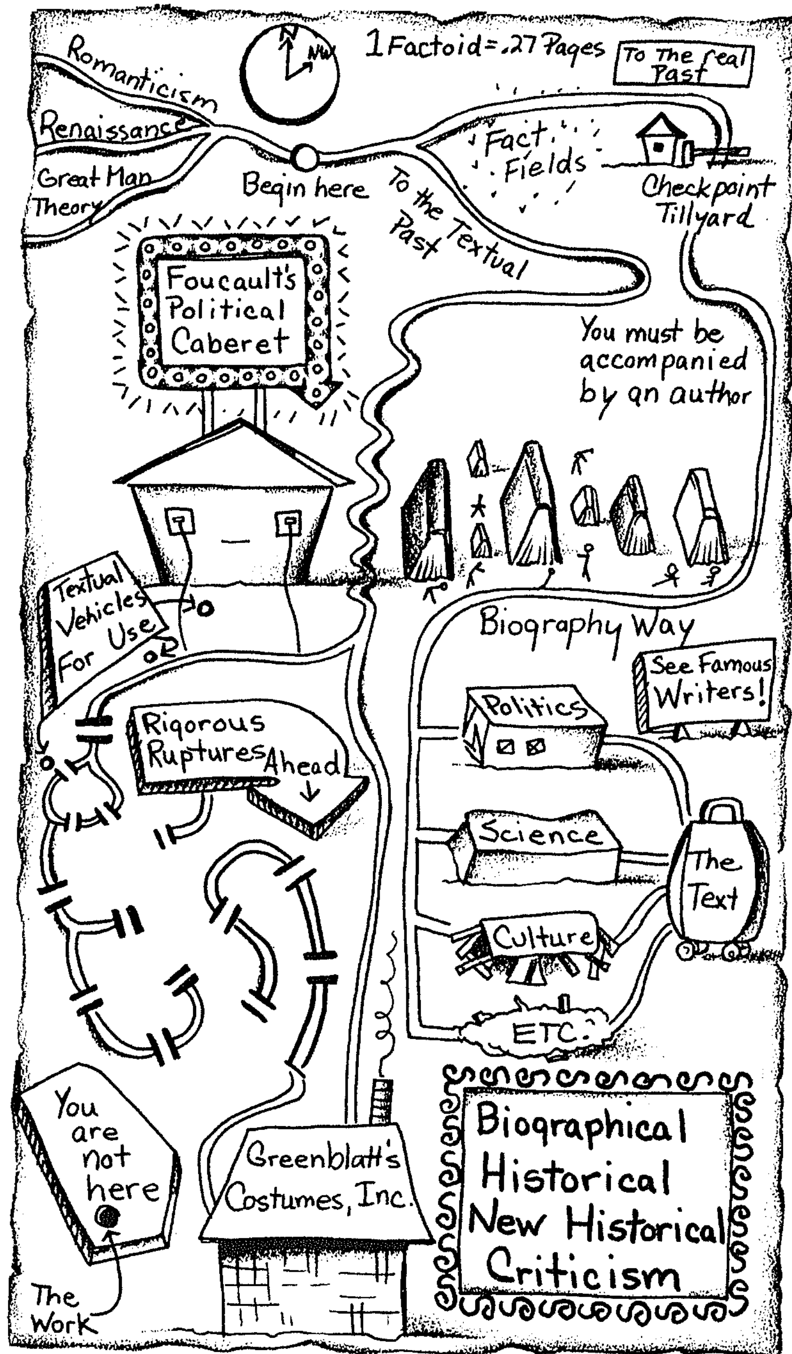


CHAPTER

6

# Connecting the Text

## *Biographical, Historical, and New Historical Criticism*

*We know somewhat, and we imagine the rest.*

—Samuel Johnson

### THE PURPOSES OF BIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND NEW HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Even the most rigorously formal New Critic or the most introspectively responding reader may make some use of biographical or historical information. It just makes common sense to wonder who wrote a particular work, and when, and how, and in what circumstances. In the wake of deconstruction, altering all our notions of language and knowledge, we also have new conceptions of authorship and historical circumstances. Thus, this chapter considers what happens when biographical, historical, and new historical concerns move to the critical foreground.

#### Biographical Criticism

If we think of a literary work primarily as a personal achievement, the accomplishment of a great mind, then biographical criticism offers to help us understand both the work and its creator, as we relate one to the other. Take, for instance, the following poem.

**When I Consider How My Light Is Spent** (1655?)
*John Milton*

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present 5
My true account, lest He returning chide,
Doth God exact day-labor, light denied,
I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
Either man's work or His own gifts. Who best 10
Bear his mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state
Is kingly : thousands at his bidding speed,
And post o'er land and ocean without rest;
They also serve who only stand and wait.

Biographical criticism would insist on the importance of knowing something about the author—perhaps most importantly, in this case, that Milton had lost his eyesight by 1651. Without this fact, it could be argued, the reader might wonder what sense to make of the phrase "how my light is spent," since "going blind" would be only one of many possible meanings (how my day is spent, how my insight is used up, how my lover is tired out, and more). Knowing about Milton's life may also help us to appreciate the poem's significance: the speaker of the poem is not, it may seem, merely a fiction, an assumed character, contemplating some hypothesis; rather, the speaker has some connection to a real man, a writer, contemplating the horror of his own blindness.

Of course, as one guide to writing about literature puts it, you should "avoid equating the work's contents with the author's life" (Griffith 115); obviously a piece of writing isn't the same thing as a person's life. Still, although the writing and the life "are never the same," are we obliged to conclude that writers do not sometimes try to express themselves truthfully? If we must conclude that "When I Consider" is "fictional" in the same sense that *Star Wars* is fictional, then we may lose some of the poem's power. For most readers this poem is considerably more moving if we imagine that Milton is writing about himself.

Just as Milton's life may illuminate the poem, the poem may also help us to understand Milton's life. It has been thought by more than one critic that Milton was a misogynist, a "domestic tyrant" as the *Oxford Companion* puts it (654), cruelly ordering his daughters about, sternly dictating to his successive wives (three in all). This poem may suggest perhaps that Milton tended to think of the universe in terms of servants and masters, and that he viewed himself as a servant to God. God's "yoke" is light, even though it employs thousands speeding "o'er land and ocean without rest," and the servant's job is simply to serve in whatever capacity. The servant is in fact so inconsequential that "God doth not need / Either man's work or His own gifts." As Milton insists to himself that he must strive to serve even if that serving means simply standing, the submissiveness in the poem reflects the sort of subservience Milton apparently expected (and thought he had earned) from those who served him. He may have treated those around him like his servants, but he also saw himself in the same way, as the servant to another master.



### Historical Criticism

Biographical criticism is the natural ally of historical criticism. We can hardly understand one person's life without some sense of the time and place in which he or she lived, and we can hardly understand human history without trying to think about the individual humans who made it. Historical criticism considers how military, social, cultural, economic, scientific, intellectual, literary, and (potentially) every other kind of history might help us to understand the author and work.

In the case of Milton's poem, the most obvious historical context might well be the political situation of England: in 1655, about the time the poem is supposed to have been written, England was struggling to recover from a civil war that had ended with the beheading of Charles I in 1649. After this regicide, of which he approved, Milton was deeply involved in politics, serving as Latin secretary to the newly formed Council of State and writing on numerous political and religious controversies. Against the backdrop of this political turmoil, the references in the poem to the "one talent" and the urgency of using it might suggest additional meanings. (He is alluding of course to Jesus's parable of the poor servants who simply buried their talents and the good servant who used his single talent for profit.)

For instance: perhaps Milton felt called to straighten out his country by employing his gift for language; the government and the church must have seemed at times to be falling apart before his eyes.

With his one talent, his gift for writing, perhaps Milton felt he should be saving the nation. But he puts this self-imposed burden in a new light in the poem when he reminds himself that God does not need his help—that others do God's bidding, and that his own job description may have changed dramatically with his impairment. He is telling himself that all he must do now is "stand and wait," ready to serve when he can. (As it turns out, Milton's accomplishments were prodigious while he "waited" to write his masterwork, *Paradise Lost.*)

The history of literature itself has also been considered especially important for the understanding of particular works. Milton's reader needs to recognize that "When I Consider" is a sonnet, but it would also be nice to know what sonnets Milton had read, how this sonnet relates to others, and what other poems or other kinds of works Milton knew. Such literary background is almost always helpful and often seems essential.

In the study of renaissance literature, for example, students have for decades read E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* in order to understand the background of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, and other Elizabethan writers. Tillyard aimed, as he said, to explain the Elizabethans' "most ordinary beliefs about the constitution of the world" (viii), and he showed clearly and repeatedly how this basic knowledge is essential to our understanding. For example, Tillyard says English citizens who lived during the reign of Elizabeth (1558–1603) believed in "a doctrine of plenitude." They imagined an order in the universe whereby every entity filled a particular position in a "chain of being," stretching from the lowest possible inert element to the highest, from the lowest plant to the highest, and from the lowest creature to the highest (25–33). In *Paradise Lost,* Milton's Raphael, an angel, explains this "chain of being" to Adam, showing him how everything is ranked, and every level of possible being is filled. And Adam explains to Eve one consequence of this hierarchical "plenitude," as Tillyard notes (32):

> Millions of spiritual Creatures walk the Earth
> Unseen, both when we wake, and when we sleep:
> All these with ceaseless praise his works behold
> Both day and night.

