

Téma:

Few terms are more foundational to our sense of reality and more thoroughly naturalized in our everyday discourse than "culture." It is indeed difficult for us to imagine a time when the term or the concept was not available for regular use, but the notion of culture in the sense familiar to us -like "art," "race," "class," and "religion," which are intimately related to it-is of modern origin. Having its prenatal stirring in the eighteenth century, the concept of culture was ushered to life by a series of ground-shifting transformations of the nineteenth century in the ever expanding domain of the West. According to Raymond Williams, who first brought to general attention the historical emergence of these and other related concepts, "culture" is for us one of the most important reality-constituting terms, or key words; it embodies the spectrum of intellectual responses to the "general pattern of change" (Williams 1983, xvii) that we associate with modernity, such as industrialization, democratization, and, we may add in light of the more recent works by Edward Said, Eric Wolf, Michael Taussig, and others, the forceful globalization of "the West" in the form of colonial and postcolonial processes.

In the contemporary use of the terms, the relation between "culture" and "religion" appears to be multiple, complex, and contradictory to some extent. First, in a highly ordinary sense, religion is seen as one of the cultural aspects or institutions of a given society. (Many classical ethnographic accounts and many monographs on individual nations are typically organized in this way.) If at times religion is to culture as a part is to the whole, at other times the synecdochic relation amounts to a plain equation, with the result that in such cases culture is considered more or less synonymous with religion. With regard to "premodern" and "theocratic" societies especially, it is often suggested that religion is coextensive with the entire national culture. On the other hand, most notably in the language of theologians and other partisans of religion, religion is claimed to be that which always and necessarily exceeds culture, something essentially distinct from, surpassing, and sometimes standing decidedly against "mere culture." But even when religion and culture are thus viewed as separate, there is typically a presumption of an intimate relation or complicity between the two, or of a commanding and controlling influence of one over the other. Hence we often think of the mainstream culture of the United States as having been largely determined by particular strands of Protestant Christianity, whereas religion is said to undergo metamorphosis over time and take on culture-specific characteristics as presumably happened when, for example, Buddhism migrated from its native India to China and of national identity. The second will examine what is often considered to be the alternative tradition of the culture idea, a more inclusive and holistic notion or so-called anthropological concept of culture as "a whole way of life" or "a complex whole" that refers to the totality of various customary practices of a given society. This idea also implies that there are not one but many cultures, and that any given culture is ultimately a meaningful entity that must be interpreted. The third section will then focus on the formation of the position of the cultural observer/interpreter and the high value placed on the ideals of objectivity and cultural specificity and the method of participant observation. The final section will discuss briefly some of the new perspectives on culture, often associated with the emerging domain of academic discourse variously identified as cultural studies, cultural criticism, and critical theory, which are largely

critical of the evaluative logic and the hermeneutical assumptions embedded in hitherto dominant concepts of culture.

1. Culture as Edification: ENGLAND

Raymond Williams's path breaking work, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1983, pub. 1958), focuses on the most palpably value laden sense of the term "culture." Williams argues that this notion of culture, associated with the aspiration for the betterment of humanity, arose from a preeminent English literary tradition, in part in reaction to but ultimately in consonance with the emergent middle-class interests predicated on the new industrialized economy and the new social order. The concept of culture changed dramatically in the course of the nineteenth century largely in response to industrialization, the rise of democracy, and the new problems of social class. According to Williams, before that time culture had meant, primarily, the "tending of natural growth" , and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, "a general state or habit of the mind", having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean "the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole". Third, it came to mean "the general body of the arts". Fourth, later in the century, it came to mean "a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual". (xvi)

This tradition of the culture idea was born of a crisis, of needs acutely felt by a number of English intellectuals beginning in the late eighteenth century: the need to shore up the defense against the threat of erosion and disintegration of the previously known mode of social integration, the need to articulate new grounds and new principles for the edification of the individual and the rectification of the community in view of the shifting order of society. This tradition of culture discourse is intentionally regulative and disciplinary, and its objectives are somewhat polemically tempered, with an eye zealously fixed on the ideal of human perfection. At the same time, this notion of culture is allied with the increasingly important sense of national identity, the presumption of the hegemony of the West over the rest, and the recognition of the West as the vanguard, if not the sole proper agent, of the civilizing process.

Although four meanings transforming the concept culture are identified by Williams as occurring in the nineteenth century, *Culture and Society* mainly follows the historical development of the first three. Concerning the fourth culture in the sense of "a whole way of life "-Williams recognizes that this use of the term "has been most marked in twentieth-century anthropology and sociology," but he does not explore the development of the idea in relation to those various burgeoning enterprises of knowledge that seek to represent cultures (ethnography, philology, comparative religion, etc.). Therefore, while Williams acknowledges the significance of the anthropological and sociological studies to the formation of the idea and notes how T. S. Eliot, for example, "like the rest of us, has been at least casually influenced by these disciplines," he nevertheless concludes that this sense of culture also depends, in fact, on the literary tradition. The development of social anthropology has tended to inherit and substantiate the ways of looking at a society and a common life which had earlier been wrought out from general experience of industrialism. The emphasis on "a whole way of life" is continuous from Coleridge and Carlyle, but what was a personal assertion of value has become a general intellectual method. (1983,233)

Focused exclusively on that aspect of the culture idea nurtured by a group of English literary elites, Williams's study tends to emphasize the ultimately conservative, often nostalgic, reactive, and expressly discriminating tenor of the notion as expressed in the words high culture.

It is important, however, not to overlook his own decidedly critical intentions in examining the idea. Among many writers his study covers, the towering figures are all celebrated conservatives: Edmund Burke in the last decades of the eighteenth century, Samuel Coleridge at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, Matthew Arnold in the middle of the nineteenth century, and T. S. Eliot in the early twentieth century.

An influential opponent to the rising tide of democracy and "aggressive individualism," according to Williams, Burke established two ideas that were to prove significant in the formation of the culture concept: the idea of the state as the necessary agent of human perfection, and the idea of what has been called an "organic society," in which the emphasis is on the interrelation and continuity of human activities (1983, 11). Before the term "culture" was ever employed in such contexts, the notion in germinal form was already operating in Burke. "Immediately after Burke," Williams adds, this complex which he describes was to be called the 'spirit of the nation'; by the end of the nineteenth century, it was to be called a national 'culture'" (II).

