The work of Jerome McGann, among others, is exemplary here. Even historically minded critics continue, for example, to write about “Shakespeare” without assimilating the evidence of a distinguished tradition of textual criticism that radically calls into question the possibility of reconstructing the identity of such a figure from the printed texts. Nor can we dodge the issue by declaring the irrelevance of subjective agency, since it is obvious that some very particular agents had their hands in the production of the quarto and folio (themselves apparently directed at different audiences). Attention to such details should make it impossible—to take another example—to speak of a Blake text and a Wordsworth text as in any a priori sense the same, and should serve to inhibit the credibility of studies that approach them simply through the falsely symmetrical formats of modern editions.

The same attention to detail can be extended to historical semantics—what, for example, did such words as swine, tyger, glory, and relief signify to readers of the 1790s—and to the silences of texts, to the allusions that they do not make, but would arguably have been expected to make. Only detailed research into the historical constituents—more than contexts—of composition and publication can recover the power of silences and repressions. Such research presents an alternative to what Hans Robert Jauss called the “horizon of expectation” prevalent among the potential readership of a text, by providing a more thoroughly materialist dimension to a schema that remains in Jauss himself focused principally upon the autonomous sequences of literary genres and directed against what he calls “the prejudices of historical objectivism.” All of these questions, and others like them, demand interpretative interaction with other questions that collectively produce a determinate image of the field of production and reception. We are not left with a tenuous commitment to the absolute uniqueness of everything—perhaps the nightmare of any new historicism that tries too hard to move away from the implausibly totalizing tendencies in the available theoretical traditions—but with a good deal of information to be assessed by anticipating (while not assuming) the emergence of a dialectical relation between specific items and larger structures. Facts about the cost of books and the nature and size of editions cannot be interpreted without asking questions about the reading public. What, for example, was its relation to the ruling, or any other class? How many people might have read each copy? Who could read, at the time? Men and women? Of which social and educational order? What other conditions mediated access to any particular text? Was there censorship? Advertising?

Obviously, answers to these kinds of questions will be both highly variable according to what is being inspected, and often indecisive in themselves. Evidence for literacy, to mention but one notorious example, is vigorously contested and politically charged. But there is no reason why conjecture cannot proceed from what we do know of the materialist context, as long as it scrupulously admits the limits of that knowledge and leaves itself open to qualification or refutation. In this way it is an essential condition of the analysis that users of the historical method are honest about what they do not know, and about the forms of information that would modify the terms of knowing. For many periods and genres of literature, there is a great deal that we do not know, and much that we may never be able to discover. These lacunae must be figured into


29. See, for example, the important model in John E. Jordan, Why the ‘Lyric Ballads’?: The Background, Writing and Character of Wordsworth’s 1798 Lyric Ballads (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1976), which describes the commonplace poetical topics of 1798 that Wordsworth and Coleridge did not invoke.

the analysis, not replaced by spurious totalities or ignored by idealist reconstructions.

The effect of these small beginnings for a historical method would not be to ignore the larger events and movements that critics like Jameson offer, but rather to test them out and revise them against locally objective items of information—dare I say facts. The potential for the identification of general structures need not be denied, but we must put them through the test of a procedure that seeks in the first place to proliferate difference, in the spirit of Foucault, but with a larger variety of forms of information than Foucault himself tended to encounter. Most positively, we can arrive at a model of the past that is not monolithically problematic, either as a projected figment of the present or as an analytically reified totality. Consider, for example, the effect of replacing every use of the word culture with the word subculture. The meagerness of a normative and all-governing historical paradigm vanishes at once; we anticipate instead a world made up of a complex assembly of interests and factions, each struggling to become the culture (or perhaps not). Difference is reinscribed where literary criticism has all too often been content to image sameness. This does not by definition mean that there are not dominant structures: quite the opposite. But it may assist us in maintaining the model of a past in which there were determinate choices apparent, and determinate conflicts and alliances that informed them. This is not to celebrate pluralism or diversity as a matter of faith, but to recognize the place of material inequalities in the formation of social consciousnesses and in the resolution of social conflicts. Cultures emerge as the result of competing or cooperating subcultures; at least, they appear to have done so for most Western societies in the period whose literatures we mostly study.

