

*t*ransitions



New Historicism and Cultural Materialism

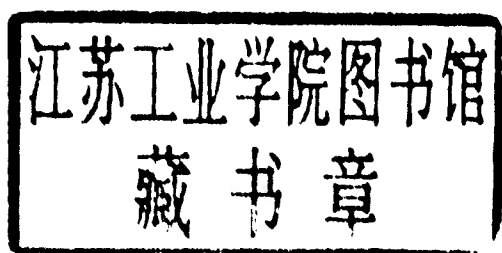
John Brannigan



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General Editor's Preface

Transitions: *transition-em*, n. of action. 1. A passing or passage from one condition, action or (rarely) place, to another. 2. Passage in thought, speech, or writing, from one subject to another. 3. a. The passing from one note to another b. The passing from one key to another, modulation. 4. The passage from an earlier to a later stage of development or formation ... change from an earlier style to a later; a style of intermediate or mixed character ... the historical passage of language from one well-defined stage to another.

The aim of *Transitions* is to explore passages and movements in critical thought, and in the development of literary and cultural interpretation. This series also seeks to examine the possibilities for reading, analysis and other critical engagements which the very idea of transition makes possible. The writers in this series unfold the movements and modulations of critical thinking over the last generation, from the first emergences of what is now recognised as literary theory. They examine as well how the transitional nature of theoretical and critical thinking is still very much in operation, guaranteed by the hybridity and heterogeneity of the field of literary studies. The authors in the series share the common understanding that, now more than ever, critical thought is both in a state of transition and can best be defined by developing for the student reader an understanding of this protean quality.

This series desires, then, to enable the reader to transform her/his own reading and writing transactions by comprehending past developments. Each book in the series offers a guide to the poetics and politics of interpretative paradigms, schools and bodies of thought, while transforming these, if not into tools or methodologies, then into conduits for directing and channelling thought. As well as transforming the critical past by interpreting it from the perspective of the present day, each study enacts transitional readings of a number of well-known literary texts, all of which are themselves conceivable as

having been transitional texts at the moments of their first appearance. The readings offered in these books seek, through close critical reading and theoretical engagement, to demonstrate certain possibilities in critical thinking to the student reader.

It is hoped that the student will find this series liberating because rigid methodologies are not being put into place. As all the dictionary definitions of the idea of transition above suggest, what is important is the action, the passage: of thought, of analysis, of critical response. Rather than seeking to help you locate yourself in relation to any particular school or discipline, this series aims to put you into action, as readers and writers, travellers between positions, where the movement between poles comes to be seen as of more importance than the locations themselves.

Julian Wolfreys

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I am fortunate to have had the advice, encouragement and the critical mind of the series editor, Julian Wolfreys, throughout the writing of this book, and without whom this volume (and series) would not have been possible. I would like to thank Margaret Bartley, the commissioning editor at Macmillan, and the readers and editors at Macmillan, for their kindness, attention to detail, and for their enthusiasm. Lastly, and most importantly, I have had the invaluable support, encouragement and love of my partner, Moyra Haslett, throughout, and her generous attention and keen intelligence has shaped the thinking and writing of this book at every stage.

JB

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Introduction: Literature in History

we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice, in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws.

Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*

The chief aim of this volume is to introduce students and the general reader to two theoretical 'movements' which have become prominent and influential practices in all aspects of the discipline of literary studies. Because both theories are very much active, and still contested, even controversial, it is important that this book does not present them as a body of knowledge to be applied to a text, any text, as a formal exercise. It is an important realisation of both new historicism and cultural materialism that its practitioners and its writings are subject to specific historical conditions, and became prominent in specific circumstances at specific times. We might ask, for example, why both emerged in the early 1980s, why both seemed to have come to prominence in Renaissance studies, why both have had large areas and genres of literature to which they have never been 'applied' in critical readings. There are particular types of literary texts in which reading these theories encounters great difficulties. There have also been significant changes in the types of readings produced and the directions in which these theories have been pushed by recent writings that might lead us to question whether or not they are coherent theories any more, if indeed they ever were. It is always worth examining, when one learns of a 'movement' or genre, if the body of texts and practitioners included in the category really have enough in common to warrant such a grouping; given the differences of approach and style of many new historicist and cultural materialist critics, the status of both theories as coherent groupings will be questioned in this volume.

