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'Greenblatt's melancholy fetish: literary criticism and the desire for loss'

1. Introduction: the desire for history

In the introduction to *Learning to Curse*, his collection of essays from 1990, Stephen Greenblatt remarked that the label 'new historicism' covers 'less a set of beliefs' than a particular intellectual trajectory 'that led from American literary formalism through the political and theoretical ferment of the 1970s to a fascination with what one of the best new historicists calls "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history"'.¹ Greenblatt suggested, as he did in many other places, that the new historicism must not be considered as a systematically elaborated research programme,² but rather, and in keeping with its signature emphasis on the importance of history, as the outcome of a particular institutional and intellectual itinerary. As Catherine Gallagher and Greenblatt wrote elsewhere, "new historicism" at first signified an impatience with American New Criticism,³ and in the 1980s this impatience matured into a position that offered a genuine alternative to deconstruction, post structuralism, and Theory – movements that, for the new historicism, simply perpetuated the New Criticism's literary formalism, albeit in more sophisticated ways.⁴ The new historicism distinguished itself through its stated ambition to escape from the 'pantextualism'⁵ that circumscribed the limited interests of these formalisms. It harked back to older forms of historicism in its desire to break out of the prison-house of language and to reconnect to historical reality, even if it no longer believed that the past could simply be relived and that historical experiences could be transmitted and reported in an undistorted way. The new historicism, that is, wanted to feel 'the touch of the real', to quote the title of another of Greenblatt's essays, even though it knew this touch to be in fact a rhetorically produced *effet de réel*. It reactivated the historical desire that New Critical and post-New Critical formalisms had suppressed, in spite of its awareness – borrowed from the more sophisticated versions of formalism – that this desire was bound to remain forever frustrated.



Textual Practice

This version of the relation between the new historicism and the various formalisms it competed with in the field of literary criticism is no doubt numbingly familiar. Nor is it a mystery that the most famous expression of the new historicism's persistent desire for history remains the first line of Greenblatt's book *Shakespearean Negotiations*, where Greenblatt submitted that '[he] began with the desire to speak with the dead'.⁶ In this sentence, Greenblatt sets apart his own critical practice from competing approaches by professing a desire that he, even while professing it, at the same time denied to other contemporaneous paradigms.⁷ Of course, critical practices do not relate to history through such professions of desire alone – and the realization that such professions are missing in some critical programmes does not automatically mean that they do not have a meaningful historical dimension. In order to illustrate this point, and to begin sketching a less customary account of the relation between the new historicism and other critical paradigms, let us briefly have another look at the much-maligned New Criticism. Even if it did not present an explicitly proclaimed literary historical project, and while historical data tended to play only a minor part in its interpretive method, it does not follow that the New Criticism must therefore be denied all interest in history. Categories such as the intentional and the genetic fallacy – to name only two of the most famous New Critical coinages – can without too much difficulty be understood as defensive reactions that assured the continued interpretability of literary texts at a moment when the archive of biographical and historical information had stopped being as harmoniously organized and as neatly delineated as it used to be; these categories were useful when time-honoured notions such as 'the author' and 'historical context' could no longer provide watertight methodological warrants for the meaningfulness of works of literature. New Critical formalism was then something more interesting than a reactionary attempt to assure an autonomous place for literature at a blissful remove from historical forces; instead, this autonomy can be understood as the fateful symptom of a condition in which the linkage of literary understanding and historical knowledge had become radically uncertain. When historical knowledge could no longer be relied on as an infallible guide in the interpretation of literary texts, and when the nature of literature's contribution to history had lost its self-evidence, an embarrassed formalism withdrew from historical reality to a domain where the multifarious interactions of world and reality could be repossessed in the 'internalized, marginalized, and sublimated form' of intra-textual relations.⁸ Looked at in this way, history did not so much disappear from New Criticism from a lack of desire, as the new historicism alleges, but rather from what Alan Liu, who has extensively mapped this dynamic, has called a 'deep embarrassment about the marginality of literary history'.⁹

This example shows that the absence of an openly avowed desire to speak with the dead does not mean that we can simply assume that a particular critical project is not interested in the past. Instead, it points us to a situation in which an embarrassed formalism is one possible – but hardly an unavoidable – way of dealing with the difficulty, if not the impossibility, of satisfying the desire to establish a meaningful relation between the present, the literature we study, and the past. This essay argues that this particular difficulty has two different causes: first, it is an effect of a situation in which the past and the present can no longer be decisively separated, a condition that is linked to certain core components of our modernity, even though these elements are often associated with post-modernity¹⁰; second, this condition assumes a particular literary critical urgency when the impossibility controlling the historical archive presents itself in the field of literary studies. The New Critical renunciation of history was a response to the uncertainties and difficulties that emerged when the interpretation of literature had to confront this modern problematic. The new historical profession of its desire to speak with the dead occurred when these problems of interpretation and method presented themselves in an *intensified* way – an intensification that is often understood as a shift from modernity to post-modernity.¹¹ While the New Criticism reacted to the destabilization of the historical archive, the new historicism responded to a condition in which that destabilization was intensified to such a degree that the very distinction between past and present had become obsolete.