This incipient idea comes into its own and is at last given a single name, culture, in Matthew Arnold's renowned essay *Culture and Anarchy* (1994, pub. 1869). Echoing Burke, Arnold conceives the state as a necessary (if ultimately temporary) agent of human perfection, on the grounds that individuals as such, or the ordinary candidates for political influence or leadership, are all too often delimited by their own class interests, and are thus unable to stand for "a general humane spirit, ... the love of human perfection" (73). Only those who are in a certain sense marginal to their individuality and their class—an alien minority unfettered by those limitations—are poised to assume the agency of culture and, by implication, that of the state. Moreover, it is above all literary education in poetry and criticism, Arnold believes, that can engender and nurture such agents capable of transcending individual and class limitations. Culture, reified in this manner (and, rather ominously, the state as its proper body politic), is abstracted from any empirical body of people or institutions. As an arena of human perfection, culture has become something of a substitute for religion. Arnold's characteristic invocations of the edifying property of culture in such well-known phrases as "the best which has been thought and said in the world" and "the passion for sweetness and light" effectively transfer familiar emotions traditionally attached to religion into a new, yet unrealized ideal.

What T. S. Eliot (1968, pub. 1948) adds to this tradition is an emphasis on wholeness in the culture idea. He objects to Arnold's deposing the traditional social class in favor of a newly conceived group of educated elites as the custodians of culture. Yet Eliot's reasons for these emendations are not really different in sentiment from the tradition of culture discourse running from Burke through Arnold and beyond to cultural neoconservatives of our time. Much as Eliot's notion of culture as "a whole way of life" is influenced by the emerging disciplines of anthropology and sociology, the wholeness of culture he has in mind has little to do with the existing empirical conditions of any given society as an actual totality. In fact, expressing a sentiment similar to those cultural moralists before him—not to mention their present reincarnations among us—Eliot depicts cultural wholeness as something quintessentially embodied in (real or imagined) traditional society, which is supposedly in grave danger or on the verge of loss. Always rumored to have existed sometime in the past, culture in this paradigmatic sense is alleged to be naturally coherent and harmonious, if not also entirely homogeneous. In such an exemplary community that represents "culture as a whole way of life," Eliot rather dogmatically assumes, the stratification of the society would not breed conflict or oppression, because hierarchy is only a matter of natural, organic differentiation and cooperation, rather than a mechanical division and functional coordination fraught with competition and strife. Those

who can be entrusted with the task of preserving this endangered cultural community are necessarily, or so Eliot and others like him assume, a certain select segment or stratum of society. Having traced this literary tradition of the idea of culture, Williams proposes a reconceptualization of this wholeness of culture, with an eye toward a more genuinely egalitarian community and a common culture that is not predicated on the governing minority. Such a reconception of culture does not materialize simply in an attempt to include the hitherto excluded, by a mere expansion of the definition of culture, or through relaxation of the presumed standard once held normative by the present (elite) claimants of culture. Rather, what Williams calls for is a fundamental reconfiguration of the dominant logic of culture. He indicates the general directions to which a reconstituted perspective on the cultural logic points. The agenda for further study, which he carries out in his subsequent works, consists of rigorous materialist analyses of popular culture and more historically nuanced studies of technology and media. This is the principal reason Raymond Williams is considered a founding figure of a new approach to the problem of culture or cultural studies.

GERMANY

Meanwhile, the idea of culture as an entity and process intimately tied to the notion of spiritual growth and maturation affecting the formation and destiny of a whole nation had an illustrious career in the German-speaking world throughout the nineteenth century. In a sense, what for Arnold's England could have been but a matter of advocacy for the future—a mere hopeful projection of the advent of a new type of governing class consisting of intellectually superior individuals dedicated to the general enhancement of culture—was already realized and instituted to some extent in Germany, all this before the German nation as such existed. As early as the beginning of the nineteenth century in this region of Europe, a highly educated minority or, in the terms made famous by Fritz Ringer, "German mandarins," was already present. This powerful "aristocracy of learning" in its broad sense included the governing bureaucrats of various principalities and newly prominent and increasingly well-paid university professors, as well as their lesser colleagues in the educational profession. According to Ringer (1969), the twin concepts of culture (Kultur) and spiritual formation (Bildung) became current as key terms expressing the mandarins' ideal of learning as an antithesis to instrumental, institutional training. Thus these concepts were also inseparable from the notion of education (Erziehung), though not in the narrow "mechanical" sense of instruction (Unterricht) but in the sense of "religious and neo-humanist conceptions of 'inner growth' and integral selfdevelopment" (87). The ideal expressed in this set of potent terms was actively implemented as the official educational policy through a systematic reform of schools and universities.

In the German usage, then, culture is even more visibly allied with the state, which was facilitated by means of a well-articulated ideology of Bildung. The characterization of culture, learning, and nurturing of the spirit (Geist) as specifically German attributes—an assumption that roughly parallels Arnold's identification of culture with the idealized notion of Englishness or T. S. Eliot's unqualified equation of culture with his idiosyncratic conception of "Christian community"—has had an intriguing history, which is also implicated in the history of related terms:

The German word Kultur was adapted from Cicero's *cultura animi* by Samuel Pufendorf and by Gottfried von Herder. Until late in the eighteenth century, it remained very closely related to the concept of Bildung. It had the meaning of "personal culture"; it referred to the cultivation of the mind and spirit. Then gradually, it was used in German learned circles in its more general sense to epitomize all of man's civilized achievements in society. In France, this second step was

not taken. Culture there remained principally *cultura de l'esprit* while civilisation) introduced by the physiocrat Marquis de Mirabeau, came to stand for the totality of man's social and intellectual creations and arrangements. (Ringer 1969,87-8)

In a development similar to that of the English word, then, German *Kultur* acquired an expanded meaning, in the sense of something like "a whole way of life." But in the course of this development two different terms, *Kultur* and *Zivilisation*) emerged, with the result that the would-be synonyms became invested with an unexpected significance: "By the time of Napoleon at any rate, culture was German and civilization was French" (88).

This opposition between culture and civilization, of course, was not value neutral. The evaluative intentions of the dichotomy are plainly expressed, for instance, in a dictionary entry from the 1920s written by Oswald Spengler, author of the once famous *Decline of the West*. According to this source, *Kultur* was to be distinguished from civilization because the former referred to "the ennoblement [*Verede/ung*] of man through the development of his ethical, artistic, and intellectual powers." "Civilization," Spengler concluded, "is to culture as the external is to the internal, the artificially constructed to the naturally developed, the mechanical to the organic, 'means' to 'ends'" (qtd. in Ringer 1969,89).

