

CHAPTER FOUR

New Historicism: Disaffected Subjects

He that goeth about to persuade a multitude, that they are not so well governed as they ought to be, shall never want attentive and favourable hearers. . . . And because such as openly reprove supposed disorders of state are taken for principal friends to the common benefit of all, and for men that carry singular freedom of mind; under this fair and plausible colour whatsoever they utter passeth for good and current.

Richard Hooker¹

After the resolutely ahistorical attitude of deconstruction, its relentless attempt to apply the same sceptical disintegrating reading techniques to texts of all periods, irrespective of context or design, any historical approach to literature may seem welcome. A school of critics practising a 'new historicism' will surely have to accept that language can have a determinate meaning, can refer to a known reality, otherwise it would have to reject all historical documents as equally uncertain. And a 'new' historicism, which promises to avoid the faults of the old one — that is something to which everyone who accepts the historical dimension of human experience can look forward. The mere name of this type of criticism will make many readers favourably disposed towards it from the outset.

But the name itself, to start with, turns out to be extremely vague. Although the phrase was apparently first used in 1980,² its vogue as a critical label dates from 1982, when Stephen Greenblatt (as he reports), having 'collected a bunch of essays' for a journal called *Genre*, 'out of a kind of desperation to get the introduction done, . . . wrote that the essays represented something I called a "new historicism"'. Wickedly disclaiming any abilities in self-publicity ('I've never been very good at making up advertising phrases of this kind'), Greenblatt professes to feel 'giddy with amazement' at its success (Greenblatt 1990, p. 146). Greenblatt went on to describe it as a critical 'practice — a practice rather than a doctrine, since as far as I can tell (and I should be the one to know) it's no doctrine at all' (*ibid.*) 'Does this mean', he asks, 'that new historicism is a completely empty term, its relative success due entirely to the felicitous conjunction of two marketable signs: "new" and "ism"?' (*ibid.*, p. 3). His answer is negative, but the opinion is often expressed that it 'remains a phrase without an adequate referent' (Veesser 1989, p. x). Historicism itself is a notoriously loose concept,³ many things to many people, never

properly distinguished from the German term *Historismus* (Thomas 1989, pp. 182–92). To some users it has 'signified reductionism, present-mindedness, and teleology' (Fox-Genovese 1989, p. 215). To others, lexicographers included, it can mean '1. The belief that processes are at work in history that man can do little to alter. 2. The theory that the historian must avoid all value judgments in his study of past periods or former cultures. 3. Veneration of the past or of tradition.' Greenblatt, having made that quotation from the *American Heritage Dictionary*, tries to subvert it: 'Most of the writing labelled new historicist, and certainly my own work, has set itself resolutely against each of these positions' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 164). However, as we shall see, the first of these points does apply, in that version of history put about by Michel Foucault.

Although eluding exact definition, the avowed success of New Historicism means that it has been the subject of intense discussion within its brief life so far (hardly a decade as I pen these words). Seldom, if ever, has a new and relatively small critical movement (its acknowledged practitioners barely reach a dozen) provoked so much heated discussion in so short a time, with so small a body of achieved work. Critics and commentators on New Historicism indeed already outnumber the practitioners,⁴ proof again of the latent panic in the contemporary cultural scene, as each 'latest trend' has to be spotted, identified, celebrated, or attacked. Many of the evaluations so far published come from rival groups, feminists, deconstructionists, cultural materialists . . . , each writer anxious to align with, or reject, whatever aspect fits or jibes with their own practice. We are not surprised that a deconstructionist critic should judge New Historicism to be 'a sort of academic media hype mounted against deconstruction' (Spivak 1989, p. 280), with the dispute between the two groups a 'turf battle'. But the suspicion of hype affects even those aligned with this group, such as Louis Montrose, who wryly and deprecatingly refers to it as 'a term appealing to our commodifying cult of the new', representing that 'acceleration in the forgetting of history which seems to characterize an increasingly technocratic and future-oriented academy and society'.⁵ In the by now world-wide disease of 'hype' in advertising, the term 'new' is a signal to the consumer that conveys both an invitation and a warning: 'You must buy this model, unless you want to feel superseded'. It is hard not to relate the consumer-industry-induced stigma of owning an out-of-date automobile or hi-fi, last season's model, to the fear of obsolescence so rife in literary critical circles today.⁶ This new school has barely come to prominence before the speculations over its waning or demise begin to appear: 'so swiftly do our paradigms now seem to shift' (Felperin 1990, p. 142; Montrose 1989, p. 18).

The hype has not, however, managed to silence some rather severe reactions, which have judged the New Historicism neither new nor historical. Howard Felperin has argued that it is in fact continuous with 'older habits of thought to which it is overtly opposed' (Felperin 1990, p. 143),

and that Greenblatt's early work is not essentially different from that of E.M.W. Tillyard (pp. 149–50), who has become the unfortunate butt of avant-garde literary critics. (A rather safe target, which may be attacked without danger.) 'American New Historicism', he concludes, 'is not all that "new"', and is 'not genuinely *historical* or seriously political either' (p. 155). Edward Pechter had also pointed out that Greenblatt's assumption that the literary text is determined by 'its ideological and historical situation' is in effect the same procedure as Tillyard's,⁷ and his analyses of Greenblatt's essays on *King Lear* and *Henry IV* argue for a continuity of method (Pechter 1987, pp. 293–4). Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, a social historian with wider than literary interests, has commented that

the emphasis on newness bespeaks the central paradox that informs the new historicism as a project: Notwithstanding some notable exceptions, it is not very historical. It is especially not self-critically or self-reflexively historical. (Fox-Genovese 1989, p. 214)

Despite their professedly radical goals, she holds, its practitioners 'implicitly perpetuate the dubious politics of what many are calling our society of information' (*ibid.*, pp. 220–1). This comment, in turn, endorses Gerald Graff's diagnosis of the remarkably accelerating rate 'at which a critical methodology goes from being celebrated as revolutionary to being condemned as complicitous. Whereas it took several years before one heard that deconstruction was really an extension of the establishment, it took only a few months for this charge to be made about the new historicism' (Graff 1989, pp. 174–5).⁸

What concerns me is not whether a critical approach is new or old, but how good it is, in particular when applied to Shakespeare. I have cited some accounts of New Historicism to show that the very identity of this approach, as well as its value, are at present hotly disputed. Historians of contemporary culture have the advantages of nearness to their topic, but they notoriously lack an overview. I shall try to outline some common attributes of this school, amorphous though it yet seems, well aware that the landscape may change very quickly. Then I shall discuss some of the Shakespeare criticism it has produced, as representing at any rate the first phase of what is claimed to be the 'turn away from the formal, decontextualized analysis that dominate[d] new criticism' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 163). 'New' — such is the paucity of modern critical vocabulary, referring to a school of criticism flourishing in the 1940s and 50s, which is sometimes said to have reacted against historical criticism. (I think it could be shown that most of the 'New Critics' in fact worked inside a historical framework, and had a far better sense of period and genre than those who claim to have superseded them.)

I

New Historicism can certainly be distinguished from 'old' (that is, any earlier historical approach or any contemporary one that does not share its stake in Current Literary Theory), in that it is a product of the 1960s upheaval leading to post-structuralism. Not that New Historicists can afford to accept the whole Derridian indeterminacy-of-language-and-meaning thesis, of course: they draw just as much from that particular line as suits them.⁹ They also draw on Lacan, occasionally, and on Althusser and his followers discussed in Chapter 7 below. Barthes is cited for the death of the author idea, but not for semiology, nor for his elaborate system of codes. The major acknowledged inspiration is Foucault,¹⁰ and Greenblatt is given to observing in a rather proprietorial manner on the advantages of having had him around Berkeley in the last few years of his life (Greenblatt 1990, pp. 3, 146–7). Greenblatt acknowledges a further debt to 'European (and especially French) anthropological and social theorists' (*ibid.*, pp. 146–7), particularly Pierre Bourdieu, but has also drawn on the American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (*ibid.*, pp. 26, 28–9). The mere recital of these names opens up a vast area of potential influence, which needs to be examined more closely.

The biggest influence, generally recognised, is that of Foucault, in various phases of his work. The earlier Foucault, as we have seen him in *L'Archéologie du savoir* (1969), was preoccupied with discourse as an anonymous, depersonalised system, deprived of a subject or author, circulating through 'sites' of power, appropriation and contestation. His ideas are still dominant in a recent account of 'The Poetics and Politics of Culture' (Montrose 1989). Louis Montrose invokes 'the multiplicity of unstable, variously conjoined and conflicting discourses' in post-structuralist theory (p. 16), claims that New Historicism is 'new' in refusing 'to posit and privilege a unified and autonomous individual — whether an Author or a Work — to be set against a social or literary background' (p. 18); defines it 'as a terminological site of intense debate and critique, of multiple appropriations and contestations within the ideological field of Renaissance studies . . .' (p. 19); sees individuals as enduring a process of 'subjectification . . . constraining them within — *subjecting them to* — social networks and cultural codes that ultimately exceed their comprehension or control' (p. 21 and note 12, acknowledging a specific debt to Foucault); and so on through a by now familiar litany of Foucauldian jargon, from 'social positionalities', 'shifting conjunctures', and 'conceptual sites within the ideological field from which the dominant can be contested' (p. 22), to 'the ideological analysis of discursive *practices*' (p. 26).

This whole abstract panoply of concepts, formulated by Foucault in the 1960s, attempting to avoid all that he saw as problematic in 'humanist' criticism but merely introducing new and more resistant problems, continues to be invoked by younger critics writing about the Renaissance in

the 1990s. Some of them specialise in drama, where — the ordinary reader might feel — the remoteness and inappropriateness of such abstractions would be instantly apparent the moment Iago, Falstaff, or Volpone walked on to the stage. Fox-Genovese's criticism of New Historicists for not being 'self-critically or self-reflexively historical' is justified in that none of them seems to have considered to what extent this eclectic post-structuralist system might be appropriate for Renaissance literature, or just anachronistic. Montrose, who has written some essays on pastoral held up as an example of this school at its best,¹¹ seems more concerned in this essay to display his awareness of theoretical positions 'now' (pp. 22, 23) — virtually none of the works he cites dates from before 1980. For a critical school so conscious of its orientation vis-à-vis other non-historical approaches, so concerned with redefining, as Fredric Jameson puts it, "our relationship to the past, . . . our possibility of understanding the latter's monuments, artifacts, and traces" (cit. Thomas 1989, p. 182), not to have considered whether its own ideology is appropriate to the historical task it aims to perform, is surprising and disappointing.

New Historicism, like so many branches of contemporary criticism, is more interested in present theories than in the past. Hence the influence of Foucault's middle period work on power and knowledge, on discipline and punishment, as he moved from studying hospitals and clinics to prisons — as if the whole of human society consisted of those who devised and administered repressive institutions and those who suffered from them. As many former admirers of Foucault protested, once the direction of his development became clearer, his concept of power was all-embracing but anonymous and passive.¹² He saw its oppressive presence everywhere, yet refused to specify the detail of its working, institutionally or individually, and he explicitly rejected any interest in reforming or transforming power structures.¹³ The effect of Foucault's legacy on New Historicism is a curious blend of vagueness (no specific or detailed analyses are attempted, since there are no models to work from), a sense of unidentified oppression verging on paranoia, and the feeling of complicity—exhilarating or disturbing. As several commentators have shown (Graff 1989, p. 169; Pecora 1989, pp. 247, 267), particularly influential on New Historicism was Foucault's insistence that 'knowledge could not avoid its complicity with structures of power in whose language it would have no choice but to speak' (Pecora 1989, p. 267). As Foucault put it in *Discipline and Punish*, 'there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations' (cit. *ibid.*, p. 276 note 53). Logicians might object that this is to give the terms 'knowledge' and 'power' such a vast application as to be meaningless, but the totalisation of that utterance was precisely its attraction (like other arbitrary pronouncements of Lacan, Derrida, Althusser, de Man, the categorical assertion is rhetorically effective, as we know). As a formula, it resembles Barthes's notion of

language as inherently involving one in power relations, even when thought silently or written down privately, and it recalls Derrida's insistence that deconstruction could not escape from the weaknesses of the system that it had to use in order to denounce. All three assertions make everyone guilty, caught in an inescapable double-bind. H. Aram Veeseer, editor of an anthology of twenty essays on New Historicism, in an introduction notable neither for clarity nor historical accuracy,¹⁴ lists some 'key assumptions' of New Historicism, two of which have the same linguistic structure: 'every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes' (Veeseer 1989, p. xi, nos. 2 and 5). We are trapped in our own systems.

Foucault's ideas on power and complicity lie behind one of the most commented-on features of New Historicist ideology and methodology, the identification of a symbiotic relationship, so to speak, between subversion and containment. That is, certain forces in society attempt to 'subvert' the status quo, which responds by 'containing' them. So the 'Establishment' or 'Government' can be seen as allowing subversion to emerge, simply in order to contain it; or even creating subversion in the first place. Foucault is the explicit source for the belief that the 'dominant authority' itself 'produces elements of apparent subversion or transgression as a means of maintaining its control' (Pechter 1987, pp. 296–7). New Historicists like to see the Elizabethan theatre itself, Walter Cohen observes, as 'a contradictory institution', both an 'extension of authority and a subversion of it; a representation of state power and a contestation of its ideology' (Cohen 1987, pp. 34–5). Their interest in power means that much New Historicist writing has been concerned with the English court, especially that of James I, and with genres that could be directed towards the ruler, such as pastoral and the masque.¹⁵ Although certainly an important factor in English literary and intellectual history, the court has too often been interpreted in glib categories derived from Norbert Elias, or selectively read to echo New Historicist concerns. As J. Leeds Barroll has recently shown, their attempt to 'implicate drama in the whole fabric of the new King's theory, policy and practice', including the claims that James "wanted the theatrical companies under royal patronage because he believed in the efficacy of theater as an attribute of royal authority", have absolutely no historical justification (Barroll 1988, pp. 454–5). James in fact expressed the usual moralistic disapproval of actors, and contemporary accounts (setting aside his drinking bouts!) record his attendance at state entertainments without any particular pleasure. Indeed, Barroll's careful documentation proves that over the years James attended fewer and fewer performances, much preferring hunting (*ibid.*, pp. 455–61). The New Historicists, as he puts it, 'constricted by old narratives that tell a traditional story of the drama in a special relationship to the state or to the person of the monarch' — albeit, I add, a story now used to cast suspicion on power and its legitimising processes — have turned their own

'story-making propensities' and 'causal constructs' into supposed facts (pp. 461–3). Barroll's conclusion, which must evoke wide agreement, is that

the documents . . . do not allow us to infer a narrative in which the monarch as authority-figure views drama as a special and vital medium with potentialities for subversion, or for the enhancement of the royal image. . . . (p. 463)

Bent on creating this myth of royal involvement in the subversion-and-containment pattern, the New Historicists have also overlooked the fact that the impulse to give the drama and masques greater prominence at court derived in fact from women, from Queen Anna of Denmark and the countesses who actually 'sponsored and enacted the masques Ben Jonson is so often said to have written for King James'. Recent, 'patriarchically inclined' criticism focussing on the King has overlooked the 'powerful women' who were 'an obvious source of power and patronage' (pp. 463–4).

Evidently the all-absorbing concern for the 'subversion-and-containment' model can blind one to other important aspects of literary and social history. The deeper problem is that this formula, like Foucault's thesis itself, is so shapeless and undifferentiated as to 'explain' any event. In effect, every play which comes to a coherent conclusion, and ends neither in uproar, nor advocating anarchy or the burning of London, can be said on Foucault's principles to 'enact order' and hence 'support state power' — if you are ready to agree that all events other than riots can be seen as legitimising the state. Cohen fairly objects to the New Historicists' unsystematic handling of Foucault's thesis, their 'failure to specify the necessary and sufficient conditions for either containment or subversion' (Cohen 1987, pp. 35–6), while Jean Howard has made an acute critique of the 'subversion and contestation' model, posing six questions that need to be answered by the critics relying on it (Howard 1986, p. 35). Recently one of their own number has warned that

the terms in which the problem of ideology has been posed and is now circulating in Renaissance literary studies — namely as an opposition between 'containment' and 'subversion' — are so reductive, polarized, and undynamic as to be of little or no conceptual value. (Montrose 1989, p. 22)

Montrose is obviously right, and we may well agree that a model which allowed for 'collective and individual agency' and for two-way movement would be preferable.

But it is significant that Montrose's misgivings are theoretical, not historical, nor literary-critical. That is, he considers neither the historical appropriateness of the model for Elizabethan and Jacobean society, nor what happens to works of literature when read in these terms. For the first point, without citing a large body of historical evidence, the causes of

social unrest in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are surely common knowledge: shortage of food, high inflation, worries about the succession, fears of foreign invasion or religious change. The groups most affected by these conditions occasionally uttered their grievances, but were obviously not manipulated into doing so by a hypocritical government. For the second point, the effect of the subversion-containment pattern on New Historicist literary criticism has been to reinforce its general suspicion of authority, and to express solidarity with anyone who challenges it. In their writings 'subversive', 'anarchic', or — in that aestheticisation of disorder mechanically borrowed from Bakhtin — 'carnavalesque' characters, such as the rebel Jack Cade in *2 Henry VI*, Falstaff and Pistol in the *Henry IV* plays, Caliban in *The Tempest*, are sympathised or identified with, those who put them down are booed and hissed. This celebration of subversion (endorsed also by old and new Marxist critics, as we shall see in Chapter 7), often takes the form of old-fashioned character criticism, ignoring both the rationale for civic order and the structure of the play.