The next section will offer a careful reading of Greenblatt's profession of his desire, in order to show how it expresses an anxiety that Alan Liu has called 'the fear of the loss of loss'.¹² This is a fear that in our current historical moment nothing can any longer be decidedly lost, and that all the trash of history will forever remain indifferently available. This condition cancels the distance between past and present, and makes it impossible to let go of the past, as well as to fully inhabit a present whose historical meaningfulness depends on its distinction from the past. We can understand Greenblatt's desire to speak with the dead as part of an (essentially conservative) attempt to recover the distinction between past and present. As will become clear, Greenblatt carefully constructs literature as a 'melancholy fetish' that allows him to hold on to the belief that things can still be definitively lost, rather than stay undecidably half-alive *and* half-dead. For Greenblatt, literature proves that things can still withdraw from a condition of indifferent availability, and in this way it preserves the possibility of loss, and thus of a meaningful distinction between the past and the present. In what follows, I first show how the motive to recover the certainty of loss underlies Greenblatt's turn to literature by close-reading the passage in which he professes his historical desire. After that, I situate this desire for

Textual Practice

loss as a reaction to core components of our modernity. In the last section, I show how the motive to recover the distinction between past and present takes on a particular urgency in the field of literary criticism. This firmly locates the new historicism in a humanist and formalist tradition, an affiliation which it often vocally disavowed.

2. Literary fetishism and the melancholic imagination

Greenblatt's confession that '[he] began with the desire to speak with the dead' comes right at the beginning of his essay 'The Circulation of Social Energy', the first chapter of his book *Shakespearean Negotiations*. First published in 1988, at a time when the new historicism had acquired full institutional visibility, and written by what was incontestably its most visible proponent, this essay offers one of the most overtly programmatic articulations of a project that presented itself as first of all a practice that explicitly refused the airy comforts of programmatic theorizing.¹³ Greenblatt, in the second sentence of his essay, immediately qualifies his desire to speak with the dead as 'a familiar, if unvoiced motive in literary studies, a motive organized, professionalized, buried beneath thick layers of bureaucratic decorum'.¹⁴ Buried and deprived of a voice – which is an eminently available but obsolete meaning of the term 'un-voiced' – this motive becomes itself a thing of the past that Greenblatt sets out to reconnect with. Greenblatt's desire is also a desire to touch back to the historical impulse that informed pre-New Critical forms of literary scholarship, and to remove the weight heaped upon this impulse by formalist tendencies and by the increasing professionalization of scholarship. Greenblatt shows himself quite aware of the paradoxical nature of his desire, and while he knows that the dead are indeed dead, this knowledge in no way cancels his desire: 'If I never believed that the dead could hear me', he continues, 'and if I knew that the dead could not speak, I was nonetheless certain that I could re-create a conversation with them'.¹⁵ Greenblatt's peculiar position is then that of somebody who is fully aware that the dead are dead, and that they can therefore no longer speak nor listen, but who *nonetheless* believes that they can still be engaged in a conversation. The dead are dead, but not so dead that they could not have, Greenblatt writes, 'contrived to leave textual traces of themselves . . . in the voices of the living'.

So how are we to understand the paradoxical place Greenblatt claims for himself? Greenblatt confesses that, although he knows satisfaction to be impossible, his desire persists – 'I know well, but all the same . . .'. In a classic essay by this title, the French psychoanalyst, Octave Mannoni has linked this structure in which 'a belief can be abandoned and preserved

at the same time' to the Freudian notion of *Verleugnung*, or (de)negation, which is in its turn closely connected to the famous Freudian account of the fetish.¹⁶ Mannoni's analysis can help us understand the stakes of Greenblatt's profession of desire. Mannoni explains that when the fetishist, in the Freudian scenario, finds himself confronted with an experience that proves that the mother has no penis, he does not deny this experience ('*he knows well*'), but he rather preserves it as an indelible mark that he will carry with him and that will motivate him to construct a fetish, which is the very thing that allows him to cultivate the illusion that reality has dispelled ('*but all the same . . .*'). According to Freud, this originary denegation of the maternal phallus provides the model for all further denegations of reality and for the preservation of all further illusions that persist in spite of their refutation in reality. As Mannoni further explains, in this process in which reality is trivialized in the service of the persistence of a particular belief we can crucially only speak of a fetish *because* the fetishist *knows* that women have no phallus¹⁷; only on this condition are we dealing with a fetish, and not with a repression of reality. Indeed, instead of a repression, in the case of fetishism, the unwelcome lesson from reality is all too cheerfully accepted. If we return this scenario to Greenblatt, we can appreciate that it is *because* Greenblatt *knows* that the dead cannot speak that his refusal to let go of the desire to speak with them 'all the same' announces the introduction of a fetish that will allow him to cultivate his persistent belief in the possibility of conversation.

It is no surprise that as soon as Greenblatt's text has carefully prepared a structural place for the fetish (and note that we are still on the first page of his book!) he introduces literature to have it occupy that place.¹⁸ Nor is it surprising, in the light of the dynamic expounded by Mannoni, that this fetish is introduced with an ambiguity that Greenblatt declares himself to be lucidly aware of.

