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BRIAN EDWARDS

Figures of Difference: History, Historicism, and Critical Practice

In a recent essay on aesthetics and history, Rodolphe Gasché suggests that there is no need for post-structuralism to rediscover history "because history was never lost" (159). But as anyone who reads the journals or notes the titles of new publications in the fields of literary theory and critical practice would realize, the last decade or so is remarkable for lamentations about a denial of "history" and calls for its return to the centre of critical discourse in the name of "history" or "politics" or "ideology" — words that seem to denote hardcore social realities in ways that the category "literature" perhaps does not. Learned journals such as *Critical Inquiry*, *New Literary History*, and *Diacritics* present continuing evidence of the liveliness of the debate and of the confusions in the terminology in which it is conducted. Works such as Frank Lentricchia's *After the New Criticism* (1980), Terry Eagleton's *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983), and the Attridge and Bennington collection of essays *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History* (1987) address the alleged displacement of history by a formalism that refuses to die. Although authors may be pronounced dead and we use, with varying degrees of confidence, such terms as postmodernism, post-structuralism, post-analytic psychology, post-colonialism and even post-feminism as markers of our up-to-dateness, or demonstrating our awareness of the avant-garde of critical discourse, the formalist legacy remains like a virus that proves resistant to each new medical procedure apparently brought against it. So, for example, in the Winter 1990 issue of *New Literary History*, Professor Carolyn Porter alleges, "In short, formalism has remained institutionally inscribed, despite the fact that we ritualistically denounce it at every opportunity" (255). What does she mean by "formalism"? Who are the "we" so strong in its denunciation?

Professor Porter teaches at the University of California, Berkeley, which she describes as decidedly not the promised land of New Historicism. Although she writes about the context of literary studies in the United States, a hardly homogeneous environment, the debate is transferrable because, in Australia and Canada, there are sufficient similarities in the broad patterns of our histories of critical practice and we participate in an

international discourse by reading and contributing to many of the same influential journals while deferring respectfully or otherwise to shared authority figures whose works present paradigms for exchanges that are both national and international in their focus. Literary studies closeted in national terms, whatever these may be, are eroded by the processes of influence, comparison, awareness, translation, and exchange that are facilitated by the technologies and economies of communication. But "formalism" is held to be the legacy of New Criticism in its exclusive focus on the literary text as icon, detached from history and therefore from politics, perpetuated in the strategies of close reading and barricaded by *the* tradition and, therefore, canonicity. According to this perspective, the text is sacrosanct, history is merely a backdrop, institutional constraints upon choice and practice are paramount, and meaning is held to be totalised, shared, and discoverable and not at all what Barthes refers to as the warring forces of signification in the "writerly" text or what Derrida indicates by graft, trace supplementarity and "sous rature." In Professor Porter's analysis of the state of play, formalism is an institutionally protected species which not only "defanged," appropriated and anaesthetised the political threat of Derridean deconstruction (that familiar story about the Yale mafia¹) but which also marginalises what she refers to as "other forms of critical practice, notably those oppositional, alternative, and sometimes strongly antagonistic forms which have emerged since the 1960s, first from Marxist, then from Afro-Americanist and feminist, and finally from Third World Studies" (256). This narrative of discontent raises a number of interrelated questions: Is the formalist monster so beastly? Is its imperialistic sway so powerful? How accurate is the image of an intractable centre generating and holding off oppositional "antiformalist" practices, an image that risks constructing the very formalism, and "othering," that the discourse otherwise seeks to dismantle? What "formalisms" do, or might usefully, accompany the allegedly insurgent practices? Is "Theory" itself a coloniser? What does it mean to rediscover history? Is an apolitical critical practice possible? How may literary studies address, as values, particularity and difference?

Questions outrun answers, as they should. Answers are provisional and, as cultural processes illustrate repetitively, the latest iconoclasm may become the next orthodoxy. Its definition and articulation invite complicity, and institutionalisation, with the risk, always, that the edge of difference may be lost in the process. Furthermore, as fashions in historiography, aesthetics, architecture, philosophy, literary studies, and fashion demonstrate, returns are possible: discovery can involve recovery. If, in Professor Porter's terminology, close reading is a formalist preoccupation, the problem for

address is not its existence as a practice but, rather, the field always of its focus.