Imagining that Milton inherited the Elizabethan idea of the chain of being may help to understand the ending of "When I Consider." Specifically, we get a better sense of the reference to the



"thousands" who speed at God's bidding, without rest. They are part of the "millions" of possible creatures existing in the scale between Milton and God; and, if God has a place (but not a need) for those who actively serve him, he also must allow in the scheme of things for some who serve in every other possible way—including standing and waiting. Thus, Milton's passive role is required of him; it is right; it is his current place in the universal chain of being.

As you can see from this small example, historical research can provide us with a much richer understanding of what an author is saying.

## Cultural Studies

"History" includes, of course, not only those great and obviously influential persons and events that we usually think of, but also the ordinary, the everyday, the apparently trivial. The development of plumbing is clearly very important to civilization, but few people, I would venture, know much about its evolution. And who would think that the history of sewers and toilets would be pertinent to the study of literature? And yet, to take only one example, Jonathan Swift's famous poem "A Description of a City Shower" (1710) makes considerably more sense if we know that the residents of London in 1710, lacking flushing toilets and sewer systems, collected their waste in chamberpots, which were often emptied into open trenches (called "kennels"). Swift's contemporaries, expecting "A Description of a City Shower" to be an idyllic celebration of the beauty of the rain, were no doubt stunned by the poem's grandiose depiction of their smelly reality. The modern reader who is unaware of the sanitary problems in Swift's day may find the poem's imagery incredible. Consider, for instance, the poem's resounding conclusion:

> Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow,
> And bear their trophies with them as they go:
> Filth of all hues and odours seem to tell
> What streets they sailed from, by the sight and smell.
> They, as each torrent drives, with rapid force
> From Smithfield or St. Pulchre's shape their course,
> And in huge confluent join at Snow Hill ridge,
> Fall from the Conduit prone to Holborn Bridge.
> Sweepings from butcher's stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
> Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud,
> Dead cats and turnip-tops come tumbling down the flood.

For Swift's reader, or for the modern reader who knows a little something about everyday eighteenth-century life, the poem is not an exaggeration of the city's repulsiveness. Instead, the poem describes in serious and inflated language what everyone saw and tried to overlook every time it rained, and thus Swift's vision becomes both strangely amusing and disturbing. It's funny to think of this mess in such heroic terms; it's also dismaying to see the stinky reality so vividly depicted.

If "history" ought to encompass everything, from international treaties to eating utensils, by the same token "literature" should be seen as more than just the great works that we usually think of. It should include also the second-rate, third-rate, and even too-bad-to-rate writings that actually compose the bulk of literary history. It is in fact probably presumptuous for us to assume the accuracy of our own perspective on what is historically important, in literature or society. The stock of many writers, including Milton, has gone up and down dramatically over the centuries.

Indeed, in the last few decades, many scholars have even expanded their view of literature to include those "texts" that aren't in the usual sense "literary" at all—advertisements, cartoons, films, romances, television shows, popular music, and much more. "Cultural studies," as this ambitious field of research has often come to be called, considers any cultural phenomena to be worthy of serious analysis. Take body piercing, for instance. Have you ever wondered why it has recently become so popular in Western culture? Why are so many people getting their belly buttons, nipples, noses, and/or other parts pierced? What are they trying to communicate through this action? How is this activity related to other cultural events, such as tattooing? While such questions might be investigated by sociologists or anthropologists or psychologists, a "cultural studies" stance would encourage an interdisciplinary and interconnecting approach to such phenomena, relating them to the whole spectrum of popular and literary culture.

We have ventured no doubt light-years from Milton (who had no pierced parts whatsoever, so far as I know), but let us adopt a cultural studies stance and imagine the possibility of linking contemporary body piercing to Milton's poem. (You may smile skeptically here if you like.) Body piercing, like tattooing, is surely an effort to draw attention to oneself, to stand out from other people, to say, "I am extraordinary, even doing nothing; I have a unique value; I am myself a work of art." While registering resistance and apartness from the conventional culture, my student with purple-striped hair



and a large ring in his nose was also declaring his membership in another community. In tribal cultures, such body markings, scarrings, deformations, and ornamental punctures allow for quick identification of one's membership and status.

Although the coding for body piercing in late twentieth-century Western culture is not so well established, jewelry through one's nose, or eyebrow, or cheek, or tongue undeniably makes a statement. It says *something.* In his cultural studies classic, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige noted how the outrageous styles of British lower-class youth—rockers, mods, punks, skinheads, and others—created an alternative value system. By their "style" (in the largest sense), the members of these various groups indicated that they did not belong to the mainstream culture, but that they were clearly part of some different culture. Their personal value might be negligible by the standards of conventional society, but by rejecting that society, making themselves by their very appearance virtually unable to find ordinary employment, they were able to reassure themselves of their value in an alternative community. Body piercing, like other expressions of "style," simultaneously asserts that the practitioner is unique and part of a community.

Milton's poem certainly focuses on the problems of assessing one's own value, and of finding one's place in society. Milton has not purposefully deformed himself, but he did think his eyesight had been weakened by excessive study. He thus finds himself unable to contribute to his community in any ordinary sense. What he is able to do, his "talent," seems "useless" (line 4) in his present physical state. Milton's problem is how he sees, and not how he is seen, but the poem indicates that he considers himself as unemployable as a skinhead applying to be a bank teller. Milton also invokes an alternative value system, for his talent is "useless" only from the point of view of ordinary utilitarian society. For Milton's life to have value in the alternative community, he does not need to make any meaningful contribution. He doesn't need to work or *do* anything to be valuable. His burden of blindness, which is also his warrant for inactivity, he calls a "mild yoke," as if it were no more than a minor inconvenience, like a ring through one's nose or cheek. He has value simply in being his unique self, waiting, serving by doing nothing as one of the community of faithful.

This unlikely conjunction of body piercing and Milton's poem finds, surprisingly enough, some common ground in their analysis. Both Milton and my hypothetical body piercer find themselves rendered physically unfit for work in the conventional sense. Their

lives, which might therefore seem to be of questionable value, are made meaningful in terms of an alternative community. For their bodies and their lives to have value, no productive action is required. Milton and the body piercer do appear to differ in one important respect—namely, that Milton comes to see his inactivity as an act of service. Don't people who pierce their bodies act out of self-interest? Or are they, instead, serving by offering a visual entertainment for others?

Cultural studies clearly draws on standard historical work, but in its inclination to leap across the boundaries of disciplines and textual genres, it also is often drawing on the energies of what has come to be called new historicism. Let's have a look at that now.

## New Historicism

The kind of historical background provided by Tillyard depends, as Jean Howard says, on three assumptions:

1. "that history is knowable";
2. "that literature mirrors or at least by indirection reflects historical reality"; and
3. "that historians and critics can see the facts of history objectively" (18).

In the past two decades these assumptions, which seem reasonable enough at first glance, have been persuasively called into question by an outpouring of theory and practice, including deconstruction and reader-response criticism. The starting point for this work is a simple observation: "history" is textual. We read about it; we experience it in words, which are used to explain the physical evidence. We don't have access directly to the past; we have a "story" about it. The Battle of Antietam, for instance, is now a textual phenomenon. It does not exist. Our tendency to separate history and literature—seeing one as fact, the other as fiction; one as the background to the other—is collapsed by this insight. So we cannot directly observe history, nor be scientific or objective about its facts or remains, because history must be interpreted; our reading of it is as subjective as our reading of any other texts.

To see how subjective history is, you probably need only read two accounts of the same event (preferably from newspapers with different political stances). There simply isn't any objective historical "reality" out there, since the past is always absent, gone by, removed. As Hayden White puts it, history becomes "a story of a particular kind" (60). History is shaped by its necessary textuality. The pastness of the past means, again, that it exists now only as an absence, an empty space that is written upon ultimately by language. The crucial insight here, let me emphasize, is that history's content and meaning are open to interpretation. The emerging popularity in recent years of **chaos theory** has underscored for many people the tentative nature of historical explanations. In the 1960s and 1970s, Edward Lorenz concluded that long-range weather forecasting was unavoidably unreliable because weather patterns were in the final analysis *chaotic.* Any patterns that we might see in the short term tended to evaporate in the long run—in part because a huge cause may have a tiny effect, and a tiny cause may have a huge effect. The air currents moved by a butterfly's wings, as Lorenz's most famous illustration goes, might set off a chain of meteorological events that would result in a hurricane on another continent. Chaos theory, starting from Lorenz's notion of the strange and potentially unfathomable connections between causes and effects, has been extended to many diverse fields, including literary criticism. For history, chaos theory obviously compounds the problem of history's textual nature by proposing that the reality historians try to describe is itself random, nonlinear, ever-changing, chaotic. But a problem is always also an opportunity, and while one might despair of the uncertainty of historical insight, another might celebrate the wider spaces opened up for innovation and creativity.



## History as Text

If history and literature are both texts, then literature is potentially as much a context for history as history is for literature. Elizabethan plays may be seen to "reflect" political events, but Elizabethan politics may also be seen as the consequence of theatrical conventions. We may think of certain political events, the coronation of Elizabeth or state trials for treason, for instance, as being "staged" like plays. We therefore might want to think about how "When I Consider" might have influenced history.

Even the reality of Milton's blindness as a "background" for the poem is produced textually for us, and it must be interpreted. It cannot be taken simply as a freestanding fact. What did blindness mean? Would it have been seen as a punishment? As a special gift or calling? Would Milton see himself as a Homeric figure, in the tradition of ancient Greece's great blind poet? Was Milton's blindness a kind of protection, affording him some exemption from prosecution

when the new government failed and Charles II returned to the throne? Why does Milton see himself as essentially helpless, unable to work, to do "day-labor," even though he can still compose—as the poem itself testifies? Was writing not considered work? Is Milton putting forward an image of himself as inactive and helpless, aiming thereby to evade responsibility for Charles I's death?