It is paradoxical, of course, to seek the living will of the dead in fictions, in places where there was no live bodily being to begin with. But those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations – in the formal, self-conscious miming of life – than in any other of the textual traces left by the dead, for simulations are undertaken in full awareness of the *absence* of the life they contrive to represent, *and hence* they may skilfully anticipate and compensate for the *vanishing* of the actual life that has empowered them.¹⁹

These dense lines compress Greenblatt's argument in support of the remarkable privilege he accords to literature. Once we start to unpack it, the argument becomes less straightforward than it at first appears. Literature – much like the new historicist himself – operates 'in full

Textual Practice

awareness of the absence' of its object, but – again like the new historicist – it 'all the same' begins to speak, and becomes a representation of what it knows to be missing. This 'miming of life' is, moreover, effective enough to offer compensation 'for the vanishing of the actual life that has empowered [it]'. What we should not overlook is the almost imperceptible slippage in Greenblatt's phrasing when he moves from the definition of literature as a place 'where there was no live bodily being to begin with' to his claim for its compensatory powers. The possibility of deriving compensatory powers from the definition of literature depends on a far from obvious shift that reveals the precise way in which literature functions as a fetish in Greenblatt's critical practice. What I mean is the subtle shift from the conception of literature as an undertaking 'in full awareness of the *absence* of . . . life' to 'the *vanishing* of the actual life' (italics mine) that converts this disadvantage into a distinctive virtue. What makes this transition a far from logical one is, quite simply (and at the risk of sounding pedantic), that an absent life, unlike a life that is (or was) present, cannot vanish. There is an all important difference between the absence of life and the loss of life. In the former case, things are neither dead nor alive, they simply are *not*; only in the latter scenario does the distinction between the dead and the living become meaningful at all.

While this may initially seem like mere nitpicking, the notion that literature marks the distinction between death and life in fact helps us understand the stakes of Greenblatt's critical practice. Applying Mannoni's analysis, we see that what Greenblatt's essay presents as an unproblematic logical inference is instead the construction of literature as a fetish that allows the persistence of the belief in a dialogue with the dead in full awareness that such a conversation is impossible. Literature functions as a fetish, and it confirms the illusion of possible contact, because it makes absent life 'present' by affirming it as vanished, as lost. Literature transforms the outright impossibility of contact into the contingent interruption of a conversation, and almost casually introduces the hopeful suggestion that this conversation, which is now merely interrupted rather than forever impossible, can somehow be resumed.

So how can the literary fetish function as a solution to Greenblatt's desire for history? The desire to speak with the dead implies an investment in the need to *go on* mourning them, to remain attached to the (fictional) moment of their loss. It is customary to see such an inability to let go of a lost object as a characteristic of melancholia.²⁰ In Freud's seminal 1917 paper 'Trauer und Melancholie' ('mourning and melancholia'), melancholia appears as a case of failed mourning, and is as such a pathological condition that is to be superseded by a more successful work of 'true' mourning. The melancholic is unable to enter into a dynamic relation with new love objects, and even with the outside world more generally,

as she fails to detach her energies from the object she has lost. Still, in Greenblatt's case for literature, the point is precisely that there was no object to lose in the first place – there was merely the absence of life. The inconspicuous shift from absence to loss that constructed Greenblatt's literary fetish can then seem to make possible a melancholic posture.

How are we to understand Greenblatt's investment in melancholy? If we take into account that melancholia is here not a symptom of grief over a particular loss, we can think melancholia differently than as a regrettable case of failed mourning. In his early book *Stanzas*, Giorgio Agamben has drawn attention to the fact that in Freud's conceptualization of melancholia, unlike in his definition of mourning, which always follows a real loss, it is often impossible to say which object has been lost, or even if any object has been lost at all. In order to explain this asymmetry between melancholia and mourning, Agamben suggests that melancholia should not so much be seen as a regressive reaction to a definite loss, but can in fact be valorized more positively as 'the imaginative capacity to make an unobtainable object appear as if lost'.²¹ Melancholia's perfect indifference to the actuality of loss, that is, confronts us with the 'paradox of an intention to mourn that precedes and anticipates the loss of the object'. 'If the libido', Agamben writes, 'behaves *as if* a loss has occurred although *nothing* has in fact been lost, this is because the libido stages a simulation where what cannot be lost because it has never been possessed appears as lost, and what could never be possessed because it had never existed may be appropriated insofar as it is lost'.²² Melancholia, far from naming a pathological inability to cope with loss, now indicates an imaginative power to simulate a definite loss, and to forge a determinate relation to something we have otherwise no access to. To the extent that it brings us into relation with something determinate, such a loss is more manageable than the uncertain and non-historical absence we were exposed to before the melancholic imagination came to simulate a lost object we could direct our energies to.²³

We can now see that for Greenblatt, literature functions as such a melancholic 'simulation' that lets an absence appear as a determine loss of life, and that sustains the belief – which persists in spite of the knowledge that all this is mere simulation – that this loss is indeed the vanishing of an actual life.²⁴ In Greenblatt's melancholic imagination, the illusion of actual loss is an effect of the power of literature, which produces a moment of loss that allows previously unengaged energies to encounter an object to focus on. Greenblatt's desire – and his literary fetishism – can now be understood somewhat differently than is customarily done: *not* as an invocation of literature as a domain in which a conversation between two historically differentiated partners can take place, but rather as a desire to stabilize the distinction between past and present that turns

Textual Practice

to literature in order to find there the melancholic assurance of loss. While the new historicism may often present itself as a desire to re-animate the dead in order to mark its difference from the New Criticism and other formalisms, it is paradoxically motivated by a more basic desire to find a life that is decidedly and irrevocably dead. This desire to establish a clear distinction between life and death emerged in a historical and institutional moment that was characterized by a dramatic uncertainty about whether such a determinate deadness in fact existed. I argue that this uncertainty about the actuality of loss is an effect of key elements of our modernity, as well as of developments internal to the practice of literary studies.