THE DIFFERENCE IN HISTORY

Writing in 1932 on the subject of "Historical Fact," Paul Valéry relates an anecdote about Degas's mother taking him to visit a very old woman of an aristocrat family, Mme le Bas. As they are leaving, Mme Degas notices portraits of Robespierre, Couthon, and Saint-Just on the wall and she asks why those "monsters' faces" should be kept there. Old Mme Le Bas replies gently, "Hush Célestine... Hush! They were saints!" Valéry suggests:

Que nous écoutions Mme Degas ou Mme Le Bas, ou le noble, le pur et le tendrement sévère Joseph de Maistre; ou le grand et brûlant Michelet; ou Taine; ou Tocqueville ou M. Aulard ou M. Mathiez, — autant de personnes, autant de certitudes; autant de regards, autant de lectures des textes. Chaque historien de l'époque tragique nous tends une tête coupée qui est l'objet de ses préférences. (I 1129)

Valéry's emphasis upon processes of selection and shaping *from* history of history, upon point of view, interpretation and construction, upon intricacies of choice and understanding and, then, upon the rhetoric of presentation points to the inevitable difference in history. His metaphor is appropriate; as a figure of dismemberment, the severed head emphasizes complications of context, the divided corpus within which meanings have to be situated and considered, this place of intersections or, in Foucault's trope, the archaeological site with its "multiplicity of contradictions" (155). The nostalgia is understandable because, in *Le Bilan de l'Intelligence*, he writes not only about the irresistibility but also the danger of history, about the danger of past experience as shaper of present tensions and future possibilities. Writing in the early 1930s, he regarded the horrors of World War I as an example of atrocious forgetting. What would he have thought in 1945? But the Muse of history is flirtatious. In the Winter 1990 issue of *New Literary History*, Carl Schorske writes:

For the first time in her life Clio is playing the dating game on her own terms. She has lost the illusion of being queen, Monarch of all she surveys in the scholarly scene. She is no longer bonded in service to theology or law, nor is she wedded to philosophy in order to realize with her partner liberal bourgeois projects in the world of politics. Now she chooses her own partners freely. (419)

She never was monogamous; even so, the muse of history pursues, and is pursued, across old disciplinary boundaries. With the divisions destabilised, she is able to acknowledge more freely her associations with narrative and with rhetoric, as well as with psychology, philosophy, economics and politics,

1 As discussed by Frank Lentricchia in *After the New Criticism*.

sometimes to the wry amusement and sometimes to the frustration of her practitioners. Whereas difference was once held to operate *between* histories, as a matter of selection and interpretation, post-structuralist linguistics locates the difference *within* any particular version as an unavoidable characteristic of the linguistic presentation and this is a more fundamental sense of difference than the figure of variation acknowledged by liberal pluralism. As contributors to the deconstruction of authority, Benjamin, Barthes, Derrida, de Man, and White do not deny the power of history but, rather, any mandate it may claim, in one or another of its versions, upon representation of the Truth. Historians, too, speak with the forked tongue of small "t" truth.

Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* was published in 1971 and particular statements made there are targets for "return to history" activists. In *After the New Criticism* (1980), Frank Lentricchia refers to William Pritchard's description of the Yale gang-of-four as the "Hermeneutical Mafia" to play upon the figure himself in locating de Man as the godfather who speaks only sparingly, and Bloom, Hartman, and Miller as his lieutenants. They are accused of a turn away from social and ideological concentrations, of a refusal of history in line with idealist Kantian aesthetics, and Lentricchia declares that his study is organized around the problematic of a "repeated and often extremely subtle denial of history by a variety of contemporary theorists" (xiii). In his later study, *Criticism and Social Change* (1983), Lentricchia refers to de Man's statement 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" (165), to suggest that de Man transforms history into literature and transfers "all those paralytic feelings of the literary onto the terrain of society and history" (50). He makes a case for Kenneth Burke's emphasis upon the operations of power in discourse and his platform for social change in contrast with the reactionary political conservatism he finds in de Man:

Deconstruction is conservatism by default — in Paul de Man it teaches the many ways that there is nothing to done. The mood is all from early T.S. Eliot. We are Prufrocks all, all hollow men, who inhabit the wasteland that we know now is the humanities wing of the modern university: "Paralysed force, gesture without motion." (51)

In the Summer 1988 issue of *Critical Inquiry*, five years after Lentricchia's *Criticism and Social Change*, David Simpson quotes this same statement from *Blindness and Insight* to suggest that de Man is perhaps more responsible than Derrida himself for the view that history is constrained by the same problems of textuality as literature. But what is it, specifically, that such objectors find problematic, if not reprehensible, in de Man's brand of

deconstruction? Is Derrida's famous statement in *De la Grammatologie*, "il n'y a pas d'hors texte" (159) the prescriptive analogue to de Man's theory of allegorization? Where, in the scheme, does one locate the work of Hayden White expressed in *Metahistory* (1973), *Topics of Discourse* (1978) and "Historical Pluralism," an article published in *Critical Inquiry* in 1986:

if we look at contemporary historical theory and practice we must admit that there are as many perspectives on history as there are modes of critical practice in literary studies. And this is for a very good reason: the referent of the term "history" is as indeterminable, is as much a matter of principled contestation, as the term "literature".... (482)

The statement returns us to Valéry's anecdote about Mme Degas, Mme Le Bas and different views of history, transformed by the interrelated problems of language and referentiality, category distinctions, and hermeneutics. Sharing with deconstructors the denial of unmediated referentiality and, therefore, the necessity to attend self-consciously to rhetoric as discourse, White complicates the texts of history in ways that recall Nietzsche's dictum, "No facts, only interpretations" and his rhetorical question, "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms and anthropomorphisms..." (47).

In this knot of issues there are separate conceptual problems that too often slide uncomfortably into one another in our dealings with them:

1. THE TEXTUALITY OF HISTORY

If history is "read" as a text inseparable from the linguistic problems of writing and reading, what implications follow for representation, for the traditional view that history deals with the business of actuality, with real social events? Are there different orders of discourse involved, so that, while acknowledging the problematics of linguistic presentation, we can also recognize a different order of language practice between "fiction" and "history"? Should the criteria or truth-conditions for historical discourse be clearly different from those applied to fiction, as Christopher Norris for example maintains,² and, if this is so, how may the terms be constituted so as to permit those inter-disciplinary dismantlings cherished by anti-formalists?

2 Cf. "Postmodernising History: Right-Wing Revisionism and the Uses of Theory."

2. THE SOCIAL/HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF LITERATURE

If there is no single proper context for the study of literature, emphases in particular acts of reading will continue to shift between attention to the text, to the social conditions (material as well as intellectual) of its production, and to the changing contexts of its reception. According to a commentator's preference, each act of reception will be unavoidably "guilty" of one bias or another, of formalist preoccupations, of the biographical fallacy, of the imposition of some political grid (Marxist, feminist, Eurocentric, post-colonial) — and all such allegations of guilt, of misreading, will themselves be guilty too since they must necessarily hold, if only for the purposes of their enunciation, a position on textuality and/or the business of critical practice. There is no innocence. We are all fallen — into the welcome challenges of self-consciousness.

3. THE LITERARY TEXT

What are its generic markers? To what extent, and how, has literary criticism been constrained by institutional practice? Carolyn Porter alleges the perfidious influence of conservative practice upon curricula and reading strategies — practice that has been predominantly masculine, Eurocentric and ahistorical. Contemporary challenges to old boundaries between the "literary" and the "extraliterary," and to canonicity and to canon-formation, make "literature" an expansive term. These challenges invite attention to texts as discourse, and re-conceive the issues of archive, gender, ideology, and critical strategies. But there is no simple passage from institutional orthodoxy to the new promised land of egalitarian practice, no simple new deal of an open range freed forever from the barbed-wire of self-serving. Nor should there be. And putting the literary text back into history, or history back into the literary text, obviously means different things according to one's perception of the key components and ideas for their combination.