This contrast does more than preferentially characterize Germany over France, reversing the usual ranking between the two nations. We recall that the political reality of modern Europe was such that, by the nineteenth century, France had long been a leading political power and a model of the modern nation-state, alternately emulated and feared by the rest of Europe. Germany, by contrast, was hardly a nation but a mere aggregate of relatively minor principalities long subsumed under the medieval rubric of the Holy Roman Empire, with one northern district, Prussia, in ascending preeminence. In the absence of material statehood, then, German *Kultur* was conjured up as an imaginary nation or, even better, as a spiritual (*geistige*) manifestation of a virtual totality not so much organized by a sociopolitical reality as enlivened by a natural, organic folk spirit (*Volksg Geist*). In comparison to such a sublime idea of a nation, any actually existing nation-state could be construed as merely a materially constructed, artificially contracted, mechanically maintained body politic, quite possibly lacking in any spiritual authenticity. In light of this logic, the French Republic, on the one hand, would be seen as a nation in its external form only, with its internationally conceived mission of civilization reflecting only the superficial aspect of reason and of modern scientific spirit, and its ultimate objective nothing more than a facile egalitarian universalism that would defy the distinct character of the *Volk*. On the other hand, mother nature itself would appear to authenticate and justify the German nation insofar as it was perceived as the embodiment of a distinct *Kultur*. In short, the discourse of *Kultur* helped German intellectuals represent the undeniably powerful French nation as a somewhat unnatural, inauthentic entity predicated on a one-sided development of modernity, and to proclaim in turn their own authentic-but as yet virtual-German nationhood with a heavy emphasis on the organic and the deeply spiritual.

II. Culture as a "Complex Whole"

If the nineteenth-century career of the culture/ *Kultur* idea has the appearance of a veritable tradition, it is above all because the integral unity and coherence and with it a sharply discriminating system of valuation and of the ways of institutionalizing those normative principles-has been the intent of this type of culture discourse. The seeming integrity of this tradition is less empirically real than polemically advocated. The impression of continuity is forged by the insistent claim on the part of some academics, journalists, politicians, and others who, for one reason or another, wish to uphold this ideology of culturedness and perhaps even to

identify themselves with certain nineteenth-century upper-middle-class intellectuals. The domain of culture discourse today in reality is considerably more mixed and complicated. This situation is in large measure due to the introduction of the anthropological concept of culture. As Williams already noted, while this newer conception of culture is by no means unrelated to previous notions, the nature of the relation has been such that the appearance of a second, ethnographically nurtured tradition of the culture idea was in deliberate distinction from, and, in a sense in protest against, the earlier, literary, socially elitist concept. In contrast to this latter, the ethnographers' view of culture is expressly holistic rather than narrowly discriminating, descriptive rather than evaluative, and fundamentally pluralistic. It presupposes the multiplicity of cultures and does not imply any obvious "standard for excellence." An important assumption implicit in this concept of culture is that the empirical totality of a given society is something that can be represented and that farther east. In the quintessentially "modern" societies of Western Europe and North America, culture is envisaged as a vehicle, at its best, for the most profound and essential thoughts and attitudes underlying religion. The assumption here is that, in a society such as "ours," something like the general essence of religion, which is perforce less tangible and more universal than any particular religion (and is nowadays often referred to as spirituality), used to be embodied in religious institutions but now has been partially liberated from those traditional institutional confinements and can find more personal, "freer" expressions through a variety of cultural venues. This deinstitutionalization takes place, supposedly, as society becomes "modernized" and "secularized."

The overwhelming sense that somehow all this is self-evident tends to mask an important reality: the categories religion and culture in these configurations are both historically specific, fairly recent formations, and our daily employment of these terms, however natural and uncontroversial it may seem, is in fact mobilizing and energizing a powerful ideology of modernity, both feeding on and feeding into a certain logic that is central to our notion of who we are and what we are. Our sense of worth and self-identity as moderns is very much vested in a particular conception of selfhood. We bank on the assumption that the self is an intrinsic, \lly free, unitary center of each person, a pure point of subjectivity; and we count on the assumption, moreover, that it is our conscious possession of this essential individuality that makes us different from non-moderns. According to this ideology, the modern self is the quintessential self: it is the universal that makes us exceptional. Once the enormity of this ideological investment is recognized, it is not hard to understand the highly charged, often polemical air permeating our discussion about different cultures. As the debates over "multiculturalism" make clear, our uses of the term "culture" are anything but innocuous but are often overtly argumentative. One might say that culture has become one of the most loaded, least subtle, and often indiscriminately used fighting words available in current parlance.

In view of this situation, it might be useful to begin by stressing that the extraordinary facility, versatility, and utility of the idea of culture derive in part from the power of the ideology of modernity. It is significant that the efficacy of the idea does not diminish given that the term "culture" is dangerously capacious, semantically vague and confused, and finally, taken as a whole, inconsistent. The rampant and varied use of the term, as well as its remarkable serviceability in spite of (or possibly because of) this lack of conceptual unity and integrity, may be better understood by examining the historical formation and ideological constitution of the idea.

In the interest of analytic simplicity, the following discussion will be divided into four sections. The first will review the advent of the idea of culture that is inherently hierarchical and evaluative, that is, the notion of culture as the sum total of superior, morally and spiritually

edifying human accomplishments (often labeled "high culture"), as well as the relation between this idea and the problem

this totality can be interpreted. This leads to the related conclusions that to know a culture is to understand its meaning; and that to grasp the "essential truth" of a culture requires a hermeneutical science.

One of the earliest statements defining the anthropological notion of culture can be found in the opening paragraph of Edward B. Tylor's *Primitive Culture* (1873, vol. 1, p. 1): "Culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense," says Tylor, "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of a society." This seemingly inchoate collection of diverse objects and phenomena, lofty as well as quotidian, is conceptually held together by the yoking phrase, "complex whole." No longer a matter of consciously selective, superior, or privileged activities and achievements, culture has thus become an all inclusive category naming the totality of social facts and deeds. This shift in meaning from the exclusive to the inclusive parallels the development of the term "society" itself: from the sense of companionship or association of a certain select group of people (as in "polite society" or "musical society") to what may be called the sociological sense of the term, meaning the totality of humans in the same habitat and their mode of being together, while counting all the strata as its members.