Although such speculative questions might also be pursued by traditional biographical and historical criticism, new historicism provides a new way of addressing them. A new historicist critic might elect to examine the whole issue of vision in Milton's day, of "light" versus "darkness," of insight versus sight, of writing versus working, and much more, as a textual matter. Since Milton's blindness is for us a textual phenomenon, the new historicist would feel free to study medical texts, economic texts, optics texts, rhetoric, and any other texts that might help explain how "blindness" functions in seventeenth century discourse: how is "blindness" constructed? Whether Milton would actually make such connections could be considered, but it would not necessarily be essential to the significance of the investigation. The new historicist critic would be more likely than the traditional historical critic to consider the possibility that Milton's blindness was psychosomatic, or feigned, or any other hypothesis that might be productive, because the new historicist assumes that history is a story, a construct, necessarily written and rewritten.

One of the most catalytic figures in this rethinking of history has been Michel Foucault, who has persistently attempted, in Eve Bannet's words, "to break down the familiar units, categories, continuities and totalities through which history, society and the symbolic order are traditionally interpreted" (96). We should note that Tillyard did not himself claim that every Elizabethan endorsed every aspect of "the Elizabethan world picture"; in fact, he repeatedly qualified his position by citing contrary opinions. Still, Tillyard does call his work *"The" Elizabethan World Picture,* and the exceptions are designed to support his generalizations. New historicists, following Foucault, endeavor to expose the complexities, exceptions, divergences, gaps, and anachronisms in our characterizations of any period. While Tillyard sees the chain of being as a reassuring and pervasive principle of order for Elizabethan thinkers, Stephen Greenblatt considers how such myths serve the ideological interests of Elizabethan culture, discouraging dissent and subversion, and he shows how *King Lear,* for example, both affirms and undermines such cultural directives. Greenblatt's argument thus becomes an intervention into the traditional way of looking at Elizabethan England.



In addition to opposing or questioning traditional schemes of history, new historicism also tends to focus on the production of "knowledge" at a particular time and place. Foucault, for example, shows how the modern conception of "the mentally ill" came into being, as the insane are assigned to the same cultural position that those with leprosy had held. Most startling, Foucault argues that "madness" has not been a stable historical event, but is rather an invention, a construct, creating an excluded "other" category. Reversing the idea of asylums as benevolent and rehabilitative, Foucault describes their character as judicial and punitive—judging without appeal and incarcerating without trial. Similarly, Foucault reverses the widespread view that sexuality has been repressed in modern Western culture, arguing instead that sexual behavior has been increasingly discussed, classified, prohibited, authorized, and exposed. Drawing on texts from widely diverse fields, Foucault describes how the categories of the perverse and abnormal have been invented and constructed.

Since new historicists are interested in how historical "knowledge" is produced, they are naturally interested in the effects of power and ideology, whether these appear in "literature" in the usual sense or in any other texts. How we see the "facts"—indeed, whether we see a set of facts—depends (to some degree) upon the controlling system of assumptions and operations (or ideology). This unavoidable interest in power has made new historicism especially appealing to those critics interested in economy and class—often designated as Marxist criticism. Marxist critics see the individual person as a product of society's system of value, and therefore exposing how the individual is constructed by class and economy is vitally important.

## Marxist Criticism

While Marxism may be hopelessly flawed as a political philosophy, it is often strikingly useful as an analytical strategy. Certain features of "When I Consider," for instance, can be highlighted by Marxism's drive to see the world in terms of economic classes, to identify who is being oppressed and exploited, and by whom. Let's look in particular at the reference to "day-labor" in line 7, which may seem merely a synonym for "work," a longer word for "labor." The line, "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied," appears clearly to be a question, although Milton's text lacks a question mark (some later editors have added a question mark, and sometimes

quotation marks too), and the question seems clear enough, once the reader straightens out who is talking—that "I" speaks, and not "He." But "day-labor" is an unusual word, and one might well wonder if Milton intends it to mean something more than just "work."

To find out about the meaning of "day-labor," one could research the history of labor or of economy in the seventeenth century. Or one could see how the term is used by other writers at that time and place. Those investigations could well be fascinating, but time-consuming. More directly, we could look in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which gives the meanings for words at various points in their histories. Or, even more directly, we could see how the term is defined in a dictionary of that time period. The first great dictionary of the English language is Samuel Johnson's famous *Dictionary* of 1755, which defines "daylabour" as "Labour by the day; labour divided into tasks." Johnson then offers illustrations, the first of which, interestingly enough, is the line we are talking about: "Doth God exact *daylabour*, light deny'd,/ I fondly ask." Here's the second:

> Did either his legs or his arms fail him? No; but daylabour was but an hard and a dry kind of livelihood to a man, that could get an estate with two or three strokes of his pen. *Southey*

Johnson's definition and the Southey illustration begin to suggest how "daylabour" differs from "work." Someone who is employed by the day, or part of a day, is more likely to be a worker at the bottom of the social hierarchy than someone who has a position. Today we distinguish between those workers who are paid an hourly wage (they "punch the clock") and those who are salaried. Johnson's illustrations for "Daylabour," which again include an example by Milton, make these hierarchical implications clearer:

> In one night, ere glimpse of morn,
> His shadowy flail hath thresh'd the corn
> That ten *daylabourers* could not end. *Milton*

> The *daylabourer*, in a country village, has commonly but a small pittance of courage. *Locke*

A "daylabourer," the Milton quotation implies, is the kind of worker who does such messy, mind-numbing jobs as threshing corn. The pay would be poor for such nonspecialized labor, and the social status would be somewhere below the seventeenth century's equivalent of a hamburger flipper. Locke's quotation further indicates the lowly standing of a "daylabourer" by disparaging the character of that whole group.



From a Marxist perspective, Locke's attitude would also suggest precisely why the working class (the proletariat) should unite and overthrow the middle and upper classes. According to Marx's labor theory of value, the true value of something reflects the amount of labor used to make it. Within a capitalist system, someone who does "day-labor" would be unjustly undervalued: rather than being compensated fairly for "the amount of labor" contributed, the underclass worker would instead be exploited by the private owner. Naturally (as Marxist thinking would go), someone like Locke, a physician and philosopher, certainly not part of the working class, would seek to justify the economic system's suppression of day-laborers by assuming their inferiority: No wonder they're poorly compensated; they have very little courage, for starters.

Such a Marxist stance, focusing on the economic and social implications of "day-labor" alone, certainly deepens and complicates our sense of Milton's poem. Let's consider what happens for a moment, beginning by looking only at the poem's first seven lines:

> When I consider how my light is spent,
>     Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
>     And that one talent which is death to hide
> Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
> To serve therewith my Maker, and present 5
>     My true account, lest He returning chide,
>     Doth God exact day-labor, light denied, . . .

Notice that, observing the poem's original punctuation, we must initially assume on a first reading that it is "my Maker," returning to chide, who says "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied." Spoken by God, the statement would seem to be a rhetorical question: "Does God expect anyone to do the sort of work that day-laborers do, picking crops, threshing corn, digging ditches, etc., when there's no daylight?" The obvious answer in this case would appear to be "no": no day, no day-labor. Of course God wouldn't require such a silly thing.

The beginning of line 8, "I fondly ask," completely reorients our reading, however, assigning the statement to the speaker. Rather than a rhetorical question, line 7 instantly becomes a complaint, and the level of Milton's frustration is indicated by "day-labor." The absurdity of God expecting anything of him, now that his "light is spent" and his talent is "useless," is reflected in the

absurdity of the image of one of the most learned men in Europe, who has devoted his life to cultivating his literary talent, engaging in "day-labor." It's as if a rocket scientist has been asked to deliver pizza. Surely God cannot require anything like day-labor of Milton.

The word "fondly," however, necessitates another level of reversal, for in Milton's day "fondly," meant, as Johnson's *Dictionary* defines it, "Foolishly; weakly, imprudently; injudiciously." To be "fond" of something was to be "foolishly tender" or "injudiciously indulgent." The question that Milton asks is, therefore, a really foolish one, as the rest of the poem reveals. Its answer shouldn't be "no"; it should be "yes indeed." In fact, however, as the rest of line 8 begins to disclose, Milton's voice does not ask this question that we have just encountered, because "Patience" is able to "prevent/ That murmur" by pointing out that (1) God doesn't need anyone's day-labor or any other kind of labor and (2) some people, even though they may seem incapable of having a job, have the job of simply waiting to see if they have a job of any sort to do. We should all be happy, the poem seems to assert, to serve in whatever fashion we are called upon.

Marxist criticism thus strives to see literature in terms of its relationship to society, and a work is assumed to reinforce the current social structure, or undermine it, or some combination of the two. The reading of "When I Consider" that I have just rehearsed—a reading that considers the experience of moving through the poem (and is probably indebted to Stanley Fish's famous reader-response version of this poem in "Interpreting the *Variorum*")—takes on yet another dimension in this Marxist context: the poem becomes propaganda for the status quo; and the key to this insight is, again, "day-labor." How so? Specifically, the experience of the poem reinforces the emerging capitalist system in Milton's England by undermining any potential resistance by the lower classes to their exploitation. The poem first poses the idea of resisting unreasonable demands for labor, then immediately dispels such opposition. All workers, the poem indicates, need to do their jobs, whatever they might be. As Marx puts it, all should give according to their means and take according to their needs. Or as Milton says, "They also serve who only stand and wait."

