To the editorial board of Representations,
past, present, and future
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Introduction

This book is probably more in need of an introduction than most: two authors, two chapters on anecdotes, two on eucharistic doctrine in the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, and two on nineteenth-century materialism. Or, to put it somewhat differently, two chapters on anecdotes, and four on bread, potatoes, and the dead. The underlying coherence of all this may not be self-evident.

We began by wanting to explain how new historicism had changed the field of literary history. The project was, on our part, a belated act of recognition. When years ago we first noticed in the annual job listing of the Modern Language Association that an English department was advertising for a specialist in new historicism, our response was incredulity. How could something that didn't really exist, that was only a few words gesturing toward a new interpretative practice, have become a "field"? When did it happen and how could we not have noticed? If this was indeed a field, who could claim expertise in it and in what would such expertise consist? Surely, we of all people should know something of the history and the principles of new historicism, but what we knew above all was that it (or perhaps we) resisted systematization. We had never formulated a set of theoretical propositions or articulated a program; we had not drawn up for ourselves, let alone for anyone else, a sequence of questions that always needed to be posed when encountering a work of literature in order to construct a new historicist reading; we would not be able to say to someone in haughty disapproval, "You are not an authentic
new historicist." The notion of authenticity seemed and continues to seem misplaced, for new historicism is not a coherent, close-knit school in which one might be enrolled or from which one might be expelled. The term has been applied to an extraordinary assortment of critical practices, many of which bear little resemblance to our own. This book will not attempt to capture that rich variety; here we will speak only for ourselves, to whom "new historicism" at first signified an impatience with American New Criticism, an unsettling of established norms and procedures, a mingling of dissent and restless curiosity.

To be sure, we talked constantly about our methodological principles. We eagerly read works of "theory" emanating principally from Paris, Konstanz, Berlin, Frankfurt, Budapest, Tartu, and Moscow, and met regularly with a group of friends to argue about them. At this distance we remember best the heated discussions, a mingling of dissent and restless curiosity. To construct such a system independent of our own time and place and of the particular objects by which we are interested, and we doubt too that any powerful work we might do would begin with. . . .

The group came to understand also that there was, in interdisciplinary studies, a tendency to invoke, in support of one's own positions, arguments from other disciplines that sophisticated thinkers in those other disciplines had in fact been calling into question. We had, as it were, been complacently dressing ourselves in each other's cast-off clothes, until, looking around the room, we erupted in laughter. The spectacle was not entirely grotesque: some of the intellectual hand-me-downs looked surprisingly good on our friends, and we experienced the odd sensation one might feel at seeing one's own discarded possessions sold at auction for a handsome profit. In a few cases, such as the formal analysis of the inner structure of literary works, we wanted to take back what we had been rather too hasty to give away. The effect on the two of us was to underscore the difficulty of constructing an overarching theory, prior to or independent of individual cases, that would integrate historical and literary interpretation, generate powerful new readings, and survive the withering critiques leveled at it from outside. We became rather good at slipping out of theoretical nooses.

After several years of regular meetings, acknowledging the transforming importance that the informal discussions had had for each of us and the vital energy that they had contributed to our work, the group began to think about ways of extending its existence, for we knew from prior experience that the charismatic moment that bound us together, though in this case unusually intense and prolonged, could not endure. We would need a structure that would provide a set of ongoing challenges and hence a raison d'être. We settled on the idea of a journal, for we could constitute ourselves as the editorial board and hence continue as well as broaden our discussions, but we needed to come up with
an idea and a title. After considerable debate, we settled on representa-
tion as the central problem in which all of us—literary critic and art historian; historian and political scientist; Lacanian, Fou-
caudian, Freudian, neo-pragmatist; deconstructor and unrecon-
structed formalist—were engaged. It was tempting then to call the pro-
posed journal "Representation," but the uneasiness some of us felt with theoretical abstraction, our skepticism about the will to construct a unified theory, led us to adopt the plural. Whatever progress we were likely to make in grappling with the contested status of representation would occur, we were convinced, only in close, detailed engagement with a multiplicity of historically embedded cultural performances: specific instances, images, and texts that offered some resistance to interpretation.

About a year after launching Representations, the group decided that it would be good to have an editorial statement, as many journals do, staking out our theoretical position, but we found once again that we could not agree on a satisfactory unitary formulation. If a literary critic came up with something that sounded plausible, the historians would sharply dissent, while the historians' terms would in turn be challenged; nor were the dis-

agreements strictly disciplinary. There were fracture lines every-
where, and yet we were convinced that we were wrestling with a shared set of issues and that it was important to continue the in-
quiry; to continue the inquiry but not to conduct a system: a few of
us at least were beginning to exult the methodological eclecticism of our intellectual climate as salutary in itself. Attempts to systematize deconstruction provided a cautionary example, for they seemed to us a betrayal of its Pyrrhonian energy (as if someone in the early
seventeenth century had tried to rewrite Montaigne in order to make him sound like Thomas Aquinas). Each of us, it turned out, still held unshared convictions that we could not sacrifice for the sake of an editorial statement. Several of us particularly wanted to hold on to our aesthetic pleasures; our desire for critical innovation; our interest in contingency, spontaneity, improvisation; our urge to pick up a tangential fact and watch its circulation; our sense of history's unpredictable galvanic appearances and disappearances. The editorial statement went unwritten.

The issues could all be traced in some sense back to the explo-
sive mix of nationalism, anthropology, poetry, theology, and her-

meneutics that found originary expression in Giambattista Vico and was recombined by the German historicists of the late eight-
teenth and early nineteenth centuries. Brooding on the wild vari-
ety of environments in which human societies have evolved, Jo-
hann Gottfried von Herder posits what he calls a principle of diversification that ensures the widest possible variety of adapta-
tions to the natural world: "The practical understanding of man
was intended to blossom and bear fruit in all its varieties: and hence such a diversified Earth was ordained for so diversified a
species." The observation, at first glance modest enough, entails a radical departure from centuries of speculation about the optimal climatic conditions for the emergence of the optimal society (speculation that had a pronounced tendency to locate those con-
ditions within a narrow compass, usually in the vicinity of the city where the writer happened to be sitting). It entails as well
the abandonment of the project of charting the translatio imperii,
the great westward trajectory of civilization from Athens to Rome
to, say, London.

