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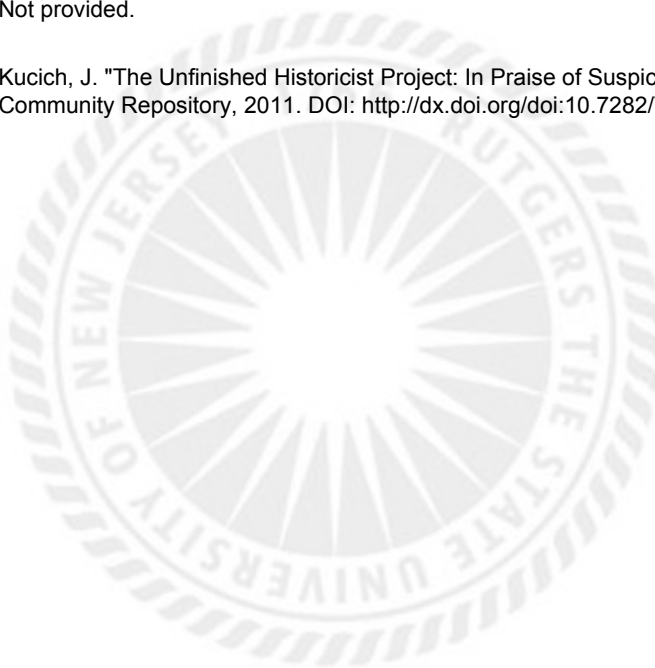
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# The Unfinished Historicist Project: In Praise of Suspicion

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John Kucich

## Abstract

Historicism remains relatively robust in Victorian Studies, but it has developed rather quietly in two contrary directions – synchronic and diachronic – that have long constituted an important theoretical fault line. The first half of this essay surveys these two ongoing types of Victorian historicism and urges the importance of integrating them; the second defends historicism from a recent theoretical movement that deflects attention from that potential integration: the critique of ‘suspicious reading’. The essay focuses on general methodological issues that affect how we defend humanistic scholarship, since historicism’s continued development remains vital not only to Victorianists but to the discipline as a whole. While historicism has been both enormously reinigorating and much contested, by friend and foe alike, the tectonic shift in our critical practice that it represents has never crystallized a simple, coherent set of principles that might define the mission of literary studies within the humanities. Although there are many ways to justify literary criticism, historicism will always be centrally entwined with them. Affirming the role suspicious reading plays in historical contextualization and clarifying the methodologies and objectives of historicism are thus tasks that still lie urgently before us.

**Key words:** Historicism, hermeneutics of suspicion, surface reading, humanities, empiricism, politics, ethics

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Is historicism over? The 2010 *SEL* reviewer of eighteenth-century studies thought it ‘had perhaps run its course. Not only did it fail to provide a rationale for what we do, as opposed to what others do, but also some of the most innovative work seemed in several ways to be working against the historicist grain’ (Kramnick 683–4). Such judgments, hardly uncommon, may signal a new disciplinary turn. But questions about historicism’s viability have been strikingly persistent over the past quarter-century. Even at the apex of the New Historicism’s prestige in the late 1980s, sympathisers and fellow-travellers such as Carolyn Porter, Alan Liu, and Richard Lehan declared it fundamentally flawed – in their view, because of its incorrigible tendency to turn history into form. Twenty years ago, we worried whether we were ‘being historical yet’ (Porter thought we weren’t [58]); now we ask routinely whether we’re being historical any more. In between, the displacement of decontextualised literary analysis by cultural history seems never to have fully arrived. So reinvigorating and yet so contested, by friend and foe alike, this tectonic shift in our critical practice has never crystallised a simple, coherent set of principles that might define the mission of literary studies within the humanities.

In our 2009 *SEL* review of nineteenth-century studies, Dianne F. Sadoff and I drew the tempered conclusion that ‘the desire to historicise remains widespread’, although ‘not nearly as imperative as it was a decade ago’ (1009). But if historicism remains relatively robust in Victorian studies, it has nevertheless developed rather quietly in two contrary directions – synchronic and diachronic – that have long constituted an important theoretical fault line. In the first half of this essay, I survey these two ongoing types of Victorian historicism and urge the importance of integrating them; in the second, I defend historicism from a recent theoretical movement that deflects attention from that potential integration: the critique of ‘suspicious reading’. Much has been written about specific problems of historicist analysis: the nature and status of evidence, the function of discourse in the social field, the legitimacy of competing archives, and the relationship between narrative (or form) and history. I will focus instead on general methodological issues that affect how we defend humanistic scholarship, since I believe historicism’s continued development remains vital not only to Victorianists but to the discipline as a whole.