## Postcolonial Studies

New historicist critics not only highlight the way power has produced "knowledge" in the past, but they are also often self-consciously aware of the possibility that literary critisism might be used as a political instrument in the here and now. When Greenblatt shows how Elizabethan culture discouraged dissent, he is unavoidably raising questions about how other cultures, including our own, have suppressed, shaped, or encouraged dissent. When Foucault strives to expose the invented status of madness or perversity in the past, he is inevitably challenging the authority of current sexual or psychological norms. Such boundaries, Foucault is implicitly asserting, are based on fictions, not facts; nurture, not nature.



This creative relationship between power and knowledge is especially evident when strikingly different cultures interact. "Knowledge" for a nuclear physicist in California may not be "knowledge" for a Pygmy tribesman in central Africa. Is one form of knowledge better than the other? Wouldn't anyone reading this text agree that the physicist is likely to have a more accurate understanding of the universe than the Pygmy? When I am sick, I think that a virus or a bacteria, not an evil spirit, has probably invaded my body. But isn't it unfair and inaccurate to value one culture over another? Aren't I being ethnocentric, placing my own ethnic group at the center of things, assuming that my own Western worldview is superior, when it is in fact just different? To be sure, characterizing whole groups is always dangerous: some very wacky people live in California, and some very sensible Pygmies no doubt live in Africa. On some issues, the Pygmy and the Californian might agree that *my* ideas are absurd. Such considerations have obviously helped to energize multiculturalism, which seeks to appreciate, understand, and respect the uniquely different viewpoints of different cultures—even if we disagree. Some practices and beliefs, however, seem so obviously unethical and erroneous that a simple mutlicultural celebration of difference becomes problematic. At the least, a multicultural stance invites us to attempt to understand the subjectivity of our own views—to see where we are standing within our own culture as we look in on other cultures.

The powerful effects of cultural bias were compellingly exposed in 1978 when Edward Said published *Orientalism*, showing how European culture in the nineteenth century created and perpetuated the idea that Middle Eastern and Asian cultures were inferior to their own. The idea that "Oriental" cultures were less advanced was used, as Said demonstrates, to justify European colonization and exploitation. Following Said, indepth examinations of the various relationships between dominant and subjugated cultures have been carried out by a growing number of scholars. "Postcolonial studies," the name now usually given to such investigations, explores in particular the effects

of this history upon formerly colonized peoples. Postcolonial criticism thus considers the role that literature has played as an agent of oppression and resistance, distortion and understanding. What did European imperialists say about the people they colonized? How did the colonized people talk about themselves and their masters?

The playing field for postcolonial studies is huge, as indicated by its ethnic diversity and geographical expansiveness (from Canada to Sri Lanka, from Australia to Jamaica, from India to Senegal), or by its theoretical sophistication and diversity (as suggested for example by *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures,* the landmark 1989 study by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin). Still, as a special kind of historical interpretation, postcolonial studies would appear to be limited in scope, focusing upon certain authors and works (those who write in or about European colonies). Milton's "When I Consider," for instance, might seem to be an unpromising work from a postcolonial perspective, as it was written well before England's massive global expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it says nothing at all about colonies or colonizing. Still, one might note that European nations were already striving toward empires well before the mid-seventeenth century. And shouldn't it be possible, in theory, to decipher England's imperialistic aspirations from almost any text, just as any one cell thoroughly analyzed may tell us a great deal about the body it was taken from? Indeed, if we return once more to "When I Consider" with postcolonial vision, we may notice that Milton does in fact depict God as an autocrat ("His state/Is kingly") who is elsewhere, but who might "returning chide" the speaker for a lack of production, for a falsified account. Milton thus sees himself (or the speaker) as a subjugated person, one who is in fact in servitude, although the absent master's "yoke" is "mild." Milton cannot avoid implicating the idealogy he inhabits, and therefore in his effort to glorify God, he thinks of "Him" as a king who appropriately controls the most extensive empire. With "thousands at his bidding" posing "o'er land and ocean without rest," we can imagine that the sun never sets on His subjects, just as the sun in later centuries would never set on the British empire. Milton's poem thus reinforces concepts essential to justifying British expansion and exploitation, as we see implicitly that the superior being rightly expects complete loyalty and service from an inferior being. The speaker in this poem, the "subaltern" (as Gayatri Spivak would put it), has no business questioning his particular situation. The speaker indeed relinquishes his rights, since his place is simply to do whatever his Maker asks of him—including even to stand and do nothing.



To notice the logic assumed by Mitlon's poem is to begin to question it, and it is easy to see how the potential for political activism in postcolonial criticism in particular and in new historicism in general would be especially appealing to many scholars who may understandably have wondered through the years if their research is having any real influence on the world beyond academe. From one point of view, new historicism simply acknowedges that some political agenda has always inevitably been involved in historical and critical work; the implications of new historicist work are just more visible and radical—and compelling.

But new historicists have also sometimes been taken to task for allowing their politics to shape their evidence and their conclusions. Foucault, for example, was involved in a variety of radical causes and activities before his death from an AIDS-related illness in 1984, and his work might well be seen as an extension of his personal and political interests. Foucault in fact seemed unaffected by charges that he misrepresented and misinterpreted his data, saying on one occasion, "I am not a professional historian; nobody is perfect."[1] But such a dismissive comment tends to conceal the fact that Foucault's best work, like new historicism at its best, has provided some invigorating and creative ways of looking at texts, history, knowledge, culture. If readers have sometimes been disoriented by the use of unexpected sources to make startling connections and assertions, we have also often been reoriented, challenged to defend our traditional notions or evolve new ones.

In other words, against the assumptions of the traditional history, of the sort practiced by Tillyard, we may place the assumptions of the new historicism:

1. History is knowable only in the sense that all texts are knowable—that is by interpretation, argument, speculation.
2. Literature is not simply a mirror of historical reality; history in fact isn't a mirror of historical reality. Literature is shaped by history and even shapes history; it is also distorted by history and is even discontinuous with history.
3. Historians and critics must view "the facts" of history subjectively; in fact, the "facts" must be viewed as their creation.

[1] This statement was made at the University of Vermont on October 27, 1982. It is reported by Allan Megill in "The Reception of Foucault by Historians," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987): 117.

## HOW TO DO BIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND NEW HISTORICAL CRITICISM

To do biographical criticism, you need to know as much as you can about the life of the author and then apply that knowledge. To do historical criticism, you need to know history and apply it. New historicism complicates things a bit, because you ought to know the author's biography—even though the author's personality is a cultural construct, a textual effect; and you ought to know the history (or histories)—even though the "facts" are always subject to questioning, supplementation, opposition. There is no telling what else you ought to know, since any and every discipline may shed some productive light on the way power is represented in various texts. Since you can't know everything, follow your instincts and your interests: useful connections or disconnections may be identified anywhere.

Or, to put these strategies into a three-step sequence:

1. Determine the historical setting of the work. Investigate the author's biography.
2. Consider how the historical or biographical background helps us to understand the work. Or consider how the work contradicts or stands apart from the usual historical or biographical background.
3. Consider what other texts of the same time might be related to the text. Identify the ideology that is shaping this system of texts.

Although these approaches require some research and patience, they are interesting and often very rewarding. With the rapid expansion of electronic resources, historical materials are becoming increasingly accessible. There is no substitute for the thrill of examining (carefully) a first edition of Samuel Johnson's great 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language;* but the CD-Rom version of the dictionary, recently released, allows one to search the entire huge work for a particular word or phrase, and anyone seeking the historical meaning of a word will find the electronic dictionary invaluable. Although travelling to London and the British Library to do research on the archives of Parliament can be quite invigorating, not everyone can afford the time and expense; but now those records are available online. You'll miss the soggy weather and charming accents, but you can still get the information you



need. Even such basic resources as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* can be accessed online. Museums and libraries now host websites containing informational riches; historical organizations provide links to scholarly journals and primary sources. You need information about railroads in the nineteenth century? Check out the Railroad History Database. Or maybe it's the history of the Air Force: there's the Air Force Historical Research Agency, of course. For anyone interested in history, it's a great time to be alive. Although chat rooms and e-mail and online shopping are nice, the Internet's most stunning potential lies in its power to teach us. The vastness of resources available may seem overwhelming at times, so don't hesitate to seek advice. Librarians and teachers are ordinarily delighted to help.

**Biographical Research**

- For convenient access to essential facts about the life of a major figure—*Encyclopedia Britannica* or another major encyclopedia. As a rule, however, you don't want to cite general encyclopedias in your essay; just use them to get started.
- For more details—the *Dictionary of National Biography* (British), the *Dictionary of American Biography,* or the *Dictionary of Literary Biography.*
- For information on contemporary authors—*Contemporary Authors.*
- Also useful—*Biography Index, Oxford Companion to English Literature, Oxford Companion to American Literature,* and the other *Oxford Companions.* An especially appealing resource is *The Atlantic Brief Lives,* which offers brief and often brilliant biographies of writers and other artists by authoritative scholars.
- For book-length biographies—check the catalogue in your library. Check the publication date of the biography; new facts and resources are coming to light all the time, although a newer biography is not necessarily a better one. Also, book reviews can help you evaluate a particular biography: *Book Review Index* covers the most sources; *Book Review Digest* includes excerpts from the reviews.

**Historical Research**

- For detailed surveys of literary history—the *Oxford History of English Literature* (13 volumes); F. E. Halliday, *A Concise History of England; from Stonehenge to the Atomic Age,* or Robert Adams, *The Land and Literature of England.* A delightful miniview of American literature appears in the first chapter of *An Incomplete Education.* The standard heavy-duty history of American literature is *The Literary History of the United States,* edited by Robert E. Spiller (2 volumes).