The wholeness of culture, insofar as it means more than a mere aggregate of discrete items, is, however, anything but immediately apprehendable or readily demonstrable. It is indeed the task of ethnography, classically conceived, to produce and represent such wholeness and to render it comprehensible, or else at least to present a sense of totality indirectly as a "web of significance," in Max Weber's celebrated phrase, against the backdrop of which more particular phenomena can be shown to make sense. What is at stake in the notion of a complex whole, therefore, is not only the coherence, confluence, or consonance of the whole but, more important for the anthropologist, its intelligibility. This notion of the cultural whole renders the entire domain of human activity as meaningful, that is, as a hermeneutical reality that can be understood and communicated, even if it is not, as in the objects of natural sciences, a mechanically measurable or predictable entity. In this way, culture has come to define not only the object but also the objective of the ethnographic enterprise. As such, it is central to the new science of anthropology, which purports to lead from the cumulation of exotic particularities to a set of general truths about humankind. Hence Tylor (1873) proceeds to elaborate his programmatic agenda:

The condition of culture among the various societies of mankind, in so far as it is capable of being investigated on general principles, is a subject apt for the study of laws of human thought and action. On the one hand, the uniformity which so largely pervades civilization may be ascribed, in great measure, to the uniform action of uniform causes; while on the other hand its various grades may be regarded as stages of development or evolution, each the outcome of previous history, and about to do its proper part in shaping the history of the future. (Vol. 1, p. 1)

Although this was written in 1871 by no less a figure than Tylor, who is generally considered to be the most prominent anthropologist of the Victorian era, the term "culture" in the anthropological, holistic sense, according to Margaret Mead, remained "the vocabulary of a small and technical group of professional anthropologists" well into the twentieth century. By the middle of the century, however, "the world [was] on such easy terms with the concept of culture, that the words 'in our culture' slip[ped] from the lips of educated men and women." In our own day, we might add, it has become a primal category of everyday conversation whether the speaker is especially educated or not. Mead suggests with some authority that the greater currency the concept of culture now enjoys is in no small measure due to the success of

Benedict's *Patterns of Culture* (1959, pub. 1934), which served as an excellent introduction to "a comparative study of different cultures, through which we can see our own socially transmitted customary behavior set beside that of other and strangely different peoples" (Mead 1959, vii).

A comparative study of cultures, perhaps somewhat counter-intuitively, emphasizes, the integral unity of a given society, and presupposes that a proper understanding and valuation of specific elements is possible only if those elements are considered in the context of that particular unitary whole. This culture specific, contextualist approach-advocated by many American anthropologists including Benedict, Franz Boas, and Mead-was a deliberate departure from what they perceived to be "the old method of constructing a history of human culture based on bits of evidence, torn out of their natural contexts, and collected from all times and all parts of the world" (Boas 1959, xv). Their approach is in marked contrast to the predominantly British, Victorian "armchair" anthropology of Tylor. As Benedict puts it, anthropology up to her time "ha[d] been overwhelmingly devoted to the analysis of culture traits ... rather than to the study of culture as articulated wholes If we are interested in cultural processes, the only way in which we can know the significance of the selected detail of behavior is against the background of the motives and emotions and values that are institutionalized in that culture" (1959,48-9).

Thus a significant development had taken place in the anthropological concept of culture at this point, from Tylor's inclusive sense of it as a general, cumulative human construction (in which sense it is most appropriate to speak of human culture, of which "primitive culture" is an aspect, moment, or stage) to the more contemporary sense of a culture as a distinctive, autochthonous entity belonging to a particular local group, however small or large such a group may be. It is this later articulation that has endowed the Tylorian "complex whole" with a more explicitly interpretive significance.

Furthermore, according to Boas, the understanding of such a pattern of integration, or configuration of the elements as a whole, is tantamount to "a deep penetration into the genius of the culture" (1959, xvii). As this phrasing indicates, the conception of a culture as a meaningful whole, thus as an object and context of interpretation, renders the anthropological study of culture analogous to the study of a work of art or literature in its most typically hermeneutical formulation. Not only does "culture" turn out to be a relatively finite and distinctive body of work that can be "read like a text," but its essential truth is ultimately a matter of a genius, that is, a deeply spiritual, creative principle, of which the multifarious elements of a given culture are particular manifestations. Nothing short of a hermeneutical science, it would appear, is equal to the task of grasping such an essence. The deeply penetrating understanding of a culture in this fashion, of course, would also lead to aesthetic appreciation and all the moral and spiritual edification that comes from such an experience. In this connection, Mead observes, it is no accident that Benedict herself was originally a student of literature, and, on that account, she could understand better than other anthropologists of her time that "each primitive culture represented something comparable to a great work of art or literature [I]f one took these cultures whole-the religion, the mythology, the everyday ways of men and women then the internal consistency and the intricacy was as aesthetically satisfying to the would-be explorer as any single work of art" (1959, ix).

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, the interpretive approach to culture as a meaningful whole and the accompanying hermeneutical assumptions have been enormously influential in the development of the contemporary discourses on religion. Theological appropriation of the hermeneutics of culture was effected by a number of prominent European emigre theologians who had highly influential academic careers in North America, including H. Richard Niebuhr (author of *Christ and Culture*), Paul Tillich (*Religion and Culture*), and more recently Paul Ricoeur. They have been inspirational or instrumental in spawning a whole range

of academic enterprises, usually with a title that begins "Religion and," such as "Religion and Literature," "Religion and the Arts," or "Religion and Culture."

Apart from this theological tradition, if we look at the development of the notion of culture in anthropology, one of the principal figures to be noted is undoubtedly Clifford Geertz. He gave a particularly sharp articulation to the idea that a culture is "an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols" (1973, 89). This symbolic notion of culture is directly relevant to the subject of religion, and he expresses this view in the title of one of his most influential articles, "Religion as a Cultural System." An implicit but obvious assumption here is that the term "culture," understood as a system of meaning, is more or less interchangeable with "a tradition," "a religious tradition," or simply, "a religion," insofar as the wholeness of each of these entities can be said to represent a complex configuration of signs and symbols which, taken as a whole, furnish significance to various aspects of a people's commonwealth. As Geertz stated it in his oft-cited definition of religion (1973,90-1), there is a cognitive/theoretical aspect as well as an emotional/practical aspect to this system, and these two aspects correspond respectively to "religion as a world view" (metaphysics) and "religion as an ethos" (ethical and aesthetic disposition) (126 - 41). These elaborations have further enriched the anthropological notion of culture by considerably complicating Benedict's basic thesis that no part of a cultural complex is to be understood or evaluated without reference to the whole, which is a distinct system. And the implication has become more pronounced in that, if a culture is something to be analyzed like a text, it also seems to have something to say.