The politicisation of New Historicists is widely acknowledged to be the consequence of their having grown up in America during the 1960s. As Catherine Gallagher observes, in the course of a sensitive intellectual and political autobiography of these years, 'the importance of such slogans as "serve the people"' was that "'the people" was a category designed to include oneself and anyone else content to join a decentered coalition of disaffected groups' (Gallagher 1989, p. 40). Identification with marginalised groups in literature of the Renaissance was somehow seen as expressing solidarity with their counterparts today; attacking Henry V or Prospero was the same kind of activity as attacking President Reagan or the White House. Greenblatt declares that

my own critical practice and that of many others associated with new historicism was decisively shaped by the American 1960s and early 70s, and especially by the opposition to the Vietnam War. Writing that was not engaged, that withheld judgements, that failed to connect the present with the past seemed worthless. Such connection could be made either by analogy or causality; that is, a particular set of historical circumstances could be represented in such a way as to bring out homologies with aspects of the present or, alternatively, those circumstances could be analyzed as the generative forces that led to the modern condition. (Greenblatt 1990, p. 167)

In either mode, he adds, 'value judgments were implicated', for neutrality would be 'itself a political position, a decision to support the official policies in both the state and the academy'. Studying 'the culture of sixteenth-century England', then, was not 'an escape from the turmoil of the present', but 'a mode of relation' between past and present that revealed the 'unsettling historical genealogy of the very judgments I was making' (*ibid.*).

I have quoted that passage at length because it will link up with several issues to be discussed in New Historicist Shakespeare criticism. The first and obvious comment to be made is that such a voluntary acceptance of politicisation and polarisation puts the writer in a state of crisis: as Councillor Mikhulin, the bureaucrat of Tsarist autocracy puts it in *Under Western Eyes*, 'abstention, reserve, in certain situations, come very near to political crime'.¹⁶ The pressure to display political engagement can induce feelings of guilt and fear in the writer who realises that he has not demonstrated in his writing that he is on the 'right' side now, and such felt pressures can make him display his political correctness however unsuitable the topic may be. ('How am I doing? Is this account of Lyly sufficiently politically radical?') It also raises the crucial methodological issue of how we relate to the past, and how we can write history. Here, too, Foucault's influence has been felt, generating a peculiar anomaly, as Lentricchia has shown, by his 'insistence that historians cannot objectively represent the past because they cannot know and therefore put distance between themselves and the circumstances which produced and disciplined them as social beings enmeshed in the practice of a historical *discipline*' (Lentricchia 1988, p. 95; 1989, p. 237). Greenblatt himself recorded 'the "impossibility of fully reconstructing and reentering the culture of the sixteenth century, of leaving behind one's own situation"', in the process bidding 'elegiac farewell', as Lentricchia ironically comments, to such values as 'objectivity, determinacy, and completeness in historical interpretation', while at the same time shifting the apology 'into a subtle claim to virtue' (*ibid.*, pp. 96; 238). It is this sense of superior knowledge, of having seen through the illusions of previous ages, that marks so much of Current Literary Theory. Yet Foucault's model has been anything but liberating. As Brook Thomas points out,

new historicists have been strongly influenced by Foucault's argument that constructions of the past are inevitably implicated in present networks of power and domination and thus never disinterested. That insight, however, catches new historicists in a seemingly unresolvable contradiction. The authority of a new historicism rests on the faith that knowledge of the past matters for the present. To admit that a history is not an account of how it really was but a present construction intervening into current political debate seems to undermine that authority. (Thomas 1989, p. 201)

At one level there is nothing new in Foucault's argument. Thomas shows that the realisation that 'historians do not objectively and scientifically recover the past but construct it from a present perspective' was generally recognised at the beginning of this century, if not before (*ibid.*, p. 195). Foucault's insistence on history being 'a present construction intervening into current political debate' is new, however, and accounts for the fact that so much New Historical writing cannot ever forget the present and its

discontents. What I mean is that while no-one I know (or could take seriously), imagines they can 'fully' re-enter a past culture, or achieve absolute disinterestedness, the goal of reconstructing the past as an imaginative activity based on all kinds of historical evidence — charters, myths, political institutions, religious and social practices, trade-routes, family history, science, music, medicine — does demand at some points the ability to suppress or at least control present attitudes, present expectations. We have to be able, at certain key points, to keep ourselves out of the picture. The relevant concept (which I don't recall ever seeing discussed by New Historicists) is anachronism. The crucial distinction has been made by the sociologist W.G. Runciman, namely that it is not 'necessarily illegitimate to apply to other people's behaviour theoretical terms which they neither would nor could have applied to it themselves', since (I add) we cannot forego the enormous development in analytical power that has been achieved in literary, historical, and philosophical writing since the Renaissance. 'It is illegitimate only if the application of such terms assumes that they did when they didn't — as, for instance, imputing a choice to some person in the past in terms that they could never have used themselves (Runciman 1983, p. 14). It seems to me, and others, that New Historicism is often guilty of anachronism,¹⁷ and is seldom able to suspend its own self-awareness as a critical school having an ideology that needs to assert itself, prove its validity as a system. Against this self-centred, self-validating ideology I would set Brook Thomas's paradoxical principle that 'the present has an interest in maintaining a belief in disinterested inquiry into our past' (Thomas 1989, p. 201). To give up that principle would have devastating consequences for historians.

New Historicists' concern with the past can link itself to the present, in Greenblatt's terms, 'either by analogy or causality'. What he did not declare is that in both modes the motive behind the linkage is often an indicting or incriminating one. The Renaissance state, like the modern state, so the argument goes, was built on hypocrisy and oppression; or, the origins of our corrupt society lie in 'early modern England'.¹⁸ This immediate juxtaposition of the sixteenth century (that somewhat delayed English Renaissance) with the twentieth inevitably recalls Jacob Burckhardt's similar linking of fifteenth-century Italy and nineteenth-century Europe. Burckhardt's (re)discovery of the Renaissance was a great act of historical imagination, but it was bought at a price. In linking classical antiquity to the Renaissance he virtually omitted, or downplayed the Middle Ages; and in seeing the Renaissance as the origin of the modern state he left out an embarrassingly large number of intervening historical factors, such as the scientific revolution, the Enlightenment, the Romantic movement, secularisation, urbanisation, the Industrial Revolution, and much else. Those who celebrate Burckhardt as a pioneer are also aware of his shortcomings.¹⁹ Greenblatt is in effect turning the tables on Burckhardt, and those who admire him, by saying: 'yes, the Renaissance is like the

modern world: aren't they both awful?" He candidly admits as much in a recent essay, describing 'one of the more irritating qualities' of his literary training (at Yale) to have been 'its relentlessly celebratory character', dedicated to showing that all Elizabethan plays were 'complex wholes', and that 'great works of art were triumphs of resolution . . . , the mature expression of a single artistic intention'. (For the mid-1960s attack on this idea see the discussion of Macherey in Chapter 7.) Greenblatt then accuses his teachers of glibly linking this kind of 'formalism' to social concerns, with 'the artist's psychic integration' seen as 'the triumphant expression of a healthy, integrated community. Accounts of Shakespeare's relation to Elizabethan culture were particularly prone to this air of veneration . . .' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 168).

The fact that Greenblatt suffered from uncritical teachers marketing Renaissance culture with such enthusiastic gush is unfortunate. But his response, thirty years on, is to market another version of the Renaissance as 'like us', disintegrated, decentered. He quotes from an earlier book (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, 1980) in which he affirmed, rather portentously, that 'we are situated at the close of the cultural movement initiated in the Renaissance; the places in which our social and psychological world seems to be cracking apart are those structural joints visible when it was first constructed' (*ibid.*, p. 182 note 4). Inasmuch as Greenblatt reverses Burckhardt, he accepts the same telescoped historical model as Burckhardt, with all its faults.²⁰ Other New Historicists share this desire to display such 'cracks' in the Renaissance world. Thus Montrose complains that the extant critical tradition in English Renaissance studies reveals 'an apparently continuous tradition of religious, social and aesthetic values shared by sixteenth-century poets and twentieth-century critics'. (Let other readers try to count how many modern critics they know of who believe in Protestantism, the thirty-nine articles, the divine right of kings, the supremacy of rhetoric, and the delights of display, . . . my list is short.) In place of these 'idealizations of a Renaissance England at once ebullient and ordered', Montrose invokes 'surviving documentary evidence of Elizabethan religious, economic, social and domestic violence, instability, and heterodoxy' (Montrose 1989, p. 24). Although this is another example of that familiar tactic in Current Literary Theory, erecting a straw man embodying a supposedly ridiculous view and then rushing to the opposite extreme, we can certainly grant Montrose some of his case.

Yet the New Historicist, rooted in his present sense of dislocation, may be projecting these fissures on to the past. Categorical assertions, so far, substitute for detailed analysis or weighing of the evidence on either side. Jean Howard has emphasized the ways in which New Historicism expresses some preoccupations of 'postmodern Culture' — 'self-reflexivity, and a self-consciousness about the tenuous solidity of human identity'. All these concerns are now 'discovered' in the Renaissance (Howard 1986, pp. 16–17). These writers, as she understands them, 'construe the period

in terms reflecting their own sense of living inside a gap in history' (p. 17). Writing about the Renaissance, the New Historicists 'make the period intelligible, by narratives of rupture, tension, and contradiction' (*ibid.*; my italics). A case in point is *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (arguably one of the most unhistorical books in modern times), where Greenblatt professed that in all the texts he studied he could find "no moments of pure, unfettered subjectivity", the human subject always being "the ideological product of the relations of power in a particular society" (*cit.* Pechter 1987, p. 300). That is a clear instance of anachronism, for all those categories derive from Foucault, and the totalising nature of Foucault's assertion already predetermines the issue. (The power relations being all-pervasive, it doesn't matter whether you can see them or not.) Another influence on that book, Howard points out, was 'Lacan's neo-Freudian psychology with its assumption, not of a unified and autonomous self, but of a provisional and contradictory self which is the product of discourse' (Howard 1986, p. 37). It is as if a contemporary student gets the idea that, because this model of the human psyche now exists, we can re-read Renaissance texts in its light. But this is to remake the past in our own anachronistic image with a vengeance, lacking any independent control. It has not realised the necessity of 'negative instances', as Francis Bacon described them, counter-indications that invalidate facile inductive arguments based on an uncritical assemblage of evidence that would prove your case by ignoring everything else. In that sense I must agree with Howard's criticism of New Historicism as it exists so far, for 'its failure to reflect on itself', for suppressing 'any discussion of its own methodology and assumptions. It assumes answers to the very questions that should be open to debate . . .' (*ibid.*, p. 31).

II

The last theoretical issue that needs discussing concerns the relation between literary texts and their context, whether a 'socio-historical site' or a 'cultural system'. The normal distinction in modern literary history has been between text and context, where the critic reconstructs what he or she deems to be the relevant background in order to illuminate specific elements of the literary text. To do this properly demands historical knowledge, sensitivity to the text, and an awareness of the two-stage process of interpretation involved. New Historicism also reads texts in this way, but at times it can treat text and background as of equal importance, or reverse the emphasis, taking the work of literature as illuminating the background. There are obvious dangers involved from whatever direction one comes, as every experienced scholar knows, but since there are no hard-and-fast rules for historically placing a text, I for one would recom-

mend a state of open-minded scepticism. Most people, I imagine, do the same, examining the procedure, the arguments and evidence used in a book or essay, and evaluating them according to their knowledge of the text and the period. I would never dream of declaring certain procedures illicit in advance. Some books can totally transform one's notion of the relevant evidence in historiography. Fernand Braudel's *Histoire de la Méditerranée* was for me a revelation in the range of evidence it drew on and the diverse ways it integrated statistics, documents, anecdotes, aspects of geography, climate, trade patterns, and so much else.

Some aspects of the New Historicist handling of text and historical evidence do arouse misgivings, however. Howard Felperin describes the 'fundamental and far-reaching' post-structuralist strategy of New Historicism as being 'its "textualising" of history and culture in the first place, its re-framing of them as discursive constructs'. Felperin judges this move as having been 'necessary to open an appeal from the pseudo-objective "facts" of an older historical empiricism to "texts" and "discourses" now explicitly political and therefore newly reconstructible' (Felperin 1990, p. vii: this author is as lavish with inverted commas as some men with aftershave). Once again a literary critic shows himself to be hopelessly out of touch with wider cultural movements. Felperin is announcing as a recent event the programmatic rejection of history as an objective discipline that was made in the mid-1960s by Derrida and Foucault (and pushed to extremes by de Man) in their desire to attack referentiality, the 'linear model of history', subjectivity, and other targets popular in those days (Simpson 1988, pp. 725–37). In this, as in so many areas, the iconoclasts used the tactic of coercive dichotomising, 'as if there were no alternative between complete self-confidence (all information is objective) and complete agnosticism (all information is projected or undifferentiated)' (*ibid.*, p. 745). David Simpson, reviewing the various dead-ends into which the 60s masters led us, calls for a return to the notions of historical evidence and objectivity (pp. 744–7). The changes he advocates were set out ten years earlier and much more cogently by a practising historian, E.P. Thompson, with his concept of historical logic as a 'dialogue between concept and evidence'. The concept is a series of interrogative hypotheses, the evidence "'facts" . . . which certainly have a real existence'. But their determinate properties make 'only certain questions . . . appropriate', and they are, like history itself, 'necessarily . . . incomplete and imperfect'. Historical enquiry legitimately uses elaborate theories, but 'each notion, or concept, arises out of empirical engagements, and however abstract . . . its self-interrogation', it must be engaged once more 'with the determinate properties of the evidence . . .'. This whole discussion (Thompson 1978, pp. 38–50) has a cogency and depth which should convince literary critics that the 'textualisation' of history was an amusing idea that can now be abandoned, along with flared jeans and flower-pattern shirts.

In traditional enquiry, one historian states, 'the text exists as a function,

or articulation, of context' (Fox-Genovese 1989, p. 217). New Historicism sometimes abandons this relationship. As Pecora observes, it 'tries to diminish, or in certain cases to eradicate, distinctions between the "aesthetic object" per se and something called a "historical background", between one kind of "text" and another', seeing the whole of material reality as involved in a process of 'representation' (Pecora 1989, p. 243). Representation is another Foucault-derived concept (Jameson 1972, pp. 191–2), which has been adapted to an eclectic mixture of semiology and anthropology. In some current 'American new historicism', Pecora writes, "'representation has become a code word for the denial that any distinction whatsoever exists between a non-signifying "real" and some realm of cultural production that "reflects", or reflects upon it' (*ibid.*, p. 244). One consequence of collapsing this distinction is that 'what, for many historians, would be more "basic" categories such as material want and material struggle' are reduced to 'merely culturally constructed sign systems' (*ibid.*). Any notion of social injustice, oppression, or the need for reform also disappears.

The key figure in New Historicist adoption of 'cultural semiotics' is the anthropologist Clifford Geertz, in particular a single essay, 'Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture', written as a preface to a collection of his writings (Geertz 1973). Geertz applies the term 'thick description' (borrowed from Gilbert Ryle) to characterise the setting of an individual event in its appropriate cultural category. The 'object of ethnography', he writes, is to create 'a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures' through which significant human communication is 'produced, perceived, and interpreted' (p. 7). Human behaviour is 'symbolic action — action which . . . signifies' (p. 10), and culture 'consists of socially established structures of meaning' (p. 12), 'interworked systems of construable signs' or symbols (p. 14). Culture, then, 'is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be *intelligibly* — that is, *thickly* — described' (p. 14; my italics). Cultural analysis, Geertz emphasises, is always a process of interpretation, concerning what 'specific people say, what they do, what is done by them' (p. 18). I fully accept this approach to culture in terms of socially established structures of meaning, and I agree that 'the important thing about the anthropologist's findings is their complex specificness, their circumstantiality' (p. 25). Both points obviously apply to the study of literature. Although Geertz's own work has been recently attacked on both ideological and methodological grounds,²¹ I am perfectly happy to accept his invocation of 'thick description' as the best way of analysing 'the conceptual structures that inform our subjects' acts'.²²

A proper reconstruction of the 'stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures' is a major undertaking even for pre-industrial or pre-literate societies, and anyone familiar with only a cross-section of modern ethnographical

studies — Malinowski on the Trobriand Islanders, Evans-Pritchard on the Nuer, Gregory Bateson on the Naven — knows what a demanding task that can be. To attempt the same for the European Renaissance, with its complex economic structures, varieties of social stratification, elaborate techniques for the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge, would be a worthwhile but massive undertaking, and no-one can blame New Historicists for citing samples only. But the problem is, how to choose such samples, and what status to give them within the society as a whole. Commentators have long complained that the samples chosen are not representative and that they have often been misapplied. (My prior objection would be that the exponents of this method have not even attempted the methodological discussion as to what the 'stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures' would look like, and where the samples would fit.) Where Montrose proposes that New Historicism substitutes 'for the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history the synchronic text of a cultural system' (Montrose 1989, p. 17), Hayden White replies that this reconstituting of 'the historical context' as 'the cultural system' gives offence to historians in that now 'social institutions and practices, including politics, are construed as functions of this system, rather than the reverse' (White 1989, p. 294). New Historicism thus seems to be based on what White calls 'the "culturalist fallacy", which marks it as a brand of historical idealism', and is 'reductionist in a double sense: it reduces the social to the status of a function of the cultural, and then further reduces the cultural to the status of a text' (*ibid.*).