The call to history, then, has different meanings. Jameson's "Always historicize" (9), Eagleton's question about "how responding to Marvell around the seminar table was to transform the mechanized labour of factory workers" (43) and Lentricchia's summons to criticism in the cause of social change represent particular positions in Marxist criticism with at least part of their focus on the material context of production and perceptions of social organization and political change. While continuing to address the questions of lost texts, historical conditions and gaps in the record, feminist criticism's theorising of difference now proceeds beyond simple male-female binaries, centre-margin distinctions and allegations of misconduct, necessary as these have been. As Shirley Neumann and Smaro Kamboureli suggest in their preface to *A/Mazing Space* (1986), "The long established binary models

have ceased to signify for women writers" (x). Respect for difference and the assertion of heterogeneity against all forms of monism require constant vigilance and energy, not only on the part of Marxists, feminists, post-colonialists, Third-World theorists, and national and ethnic groups, but from all students of literature and history in their complex comparative contexts. It is not the case that history is single and fixed, a long narrative progression that, like most things, is seen retrospectively; it is not the case that literary studies have to be either formalist or historical, that there can be no simultaneous attention to forms and to historical particularities. The choice is not between mutually exclusive alternatives. Thus, I have no quarrel with Jameson's conclusion to an article titled "From Criticism to History" published in 1981 in *New Literary History*:

I want to suggest that we forget about history as some reified phenomenon, and think rather in terms of the conceptual and dialectical operations whereby we *historicize* our materials. If we see our critical mission in these terms, terms of process rather than of inert interdisciplinary linkages, it will become clear that any kind of criticism is grist for the mill of history and that any critical insights of whatever variety (stylistic, psychoanalytic, archetypal, topological, generic, semiotic) can always be historicized. The dialectic is indeed the very name for this process.... (375)

The statement leaves open, of course, the particular direction and manner of one's historicising in any act of critical engagement with a text. No particular choice is ever likely to satisfy all customers; there is always the opportunity for difference.

DERRIDA AND HISTORY

In his *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Marxist Eagleton refers to Derrida's studies as "grossly unhistorical, politically evasive and ... oblivious to language as 'discourse'" (148) and to post-structuralist linguistics as "affirming nothing, it is as injurious as blank ammunition" (145). Two years earlier, and while regarding Derrida's work as thoroughly formalist, a formalism that he praises for "an elegant commanding overview matched in philosophy only by Hegel" (177), Marxist Lentricchia presents in *After the New Criticism* an appreciation not only of Derrida's scholarship but also of his historical consciousness. I wish to look briefly at some of Derrida's work to present a case against allegations of its ahistorical, apolitical formalism, and to approach the questions through Lentricchia's analysis in *After the New Criticism* where, he says, he opposes "history" that would deny "histories." What does the "Deconstructive Angel" (Abram's epithet) from the mid-1970s ancient history of "Fear and Trembling at Yale" (Graff's title) have to offer to an historical critical practice?

Lentricchia allows (at least) two different emphases in interpretation of Derrida's writings, that which encourages "the pleasure-oriented formalism of the Yale critics" and his preferred view that Derrida initiates a new historical project already underway in the post-structuralist work of Foucault. Concentrating on the processes of "decentering" and "différance," he recuperates the problematic issues of meaning and authority while attending to Derrida's dismantling of logocentrism and the associated idea of being in presence. Destabilising the sign by noting the absence (and textualisation) of the signified ("Il n'y a pas d'hors-texte") as a form of closure, and emphasizing the incessant operations of "trace," "supplement," "hymen," and "dissemination," Derrida's denial of origins and presence offers the text in its indeterminateness:

This interweaving, this textile, is the text produced only in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces. (*Positions*, 26)

and

Ce que nous avons tenté de démontrer en suivant le fil conducteur du "supplément dangereux," c'est que dans ce qu'on appelle la vie réelle de ces existences (...), il n'y a jamais eu que de l'écriture; il n'y a jamais eu que de suppléments, des significations substitutives qui n'ont pu surgir que dans une chaîne de renvois différentiels (...) Et ainsi à l'infini... (*De la Grammatologie*, 228)