The most obvious analogue in religious studies to this conception of culture as a meaningful whole is Mircea Eliade's characterization of the history of religions as a "religious hermeneutics" (1969, 1-11, 54-71). He sought to mark out a distinct territory for the scientific study of religion (Religionswissenschaft or, in his own parlance, the history of religions). At the same time Eliade was intent on situating this enterprise firmly in the general context of the interpretive study of culture, as opposed to the context of positivistic sciences, philosophical speculations, or theological apologia. To this end, Eliade underscores the importance of hermeneutics: .

Hermeneutics is of preponderant interest to us because, inevitably, it is the least-developed aspect of our discipline. Preoccupied, and indeed often completely taken up, by their admittedly urgent and indispensable work of collecting, publishing, and analyzing religious data, scholars have sometimes neglected to study their meaning. Now, these data represent the expression of various religious experiences [T]he scholar has not finished his work when he has reconstructed the history of a religious form or brought out its sociological, economic, or political contexts. In addition, he must understand its meaning. (2)

According to this argument, sociology, economics, political science, and other cognate disciplines can, at their best, help elucidate the context in which various "religious experiences" occur, while leaving the question of their meaning untouched. By the same token, if the historian of religion merely collected and analyzed data and stopped short of "understanding their meaning," it would be tantamount to studying only "the exterior aspects of the spiritual universe" (Eliade 1969,60). For Eliade and other like-minded religionists, the essential nature of religious experience perforce falls outside the purview of secularist disciplines because

The hierophanies-i.e., the manifestations of the sacred expressed in symbols, myths, supernatural beings, etc.-are grasped as structures, and constitute a pre-reflective language that requires a special hermeneutics. For more than a quarter of a century [Eliade wrote this in the 1960s], historians and phenomenologists of religion have attempted to elaborate such a hermeneutics By means of a competent hermeneutics, history of religions ceases to be a museum of fossils,

ruins, and obsolete mirabilia and becomes what it should have been from the beginning for any investigator: a series of "messages" waiting to be deciphered and understood. (Preface, n. p.)

A hermeneutics proper to this task is therefore "a total hermeneutics, which can decipher and explicate every kind of human encounter of man with the sacred, from prehistory to our day" (58). Here, Eliade to some extent resuscitates the world historical perspective of Victorian anthropology, without seeming to support the evolutionist assumptions of Tylor.

To be sure, not everyone professionally engaged in religious studies would subscribe to this particular conception of "religious hermeneutics." More broadly speaking, however, the hermeneutical paradigm has become so insidiously pervasive in the human sciences generally in the course of the twentieth century that it now seems to strike many people as perversely unnatural, if not entirely impossible, to entertain the possibility that "culture" or "religion" could be construed in any way other than as an intricately intrareferential "meaningful whole," or that an act of interpretation could be conceived in some way other than as probing of the depths, or hunting in the forest of words and images for some less than-obvious meaning that is the essential truth of that whole.

In the last section of this essay, we will consider some of the challenges to this hermeneutical paradigm predominant in both cultural anthropology and the study of religion. For the moment, let it suffice to note that the overwhelming emphasis on meaning as the ultimate constitutive substance of a cultural wholeness has had the effect, among others, of bringing the anthropological notion of culture into closer association with the more literary, aesthetic, and moral concepts of culture discussed earlier. If a culture could be read, interpreted, and appreciated like a work of art or literature, "to read a culture" would not only yield scientific truths but would also prove just as morally edifying and spiritually enriching as reading "great books" is reputed to be. In fact, one might say that in the long run it should prove more rewarding, because what the reader of a culture will come to grasp is not merely a genius of a particular time and place embodied in an individual "great author" but the collective genius and the destiny of a whole people or nation. Thus, over and above the chastely scientific purpose of research, there is room for the student of a culture to hope that any given culture, however alien and idiosyncratic some of its constitutive elements might appear, could in the end be saying something, imparting a secret message, a forgotten promise, perhaps even a hidden anecdote of destiny.

III. The Making of the Participant Observer

If the hermeneutical notion of culture makes feasible such a providential prospect for the study of culture, the moral investment in the position of the interpreter of cultures is considerable. For what is being discovered here (or shall we say invented?) is not only a new kind of general object, that is, culture, but also a new seat of knowledge and understanding proper to this object: the position of the observer/interpreter of culture. The making of this new subjectivity, which is indispensable to the emergent science of culture, has not been seriously examined. The issue tends to be almost always confused with, or rather occluded by, what are taken to be more or less technical problems concerning the principles of scientific objectivity and the method of empathic understanding. Even the most obviously moralizing phrases often used to express the ideals of research, for example, "doing justice to the data," "not violating the integrity of the tradition as a whole," "observing facts impartially without distorting them with one's own values and interests," have not invited the critical attention that would expose the historical circumstances contributing to the development of the underlying ideology of cultural observation.

A welcome exception is Christopher Herbert's admirable study *Culture and Anomie: Ethnographic Imagination in the Nineteenth Century* (1991), which is the first sustained critical analysis of the emergence of the anthropological concept of culture. This work demonstrates that the seemingly new, seemingly neutral, pluralistic, and relativistic notion of culture, which made its first appearance around Tylor's time and gradually gained prominence in the course of the twentieth century, was in fact neither new nor neutral. Moreover, this idea was far from being merely empirical, descriptive, or value free but was as much a product of the intellectual and moral crises of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe as the other, literary, normative, and more explicitly Eurocentric idea of culture. This argument, of course, is based on the observation that the particular "way of thinking" that eventually solidified into the ethnographic notion of culture had been around long before it became attached to the word itself. It is also predicated on an entirely novel but compelling hypothesis that what was truly at issue in this way of thinking was the problem of desire.

The problem of desire, and that of human volition more generally, has been primarily a theological problem in the West. In the theological context, the issues most pertinent to the question of desire are not paths to fulfillment or impediments to satisfaction but, rather more typically and ominously, transgression and sin. Accordingly, the question of desire immediately evokes the problem of regulating and controlling the natural exuberance of human acts, which are always imbued with desire, and the problem of organizing these acts positively as constitutive elements in an orderly, consecrated community. This leads to the problem of freedom. The entire complex of problems—desire, inhibition-discipline, order, freedom—was acutely felt by the educated Europeans of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the basic assumptions about the world were reportedly undergoing a radical transformation. Change and progress, rather than permanence and constancy, became the norms instead of anomalous occurrences. Consequently, the question of freedom and autonomous will came to against the backdrop of these transformations at the turn of the eighteenth to nineteenth century, Herbert suggests, that the question of desire—and the general dissatisfaction with the traditional theological answers to it—provided grounds for the eventual formation of the culture idea. While keeping this general argument in mind, let us attend to the issue of particular interest for us here, namely, the historical formation of the ethnographic observer.