The cultural 'samples' that New Historicism brings into the foreground may be chosen at random, although some commentators see a deliberate pattern. To White their concern with the anecdotal reflects a Foucault-inspired interest in the fragmentation of 'dominant codes — social, political, cultural, psychological' (*ibid.*, p. 301). To Lentricchia the 'lengthy citations of bizarre, apparently off-center materials' at the beginning of Greenblatt's essays 'seem to promise what, in theory, new historicism, so hermeneutically savvy, isn't supposed to promise — direct access to history's gritty ground-level texture' (Lentricchia 1988, p. 91; 1989, p. 234). In fact, he argues, the dominant idea is still Foucault's, 'that all social life is organized and controlled down to its oddest and smallest details' (*ibid.*). Other commentators object that the New Historicists seldom declare what status they are claiming for the 'cultural samples' on display, an opportunistic silence which leaves their readers unable to know what weight to give this anecdotal material. The Marxist critic Walter Cohen has observed that 'New historicists are likely to seize upon something out of the way, obscure, even bizarre: dreams, popular or aristocratic festivals . . . sexual treatises . . . descriptions of clothing, reports on disease', and much else (Cohen 1987, p. 33).²³ These have always figured in traditional historiography, only now they are elevated from the margin to the centre, indeed displace the centre, dispensing with the notion of a

coherent structure in politics, society, religion, or any other aspect of Renaissance culture. But the New Historicists' fondness for the 'telling anecdote' or 'overlooked detail' of social history, Cohen objects, rests on the large and unexamined methodological assumption that 'any one aspect of a society is related to any other', and that therefore 'any social practice has at least a potential connection to any theatrical practice' (p. 34). This belief in 'arbitrary connectedness' results, as he shows, in alarming contradictions between pronouncements by the same writer. In one essay Greenblatt sees the history play as aristocratic, in another as bourgeois; elsewhere the 'relation between power and subversion is formulated in contradictory terms'. Power is visible; power is invisible. 'Since each essay [by Greenblatt] pursues a particular issue to a logical extreme' without the constraint of an organising principle, 'contradictions are bound to occur'. Further, the New Historicists' fragmentation of history into a series of uncoordinated episodes encourages the belief that any single episode may be proclaimed fully representative.

The dangers of this elevation of the anecdotal to a central status are clear, encouraging as it does the use of interesting little stories not as ornaments to the text but as load-bearing props in the argument, a role to which they are unsuited. Robert N. Watson, otherwise an effusive admirer of this group, commenting that to begin an essay with a historical anecdote has become 'practically a generic signature of New Historicist studies', and floating the idea of renaming it 'the New Anecdotalist movement', lists some of the risks involved in such a method:

The historical data may be so fragmentary as to be worthless for characterizing the crucial activities of an entire culture; the critic may allow the mere suggestive juxtaposition of specific historical and literary artifacts to serve in place of any specific explanation of the connections, ignoring all the dangers of the argument by analogy; and the use of an historical rather than a literary excerpt may be exploited to give the essay an aura of being somehow more real and important than 'purely literary' criticism, as if pageants or inquisitions or architecture were legible in objective and ideologically liberating ways that literature itself is not.²⁴

Jean Howard also objected to the anecdotal method, for not declaring whether the 'illustrative example' is representative, and if so, on what grounds, statistically, say, or just by one's own authority (Howard 1986, p. 38). Despite their evasiveness on this, as on other major issues, the success of the new anecdotalism clearly means that most readers have been happy to accept the validity and meaningfulness of the anecdotes at face value. (This may, of course, be a comment on current critical and scholarly standards.)

As we can see, some critics have begun to raise the methodological issue of what Howard describes as the 'theoretical aporia' created by New His-

toricism's discussing 'neither the rationale for the method nor the status of the knowledge produced', thus not allowing others to relate the cultural sample to 'a culture's whole system of signifying practices' (*ibid.*). To me these misgivings in principle are well justified; others may feel that they would prefer to see the method in practice. In which case, as Greenblatt might say, 'consider the following document', the opening of his essay 'Resonance and Wonder':

In a small glass case in the library of Christ Church, Oxford, there is a round, red priest's hat; a note card identifies it as having belonged to Cardinal Wolsey. . . . [The] note informs us [that] the hat was acquired for Christ Church in the eighteenth century, purchased, we are told, from a company of players. If this miniature history of an artifact is too vague to be of much consequence — I do not know the name of the company of players, or the circumstances in which they acquired their curious stage property, or whether it was ever used, for example, by an actor playing Wolsey in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII* — it nonetheless evokes a vision of cultural production that I find compelling. The peregrinations of Wolsey's hat suggest that cultural artifacts do not stay still, that they exist in time, and that they are bound up with personal and institutional conflicts, negotiations, and appropriations. (Greenblatt 1990, p. 161)

In such a way one can begin a paragraph in the mode of Hazlitt or Charles Lamb, and end up sounding like Foucault.

Unfortunately, as Anne Barton has pointed out, almost every detail in this anecdote is wrong:

A wide-brimmed cardinal's hat . . . can indeed be viewed under glass in Christ Church library. The note accompanying it, however, provides information rather different from that Greenblatt attributes to it. It explains that the hat was found in the Great Wardrobe by Bishop Burnet (who died in 1715) when he was Clerk of the Closet. Burnet's son left it to his housekeeper, from whom it passed to the Dowager Countess of Albermarle's butler, and then to the countess herself, who in 1776 presented it to Horace Walpole. Described in the Strawberry Hill sale of 1842 as Wolsey's, the hat was bought by the actor Charles Kean, who is said to have worn it more than once when playing Wolsey in *Henry VIII*. Kean died in 1868. It was after the death of his only child, a Mrs. Logie, that various members of Christ Church purchased it, for the sum of sixty-three pounds. This note card is known to have been in place for at least a quarter of a century. (Barton 1991, p. 51)

That cautionary tale, displaying what Barton describes as 'Greenblatt's tendency to handle historical circumstances approximately', shows that anecdotal history may express neither a Foucauldian interest in fragmented codes nor the nitty-gritty of history but a mixture of dilettantism and

carelessness. The open-minded scepticism I have recommended must include a readiness to check all sources.

III

Turning finally to New Historicist Shakespeare criticism, I shall limit this discussion to the essays by Greenblatt, who coined the term and is widely regarded as its outstanding practitioner, and I shall focus on two characteristic aspects, the juxtaposition of literary texts with unusual contextual material, and the use of both to indict government past and present, all structures of legitimacy. This is what he described himself as doing, linking 'the Renaissance . . . to the present both analogically and causally'. Both modes might appear to be historical, or diachronic, but a prior methodological point that needs discussion is the effect of the New Historicists substituting 'the synchronic text of a cultural system' for the diachronic approach of conventional history (Montrose 1989, p. 17). In this mode they follow the orientation of semiology after Barthes, which — as we saw in Chapter 1 — was concerned not with what signs mean but how they function, or how they circulate within a society. In 1988 Greenblatt collected four previously published essays to make a book called *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, adding a new essay justifying his concept of 'the circulation of social energy' (Greenblatt 1988, pp. 1–20), in which he tries to offer 'insight into the half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered' (p. 4). But any notion that these might be produced by authors in an intentional act of creation disappears into a generalised and depersonalised idea of circulation, 'moving certain things — principally ordinary language but also metaphors, ceremonies, dances . . . from one culturally demarcated zone to another' (p. 7). This is obviously a restatement of Foucault's account of the circulation of discourse, and Greenblatt acknowledges his debt to *L'Usage des plaisirs* for the term 'dynamic circulation' (p. 12). Updated perhaps, the Barthes-Foucault emphasis on the system of transactions still ignores the crucial issue of meaning, as well as agency. If we are to write a history of cultural transactions we need to ask who instigates this 'circulation' (if we must keep this inherently vague and all-encompassing term), and why; also what it meant at each stage, and what it means now.

The new term here is energy, for which Greenblatt acknowledges a debt to the French anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu. Checking the work cited, we find Bourdieu using the term 'social energy' in discussing what he calls 'symbolic capital', that is, the standing that a person or group achieves in the eyes of peers by such tactics as 'amassing food only to lavish it on others', or by conspicuous purchases to indicate often illusory wealth

in store. The result of such attempts to preserve domination is an 'endless reconversion of economic capital into symbolic capital, at the cost of a wastage of social energy . . .'.²⁵ Greenblatt uses Bourdieu's concept, but attempts to improve on it (or 'historicise' it) by referring to the OED and noting (Greenblatt 1988, p. 5) that the word 'energy' entered English through Elizabethan rhetoric, with George Puttenham drawing on a tradition going back to Aristotle.²⁶ However, this attempt to provide a historical context is badly informed, for in classical rhetoric *energeia* denotes the forcefulness or 'vivacity' imparted to language by the proper use of rhetorical tropes and figures, especially metaphor. Sidney calls it 'forcibleness', through which a writer can arouse passion, and Scaliger identifies it with rhetorical *efficacia*, that is, *vis orationis repraesentantis rem excellenti modo*.²⁷ To Bourdieu, as to most people using the term, energy obviously implies a finite and ultimately quantifiable resource, and Greenblatt admits that 'the term implies something measurable' (p. 6). Yet by invoking rhetoric he in fact confuses measurability with performance, and treats content as form. As a result he is reduced to defining social energy not in terms of resources which may be 'wasted' (although evaluation of that topic could only be made once one had discussed its purpose, function, and success), nor even as forcefulness, but merely as a process of relocation within 'culturally demarcated' zones.

For readers who might be getting restive at the absence of definition or localisation Greenblatt asks, 'what then is the social energy that is being circulated?' and answers — 'in a sense the question is absurd' — that 'everything produced by the society can circulate', such as 'power, charisma, sexual excitement, collective dreams, wonder, desire, anxiety, religious awe . . .' (p. 19). But this is indeed obvious. Whereas Bourdieu gives a rigorous account of actual exchange processes in a closely-studied society, including a critique of the terms in which such processes have been hitherto described, Greenblatt offers a loose, all-inclusive but nothing-defining term which, Matthew Arnold-like, he attempts to legitimise by rhetorical repetition (pp. 19–20). My point is that the synchronic, pseudo-semiological, pseudo-anthropological interest in cultural systems or (more recently) 'cultural artifacts' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 161), is so vaguely conceived, so lacking in methodological reflection, as to risk declining to a magpie-like collecting of objects that glitter and catch the eye. To anyone who has learned from modern ethnography, there is a vast gulf between that detailed, vigorous, conceptually self-aware exploration of other cultures, and the New Historicists' all too frequent anthologising of the unusual. Whoever is ambitious, in Greenblatt's words, 'to erase all boundaries separating cultural studies into narrowly specialised compartments' (*ibid.*, p. 4), needs to take seriously the analytical and historiographical standards that apply in each discipline.

As an example of Greenblatt's placing of literary texts in social contexts let us take an essay that begins 'far from the Renaissance, with a narrative

of social practice first published in the *American Baptist Magazine* of 1831' (p. 80). Why not, if it can link up convincingly with the literary work? The 'social practice' (another portentous phrase) here invoked is actually an individual action by the Rev. Francis Wayland, a Baptist minister and early president of Brown University, recording how he disciplined his 15-month old son, an 'unusually self-willed' boy, who had started crying one day when his father took him from the arms of his nurse, and angrily thrown away a piece of bread his father offered him. Convinced of 'the necessity of subduing his temper', Wayland kept the boy in solitude and periodically offered him food, provided that he accepted both it and his father in a welcoming way. Having 'fasted thirty-six hours', as Wayland misdescribes his enforced withdrawal of food and love, the boy 'was now truly an object of pity'. Unmoved, though, Wayland persisted in his 'course of discipline' until his son's will was completely broken, and he 'repeatedly kissed me, and would do so whenever I commanded. He would kiss any one when I directed him . . .', and finally came to love his father more than anyone else (pp. 80–82; my italics). This is a chilling narrative, particularly in Wayland's unawareness of the incongruity of such words as 'commanded' and 'directed'. To anyone familiar with the boisterous and unpredictable energies of children at this age (as I write this my youngest daughter is 15 months old, as it happens), the scene can be vividly imagined, in all its cruelty.

For Greenblatt, scourge of twentieth-century complacency, it would be 'a mistake' to imagine that we today have freed ourselves from such 'primitive disciplinary pathology'. We have not; but then, we also know where it comes from, for

Wayland's struggle is . . . the sophisticated product of a long historical process whose roots lie at least partly in early modern England, the England of Shakespeare's *King Lear*. (p. 82)

Wayland's demands 'that his son take food directly from him and come to him voluntarily' are, Greenblatt suggests, a 'bourgeoisified version of the love test with which Shakespeare's play opens' (*ibid.*). Everyone will acknowledge a certain resemblance between these two situations, as a parent articulates an expectation of love which the child is supposed to show, but at the same time we can all see the differences. *King Lear* begins with an abdication and inheritance ritual, a highly artificial ceremony added by Shakespeare to his sources (no other version of the Lear story included this point),²⁸ designed to legitimise the King's *de facto* division of his kingdom. The ceremony goes hideously wrong when Cordelia refuses both the flattery and the reification of love that Lear expects. There is no question of 'disciplining' her in the sense of improving her future conduct, for whatever Cordelia has learned from her upbringing has not, thankfully, stamped out her individual integrity, and it is too late to change that. Greenblatt recognises as much (p. 83), and subsequently offers a sensible,

if 'conventional (none the worse for that!) analysis of the play in terms of its network of rights and obligations (pp. 95–6). In between these points, however, he builds up a structure of inference that the anecdote from *Wayland* seems too slight to support.

In effect, Greenblatt develops the 'continuity' option (rather than 'analogy'), seeking to link Shakespeare's England directly with 'Jacksonian America', notwithstanding the many different factors shaping each society. He argues that one 'crucial difference' between the two texts is that 'by the early nineteenth century the age of the child who is tested has been pushed back drastically'. The fact that *Wayland* expected his 15-month old son to understand him, we are told, 'reflects a transformation in cultural attitudes towards children, a transformation whose early signs may be glimpsed in Puritan child-rearing manuals', and which 'culminates in the educational philosophy of Rousseau and the poetry of Wordsworth'. (I doubt if either of those had much to say about bringing up one-year old children...) Cordelia, however, is tested at '*precisely [sic] the age that demanded the greatest attention, instruction, and discipline*' in Shakespeare's England, *the years between 15 and 26* (p. 83; my italics). For, according to Lawrence Stone, 'the floating mass of young unmarried males' constituted an unruly element in society, whose spirits had to be curbed by educational and social pressures, while girls, too, had to be taught to move 'from the authority of the father or guardian to the authority of the husband' (p. 83–4). Setting aside for the moment Stone's extremely dubious history of family life (see Chapter 6), I note here the whole series of assumptions that Greenblatt has quietly made, whether or not with full awareness: that a literary text is reliable evidence for Elizabethan society; that each of these two texts is representative of their period; and that the differences between them represent actual historical changes. Assumptions of such magnitude surely deserve some methodological discussion.

Greenblatt, unconcerned with method, claims that by the nineteenth century 'the temporal frame has shifted from adolescence to infancy', and, 'equally significant, the spatial frame has shifted as well, from the public to the private' — shifts, that is, which are representative of their period. 'Lear is of course a king', Greenblatt hurriedly adds, but asserts that Renaissance writers conceived the family as continuous with public life, so that 'Lear's interrogations of his daughters' feelings toward him' can be seen as registering 'a central ideological principle of middle- and upper-class families in the early modern period' (p. 84). This is to assume, without argument, that a play whose known sources include a folk-tale story as retold by a legendary Celtic history of Britain, medieval chronicles, a contemporary novel inspired by Greek romance, and a tract exposing Jesuit exorcisms, not to mention Shakespeare's creative re-shaping of all this material, nevertheless presents a typical image of contemporary family life. Equally tendentious, it seems to me, is the remark that 'By the time of Jacksonian America, the family has moved indoors, separated from civil

society . . .' (p. 85). But surely the family of a Baptist minister was more or less on public display, meant to be seen as exemplary to society at large? To generalise on such slender evidence is a prime example of the faulty nature of arguments that do not recognise the necessity of confronting 'negative instances', as Bacon emphasised; the fact that an observation of 1,000 white swans concluding that all swans are white would be negated by the discovery of a single black one. All that is needed to destroy Greenblatt's thesis would be to discover a Renaissance text in which a father disciplined his child in the same way as *Wayland*, and/or a nineteenth-century one where a father disinherited a child for not giving him love on the terms he expected. But in any case the generalisations rest on the flimsiest base.

Greenblatt's desire to bring his two texts into more than accidental contiguity leads him to argue for the 'continuity' option in his linking of past and present, now claiming several 'significant continuities between Renaissance child-rearing techniques and those of nineteenth-century American evangelicals', the first being parental observation of children. Where *Wayland* scrutinises his son carefully, Lear and Gloucester 'seem purblind by comparison': Lear can't distinguish the elder daughters' hypocrisy from the youngest's truth, while Gloucester can't even recognise Edgar's handwriting (p. 85). But it is surely pointless to apply naturalistic criteria to the behaviour of characters in a play, and then argue outwards from this point to history. Lear's inability to evaluate Cordelia properly is the starting point of the play's action, an artificial situation in itself, of course (I mean, that an action should have such a clear-cut beginning), but it is perhaps the culmination of a lifetime's ethical blindness. As for Edgar's handwriting, a competent trickster like Edmund could easily forge that (just to accept for the moment these naturalistic expectations). But all this is irrelevant, in any case, for Greenblatt was meant to be showing 'significant continuities' between England in 1605 and America in 1831, and the fathers here are behaving quite differently. At least in *Lear*, he can add, the daughters 'scrutinize their fathers', the remarks of Goneril and Regan at the end of the first scene ('how full of changes his age is') thus being taken out of the play and generalised as a social practice. Widening his historical scope still further, Greenblatt tells us that 'there is virtually no evidence' of 'intense paternal observation of the young' in 'late medieval England' but 'quite impressive evidence' of it in the seventeenth century, as in Puritanism, witness the diary of Ralph Josselin (p. 86). Such reckless assertions, which claim to know social attitudes over a three-hundred year period, are familiar from the works of Foucault and Stone, but here read more like a parody of them.