While this volume is primarily engaged, then, in introducing new historicism and cultural materialism, it will do so in a critical and interrogative fashion so that we may discover the blind spots as well as the potential uses, the contradictions as well as the underlying logic, the hidden agendas as well as the explicit assumptions, what they evade as well as what they value. It is important also to realise that the author of even a critical work like this one is far from immune from subjective approaches and selective appropriations. My own position towards these theories is never inseparable from my explanations of them, and for this reason it is best to make this position explicit from the outset. As an academic in a literature department, who teaches and researches in and across the disciplines of literature and history, the work of new historicist and cultural materialist critics has been tremendously influential on my own thinking and critical practice. Moreover, they have become central to my teaching practice in approaching literary texts in relationship to historical context. Although these theories have become unavoidable in academic interest in the relationship between literature and history, and have gained prominence not only to the extent that they are widely taught on literary theory courses but also form substantial methodological bases for a wide variety of other literary, historical and cultural studies courses, I also believe that there are problems with the methodologies and theoretical bases of both new historicism and cultural materialism which we need to bear in mind. It will become clear in the course of this volume that I believe that new historicist and cultural materialist methods and thinking can equip us with very useful ways of looking at literature in history, but that they are not free of troubling and unsatisfactory implications. What I will argue in this volume, then, is that we ought to treat new historicism and cultural materialism with the same degree of suspicion as they afforded previous versions of the past.

Literature *and* history

In their introduction to *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama*, Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton note that new historicist and cultural materialist theories mark the 'return to history' in literary criticism (Wilson and Dutton 1992, 1), and that the focus on the status of history in literary texts is probably the most important contribution

which these theories have made to recent work in literary studies. New historicism and cultural materialism share a common preoccupation with the relationship between literature and history, and share an understanding of texts of all kinds as both products and functional components of social and political formations. Where many previous critical approaches to literary texts assumed that texts had some universal significance and essential ahistorical truth to impart, new historicist and cultural materialist critics tend to read literary texts as material products of specific historical conditions. Both theories approach the relationship between text and context with an urgent attention to the political ramifications of literary interpretation. In the eyes of new historicist and cultural materialist critics, texts of all kinds are the vehicles of politics insofar as texts mediate the fabric of social, political and cultural formations. This view is evident in the work of new historicist and cultural materialist critics who read historical context through legal, medical and penal documents, anecdotes, travel writings, ethnological and anthropological narratives and, of course, literary texts. It is important to bear in mind right from the beginning in approaching these theories that they break down the simplistic distinction between literature and history and open up a complex dialogue between them. They refuse to see literary texts against an overriding background of history or to see history as a set of facts outside the written text. To a new historicist or cultural materialist critic, history is not objective knowledge which can be made to explain a literary text. To see history as a secure knowledge which a literary critic can use to fix a text's meanings is clearly a comforting idea, as Jean Howard argues:

A common way of speaking about literature and history is just that way: literature *and* history, text *and* context. In these binary oppositions, if one term is stable and transparent and the other in some way mirrors it, then that other term can be stabilized and clarified too. (Howard 1986, 24)

Literature is not, however, simply a medium for the expression of historical knowledge. It is an active part of a particular historical moment, or, as Howard says, 'literature is an agent in constructing a culture's sense of reality' (25). For new historicism and cultural materialism the object of study is not the text and its context, not literature and its history, but rather literature *in* history. This is to see literature

as a constitutive and inseparable part of history in the making, and therefore rife with the creative forces, disruptions and contradictions of history.

Debates concerning the effects of literature as a form of social expression are far from recent. Plato argued in *The Republic* that poetry ought to be banished from the ideal state because of its corrupting influence (Plato 1987, 70–117, 359–77), a theme that continues in contemporary concerns over the effect that television and cinema have on increases in drug-taking, crime and violence among young people. All states and governments operate some kind of censorship and licensing laws or codes concerning cultural media; and no period in literary history is free of an exemplary case of censorship or controversy where powerful sections of society voice their concern that literature or film or theatre or dance was exerting a corrupting influence. While formalist¹ critics have sought to maintain the idea that literature is a discrete, apolitical and transcendent form of artistic expression, the societies and cultures within which literary texts operate have been busy constraining and censoring such expression out of anxieties that literature would encourage and promote illegal, immoral or undesirable actions. Clearly, we ought to pay attention to the anxieties that governing powers let slip about the effects of literature on social and political behaviour before rushing to accept the idea that literature transcends and has no effect on history, or that history has no effect on literature. New historicist and cultural materialist critics argue that literature does have powerful effects on history, and vice versa, and have paid considerable attention in their work to the effects of literature in both containing and promoting subversion, and to instances of state and hegemonic control over cultural expression.