The hypothetical state of nature, a brutish existence ruled by nothing but instinctive desire and unfettered intercourse of animal life, was imagined to be the condition of the human race prior to the onset of the civilizing process. This fantasized state of lawless desire has functioned as a template for the Europeans' representation of those they considered to be savages, namely, the native inhabitants of the Americas, Oceania, the Pacific Islands, and many parts of Africa and Asia. For most Europeans, the exotic denizens of those faraway places remained a matter of distant rumors embellished by their own imagination rather than firsthand experience of any kind. More an object of fancy than of direct social intercourse, the savage was portrayed all the more vividly as a reverse image of the domestic and familial European society (or what was construed as such), where natural instincts and desires were fastidiously checked and disciplined by the authorities of religion, state, and increasingly science.

Among the small number of Europeans who did venture out to those faraway places were Christian missionaries, and they were among the first to record in detail the life of the savages in their native habitat. By the official "scientific" standards of the twentieth century, however, these early records left by the missionary observers are generally regarded as unreliable reports of facts, and valued even less when it comes to their interpretations of these facts. Missionaries' views and opinions were informed and predetermined by dogmatic Christianity, so it is said, and such religiously biased observations are palpably at odds with the principle of scientific

objectivity and impartiality. This commonplace assessment of the missionary ethnography largely ignores, though it does not necessarily deny, that there is a significant continuity between "prescientific" ethnographic writings and later, academically certified anthropologists' studies, especially with regard to the position of the observer and the style of notation.

To be sure, the missionaries' professed motives and objectives differed sharply from the scientific credo of the later anthropologists. But those soldiers and servants of God, on a mission to win the heathen souls for Christianity, found themselves surrounded by, indeed thoroughly immersed in, the actualities of the native life, not unlike the situation of the anthropologist at his/her fieldwork. However opinionated, prejudicial, or parochially skewed their views of the perditious native ways finally may have been, theirs were also veritable eyewitness accounts based on direct experience while they lived among the natives for extended periods, usually many times longer than the average length of fieldwork considered adequate for dissertation research in anthropology today. As a rule, the missionaries' observations were recorded in great empirical detail, as meticulously particular as any field notes of the modern anthropologist.

These points of commonality between the habits of the two types of ethnographers—the religious and the scientific—may seem unremarkable, but Herbert probes further into the nature of the intensity of their immersion and the high premium placed on the precise recording of details and empirical specificity common to both groups. The obsessively minute attention to what was seen, heard, and measured, and the voluminous retention of these empirical particulars, goes hand in hand with the idea, emphatically maintained by these observers, that empirical notation, generated from a specific position of observation amidst the life-world of an unmediated experience (or what was taken as such), ultimately speaks for itself and possesses a self-validating power. It is as though the ethnographic writing at its best were dictation taken directly from the lived experience, as though the recorded minutiae were the fingerprints left by real events. These fundamental beliefs about the ideal transparency of ethnographic writing, however, were tantamount to a symptomatic response—or, as psychoanalysis would put it, reaction formation—against a certain ambivalence and anxiety inherent in their theory and practice of observation. What, then, was the nature of this anxiety?

As noted before, the missionaries shared with their fellow Europeans at home the theory that represented savage life as a state of unrestrained desire: an anarchic condition governed by nothing except the capricious forces of natural instincts. Sexual license, cannibalism, witchcraft, devil worship, and other diabolical customs were attributed to this state of nature. At the same time, the missionaries were among the first to confront the actual conditions of the savage life, which did not necessarily conform to this preconceived theory. They were, in effect, witness to the fact that, far from being a lawless free-for-all, the lives of the tribes people were often highly rule bound, checked and regulated by an elaborate system of obligations, prohibitions, customs, and protocols, which initially are largely incomprehensible to outsiders and therefore tend to appear altogether irrational. We know that, by the very nature of their mission, these Europeans were not only obliged to recognize and comprehend the basic social systems of the natives but also to familiarize themselves with native ways, and even to adapt to them to a degree, in order to be able to communicate with the potential converts. To learn the native language, for instance, entailed an adaptation to an enormous system of inherited signs, rules, and shared idioms.

Hence the paradoxical situation of the missionary observers: on the one hand, their European-manufactured theory of unrestrained desire supposedly dominating the savage life; and on the other, their own increasing entanglement in the "web of significance" that was the native way of life but, in a certain sense, was not supposed to exist. Even in the face of this contradiction, however, the missionaries were not free to abandon the theory that portrayed the savage as the epitome of indomitable desire bereft of organized sociability, not only because this

view was sanctioned by their ecclesiastic authority but also, and most important, because the veracity of the theory was the precondition of their very mission, which was to save the savages from the anarchy of natural desire. Seen in this way, it is evident that this paradox of the missionaries' position was essentially an epistemological problem, a logical disharmony disturbing their inherited ideology of cognition. But this dilemma is not readily recognizable as such in the missionaries' own writing because, as Herbert suggests, this incongruity was experienced or expressed "not as uncertainty about principles of research ... but as a seemingly unresolvable moral and emotional predicament" (1991, 162).

Accordingly, it appears, the missionaries' response to this moral predicament was also akin to the traditional religious discipline of body and soul: active diminution of the observing self to the point of near invisibility, and, conversely, almost morbid heightening of the faculty of perception. It is as though they hoped and believed that the hallucinatory vividness of the extraordinarily detailed observations amassed over a sustained period could finally overwhelm and completely inundate the potentially problematic dimension of the observer, reducing his/her position to near nothing under the deluge of "facts." Whether or not this novel form of self-denial afforded any moral comfort, missionary observers of what were later to be called "primitive cultures" were engaged, unawares, in "an extravagantly risky experiment with modern modes of thought ... in a project amounting to the invention of a new subjectivity" (Herbert 1991, 156). The total immersion in the sea of alien life, and thus to some degree participation in such a life, was a precondition of this new mode of observation, and it entailed an extraordinary crisis of perception, with an imminent danger of counter-conversion. The discipline of reducing the problematic self to the minimal point of seeing eye, or invisible observer, and the concomitant amplification of vigilance resulted in the voluminous accumulation of sharply focused, high-resolution images and records of what was observed—images and records that seem to stand all on their own with their intrinsic power of self-evidence and self-authentication. In short, their notations seem to present themselves as a direct recording of incontrovertible facts, independent of the material dimension and the historical circumstances of the observing body. The minutiae of the data thus appear to silence the "unresolvable moral and emotional predicament" in which the observer was necessarily embroiled.