Bringing together two such different texts is a difficult task, 'yet in the trial', as Nestor says of the combat between Hector and Achilles, 'much opinion dwells' — and some danger. The person juxtaposing the two may be tempted to snatch at slight resemblances. The fact that Josselin

threatened to disinherit his unruly heir John, in 1674, Greenblatt claims, 'provides an immediate link to *King Lear*' (not surprisingly, since Greenblatt has chosen to quote only this one passage about disinheritance), but also, he finds, 'Josselin's threat to "make only a provision . . . to put bread in your hand" curiously anticipates the symbolic object of contention in the Wayland nursery . . .' (pp. 86–7). An equally flimsy parallel — recalling Fluellen's unwitting parody of Plutarch's 'Parallel Lives', the telling comparison between Macedon and Monmouth being that each town has a river 'and there is salmons in both' — is that Lear's pathetic 'dream of the prison as nursery' distinguishes him from Wayland, who 'used the nursery as a prison'. This is one of 'the crucial differences' between two cultures (p. 98): not everyone will agree. The last of these supposed historical categories that Greenblatt invokes is what he calls 'salutary anxiety', the deterrent effect of the fear of punishment, which in Renaissance England was at 'the symbolic center of society', in royal power, but had been 'lost by early nineteenth-century America' (p. 91–2). What concerns me is not the Americans' 'loss' (hardly surprising, given their rejection of a monarchy), but Greenblatt's attempt to diffuse the concept of anxiety first to Renaissance theories of tragedy and thence to Shakespeare. As a dramatist, Greenblatt suggests, Shakespeare creates authority figures, such as the Dukes in *Measure for Measure* and *The Tempest*, both of whom 'systematically awaken anxiety in others and become, for this reason, images of the dramatist himself' (pp. 91–2). This double claim, already made earlier,²⁹ must be dismissed as wholly anachronistic, proto-Freudian, lacking any grounding either in literary theory or dramatic practice. It seems a suspiciously easy way of associating Shakespeare with the state and its exercise of power.

* * *

From this first experience of New Historicist practical criticism we can deduce that the juxtaposition of two items, texts, cultural samples, or whatever, if it is to suggest similarities as well as differences, has to find a common point, a *tertium comparationis*. In the Wayland/Lear essay Greenblatt's similarities sometimes turned out to be differences, at other times just trivial. The element of risk involved is great, but the 'opinion' or reputation, the symbolic capital that can accrue if performed to the general satisfaction, is also great. In an essay called 'Fiction and Friction' Greenblatt links *Twelfth Night* with two cases of transvestism recorded in France in and after Shakespeare's lifetime. In one of them, reported by Montaigne, a girl posed as a man, married a woman and lived together with her for several months 'to the wife's satisfaction', before the girl was exposed, tried and executed (Greenblatt 1988, pp. 66–8). According to Greenblatt, in *Twelfth Night* 'Shakespeare almost, but not quite, retells' this story. Presumably he means that Viola in her disguise as Cesario might

have actually gone through a ceremony with Olivia (despite Viola's own love for Orsino), and then . . . and then . . . — but the more we begin to think the suggestion through, the more absurdly impossible it seems. To Greenblatt it is 'one of those shadow stories that haunt the plays' (p. 67). Yet, to scrutinise that metaphor for a moment, how can the story be said to 'haunt' the plays when the chances are that neither Shakespeare nor the majority of his audience had ever heard of it? And in what sense is it a 'shadow'? As the *persona* in Donne's 'Nocturnal upon St. Lucy's Day' puts it, 'If I an ordinary nothing were, / As shadow, a light and body must be here'. Where is the light, and which is the body?

To anyone familiar with English Renaissance drama it is surprising that Greenblatt, looking for examples of female transvestism, should go so far afield. It is odd, to start with, that he should have taken his examples from France, when the English public theatre alone in Europe did not allow women on the stage. Better instances of actual female transvestism would have been Richard Brome's comedy, *A mad couple well match'd* (1639), or Ovid's fable of Iphis and Ianthe (*Metamorphoses*, 9.673–797).³⁰ But a more pressing objection must be against the use of actual transvestism as a parallel for romantic drama, in which — with the familiar paradoxes of reversal within English drama — a boy actor dresses as a woman who then disguises as a man. This is an artificiality peculiar to the theatre in those days, of course, but it remains a convention or contract that must simply be accepted before drama can at all take place. Such disguises within the play are short-term, achieve a specific aim — self-preservation, suspension of identity, the achievement of some romantic goal — and are abandoned once that goal is achieved. In this form ♂ *pretends* to be ♀, up to the denouement, whether voluntary or not. But there is an enormous jump from here to the two historical topics that Greenblatt brings in, transvestism (♀ *functioning* as ♂) and hermaphroditism (*being simultaneously* ♀ and ♂). And for someone pretending to recreate the Renaissance social context it is surprising that Greenblatt should not have observed the fierce disapproval, in those days, of what is now lightly termed 'cross-dressing'. This is a well-known point to anyone familiar with the connotations of 'effeminacy' then, or with the exemplum of Hercules reduced to spinning for Omphale, or the biblically-inspired diatribes of Elizabethan moralists, or Sidney's difficulties with the 'womanish man' produced by the disguised prince in *Arcadia*. This whole topic has been recently treated with great historical range and critical intelligence by Linda Woodbridge,³¹ in a book unwisely ignored by Greenblatt, which shows that the Renaissance knew 'a tradition of fear and of contempt for physical androgyny and transvestism which went back to the Greeks' (and presumably explains why the legal sentences punishing it were so savage). Ovid's myth of Hermaphroditus became 'an emblem of bestial transformation' in Renaissance culture (Woodbridge 1984, p. 141). In Shakespeare's plays the dramatist reminds us each time that female transvestism, 'however necessitated by emergency

circumstances, is unnatural' and 'shameful'. When Shakespeare's heroines don male weapons they are given 'the feigned masculinity of the braggadocio' (*ibid.*, pp. 153–4) as a sign of the role being played. In the Renaissance male transvestism was regarded as even more shameful, horrible, or comic (p. 157).

Greenblatt claims to be 'break[ing] away from the textual isolation that is the primary principle of formalism' (Greenblatt 1988, pp. 72–3). The dichotomy is attractive, but specious: the alternative to 'isolation' can be irrelevant contextualisation. Greenblatt's ambition to 'historicize Shakespearean sexual nature' (p. 72) will not be fulfilled by ignoring the central issues of normal male-female sexual behaviour for such 'newer' topics as Renaissance attitudes to hermaphroditism, or the belief — of some theorists only³² — that the male and female genitalia were structurally homologous (pp. 72–85), topics which are in any case completely marginal to the plays. Greenblatt finally returns to the text (*Twelfth Night*, we recall) from his background reading via a new *tertium quid*, namely the concept of heat. In most physiology descending from Aristotle and Galen heat is a crucial factor in distinguishing the sexes. The male's greater body heat was thought to produce 'the most perfectly concocted semen from which the male will be born', and to give the male child superior mental characteristics: 'courage, liberality, moral strength, honesty'.³³ Heat is a functional part in theories of sex (not gender!) differentiation, another topic of marginal interest to Shakespearean drama. Greenblatt, however, treats heat as he pleases, now in concrete terms in the medical writings, then in abstract or metaphorical terms in literature, locating it as verbal wit, in turn redefined as 'pleasurable chafing', or 'erotic chafing'. His theory (a strikingly improbable one, depriving the dramatist of anything approaching common sense) is that 'Shakespeare realized that . . . sexual chafing could not be presented literally on stage' (what does this mean: sexual foreplay? masturbation?), and so resorted to 'verbal wit' as a substitute (pp. 88–9). Having ascribed this remarkable piece of logic to the dramatist he concludes that 'dallying with words is the principal Shakespearean representation of erotic heat' (p. 90). By this concept he does not mean, surprisingly enough, Shakespeare's use of bawdy, but the kind of obstructive punning made by Feste against Viola, or — we might add, finally ruining his gossamer theory of the 'eroticism' involved — by the gravedigger to Hamlet. Few things have been less erotic to readers and theatre-goers in these last three hundred years than this kind of wit, and it is a sad instance of the gap between critical ambition and performance that, after this long haul through the medical background, we are given such a brief and unoriginal discussion of *Twelfth Night*, with an unrelated switch from *res* to *verba*. As one critic has said, in a different context, 'of all activities, the consumption of words is the most remote from pure or bodily sensation' (Tallis 1988, p. 118).

It is always hard for the reader to know how much self-criticism lies

behind the book he is reading, how many times the author has scrapped material that he found inadequate, rewritten passages that were clumsy or confused. While ready to credit Greenblatt any amount of *labor limae*, for such smooth eloquence as his does not come easily, an essay like 'Fiction or Friction' seems to me to show a disregard for, or unawareness of, normal scholarly criteria of argument and evidence. Some readers object that it only uses the medical material in a subsidiary way;³⁴ my objection is that it neither masters that material nor uses it to illuminate the drama. A more promising subject is offered by an essay called 'Shakespeare and the Exorcists', which brings together *King Lear* and Samuel Harsnett's *Declaration of Egregious Popish Impostures* (1603). Harsnett, who had previously exposed the Puritan exorcist, John Darrell, here unveiled the practices of the Jesuit Edmunds in persuading three chambermaids in the family of Edmund Peckham "to seeme as though they had been possessed, when as in truth they were not". The priest's motive was to reconcile the 'supposed demoniacs and others . . . to the old Church', and he was successful (Muir 1961, pp. 149–50). The main link between Harsnett and Shakespeare consists, as Lewis Theobald first showed in 1733,³⁵ in the fact that Edgar, in his assumed *persona* as Poor Tom, uses the names of the several devils who supposedly possessed the serving maids:

Five fiends have been in poor Tom at once; as Obidicut, of lust; Hoberdidance, prince of dumbness; Mahu, of stealing; Modo, of murder; Flibbertigibett, of mopping and mowing. . . . (4.1.58ff)

There are numerous smaller echoes, but that is the most concentrated. Shakespeare shows no interest in the supposed 'exorcism', nor in the Jesuits' doings, but uses the text for its authentic details of devils' names, and seems to have been attracted by its great range of unusual words, which crop up in *King Lear* and almost nowhere else in the canon.³⁶ Given the evidence of these verbal borrowings, what then?

Greenblatt is aware that this link has been 'known for centuries', but complains that 'the knowledge has remained almost entirely inert, locked in the conventional pieties of source study' (Greenblatt 1988, p. 94; in an earlier version source study was said to be 'the elephant's graveyard' of modern criticism). Ready to vitalise and release it, Greenblatt starts from the Foucault-like approach of locating the 'institutional strategies' in which both texts are 'embedded', and makes the following grandiose statement: 'These strategies, I suggest' — the reader soon learns to beware of such ingratiating and modest-seeming claims — 'are part of an intense and sustained struggle in late sixteenth and early seventeenth century England to redefine the central values of society', a process of 'transforming the prevailing standards of judgment and action, rethinking . . . conceptual categories' (p. 95). The subsequent discussion does nothing to justify this grandiose claim: what was the struggle? which — or whose — were the values? which categories were rethought? These are all questions that are

never posed, let alone answered. This claim illustrates Alastair Fowler's judgment on New Historicism's 'fondness for exaggeration': 'Overstated epistememes are unsusceptible of demonstration; so the new historicists tend to rely on unargued assertion, or on selected instances' (Fowler 1988, pp. 967–8). Greenblatt's point of departure here is Harsnett's denunciation of exorcism (following Reginald Scot) as 'juggling and deluding the people by counterfeit miracles' (Greenblatt 1988, p. 100). Other opponents of exorcism described it as false or 'theatrical', drawing on the pejorative metaphors traditionally attached to the theatre. In fact, although Greenblatt sweepingly dismisses source studies, credit for first commenting on the theatrical imagery in Harsnett must be given to Kenneth Muir, a leading source scholar of modern times. 'One of the first things . . . to strike a reader of Harsnett's *Declaration*', Muir writes, 'is his detailed and unclerical knowledge of the theatre'. There are many references to Plautus and Terence, to medieval miracle-plays, and a memorable description of the Vice (Muir 1961, p. 148).

But Harsnett's acquaintance with the stage can best be gauged from the way he continually returns to his comparison, made on the first page, of the tricks of the exorcists to a stage performance. There are scores of references to actors, comedians, players, tragedians, cue-fellows, playing, acting, performing, feigning, counterfeiting, acts (of a play), dialogue, prompter, cue, *plaudites*, puppets, scenes, hangings, &c. (*ibid.*, p. 149)

The fact that Harsnett uses 'some 230 words derived from the theatre' may reveal a private passion for the stage, but, 'as Chaplain to the Bishop of London he had the job of licensing books for the press . . . and he read plays as part of his job'. His publisher, James Roberts, was also connected with the theatre, having printed the Second Quarto of *Hamlet* and other plays (*ibid.*).

The originality of Greenblatt's link between exorcism and drama is much diminished once we read Muir's analysis. Greenblatt's treatment of the material, however, is original. His strategy is to emphasise the fact that although some echoes of Harsnett appear from other characters, the main list of devils is given to Edgar, who is 'counterfeiting' madness, or as he misleadingly puts it, displaying theatricality. From this point the argument develops as a (fallacious) syllogism: exorcism was denounced as 'counterfeit'; but drama was also counterfeit; *ergo*, drama is a form of exorcism, or exorcism a form of drama. But the fact that opponents of exorcism used derogatory metaphors from the theatre does not mean that these are convertible propositions. Then to say that Edgar's claim to have seen a 'fiend which parted from' Gloucester before his attempted suicide (4.6.69ff) — and not, notice, emerging from his mouth, as supposedly happened in exorcism — constitutes 'the play's brooding upon spurious exorcism' (p. 118), or shows that the play effects a 'convergence of

exorcism and theater', to make such judgments is to build not upon sand but on air. The references to devils in *King Lear* have nothing to do with exorcism, and Shakespeare shows no interest either in the Jesuits or in what Greenblatt misleadingly describes (without ever defining) as 'charismatic exorcism' (pp. 10, 120). Greenblatt can be judged to have succumbed to the 'continuing temptation' in his method, as Garry Wills puts it, to 'use . . . historical data outside their full historical context'. In this essay, Wills judges,

Greenblatt ignores the several meanings of 'exorcism' at the time, and entirely misses a polemic from the same years that *did*, explicitly, attack Jesuit exorcisms-by-relic — Thomas Dekker's play *The Whore of Babylon*, in which priests are dispatched from Rome to England to undermine the regime with exorcisms. Greenblatt thought there should be an anti-exorcism play, given the salience of the issue; but he got the wrong one. . . .³⁷

Among the fragments of reading Greenblatt uses to bolster up his argument is the fact that *Lear* was once performed at the manor house of a recusant couple in Yorkshire, which to him suggests that the play itself was 'strangely sympathetic . . . to the situation of persecuted Catholics' (p. 122); and the remark that Cordelia 'redeems nature from the general curse', which to him suggests a link with medieval Resurrection plays which offered ocular proof that Christ has risen (p. 125), two comments that show some uncertainty about the nature of religion in the Renaissance.³⁸

The *tertium comparationis* in this essay, exorcism, supposedly linking Harsnett with Shakespeare, again fails to fulfil the demands Greenblatt makes on it. He ascribes a wholly illusory idea to the dramatist by saying that 'In Shakespeare, the realization that demonic possession is a theatrical imposture leads not to a clarification . . . but to a deeper uncertainty in the face of evil' (p. 122; my italics). Greenblatt reports Harsnett as saying that 'the hidden reality' behind the imposture 'is . . . the theater' (p. 126; my italics): but all that Harsnett says is that it is, like the theatre, a 'performance'. Greenblatt arrives at the conclusion that 'if false religion is theater' (p. 126) then — the suggestion is — theatre is false religion, as proved by 'Edgar's fraudulent, histrionic performance' (p. 127). Somehow all this is said to show that 'the official position is emptied out, even as it is loyally confirmed' by Shakespeare, 'dutifully' writing a play to show the identity of theatre and imposture (*ibid.*). (For a self-proclaimed New Historicist Greenblatt is all too often ready to commit the old heresy of biographical criticism, ascribing political motives to Shakespeare outside the plays themselves.) The further argument, that mad Lear's discovery of 'the thing itself' is actually 'a man playing a theatrical role' (p. 126), is fallacious: what Lear *has* discovered is a near-naked man, a poor forked animal. To start calling in question the theatricality of the theatre in these

terms is to step into a spiral that descends rather quickly, into itself. The link that Greenblatt attempts to forge between exorcism and *King Lear* is self-deluding, illusory.

IV

The other axis in Greenblatt's linking up the present age with the Renaissance, I suggested, was the motive of indictment or incrimination, briefly glimpsed in those remarks on Edgar's 'fraudulent' performance. The form this usually takes is to attempt to upset the accepted distinction between dominant and subordinate, legitimate and illegitimate pretenders to power. A key text for Greenblatt, as for the English neo-Althusserian 'Cultural Materialists' is *The Tempest*, now unfortunately reduced to an allegory about colonialism, in which Prospero becomes an exploitative protocapitalist and Caliban an innocent savage, deprived of his legitimate heritage. In an essay called 'Learning to Curse: Aspects of Linguistic Colonialism in the Sixteenth Century' (Greenblatt 1990, pp. 16–39), the play is said to present 'the startling encounter between a lettered and an unlettered culture' (p. 23). Greenblatt refers to the scene where Caliban invites Stephano and Trinculo to ambush Prospero during his afternoon sleep:

There thou mayst brain him,
Having first seiz'd his books . . . Remember
First to possess his books; for without them
He's but a sot, as I am, nor hath not
One spirit to command. They all do hate him
As rootedly as I. Burn but his books. (3.2.88ff)

(Caliban lyingly attributes hatred to the other spirits: Ariel, although anxious to regain freedom, is still loyal to Prospero and is actually present throughout this scene, sowing discord among these plotters and foiling their murder plot). The crucial point is, what these books represent?