In the double sense of "différance," with its spatial and temporal connotations of simultaneously differing and deferring, Derrida resituates within operations of the sign itself the element of difference that Saussure locates between signs. It is not surprising that Lentricchia cast Saussure in the role of original sinner responsible for the fall of history, referring to "the insistent charge that Saussure and his structuralist progeny suffer from a failure of historical consciousness that stems from the hierarchizing of synchrony and diachrony" (117), and finding support in Jameson and Said. But as Derek Attridge suggests in his essay "Language as History/History as Language: Saussure and the Romance of Etymology" (1987), other interpretations of Saussure's *Course* are possible: it can be argued that his achievement "lay not in clarifying (as he hoped to do) but in problematising the notion of history and its relation to the present" (186), an argument sustained by holding that Saussure's emphasis on synchrony is methodological and that, in any case, language in its instability shifts between the diachronic and the synchronic each of which is provisional, is historical. Like Derrida's critique of Saussure in *De la Grammatologie*,

particularly his inversion of the priority of speech over writing, the interpretation frees Saussurean linguistics not from history but from naive conceptions of it. Questioning etymological attempts to fix meaning by an appeal to origins is not only to question ideas about originality as authenticity but also to oppose one perception of history to another.

Lentricchia does not condemn Derrida's work to any ahistorical, apolitical, acultural wasteland of self-delighting freeplay. For him, that is the negative aspect of the line of interpretation followed by the Yale critics, another question. Suggesting that Derridean deconstruction leads to interrogation of the play of signification from within writing, on temporal and cultural grounds, he acknowledges Derrida's attention to authorities and to contexts and quotes approvingly:

I didn't say there was no centre, that we could get along without the centre. I believe that the centre is a function, not a being — a reality, but a function. And this function is absolutely indispensable. The subject is absolutely indispensable. I don't destroy the subject; I situate it.³

Derrida's work does not deny "authorities" or "centres" or the business of "Realpolitik" — to do that would be absurd. Rather, he refuses their power to specify the limits of meaning. In Lentricchia's words, "Put as boldly as possible, Derrida's point is that once we have turned away from various ontological centerings of writing, we do not turn to free-play in the blue, as the Yale formalists have done. Rather, it would appear that our historical labours have just begun" (175). Formalist concerns are mixed with cultural consciousness, the aesthetic with the historical. It is a political move to ask, as Derrida's deconstructive readings do, who (or what) is writing, from what position and with what authority. The close reader can be attuned to history and to politics. As Lentricchia has noted, Derrida and Foucault can be regarded not as antagonists but as "cooperative philosophical explorers" (208). Foucault's "archaeological" and "genealogical" analyses of the workings of knowledge and power in discourse, in his studies of madness, medicine, prisons and sexuality, reveal not essences or unalterable laws but processes of selection, discontinuities and influence. At the risk of eliding important differences in their writings that need to be (and of course have been) addressed, such as Derrida's stronger emphasis upon the instability of meaning compared with Foucault's focus on the historical condition of meanings in specific contexts, they may be seen to produce complementary

3 The comment occurs in the discussion following Derrida's presentation of the paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences" in 1966 at the Johns Hopkins symposium, "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" (Macksey 271).

post-structuralist readings. History, like the texts of its composition is a heterogeneous discursive field. But that the object of analysis is always open to acts of decentring and reinterpretation denies neither its appropriation at any point nor the operations of power within and about it.

CLIO'S HANDMAIDENS: THE NEW HISTORICISM

In the restless context of contemporary theory and practice and, in particular, with allegations of the loss of history as a cause for concern, "New Historicism" emerges as a contender for honours in the next batch of all-round cultural awareness awards. Or does it? Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* was published by Clarendon Press in 1988. One example of "New Historicism" at work, what are Greenblatt's main perceptions and strategies? In what ways, to what extent, might this style of critical practice recuperate the apparently lost soul of "history" for studies in literature and culture? Is the new historicism an answer to charges of the discontinuous, isolationist, elitist and self-absorbed formalism held to characterize literary studies in our institutions?