There is no longer a unitary story, a supreme model of human
perfection, that can be securely located in a particular site. Any
individual culture, no matter how complex and elaborate, can ex-
press and experience only a narrow range of the options available
to the human species as a whole, a species that is inherently—
that is, abstracted from any particular historical manifestation of its being—without qualities. "Born almost without instinct," hu-
mans are astonishingly malleable; our identity is formed "only
through lifelong training toward humanity, and this is the reason
our species is both perfectible and corruptible." Though there are
instances in which particular social adaptations are dismaying,
Herder eschews the Enlightenment project of finding a universal
norm for the realization of human potential. To be sure, for Herder
enlightenment exists, just as beauty exists—his vision is fueled by
faith that history is essentially progressive and that "the increased
diffusion of true knowledge among people has happily diminished
their inhuman, mad destroyers"—but it cannot be fixed in any
single place or time: "The chain of culture and enlightenment
[Kette der Kultur und Aufklärung] stretches to the ends of the earth."

"The increased diffusion of true knowledge among people has happily diminished their inhuman, mad destroyers."
Herder finds in the phenomenon of extreme human diversity not an incoherent Babel or the breeding ground of murderous conflict but rather a principle of hope:

Man, from his very nature, will clash but little in his pursuits with man; his dispositions, sensations, and propensities, being so infinitely diversified, and as it were individualized. What is a matter of indifference to one man, to another is an object of desire: and then each has a world of enjoyment in himself, each a creation of his own.

Hence the goal should never be to reduce the variety of human adaptations to a single triumphant form or to rank the cultures of the earth as if they were all competing for the same prize. To the question posed by the Berlin Academy—"Which was the happiest people in history?"—Herder replies that all comparison is disastrous:

Happiness does not depend on a laurel wreath, on a view of the blessed herd, on a cargo ship, or on a captured battle flag, but on the soul that needed this, aspired to this, attained this, and wanted to attain nothing more. Each nation has its own center of happiness within itself.

The task of understanding then depends not on the extraction of an abstract set of principles, and still less on the application of a theoretical model, but rather on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual.

Much of this resonates in powerful ways with the impulses and perceptions that lay behind the journal Representations: the fascination with the particular, the wide-ranging curiosity, the refusal of universal aesthetic norms, and the resistance to formulating an overarching theoretical program. Moreover, Herder found a way to justify and to integrate our simultaneous obsession with history and art:

In poetry's gallery of diverse ways of thinking, diverse aspirations, and diverse desires, we come to know periods and nations far more intimately than we can through the misleading and pathetic method of studying their political and military history. From this latter kind of history, we rarely learn more about a people than how it was ruled and how it was wiped out. From its poetry, we learn about its way of thinking, its desires and wants, the ways it rejoiced, and the ways it was guided either by its principles or its inclinations.

Poetry, in this account, is not the path to a transhistorical truth, whether psychoanalytic or deconstructive or purely formal, but the key to particular historically embedded social and psychological formations. The first questions to be asked about an art such as drama, Herder writes, are "When? Where? Under what circumstances? From what sources should a people do this?" The deepest sources of art lie not in the skill of the individual maker but in the inner resources of a people in a particular place and time: "A people will wherever possible," Herder writes, with a hostile glance at French neoclassicism, "invent its drama according to its own history, spirit of the times, customs, opinions, language, national biases, traditions, and inclinations." This approach accords well not only with our anthropological and cultural interests, but also with our rather conservative interest in periodization (for each of us had been trained to be a specialist in a given area and to take its geographical and temporal boundaries seriously). More important still, Herder's brilliant vision of the mutual embeddedness of art and history underlies our fascination with the possibility of treating all of the written and visual traces of a particular culture as a mutually intelligible network of signs.

The problem with this vision, as with roughly comparable observations by Schiller, Schlegel, and Schleiermacher, is that we were inclined to argue over each of its key terms, just as we argued over our own attempts to formulate what was roughly the same insight. What is the nature of the "volk" that Herder invokes, or the "spirit of the times"? In what sense is any era ever truly finished—who sets the boundaries and how are they patrolled? Do we not have overwhelming evidence, in our own time and in every period we study, of an odd interlayering of cultural perspectives and a mixing of peoples, so that nothing is ever truly complete or unitary?

What are the consequences of treating all of the traces of an era, even if its boundaries could be successfully demarcated, as a
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single cultural formation? To what extent can bubonic plague, infant mortality, or venereal disease be regarded as cultural? And what is the status, for Herder or for ourselves, of individual makers?

Between Herder’s time and our own, historians of culture have answered these questions in a variety of ways, and most recently the hoarier issues, such as the nature/culture distinction or the status of the individual, have, it seems, been rendered obsolete by conceiving of cultures as texts. This conception, too, has a venerable history, but the linguistic turn in the social and humanistic disciplines has heightened its appeal. What becomes newly interesting about the nature/culture distinction, for example, is the very fact that it cannot be fixed because the boundaries between the terms and the significance of those boundaries vary too widely in different contexts. Like other crucial distinctions, the nature/culture divide should be read, in the manner of structural linguistics, as a key binary opposition, loaded with information for deciphering the various social codes one encounters in historical studies. Not that this new textualism solves all of our problems. Are the cultural texts imagined to be coherent? Does it make sense to assimilate visual traces to textual traces? What happens to such phenomena as social rituals and structures of feeling when they are textualized? We found that the harder we pushed on the terms of any prospective programmatic statement for our journal, the further we seemed to get from actually doing the work that drew us together in the first place.

Still, the notion of a distinct culture, particularly a culture distant in time or space, as a text—a notion we got more from Geertz and the structuralists than from the historicists—is powerfully attractive for several reasons. It carries the core hermeneutical presumption that one can occupy a position from which one can discover meanings that those who left traces of themselves could not have articulated. Explication and paraphrase are not enough; we seek something more, something that the authors we study would not have had sufficient distance upon themselves and their own era to grasp.

Does this mean that we have constituted ourselves as, in the words of a detractor, “the School of Resentment”? Not at all: we are, if anything, rather inclined to piety. Nonetheless, any attempt at interpretation, as distinct from worship, bears a certain inescapable tinge of aggression, however much it is qualified by admiration and empathy. Where traditional “close readings” tended to build toward an intensified sense of wondering admiration, linked to the celebration of genius, new historicist readings are more often skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial. This hermeneutical aggression was initially reinforced for many of us by the ideology critique that played a central role in the Marxist theories in which we were steeped, but, as we were from the beginning uncomfortable with such key concepts as superstructure and base or imputed class consciousness, we have found ourselves, as we will discuss at some length in this book, slowly forced to transform the notion of ideology critique into discourse analysis. Moreover, no matter how thoroughgoing our skepticism, we have never given up or turned our backs on the deep gratification that draws us in the first place to the study of literature and art. Our project has never been about diminishing or belittling the power of artistic representations, even those with the most problematic entailments, but we never believe that our appreciation of this power necessitates either ignoring the cultural matrix out of which the representations emerge or uncritically endorsing the fantasies that the representations articulate.