This hyperinvestment in the eyewitness and in the power of self-evidence attributed to the object/phenomenon described, and the concomitant erasure of the materiality of the observer, suggests Herbert, produced the prototype of the so-called participant observer, the uniquely valorized subject position of modern ethnographic science. But if there is a continuity between the missionaries' self-immersion in the starkness of facts and the twentieth-century anthropologists' insistence on the absolute efficacy of participant observation, what is the comparable ambivalence or anxiety underlying the position of the modern anthropologist? What, in other words, is the epistemological disharmony or contradiction inherent in the ideology of anthropological observation analogous to the missionaries' predicament at the observation of the allegedly lawless savage?

According to Herbert, the predicament of the modern anthropologists ultimately stems from the same root as the missionary observers'. In fact, the seemingly scandalous comparison between the prescientific and the scientific ethnographies is useful precisely because the case of earlier, religiously engaged ethnographic observers illumines the moral and epistemological predicament of the European observer in primitive society ... with an anguish of frankness that throws strong light on the academic complacencies of a later era. It reveals the secret ... not only that the ethnographic and relativistic doctrine of culture was not invented out of thin air by a high-minded caste of disinterested professional researchers, but such a doctrine bears from its inception the mark of almost fatal self-contradiction. (1991, 155)

For the newer generation of empirically oriented anthropologists from Malinowski to Geertz, the precise location of the intelligible pattern, order, or system of "culture as a complex whole" has been an ever present, seemingly irresolvable problem. Is this "pattern" of culture something that exists "out there," so to speak, "in the things themselves," or is it in the mind of the observer? No unequivocal answer to this flat-footed question is possible, however, because the ethnographer cannot relinquish either pole of this experience. While it is acknowledged that such a system or pattern is not immediately present in the things observed but ultimately made comprehensible and representable only in the work of the ethnographer after an elaborate analysis, the very principle of ethnography as an objective science demands that its truth finally reside in the things observed and not in the theoretic mind of the observer. On the heels of this admission, it is emphatically claimed that such a truth becomes discernible in the actuality of things themselves only from a very specific, highly disciplined point of observation. But if so, "culture as a meaningful, complex whole" must be an entity whose cognitive reality is entirely dependent on this especially constructed standpoint and, by implication, on the particular theory of perception and the ideology of empirical notation that supports the authority of such an Archimedean point. The idea of culture, therefore, turns out to be more than a mere concept; it is an argument, a theoretical object that comes with a certain discipline, persuasions, and admonitions. As Herbert puts it, the formalized idea of culture emerges as a gloss on the Malinowskian research method, "culture" being defined in effect as that which can only be perceived by personal immersion in an alien society and can only be represented by a notation of the seemingly insignificant so detailed as to constitute a new mode of awareness (and of prose style). From the first, the culture thesis seems to crystallize in this fashion around the solitary figure of the ethnographer executing a program. (1991, 163)

In sum, the reality of "culture as a complex whole," its intelligibility to the disciplined observer, and, in fact, all that is vested in the so-called anthropological notion of culture is contingent on the singular point of participant observation and the vigilantly empiricist prose generated from that position. Once the staying power supposedly endemic to the seat of observation is questioned or hypothetically denied, once the heightened rhetoric of empirical reality and self-evidence of data (with all the moralizing phrases that go into this rhetoric) is relaxed, and once the position of the observer ceases to be supercharged-or, in psychoanalytic terms, hypercathected and fetishized-the gossamer reality of the "complex whole" will likely begin to appear no more substantial than the phrase itself.

IV - Beyond the Hermeneutics of Culture

It remains to consider briefly some recent perspectives on the question of culture that are largely critical of the hitherto dominant, hermeneutical assumptions. The domain of academic and intellectual practice in which these critical tendencies are most prominent may be the widely interdisciplinary field variously called "cultural studies," "cultural criticism," "critical theory," or sometimes just "theory." The following is frequently asked: Since every existing department of humanities and social sciences can be said to be an enterprise to "study culture" in one aspect or another, what could "cultural studies" possibly be other than all of these traditional disciplines combined, perhaps with a few not so traditional areas of inquiry added? This common expression of confusion may be a useful place to begin considering how these new perspectives on culture are situated in relation to the established organization of knowledge in human sciences or what might be collectively called-to the extent that these established disciplines have been influenced or dominated by hermeneutical assumptions as embodied in the idea of culture-cultural hermeneutics.

It is notable that the trajectory for much of the counterhermeneutical moves in cultural studies has been charted by theorists studying literature. For this reason above all, the discipline of literary studies has been and continues to be an important component in the development of cultural studies, some would say despite the preponderant focus on so-called high culture. For the last several decades, the major trends in literary criticism have dislodged the conception of literary interpretation as an enterprise geared toward the recovery of the author's life-world or penetration into its genius; instead they have focused on developing rigorous rhetorical readings. As a rule these new schools of literary studies make the point of paying meticulous attention to the material properties of the text, such as the rhetorical apparatuses of language; figures and tropes; and social technologies of production, circulation, and reception of the text-as opposed to the more ideational meaning supposedly hidden or contained in the text.

These interpretive strategies are often called by the simple name "close reading." This is a plainly descriptive phrase but not entirely informative of its counterconventional orientation. Indeed, much of the confusion about cultural studies and what is more commonly referred to in literary studies simply as "theory" seems to stem from the fact that a surprisingly large number of scholars and writers who are not themselves regular practitioners of literary analysis continue to assume that these interpretive strategies-including psychoanalysis, structuralism, and poststructuralism-are merely more advanced forms of hermeneutics in the conventional sense. In addition to literary studies, various other types of scholarship also challenge the dominant hermeneutical paradigm for the study of culture and its objectivist ideology epitomized by cultural anthropology and history of religions, as well as orthodox historical and literary studies. A study of popular culture, for instance, does not merely add to or fill the gap left by the traditional scholarship fixated on high culture; it often has the effect of questioning, contesting, and exposing the unavowed interests inherent in the established organization of knowledge and system of valuation, which is supposed to be objective and value-free. Studies of various media-including photography, film, and other representational and reproductive technologies-eschew the hermeneutical obsession with the nonmaterial; symbolic, or spiritual content of a body of work and change the nature of scholarly attention by placing a greater emphasis on the materiality of its medium (Kittler 1990). Museum studies-which examine the important modern institution whose primary function is the representation of cultures-have been effective in analyzing the intricate connections between the seemingly objective, scientific, and disinterested cultural representation on the one hand, and the elemental forms of value-laden, desire-driven transactions such as acquisition, appropriation, aestheticized exhibition, and eroticized consumption of the material bodies and objects native to foreign or colonized territories on the other (Haraway 1989; Karp and Lavine 1991; Duncan 1995).