Both theories emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s, new historicism in the USA, cultural materialism in Britain. As we shall see in this volume, the issues with which new historicist and cultural materialist critics are most concerned are the role of historical context in interpreting literary texts and the role of literary rhetoric in interpreting history. The work of these critics follows from, and develops further, the interests and beliefs of previous generations of Marxist and historicist critics² who re-evaluated the stories that past societies had told of themselves. Historicist critics introduced a degree of scepticism concerning the construction of historical narratives, and the place of the critic or historian within those narratives. Historicism

understands the stories of the past as society's way of constructing a narrative which unconsciously fits its own interests. Marxist critics, borrowing from the lessons of historicism, see history as the procession of stories favourable to the victor, the ruling class, with literary texts as much as historical texts taking part in that procession. Walter Benjamin asserts this view in his 'Theses on the Philosophy of History':

All the rulers are the heirs of those who conquered before them. Hence, empathy with the victor invariably benefits the rulers. Historical materialists know what that means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which the present rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called cultural treasures, and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For without exception the cultural treasures he surveys have an origin he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great minds who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of their contemporaries. There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. (Benjamin 1992, 248)

Benjamin follows a number of Marxist and historicist thinkers in defining history as a contest of ideologies,³ and, as a result, follows a radical revision of the notion of truth. Truth, for many nineteenth- and twentieth-century philosophers, is no longer a stable category which is objectively knowable. Nietzsche, for instance, sees truth as a mobile army of metaphors, an image which sees truth operating not only as a flexible weapon defined by and acting in the interests of a ruling ideology, but also as a rhetorical rather than an empirical phenomenon. Truth is constructed as a seemingly objective category, the contents of which are composed of unconsciously partial and preferential versions of the past. This becomes particularly important when the Marxist thinker Louis Althusser claims that literature is one of the institutions which participate in making state power and ideology familiar and acceptable to the state's subjects (Althusser 1984, 1–61). Literature will reflect the values, customs and norms of the dominant interests in its society, according to Althusser's idea, and so is mobilised, mostly unconsciously, by the state as an ideological weapon, an army of metaphors which seek to persuade and manipulate rather than coerce.

In seeing literature as a constitutive part of the way a society orders and governs itself, new historicism and cultural materialism build on Marxist and historicist approaches to literary texts, and are set against formalist approaches to literature which disregard historical context in interpreting literature. According to Paul Hamilton, new historicist and cultural materialist critics are returning the discipline of literary studies to an historically informed base, and the opposition between historically based and formally based interpretations is one which was already central to the discipline: 'Since its acceptance as a respectable academic subject, English literary criticism has alternated between seeing itself as an historical or a formal discipline of thought' (Hamilton 1996, 151). In part this means that new historicist and cultural materialist critics are engaged in uncovering the historical contexts in which literary texts first emerged and were received, but it also means that they are busy interpreting the significance of the past for the present, paying particular attention to the forms of power which operated in the past and how they are replicated in the present. For critics such as Stephen Greenblatt or Alan Sinfield, literary texts are vehicles of power which act as useful objects of study in that they contain the same potential for power and subversion as exist in society generally. In this way literary texts become an important focus for contemporary attempts to resist power, and such critics (particularly cultural materialist critics in Britain) are more often explicit about their own political interests in subverting and resisting power, and employ literature to those ends. New historicism and cultural materialism can be seen therefore using the past as an impetus for political struggle in the present, and making it clear that the discipline of literary studies is not removed from the sphere of politics.

What is new historicism?

New historicism is a mode of critical interpretation which privileges power relations as the most important context for texts of all kinds. As a critical practice it treats literary texts as a space where power relations⁴ are made visible. The visibility of power is an important concept when considering Elizabethan theatre and its relationship to the state. Jonathan Dollimore cites for an example Queen Elizabeth's anxiety that a play that implied a criticism of her, *Richard II*, 'was played 40 times in open streets and houses' (Dollimore and Sinfield

1985, 8). As Dollimore points out, Elizabeth's anxiety is that the play was performed in the *open*, in a public place outside the contained and demarcated space of the theatre, breaking down the distinction between art and reality, aesthetics and politics. The play becomes more visible and threatens to reveal through allegory the injustice of the monarch to a wide audience. The theatre itself, although advertising itself as the space of fiction and illusion, also allows certain relations, actions and motives to become visible. In many of Shakespeare's works in particular the theatre visibly presents the power plays and political corruption within a monarchic system, and spectacularly represents the poisoning of a king, the madness of a king, the murder of monarchs in their beds. By making such power plays visible, acted out on stage, theatre presents past political events in the spectrum of the contemporary, alongside, and often geographically close to, the seat of royal power in Elizabethan England. The Globe theatre was only a long stone's-throw away from the Tower of London, and this might lead us to suspect that the representation of regicide in such proximity to the centre of regal power indicates either that it had been so safely contained as to render it powerless, or that it was tantalisingly close to the point of subversion and dissidence right at the heart of power.