The notion of culture as text has a further major attraction: it vastly expands the range of objects available to be read and interpreted. Major works of art remain centrally important, but they are jostled now by an array of other texts and images. Some of these alternative objects of attention are literary works regarded as too minor to deserve sustained interest and hence marginalized or excluded entirely from the canon. Others are texts that have been regarded as altogether nonliterary, that is, as lacking the aesthetic polish, the self-conscious use of rhetorical figures, the aura of distance from the everyday world, the marked status as fiction that separately or together characterize belles lettres. There has been in effect a social rebellion in the study of culture, so that figures hitherto kept outside the proper circles of interest—a rabble of half-crazed religious visionaries, semiliterate political agitators, coarse-faced peasants in hobnailed boots, dandies
whose writings had been discarded as ephemera, imperial bureaucrats, freed slaves, women novelists dismissed as impudent scribblers, learned women excluded from easy access to the materials of scholarship, scandalmongers, provincial politicians, charlatans, and forgotten academics—have now forced their way in, or rather have been invited in by our generation of critics.

The drastic broadening of the field that results from the consideration of whole cultures as texts leads in several directions:

- Works that have been hitherto denigrated or ignored can be treated as major achievements, claiming space in an already crowded curriculum or diminishing the value of established works in a kind of literary stock market. Shares in Sir John Davies, say, decline, as capital shifts to Aemilia Lanyer and Lady Mary Wroth; John Denham gives way to Lucy Hutchinson and Gerard Winstanley; Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats rub shoulders in anthologies and course assignments with the recently revalued Anna Letitia Barbauld, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Robinson.

- The newly recovered authors are of interest in themselves, but they also inevitably change the account of those authors long treated as canonical. Achievements that have seemed like entirely isolated monuments are disclosed to have a more complex interrelation with other texts by "minor" authors. New historicism helps raise questions about originality in art and about the status of "genius" as an explanatory term, along with the status of the distinction between "major" and "minor." The process by which certain works achieved classic status can be reexamined.

- In the analysis of the larger cultural field, canonical works of art are brought into relation not only with works judged as minor, but also with texts that are not by anyone's standard literary. The conjunction can produce almost surrealist wonder at the revelation of an unanticipated aesthetic dimension in objects without pretensions to the aesthetic. It can suggest hidden links between high cultural texts, apparently detached from any direct engagement with their immediate surroundings, and texts very much in and of their world, such as documents of social control or political subversion. It can weaken the primacy of classic works of art in relation to other competing or surrounding textual traces from the past. Or, alternatively, it can highlight the process by which such works achieve both prominence and a certain partial independence.

It is hardly an accident that this broader vision of the field of cultural interpretation, which had been mooted for more than a century, took hold in the United States in the late 1960s and '70s. It reflected in its initial period the recent inclusion of groups that in many colleges and universities had hitherto been marginalized, half hidden, or even entirely excluded from the professional study of literature: Jews, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and, most significantly from the point of view of the critical ferment, women. Women's studies, and the feminism that motivated its formation, has served as an important, if little acknowledged, model for new historicism in that it has inspired its adherents to identify new objects for study, bring those objects into the light of critical attention, and insist upon their legitimate place in the curriculum. It has also served to politicize explicitly an academic discourse that had often attempted to avoid or conceal partisan or polemical commitments, and it unsettles familiar aesthetic hierarchies that had been manipulated, consciously or unconsciously, to limit the cultural significance of women.

This unsettling of the hierarchies does not seem revolutionary—we are not inclined to confuse a change in the curriculum with the fall of the state—but it does feel democratizing, in that it refuses to limit creativity to the spectacular achievements of a group of trained specialists. The risk, from a culturally conservative point of view, is that we will lose sight of what is uniquely precious about high art: new historicism, in this account, fosters the weakening of the aesthetic object. There is, we think, some truth to this charge, at least in relation to the extreme claims routinely made by certain literary critics for the uniqueness of literature. Works of art, in the more perfunctory moments of celebration, are almost completely detached from semantic necessity and are instead deeply important as signs and embodiments of the freedom of the human imagination. The rest of human life can only gaze longingly at the condition of the art object, which is the manifestation of unalienated labor, the perfect articulation and realization of human energy. The art ob-
ject, ideally self-enclosed, is freed not only from the necessities of the surrounding world (necessities that it transforms miraculously into play) but also from the intention of the maker. The closest analogy perhaps is the Catholic Eucharist: the miracle of the transubstantiation does not depend, after all, on the intention of the priest; it is not even the consequence of the institution that celebrates the Mass. Rather the institution is itself understood to be the consequence of the miracle of the Sacrament.

When the literary text ceases to be a sacred, self-enclosed, and self-justifying miracle, when in the skeptical mood we foster it begins to lose at least some of the special power ascribed to it, its boundaries begin to seem less secure and it loses exclusive rights to the experience of wonder. The house of the imagination has many mansions, of which art (a relatively late invention as a distinct category) is only one. But the new historicist project is not about “demoting” art or discrediting aesthetic pleasure; rather it is concerned with finding the creative power that shapes literary works outside the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as within those boundaries. The risk, from a radical point of view, is a wholesale aestheticizing of culture, and in the formative years of new historicism we often had Walter Benjamin's polemical words quoted at us, as if they were the revelation of a theory crime that we had committed. Fascism, Benjamin writes at the end of his great essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” has made war the consummation of the principle of art for art's sake: humankind is invited to experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure. “This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic,” he concludes grimly; “Communism responds by politicizing art.” Taken out of context and treated as a piece of prescriptive dogma (and a summary judgment), this formula seems to us misguided and absurdly reductive, for our effort is not to aestheticize an entire culture, but to locate inventive energies more deeply infused within it. To do so is hardly to endorse as aesthetically gratifying every miserable, oppressive structure and every violent action of the past. Rather, it is to imagine that the writers we love did not spring up from nowhere and that their achievements must draw upon a whole life-world and that this life-world has undoubtedly left other traces of itself.

There are, to be sure, specialized skills in writing, as in the other arts, but these linguistic skills, worthy of being admired, are not independent of a much broader expressive power in language, just as skill in drawing is not independent of what Michael Baxandall (in Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy) calls “the period eye.” We are intensely interested in tracking the social energies that circulate very broadly through a culture, flowing back and forth between margins and center, passing from zones designated as art to zones apparently indifferent or hostile to art, pressing up from below to transform exalted spheres and down from on high to colonize the low.