3. Modernity and the loss of loss

Greenblatt's candid acknowledgement on the first page of *Shakespearean Neotiations* that the re-animation of the dead is in fact impossible covers over a much more uncomfortable realization: that in the present day there is no way to verify that the dead are indeed irrevocably dead. The new historicism reacts to a situation in which past and present exist side by side, and in which the news and the archive address us simultaneously. Under this dispensation nothing can either fully materialize or definitively disappear, and things only ever present themselves in a spectral state of half-presence. Powers are sensed as phantom forces, but they are never fully embodied.²⁵ And when the distinction between past and present becomes obsolete, the very possibility of understanding our present as the future of the past is threatened. When it is no longer possible to understand the way our present, as well as the literature we study, relate to history, this can inspire the desire to master the pervasive spectrality of the present by establishing a clear separation between the past and the present. Greenblatt's melancholy fetish is one form such a desire can take. For Alan Liu, this condition in which nothing is definitely lost and in which the past and the present are indifferently available, condemns the new historicism to 'a mourning so existential as to become comparable to melancholia'. Where mourning, in the normal Freudian scenario, precisely depends on a reality test that verifies that the lost object no longer exists, the new historicism 'cannot take it for granted that the loss of the object can be known, for "reality" is in this case the lost object and so cannot serve as the testing principle for its own loss'.²⁶ The recovery of reality depends on the recovery of a determinate loss – and this leads Liu to identify the new historicism as a 'project of verifying the "lostness" of the lost object'.²⁷ The desire for the certainty of loss motivates Greenblatt's turn to literature.²⁸

But how are we to understand this condition of indifferent availability in which nothing definitely disappears and in which things only ever

acquire a spectral half-reality? These notions are routinely associated with post-modernity, but we can better understand them as components of commodity capitalism as such. The inability of the subject to absorb and assimilate the multiplicity and variety of things that confront it, and what Marx called the 'phantom-like objectivity' of commodities that condemns things to a virtual and abstract life, can only be identified as post-modern to the extent that post-modernity (or late modernity) foregrounds core elements of commodity capitalism as such. The emergence of the new historicism in the second half of the twentieth century is not an effect of a seismic shift from modernity to post-modernity, but rather, I argue, of the peculiarly intense way in which the indifference of past and present has come to assert itself in literary critical practice.

Alan Liu is one of those who firmly positions the new historicism in the post-modern moment: he argues that it belongs to 'what appears to be the major Anglo-American and Germanic understanding of post-modernity'. This understanding sees the world as an 'assemblage-universe as an arbitrary system', and responds to it by insisting on loss, on mourning, and on the possibility of a reality that escapes the grasp of the overcrowded present.²⁹ Still, this 'assemble-universe' marked by infinite exchange and weightless circulation is the world of our capitalist modernity as such, rather than (pace Liu) of its post-modern (or late capitalist) inflection alone. It is a condition that has engaged modern literature and culture long before post-modernity. In a recent article on the poetry of Thomas Hardy, for instance, Marjorie Levinson describes Hardy's world – the heydays of the British Empire and of commodity fetishism – as 'an imploded world, wherein simultaneity not sequence is the order of things'.³⁰ For Levinson, 'in a world without spatial or temporal boundaries, loss itself disappears as does transformation and its dialectical momentum. What was once transformation is now registered as metamorphosis'.³¹ We can also mention Fredric Jameson's suggestion that 'the end of temporality', which for him also consists in the disappearance of meaningful distinctions between the past and the present, is essentially related to what he calls 'the explosive fact of decolonization', which confronted the Western subject with 'an immense multitude of others' who all press their claim and who block the possibility to transcend the present and to adopt a truly historical perspective.³² Or take a recent book by David Simpson on Wordsworth, which investigates the spectral figures that haunt Wordsworth's poetry as a reflection of his period, which is marked by 'global warfare involving massive mobilizations' as well as by 'the increased spread of mechanized labour and factory discipline'.³³ Here also, the pervasiveness of the commodity form stimulates both an overcrowding of the present and a spectralization of reality.

The examples of romantic disorientation, Victorian commodity culture, and twentieth century decolonization make clear that what Liu

Textual Practice

terms 'the loss of loss' is not a post-modern – let alone a new historical – plight alone, but rather a much more pervasive dimension of Western modernity. This also means that the emergence of the new historicism cannot just be explained away as a symptom of post-modernity. Indeed, the rest of this essay demonstrates how Greenblatt's melancholic imagination must not only be situated in the broad context of our modernity, but is also continuous with a tendency that is internal to the field of literary studies. In literary criticism, the loss of the distinction between past and present asserts itself with peculiar intensity. It has traditionally been the business of literary criticism and literary history to order the past, and to demonstrate how the past informs the literature of the present; when the distinction between past and present disappears, it is all too tempting to fetishize literature as a power that can restore that distinction. As I suggested in my remarks on the New Criticism, the loss of loss presents itself as a very concrete difficulty for the historical interpretation of literature, and this embarrassment has repeatedly informed the ambition to recover a present and a past that would be untainted by the temporal confusion caused by the impossibility of definite loss. The examples of Erich Auerbach and Geoffrey Hartman reveal that Greenblatt's melancholic imagination is but one version of a more general critical tendency to invoke literature in order to recover a clear historical distinction between past and present that is no longer available in the confusions of modern life.