* * *

How to place Caliban is a delicate question for the critic. He is the traditional 'wild man' in European travellers' encounters with primitive communities; he is an embodiment of lawless appetite, who would kill Prospero and rape Miranda if he could. His rape attempt on Miranda was evidently the point at which Prospero abandoned his goal of educating Caliban. Until then, Caliban recalls,

Thou strok'st me and made much of me, wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how

To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night; and then I lov'd thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o'th'isle . . . (1.2.334ff)

Up till that point, Prospero interjects, he had used Caliban 'with humane care, and lodg'd thee / In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate / The honour of my child' (347ff). Caliban is unrepentant — 'Would't had been done! . . . I had peopled else / This isle with Calibans' — evidently not acknowledging the traditional moral emphasis on controlling the appetites of lust, greed, anger, and so forth. The best way to see Caliban, I suggest, is as an anomalous category within the Great Chain of Being. He is capable of language, and thus above the animals, but incapable of reason, that ability to control the appetites and live peaceably in the social group. Reason has been, since the time of Isocrates and Cicero, the other traditional attribute linking language with humanity. As Prospero says when he learns of Caliban's plotting with Stephano and Trinculo to murder him, he is innately resistant to reason and education ('nurture'),

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick; on whom my pains,
Humanely taken, all, all lost, quite lost!
And as with age his body uglier grows,
So his mind cankers. (4.1.188ff)

Again at the end, when the comic villains in the subplot are exposed, Prospero can say 'this thing of darkness I / Acknowledge mine' (5.1.278ff), his failed experiment, the limit case of the civilising powers of language.

I would argue that Shakespeare is here challenging the humanists' automatic equation of *ratio* and *oratio*, their assumption that the gift of language necessarily endows speakers with reason. The tradition descends directly from the prooemium to Cicero's *De Inventione*, which records how at some time in the past 'men wandered . . . in the field like animals and lived on wild fare', lacking reason, religion, society and law, until one 'great and wise man transformed them from wild savages into a kind of gentle folk' by the use of 'reason and eloquence', *ratio et oratio* (cit. Vickers 1988, pp. 10–11). This tradition, communicated in texts that formed part of the basic curriculum for rhetoric and literature at both grammar school and university, was very familiar in the English Renaissance. As Sir Philip Sidney wrote in his *Apology for Poetry*,

For if *oratio* next to *ratio*, speech next to reason, be the greatest gift bestowed upon mortality, that cannot be praiseless which doth most polish that blessing of speech. . . . (Sidney 1965, pp. 121–2)

And in a poem called 'Man', George Herbert rephrased the tradition:

Man is ev'ry thing,
And more: He is a tree, yet bears more fruit;

A Beast, yet is, or should be more;
Reason and speech we onely bring.

As part-man, part-beast, Caliban has acquired only half of these twinned faculties, having *oratio* but lacking the more important *ratio*, that faculty praised by Martin Luther as 'an excellent gift of God, . . . indispensable to human welfare; without it, men could not live together in society, but would devour one another like the irrational animals. Therefore . . . it is the function and honor of civil government to make men out of wild animals and to restrain them from degenerating into brutes' (cit. Frye 1963, p. 101). I have argued elsewhere that Shakespeare calls in question the humanist belief that eloquence is the defining mark of a good man by making so many of his most persuasive talkers evil.³⁹ Caliban, I suggest, is another challenge to the humanists' naïve belief that the gift of speech is inherently civilising. He is resistant to nurture, impervious to reason, a creature that can only be counted on to follow its own desires, however violent.

But as so many instances show, Shakespeare seldom created wholly evil characters with no redeeming features. He regularly allowed his anarchic or criminal people some basic vitality, some engaging characteristics, or just the ability to survive in society — as Parolles says, 'Simply the thing I am / Shall make me live'. Creating Caliban involved the coherent mixture of attractive and unpleasant features. He is the son of the 'damned witch Sycorax', who had imprisoned Ariel within a cloven pine until Prospero's superior magic had released him. Caliban was the child that Sycorax 'did litter here, / A freckled whelp hag-born — not honour'd with / A human shape' (1.2.283ff). This curious mixture, part-human, part-animal, lives off what it can catch with its bare hands. Terrified of Stephano and Trinculo, Caliban offers to pluck them berries, catch fish, pick crab-apples, dig up peanuts 'with my long nails', steal birds' eggs (2.2.158ff). His naïve wonder at the drunken butler and servant —

These be fine things, an if they be not sprites.
That's a brave god and bears celestial liquor.
I will kneel to him. (2.2.116ff)

parallels that of Miranda, on first seeing the assembled court of Milan, the usurping Duke and his followers:

O wonder!
How many goodly creatures are there here!
How beauteous mankind is! O brave new world,
That has such people in't! (5.1.183ff)

And just as her naïveté is exposed by Prospero's laconic 'Tis new to thee', so is Caliban's, by Trinculo: 'A most ridiculous monster, to make a wonder of a poor drunkard!' (2.2.163ff). Yet, as the very medium in which Trinculo and Stephano express themselves shows, Shakespeare has con-

finned them to prose, giving Caliban the higher register of verse,⁴⁰ and a responsiveness to the natural world that shows again his anomalous placing between the human and the animal: 'Pray you, tread softly, that the blind mole may not / Hear a foot fall' (4.1.194). No one else in Shakespeare could have said that.

The balancing of attractive and loathsome qualities, this placing of him in anomalous categories, may explain why Caliban can only take over part of the humane culture symbolised by the gift of language. So his desire to burn Prospero's books should be taken in the first instance as identifying the source of superior magical power, 'my so potent art', as Prospero calls it (5.1.50), an art even greater than Sycorax, who could 'control the moon' (5.1.212ff). It can also be taken, as Greenblatt does, to show a hostility to letters — 'without them / He's but a sot, as I am'. If so, Caliban, who has learned to talk but not to read and write, comes in the same class as Jack Cade, the rebel leader, who proclaims a totalitarian Utopia in which 'there shall be no money', and everyone will 'agree like brothers and worship me their lord'. The first victim of the mob is a clerk, who 'can write and read and cast account' — 'O monstrous!', Cade says, and cross-examines him: 'Dost thou use to write thy name? Or hast thou a mark to thyself, like an honest plain-dealing man?' When the clerk admits, 'I thank God, I have been so well brought up that I can write my name', the mob shouts 'He hath confess'd. Away with him! He's a villain and a traitor'. So he is taken off to be hanged, 'with his pen and inkhorn about his neck' (2 Henry VI, 4.2.70ff). A later victim is Lord Say, whom Cade formally indicts:

Thou hast most traitorously corrupted the youth of the realm in erecting a grammar school. . . . It will be prov'd to thy face that thou hast men about thee that usually talk of a noun and a verb, and such abominable words as no Christian ear can endure to hear. (4.7.30ff)

That is an amusing charge, of course, but when the head of Lord Say appears on a pole a few minutes later the link between 'hostility to letters' and anarchy is not so comic any longer.

For Greenblatt (like the Cultural Materialists to be discussed in Chapter 7) Caliban is the hero of the piece, with Shakespeare a dubious accomplice in his oppression and exploitation. Quoting a critic who believes that every dramatist is a colonist, and that in creating Prospero 'Shakespeare's imagination was fired by the resemblance he perceived between himself and a colonist', Greenblatt announces that 'the problem for critics' — as if this rather dotty idea had had a wide uptake — 'has been to accommodate this perceived resemblance between dramatist and colonist with a revulsion that reaches from the political critiques of colonialism in our own century back to the moral outrage of Las Casas and Montaigne' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 24). That flimsy idea having been assimilated, without any methodological discussion, to the general outrage that all decent people

today feel about colonialism, Greenblatt can capitalise on this indictment, declaring that

many aspects of the play itself . . . make colonialism a problematical model for the theatrical imagination: if *The Tempest* holds up a mirror to empire, Shakespeare would appear deeply ambivalent about using the reflected image as a representation of his own practice. (*ibid.*)

In one stroke Greenblatt has taken the trivial analogy between dramatist and colonist to express a general historical law about drama, and then made some ungrounded biographical insinuations about Shakespeare's uneasy feelings at being involved in this enterprise. All this from a critic who professes fidelity to the text (Greenblatt 1988, p. 4).

But let us first deny your major: dramatists are not colonists. They create in language both a world and its inhabitants. That world did not belong previously to any other group of people, who have been driven out or exploited; it has been created specifically for this play. Apply any weight to such an argument and it collapses. Shakespeare is not a colonist, nor is Prospero. He was cast away by his usurping brother and landed on an island previously inhabited by Sycorax. But she, too, had only landed there having been cast away, this time legally, by the citizens of Argier, 'for mischiefs manifold and sorceries terrible', who only spared her life because she was pregnant. Whether Sycorax as an exiled aggressor has more right to the island than Prospero as an injured victim, is a moot point, but it is in any case not one raised by the play. After Sycorax's death Prospero landed there, freed Ariel, and attempted to educate Caliban (1.2.257ff). Prospero has made the island as inhabitable as he could, until the propitious time arrived when he could bring his enemies within his power and go home. Having not killed but forgiven them — which is after all the main and surprising event of the play — he will return to Naples to celebrate the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda, thence 'retire' to his *vita contemplativa* in 'Milan, where / Every third thought shall be my grave' (5.1.310ff). He is happy to leave 'this bare island' (Epilogue 8), where Caliban can now live alone, if he wants to, whatever the legitimacy of his claim. (From his final words, 'I'll be wise hereafter / And seek for grace' (5.1.198f) it looks as if Caliban prefers to serve Prospero. Since Ariel will 'to the elements / Be free' (3.2.1f), the island may well be uninhabited again.) Prospero's stay on the island, then, is enforced, not voluntary, and while he can use its natural resources to stay alive, all the normal features of the hated colonist — murdering the natives, stealing their land, exporting their goods, produce, and wealth for profit back to one's home country — are conspicuously lacking. If modern critics want to denounce colonialism they should do so by all means, but this is the wrong play.

The terms with which Greenblatt has presented the issue make it inevitable that he will side with Caliban in the scene where Miranda

(according to the Folio text; some modern editors re-assign the speech to Prospero) describes just how Caliban's nature was resistant to nurture:

Abhorred slave,
Which any point of goodness will not take,
Being capable of all ill! I pitied thee,
Took pains to make thee speak, taught thee each hour
One thing or other: when thou didst not, savage,
Know thine own meaning, but wouldst gabble like
A thing most brutish, I endow'd thy purposes
With words that made them known. But thy vile race,
Though thou didst learn, had that in't which good natures
Could not abide to be with. . . . (1.2.353–62)

The traditional schoolbook definition of man was *animale rationis capax*:⁴¹ Caliban, capable of *oratio* only and otherwise 'capable of all ill', retorts:

You taught me language; and my profit on't
Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you
For learning me your language! (365–7)

At one level, that again defines Caliban's anomalous position, his resistance to nurture, reason, sociableness ('conversation', in the old sense of that word). On another level, though, as several writers point out, it is only part of the truth. Caliban can do much more with language than curse. He speaks in verse, and Shakespeare has deliberately given him that great speech of assurance and consolation:

Be not afraid. The isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears, and sometimes voices. . . . (3.2.127ff)

(Within the series of plot-parallels created by Shakespeare that speech matches Prospero's reassurance: 'Be cheerful, sir. / Our revels now are ended . . .'). Our sense of Caliban being always out of place in whatever hierarchy we evoke is confirmed by the coarse reaction of Stephano to this description of the isle, full of sweet airs: 'This will prove a brave kingdom to me, where I shall have my music for nothing'. Caliban, we are glad to see, has a brain ultimately able to perceive how he wasted himself on this couple: 'What a thrice-double ass / Was I to take this drunkard for a god / And worship this dull fool!' (5.1.299ff).

I insist on the range and complexity of attributes that Shakespeare has given Caliban because Greenblatt ignores them, simplifying him as the oppressed underdog. Commenting on 'You taught me language', he says that it 'might' be taken as a self-indictment, that Caliban's nature is too debased to take on the full range of humanity.

But the lines refuse to mean this; what we experience instead is a sense of their devastating justness. Ugly, rude, savage, Caliban achieves for an instant an absolute if intolerably bitter moral victory. There is no reply. . . . (Greenblatt 1990, p. 25)

It is, he repeats, 'a momentary victory that is, quite simply, an assertion of inconsolable human pain and bitterness' (p. 26). Greenblatt's hatred of colonists and sympathy for the oppressed leads to a romanticisation or sentimentalisation of Caliban. I see, 'quite simply', no such 'inconsolable human pain', only anger and frustration, one register among many in Caliban's power over language. (The term 'human' is in any case too simple.) This sentimentalisation reaches its highest point in Greenblatt's comment on the speech where Caliban offers to show Trinculo and Stephano where to find apples, nuts, and other food: 'sometimes I'll get thee / Young scamels from the rock'. Greenblatt speaks admiringly of 'the rich, irreducible concreteness of the verse' as showing 'the independence and integrity of Caliban's construction of reality' (now he's a post-structuralist, too), and says that the proof of the opacity of Caliban's world 'is the fact that we do not to this day know the meaning of the word "scamel"' (p. 31). True, that word is baffling, whether it refers to sea-mels (seamews), shellfish, or perhaps, as has recently been suggested, derives 'from *squamelle*, furnished with little scales. (Contemporary French and Italian travel accounts report that the natives of Patagonia in South America ate small fish described as *fort scameux* and *squame*).⁴² Whether the indeterminacy of the word is due to Shakespeare's handwriting, the printers' misreading, or just an unfamiliar expression from a garbled traveller's manuscript, it seems the height of empathy with the oppressed to ascribe to Caliban this proof of the authenticity of his world, before the colonists overran it. And meanwhile the long discredited biographical approach has been revived to stigmatise the dramatist, claiming that 'Shakespeare even appeals to early seventeenth-century class fears by having Caliban form an alliance with the lower-class Stephano and Trinculo to overthrow the noble Prospero' (p. 38; note 46). The desire to find guilty men is often not too fussy about the kind of evidence it uses.

The discourse about colonialism in modern criticism is a one-sided affair, heroes and villains instantly recognisable, a narrative in which the seven deadly sins each get starring roles. The question for literary critics is not whether colonialism is detestable — that needs no discussion — but which works of literature; which authors, which characters can be judged, legitimately and fairly, having weighed the evidence and given everyone their say, to be guilty of endorsing colonialism and its evils. *The Tempest* has become the display ground for critics eager to vent their righteous indignation and to show that they, at least, are not guilty of that com-

licity with the repressive forces of history shown by those who have previously read, taught, and admired Shakespeare. One could expect Greenblatt, too, to take the play as an allegory of colonialism, and his reading had the expected results. It is more surprising to find him applying the same incriminatory methods to the *Henry IV* plays. After all, if anyone leaves England in those plays it is not to colonise anywhere but to attack our ancient enemies the French, and to dispute areas of land in a process that started in 1066 and continues to this day in the form of rugby-matches. There are — surely! — no colonists, and no colonised there, unless we refer to the 'four nations' scene in *Henry V*. How can Greenblatt possibly use these texts to indict colonialism?

The answer is, of course, by means of a parallel text, between which and Shakespeare a network of common points can be established to show 'the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 164), a phrase which may here seem euphemistic. Greenblatt's essay in incrimination, 'Invisible Bullets' (which on its original appearance in *Glyph*, 1981, had the subtitle: 'Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion'), has been much admired by followers of New Historicism. Robert N. Watson writes that 'Stephen Greenblatt's wonderfully fresh and insightful "Invisible Bullets" is of course a seminal document in the New Historicist Movement'.⁴³ Arthur F. Kinney, editor of *English Literary Renaissance*, has hailed it as 'perhaps the most important, and surely the most influential essay of the past decade in English Renaissance cultural history'.⁴⁴ Given such a glowing reception, this essay seems worth examining closely.

Greenblatt sets out to relate Thomas Harriot's *Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588)⁴⁵ to Shakespeare's Hal/Henry V, the *tertium quid* being the familiar pair of 'orthodoxy' and 'subversion', both terms being echoed over and over in that primitive but for some readers evidently effective form of rhetorical repetition (see pp. 21ff, 30–35, and especially p. 39, where the word 'subversion' appears ten times on one page). To anyone familiar with the values and practices of New Historicism it will be immediately apparent that to cite a 'colonialist' text can only bode ill for the literary work ultimately involved in the comparison. But here even the text from socio-cultural history comes in for attack. Greenblatt accuses Harriot of exemplifying the 'Machiavellian' argument that Christianity 'originated in a series of clever tricks, fraudulent illusions perpetrated on Moses' by the Hebrews using Egyptian magic (pp. 24–5). The page-reference given is to chapter vi of *The Prince*, where Machiavelli merely mentions Moses in a list of founders of kingdoms and says nothing about fraud or magic. A few lines later Greenblatt candidly admits that this argument 'is not actually to be found in Machiavelli' (p. 25), thus destroying whatever historical status he claims for the reference, but he reports that it can be found in the 'notorious police report of 1593 on Christopher Marlowe' made by the government spy Richard Baines

(p. 24). Why Greenblatt should drag in Machiavelli is not clear, unless as a modern bogey-man or smear word (totally unhistorical, if so), but he repeatedly ascribes to Machiavelli the 'sense of religion as a set of beliefs manipulated by the subtlety of priests to help instill obedience and respect for authority' (p. 26). The passage in Machiavelli he refers to is his commentary on Livy,⁴⁶ *Discorsi*, I.xi, which describes how Numa Pompilius, newly elected king of Rome, 'finding a very savage people, and wishing to reduce them to civil obedience by the arts of peace, had recourse to religion as the most necessary and assured support of any civil society' (p. 146). Greenblatt has failed to understand several issues here. The first thing he has not noticed is that Machiavelli is quoting Livy practically verbatim, and enlarging Livy's account with glowing approval of the social efficacy of religion, in a theory not unlike Emile Durkheim's.⁴⁷ Fear of the gods, Machiavelli emphasises, makes men keep their oaths and also unites the people, 'keeping them well conducted, and covering the wicked with shame' (p. 147). Machiavelli says nothing about faith, nor does he — any more than Livy — see this as constituting the *origin* of religion, which already existed and was simply applied by an enlightened ruler to a civic purpose. Machiavelli actually grants Numa 'the highest merit' for using religion as a means of establishing social concord, his 'wisdom and goodness' bringing Rome peace and prosperity (p. 148).