Here is another less visible feature of treating cultures as texts, once again traceable to German romanticism: the triumph of an expressivist and creative notion of language, and with it a fascination with the entire range of diverse expressions by which a culture makes itself manifest. That range is in the abstract virtually limitless, but in any given instance it has a shape, a complex individuality by which we come to identify the peoples who live together in a particular time and place. To wall off for aesthetic appreciation only a tiny portion of the expressive range of a culture is to diminish its individuality and to limit one's understanding even of that tiny portion, since its significance can be fully grasped only in relation to the other expressive possibilities with which it interacts and from which it differentiates itself. Hence even if one's interests were exclusively with high culture, it would be important to cast one's interpretive net broadly, to open the windows to the culture at large. That is at least by implication one of Herder's insights about the relation of an aesthetic form to the life-world of the people from which it arises. As with the aestheticization of culture, there is much to argue with here, since such views could be (and were) the basis for a singularly nasty völkisch nationalism, but they also lead to an interest in cultural individuality, a respect for diverse expressive solutions to perennial problems, and a vast broadening of aesthetic interest.

We are trying, in other words, to deepen our sense of both the invisible cohesion and the half-realized conflicts in specific
cultures by broadening our view of their significant artifacts. This ambition to specify the intriguing enigmas of particular times and places distinguishes our analyses from the contemporary pan-textualism of the deconstructionists, who have their own version of the proposition that a culture is a text. Stressing the slippages, aporias, and communicative failures at the heart of signifying systems, linguistic or otherwise, their cultural textualism has no historicist ancestry. For them, written language is the paradigmatic form in which the problems of making meaning become manifest, and a culture may be said to be "textual" because its meaningful signs are inherently ambiguous, paradoxical, and undecidable. Deconstructionist literary analyses thus continually turn up textuality itself as the source and structure of all enigmas. Although maintaining that there is nothing outside of the text, no place of simple and transparent meaning where the slipperiness of the sign system can be escaped, deconstructionists nonetheless tend to draw their examples from the literary canon. While we frequently explore other kinds of texts, they urge that literary language uniquely exposes to scrutiny a textuality that operates everywhere and throughout history. Hence, in addition to skipping the levels of analysis that interest us most—the culturally and historically specific—deconstructionism also seems to reerect the hierarchical privileges of the literary.

The deconstructionists have clear methodological directives to stick to the literary despite their putative pan-textualism, but we have no comparable protective regulation. Having impetuously rushed beyond the confines of the canonical garden, we stand facing extraordinary challenges and perplexing questions:

- Out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, the identification of units suitable for analysis is problematized. If every trace of a culture is part of a massive text, how can one identify the boundaries of these units? What is the appropriate scale? There are, we conclude, no abstract, purely theoretical answers to these questions. To a considerable extent the units are given by the archive itself—that is, we almost always receive works whose boundaries have already been defined by the technology and generic assumptions of the original makers and readers. But new historicism undertakes to call these assumptions into question and treat them as part of the history that needs to be interpreted.

- Similarly, we ask ourselves how we can identify, out of the vast array of textual traces in a culture, which are the significant ones, either for us or for them, the ones most worth pursuing. Again it proves impossible to provide a theoretical answer, an answer that would work reliably in advance of plunging ahead to see what resulted. We have embarked on what Ezra Pound in an early essay calls "the method of Luminous Detail" whereby we attempt to isolate significant or "interpreting detail" from the mass of traces that have survived in the archive, but we can only be certain that the detail is indeed luminous, that it possesses what William Carlos Williams terms "the strange phosphorus of the life," in the actual practice of teaching and writing.

- If an entire culture is regarded as a text, then everything is at least potentially in play both at the level of representation and at the level of event. Indeed, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain a clear, unambiguous boundary between what is representation and what is event. At the very least, the drawing or maintaining of that boundary is itself an event.

- In the larger perspective of the cultural text, representations similarly cease to have a settled relationship of symbolic distance from matter and particularly from human bodies. The way bodies are understood to function, the difference between men and women, the nature of the passions, the experience of illness, the border line between life and death are all closely bound up with particular cultural representations, but they cannot simply be reduced to those representations. The body functions as a kind of "spoiler," always baffling or exceeding the ways in which it is represented.

- The unsettling of the relation between imitation and action, between background and foreground, and between representation and bodily reality gives rise to a sense of archival and interpretive inexhaustibility. There is always something further to pursue, always some extra trace, always some leftover, even in the most satisfyingly tight and coherent argument. Moreover, works that are at first adduced only in order to illuminate a particular cultural object develop an odd tendency to insist upon themselves as fascinating interpretive enigmas.
If a whole culture is regarded as a text—if all the textual traces of an era “count” as both representation and event—then it is increasingly difficult to invoke “history” as censor. That is, for new historicism, history cannot easily exercise that stabilizing and silencing function it possessed in analyses that sought to declare the limits of the sayable and thinkable. Of course, certain things are easier—and certainly safer—to say and to think, at a given time and place, than other things, and it is important to know and to keep in mind the relative ease. But in any culture that has left a complex record of itself—and certainly in any culture that we study—there turn out to be virtually no boundaries that are not transgressed by someone or other (or imagined by those in power to be transgressed in some dark corner). Against the determinism that attempts to insist that certain things in a given period were beyond conception or articulation, new historicism invokes the vastness of the textual archive, and with that vastness an aesthetic appreciation of the individual instance.

Because of this very lack of a given set of objects, new historicism becomes a history of possibilities: while deeply interested in the collective, it remains committed to the value of the single voice, the isolated scandal, the idiosyncratic vision, the transient sketch. From the beginning we thought it was crucially important to have it both ways: we wanted to delve as deeply as possible into the creative matrices of particular historical cultures and at the same time we wanted to understand how certain products of these cultures could seem to possess a certain independence. In our scholarship, the relative positions of text and context often shift, so that what has been the mere background makes a claim for the attention that has hitherto been given only to the foregrounded and privileged work of art, yet we wish to know how the foregrounding came about. We suspect that it occurred through no very peaceful process, and hence we seek to place an emphasis on the tension between certain artifacts (including many of the works that have been regarded as canonical works of art) and their cultures. That is, our work has always been about resistance as well as replication, friction as well as assimilation, subversion as well as orthodoxy. We are fascinated by the ways in which certain texts come to possess some limited immunity from the policing functions of their society, how they lay claim to special status, and how they contrive to move from one time period to another without losing all meaning. Accordingly, we mine what are sometimes called counterhistories that make apparent the slippages, cracks, fault lines, and surprising absences in the monumental structures that dominated a more traditional historicism.