### **Synchronic and Diachronic Historicisms**

Both synchronic and diachronic historicisms rest on a fundamental methodological hybridity: on the one hand, a broadening of the

empirical base of evidence (which critics do not normally theorise as empiricist, since that would require clarity about large-scale data sets, control variables, and so forth); on the other, an illumination of that base through theoretical perspectives derived from historicist-friendly approaches: feminism, queer studies, cultural studies, ethnic studies, empire studies, and the many other politically grounded practices that supplanted 1970s high theory by foregrounding literature's social embeddedness. Historicists may question theoretical orthodoxies and suggest readjustments, but the political undertones of their work have remained remarkably constant over the past few decades, if increasingly less militant – sometimes shading into ethical terms or into shared but rudimentary assumptions about power and domination. Time itself is politically and ethically neutral, but historicism is not and never has been.

The methodological hybridity I've described – an empirical broadening refocused through political or ethical perspectives – has been undertheorised by scholars who tend to operate in both registers at once, as if it were natural to do so. This hybridity warrants the kind of self-conscious formulation that Peter Galison once hypothetically named 'specific theory', a theorisation that might work between the 'dream of an extreme empiricism and the infinite scale of a magical universalism' (382). The gap between what the archive tells us and our willingness to reread it willfully in the light of theory is stronger in some fields than others. It remains remarkably pronounced, for example, in queer studies, given the pernicious historical record. But all of us labour across it. When the gap grows especially wide, it contributes to the atomisation of materialist topics we've suffered recently, in which potentially large questions of literary, cultural, or book history devolve into micro-projects. But when topical and conceptual creativity intersect, this hybridisation energises Victorian scholarship in one of two distinct temporal directions.

Synchronic historicism strives to recover the Victorian moment 'as it was in itself', to echo the new German historians of the early 1800s, although less naïve synchronists understand that they formulate paradigms for periods, not unmediated history. At the risk of sounding heretical, we display this mode best in our textbook writing. As co-editor with Jenny Bourne Taylor of the nineteenth-century volume in the *Oxford History of the Novel in English* (now in preparation), I've been struck by how methodological hybridity enriches knowledge of the period qua period. Contributors refer to over six hundred novels published between 1820 and 1880, an expansive archive that owes an obvious debt to historicism's deprivileging of literary canons. While

that may be well short of what Margaret Cohen calls ‘the great unread’ (6) – the seven thousand novels published in the nineteenth century, which Franco Moretti has recently reminded us we can never hope to master – it forms a significantly more solid analytical foundation than that available to mid-twentieth-century literary historians, who now seem impressionistic by contrast. It also provides a more secure critical platform than the formal model for tracing literary change that Moretti advocates, which charts shifts in literary conventions in lieu of textual coverage. Even Moretti concedes that, in the case of idiosyncratic works or genres that have disappeared, his approach would be ‘an *obstacle* to knowledge’ (‘Slaughterhouse’ 226).

But our contributors do more than read a lot. They also reveal how central the Victorian novel was to national, political, familial, and psychic life by illuminating it with the theoretical insights of the last two critical generations. This is not merely a broadened but an entirely new history we are producing. Unlike our predecessors, we have a complex sense of literature’s role in key historical shifts: the shaping of imperial and anti-imperial ideology, the emergence of modern subjectivity, the engagement of high culture with new popular media, the construction of heteronormativity and its counter-discourses – to mention only a few social developments we now recognise as entwined with literary history. My enthusiasm for this empirically broadened but conceptually sharpened knowledge extends to the daunting stack of scholarly companions and teaching aids I read as I prepared the Oxford volume. Think of these as publishers’ cash cows and roll your eyes, but read them and be astonished – both by their range of knowledge and by the conceptual leverage they apply to cultural flashpoints.