Furthermore, Greenblatt has failed to realise that Machiavelli is holding up ancient Rome as an explicit rebuke to the modern papacy. As Machiavelli writes in the following chapter, 'Princes and republics who wish to maintain themselves free from corruption must above all things preserve the purity of all religious observances, and treat them with proper reverence; for there is no greater indication of the ruin of a country than to see religion contemned' (p. 199). If the Christian religion had been maintained 'according to the principles of its founder', the Christian states and republics might have remained happy and united. The greatest proof of its current 'decadence' is

the fact that the nearer people are to the Church of Rome, which is the head of our religion, the less religious are they. . . . [The] evil example of the court of Rome has destroyed all piety and religion in Italy, which brings in its train infinite improprieties and disorders. . . . (p. 151)

The Church has kept Italy divided, Machiavelli alleges, by resting comfortable in its temporal dominion and not trying to enlarge it to take control of the whole country, while blocking any other attempt to do so (p. 152). The court of Rome is such a source of dissension and weakness that if it were transposed en bloc to 'the Swiss, who of all people nowadays live most according to their ancient customs so far as religion and their military system are concerned', in no time at all 'the evil habits of that court would create more confusion in that country than anything else

that could happen there' (p. 152–3). To reiterate his point, Machiavelli returns to Livy and Rome in the next chapter, describing 'How the Romans availed of religion to preserve order in their city, and to carry out their enterprises and suppress disturbances' (pp. 153–5).

Not everyone accepted Machiavelli's recommendation of a state power using religion in this way, and the Catholic church was predictably outraged. This 'famous indictment of the Church', as Mark Phillips records, provoked much discussion. Francesco Guicciardini, for instance, did not share Machiavelli's early humanist reverence for Roman history as exemplary. While he 'accepts and redoubles (the) invective against' the modern papacy, Guicciardini argues that 'the peculiar conditions' of ancient Rome's greatness invalidated 'any argument from Roman example'.⁴⁸ Whichever writer we side with, this is the proper historical context within which to discuss Machiavelli's invocation of Numa Pompilius and the social function of religion. Greenblatt, drawing on what he elsewhere despises as 'vulgar Machiavellianism', and on the reports of Elizabethan informers (thus aligning himself with the government that employed them), first travesties Machiavelli and then transfers the smear words — 'fraudulent imposition', 'coercive' — to Thomas Harriot's account of the Algonquian Indians. His sense of historical accuracy, presumably, makes him add that 'Harriot does not voice any speculations remotely resembling the hypotheses that a punitive religion was invented to keep men in awe and that belief originated in a fraudulent imposition by cunning 'jugglers' on the ignorant . . . ' (p. 26). But that smear is allowed to stand as concerns Machiavelli, and Harriot is soon linked with it. No doubt aware that if a description is repeated often enough, the unwary reader will accept it as true ('lie boldly', as Coleridge wrote, 'some of it is bound to stick'), Greenblatt presents Harriot throughout as a cynical exponent of what he calls 'the Machiavellian anthropology that *posited the origin of religion* in an imposition of socially coercive doctrines by an educated and sophisticated lawgiver on a simple people' (p. 27; my italics: repeated on p. 28). Again invoking Machiavelli and the term 'coercive belief', as if to create a reflex or subliminal association, Greenblatt claims that Harriot uses 'the most radically subversive hypothesis in his culture about the *origin and function of religion* by imposing his religion . . . on others', and so subverting that religion (p. 30; my italics). (This is an extraordinarily disabling modern idea, incidentally, that to try to disseminate your faith is to 'subvert' it. It is another post-Derrida way of attacking the enemy, claiming that their acts achieve a goal exactly opposite to that intended. Where is the evidence?)

Anyone who takes the trouble to consult Harriot's text will find that Greenblatt gives a wholly false impression of it, by selective quotation and persistent distortion. Harriot was not a 'lawgiver', to start with, but an observer, 'specially imploied . . . in dealing with the naturall inhabitantes' (H., p. 321), as he put it, due to his mastery of their language (which he

had probably learned from two Indians who had been brought to England in 1584, and whom he may have taught English). Harriot was engaged to draw up a report on the colony in the course of one visit; he had no official administrative post. He was an orthodox Christian, too, and there is no evidence at all for the claim that he shared the supposedly 'Machiavellian' belief that religion was a fictitious belief-system invented by cynical rulers in order to dupe their subjects. (There is no evidence that Machiavelli believed this either; I could surmise, with just as much authority, that this is actually Greenblatt's theory of religion.) Harriot, dutiful student of all aspects of this potential colony, having spent a year there collecting and analysing material, hoped that by publishing his account he would counteract the 'slanderous and shamefull' reports put about by other Englishmen who had only visited it briefly (*H.*, p. 320), not explored the whole country, and who were frustrated at not having instantly struck rich: 'after gold and silver was not so soone found, as it was by them looked for, [they] had little or no care of any other thing but to pamper their bellies' (*H.*, p. 323). Harriot writes as an all-round scholar hired by a group wanting to attract investments in the 'enterprise for the inhabiting and planting in Virginia' (*H.*, p. 320). His brief was to ascertain whether the country was fruitful, would both support human life and allow the production of enough exports to make it commercially viable. Although the mere fact that he agreed to work for his patron Raleigh will be enough to make him suspect to haters of colonialism (for whom all are guilty), he was not a colonist himself but a poor scholar. Arguably the most outstanding English mathematician of his generation, Harriot never found a niche in the university system and, like so many scientists in early modern Europe (as we are beginning to realise), depended on patronage.⁴⁹

Harriot divides his treatise into three parts, first considering those 'merchantable commodities' already found in Virginia, or which could be planted: grass silk, flax and hemp, alum, sassafras, cedar, wine, oil, furs, minerals, pearls, dyes, and other things which could be exported (*H.*, pp. 325–37). In the second part (*H.*, pp. 337–62) he surveys the commodities that can yield 'victuall and sustenance of mans life', grain, pulses, fruit, herbs, including a remarkably precise observation of the indigenous people's ways of sowing grain, and one of the earliest descriptions of tobacco as used both medicinally and in religious rituals (*H.*, pp. 344–5). In the third part he discusses those resources that can be used for building houses (*H.*, pp. 362–68), and finally surveys 'the nature and maners of the people' (*H.*, pp. 368–82). The qualities of open-minded observation and natural curiosity evident throughout the treatise — listing 86 different kinds of fowl as distinguished 'in the country language', for instance, of which he also had a visual record in the drawings made by the artist John White, who accompanied the expedition — are strikingly evident in Harriot's account of the people.⁵⁰

Future investors in a frankly commercial enterprise are not normally

interested in ethnographical description for its own sake, being basically concerned whether the inhabitants are 'friendly' or not. (Once again I record, should anyone doubt it, my disgust at how colonists have treated indigenous peoples. Greenblatt has no monopoly on this feeling.) At pains to reassure potential 'Adventurers' (putting out their risk-capital) on this head, Harriot describes the natives as 'not to be feared, . . . having no edge tooles or weapons of yron or steele to offend us withall, neither knowe they how to make any'. Their only weapons are bows and arrows, their sole defence shields 'made of barks, and some armours made of stickes wickered together with thread' (*H.*, pp. 368–9). If it should come to 'warres between us and them, . . . wee having advantages against them so many maner of waies, as by our discipline, our strange weapons and devises else, especially by ordinance great and small', the outcome can be 'easily imagined' (*H.*, p. 37f). In other words, the settlers will be safe, the investors' capital will be safe, and a goodly return on investment can be expected from this fruitful land.

Having thus completely satisfied the commercial readers' interest in this people (in much the same way as the *Wall Street Gazette* or *Financial Times* might evaluate investment risk) Harriot, unasked and unprompted, adds half-a-dozen pages describing the Algonquian Indians as a people, and especially their religious beliefs. This is another instance of Harriot's disinterested curiosity in the world about him, for no colonialist in the stereotype of rapacious exploiter cares two cents about the theology of the people he is about to rape. Yet, ironically, this is just the passage that Greenblatt seizes on to accuse Harriot of writing his description of the Indians purely 'to prove that the colony could impose its will on them. The key to this imposition, as we have seen, is the coercive power of religious belief, and the source of the power is the impression made by advanced technology upon a "backward" people. Hence Harriot's text is committed to record what I have called his confirmation of the Machiavellian hypothesis' (Greenblatt 1988, p. 31; I have not already quoted this passage). Whoever opens Harriot's text, however, will find something very different. Far from using 'advanced technology' to oppress or terrify them, Harriot juxtaposes European civilisation with the inhabitants' natural gifts, a comparison from which the Algonquians emerge rather well:

In respect of us they are a people poore, and for want of skill and judgement in the knowledge and use of our things, doe esteeme our trifles before thinges of greater value: Notwithstanding, in their proper manner (considering the want of such meanes as we have), they seeme very ingenious. For although they have no such tooles, nor any such crafts, Sciences and Artes as wee, yet in those things they doe, they shewe excellencie of wit. (*H.*, p. 371)

That combination of self-deprecation ('our trifles') and praise of the indigenous people's native intelligence is far removed from the Eurocentric

superiority recorded by some early visitors to unexplored lands. True, Harriot does write that the more the Indians discover 'our manner of knowledges and craftes to exceede theirs in perfection and speed. . . by so much the more it is probable that they shoulde desire our friendship and love, and have the greater respect for pleasing and obeying us' (H., p. 372). This belief may well seem naïve, but it also expresses his continuing emphasis on the need to live together in peace — peaceful subjection, of course.

No modern reader, obviously, can accept at face value Harriot's further hope that if 'good government be used', the Indians may soon 'be brought to civilitie, and the imbracing of true Religion' (*ibid.*). We are all too conscious that our 'civilitie' is only one of many possible types, and that in destroying others to make them conform to ours we are calling the very notion of civilisation in question. As for 'true Religion', we may be prepared to accept the sincerity of each believer that his or her system of belief is the true one, but we do not think sincerity sufficient ground for imposing any belief system on another people. I do not wish to endorse Harriot's beliefs in any way; merely to record that Greenblatt has misrepresented them, and to that degree failed in the first duty of a historian. The major feature of the Algonquians' religion, which Greenblatt never mentions, is that it is polytheistic.

They beleeve that there are many Gods, which they call *Montoac*, but of different sortes and degrees; one onely chiefe and great God, which hath bene from all eternitie. Who, as they affirme, when hee purposed to make the worlde, made first other goddes of a principall order, to bee as meanes and instruments to be used in the creation and government to follow; and after the Sunne, Moone, and Starres as pettie gods, and the instruments of the other order more principall. . . . For mankinde they say a woman was made first, which by the working of one the goddes, conceived and brought forth children: And in such sort they say they had their beginning. . . . They thinke that all the gods are of humane shape, and therefore they represent them by images in the formes of men. . . . (H., pp. 372–3)

The Algonquians 'beleeve also the immortalitie of the soule', Harriot records, and (perhaps already influenced by earlier Christian visitors: H., p. 373 note) they posit the existence of heaven and hell after death, the deterrent fear of hell making 'manie of the common and simple sort of people . . . have great respect to their Governours, and also great care what they do, to avoid torment after death, and to enjoy blisse'. In addition, the Algonquians have a code of punishment for various kinds of wrongdoing on earth, 'according to the greatnes of the factes' (H., pp. 374–5).

Although not entirely consistent with other sources, Harriot's remarks are respectful, neither antagonistic nor exploitative, and address the concerns of many of his non-capitalist readers by considering the inhabitants'

possible conversion to Christianity: 'some religion they have alreadie, which although it be farre from the truth, yet being as it is, there is hope it may bee the easier and sooner reformed' (H., p. 372). In order to emphasise their potential for conversion he notes that the Indians 'were not so sure grounded' in their religion, 'but through conversing with us they were brought into great doubts of their owne, and no small admiration of ours' (H., p. 375). An instance of the Algonquians' tendency to 'esteeme our trifles before thinges of greater value' was their reaction to the explorers' 'Mathematical instruments' — a compass, a lodestone, perspective glass, fireworks, guns, clocks. The Indians were so impressed that they thought these instruments 'were rather the works of god than of men, or at the leastwise they had bin given and taught us of the gods', so making the English a people 'whom God . . . specially loved' (H., pp. 375–6). These are familiar enough reactions by any primitive people confronted for the first time with European technology, and could be duplicated many times over. Greenblatt uses them, however, to make the very serious charge (fundamental to his thesis) that Harriot 'undermined the Indians' confidence in their native understanding of the universe' by the 'marvels' he showed them, so subverting their religion (p. 27).

Unfortunately for Greenblatt's thesis, though, there is no evidence that Harriot did, or even thought that he had done, such a thing. The fact that one Indian chief, when ill, 'sent for some of us to praie' to the Christian God, and that others made the same request when their corn 'began to wither by reason of a drought' (H., p. 377), is unsurprising in a polytheistic system confronted with gods of apparently greater power. Some of the Algonquian priests and people, Harriot records, 'sometimes accompanied us, to pray and sing Psalmes; hoping thereby to bee partaker of the same effects which wee by that meanes also expected' (*ibid.*). Although willing to expound the Bible to them, Harriot refused to compromise his own religious beliefs, rejecting some of the Indians' appeal to call down divine wrath on their enemies because 'our God would not subject himself to any such prayers and requests of men' (H., p. 379). Harriot, at least, was quite clear about the differences between polytheism and Christianity. Whether Greenblatt is or not, it is unfortunate that he should have failed to inform his innocent and trusting readers about the Algonquians' polytheism, the crucial fact which casts doubt on his claim that Harriot, or anyone else, could bring about the *collapse* of their belief system. Greenblatt is reading with Western eyes, creating a wholly imaginary religious crisis from the assumptions of a monotheistic religion. In polytheism, witness modern Japan, believers regularly turn from one religious system to another as circumstances arise, or pursue both simultaneously. The further, and quite unrelated fact that many Indians contracted fatal diseases from the Europeans (measles, smallpox, perhaps influenza), whom they suspected of killing with 'invisible bullets' (H., pp. 378–80), is indeed tragic, and one of the most disturbing features of colonisation, but it is in any case an issue

of a wholly different kind. Harriot neither willed nor caused — could not have caused — that. Nor, when Harriot made some missionary attempts, is there any evidence of him practising 'fraud' or 'coercion'. He simply did what every responsible Christian, Protestant or Catholic did in those days, sincerely try to convert what they thought to be heathen souls. Of course, Greenblatt adds, the 'subversiveness' of Harriot's 'confirmation of the Machiavellian hypothesis' — an illusory confirmation of an illusory hypothesis! — may have been invisible to most readers, and even to Harriot himself. Indeed, he suggests, 'it may be that Harriot was demonically conscious of what he was doing' (p. 31) — a remark that opens an infinite field of insinuation.

For a less biased account we could turn — as Greenblatt could have turned, since the book was published in 1983 and his essay has appeared in several revised versions since then — to the standard biography of Harriot.⁵¹ Here we learn of Harriot's scientific preparations for Raleigh's expeditions of 1584–5, including the lessons he gave to the ships' captains on navigation, a science in which Harriot achieved quite remarkable accuracy (Shirley 1983, pp. 85–95). Harriot consulted sea masters arriving in the London docks, studied critically the instruments available, devised new instruments and even produced new charts, with an unusual mastery of both theoretical and practical knowledge. His curiosity in the world around him led to him compiling for his own use a glossary of sea terms (*ibid.*, pp. 96ff). The same spirit of enquiry made him master the Algonquian language, becoming the main spokesman and translator for the expeditions, 'one of the most advanced linguists of his time and the first Englishman to master this highly complicated language' (p. 107). In his published *Report* he noted that 'the language of every [Algonquian] government' — or settlement — 'is different from any other, and the further they are distant, the greater is the difference' (H., p. 370), revealing a surprising sensitivity to dialects. His surviving papers include some in a strange script which was formerly interpreted as 'cabalistic': in fact, we know now that this was a surprisingly original phonetic transcription of Algonquian, for which Harriot invented a new cursive script (Shirley 1983, pp. 108–12). One would never guess from Greenblatt's reduction of him to the level of a fraudulent colonist that Harriot was a veritable *uomo universale*; but then, Greenblatt is disillusioned with celebrations of Renaissance accomplishments.

On his first expedition to Virginia Harriot was already noting Indian names, customs, and beliefs (*ibid.*, p. 133), showing his characteristic 'accuracy and completeness' (p. 146). In his dealings with the Indians, his biographer judges, Harriot revealed 'his personal warmth and sympathy for men of a totally alien culture, and his willingness to accept their unorthodox beliefs with understanding' (p. 151). Although biographers sometimes tend to overvalue their subjects, that seems to me a fair assessment of Harriot, and any reader of the *Report* can see how critical he was

of those members of the colony who had been cruel to the Indians (H., p. 381; Shirley 1983, p. 152). In attempting to bring Christianity to them 'he expressed none of the militant zeal' of the Catholic Spaniards, but rather a tolerance and receptiveness which was as much interested in learning their religious views as imparting his own (pp. 152–3). He was impressed by the seriousness with which the Algonquians held their religious beliefs, their "solemn feastes" and "solemn prayers", praising their integrity and peace of mind: "This people therefore voyde of all covetousnesse, lyve cherfullye and att their harts ease" (p. 153). Their moral superiority to Europeans was thus evident. It seems fair to conclude that, rather than an unscrupulous manipulator trying to bring down a whole belief-system, in his dealings with the Indians Harriot showed the same open-mindedness and willingness to entertain 'unusual premises' that made him the outstanding English scientist of his age (p. 154).