**New Historical Research**

Some suggestions for places to look for materials:

- Popular or noncanonical literature: children's stories, adolescent fiction, romances, adventure stories, and so forth.
- Primary materials for other disciplines; music theory, psychology, criminology, architecture, and so forth.
- Newspapers and magazines. These can offer you descriptions of events and leads to other texts.
- Artifacts from the period. Think like an archeologist trying to make sense of the physical remains of a particular time. For instance, a delicate and ornate snuffbox from the eighteenth century may illuminate the sort of cultural environment in which, say, Mozart's delicate and ornate music could be written.

## THE WRITING PROCESS: SAMPLE ESSAYS

The work I want to focus on in this section is a compelling short story, first published in the October 27, 1962, issue of *The New Yorker.*

**Reunion** (1962)

*John Cheever*

The last time I saw my father was in Grand Central Station. I was going from my grandmother's in the Adirondacks to a cottage on the Cape that my mother had rented, and I wrote my father that I would be in New York between trains for an hour and a half, and asked if we could have lunch together. His secretary wrote to say that he would meet me at the information booth at noon, and twelve o'clock sharp I saw him coming through the crowd. He was a stranger to me—my mother divorced him three years ago and I hadn't been with him since—but as soon as I saw him I felt that he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom. I knew that when I was grown I would be something like him; I would have to plan my campaigns within his limitations. He was a big, good-looking man, and I was terribly happy to see him again. He struck me on the back and shook my hand. "Hi, Charlie," he said. "Hi, boy. I'd like to take you up to my club, but it's in the Sixties, and if you have to catch an early train I guess we'd better get something to eat around here." He put his arm around me, and I smelled my father the way my mother sniffs a rose. It was a rich compound of whiskey, after-shave lotion, shoe polish, woollens, and the rankness of a mature male. I hoped that someone would see us together. I wished that we could be photographed. I wanted some record of our having been together.



We went out of the station and up a side street to a restaurant. It was still early and the place was empty. The bartender was quarreling with a delivery boy, and there was one very old waiter in a red coat down by the kitchen door. We sat down, and my father hailed the waiter in a loud voice. "*Kellner!*" he shouted. "*Garçon! Cameriere! You!*" His boisterousness in the empty restaurant seemed out of place. "Could we have a little service here!" he shouted. "Chop-chop." Then he clapped his hands. This caught the waiter's attention, and he shuffled over to our table.

"Were you clapping your hands at me?" he asked.

"Calm down, calm down, *sommelier,*" my father said. "If it isn't too much to ask of you—if it wouldn't be too much above and beyond the call of duty, we would like a couple of Beefeater Gibsons."

"I don't like to be clapped at," the waiter said.

"I should have brought my whistle," my father said. "I have a whistle that is audible only to the ears of old waiters. Now, take out your little pad and your little pencil and see if

you can get this straight: two Beefeater Gibsons. Repeat after me: two Beefeater Gibsons."

"I think you'd better go someplace else," the waiter said quietly.

"That," said my father, "is one of the most brilliant suggestions I have ever heard. Come on, Charlie, let's get the hell out of here."

I followed my father out of that restaurant into another. He was not so boisterous this time. Our drinks came, and he cross-questioned me about the baseball season. He then struck the edge of his empty glass with his knife and began shouting again. "*Garçon! Kellner! Cameriere! You!* Could we trouble you to bring us two more of the same."

"How old is the boy?" the waiter asked.

"That," my father said, "is none of your God-damned business."

"I'm sorry, sir," the waiter said, "but I won't serve the boy another drink."

"Well, I have some news for you," my father said. "I have some very interesting news for you. This doesn't happen to be the only restaurant in New York. They've opened another on the corner. Come on, Charlie."

He paid the bill, and I followed him out of that restaurant into another. Here the waiters wore pink jackets like hunting coats, and there was a lot of horse tack on the walls. We sat down, and my father began to shout again. "Master of the hounds! Tallyho and all that sort of thing. We'd like a little something in the way of stirrup cup. Namely, two Bibson Geefeaters."

"Two Bibson Geefeaters?" the waiter asked, smiling.

"You know damned well what I want," my father said angrily. "I want two Beefeater Gibsons, and make it snappy. Things have changed in jolly old England. So my friend the duke tells me. Let's see what England can produce in the way of a cocktail."

"This isn't England," the waiter said.

"Don't argue with me," my father said. "Just do as you're told."

"I just thought you might like to know where you are," the waiter said.

"If there is one thing I cannot tolerate," my father said, "it is an impudent domestic. Come on, Charlie."



The fourth place we went to was Italian. "*Buon giorno,*" my father said. "*Per favore, possiamo avere due cocktail americani, forti, forti. Molto gin, poco vermut.*"

"I don't understand Italian," the waiter said.

"Oh, come off it," my father said. "You understand Italian, and you know damned well you do. *Vogliamo due cocktail americani. Subito.*"

The waiter left us and spoke with the captain, who came over to our table and said, "I'm sorry, sir, but this table is reserved."

"All right," my father said, "Get us another table."

"All the tables are reserved," the captain said.

"I get it," my father said. "You don't desire our patronage. Is that it? Well, the hell with you. *Vada all'inferno.* Let's go, Charlie."

"I have to get my train," I said.

"I'm sorry, sonny," my father said. "I'm terribly sorry." He put his arm around me and pressed me against him. "I'll walk you back to the station. If there had only been time to go up to my club."

"That's all right, Daddy," I said.

"I'll get you a paper," he said. "I'll get you a paper to read on the train."

Then he went up to a newsstand and said, "Kind sir, will you be good enough to favor me with one of your God-damned, no-good, ten-cent afternoon papers?" The clerk turned away from him and stared at a magazine cover. "Is it asking too much, kind sir," my father said, "is it asking too much for you to sell me one of your disgusting specimens of yellow journalism?"

"I have to go, Daddy," I said. "It's late."

"Now, just wait a second, sonny," he said. "Just wait a second. I want to get a rise out of this chap."

"Goodbye, Daddy," I said, and I went down the stairs and got my train, and that was the last time I saw my father.

In what follows we turn from the primary text to other texts, seeking connections. These connections might be used to argue for the story's unity or disjunction, or to explain the psychology of the characters, or in any number of other ways. But here I am interested primarily in how the story might reflect Cheever's personal history and feelings, in the first example, and then how the story is shaped by a system of ideas regarding prestige, identity, suicide, and alcohol in the second example.

## A BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY

### Preparing to Write

A search of the electronic card catalogue at my school's library revealed thirteen books with John Cheever as their subject. I retrieved the seven that weren't checked out and requested the others to be held for me. Then I started skimming and reading, looking especially for materials relating to "Reunion," but also learning as much about Cheever as I could. Here's a sampling of the notes I took:

**FROM *JOHN CHEEVER* by Lynne Waldeland (Boston: Twayne, 1979):**

- "Reunion" is from *The Brigadier and the Golf Widow,* Cheever's "best volume of short stories," according to William Peden (91).
- The stories share a theme of transformation.

**FROM *THE LETTERS OF JOHN CHEEVER*, edited by Cheever's son, Benjamin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988) :**

- Regarding the original publication of "The Brigadier and the Golf Widow," the title story of the volume in which "Reunion" would later appear: Cheever writes to a friend that he went into *The New Yorker* offices to correct the galleys (the trial printing) of the story and found that Bill Maxwell had cut the story "in half." Cheever went along, he says, with the cut in the office but then later called from a bar and cursed Maxwell, who was at home entertaining "Elizabeth Bowen and Eudora Welty" (two famous writers), telling Maxwell that if he cut the story "I'll never write another story for your [sic] or anybody else" (232).
- Cheever's letter concludes this way: "Anyhow the magazine had gone to press and they had to remake the whole back of the book and stay up all night but they ran it without the cut" (232–33).

Maxwell's recollection, reported by Benjamin, is very different: Maxwell says he thought the story had two endings, and so he was going to see how Cheever liked it with only one. He had no plan to cut the story at all without Cheever's approval; the story wasn't about to go to press (Cheever had found it on Maxwell's desk), and there was no all-night reworking; Bowen and Welty had visited his house, but never at the same time (233).



How can Cheever have the story so wrong? Does he have no allegiance to the truth, preferring to spin a good tale? Or does his letter describe the truth, at least as he remembers it? The letter seems to have been written immediately afterward: how could his memory be so immediately faulty? Intrigued by this problem, I turned to the introduction to the volume of letters, written by Cheever's son, Benjamin. Benjamin Cheever makes clear that "my father's interest in telling a good story was greater than his interest in what we might consider the facts" (20). Cheever's letters thus become a kind of rehearsal for his fiction, as he practices shaping reality into better narrative material. Benjamin notes that he has "included excerpts from his journals and his fiction, so that one can see the life—sometimes the same incident—reflected differently through the prism of his prose" (20).

For anyone undertaking biographical criticism, the implications here are clear: we should be particularly cautious regarding the "facts," especially as reported by Cheever; at the same time, we should be aware that Cheever does work his life into his stories, apparently sometimes in rather direct ways.

The following passages also caught my attention:

- Benjamin writes:

  The most difficult part for me, as a son, was the extent of my father's homosexuality. It's impossible for me to be objective about this, or to separate his fears from my own, but he was certainly troubled by the issue. (16)

- Benjamin writes:

  He used to say that I must wish I had a father who didn't drink so much, and I'd always say no. I suppose this makes me what Alcoholics Anonymous would call an enabler, somebody who makes it all right for the alcoholic to destroy himself. Maybe so, but I thought then and think now that you have to take the people you love pretty much the way you find them. Their worst qualities are often linked with their very best ones. (18)

- Also, reminding me of the father's smells in "Reunion," Benjamin writes:
  It remains that while I am not a heavy drinker myself, or a smoker, I still find the smell of gin and tobacco a delicious combination. (18)

  Finally, the following passages are especially interesting in the context of biographical criticism. Benjamin Cheever says:

  The connection between his life and his work was intimate, but it was also mysterious. My father was fond of saying that fiction was "crypto-autobiography." One obvious reason for this statement is that it protected him from the attacks of friends and family who felt that they'd been libeled in his prose. (21)

**FROM THE FIRST CHAPTER OF *JOHN CHEEVER* by Samuel Coale, "Cheever's Life" (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1977) :**

- Cheever's father was a shoe salesman who was out of work late in life, and his mother opened a shop for the family to survive, selling first their own belongings. Cheever's father resented, apparently, her independence and competence and his own helplessness.