This characteristically double vision of the art of the past—at once immersed in its time and place and yet somehow pulling out and away—is deeply related to our understanding of our own aesthetic experience. We never feel that we can simply put off all our historically conditioned longings, fears, doubts, and dreams, along with our accumulated knowledge of the world, and enter into another conceptual universe. But at the same time we do not experience works of art—or indeed any significant textual trace of the past—as confirmation of what we already know. In a meaningful encounter with a text that reaches us powerfully, we feel at once pulled out of our own world and plunged back with redoubled force into it. It seems arrogant to claim such an experience for ourselves as readers and not to grant something similar to the readers and the authors of the past.

When we began to try to impose some order on the tangled effects that new historicism has had on the practice of literary history, we designated four specific transformations that it helped to bring about: (1) the recasting of discussions about “art” into discussions of “representations”; (2) the shift from materialist explanations of historical phenomena to investigations of the history of the human body and the human subject; (3) the discovery of unexpected discursive contexts for literary works by pursuing their “supplements” rather than their overt thematics; and (4) the gradual replacement of “ideology critique” with discourse analysis. Initially, we thought we would address each of these transformations as a team, trading paragraphs back and forth and patiently reasoning together until we achieved a single voice and a single vision. But like all utopian voyages, this one foundered on the sharp rocks of reality. And it deserved to be shipwrecked: for not only did we recreate in miniature the many small and great conceptual disagreements that had emerged whenever the larger group of collaborators sat down together to try to work out a
shared programmatic statement, but also once again (and more happily) we discovered that serious work only got done when each of us became passionately engaged with particular texts, images, archives, and problems. No progress can be made on methodological problems without total immersion in practice, and that immersion is not for us fundamentally collaborative: it is doggedly private, individual, obsessive, lonely. Only when we had drafted the bulk of the core chapters by ourselves—chapters 3 and 5 by Greenblatt, chapters 4 and 6 by Gallagher—could we begin again to exchange work, offer suggestions and counterarguments, and transform the first-person singular into the first-person plural.

In chapters 3 through 6 we are true, in our fashion, to our original fourfold scheme of new historicist transformations. Chapters 3 and 4 make a contrasting pair that examines how cultures erect collapsible distinctions between representations and what they wish to consider ultimate realities. The first of this pair, "The Wound in the Wall," examines the implicit assumptions about representation embedded in works of art and links these assumptions to institutional strategies. It explains how two Renaissance paintings both bear and efface the marks of the eucharistic doctrine of the Real Presence, especially its anti-representationalism. The second, "The Potato in the Materialist Imagination," jumps forward three and a half centuries to encounter an equally unsettled relation between "the real" and its licensed representations inside nineteenth-century materialism; along the way, it explicates the similarities and differences between historical materialism and the body history that has been new historicism's close intellectual kin. Chapters 5 and 6 form another pair, which juxtaposes two works of literature, *Hamlet* and *Great Expectations*, as well as the pressures to believe or disbelieve that shaped them. The first of this pair, "The Mousetrap," also illustrates the historical uses of supplementarity, since it gets from *Hamlet* to its unacknowledged "context" (the murderous disputes over eucharistic doctrine in England) by tracing God's body through the entrails of a mouse. The second of our literary chapters, "The Novel and Other Discourses of Suspended Disbelief," again fast-forwards into the nineteenth century both to encounter literature's role in normalizing disbelief and to explore the origins and limits of the concept of "ideology."

The chapters route their theoretical and methodological generalizations through dense networks of particulars. As we had not at the outset foreseen that they would take such circuitous ways, we wrote two opening chapters—"The Touch of the Real" and "Counterhistory and the Anecdote"—to try to explain what had emerged as our most consistent commitment: a commitment to particularity. (Even here we had to pull in separate directions—Greenblatt in chapter 1 and Gallagher in chapter 2—before we were able to merge our texts.) Both chapters explore the new historicist attraction to the anecdote, the first by describing the influence of two writers who use anecdotes or fragments to produce the effect of a historical real, and the second by placing the new historicist anecdote inside the historiographical context of other contemporary counterhistorical methods. The book thus took the shape of two chapters *about*, followed by four chapters of *new historicism.*

Writing the book has convinced us that new historicism is not a repeatable methodology or a literary critical program. Each time we approached that moment in the writing when it might have been appropriate to draw the "theoretical" lesson, to scold another school of criticism, or to point the way toward the paths of virtue, we stopped, not because we're shy of controversy, but because we cannot bear to see the long chains of close analysis go up in a puff of abstraction. So we sincerely hope you will not be able to say what it all adds up to; if you could, we would have failed.
One

The Touch of the Real

Analysis," writes Clifford Geertz in the essay "Thick Description" that opens his celebrated book, The Interpretation of Cultures (1973), "is sorting out the structures of signification—what Ryle called established codes, a somewhat misleading expression, for it makes the enterprise sound too much like that of the cipher clerk when it is much more like that of the literary critic—and determining their social ground and import." Small wonder then that Geertz's account of the project of social science rebounded with force upon literary critics like us in the mid-1970s: it made sense of something we were already doing, returning our own professional skills to us as more important, more vital and illuminating, than we had ourselves grasped. We perhaps did not wholly appreciate the scientific ambition lurking in the word "determining," but we were excited to find a sophisticated, intellectually powerful, and wonderfully eloquent anthropologist who could make use of the tools in our disciplinary kit and in so doing renew in us a sense of their value.

Within the contentious discipline of anthropology, Geertz has by now been so routinely accused of one or another form of wickedness—such is the cost of academic success—that it is easy to overlook the liberating effect he had on those who came to him, as we did, from the outside and particularly from literary criticism. He did not attempt, of course, to justify the academic analysis of literature, let alone to find in it the radical politics for which we were longing, but he did something that seemed still more important. He argued that our interpretive strategies pro-vided key means for understanding the complex symbolic systems and life patterns that anthropologists studied. The effect was like touching one wire to another: literary criticism made contact with reality. Or rather, as Geertz quickly observed, it made contact, as always, with pieces of writing. But this was writing with a difference: not poetry or fiction but verbal traces less self-consciously detached from the lives real men and women actually live.