Colonial and postcolonial studies, meanwhile, have done much to illumine the specific ways in which culture as an object of knowledge and of representation emerged inextricably intertwined with the process of colonization. Some of these works demonstrate that what we customarily take to be a defining characteristic of a certain culture-caste in India, for example-was not really an indigenous tradition that had existed in the non-Western society prior to contact with the West but was either invented or developed into what it is today over the course of the colonial process (Dirks 1992; Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Some historians have put these insights in a more general form and have argued that the very notion of a particular culture as something clearly alien and distinct from the European civilization originated precisely from the condition of Western-non-Western contact, that is, from the condition of hybridity. They argue that something like a so-called traditional culture came to be projected retrospectively as that which defines the non-West in essence, and that this projection has been broadly instrumental in the ongoing contentious "contact" that is colonization. What is posited as a "pure" alien culture,

like the notion of "pure race," they suggest, is but an ideological fiction. Cultural contact and hybridity are the primary conditions from which these fictions of pristine cultures originate (Young 1995; Thomas 1994).

Two of the most important contributions made by literary scholars to the critical investigation of cultural representation are the above-mentioned works by Raymond Williams and Christopher Herbert. These studies demonstrate that culture has been posited and advocated, rather than discovered and named, as a universal category of science, a body of work, or a system of values, which in itself supposedly possesses permanent objective validity transcending individual, class, regional, or parochial interests. They also show that the emergence and further development of the idea of culture have been inextricably bound to the moral and cognitive problems keenly felt at various historical moments. The culture idea is therefore less a conceptual tool than a bundle of arguments, moral persuasions, in brief, an icon of a certain epistemological position we are persuaded to assume. As such, the idea embodies certain highly interested attitudes. This notwithstanding, since the ideal of objectivity and transcendence beyond the personal is paramount in the culture discourse of both literary and anthropological traditions, the interests and attitudes actually animating and energizing the idea of culture are largely disavowed; they become palpable only through the labor of critical analysis. For this reason, although the historiography of a concept is not typical of the works in cultural studies generally, investigations by Williams, Herbert, and others like them have contributed significantly to the critical objectives of cultural studies.

There are, however, some common retorts against this kind of intellectual history. One protesting argument comes in the form of a reminder that, however significant and portentous the modern transformation of the concept of culture might have been, culture in the sense of certain civic training and nurture is not completely a modern invention but most assuredly has its roots and precedents in earlier times. More seriously, it might be protested that there is something monolithic and imperious about the very notion of modernity that is supposed to denote such an overwhelming and fundamental shift in the course of history. How much objective validity should be attributed to the claim that all these transformations somehow began in the late eighteenth century? This line of protest is worthy of attention if only for its power to warn against a certain (mis)construal: we would likely run into serious problems if we were to take the thesis about the modern emergence of the culture idea as an absolute historical claim, instead of a strategic one. For, in the last analysis, the significant contribution Williams's and Herbert's works make is not a discovery concerning when, where, and under what circumstances the idea of culture originated. Rather, the value of genealogical analyses such as these resides in what they would allow us to see when a concept so thoroughly ingrained in our everyday discourse (and therefore made largely invisible) is denaturalized and suspended before our eyes as an object of scrutiny. A heuristically simplified historical thesis is sometimes effective in procuring such a strategic condition favorable for critical analysis.

Another criticism to be anticipated is the complaint that a study such as Williams's or Herbert's is nothing more than a history of an idea and is therefore not about the actual, empirical reality of culture. By overvaluing this type of analysis, a critic would say, we run the risk of reducing the historical and empirical issues to a matter of Western or Western-generated ideas. Although a warning against idealist tendencies is generally valuable, this particular line of protest is in this context more reactive than responsive, because it is tantamount to reasserting the reality of culture as something pregiven, as something naturally real over and above the "mere concept" of it. As we have seen from these studies, however, there is nothing mere about this concept, or about the ways in which some real consequences follow when we wield it in our daily politics at all levels.

What is barely submerged in this murmur of protests and counterarguments is the question of what it means to be historical. For reasons that are not altogether simple or apparent, history has become one thing that no one, it seems, wants to be accused of forgetting or ignoring. To do so in the present mores amounts to losing touch with such duty-awakening exigencies as the materiality of life itself, the real people, one's own situatedness, and so on. The moral imperative of "being historical" is so great that the student of culture of any persuasion is immediately made to feel answerable. What is not at all clear and is not even acknowledged as such is that there is a tremendous disagreement-or perhaps it is more accurate to say confusion-about how this demand of the real might be met, and how the order of the historical/material/real is constituted for us, not for always, but here and now.

This is to suggest that a certain theoretically inflected wing of cultural studies has contributed to the explosive situation of the current state of human sciences precisely because it has directly challenged the assumptions and strategies of traditional historiography established in the nineteenth century and still dominant today, or what might be roundly termed old and new (but perhaps not so new) historicism. What if "being historical" is not a matter of recovering and reconstructing a richly nuanced narrative truth, full of "thick descriptions," of a certain wholeness of a past, but instead is a matter of more or less outwitting such a compelling narrative truth and letting some forgotten moments and contours of the past "flare up," as Walter Benjamin would say, in order to illumine and decompose the compulsive narrativity of history that dictates the ideology of the present?

The posthermeneutical moment of cultural studies is also an anti historicist (and antivulgar materialist) moment. And this is the principal reason Benjamin a figure rather difficult to classify, who might arguably be called a kabalistic Marxist, dialectical materialist literary critic and philosopher, who wrote not only about high modernist art and new media but also about the streets of Paris, children's books, books written by the insane, etc.-has been an important re source for today's practice of cultural studies and continues to be a significant marker for a new direction in the study of culture.