4. Literary criticism and the recovery of the historical present: two examples

My first example is one of the works that Greenblatt, in a 1997 essay, hailed as an 'old' historicist precursor of the new historicism, Erich Auerbach's magisterial study *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (1946), which was written in Istanbul during the Second World War.³⁴ Greenblatt remarks that Auerbach 'seems indeed from this distance like one of the philological giants who lived before the flood'.³⁵ Greenblatt's dramatic reference to a flood recalls the often-remarked-upon precarious conditions in which Auerbach wrote his *Mimesis*. Working in the tradition of an explicitly German historicism, Auerbach wrote his book in Turkish exile from the Nazis during the Second World War, far removed from the intellectual centres of Europe. In the face of such historical adversity, Auerbach's story of realism is, as Robert Doran has written, also 'the story of the triumph of the notion of equality and the concomitant notion of human dignity'.³⁶ For Auerbach, the different excerpts of the European canon with which each of the book's 20 chapters is concerned count as so many affirmations of man's

capacity to assert himself in the face of historical circumstances. Auerbach's own meticulous analyses of these excerpts, which were themselves undertaken in the face of momentous adversity, then count as 'performative' confirmations of the human capacity for resistance that they unearth in the history of realism.

Auerbach's project cannot be understood in isolation from the atrocities that were taking place at the same time on the European continent. Auerbach's affirmation of a European cultural tradition is undertaken in full awareness that, as he writes, 'European civilization is approaching the term of its existence'.³⁷ *Mimesis* is marked by an uncomfortable ambiguity that is comparable to the tension we observed in the case of Greenblatt: Auerbach knows only too well that European culture is falling apart all around him, but he all the same affirms it in the face of these disasters. Yet Auerbach's *belief* in the persistence of a tradition he *knows* to be bankrupt is not – as was the case in Greenblatt's denegation of the silence of the dead – accompanied by a failure to appreciate the stakes of his present situation. Instead, Auerbach profusely acknowledges the conditions in which he operates. In his 'Epilegomena to *Mimesis*' from 1953, he writes that *Mimesis* is 'quite consciously a book that a particular person, in a particular situation, wrote at the beginning of the 1940s'.³⁸ Auerbach's situation is a condition of relative intellectual isolation in Istanbul, where he had no access to a decent research library and could not keep up with the scholarly work of his contemporaries. Yet, Auerbach notes at the end of *Mimesis*, it is precisely this marginalized position that made the writing of the book possible. Defending his decision not to write a traditional, exhaustive literary history, but to focus instead on a limited sample of literary passages, Auerbach writes: 'I could never have written anything in the nature of a history of European realism; the material would have swamped me'.³⁹ Only thanks to the paucity of materials available in Istanbul could *Mimesis* be written at all, and could Auerbach appear to Greenblatt as a philological giant living *before* the flood, the flood of an unworkable multiplicity of historical materials that can no longer be ordered and that blocks the philological endeavour to produce a comprehensive literary history.⁴⁰ The reason Auerbach managed to write *Mimesis* at all was his felicitous removal from the European metropolis, an exile that restricted the materials available to him to a manageable set of privileged texts.

In the case of Auerbach, we find a particularly literary critical variant of the pervasive half-life that I earlier described as an aspect of our modernity *tout court*. While in Auerbach's precarious day and age it was still possible to find a temporary respite from a continuously inflowing stream of data, if only as the result of a forced exile from the country taken over by a totalitarian regime, such a possibility seems decidedly obsolete in the age of

Textual Practice

information technology that has become a pressing reality since the period when the new historicism emerged. In the last paragraph of his book, Auerbach already anticipates this condition when he notes how, in the work of modernists such as Virginia Woolf, the emphasis on the 'random moment' results in a multiplicity and variety of elements that can no longer be either synthesized or differentiated. In Auerbach's view, this apparent multiplicity and diversity of random moments covers over an 'economic and cultural levelling process' in which the real 'differences between men's ways of life and forms of thought have already lessened'.⁴¹ Because of the infinite availability and retrievability of random moments, their seeming uniqueness in fact testifies to a much more basic indifference.

In a letter from Istanbul to his friend Walter Benjamin from 1937, Auerbach comments on what he calls the 'fanatical, anti-traditional nationalism' of Atatürk, whose 'destruction of the historic national character' and whose introduction of the Latin script he unhesitatingly compares to the ravages perpetrated at the same time by Hitler and Mussolini. Auerbach writes: 'I am more and more convinced that the contemporary world situation is nothing other than the cunning of providence to lead us along a bloody and circuitous route to the Internationale of Triviality and Esperanto culture'.⁴² Instead of injecting new life into a national tradition, Atatürk's enforced introduction of the Latin script in Turkey merely leads to an inexpressive Esperanto, a language that is neither alive, as the Turkish with its 'Arabic and Persian influences' was, nor fully dead, like Latin. Esperanto cuts Turkish culture loose from its traditional roots without actually destroying it; it preserves it as only ever half-dead. Atatürk's Esperanto culture is a mock-culture in which the tradition and the Turkish language do not simply disappear, but are rather condemned to survive themselves in a diminished form. For Auerbach, the situation in Turkey epitomizes the sorry state of European culture at the time. This is the situation that he had to turn away from in order to be able to write his *Mimesis*.⁴³