The motivating force behind Greenblatt's distortion of Harriot's *Briefe and True Report* is obviously the politicisation he admits to in his own criticism since the Vietnam War, the belief that 'neutrality was itself a political position, a decision to support the official policies in both the state and the academy' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 167). His way of connecting 'the present with the past', we recall, was either by representing 'a particular set of historical circumstances . . . in such a way as to bring out homologies with the present', or else to analyse 'those circumstances . . . as the generative forces that led to the modern condition' (*ibid.*). Either way, representation or analysis, Greenblatt has given a false and tendentious account of Harriot, intended to associate him with a whole series of New Historicist targets. The *ressentiment* behind the misrepresentation comes out most clearly in Greenblatt's bitter comment at the end of his account of the *Report*, on 'the pious humbug with which the English conceal from themselves the rapacity and aggression, or simply the horrible responsibility implicit in *their very presence*' (Greenblatt 1988, p. 38; my italics). Such a general indictment can raise uncomfortable questions, though. Granted that the original colonists are most to blame, what about later immigrants? Perhaps their decision to emigrate in search of work can be faulted as endorsing the colonialists' original 'seizing' of the land, in which case which of us would be free from blame?⁵² The discourse on colonialism seems to find dangerously easy targets.

* * *

I have dealt with Harriot's treatise at some length because it is obviously unfamiliar to most readers, even to those academics who have praised this essay 'Invisible Bullets' so highly. (I can't imagine that they will continue to do so once they know what Harriot actually says.) With Greenblatt's account of *Henry IV* and *Henry V* I can be briefer, since the critical bias will be more visible to readers who know those plays. Greenblatt applies to

them the familiar New Historicist interest in 'the production and containment of subversion and disorder' (p. 40). The villains of the piece turn out to be not the rebels, Hotspur, Northumberland and Co., nor the parasites and rogues, Falstaff, Pistol and Bardolph, but the forces of ostensive law and order, especially Prince Henry. Hal is seen from the outset in extraordinarily unsympathetic terms, as 'a "juggler", a conniving hypocrite'; the 'power he both serves and comes to embody is glorified usurpation and theft' (p. 41). This interpretation deliberately ignores, or discounts, the quite explicit passages in which Shakespeare presents a very different judgment. At the end of his first scene in *1 Henry IV*, the dramatist gives Hal a self-declaratory speech — 'I know you all' — to reassure those members of the audience who did not know the chronicle history that the Prince is simply enjoying himself until the time comes for him to take up his responsibilities:

So when this loose behaviour I throw off
And pay the debt I never promised,
By how much better than my word I am,
By so much shall I falsify men's hopes; . . . 199
I'll so offend to make offence a skill,
Redeeming time when men think least I will. (1.2.196ff)

Although the speech is an unambiguous declaration of Hal's intent to foil the many backbiters who, as Holinshed records, were constantly spreading evil stories about him, Greenblatt reads it 'against the text', as modern theorists quaintly put it, to present it in his negative light. Ignoring the obvious sense of 'hopes' in line 199 — that is, 'the expectations of my enemies and critics that I will turn out a ne'er-do-well' — Greenblatt sees it as implying barefaced deception and betrayal (p. 41). At one level this 'partial' interpretation of the sense is old-fashioned character criticism, which isolates one character from the play, ignoring the context and the playwright's design. Within character criticism it belongs to the vituperative pole, what Richard Levin has called 'character assassination',⁵³ namely the building up of 'a "case" against the targeted character by going through, or at least claiming to go through, his entire career within the play in such a way as to put him in the worst possible light' (Levin 1979, pp. 85–6). In this mode of reading 'the critic treats only those facts which reflect (or can be made to reflect) unfavorably upon the character, and silently passes over all the others'. As Levin shows, this strategy also involves selecting only 'those aspects that will submit to his negative thesis'; emphasising 'relatively trivial facts at the expense of the important ones' which establish a correctly balanced attitude to the character, so distorting the play; and taking those facts 'out of the context established by the playwright to guide our response to them' (*ibid.*). Greenblatt does all of these.

Since the New Historicists, in the wake of Barthes and Foucault,

generally dismiss the notion of the author having shaped his materials with a coherent moral and aesthetic design, they end up committing the same error as do thousands of unsophisticated readers who regard characters in literary works as if they were people you could meet on the street. Greenblatt has taken an instant dislike to Hal for what he thinks Hal represents, and proceeds to damn him like some wholly unprincipled prosecuting attorney. Earlier Greenblatt had professed his belief that 'sustained, scrupulous attention to formal and linguistic design will remain at the center of literary teaching and study' (Greenblatt 1988, p. 4): by these criteria his account of *1 Henry IV* is fragmented and unscrupulous. To present Hal as 'the prince and principle of falsification . . . a counterfeit companion . . . an anti-Midas: everything he touches turns to dross', resulting in a 'devaluation' that reduces him to 'counterfeit coin' (p. 42) — such a totally unsympathetic reading seeks no justification in the text (95% of which is never referred to) and is more concerned to legitimise itself as a politically correct opposition to 'the official policies in both the state and the academy'.

Greenblatt is echoing, whether he knows it or not, other hostile accounts of Hal, such as those by Richard Simpson, the Victorian, and D.A. Traversi, a 1940s *Scrutiny* critic. His account is just as one-sided as theirs, but serves a different goal. Embodying as he does the New Historicist fascination yet disillusionment with the sources of power and authority, Greenblatt must ignore not only the positive aspects of Hal as a character in the play, but also the historical record of him as embodying legitimate rule. Bolingbroke had seized the crown from Richard II, and his reign was 'unquiet', as a Tudor historian put it, a tissue of rebellion on the outside and guilt within, the nemesis of conscience sapping any enjoyment of his rule. But, by a sleight of hand in the Tudor historians, one sometimes feels, when Hal succeeded to the throne he cast off his father's guilt and became the legitimate ruler, Henry V, whose achievements in war and peace assured England prosperity throughout his reign, and great victories in France. His positive gains, in turn, were dissipated by the imprudence of Henry VI and the recurrence of civil conflict, leading to the disaster of the War of the Roses, from which Henry VII and the Tudor dynasty saved us. All this is familiar from the historians or Shakespeare's *Henry VI* cycle, as every schoolboy knows. References to the sources will show that Shakespeare's synthesis from Hall, Samuel Daniel, Holinshed, and half-a-dozen other versions gives a coherent and consistent picture of Hal embodying maturity, decency, chivalry, courage, wit, authority, and a sense of future responsibilities which he must and can assume with dignity and justice.⁵⁴ To realise this, it is only necessary to read the plays with an open mind.

One of the main changes that Shakespeare (following Daniel) made from the chronicles was to reduce the age of Hotspur, who was historically older than King Henry IV, in order to make him the rival of Hal. From the

first, Geoffrey Bullough writes, Shakespeare's 'intention was to make the Hal-Hotspur antithesis culminate in the physical and moral triumph of the former at the battle of Shrewsbury. Yet to give this any weight the Prince must be shown in action as a madcap' first (Bullough 1962, p. 159), those legendary incidents involving his misbehaviour as the wild young man who reformed on succeeding to the crown. In another source, the 'rowdy and chauvinistic play' called *The Famous Victories of Henry the Fifth* (ca. 1587–88), as David Bevington points out, 'Hal is truly unregenerate. He not only robs and wenches, but endorses the idea of plundering the rich and encourages his companions to look forward to unrestricted license when he is King. The blow he delivers the Chief Justice is a blow for freedom. Hal seems consciously to desire his father's death. Yet he does reform', albeit in a 'crude and sudden' way (Bevington 1980, p. 1641). Shakespeare preferred to follow the chronicles in recording that none of Hal's exploits actually harmed anyone; indeed Shakespeare (like Stow) has him repay to the victims the purses Falstaff managed to steal on Gadshill. Hal performs a double restitution: of the money to the travellers, of the kingdom to its legitimate officers. Hal's intention to 'redeem time' — to buy it back, as if a debt, or make amends for time lost — is a motif which Shakespeare deliberately emphasises. In his first long confrontation with his father, whose praise of Hotspur is obviously designed to build him up as a worthy rival (3.2.97–128), Hal defends himself from the slanders of 'smiling pickthanks and base newsmongers' and twice vows: 'I shall hereafter . . . / Be more myself' (92–3), promising to 'redeem all this on Percy's head', who shall 'exchange / His glorious deeds for my indignities' (132ff). When he confronts the rebels before the battle of Shrewsbury Hal generously praises Hotspur and acknowledges his own falling-off until now:

I do not think a braver gentleman,
More active-valiant or more valiant-young,
More daring or more bold, is now alive
To grace this latter age with noble deeds.
For my part I may speak it to my shame,
I have a truant been to chivalry. . . . (5.1.87ff)

Hal's generosity (another positive side of his character that Greenblatt either cannot or will not see) is praised by Vernon as he reports back to Hotspur how Hal

gave you all the duties of a man,
Trimmed up your praises with a princely tongue,
Spoke your deservings like a chronicle. . . .

Not only generous in praising his rival, Vernon reports, Hal 'made a blushing cital of himself / And chid his truant youth with such a grace' as if he had acquired the ability 'Of teaching and of learning instantly'. In addition to giving an independent testimony of Hal's positive qualities,

Vernon's report repeats the dialectic of truancy and reform that was established at the play's outset. When Hal has fulfilled his promise, killing Hotspur, routing Douglas, and saving his father's life, the King duly acknowledges his reformation: 'Thou hast redeemed thy lost opinion' — that is, reputation (5.4.47).

In the sequel Shakespeare twice gives Hal a self-reproach for not yet having 'redeemed' his lost time, first in the jaded scene with Poins: 'Well, thus we play the fools with the time, and the spirits of the wise sit in the clouds and mock us' (2 *Henry IV*, 2.2.134); and secondly at the end of the Eastcheap scene with Falstaff: 'I feel me much to blame/So idly to profane the precious time' (2.4.364–5). Awaiting news of the confrontation with the rebels, the sick King also praises Hal's generosity: he has 'a tear for pity, and a hand / Open as day for melting charity' (4.4.30–32). In the great scene between them that follows — when Hal's 'trying' with the crown, 'as with an enemy', produces the last misunderstanding between them, the son's self-defence settling his father's anxieties once and for all — Hal affirms his integrity and the sense of duty he is now ready to accept:

If I do feign
O let me in my present wildness die,
And never live to show th'incredulous world
The noble change that I have purposed! (4.5.151–4)

Finally, having acceded to the throne and endorsed the Lord Chief Justice, the new King declares that he has buried the 'affections' or passions of his prodigal years, and will now live — echoing the words of his first soliloquy —

To mock the expectation of the world,
To frustrate prophecies, and to raze out
Rotten opinion, who hath writ me down
After my seeming. (5.2.123–30)

Hal's abandonment of 'vanity' shows his underlying virtue, making the prophecy of his conversion to the responsibilities of office a coherent ethical motif with which Shakespeare organised both plays. (To some modern critics, of course, any character who overtly takes up an ethical position must be suspected of hypocrisy. The clarity with which much literature of the past uttered ethical evaluations is a source of considerable difficulty to some critical schools today.)

This exemplary story of the emergence of a supremely successful and legitimate ruler can be of little interest to the avowedly politicised New Historicist, disillusioned after Vietnam, Watergate, the Gulf War, or any of a dozen episodes in contemporary history that reveal our governors in the worst possible light. The jaundiced idealist Greenblatt, preferring to side with 'rotten opinion' and 'base newsmongers', writes a sustained

indictment of Hal. He ignores history and draws opportunistically on his 'background' source, Harriot, whose attempt to supply an Algonquian-English dictionary is now said to have been made to 'consolidate English power in Virginia' (Greenblatt 1988, p. 45) — the 'politicized' nature of that remark, ascribing the worst possible motives to Harriot the inquiring scholar, needs no comment. In the same way, Greenblatt continues, Hal studies the tavern slang of his cronies in order 'to understand and control the lower classes' (p. 49). In order to make this analogy, Greenblatt has had to ignore the dramatic context, from which it is clear that Hal is performing neither a Henry Mayhew exercise in social reporting nor a Basil Bernstein one in socio-linguistics, but is actually enjoying himself. At the 'olde Taverne in Eastcheape' in Part One of the play, he calls on Poins to 'lend my thy hand to laugh a little', having been 'with three or four loggerheads, amongst three or fourscore hogsheads' — that is, drinking in the cellars with the tapsters, with whom he is on Christian name terms. He is proud to have been accepted by them, for they 'tell me flatly I am no proud Jack like Falstaff' — note that comment on Falstaff's egoism —

but a Corinthian, a lad of mettle, a good boy (by the Lord, so they call me!), and when I am King of England I shall command all the good lads in Eastcheap. They call drinking deep 'dyeing scarlet', and when you breathe in your watering they cry 'Hem!' and bid you 'Play it off!' To conclude, I am so good a proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life. (2.4.2–19)

This sense of Hal's enjoyment at having been accepted into the Eastcheap world, with its ludicrously serious rules for drinking and its special cant, the feeling of 'play' involved, is totally absent from Greenblatt's account. Equally ignored is the Prince's zest for play-acting with Falstaff, putting serious affairs in a comical light. At one point Hal imagines them personating the rebels: 'I prithee call in Falstaff. I'll play Percy, and that damn brawn shall play Dame Mortimer his wife. . . . call in ribs, call in tallow' (2.4.108ff). Falstaff shares, indulges this delight in improvisation and fantasy: 'What, shall we be merry, shall we have a play extempore?' (279–80), an invitation that he repeats when they imagine Hal being rebuked by his father when he returns to court:

FALSTAFF. If thou love me, practise an answer.

PRINCE HENRY. Do thou stand for my father and examine me upon the particulars of my life.

FALSTAFF. Shall I? Content.

There follows what the Hostess rightly describes as 'excellent sport i'faith', that marvellous scene in which each in turn acts out accusation and defence, Hal being accused by his father, as agreed, but Falstaff then unexpectedly attacked by Hal, producing Falstaff's superb *apologia pro vita sua* (2.4.373–485). In addition to its structural importance for the

father-son relationships in the play, and the related issues of truancy and corruption, few comic scenes have given greater pleasure on the English stage than this one. Here, if anywhere, would have been the place to invoke that otherwise popular ingredient in Current Literary Theory, Bakhtin's notion of carnival. But such sympathetic critical paradigms may only be used for openly subversive characters, ideologically approved.

Greenblatt bolsters his indictment of Hal by citing a passage in the sequel, the scene where Warwick tries to reassure the dying Henry IV that his son is no wastrel. But our New Historicist once again betrays history, failing to provide the background needed to understand it. Warwick states that

The Prince but studies his companions
Like a strange tongue, wherein, to gain the language,
'Tis needful that the most immodest word
Be look'd upon and learnt; which once attain'd,
Your Highness knows, comes to no further use
But to be known and hated. So, like gross terms,
The Prince will in the perfectness of time
Cast off his followers,

memory of their wrongdoings aiding the future King's knowledge of crime and punishment (2 *Henry IV*, 4.4.68ff). It was a widely-understood principle in classical and Renaissance politics that a ruler should get to know his subjects — indeed, a whole school of texts describes how a wise ruler did so by going among them in disguise. As Sir Thomas Elyot wrote in *The Governor*, rulers will never discover the causes of sickness or health in society 'except they them selves personally resorte and peruse all partes of the countrayes under their governance, and inserche diligently . . . what be the customes and maners of people good and bad', in order to 'here what is commonly or privately spoken'.⁵⁵ This is to give a serious, not to say a studious explanation, which might indeed be open to the charge of hypocrisy. But as we have seen, Shakespeare presents a Hal who is not pretending, but really enjoying this carefree time before taking on the pains of office. Greenblatt ignores the 'carnival' aspect of his behaviour, accepts Elyot's serious explanation, as it were, but only to put it to the worst possible application. He actually accuses Hal of seriously compiling that 'kind of glossary . . . specifically linked to the attempt to understand and control the lower classes', namely 'the sinister glossaries appended to sixteenth-century accounts of criminals and vagabonds' (p. 49: one detects in the New Historicists, and not for the first time, a touch of paranoia in their attitude to the 'ruling classes'). But first — to state the obvious! — criminals and vagabonds did not constitute the 'lower classes' in Elizabethan England, who were for the most part honest working men and women who regarded criminals with fear and disapproval. Secondly, the aim of the compilers of such glossaries was not to 'control' the criminals but to have

their canting terms and crooked practices, known, so that honest citizens would not be deceived by them, and the laws of the realm upheld. These are the explicit motives of such a typical text as Thomas Harman's *Caveat for Common Cursitors* (1566), and Harman would have agreed with Warwick's insistence on the need to learn such 'immodest terms' so that they 'be known and hated'. Thirdly, Hal is not compiling a glossary of any kind. That Greenblatt should put on the same level Harriot's list of Algonquian words, Hal's delight at such phrases as 'Hem!' and 'Play it off!', and Harman's account of thieves' slang is a trivial, and at first sight puzzling manoeuvre.

But there is a link, in Greenblatt's eyes: namely, he accuses Harman of having 'betrayed' his informants by printing information given to him in confidence (for the public good, we recall), and argues that similarly 'the "larger order" of the Lancastrian state in this play seems to batten on the breaking of oaths' (p. 52). It is a characteristic New Historicist procedure, as we know, to find the Renaissance guilty of having created unpleasant aspects of modern society. So here, Greenblatt writes, 'the founding of the modern state, like the self-fashioning of the modern prince, is . . . based upon acts of calculation, intimidation, and deceit'. But Hal betrays no one. The breaking of the assurance of safe conduct given to the rebels is assigned by Shakespeare, following his sources, to Prince John (*2 Henry IV*, 4.2.110ff). Changing the emphasis in his sources, Bevington writes, 'Shakespeare puts Northumberland in a more dishonorable position than in Holinshed, and emphasises the perfidious dastardy of Prince John. Seemingly, Shakespeare wanted to stress the coldness and cynicism of Machiavellian politicians on both sides of the rebellion, as a contrast with the more enlightened policy to which Prince Hal aspires' (Bevington 1980, p. 1641). Whatever we might feel about deceiving our enemies (if it spared a lot of lives, as the disinformation techniques used by allied espionage during the second world war did, there might be something to be said for it), in Elizabethan terms it could be justified, since rebels are guilty of treason: they have betrayed the oath of allegiance that every subject is deemed to have sworn, to obey the sovereign and the law of the land. Greenblatt does not make Hal guilty of this act, but he says in general that 'out of the squalid betrayals that preserve the state emerges the "formal majesty" into which Hal at the close, through a final, definitive betrayal — the rejection of Falstaff — merges himself' (p. 53). Greenblatt has not, unfortunately, examined the text here with the 'sustained, scrupulous attention to formal and linguistic design' that he claims to respect. Had he done so, he would have found that Hal does not 'betray' Falstaff since he never promised him anything, indeed explicitly predicted his ultimate banishment at the start ('I do, I will': *1 Henry IV*, 2.4.475).