We may offer up the fruits of our methodological hybridity best when least constrained to write idiosyncratically, but we distill our collective knowledge from the more specialised work such hybridity sustains. I’m thinking of groundbreaking studies such as two recent books on war: Christopher Herbert’s *War of No Pity: The Indian Mutiny and Victorian Trauma* and Stefanie Markovits’s *The Crimean War in the British Imagination*, which use theoretical perspectives (trauma and genre theory, respectively) to remind us of the immediacy with which national conflicts permeate literature. Or Elizabeth K. Helsinger’s *Poetry and the Pre-Raphaelite Arts*, which combines social theory with book history, Victorian theories of colour, studies of consumer culture, and other interdisciplinary bodies of knowledge to prove that the Pre-Raphaelites were fiercely self-conscious about their historical situatedness, not nostalgic feudalists. In contrast to 1980s historicism,

which used deconstructive techniques to turn the whole social text into an object of formalist analysis (as Porter *et al.* noted), these works pragmatically amalgamate empirical and theoretical methods. However ill-defined that pragmatism may be, it produces a thickened history of the period's literary and social intersections.

If empirical-theoretical hybridisation fuels synchronic studies, it also drives diachronic projects that explore the role Victorians played in the transition to modern culture. The recent 'Victorian cluster' in *PMLA* is an exemplary instance. Carolyn Dever's 'Introduction' claims that the essays in the cluster share a 'desire to fathom a "Victorian" past in relation to emergent discourses of modernity' (371) – the scare-quotes around 'Victorian' announcing her uncertainties about synchronic knowledge. Each essay fathoms that past by reading an expanded archive through fresh critical lenses. Two focus on turn-of-the-century modernism – a crucial site of revisionism, since the stark boundaries that are supposed to divide Victorian and modern cultures remain stubbornly entrenched in academic and popular thought. Robert E. Loughy argues that Dickens' conception of personal and cultural memory anticipated late-nineteenth-century psychoanalytic and anthropological theory; Andrea Henderson demonstrates that modernist conceptions of space emerged from Victorian non-Euclidean geometry, which had 'an earlier and more fundamental influence on developments in aesthetics' than previously believed because it called attention to 'the strictly formal properties of signs' (457).

Other essays trace discontinuities rather than smooth transitions between Victorian and modern culture. Daniel Siegel studies evolving constructions of historical consciousness to argue that, whereas modernism saw history as the effect of arrest or 'hesitation' (375), Victorian fiction conceived it in dialogic terms. Elsie Michie exemplifies historically informed formalist reading by demonstrating that Victorian fiction worked through contradictions in political economy and literary discourse by means of gendered plot formations, which 'imagine a world' in which such contradictions could be overcome (425), a formal solution she argues the modern novel decisively reversed. Projects like Michie's conform to the model for historicist-formalist practice once proposed by Richard Strier: 'unlike the historicism of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries [twentieth-century historicism] drives context into text, world into work, thus delivering up form ... as the privileged analytic object, exposing history in tension with ideology' (211).

Perhaps the most compelling approach in the *PMLA* 'cluster' is that of Lauren M. E. Goodlad's 'Trollopian "Foreign Policy"', which puts Victorian texts to work in twenty-first-century global studies. Arguing that situated conceptions of cosmopolitanism, in contrast to the Enlightenment ideal of a 'view from above', were 'visibly under way' in the fiction of Anthony Trollope, Goodlad shows that the ethico-political project of studying unprivileged or coerced models of hybridised identity formation began long before present-day globalisation theory. In fact, she identifies a 'disconnect' between that theory and its nineteenth-century antecedents. Goodlad thus answers the question 'can criticism of nineteenth-century literature illuminate our globalizing world in the first decade of the twenty-first century?' with a resounding yes (437), demonstrating that Victorian ideas about cosmopolitanism can restore to current theoretical practice the sense of 'finite expectations' that it has forgotten (438).