Following imperatives that can be read most clearly in Foucault's work, Greenblatt reads the Shakespearean text as a cultural construction, a site of exchange within the restricted economy of the Renaissance theatre itself as the product of identifiable social interests, energies and discourses, appropriations and displacements. Foregoing, therefore, his dream of the epiphanic moment of unmediated communication with the singular genius himself, Greenblatt's Shakespeare is the figure of a major shareholder in a joint stock company — "there is," he says, "no originary moment, no pure act of untrammelled creation. In place of a blazing genesis, one begins to glimpse something that seems at first far less spectacular: a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies. Gradually, these complex, ceaseless borrowings and lendings have come to seem to me more important, more poignant even, than the epiphany for which I had hoped" (7). It is curious that Greenblatt should present as discoveries, and the result of his scholarship, precisely what many linguists, literary theorists, and students of ideas have been saying, if not always practising, for generations: the view of texts as "sites of institutional and ideological contestation" (3) and the impossibility of taking "the text itself as the perfect unsubstitutable, freestanding container of all of its meanings" (3). "In practice," he suggests, "made up" means inherited, transmitted, altered, modified, reproduced far more than it means invented: as a rule, there is very little pure invention in culture" (13). There is no shortage of statements in critical discourse about the complexities of influence, borrowing, and

repetitions with difference. There is no shortage of evidence in Shakespearean studies of sources for the plays, of the cultural circumstances of their production, or of a "poetics of culture" approach that deconstructs singularity by situating it within the complex intersections of institutions, events and ideas, or the discursive formations of culture. How could the researcher be anything but "increasingly uneasy with the monolithic entities that (his) work had posited" (2). In any case, Greenblatt defines the "newness" of new historicism in its concentration on the divided texts of literature and society, in their exchange processes, against "old" faith in the stable reference of monological attention to the text in history. History receives a deconstructive shot and, hardly new, border territories become places of interest: "(I) look less at the presumed centre of the literary domain than at its borders, to try to track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margin of the text" (4). To what extent can this statement of discoveries, aims and strategies satisfy the "Always historicize" imperative? Will it do any more to transform the mechanized labour of factory workers than reading Marvell around a seminar table? Or, more seriously, and in recognition of not only the divided processes of history but the quite properly different views and requirements that individuals and groups have of both history and literature, what does this example of new historical practice offer for our appreciation of texts as complex cultural productions? I wish to concentrate briefly on one example, "Shakespeare and the Exorcists," Professor Greenblatt's piece on the margins of *King Lear*.

In 1603, Samuel Harsnett, chaplain to the bishop of London, wrote a detailed analysis of the famous Buckinghamshire exorcisms of 1585-86 in which a group of English Catholic priests conducted a series of allegedly spectacular exorcisms in the house of Sir George Peckham of Denham, Buckinghamshire. As Greenblatt notes, for two and a half centuries Shakespearean scholarship has accepted that Shakespeare was reading Harsnett's *A Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* as he was working on *King Lear*. His argument for reconsideration of the borrowing claims that the link has been locked in the "conventional pieties of source study" (94); lists were made but questions about the dramatic and cultural significance of the intersection of texts were either unanswered or, indeed, not formulated. His procedure is to examine the institutional strategies in which both Harsnett's *Declaration* and Shakespeare's *King Lear* are embedded: the religious wranglings of late Elizabethan England, fundamental questions about values and social organization, and the place of the theatre in cultural politics.

In denunciation of exorcisms, Anglican Harsnett argues vehemently that they are a fraud and that evil lies not in the allegedly "possessed" but in the chief architects themselves, the Catholic priests as exorcists:

Dissemblers, jugglers, impostors, players with God, his son, his angels, his saints: devisers of new devils, feigned tormentors of spirits, usurpers of the key of the bottomless pit, whippers, scourgers, batfoulers of fiends, Pandars, Ganimeadeans, enhancers of lust, deflowerers of virgins, defilers of houses, uncivil, unmanly, unnatural venerans, offerers of their own mass to supposed devils, depravers of their own relics.... (Quoted, 104-05)