The crucial self-defining move in Geertz's essay on "thick description" comes when the anthropologist pulls away from Gilbert Ryle's distinction between a twitch and a wink (and between both of these and a parody of a wink or even the rehearsal of this parodic wink). "Like so many of the little stories Oxford philosophers like to make up for themselves," Geertz remarks, "all this winking, fake-winking, burlesque-fake-winking, rehearsed-burlesque-fake-winking, may seem a bit artificial" (7). What would be the alternative to such artificiality? How could the distinction between "thin description" and "thick description" (the one merely describing the mute act, the other giving the act its place in a network of framing intentions and cultural meanings) be linked, as Geertz puts it, to something "more empirical"? The answer is still, it turns out, a little story—that is, an anecdote; however, now it is not one of the little stories Oxford philosophers make up for themselves, but rather one of the little stories anthropologists record, or are supposed to record, in their notebooks during the great disciplinary rite of passage known as fieldwork. "Let me give," Geertz writes, "deliberately unpreceded by any prior explanatory comment at all, a not untypical excerpt from my own field journal" (7). There follows, set off in a different typeface, a wonderful short account of an episode of sheep stealing, murder, and justice—a series of events that occurred in central Morocco in 1912 and were related to Geertz in 1968 by one of the participants, an old man named Cohen.

"A not untypical excerpt": are such recorded stories typical or not of the contents of the anthropologist's field journal? Geertz's delicate double negative enables the text he quotes to have some representative force without being absorbed into a larger whole. If you understand what it means to interpret this excerpt, you will have some idea of what it means to interpret many roughly
comparable excerpts, but you will not thereby possess the entire cultural system. That is, you will not be freed of the obligation to ponder each excerpt individually and (as far as possible) on its own terms, nor will you have comprehended anything like the full range of the materials to be pondered. "Deliberately unprecedented by any prior explanatory comment at all": the excerpt is meant to surprise and to baffle, not to assume a comfortable place in a preexisting analysis of Moroccan culture. It functions then to subvert a programmatic analytical response, a fully systematized methodology, and it helps to call into question, in the midst of a loose allegiance to structuralism, whether either a culture or a method could ever be rendered satisfyingly systematic. The anecdote is, as Geertz puts it, "quoted raw, a note in a bottle." As such, it is meant not only to convey the idea of the "empirical" (as distinct from the philosopher's "artificial" stories) but also to arouse the bafflement, the intense curiosity and interest, that necessitates the interpretation of cultures.

Geertz repeats the image of the note in the bottle twice in the essay on thick description. The image nicely serves to emphasize something at once specific to his sheep-stealing anecdote, since it has now bobbed up from 1912 and thus from a Morocco that has by now long vanished over the horizon, and more general, since all cultures that are not one's own are always located beyond one's familiar horizon. It thus underscores the promise, implicit in most ethnographic texts and explicit here, that the excerpt has not been invented by the anthropologist, that it comes from "somewhere else." Moreover, the anecdote has not been carefully cooked up, like Ryle's story of winks and twitches, to exemplify an abstract point; it is not only something found, like a note in a bottle, but also, as Geertz puts it, "raw."

Yet Geertz's link to literary criticism depends upon his immediately qualifying, indeed abandoning, this notion of the "raw." For if it is important for the reader to accept Geertz's claim that he is not making up an exemplary tale but rather quoting something told to him by one of his "informants," it is at least as important for the reader to grasp that the quotation is itself a story, a story that has been written down in the anthropologist's field journal. This insistence on narrative and on textuality helps to justify the appeal to techniques of literary analysis, but it is not quite the same as an insistence that "there is nothing outside the text." Or rather as soon as you collapse everything into something called textuality, you discover that it makes all the difference what kind of text you are talking about. The collapse licenses a certain kind of attention and invites the questions that literary critics characteristically ask, but at the same time it calls for a sharp attention to genre and rhetorical mode, to the text's implicit or explicit reality claims, to the implied link (or distance) between the word and whatever it is—the real, the material, the realm of practice, pain, bodily pleasure, silence, or death—to which the text gestures as that which lies beyond the written word, outside its textual mode of being.

The "raw" excerpt from the field notes makes a stronger claim to reference—it points more directly to a world that has some solidity and resistance—than Ryle's invented example, but the former is no less a textual construction than the latter. The sheep-stealing anecdote has a quality of strangeness or opacity, but not because it is something mute and shapeless, dug up like a potato from an alien soil. What "we" anthropologists call "our data," Geertz writes, "are really our own constructions of other people's constructions of what they and their compatriots are up to." "This little drama" (9), as he calls the passage he quotes from his field notes, is meant to show that there is rather less observation and considerably more explication—explication de texte—than anthropologists generally admit to.

Thick description, as Ryle uses the term in his essays on thinking, entails an account of the intentions, expectations, circumstances, settings, and purposes that give actions their meanings. The distinction between a twitch and a wink is secured by the element of volition that is not itself visibly manifest in the contraction of the eyelid; a thin description would miss it altogether. So too with the other layers of framing intentions that Ryle piles on: fake twitches, rehearsals of fake twitches, and so forth. Many of these framing intentions seem to introduce an explicitly aesthetic or representational quality, but such a quality is not essential to the notion of thick description. A thin description of what you are doing when you are pumping up bicycle tires, to cite an-
other of Ryle's examples, would be an account of a series of repetitive physical motions that produce a certain effect. A thick description of those same motions would involve a fuller sense of the significance of what you are doing. If you are pumping up your bicycle tires because you are preparing to go for a bike ride, a thick description of your pumping requires a reference to your intended ride, whether that ride actually occurs or not; if, on the other hand, you are pumping up your bicycle tires because you want to strengthen the muscles of your arms so that bullies will no longer kick sand at you at the beach, the thick description of your pumping would differ accordingly.

Ryle is fascinated by receding planes, a fascination that repeatedly draws him to the game of inventing chains of further complications around what initially seems a simple action: winking (or twitching), clearing your throat, hitting golf balls, playing tennis, cooking, jumping over flower beds. The mental game is not difficult to play: you are not actually intending to go on a bike ride (to continue in Ryle's vein) but only pretending that you are, in order to deceive an observer, or you are rehearsing for a drama in which you will play the part of someone who deceives an observer by pumping up bicycle tires as if in anticipation of a bike ride that your character never really intends to take. And so on. The difficulty lies in accounting persuasively for the relation between these surrounding circumstances and the action as thinly described. Thick description, in Ryle's account, involves two major features: intention-parasitism (the intention with which a person undertakes to pump up bicycle tires is ancillary to and hence parasitical upon his intention to take a bike ride) and circumstance-detachment (the actor rehearsing the part of the tire pumper need not actually have a pump or a bike on hand—a stick and a table will do just fine for the purpose of rehearsal—but the act of rehearsing only makes sense in reference to the intended performance).

For Ryle, thick description is manifestly a quality of the explanation rather than of the action or text that is explicated: it is not the object that is thick or thin, but only the description of it. A thick description thus could be exceedingly straightforward or, alternatively, exceedingly complex, depending on the length of

the chain of parasitical intentions and circumstantial detachments. A thin description need not be brief or schematic; it could be quite lengthy and complicated—an adequate account of the physiology and pneumatics involved in pumping tires would take many pages—but it would not concern itself with the agent's framing intentions or the culture within which those intentions acquire their significance. Thickness is not in the object; it is in the narrative surroundings, the add-ons, the nested frames.