For the literary scholar living in the age *after* the flood that Auerbach could still escape, no such temporary relief is possible. When Auerbach cites his fateful removal from an overabundance of data as an enabling condition for the writing of his literary-historical masterpiece, this points us to the reasons why such an 'old' historicist project was no longer possible for the new historicists. Due to the development of the mass media, to the increased possibilities for storage and retrieval of data that this development brought with it, and to the ever greater importance of these media in literary and cultural research, the new historicism had to confront an intensified version of the situation Auerbach diagnosed and only barely escaped. Although the new historicism prided itself on its openness to all things worldly and historical, its melancholic turn to literature betrays its desire for a world where things can still irrevocably disappear. Even while the

new historicism tended to assert its own programmatic return to reality against the alleged a-historicity and narrowly literary focus of New Critical and post-New Critical formalisms, Greenblatt's professed desire for history reveals a melancholic dissatisfaction with the confusions of the present.

Such a dissatisfaction with an overcrowded present, and the construction of literature as a fetish that allows us to hold on to the belief that a clear separation between past and present is still possible, connects Greenblatt's position to that of Auerbach's 'old' historicism, and also, as I want to suggest here in conclusion, to the formalisms to which the new historicism was so vocally opposed. To conclude this essay, we can have a brief look at a relatively uncontroversial example of such a post-New Critical formalism. In the 1970s, the decade when the new historicism began to mark its difference from this type of formalism, Geoffrey Hartman produced a number of passionate claims for the cultural importance of literature. He also wrote extensively on Derrida in this period, which culminated with the publication of *Saving the Text*, a book on Derrida from 1981. His work in this era is generally received as a prime instance of what is often called the American 'domestication of Derrida', a domestication that allegedly removed the real radicality from Derrida's work in order to streamline it with narrowly literary formalist agendas. While the new historicism often believed itself to oppose this domestication and to reconnect literary thinking to reality, Hartman's cultural diagnosis from the early 1970s in fact comes very close to Auerbach's earlier analysis, and to the conditions that underlie Greenblatt's melancholic desire. The present, Hartman writes in a typical passage, 'is not a desert but a dump: we suffer from too much rather than from too little, from the rate of change and inexorable accumulation of cultural detritus'.⁴⁴ This detritus is not only produced by 'an endlessly inflowing contemporaneity', which we can recognize as the domination of the commodity form that condemns all things to virtuality and abstraction, but it also consists in a heap of 'outmoded signs, myths, allusions, and styles'. The burden of the past is, for Hartman, 'a peculiarly modern burden', and is the result of '[t]he growth of the historical consciousness, its multiplying of disparate models all of which press their claim'.⁴⁵ The upshot of this fateful combination of the pervasiveness of the commodity form and the uncontrollable multiplication of historical data is a situation marked by 'sheer juxtaposition', a 'pluralism verging on indifference'.⁴⁶ For Hartman, the simultaneity of past and present defines the task of criticism: literary criticism is to develop a style that preserves literature's claim to make a genuine difference in this cultural condition: criticism, Hartman writes, 'literally "preserves" art by allowing it to persist like a separate stream or vortex in what surrounds it'.⁴⁷ Like Greenblatt and Auerbach, Hartman turns from an overcrowded everyday to the promise of a more genuinely historical reality for which literature serves as a vehicle.

Textual Practice

Hartman's critical project in this period leads him to adopt Derridean deconstruction, and its critique of the 'metaphysics of presence', as a particular critical writing strategy that is, more than other critical paradigms, aware of the problematic 'half-presence' of literature and of other phenomena in the contemporary world. For Hartman, deconstructive criticism's attention to the text interrupts the indifferent and all too self-evident availability of meaning by teaching us that the text is never fully present, but is rather always disseminated in a multiplicity of traces. Deconstructive criticism rehearses the realization that things are never fully present, and as such it preserves the possibility of a reality that would be different from the one we have, even if it is only because that reality lies in the past and cannot be recovered. Derrida is for Hartman 'a conservative thinker',⁴⁸ and deconstruction first of all has a 'recuperative and truly conservative strength',⁴⁹ precisely because its intense dedication to the text testifies to the desire to look beyond the confusions of the present, and to open a perspective on a tradition that the chaos of the present tends to obscure. Literary criticism, for Hartman, saves literature from drowning in the continuous flood of contemporary and past signifiers and makes it the placeholder for the possibility of a past or future that is not simply condemned to being an indifferent part of the present.

Whatever the (obviously very real) differences between the alleged pantextualism of deconstruction and the circulation of social energy that the new historicism emphasized, we are missing an important continuity between these projects when we follow the new historicism and dismiss critical formalism on account of its alleged disinterest in history. What is obscured by such an opposition is a major trend in literary studies since the Second World War that tends to fetishize literature in order to recover the distinction between past and present, between loss and life. Greenblatt's melancholic imagination is one form of this tendency that has assumed. Whether nominally dedicated to any form of historicism or not, the study of literature has found itself situated in an 'extended present' that no longer exists in a meaningful opposition to the past.⁵⁰ While such an overcrowded and confused present appears to be characteristic of our modernity, and not of the age of post-modernity alone, this situation has asserted itself with peculiar intensity in the field of literary studies. Because part of the business of literary and cultural studies is to understand the significance of the past for our present and for the literature we read, these fields constitute a privileged place to register disturbances in the relation between past and present – and this is the case even when they do not begin with the desire for a such privilege.