The same commitment to particularity and difference that has informed what I have said about texts and audiences must also be extended to the notoriously vexed category of subjectivity, an entity doggedly besieged and for many completely destroyed by the united energies of the formative critics of the late 1960s, whether of the left, the right, or the center. What must be reinserted into historical analysis is not of course the traditional humanist idea of a subjectivity founded in free will and conscience, and very little else. Subjectivity can now be thought of, as instead, made up of both idiosyncrasy and intersubjectivity. The first is particular to an individual, and includes not only will and choice but also a genetically unique constitution of the sort that we have hardly begun to understand but must nonetheless recognize. In this way, idiosyncrasy may be partly made up by conscious decision-making faculties, which must neither be ignored nor described as metaphysically primary. Intersubjectivity describes what is not peculiar to an individual—the general determinations at work within subjective behavior. The distinction may be one of degree or of chronology rather than of kind, but it is useful nonetheless and will apply in different ways to different people in specific times and places. Derrida and Foucault, for example, made massive claims for the primacy of the intersubjective, whether in language or in discourse; and Althusser made similar claims for the power of ideology. These extreme arguments were surely therapeutic alternatives to a humanist tradition, but they do not seem to me to meet the needs of a detailed analytical method. Subjectivity must rather be imagined as the site of determinate (if not always visible) forces inclining us to decisions that range between relatively unconstrained and highly constrained. Neither free will nor historical automatism, taken alone, works adequately as an explanation of particular acts (especially acts in language). Detailed awareness of the precise sets of forces operating around the moment of writing will almost always produce complex explanations. As we break down "history" into its locally constituent moments, speaking, for example, not just of "the French Revolution" as the context for a particular Wordsworthian anxiety, but of the immediate image of Anglo-French relations in, say, 1798 (and so on down to months and days), so we must also investigate the moment of the subject as it experienced specific places at specific times. The author of "Simon Lee," for example, was not only writing in a general climate of opinion sensitive to the relations between masters and men, work and leisure, charity and relief; he was also living in a particular place under definite conditions of tenancy and experiencing some notable neighbors and visitors. The particular details do not exclude the larger patterns, in the manner of a rigid empiricism, but must be recognized along with them. And fortuitous coincidence can deflect, repress, or refigure even the most powerful ideological pressure.

By pursuing a historical method founded in the procedures described above, we can think initiate a departure from the subcultural consensus governing the spectrum of critics from Derrida to Jameson; a consensus that upholds the hermeneutic instability of the past as an object of analytic attention, whether in the form of outright skepticism (Derrida and de Man), or by denying access behind the surface of discourse (Foucault), or by proposing implausibly totalistic explanations for objective continuity (Jameson). All of these models share a common attitude in speaking about our knowledge of the past as if it were a whole, as if there were no alternative between complete self-confidence (all information is objective) and complete agnosticism (all information is projected or undifferentiated). The approach here proposed, which is for some reason much more popular among working historians than among literary critics

31. I am drawing here on the important argument of Raymond Williams, in his Marxism and Literature (Oxford, 1977), pp. 121–27. Williams' contribution to this debate is enormous; significant, but has surely been obscured by its commitment to plain language and theoretically self-effacing arguments.

the past than a monolithic notion of otherness or an equally undifferentiated projection of sameness; if it is possible to explore the options that Derrida glimpsed but could not pursue;—then our image of the present is also refigured. It is then neither an organic growth within some pseudo-Hegelian whole, nor a disconnected montage of postmodern bits and pieces. Refusing both extremes as the creations of theory and rhetoric rather than of historical inquiry, we see neither a whole human adventure nor an accumulation of the ungovernable demons of periodicity, but rather a complex system made up of tensions between emergent and residual subcultures—to use Raymond Williams' terms again—wherein particular and verifiable inequalities of power and reproduction combine with contingencies and redundancies, both individual and environmental. One consequence of this emphasis might be, for example, a more self-conscious use of the vocabulary of "cultural" determination. If we wish to excuse our various sins by claiming to operate inevitably within a racist, sexist, or imperialist (pick your own term) "culture," are we not indulging in the rhetoric of unanalyzed totality, and thus responding not so much to historical inevitability as to convenience by failing to recognize the existence of adversarial subcultures and their claims upon us? Specification of these subcultures is beyond the scope of this essay, which is therefore silent (as I have previously explained) on the subject of feminisms, undoubtedly the most immediate challenge to the traditions of the academy. But such specification can only be assisted by an analytic history that includes gender as one of its objects of attention. There seems to me to be no a priori prohibition on the practice of such a history; stringent skepticism about the nature of historical claims can perfectly well coexist with an absolute commitment to historical methods. But there are some frightening implications for the "profession," not the least of which is that if we are to try to become historians we are going to have to do more research and publish less. The persuasions of the workplace are very strong. But if we are to give in to them, let us do so self-consciously, without having to pretend that the adoption of a historical method of the sort here sketched out is in some philosophical or methodological sense impossible. Let us above all refuse the consolation of a "return" to history, and ponder instead all the reasons why we have not yet been there.

This essay has focused largely upon analytic rather than prescriptive history. But the redefinition of objectivity as a decisive, basic, and initiatory part of the project of analytic history also reconditions our sense of prescriptive history, our view of the present and forthcoming world. If it is possible to think beyond ourselves, to discover something more in

33. Thus Stanley Fish seems to me to ignore the most persuasive readings of Blake's "The Tyger," those of Paulson and Kathleen Raine, in order to argue his case that the poem may be indefinitely rewritten by its readers. See Fish, Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), p. 340.