And so on... "prostituters," "profaners," "violators," "blasphemers," "seducers," "plotters," "conspirators," "contrivers" — the inventiveness of Harsnett's rhetoric is comic only in distance. Needing to convince the people of this fraud, he finds his explanatory model in the theatre: "Exorcisms, Harsnett argues, are stage plays, most often tragi-comedies, that cunningly conceal their theatrical inauthenticity" (106). Priests and possessed are players of roles in a theatre of illusion, tragedy is farce and, for Harsnett, Catholicism is "the Pope's playhouse" (113). Situating the *Declaration* in this cultural context, Greenblatt emphasizes the seriousness of the stakes; if Harsnett can demonstrate a monstrous hoax in which the exorcists are "vagabond players, that coast from Town to Town" (quoted, 113), he believes its power and the authority of its practitioners will be destroyed.

How does this contribute to appreciation of *King Lear*? Greenblatt's reading locates the play in the context of its making: "When in 1603 Harsnett was whipping exorcism toward the theatre, Shakespeare was already at the entrance to the Globe to welcome it" (115). To be more exact, he locates the play with respect to one source important to its making. His subsequent analysis concentrates, of course, on Edgar's feigned possession as Poor Tom, the theatrical "exorcism" of Gloucester's demons on the flat boards of Dover cliff, and the absence in *King Lear* of spirits, witches, ghosts and, despite the repetitive address, gods. There is no supernaturally endowed redemption. Greenblatt sees in *King Lear* a corroboration and a demonstration of Harsnett's arguments — players play roles, simulate conditions, and enact a fiction. However, while acknowledging the analogy between theatrical performance and exorcism as a two-way exchange, it is necessary to be mindful as well of differences in context whatever similarities there may be in performance. Greenblatt's presentation is careful and elegant; its manner of focus on the "nonliterary" and esoteric text, Harsnett's 1603 *Declaration*, constitutes the "new" of its new historicism. He does not address the range of issues — thematic, formal and stylistic — that fill out the mass of commentary on *King Lear*. Why should he? Whether or not the new historicism becomes a new determinism and, as such, a hedge rather than an invitation to continuing discourse will depend upon the manner of each re-exploration of cultural contexts and not upon the fact that this is the way its attention turns. Greenblatt's historical criticism presents one precisely articulated example of the processes of textuality defined by Derrida: "This

interweaving, this textile, is the text produced in the transformation of another text. Nothing, neither among the elements nor within the system, is anywhere ever simply present or absent" (*Positions*, 26).

Guy Davenport, who makes an art of beginnings, begins an essay on Montaigne with these lines:

When, in the good September weather of 1580, Michel Eyquem de Montaigne's medicine-and-book-laden coach set out for Rome by way of Austria and Switzerland and all the sights and spas along the road, Shakespeare was a loud sixteen (given to making speeches in a high style, Aubrey records) in the country town of Stratford, and Ben Jonson was a cunning little schoolboy of seven in London, learning Latin and Greek. (37)

1580 is also the year of publication of the first edition of Montaigne's *Essays*. In a curious two-pager titled "That Our Actions Should Be Judged by Our Intentions", VII in Book One, Montaigne, also clever on beginnings, begins: "Death, they say, releases us from all our engagements; I know some who have regarded this differently" (33). As if they should constitute together a sixteenth-century litany of warnings, this essay sits between "The Hour of Parley is a Dangerous Time" and "Of Idleness."

The texts of literature and history present so many curiosities, of course, singly and in the company of others; and in the best of all possible conditions, there should be no Charter of Prohibitions upon their production or reception. Until they prove otherwise, differences in the fields of theory and critical practice are signs of health and, whenever we may think that Lear speaks the voice of critical practice,

Thou shalt find

That I'll resume the shape which thou dost think
I have cast off for ever. (I.iv.308-10)

the diversity and vigour of debate of the last twenty years suggest that the shape is far from fixed. The recent history of critical theory and practice is remarkable, in particular, not only for extending the range of reading strategies but also for challenges to the restrictions of disciplinary and canonicity. In the interests of difference, for cultural appreciation, it is always necessary to re-read the history of literature, literary production, and literary studies and with a view to dismantling the barricades.

Deakin University

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