Goodlad's derivation of twenty-first-century theoretical leverage from a nineteenth-century writer consigned to the scrap heap of imperial ethnography exemplifies one important way cultural artifacts matter beyond their historical moment. Diachronic historicism at its best often recovers these kinds of unrealised critical possibilities in Victorian texts. Bruce Robbins' *Upward Mobility and the Common Good* traces the emergence in nineteenth-century fiction of the social ethos underlying the welfare state, which relied on a particular narrative of upward mobility that normalised by minimising social inequalities. He then uses that narrative tradition to analyse present-day welfare-state debates in less jaundiced terms than those employed by recent leftist critics. Sharon Marcus' *Between Women* revises discussions of female friendship by breaking through the critical blindness of feminist readers who construe all female friendship as erotic. Marcus thereby generates a rich critical lexicon for describing the possibilities immanent in both nineteenth- and twenty-first-century female experience.

Some Victorianists straddle the synchronic/diachronic divide: Helsinger and Marcus come immediately to mind. But most fall distinctly on one side or the other, which highlights an important metacritical rift: can historicism be better justified on synchronic or diachronic grounds? Should we tell students and the broader public that, as Louis Menand once put it, 'a nineteenth-century novel is a report on the nineteenth century; it is not an advice manual for life out here on the twenty-first-century street'? Or should we tell them what Menand wrote only a few sentences later: 'in developing tools for understanding the nineteenth-century novel, we are at the same time



developing tools for understanding ourselves' (15)? Which is the better way to rationalise our work – or, can we have it both ways? Historicism will never serve as a broad foundation for humanistic study unless it can answer this question plainly.

There are more particular questions one could ask of synchronic and diachronic approaches. The former raise vexed issues of periodisation and epistemology. Even Dracula found centuries' worth of archival textual study insufficient without a few weeks' conversation with a live 'Victorian' human being. The latter risk what Fredric Jameson called 'nostalgia for the present' (*Postmodernism* 279). At their most reductive, they resemble British cultural materialism of the 1980s, with its limited instrumentalist imperatives. But if historicism is to ground the collective enterprise of literary studies, it must specify, above all, how twenty-first-century critical priorities shape historicist projects, and vice versa. Why have the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny become important focal points for recent criticism, for example, and why have studies of these 1850s conflicts stressed literary critiques of imperialism? Conversely, how can we prove that the theoretical leverage we require on global studies must come from Trollope? Is some causal sequence in the historical record of which Trollope is a part necessary to these theoretical insights? Or is the imaginative or aesthetic form of Trollope's work intrinsic to them? If not, then surely we can do without him? Historicist work will not be compelling to general audiences unless the dialectical relationship between the priorities of interpreters and the situatedness of the 'Victorian' archive are centrally addressed.

This is not a new lament, but twenty-five years ago at least we knew why so many Victorianists were writing about sodomy and sensation. Now that our political commitments are more latent, the relationship between underlying critical motivations and the subjects we study can seem obscure. The lacuna in historicism's sense of its own temporality has been usefully explored by a number of Victorianists, most notably in Helena Michie's recent work on the awkwardness of historicist 'syntax', a symptomatic betrayal of ambivalence about our position relative to the historical record. Such ambivalence is especially problematic, I want to stress, if it deepens uncertainties about the mission of historicism. Without a sure sense of collective purpose, we can only wish for a paradigm shift that might define the rationale for what we do more clearly.

I would hardly discourage such restlessness: how else will self-consciousness about our discipline emerge? But in the remainder of this essay, I take issue with one candidate for such a paradigm shift: the

notion that we are ready to move beyond the ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ (or ‘symptomatic reading’) and that there lie before us coherent ways of doing so. I raise this issue because critiques of suspicion sometimes threaten to derail the ongoing project of historicist inquiry I have so far described, either by advocating forms of aesthetic and affective immediacy or by discounting historical interpretation that depends on counter-intuitive or obscure evidence. There are more broadly humanistic reasons to quarrel with the attack on suspicious reading. As I hope to show, versions of this attack that advocate a ‘common sense’ critical approach and those grounded in purely aesthetic values erode our discipline’s already precarious credibility among non-humanists. Versions that aspire to social scientific astringency, by contrast, can undermine awareness of the specific skill humanists bring to data: interpretation. Moreover, even sophisticated attacks on the hermeneutics of suspicion often involve a rewriting of disciplinary history, a recycling of older theoretical alternatives, and a tactical miscalculation about how to restore to the humanities the prestige they enjoyed a half-century ago. Most importantly, though, while historicism is not always the target of anti-suspicious critiques, by resisting its contextualising imperatives such critiques sometimes find common ground. And in doing so, they help us forget that a coherent rationale for the historicist project still eludes us.