**FROM *HOME BEFORE DARK*, a biography of Cheever by his daughter, Susan (Boston : Houghton, 1984) :**

- e. e. cummings was Cheever's "first model" (59). Susan Cheever remembers attending with her father a poetry reading by Cummings. When Cummings saw Cheever, "The force and openness of their affection for one another seemed to shake that airless, heavily draped room" (60). Susan remembers particularly, she says, sitting with her father as Cummings read "my father moved through dooms of love" (60), the elegy to Cummings's father.
- Cummings died in 1962, the same year "Reunion" was published.
- A passage that's interesting in the context of the father's use of foreign languages to attract waiters in "Reunion" :

  Although he spoke minimal French, he always called the French classics by their original names : *Les Faux-Monnayeurs, La Chartreuse de Parme, Le Rouge et le Noir.* In his last years—a time when he was so well respected that a lot of people assumed he spoke two or three languages—he began dropping French words into his conversation. When he was sent his own books in French translations, he kept them on the desk or his bedside table. With Italian, he was even worse. He spoke a stilted, conversational Italian, but he used it at every opportunity, and he even insisted on re-Italianizing all Americanized Italian words or names. (He always insisted on calling my editor Nan Talese "Nan Talayzee," for instance.)

  "Che cosa di buona oggi?" he would ask any dark-haired waiter, whether he was at the Four Seasons or the Highland Diner on Route 9 in Ossining. They were always very polite. (113–14)



- Susan Cheever also offers this passage, which reminds me of Charlie's awareness of the smell of his father and suggests that Cheever longed for the sort of father that his character, Charlie, did not have:

  "There is the presence of a father—stern, unintelligent and with a gamey odor—but a force of counsel and support that would have carried one into manhood," my father wrote in his journal. "One does not invest the image with brilliance or wealth; it is simply a man in a salt and pepper tweed, sometimes loving, sometimes irascible and sometimes drunk but always responsible to his son." My father didn't have this ideal, tweedy parent he dreamed of in his journal who would have "equipped him for manhood." He spent much of his life looking for counsel and support from surrogate fathers and ultimately, painfully, rejecting them. (128)

- Late in Cheever's life, according to Susan, when he had achieved some fame:

  He dropped names shamelessly. It was no longer safe to tease him about favorable reviews. In restaurants, he let headwaiters know that he was someone important. Since this kind of behavior was new to him, he wasn't particularly graceful about it. Walking down Park Avenue with him once, after a lunch at the Four Seasons ("Che cosa di buona oggi?"), I noticed that he was smiling his public smile at everyone who passed—just in case they recognized him, I suppose. (210–11)

**FROM SCOTT DONALDSON'S BIOGRAPHY, *JOHN CHEEVER* (New York: Random, 1988):**

- Cheever's mother told him he was a mistake: "If I hadn't drunk two Manhattans one afternoon, you never would have been conceived" (19). And his father wanted him aborted, even inviting the abortionist to dinner, an event that appears in both *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *Falconer*.
- In the story "National Pastime," the father won't teach the son to play baseball, which causes the son real embarrassment and trauma (20).

**FROM *THE JOURNALS OF JOHN CHEEVER*, edited by Robert Gottlieb (New York: Knopf, 1991):**

- Cheever writes:

  Having drunk less than usual, having, as my father would say, gone light on the hooch, I find myself, for the first time in a long time, free of the cafarde. Quarter to nine. Eastern day-light- saving time. It would be pleasant to consider this a simple matter of self-discipline. Thunder and rain in the middle of the afternoon; the first of the month. Our primordial anxiety about drought and its effect on the crops, the crops in this case being three acres of lawn and forty-two rosebushes. (135–36)

  I dislike writing here about boozefighting, but I must do something about it. A friend comes to call. In my anxiety to communicate, to feel the most in warmth and intimacy, I drink too much, which can be two drinks these days. In the morning I am deeply depressed, my insides barely function, my kidney is painful, my hands shake, and walking down Madison Avenue I am in fear of death. But evening comes or even noon and some combination of nervous tensions obscures my memories of what whiskey costs me in the way of physical and intellectual well-being. I could very easily destroy myself. It is ten o'clock now and I am thinking of the noontime snort. (103)

  Year after year I read in here that I am drinking too much, and there can be no doubt of the fact that this is progressive. I waste more days, I suffer deeper pangs of guilt, I wake up at three in the morning with the feelings of a temperance worker. Drink, its implements, environments, and effects all seem disgusting. And yet each noon I reach for the whiskey bottle. I don't seem able to drink temperately and yet I don't seem able to stop. (103)

  Never having known the love of a father has forced me into love so engulfing and passionate that there is no margin of choice. (177)



At this point I had invested about twelve hours in doing research—skimming, reading, taking notes. I decided to move on to the next phase: organizing this material and relating it to "Reunion."

## Shaping

Simply by selecting some observations rather than others, I was already in a sense organizing my materials. But I wasn't quite sure why I was attracted to these biographical materials, and so I spent some time reading over my notes and looking for links and patterns. For each note, I tried to think of some words or phrases that would characterize the material. The following topics seemed the most obvious:

1. Fiction as "crypto-autobiography."
2. The need for the father's love.
3. Alcoholism.
4. The father's smells.
5. The father's coldness.
6. The father's love.
7. The father's failure.
8. Foreign languages (and name-dropping).

Next, I went through the materials again and numbered them according to the list above, thus allowing me to group together all of the materials that dealt, for instance, with the relationship of Cheever's fiction to his life.

At this point, before I could tell how to arrange my organized materials, I needed a main idea: I couldn't tell how to order my materials if I didn't know what I was trying to accomplish. Employing a biographical stance, I knew that I was trying to determine how our understanding of Cheever's life enlarges or affects our understanding of his story. In Cheever's case, such an approach

seems especially promising, given Cheever's own acknowledgment of the intimate relationship between his life and art.

But how would I characterize that relationship? At this point, before I launch into that speculation, you may want to take a few moments and see how you'd apply the biographical information to the story. What would your main idea be?

One striking finding is that Cheever and the father in "Reunion" resemble each other: each is an alcoholic father afraid that he is neglecting or hurting his children. Cheever struggles not to drink before noon and then, losing that battle, struggles not to get out of control. The father in the story also seems to be fixated on his drinking, forgetting apparently about feeding Charlie lunch. After only one drink with Charlie, he orders "Bibson Geefeater," suggesting perhaps that he has already been drinking beforehand. The father in the story also seems to be like Cheever in his desire to show off his knowledge of foreign languages, and the father also does a bit of name-dropping. Although Cheever and his wife never divorced, they seem to have lived most of their lives on the edge of that gulf. Seeing Cheever in the father, seeing Cheever's awareness of his own shortcomings reflected in the father, I tend to have more sympathy for the father.

But there are also significant ways in which the young boy, Charlie, is like Cheever. Cheever felt distanced from his father, even as he longed for his love. He felt his father to be mysteriously cold—"the greatest and most bitter mystery in my life." Even Cheever's sensitivity to the way his father smelled, recorded in his journal, is a trait we see in Charlie. Cheever did not have a secretary, but his father did, at least until he lost his job. We know that Cheever felt his father neglected him, just as Charlie's father, who has not seen him in three years, is "a stranger." In fact, Cheever believed his father wanted him aborted.

But so what if Charlie's father is like Cheever's father, and like Cheever? And Charlie is also like Cheever and perhaps like Cheever's son? What do these parallels explain? Well, what *needs* to be explained? What do you find most remarkable or puzzling about the story? For me, two things are strange:

1. Charlie says his father will be "my future and my doom." Why will his father be his doom? How does he know "that when I was grown I would be something like him"?
2. Charlie provides a portrait of his father that is at first perhaps a bit amusing but is ultimately grotesque. In the end Charlie's father seems to be a kind of monster, obsessed with getting "a rise" out of the newsstand clerk while the son he hasn't seen in three years is leaving. Why does Charlie, after telling us how "terribly happy" he was to see his father, reveal nothing of his feelings? We can guess how Charlie felt, but we do not know. Why the absence of feeling—at least in the telling (which may not be truthful)?



Does Cheever's relationship to the two characters offer any sort of explanation to both questions? I think so, and that idea becomes my tentative thesis:

> Cheever resented his father's alcoholism and inattention and at the same time longed for his love; he desired to turn away from his father, putting the pain of his neglect behind him, and at the same time he wanted to turn toward his father, to bridge their distance. This love/hate conflict is intensified by Cheever's awareness that he is in certain crucial ways like his father. In "Reunion" Charlie does not directly express his disgust and rage at his father because his position is essentially the same as Cheever's: in hating his father, Charlie (like Cheever) is closing off the possibility of resolution; in hating his father, Charlie (like Cheever) is hating himself.

This thesis, as is usually the case, suggests an organization for the essay:

1. Cheever's fiction meaningfully echoes his life: thesis.
2. Charlie's father and Cheever's father.
3. Charlie and Cheever.
4. Charlie's father and Cheever himself.
5. Conclusion.