The fact that a queen worried about the public performance of a play, possibly Shakespeare's, reveals that there are powerful political stakes in the effects which literary texts and performances can have. For the most part, new historicist critics are not as interested in power plays between contending monarchs or between monarchs and usurpers as they are interested in the operations of power within self-regulating ideologies. A formative study for new historicism was Claude Lévi-Strauss's recognition that culture is a self-regulating system, just like language, and that a culture polices its own customs and practices in subtle and ideological ways. For new historicists this recognition has been extended to the 'self', particularly in Stephen Greenblatt's early and seminal study, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*. What makes the operations of power particularly complex is the fact that the self polices and regulates its own desires and repressions. This removes the need for power to be repressive. No physical or military force need be deployed or exercised for power to have operated effectively in the interests of dominant ideological systems when the self, ideologically and linguistically constructed, will reproduce hegemonic⁵ operations.

New historicism often makes for grim reading with its insistence that there is no effective space of resistance. Because no self, group or culture exists outside language or society, and because every language and society are self-policing, hegemonic systems, there is no possibility of resistance emerging unchecked. This is not to say that there is no resistance, or, as it is more usually termed in new historicist writing, subversion. But subversion is always produced in the interests of power, according to new historicists. The 'production of subversion' is, writes Stephen Greenblatt in his famous essay 'Invisible Bullets', 'the very condition of power' (Greenblatt 1981, 57). Power needs to have subversion, otherwise it would be without the opportunity to justify itself, and to make itself visible as power. Precisely what 'power', and the force behind it, are we will save for the next part of this volume, but power's pervasiveness is certainly a shared assumption among new historicist critics, and this they borrow from Foucault, when he claimed in 1981 that 'Power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere' (Foucault 1981, 93). We might pessimistically ask at this point what use is a critical practice that consistently registers the ineluctable and exhaustive nature of power, the futility of resistance, and the inescapable fact of our containment within linguistic and ideological constraints. New historicists usually see their practice as one of exposition, of revealing the systems and operations of power so that we are more readily equipped to recognise the interests and stakes of power when reading culture. Moreover, it is important to recognise that for new historicists the nature of power may remain the same but the form that it takes does not. Again borrowing from Foucault, new historicists often seek to identify what forms power takes as it changes from one period to another, or as Paul Hamilton refers to it, 'the repetition of power through different epistemés' (Hamilton 1996, 162). Much of the early new historicist work on the English Renaissance period, then, focuses on identifying the transition from a pre-modern to a modern epistemé,⁶ in which, for example, the modern bourgeois idea of the individual began to emerge.

Since new historicism expends most of its energies on identifying and exposing these different historical epistemés, and the historical evolution of conceptions of the state, the individual, culture, family, etc., it is easy to see how it has represented for many commentators a turn to history. What is most striking about its methods of analysing

history, however, is its widespread privileging of textuality, language and representation as the basis for historical analysis. It is in effect literary criticism turned on history, reading history as a text. One of the most problematic aspects of new historicism for historians, however, is its insistence on the pervasiveness and ineluctability of an overarching power, which pays scant attention as a result to the specificities and complexities of history. Indeed, later in this volume I will look more closely at this criticism and examine the contesting notions of history that prevail between literary critics practising new historicism and various different historians.

What is cultural materialism?

Like new historicism, cultural materialism privileges power relations as the most important context for interpreting texts, but where new historicists deal with the power relations of past societies, cultural materialists explore literary texts within the context of contemporary power relations. For cultural materialists the right-wing politics of Thatcherism in 1980s Britain was the context in which they revisited interpretations of Shakespeare, Webster, Wordsworth, Dickens and post-war British literature. According to cultural materialists, texts always have a material function within contemporary power structures. This is amply demonstrated by Alan Sinfield in *Faultlines* when he examines how a Royal Ordnance advertisement for defence equipment in 1989 utilises Shakespeare in promoting itself as a bastion of security and tradition (Sinfield 1992, 1–7). ‘We played the Globe’, boasts the advertisement, going on to say that at the same time that Shakespeare was putting on his plays in the Globe Theatre, the Royal Ordnance started supplying Britain’s military forces with arms. Shakespeare in this advertisement acts as a guarantee of a secure English tradition, promoting an idea of England that supports imperialism (‘playing the globe’), that asserts its cultural superiority over others, and represents the same values over 400 years, thereby endorsing a conservative approach to English politics and society.⁷ For cultural materialists, literary texts behave in a direct and meaningful way within contemporary social and political formations.

This is not to say that the writings of emerging new historicists bore no relation to the politics of 1980s America. As we shall see later in the volume, much of new historicist thinking regarding the possibility of