K.U. Leuven

Notes

- 1 Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 3. The new historicist who is quoted here is Louis Montrose.
- 2 For firm assertions that the new historicism is 'a practice rather than a doctrine', see Greenblatt's essay 'Towards a Poetics of Culture' in Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, p. 146, and the introduction to Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). Joseph Litvak's review article usefully explains how the new historicism's 'reticence or evasiveness' in relation to theory is central to its critical project. Joseph Litvak, 'Back to the Future: A Review Article on the new historicism, Deconstruction, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction' in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 30 (1988), pp. 120–149.
- 3 Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 2.
- 4 The idea that deconstruction and poststructuralism are a mere continuation of the formalism of the New Criticism is a commonplace. For some versions of this assumed continuity, see Paul Bové, 'Variations on Authority: Some Deconstructive Transformations of the New Criticism' in Jonathan Arac et al. (ed.), *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1983), pp. 3–5. Greenblatt's treatment of Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard in his essay 'Towards a Poetics of Culture' (see also note 2) makes clear that he indeed sees poststructuralism as, in the final analysis, just another formalism.
- 5 See Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 14.
- 6 Stephen Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (London: Clarendon, 1990), p. 1. In this essay, I will silently consider Greenblatt as a metonymy for the new historicism, a procedure that seems to be the rule rather than the exception, and not least in the work of Greenblatt himself. For instance: 'One of the peculiar characteristics of the "new historicism" in literary studies is precisely how unresolved and in some ways disingenuous it has been – *I have been* – about the relation to literary theory'. Greenblatt, 'Towards a Poetics of Culture', p. 146. Italics mine. While I am aware of the impressive variety of approaches that are gathered under the label of the new historicism, I am more concerned with a properly historical understanding of the desire for history in post-war criticism than with the different shapes this desire has assumed. While there are very real differences between, for instance, Romantic new historicism and Renaissance new historicism, or between different historicist approaches to gender and sexuality, I only focus on the emergence of the desire for history that underlies these different approaches. Tobias Weber has usefully enumerated the places where Greenblatt explicitly refers to or uses the *topos* of a conversation with the dead. See Tobias Weber, "'I began with the desire to speak with the dead": Stephen Greenblatt's Unterhaltung mit den Toten', in Patrick Eiden et al. (ed.) *Totenkulte: kulturelle und literarische Grenzgänge zwischen Leben und Tod* (Frankfurt a.M.: Campus, 2006), pp. 133–146, pp. 135 and 138.

Textual Practice

- 7 For some of Greenblatt's remarks on formalism as a practice that 'carefully' excluded non-formal issues, and that was marked by 'intellectual isolationism and claustrophobia', see Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse*, pp. 1–5.
- 8 Alan Liu, 'The Power of Formalism: The new historicism', *ELH*, 56 (1989), pp. 721–771, p. 742.
- 9 Liu, 'The Power of Formalism', p. 722. For a recent account of the withdrawal of the New Critics from social action to formalism, see Schryer, 'Fantasies of the New Class: The New Criticism, Harvard Sociology, and the Idea of the University', *PMLA*, 122 (2007), pp. 663–678.
- 10 See David Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 4.
- 11 The term 'intensification' seems an appropriate one to indicate both the basic continuity and the vital variations between late modernity and the modernity that precedes it, if only because it avoid the suggestion of a clean break that the term 'postmodernity' carries. For an extensive mobilization of this term that informs my use of it here, see Jeffrey Nealon, *Foucault Beyond Foucault: Power and its Intensifications since 1984* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- 12 Alan Liu, 'The new historicism and the Work of Mourning', *Studies in Romanticism*, 35 (1996), pp. 553–562, 558. While it may at first sight appear strange that Liu conflates anxiety, which is often understood as having no determinate object, with fear, which is normally aimed at a localizable object, my essay will make clear that it is precisely the impossibility of knowing whether there is indeed an object to relate to that motivates this paradoxical fear/anxiety.
- 13 See Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 19: 'Each time we approached that moment in the writing when it might have been appropriate to draw the "theoretical" lesson . . . we stopped . . . because we could not bear to see the long chains of close analysis go up in a puff of abstraction'.
- 14 Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 1.
- 15 A passage in Greenblatt's essay 'The Touch of the Real' closely resembles this one (and this underlines its centrality to Greenblatt's work): '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'. Stephen Greenblatt, 'The Touch of the Real' in Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, pp. 20–48, p. 30.
- 16 Octave Mannoni, 'I Know Well, but All the Same . . .', in Molly Anne Rothenberg *et al.* (ed.), *Perversion and the Social Relation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), pp. 68–92, p. 70. James Stratchey, who translated Freud's essay into English, translates *Verneinung* as 'negation', in order to distinguish it from 'denial', which would be the normal translation of the German *Verneinung*. Because the term 'negation' is now so common in academic discourse, I have found it useful to translate Freud's term as 'denegation', which still has a more technical meaning.
- 17 Mannoni, 'I Know Well, but All the Same . . .', pp. 68–72.
- 18 Here as elsewhere, the figure and the work of Shakespeare are exemplary for Greenblatt. See Marjorie Garber, 'Shakespeare as Fetish', *Shakespeare*

Quarterly, 41 (1990), pp. 242–250. Garber's key example of the fetishization of Shakespeare is the very page in Greenblatt's book that I am discussing here. She also brings Freud and Mannoni into the discussion, but does not take her analysis of Greenblatt as far as I do here.