More important, had Greenblatt approached the play with an open mind in the first place, he might have realised that Falstaff, despite all his engaging qualities, is the great predator, an unscrupulous parasite who

never has a good word to say about anyone, never does a good deed, and, if he had the power, would corrupt the whole state.⁵⁶ Falstaff is not 'betrayed': he betrays himself, most seriously in the grotesque act, 'alone' on stage — 'Nothing confutes me but eyes, and nobody sees me' (5.4.128: 'O wie gut, dass niemand weiß, / Dass ich Rumpelstilzchen heiß (!)') — of stabbing the corpse of Hotspur, whom Hal has killed, and claiming credit for his defeat (*1 Henry IV*, 5.4.120ff). Greenblatt comments neither on this episode nor on the amazing generosity which Shakespeare ascribes to Hal when, having protested at Falstaff's lie — 'Why, Percy I kill'd myself' — he nonetheless lets Falstaff take credit for the victory: 'if a lie may do thee grace, / I'll gild it with the happiest terms I have' (5.4.142–56). In terms of dramatic technique (needless to say, ignored by New Historicism), the 'counterfeit' and 'honour' soliloquies in Part One show Falstaff still as an engaging rogue but isolate him and involve the thinking spectator or reader in some moral problems. Shakespeare heightens both effects in Part Two, where the nature and frequency of the soliloquies confront the audience more and more with his unpleasant qualities.⁵⁷ Greenblatt finds 'the mood at the close' of the play, after Falstaff's rejection, 'unpleasant' (p. 55, reading 'against the text' once more), but it depends whose side you are on. Had Falstaff been given power, we may be sure, the result would not have differed much from the anarchy incarnated in Jack Cade (*2 Henry VI*, 4.2.61ff, 4.6, 4.7). It is Cade who says 'And when I am King, as King I will be, . . . there shall be no money'; all men shall wear the same 'livery, that they may . . . worship me their lord'; and: 'Away! burn all the records of the realm; my mouth shall be the parliament of England'; and: 'there shall not a maid be married, but she shall pay to me her maidenhead, ere they have it'. For law and order Cade wants to substitute a grotesque version of feudalism with himself as the ruler living off his people. (Twentieth-century history has given us more than enough examples of leaders of religious groups or political states indulging their own appetites for greed, sex, or riches.) Falstaff's Utopia is less explicit, but includes the request to Hal to banish the gallows when he succeeds to the throne: 'Do not thou when thou art king hang a thief' (*1 Henry IV*, 1.2.56ff). And when the news reaches him that Hal has become King he proclaims: 'Let us take any man's horses — the laws of England are at my commandment. Blessed are they that have been my friends, and woe to my Lord Chief Justice!' (*2 Henry IV*, 5.3.119ff).

Once again, for all his apparent contemporaneity, Greenblatt is here repeating traditional attitudes in Shakespeare criticism, for protests at Falstaff's rejection go back to A.C. Bradley in 1909, and beyond him to Maurice Morgann, much discussed — and ably refuted — in the 1770s.⁵⁸ Scratch a New Historicist and you find a disappointed romanticist. But whereas earlier sentimentalists protested out of affection for the fat rogue, Greenblatt displays no affection for him, taking Falstaff's side merely as a weapon in his own opposition to the powers of legitimacy and authority.

Turning to *Henry V*, then—in which he predictably finds ‘every nuance of royal hypocrisy, ruthlessness, and bad faith’ (p. 56) — and anxious at every stage to attack established authority, our critic is reduced to siding with Pistol and Bardolph against Fluellen and the King. According to Greenblatt, Pistol ‘pleads that Fluellen intervene to save Bardolph, who has been sentenced to die for stealing a “pax of little price”’ (p. 58). But this is to accept Pistol’s view of the affair! Robbing churches, to the Elizabethans, was a serious crime, and the punishment exemplary. To Greenblatt ‘this attempt to save his friend’s life is the ground for Fluellen denouncing Pistol as a “rascally, scald, beggarly, lousy, pragging knave”’: as if those two incidents were connected, and as if there were not ample, indeed unanimous evidence in the play to endorse Fluellen’s judgment. Greenblatt conveniently overlooks the denunciation of the whole crew of parasites that Shakespeare gives to a choric character, the Boy:

As young as I am, I have observed these three swashers: I am boy to all three, but all they three, though they would serve me, could not be man to me; for indeed three such antics [buffoons] do not amount to a man . . . They will steal anything, and call it purchase. . . . They would have me as familiar with men’s pockets as their gloves or their handkerchers: which makes much against my manhood. . . . I must leave them, and seek some better service: their villany goes against my weak stomach, and therefore I must cast it up. (3.2.28ff)

Pistol’s whole career of crime, rant, and ignoble cowardice — unforgettably conveyed when he grovels to Fluellen and eats the leek he has mocked (5.1.14ff) — is presented by Shakespeare throughout in the worst possible light. Pistol is explicitly condemned by the Boy here and later (4.4.66ff); by Gower, who describes him as ‘an arrant counterfeit rascal, . . . a bawd, a cutpurse . . . , a rogue’ who poses as a soldier, one of the ‘slanders of the age’ (3.6.61ff), ‘a counterfeit cowardly knave’ (5.2.69); and by Fluellen (notable for ‘care and valour’, as Shakespeare makes the King say at 4.1.84), outraged by this ‘rascally, scald, beggarly, lousy, pragging knave’ (5.1.5ff).

The consistency of Shakespeare’s critical view, and an example of the early theatrical convention of self-presentation, can be seen from the number of times he makes Pistol describe himself as a parasite — on his way to the wars: ‘Let us to France, like horse-leeches, my boys, / To suck, to suck, the very blood to suck!’ (2.3.55–6); after his defeat of a French soldier, taken in by his bluster: ‘As I suck blood, I will some mercy show’ (4.4.64); and at his dismissal from the play, vowing to become a ‘bawd’ and ‘cutpurse of quick hand. / To England will I steal, and there I’ll steal’ (5.2.85ff). Yet his desire to perform a character assassination of Hal means that Stephen Greenblatt voluntarily allies himself with Pistol — an uncomfortable bedfellow for a Berkeley professor. As for the presence of the ‘four nations’ (English, Welsh, Scottish and Irish) in Henry’s army, where

generations of readers have taken this as a symbol of the new spirit of national unity embodied in the King (a unity of mutual support, as anyone with an inkling of geography or history would know, since the destruction of any of these countries by a foreign power would spell the ruin of them all), Greenblatt sees them through New Historicist spectacles as signifying coloniser and colonised (p. 56). At least this is predictable.

In the scene on the eve of Agincourt, finally, Greenblatt claims that the soldier Williams challenges the king’s authority effectively, Henry being forced back on ‘a string of awkward “explanations” designed to show that “the king is not bound to answer the particular endings of his soldiers” — as if death in battle were a completely unforeseen accident’ (p. 61). The critic’s sarcasm cannot conceal the fact that the burden of this discussion is indeed to absolve the king of personal responsibility for the deaths or injuries of his soldiers. He is only the head of a state which goes to war collectively, and is collectively responsible. Greenblatt’s further claim that Henry is ‘almost single-handedly responsible’ for the war ignores the evidence from this play — or from the *Henry VI* cycle, or from the Tudor historians — that the king had the backing of the whole nation; that he achieved a glorious victory; and that the prestige of England was never greater. After Vietnam, after the Falklands, it takes more effort of the historical imagination to think oneself back into a position where Henry V can be seen as a hero who unified his country, bringing peace and prosperity. It is all too easy to ignore history and see him in the jejune and jaundiced terms of disillusioned liberals.⁵⁹ But to do so while practising something claiming to be ‘historicism’ becomes an act of self-deception.

V

If Greenblatt’s work represents the *acme* of New Historicism then the number of grave defects it contains must arouse doubts about the value or validity of this whole school of criticism — if that is not to grant it a spurious unity (time will tell). A disregard for the integrity of the literary text; a bending of evidence, background and foreground, to suit one-sided interpretations; the foisting of modern cultural and political attitudes on to Renaissance texts — these are serious deficiencies for a movement which claims to avoid the mistakes of the past and provide a model for the future. To many readers this will constitute sufficient reason to view their work with cautious scepticism.

To some critics, however, New Historicism does not go far enough. One writer frequently associated with the group, Jonathan Goldberg, published an essay on *Macbeth* specifically designed to advance a new cutting edge. Goldberg refers to Greenblatt’s essay on *King Lear* and the exorcists but rejects its method, not on the historical or critical grounds that I have

outlined but because it 'does not ultimately call into question the value system upon which it rests. Greenblatt's *King Lear* is, in many ways, perfectly recognizable' (Goldberg 1987, pp. 242–3), evidently a major defect in Goldberg's eyes. Greenblatt's argument, he complains, 'does not . . . go far enough in distinguishing itself from more conventional literary criticism. It seeks to preserve the very notion of literalness it calls into question' (p. 244). Summoning up a more powerful magic, Derrida's concepts of 'répétition', 'trace', and 'différance', Goldberg announces that he will now 'call into question the methods of literary critics, and the practices of textual, historical, and formalistic criticism' (p. 245) — with an appropriately de-centred view of history as 'heterogeneous dispersal' (p. 247).

Stimulated by this prospect of a total rejection of all extant systems, the reader of the discussion of *Macbeth* that follows is sadly disappointed to find that most of it is entirely traditional criticism, discussing Shakespeare's sources and his deviations from them, mirror-imagery, possible revisions of the text, Ben Jonson's masques, Jacobean absolutism, and panegyric. As for the comments on Shakespeare's plays, although they pay homage to the current concern with gender they read more like old-fashioned judgmental character criticism, only worse in that they ignore motive and context. Masculinity in *Macbeth*, Goldberg declares, 'is directed as an assaultive attempt to secure power, to maintain success and succession, at the expense of women. As is typical of many of Shakespeare's tragedies, the play is largely womanless and family relationships are disturbed' (p. 259; my italics). As it happens, there are three women in *Macbeth* (excluding the witches), as there are in several of Shakespeare's tragedies, a reasonable complement given the make-up of the average Elizabethan theatre-company, and two of them have important roles. But it would not suit Goldberg's argument to note this. True, family relationships are disturbed: that is indeed one of the characteristics of tragedy as a genre. For Goldberg, however, it is proof of the dramatist's misogyny. Pursuing his thesis that Shakespeare is 'anti-feminine', he states that when Macbeth is killed he

is replaced by two men who have secured power in the defeat of women. Indeed, Macduff has not only abandoned his wife and family, his very birth represents a triumph over his mother's womb, the manifest fantasy of being self-begotten that also deludes Macbeth in his final encounter. (p. 259)

Readers will not need me to remind them that Macduff's flight was an emergency to preserve his life on the outside chance that he might be able to defeat the tyrant; and that the loss of his family causes him more anguish and remorse than anyone else in the play is capable of, an ability to care about others against which we can gauge Macbeth's concern solely with himself. There is no evidence in the text or anywhere else that Macduff has 'secured power' by 'the defeat of women'. As for his birth by Caesarian section, that is such a singular *donnée* of plot, the special case

that would fulfil the witches' prediction of Macbeth's invulnerability to man 'born of Woman', that it would be folly to base any normative argument on it. And to call this birth a 'triumph over his mother's womb' is an unpleasantness which may be a peculiarly modern form of misogyny on Goldberg's part, but is nowhere found in the play. As dramatic criticism Goldberg's is no better than Greenblatt's on Hal in disregarding the play's integrity, both critics displaying a self-willed quality that can only be described as ruthless. More striking, though, is the gap between the critic's ambitions for a wholly new discourse and what he actually produces.

Everyone will agree with the principle from which these critics apparently began, that the writing of history is a construct in which the historian evaluates evidence and organises a narrative that fulfils contemporary expectations of coherence and consistency — that, in these respects at least, all narrations of the past, far from being 'objective', bear the marks of the individual writer and of the age in which they were produced. Paradoxically (to adapt a phrase), the 'poverty of the New Historicism' lies in its being subject to the same constraints. Its own critical practice is just as much a product of its time, of an ideology that only allows it to deal with a part of Shakespeare, reshaped to suit its own purposes. It is not the proclaimed historicist approach that, in the end, mars this form of criticism, nor its flirtation with Current Literary Theory, but its relentless politicising. The general form this politicising takes is a monotonous preoccupation with the triad of power, containment, and subversion. Greenblatt, in addition, uses both literary texts and the cultural context to indict aspects of modern society of which he disapproves. It is the present that controls his work, not the past. Frank Lentricchia has described Greenblatt as endorsing a version of determinism that is 'the typically anxious expression of post-Watergate American humanist intellectuals' (Lentricchia 1988, p. 93; 1989, p. 235), and Louis Montrose has recorded his feeling that New Historicist concerns are 'partially impelled by a questioning of our very capacity for action — by a nagging sense of professional, institutional, and political powerlessness or irrelevance' (Montrose 1989, p. 26). Everyone must have days when they feel powerless or irrelevant, and citizens of a democracy that only get to vote every four or five years often feel that their participation in political life is nominal.

While sharing and understanding Montrose's feelings, though, a deeper and more important issue may be involved. Montrose does not suggest that their academic work is only 'a psychological compensation for social inactivity and political quiescence' (*ibid.*), but Lentricchia's critique of Greenblatt accuses New Historicism of encouraging — in the wake of Foucault — a cynically passive acceptance of a corrupt society over which we supposedly have no control. The Foucauldian belief in 'a power that coerces all practices' produces 'the desire to get outside politics' (Lentricchia 1988, p. 95; 1989, p. 237). The New Historicist, powerless to act, longs for 'a space of freedom' where he will not feel

enabled by vast, impersonal systems. There, in that special place, we know we are because we feel ourselves to be discontented; in that reflective space we make the judgement that no system enables — that we are unhappy. And we locate our unhappiness precisely in those systems that have produced and enabled us as selves. (*ibid.*, pp. 100–101/241)

Hence the attraction of literary criticism written by disaffected subjects who, as Hooker put it, 'openly reprove supposed disorders of state' and thus appear 'principal friends to the common benefit of all'. Hence, too, the parallel indictment of the Renaissance, as Lentricchia also notes, for being 'peculiarly modern', but "'modern" not only in a sense not intended by Jacob Burckhardt but in one which would have horrified his liberal confidence: the Renaissance is *our* culture because it is the origin of our disciplinary society' (pp. 97/238).

Lentricchia's target is the 'political quandary' he diagnoses in New Historicism: 'hating a world that we never made, wanting to transform it' but believing that impossible, 'we settle for a holiday from reality, a safely sealed space reserved for the expression of aesthetic anarchy' as a substitute for political action (pp. 101/241–2). He is concerned that this cynical acceptance of power and passivity encourages quietism and an illusory picture of democracy as totalitarian. My concern, rather, is with the discrepancy between Greenblatt's claim that the value of New Historicism is its 'intensified willingness to read all of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts' (Greenblatt 1990, p. 14), and the travesties that he performs on Harriot, Harsnett, and several other writers called up to provide contextual material. The fact (already noted by several critics)⁶⁰ that Greenblatt regularly misrepresents the cultural or literary text that he discusses, suggests to me that his desire for revenge or retribution has overcome his better judgment. Taking up but redirecting the remarks of Montrose and Lentricchia, I see this distorting process displaying what Max Scheler described in his classic analysis as *Ressentiment*, that stifling feeling of impotence, born of the mentality (originally defined by Nietzsche's attack on Christianity), in which the dominated helplessly seeks to subvert and overturn the values of the master.⁶¹

The feeling of powerlessness, Scheler showed, gives rise to such 'emotions and affects' as 'revenge, hatred, . . . the impulse to detract' (p. 46). The desire to detract seeks 'those objects . . . from which it can draw gratification. It likes to disparage and to smash pedestals, to dwell on the negative aspects of excellent men and things, exulting in the fact that such faults are more perceptible through their contrast with the strongly positive qualities' (*ibid.*, p. 47). Or, as in the case of Harriot or Hal, denying them any 'positive qualities' at all. The crucial element for Scheler is the simultaneous presence of bitter feelings and the inability to turn them into action.

Ressentiment can only arise if these emotions are particularly powerful and yet must be suppressed because they are coupled with the feeling that one is unable to act them out — either because of weakness, physical or mental, or because of fear. Through its very origin, *ressentiment* is therefore chiefly confined to those who *serve* and are *dominated* at the moment, who fruitlessly resent the sting of authority. (p. 48)

To Scheler's suggested motives for the non-expression of feelings we can now add the Foucault-derived belief that there is no point in uttering them, because subversion will in any case be contained and rendered meaningless. Uncannily like Foucault is Scheler's account of how 'the delights of oppositionism' depend on a negative view of the situation: 'It is peculiar to "*ressentiment*" criticism that it does not seriously desire that its demands be fulfilled. It does not want to cure the evil . . .' (p. 51). Society must go on being conceived as composed of anonymous power-structures that determine us and deny our selfhood. The Renaissance can go on being re-defined as the origin of our discontents, while Shakespeare can go on being shown — with a mixture of regret and satisfaction — to be guilty too.