### **Suspicion about Suspicion**

Generalising about a critical mood rather than a coordinated body of theory is difficult, and in describing the critique of suspicion I will inevitably lump together critics who make odd bedfellows. Victorianists of many stripes participate in this critique, and they do so in greater numbers than scholars from other fields – with good reason. Victorian Studies has long been saturated with ‘deep reading’ projects: epistemologies of the closet, Foucauldian paranoia about discipline, depth psychology, quests to uncover repressed sexuality. In different ways, these projects all found fertile ground in a period whose novelists loved unreliable narrators and whose poets more or less invented the dramatic monologue. A widespread repudiation of ‘deep reading’ seems a predictable recoil.

Victorian Affective Studies usually reject symptomatic reading out of hand, as in Brigid Lowe’s *Victorian Fiction and the Insights of Sympathy: An Alternative to the Hermeneutics of Suspicion*. Suzanne Keen points out that recent affective work always constructs an opposition between

empathy and interpretive ‘skepticism and suspicion’ (xiii), although Keen herself believes that ‘the two modes are not incompatible’ (x), and that there is ‘scant evidence’ that reading has a special capacity for promoting empathy or that literary empathy promotes progressive social attitudes (xiv). The versions of formalism Marjorie Levinson labeled ‘backlash New Formalism’ also dismiss symptomatic reading categorically (559), although most Victorianists seem to share Samuel Otter’s sense that a simple pendulum swing from historicism back to formalism would be ‘a familiar and wearying motion’ (118). More importantly, Victorianists who have proposed broadly conceived non-symptomatic reading practices – such as Marcus’s ‘just reading’ (*Between* 3) or the ‘literal reading’ advocated by Elaine Freedgood (*Ideas* 155) – have constructed a more powerful and influential polemic. Most central to my discussion will be Marcus, who, with Stephen Best, prefaced a special issue of *Representations* with the manifesto ‘Surface Reading: An Introduction’. These Victorianists, particularly Marcus, reflect a general scholarly movement. At a National Humanities Center conference called ‘The State and Stakes of Literary Study’, held on 19–20 March 2010, many well-known literary critics expressed ‘frustration with the “hermeneutics of suspicion” that had long reigned as the paradigm for literary study’ (*Scholars* 6). The breadth of this phenomenon compels me to refer to a few prominent works not grounded in the Victorian period, notably Rita Felski’s ‘After Suspicion’.

I’ll begin with the rewriting of disciplinary history. Most opponents of the hermeneutics of suspicion (Freedgood is a notable exception) claim that adversarial truth-seeking, in which critics compel texts to yield up their secrets, has characterised literary analysis over the last several decades. Marcus and Best decry criticism ‘that took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection and disclosure by an interpreter’ (1). They place such interpretation within ‘a long history’ of western assumptions that ‘the most significant truths are not immediately apprehensible and may be veiled or invisible’ (4). Designating this process ‘symptomatic reading’, they categorise the hermeneutics of suspicion as one variant, although they claim that Paul Ricoeur’s classic formulation in *Freud and Philosophy* ‘became a general property of literary criticism even for those who did not adhere strictly to psychoanalysis’. They find Marxist criticism to share this search for bedrock truths through the forcible rewriting of texts via ‘master codes’. They also amalgamate the Derridaean critique of truth as presence within this theoretical constellation (despite its launching of philosophical antifoundationalism) by claiming that it ‘harkens

back to the Gnostic concept of truth as too complex to describe' (5). Marcus and Best deny that their work is a 'polemic' against symptomatic reading, but they do ask their contributors to formulate 'alternatives [that] might pose new ways of reading' (3), resisting models that assume 'an adversarial relation to the object of criticism' (16).

Although writing informally for a more general audience, Felski echoes the contention that interpretation has become an inquisitorial effort 'to read between the lines and against the grain' so as to demystify the illusions texts foster or to flush out their 'secrets' – even when suspicion 'is ratcheted up to a higher-order skepticism that calls the feasibility of truth into question' (28–9). Suspicious critics are 'intent on outfoxing literary texts by pouncing on their contradictions and deciphering their ideological inscriptions'. Felski acknowledges that suspicion 'remains an indispensable sensibility and reading strategy in the classroom', but she objects that it has been elevated into 'the governing principle of literary studies' at the expense of 'generosity ... hope ... and the world-disclosing aspects of art' (33). Like Marcus and Best, she encourages new modes of non-suspicious reading, which she calls 'postcritical' (34).