- 19 Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 1. Italics mine.
- 20 Sigmund Freud, 'Trauer und Melancholie', in Alexander Mitscherlich *et al.* (ed.), *Studienausgabe III* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975), pp. 193–213.
- 21 Giorgio Agamben, *Stanzas: Word and Phantasm in Western Culture*, trans. Ronald Martinez (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 20.
- 22 Agamben, *Stanzas*, p. 20.
- 23 See Dominick LaCapra's 'Trauma, Absence, Loss', *Critical Inquiry*, 25 (1999), pp. 696–727 for some aspects of the confusion of (ontological) absence and (historical) loss.
- 24 In the entry entitled 'Verleugnung (déní)' in their *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis already seem to suggest the usefulness of the melancholic construction of loss for the restoration of reality: 'If it is the woman's "lack of a penis" that is being denegated, it is difficult to talk of perception or reality, because an absence is not perceived as such, as it only becomes a reality to the extent that it is put into relation with a possible reality'. Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse* (Paris: PUF, 1976), p. 116. Translation changed.
- 25 Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, p. 6.
- 26 Liu, 'The new historicism and the Work of Mourning', p. 560.
- 27 *Ibid.*, p. 560.
- 28 Of course, the relation between the recovery of reality and the role of literature appears very differently on the surface of Greenblatt's work. The following passage illustrates this: '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 on the absence of the bodies and voices that it represents'. What Greenblatt fails to appreciate is that the phrase 'without giving up' should by right twice be replaced with 'by deploying' in this passage: it is through the melancholy fetish of literature that Greenblatt attempts to recover 'a confident conviction of reality', which depends on a restored distinction between past and present. Gallagher and Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism*, p. 31.
- 29 Liu, 'The new historicism and the Work of Mourning', p. 560.
- 30 Marjorie Levinson, 'Object-Loss and Object-Bondage: Economies of Representation in Hardy's Poetry', *ELH*, 73 (2007), pp. 549–580, p. 568.
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. 568.
- 32 Fredric Jameson, 'The End of Temporality', *Critical Inquiry*, 29 (2003), pp. 695–718, p. 709.
- 33 Simpson, *Wordsworth, Commodification, and Social Concern*, p. 2.
- 34 In the first chapter of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, on which I have been drawing in this essay, the example of Auerbach is more cryptically acknowledged when Greenblatt notes that his vision is more 'fragmentary' than that

Textual Practice

- of critics conveying the impression 'that had they but world enough and time, they could illuminate every corner of the text and knit together into a unified interpretive vision all of their discrete perceptions'. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 4. Marvell's line 'If we had but world enough and time . . .' is Auerbach's motto in *Mimesis*. My discussion should make clear that Auerbach's position is more problematic, and indeed more fragmentary than Greenblatt here makes it out to be.
- 35 Greenblatt, 'The Touch of the Real', p. 45.
- 36 Robert Doran, 'Literary History and the Sublime in Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*', *New Literary History*, 2 (2007), pp. 353–369, p. 359.
- 37 Erich Auerbach, *Literary Language and its Public in Late Latin Antiquity and in the Middle Ages*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965), p. 6.
- 38 Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in European Literature*, trans. Willard Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), p. 574.
- 39 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, p. 548.
- 40 For a classic analysis (in terms of Kant's mathematical sublime) of how an overabundance of publications and materials leads to such a 'blockage', see Neil Hertz, 'The Notion of Blockage in the Literature of the Sublime', in Geoffrey Hartman (ed.), *Psychoanalysis and the Question of the Text* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 65–85.
- 41 Auerbach, *Mimesis*, pp. 552–553.
- 42 Erich Auerbach, 'Scholarship in Times of Extremes: Letters of Erich Auerbach (1933–46), On the Fiftieth Anniversary of his Death', intr. and trans. Martin Elsky *et al.*, *PMLA*, 122 (2007), pp. 742–762, p. 751.
- 43 I not only refer to Auerbach's exile from German totalitarianism, but also to his alleged indifference to his Turkish surroundings. See Emily Apter, 'Global *Translatio*: The "Invention" of Comparative Literature, Istanbul, 1933', *Critical Inquiry*, 29 (2003), pp. 253–281.
- 44 Geoffrey Hartman, *The Fate of Reading and Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), p. 306.
- 45 Geoffrey Hartman, 'History-Writing as Answerable Style', *New Literary History*, 2 (1970), pp. 73–83, pp. 75–76.
- 46 Hartman, *The Fate of Reading*, p. 260.
- 47 Geoffrey Hartman, 'The Interpreter: A Self-Analysis', *New Literary History*, 4 (1973), pp. 213–227, p. 221.
- 48 Geoffrey Hartman, *Saving the Text: Literature, Derrida, Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 24.
- 49 Geoffrey Hartman, *Easy Pieces* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985), p. 193.
- 50 Craig Ireland, *The Subaltern Appeal to Experience: Self-Identity, Late Modernity, and the Politics of Immediacy* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill and Queen's University Press, 2004), p. 150.