## Drafting

You might want to sketch out your own draft of an essay based on the plan above before you read the one that follows.

### John Cheever's "Reunion" as "Crypto-Autobiography"

*The intro sets up the problem: why is Charlie's father unsympathetically portrayed?*

In John Cheever's "Reunion," the portrait of Charlie's father seems in the final analysis harsh and unforgiving. Not having seen his son in three years, the father proceeds at their meeting to drink himself into an abusive, obsessive state.

He is never overtly mean to Charlie to be sure, but he is also far from attentive. Before the meeting, he did not respond personally to his son's letter asking about the lunch, letting his secretary arrange it instead; and throughout the visit, he seems intent only on getting drinks and exerting his authority over waiters, showing little or no interest in the well-being of his son. As Charlie leaves, his father is unable even to say goodbye appropriately because he is so intent on getting "a rise" out of the newspaper clerk.

Yet Charlie's opinion is not explicitly presented.

And yet, despite his father's distressing behavior, Charlie does not directly express his feelings about the day's events. In the first paragraph he tells us that he was "terribly happy" to see his father, that he even wished they could be photographed together, but at the same time he says he immediately knew, the moment he saw his father, that he was "my future and my doom." Even with this emotional load, Charlie appears simply to report what happened without betraying his own reaction. But much is left out, leaving the reader to guess what Charlie is feeling, how this event has affected him, why this was the "last time I saw my father." Was he so outraged, hurt, saddened, confused, embarrassed, or something else that he determined never to see him again? Or did his father die soon afterward? The story is so brief that it is difficult to speculate with any confidence on Charlie's motivations, or even on his accuracy, yet it is so vividly told that it is difficult not to speculate.

Thesis is introduced here.

Perhaps this distancing is precisely what Cheever wanted: to tell a story about a father and a son, presenting deeply moving events without really exposing what they mean. To understand Cheever's purpose, and thereby understand his story better, we need to look at Cheever's own experience of father-son relationships. The justification for relating life to fiction is particularly strong in Cheever's case



Cheever's life connects to the story.

since the same incident oftentimes is recounted in his letters and journals and then employed in his fiction. Even when Cheever was supposedly reporting a real event, his "interest in telling a good story was greater than his interest in what we might consider the facts," as his son Benjamin put it (20). As Benjamin wrote, "The connection between his life and his work was intimate," and Cheever was even "fond of saying that fiction was 'crypto-autobiography'" (21). In fact there are obvious autobiographical elements in "Reunion," and decoding them does shed some light on the story.

Cheever's father and Charlie's father.

First, we should note that Cheever was profoundly troubled by his relationship to his father: late in life he called his father "the greatest and the most bitter mystery in my life," and he revealed that the problem of learning to love a father "appears in all the books and stories" (qtd. Susan Cheever 209–10). We do not need to know much about Cheever's childhood to imagine why he kept trying to sort it out. Not only did Cheever's mother tell him he was a mistake ("If I hadn't drunk two Manhattans one afternoon, you never would have been conceived"), but also, as Scott Donaldson's biography says, "his father wanted him aborted, even inviting the abortionist to dinner, an event that appears in both *The Wapshot Chronicle* and *Falconer*" (19). Charlie's father is in some crucial aspects like Cheever's father: alcoholic, insecure, sarcastic, self-centered. Unlike Charlie's father, Cheever's father was not divorced, but there were tremendous hostilities between his parents, leading to drunken infidelities, threatened suicides, and violent arguments—which formed much of the substance of Cheever's fiction.

Charlie and Cheever

If Charlie's father is like Cheever's father, Charlie is also a reflection of Cheever. Charlie, like Cheever, wants to love his father, but he finds a man who is apparently uninterested in

him and careening out of control. In his hunger for love, Charlie tries to connect with his father on some more primitive level, smelling his father "the way my mother sniffs a rose" and finding "a rich compound of whiskey, after-shave lotion, shoe polish, woollens, and the rankness of a mature male." Cheever was also extraordinarily moved by smells, telling his publisher at one point that he was "a very olfactory fellow," and not to try to remove any of the smells in his book.

Cheever and his father.

But Cheever does not seem to express his rage and disappointment very directly through Charlie. Surely part of the obstruction is Cheever's realization that he is in many ways like his father, Frederick Cheever, a shoe salesman who became unemployed and bitter in the mid–1920s. John Cheever was not technically out of work, but he did not have a regular job, and he struggled for much of his life to make ends meet. Most obviously, like his father—like Charlie's father—Cheever could not control his drinking. In an entry from the early journals (late forties and fifties), Cheever writes, "Year after year I read in here [in his journal] that I am drinking too much, and there can be no doubt of the fact that this is progressive" (103). Although Cheever finds everything about his drinking "disgusting," still "each noon I reach for the whiskey bottle." Cheever was evidently aware of the effect of such behavior on a son, as Cheever's own son, Benjamin, writes (in *The Letters of John Cheever*), "He used to say that I must wish I had a father who didn't drink so much, and I'd always say no" (18).

Cheever and Charlie's father.

In fact, Charlie's father's habit of baiting waiters in foreign tongues may have been modeled on Cheever's own behavior, as a passage from Susan Cheever's biography of her father reveals. After commenting on how Cheever, even though "he spoke minimal French," began "dropping French words into his conversation," she goes on to say, "With



Italian, he was even worse," using it "at every opportunity," especially in restaurants (113).

Summary

Thus Charlie's statement that his father was "my future and my doom" resonates on several levels. Cheever, the model for Charlie, had become "something like" his father. And Cheever's father was "something like" Charlie's father, just as Charlie would become "something like" Cheever himself. For Charlie to hate his father would involve hating himself, his own future self; yet he could hardly approve affectionately of his father. But more than that: for Charlie to express his hatred toward his father, Cheever would have to acknowledge his own hatred for his father, which would likewise involve a self-destructive disgust. Cheever could not find a way to love his father, but he could not find a way to hate him either. And so he was driven to write about him endlessly, searching for a way to describe the relationship and resolve it.

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## A NEW HISTORICAL ESSAY

### Preparing to Write

Where could I look for some clues to the ideology shaping Cheever's story? I decided that one place to look, thinking of "Reunion" as part of a cultural system, would be *The New Yorker* magazine in which the story was first published. Knowing the story came

out in 1962, I found it in the October 27th issue: the whole story appears on page 45.

I studied the magazine, trying to absorb the culture of 1962, the book and movie reviews, the current events, the articles, the advertisements, time-traveling back a little over thirty years. I did not imagine one issue of one magazine could contain an entire culture, but I did assume that a close inspection of one issue might suggest a great deal about the world *The New Yorker* presented to its readers. I tried to imagine myself as an anthropologist studying a foreign and unknown culture—in this case, the culture of *The New Yorker's* writers, advertisers, and readers. In reading through the magazine, I was struck very quickly by two messages, which seemed to appear relentlessly in various ways. Both messages arguably still permeate our culture, but they seemed especially prominent in this "foreign" setting. Perhaps I was simply paying close attention to what I ordinarily try to ignore.

Put bluntly, I found the magazine telling its readers again and again to consume—to purchase, to view, to possess, to ingest—and to display the quality of their discerning consumption. Most insistently, it seemed that readers were being told to consume superior alcoholic beverages: directly in some thirty-six ads and indirectly in ads for other products. An ad for Japan Airlines pictured a happy couple in the act of taking drinks from an attentive hostess; another for Caron perfumes depicted a beautiful woman clinking a brandy glass with her lover.

I was also struck by the exhortations to wear superior clothing, urging readers to display their wealth and excellent taste. Such exhibition was motivated, sometimes blatantly, sometimes subtly, by the promise of acceptance and affection. These messages—consume and display—appeared most obviously in the advertisements, but they could also be discerned in the articles and even the cartoons. They often appeared together.

## Shaping

If we recognize that Cheever's story appears in a context saturated with recurrent encouragements to drink (for status and success) and to display one's status and success, what difference does it make? How does this context affect our reading of the story? How does the story affect our reading of the context, for that matter?

One effect might be to reconsider our assessment of Charlie's father's drinking. In new historicist fashion, stressing ideology over individuals, I would argue that Charlie's father is not an autonomous agent, fully responsible for his failures. Rather, Charlie's father is to some degree a product of a value system he has learned too well. He has simply learned to seek affection and status in alcohol. His efforts to display his sophistication in languages and to demonstrate his dominance over the various waiters are also the effect of a powerful (but pitiful) desire for status.



This view of the father's fundamental insecurity and loneliness, which he attempts to erase by drinking and asserting himself, reminds me of some passages in Cheever's journal.

- Writing about his inability to control his drinking, Cheever writes: "I could very easily destroy myself" (103). Charlie's father, like Cheever, is destroying himself slowly. Cheever and his character are being driven by emotional pain and insecurity to seek relief in the way that their culture has prescribed—asserting their status, consuming alcohol.

We do not know in "Reunion" why Charlie's father and mother were divorced, and we may assume that Charlie has not seen his father for three years because his father is uncaring. Cheever's journal may help us to consider other possibilites consistent with the facts of the story—namely that Charlie's mother may have prevented his father from seeing him. Perhaps she considered his father so worthless that she did not want Charlie to see him again. Perhaps Charlie's father feels so guilty that he considers himself unworthy of his son's attention.

Finally, I should mention one more journal entry in which Cheever records the visit of a friend: "in my anxiety to communicate, to feel the most in warmth and intimacy, I drink too much, which can be two drinks these days" (103). The advertisements and cartoons link intimacy and affection to alcohol, and Cheever does the same thing here. Again, Charlie's father's behavior needs to be reconsidered.