Generalisations about disciplinary history are always prone to caricature, although without them we would never be able to grasp key shifts in critical sensibility. But at the risk of seeming obtuse, I question the claim that recent criticism has generally sought to master the text by unveiling its truth, essence, or secret (either by exposing its illusions about itself or about the nature of truth-claims). Ricoeur himself, the originator of the phrase 'hermeneutics of suspicion', never aspired to set critic and text in opposition or to flush out the secret essences of texts. He combined phenomenology with structural linguistics, in part, to demonstrate that subjectivity – including critical subjectivity – occupies the same discursive plane as textuality. Because both are constituted in language, they are equally given, he believed, to an ineluctable tension between what can be spoken and what remains hidden in any utterance. But Ricoeur contended that bringing what lies beneath discourse into view does not result in the recovery of being, ontology, or the truth of the text. Quite the contrary: Ricoeur believed that this level of meaning, also constructed in language, remains incomplete unless returned to the world of phenomenal materiality, through a dialectic of self-consciousness utilising the properties of symbol and metaphor, a process he referred to as the 'hermeneutics of belief'. Thus, in Ricoeur's philosophy, phenomenology and structural linguistics are incomplete without one

another, and integrating them depends on an open-ended overcoming of their respective distantiations of meaning. As he put it: 'Hermeneutics seems to me to be animated by this double motivation: willingness to suspect, willingness to listen; vow of rigor, vow of obedience' (*Freud* 27).

The notion that Ricoeur lies at the origins of a practice enshrining the skeptical critic as heroic master of mystified texts seems clearly mistaken. But even if we concede that his name and terminology are being invoked as shorthand for a broader critical temperament (one presumably not committed to his dialectics), that account remains one-sided. At this juncture, I risk indulging a few caricatures myself, but I hope these counter-instances, however foreshortened, demonstrate that criticism of the late twentieth century was hardly as agonistic and reductive – or as neglectful of the material immediacy of literary language – as its twenty-first-century antagonists allege.

The antifoundationalism of the 1960s and 70s arrayed itself strenuously against notions that interpretation proceeds from a superior epistemological position, that it masters texts by plumbing their depths for essential secrets, and that the proper critical attitude should be a skeptical unmasking. What greater lover of textual surfaces, for example, than Roland Barthes, who declared in *S/Z* that a novel is 'a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds' (5)? Barthes celebrated an anti-reductive, playful interpretive method by affirming that readers of literature entertain multiple and sometimes contradictory responses. In *The Pleasure of the Text*, he mused: 'this anti-hero exists: he is the reader of the text at the moment he takes his pleasure' (3). It was not because Barthes opposed his own suspicious mastery to duplicitous texts but because he immersed himself in the rich play of textual possibilities that Richard Howard opined, in his introduction to *S/Z*, that 'this criticism is literature' (xi).

As much as anyone else, Barthes reflected the critical spirit of those times. In *On Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler chided certain critics for claiming that theorists attempt to 'dominate literature' (19) by insisting on 'the "true" meaning of the works they study' (21). He reproved others for the equally naïve claim that theory 'threatens the very *raison d'être* of literary studies by foregoing the attempt to discover the true meaning of a work and by deeming all interpretations equally valid' (19). Both accusations, Culler argued, betray ignorance about the rigorous opportunities postmodern theory makes available for generating meaning. We can all think of critics who went to either extreme. But most mid- to late-century theorists took pains to negotiate a path between these simplistic alternatives. Mikhail Bakhtin,

in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, defined the central property of literary works to be polyphony. Post-Freudian psychoanalysis tried to recover what Kaja Silverman called 'a limited but nevertheless unresolvable polysemy' (281). Contemporary opponents of suspicious or symptomatic reading can hardly be ignorant of how vigourously their characterisations were repudiated by late-twentieth-century theorists themselves. So why this historical rewriting?