As Geertz's famous essay deploys the term, however, thickness begins to slide almost imperceptibly from the description to the thing described. For, though Geertz may wish to imply that his excerpt was chosen virtually at random and that one fragment would have been as good as another, some texts seem far more amenable to thick description than others, and consequently some texts seem "thicker" than others. Thickness no longer seems extrinsic to the object, a function solely of the way it is framed. The sheep-stealing narrative is supposed to be nothing more than the ethnographic equivalent of Ryle's winks and twitches, but in fact they seem profoundly different: Ryle's is a purpose-built illustration of a carefully delimited philosophical point; Geertz's supposedly "raw" excerpt from his field notes is a complex narrative in which the motivating intentions seem intrinsic. That is, neither of Ryle's key terms, intention-parasitism and circumstance-detachment, is remotely relevant to Geertz's anecdote, precisely because the intentions and circumstances are not securely situated on the outside of the actions reported.

This slide is not a theoretical proposition, nor is it, in its divergence from Ryle, a mistake; rather, it is part of the disciplinary interest of anthropology. The shift from the philosopher's tale to the "native informant's" tale is for Geertz a shift from the "artificial" toward the "empirical"—that is, toward textual constructions, presented as "raw" data or "evidence," that seem less purpose-built, more resistant to simple appropriation, and hence more nearly autonomous. As the anthropologist interprets his exemplary texts, these texts seem to be increasingly embedded in the cultures from which they come and to possess within themselves more and more of the culture's linked intentions. In practice (that is, in Geertz's interpretive practice), certain construc-
tions of cultural reality appear compressed and hence expandable: "From this simple incident," Geertz remarks about the sheep-stealing anecdote, "one can widen out into enormous complexities of social experience" (19).

Are these complexities actually inscribed in the textual fragments, or are they brought to bear upon them from the outside in the course of interpretation? Part of Geertz's power was his ability to suggest that the multilayered cultural meanings by which he was fascinated were present in the fragments themselves, just as the literary criticism of William Empson or Kenneth Burke managed to suggest that the dense ambiguities and ironies were present in the literary texts themselves and not only in the acts of interpretation. Those acts of interpretation were not completely supplementary—they helped to create as well as to disclose the effect of compression—but the dense networks of meaning charted in an effective thick description had to be traceable back to the anecdote initially held up for scrutiny.

What we are calling the effect of compression enabled a literary historian like Erich Auerbach to move convincingly from a tiny passage to a sprawling, complex text (and, finally, to "Western Literature"). Drawing on literary criticism—Auerbach is cited, along with Samuel Taylor Coleridge, T. S. Eliot, Burke, Empson, R. P. Blackmur, and Cleanth Brooks—Geertz did something similar with cultural fragments, small bits of symbolic behavior from which he could "widen out" into larger social worlds. The techniques of literary analysis thus helped to make possible for Geertzian anthropology something akin to what in optics is called "foveation," the ability to keep an object (here a tiny textualized piece of social behavior) within the high-resolution area of perception. Foveation in cultural interpretation is rather difficult because of problems of both scale and focus. The interpreter must be able to select or to fashion, out of the confused continuum of social existence, units of social action small enough to hold within the fairly narrow boundaries of full analytical attention, and this attention must be unusually intense, nuanced, and sustained.

Geertz grasped that, along with analytic philosophy, literary criticism had for years been honing useful foveation skills. Hence the terms that he uses to describe his piece of thick description not only emphasize its own textuality (in keeping with his insistence that ethnographers are writers), but also repeatedly extend that textuality to the object described: "our sheep story—an assortment of remarks and anecdotes," "a not untypical excerpt from my own field journal," "a note in a bottle," "a passage," "this little drama," "our text," "a social farce," "our pastoral drama," "the rigor-marole," a "social discourse"—and moving away from the excerpt and toward what the excerpt is meant to exemplify: "a manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behavior" (10). That is, culture is itself an "acted document," whether it takes the form of "a burlesqued wink or a mock sheep raid" (10). The point is that to understand what people are up to in any culture—and, "leaving our winks and sheep behind for the moment," Geertz takes a Beethoven quartet as his example—you need to be acquainted "with the imaginative universe within which their acts are signs" (at).

For the purposes of literary criticism, "imaginative," "drama," "manuscript," and "signs" were reassuringly familiar terms, as was the whole emphasis on symbolic behavior, but the specific force of Geertz's work for new historicism resided in the expansion of these terms to a much broader and less familiar range of texts than literary critics had permitted themselves to analyze. For Geertz this expansion reflected an empowering appropriation of analytical tools, an appropriation that conferred the prestige accorded to the supreme achievements of Western high culture, such as Beethoven quartets, on the flotsam and jetsam in an anthropologist's field notes. At issue was not only prestige—what Pierre Bourdieu famously analyzed as cultural capital—but a transference of the kind of attention paid to canonical works of art to the ordinary and extraordinary behavior of the subjects of anthropology. To construct descriptions, Geertz notes, "of the involvements of a Berber chieftain, a Jewish merchant, and a French soldier with one another in 1912 Morocco is clearly an imaginative act, not all that different from constructing similar descriptions of, say, the involvements with one another of a provincial French doctor, his silly, adulterous wife, and her feckless
lovers in nineteenth century France” (15–16). If it is not altogether clear at this moment in Geertz’s essay whether it is the anthropologist himself or the anthropologist’s informant Cohen who is being likened to Gustave Flaubert, this is because both the informant’s discourse and the anthropologist’s discourse about that discourse (and, for that matter, the series of actions from 1912) are alike fictions, in the root sense of things made, composed, fashioned.