At this point, it seems clear that I have way too much material for a brief essay—which means that I'm in good shape. But don't I need to dig further, examining all *The New Yorker* issues of 1962, and *Good Housekeeping* and *Reader's Digest* also, and everything else that can be recovered? Not really, although it's always nice to know as much as you can. My claim is simply that a certain community (the readers of *The New Yorker*) at a certain slice of time (1962) were being exposed to a certain set of messages. Rather than having to dig up a whole city, the new historicist can construct a tentative system of meaning from the close analysis of selected artifacts. The point is not that one document influenced another, but rather that at this

moment within this community all documents participated in certain common assumptions.

So, looking over my notes, freewriting and brainstorming, I come back to my focus on Charlie's father as a reflection of a system of meaning. I try organizing my material in the following way:

The emotional view: Charlie's father as a deviant jerk.

Thesis: The analytical view: Charlie's father as a product of his time.

Advertisements and cartoons suggest alcohol confers status and affection: manliness.

Cheever and Charlie's father: drowning self and pain in drink.

## Drafting

You might wish to draft an essay yourself at this point, then compare your application of the materials to mine.

### How to Make an Alchoholic Drink: Cheever's "Reunion" in Its Context

*The opening orients the reader to the story and the issue: the father's lack of affection.*

In John Cheever's "Reunion," Charlie's father appears to be the worst sort of parent. After three years of separation (following a divorce), the father doesn't respond to his son's letter but rather has his secretary arrange their meeting. He greets his son in a strange way, with no apparent affection:

> "Hi Charlie," he said. "Hi, boy. I'd like to take you up to my club, but it's in the Sixties, and if you have to catch an early train I guess we'd better get something to eat around here."

Although he puts his arm around Charlie, his subsequent behavior seems to confirm his callous self-absorption, as he apparently forgets about lunch and thinks only of drinking and insulting waiters. The visit ends with Charlie saying goodbye, for the last time, to a father who seems interested only in harrassing a newsstand clerk.

*This paragraph introduces a possible explanation: the father's values are shaped by his culture.*

But before we entirely dismiss Charlie's father, we might consider his motivation. What does he think he is doing? Where has he learned such behavior? Certainly Charlie is a



victim of his father's indulgent inattention; but is Charlie's father also a victim in any way? In *The New Yorker* magazine in which "Reunion" first appeared, we find a set of directives that helps to explain the behavior of Charlie's father, which may well be motivated not by any sort of disregard or animosity toward Charlie, but rather by the desire for status and affection. This desire is fueled by a system of values reflected in and even shaped by *The New Yorker.*

*Evidence: Ads for alcoholic beverages focus on status.*

Again and again advertisements in the October 26th issue of 1962 convey to the readers the paramount importance of status, rank, superiority. One of the most blatant of these ads asks the question "Are you a status seeker?" If you like "Italian restaurants," the ad continues, "foreign cars," "antique furniture," and finally "Lord Calvert" whiskey, then you apparently are a status seeker (as you should be, the ad implies). The association of alcoholic beverages with nobility, and therefore "status," is a recurrent theme. Grand Marnier is "The Emperor of Liqueurs," and another scotch is named "House of Lords." Old Hickory is drunk by "all the nicest people," and several couples in formal evening attire are depicted. The drink identifies you as a superior being, among "the nicest people," which does not in this context seem to mean the most polite or philanthropic.

*Other ads and status.*

Other ads for nonalcoholic products also reinforce this desire for status. One ad pictures an aristocratic man, sneering slightly, in an overcoat, standing behind a large, exotic-looking dog, with the caption "Which has the pedigree?" Of course, it isn't the dog, or the man; it's the coat. Buying this coat, the ad implies, gives you a pedigree you can wear. This

*Clothing and status.*

anxiety about the status of one's clothing, or how one's clothing expresses one's status, is also employed by advertisements for alcoholic drinks. One ad depicts a man from the neck down, dressed in a tuxedo, carrying a fur coat with a large label clearly exposed. The caption

says, "When a label counts, it's Imported O.F.C.," and we can easily see that the label in the fur coat is the same as the label on the bottle of whiskey to the right of the text.

Here the focus on labels is applied to clothing and whiskey.

When does a label count? When one is concerned about the display of status and superiority, a concern that this and many other ads serve to amplify and exploit. A tuxedo and a fur coat represent the pinnacle of fashion, and we can imagine that the physically fit man, draping the fur coat over his arm, is waiting for his companion to come claim the coat. The man's head is not pictured because with the right label, his appearance doesn't really matter—and the reader can imagine his own head on that body. Tellingly, the ad says almost nothing about how the whiskey tastes ("Rich. Light.") but stresses rather that it is "In immaculate good taste." This designer whiskey confers status, prestige, and even companionship; who cares what it tastes like?

The claim: Charlie's father is motivated by anxiety, created in part by these cultural values.

This anxiety about one's status and the implication that drinking alcoholic beverages will elevate it, which pervade the advertisements and even the cartoons in *The New Yorker,* arguably shape the character of Charlie's father, and Cheever as well. Charlie's father has his secretary make the arrangements for meeting his son in order to establish that he has a secretary. He wants his son to realize that he has status—because he has absorbed the cultural lesson that his self-worth depends on it. He mentions "my club" for the same reason, I would argue: to convey that he has a club, even though it is conveniently too distant to be used. Likewise, his display of foreign languages and his manic rudeness toward the various waiters are pitiful efforts to impress his son with his sophistication and power. At the end, as he struggles to "get a rise" out of the newsstand clerk, he is trying desperately to show his son how clever and superior he is. That is why he says "just wait a second, sonny": he is putting on this performance for his son, not for his own amusement. His interest in his son and his excitement are subtly suggested by his arrival "at twelve o'clock sharp." He's eager to see his son; he simply does not know how to impress his son, and his response is an effort to establish his status.



Even his alcoholism is related.

Even Charlie's father's desperate pursuit of alcohol reflects his anxiety about his status. Not only can we speculate that his nervousness drives him to medicate himself with liquid depressants; we can also see how his pursuit of drinks reflects his awareness of the association, created in advertisements and other cultural messages, between alcoholic consumption and affection. Charlie's father is seeking to create a bond with Charlie in a way that advertisements even today continue to promote. Charlie's father wants to create an "it-doesn't-get-any-better-than-this" moment; when the second waiter refuses to serve Charlie, his father immediately leaves because he wants more than a drink for himself; he hopes the drinks will lead to affection and bonding.

Conclusion: these values are destructive.

But he is really self-destructive, as Cheever makes clear. Charlie's father does not establish his status, and his quest for drinks does not create a bond. Instead, the day's events extinguish the contact between father and son, just as the father's drinking represents a slow self-extinction. Cheever has exposed the lie in the advertisements surrounding his story.

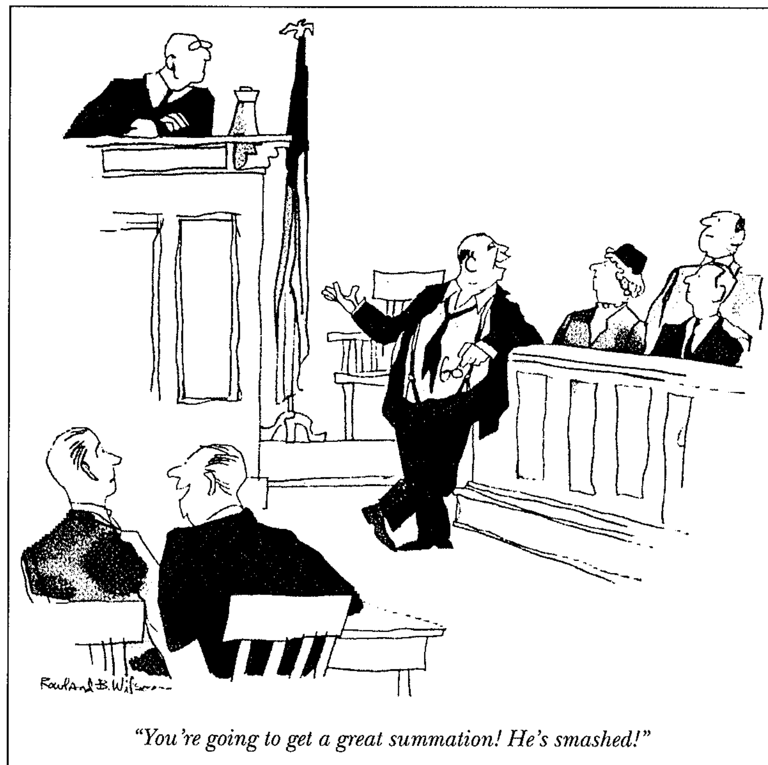
## PRACTICING BIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, AND NEW HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Here are some possibilities to get you started.

1. If you were going to begin today to write a screenplay, a short story, a novel, a poem, or a play, what would it be about?

Sketch out a rough draft or outline, or write the work if possible. Then consider how biographical, historical, or new historical criticism might relate to your work.

2. Choose another magazine from 1962 (*Good Housekeeping, Life, Reader's Digest, The Atlantic,* for instance) and compare its system of values to *The New Yorker's,* as I've described it. How does this expanded vision of 1962 affect your view of "Reunion"? What if "Reunion" had appeared in *Good Housekeeping,* for instance?
3. Here are two cartoons from the same *New Yorker* issue containing "Reunion." Discuss the system of values they imply. How might they be related to "Reunion"?



*"You're going to get a great summation! He's smashed!"*

Drawing by Rowland B. Wilson; © 1962, 1990 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

*"He's got this gimmick, see. He's completely honest."*

Drawing by Stan Hunt; © 1962, 1990 The New Yorker Magazine, Inc.

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