Our goal in response to Geertz was not exactly to reverse the disciplinary appropriation, that is, to apply to literary analysis the terms and concepts developed by anthropologists. (Such an application, of course, was in fact occurring, especially in literary structuralism’s use of Claude Lévi-Strauss.) What we wanted was not social science but ethnographic realism, and we wanted it principally for literary purposes. That is, we had no interest in decisively leaving works of literature behind and turning our attention elsewhere; instead, we sought to put literature and literary criticism in touch with that elsewhere. It is a tribute to Geertz that it was social science but ethnographic realism, and we wanted it principally for literary purposes. That is, we had no interest in decisively leaving works of literature behind and turning our attention elsewhere; instead, we sought to put literature and literary criticism in touch with that elsewhere. It is a tribute to Geertz that it was social science but ethnographic realism, and we wanted it principally for literary purposes. That is, we had no interest in decisively leaving works of literature behind and turning our attention elsewhere; instead, we sought to put literature and literary criticism in touch with that elsewhere. It is a tribute to Geertz that it was not his method that seemed powerful to us (after all, that method was in part borrowed from literary criticism), but rather the lived life that he managed so well to narrate, describe, and clarify. That lived life, at once raw and subtle, coarse and complex, was the thing that had been progressively refined out of the most sophisticated literary studies, or so it seemed to us at the time. By embracing and displacing literary studies, *The Interpretation of Cultures* provided an impetus for recovering what had been lost. Literary criticism could venture out to unfamiliar cultural texts, and these texts—often marginal, odd, fragmentary, unexpected, and crude—in turn could begin to interact in interesting ways with the intimately familiar works of the literary canon.

To Auerbach’s powerful ability to conjure up complex lifeworlds from tiny fragments, Geertz added the anthropologist’s strong claim to a hold on the world. That is, it was crucial, as part of the pleasure and interest of reading Geertz, to believe that he had not made up his Mr. Cohen and that Cohen too had not simply made up his story. To be sure, Geertz encourages the reader to grasp that his informant’s version of the story is not identical to one that would have been produced by any of the other principals in it and that he may have considerably enhanced the story for rhetorical effect; but Cohen was a real person recounting actual experiences, and his story was *his* story and not the ethnographer’s.

“I can call spirits from the vasty deep,” claims Owain Glyndwr, the strange Welsh magus in Shakespeare’s *Henry IV*. “Why, so can I, or so can any man” is Hotspur’s sardonic reply, “But will they come when you do call for them?” 4 So too an anecdote may conjure up reality, but will reality come when it is called? If it is only a matter of rhetoric—the effect of what the ancient rhetoricians called *enargeia*, or vividness—then only a reality-effect is conjured and nothing more. But something more is at stake. Geertz gestures toward that something when he acknowledges that there are important problems of verification or, as he prefers to term it, appraisal. This process of appraisal is largely internal to a particular discipline—we obviously had no way of testing Geertz’s interpretation of Moroccan culture nor could we confirm the authenticity of his field notes—but it is in principle significant for the value anthropology could have for literary studies. For the interest was never to collapse anthropology and literary criticism into each other but to draw upon their particular strengths, strengths that depended at least as much upon the differences between their characteristic texts as upon their surprising similarities. Indeed it is an awareness of how those differences are constituted and what they mean—an understanding of the emergence of the literary and the imaginative force of the nonliterary—that has virtually obsessed not only our own work but that of new historicism in general.

What then should we make of Geertz’s claim that an anecdote from the field journal is “not all that different,” as an imaginative construction, from *Madame Bovary*? Very little beyond the critical incentive, or rather the imperative, to interpret. To be sure, if it turned out that Geertz’s Cohen had taken it upon himself to be the Flaubert of the Maghreb and had made up his entire story, we might still have concluded that we possessed something of ethnographic value: a glimpse of the fantasies of an old man who had been steeped in the symbolic systems of colonial Morocco. 7 If, however, it turned out that Geertz had made up Cohen, we
at least would have concluded that as an ethnographer Geertz was not to be trusted, and his work would have immediately lost much of its value. For it is precisely not as a fiction or as a little philosopher’s tale that Geertz invites us to read his anecdote; it is as a “raw” sample of his field notes. The frame is crucial, since in this case it helps us to conjure up a “real” as opposed to an “imaginary” world.

Geertz’s conjuring of the real seemed to us useful for literary studies not because it insisted upon the primacy of interpretation—that was already the norm in literary criticism—but because it helped to widen the range of imaginative constructions to be interpreted. His thick descriptions of cultural texts strengthened the insistence that the things that draw us to literature are often found in the nonliterary, that the concept of literariness is deeply unstable, that the boundaries between different types of narratives are subject to interrogation and revision. We wanted to argue that human creativity, including narrative and linguistic creativity, only makes sense in the long run because it is a widespread, indeed democratic, possession—a possession that is almost impossible to contain within a small elite or sequester from the sweet, familiar light of the everyday. We wanted also to use the anecdote to show in compressed form the ways in which elements of lived experience enter into literature, the ways in which everyday institutions and bodies get recorded. And we wanted, conversely, to show in compressed form the ways in which poetry, drama, and prose fiction play themselves out in the everyday world, since men and women repeatedly find themselves in effect speaking the language of the literary not only in their public performances, but also in their most intimate or passionate moments.

We sought something beyond this: we wanted to find in the past real bodies and living voices, and if we knew that we could not find these—the bodies having long moldered away and the voices fallen silent—we could at least seize upon those traces that seemed to be close to actual experience. Literature seemed to us, as to many others, almost infinitely precious because its creators had invented techniques for representing this experience with uncanny vividness; but there were other techniques and other texts, outside the conventional boundaries of the literary, that possessed a nearly comparable power. The greatest challenge lay not simply in exploring these other texts—an agreeably imperial expansion of literary criticism beyond its borders—but in making the literary and the nonliterary seem to be each other’s thick description. That both the literary work and the anthropological (or historical) anecdote are texts, that both are fictions in the sense of things made, that both are shaped by the imagination and by the available resources of narration and description helped make it possible to conjoin them; but their ineradicable differences—the fact that neither is purpose-built for the other, that they make sharply different claims upon the actual, that they are incommensurable and virtually impossible to foveate simultaneously—made the conjunction powerful and compelling.

We wanted to recover in our literary criticism a confident conviction of reality, without giving up the power of literature to sidestep or evade the quotidian and without giving up a minimally sophisticated understanding that any text depends upon the absence of the bodies and voices that it represents. We wanted the touch of the real in the way that in an earlier period people wanted the touch of the transcendent.

“Readers of the Odyssey will remember the well-prepared and touching scene in book 19, when Odysseus has at last come home, the scene in which the old housekeeper Euryclea, who had been his nurse, recognizes him by a scar on his thigh.” This is how the text of Erich Auerbach’s great book Mimesis, both in the German-language original and the English translation, begins: no pages of acknowledgments, no methodological foreword, no theoretical introduction. Between the title (Mimesis: Dargestellte Wirklichkeit in der Abendländischen Literatur) and the table of contents, there is only an epigraph in English, to which we will return, from Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress”: “Had we but world enough and time...” In the first edition, published in Switzerland by A. Francke AG. Verlag in 1946, there is also along with the copyright information, in very small letters, the words “Mai 1942 bis April 1945.” Then we plunge immediately into a close reading of the episode of Odysseus’s scar, an analysis meant to