Before answering that question, I must reemphasise that opponents of suspicion often take psychoanalysis and Marxism as the principal culprits in the rise of reductive truth-seeking. Marcus and Best claim that Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* was 'the book that popularised symptomatic reading among U. S. literary critics' (3) – a disputable assertion, both because symptomatic reading has a much longer history and because in 1981, when *The Political Unconscious* valiantly tried to revive Marxist criticism, materialists were already deserting in droves for Althusserian post-structuralism, Marxist-feminism, Bakhtinian dialogics, and, of course, the method Stephen Greenblatt officially christened 'the New Historicism' the following year. Both psychoanalysis and Marxism had begun falling out of favour by the late 1970s precisely because many saw them as deterministic. I do not have time to discuss the interpretive fluidity of post-Freudian scholarship, or of Freud and Marx themselves. But I must note that the last half-century's most interesting political theory was concerned precisely with freeing interpretation from rigid conceptions about the material or social origins of meaning, while still anchoring cultural objects in historical specificity. Louis Althusser's concept of 'semi-autonomous spheres' was one of many challenges brought against the reductiveness of base/superstructure models and conceptions of social 'totality'; the post-Marxist work of Barry Hindess and Paul Hirst or Chantal Mouffe and Ernesto Laclau similarly resisted traditional materialist analysis.

To cite a more pertinent case, given the general shift in materialist criticism of the late 1970s mentioned above, Catherine Gallagher's well known defense of the New Historicism argued that its opponents falsely believed it had a determinate politics and promoted a closed textual exegesis. One of New Historicism's chief differences from traditional versions of Marxism, Gallagher claimed, was that it did not believe in interpretive master codes and was not, therefore, 'a politics in disguise'. As she put it at the time, practitioners of the New Historicism 'posit no fixed hierarchy of cause and effect as they trace the connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of subjectivity'; while their practices are 'seldom

*intrinsically* either liberatory or oppressive [and] seldom contain their politics as an essence', they nevertheless seek to identify cultural and critical practices that 'occupy particular historical situations from which they enter into various exchanges, or negotiations with practices designated "political"' (37). As practiced by Gallagher, Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Mary Poovey, and others who pioneered a particular application of Foucauldian theory to literary studies, the New Historicism was one instance of a broad movement in late twentieth-century thought about the relationship between textuality and materiality, much of which sought to avoid reducing texts to their contexts or to any material origin of textual 'symptoms'. I stress this point because the most disturbing tendency pervading many attacks on suspicion is their rejection of historicism as reductive.

Ironically, non-symptomatic methods can lend themselves perfectly well to historicist analysis. What Marcus calls 'just reading' is an historically informed re-reading of literary and non-literary sources that deepens both the archival record and techniques for cultural literacy. Freedgood's *The Ideas in Things* embraces rather than repudiates historicism, teaching us how to see objects in nineteenth-century fiction by excavating historical meanings that would have been familiar to Victorian readers but must now be actively restored – the significance the slave trade lends to *Jane Eyre's* mahogany furniture, or that the British destruction of the Indian textile industry lends to *Mary Barton's* calico curtains. Freedgood rightly argues that such historical enrichment forestalls allegorical reading, permitting us to grasp the contextualised particularity of objects rather than to leap at symbolic interpretation. Unlike Marcus and Best, she never drives a theoretical wedge between her reading practices and historicism. She and other non-symptomatic readers give us exemplary new critical goals and angles of vision for uncovering what lies hidden in our cultural past, as well as calling our attention to new critical objects. Doing so always has historicist implications, if only because the meanings thus revealed were covered over by specific developments in the history of interpretation: in Marcus' case, the over-reading induced by early stages of queer theory. But excavating such meaning involves interpreting it through new critical filters, not refusing to interpret.

For some time now, too, critics have been combining non-symptomatic methods derived from the social sciences with historical interpretation. Important recent instances include Moretti's 'distant reading' ('Conjectures' 151) and Heather Love's antihumanist model of interpretation, which uses a 'descriptive sociological method' to

uncover documentary gestures in literary texts (387). As John Frow puts it, by helping construct data sets that yield specific forms of social knowledge, ‘the interpretive methods of literary analysis are not distinct from those of a sociological understanding but are its necessary precondition’ (239). Quantitative models can provide useful contextualising information, as well as prompting much-needed reflection on historicists’ empirical methods, without demanding interpretive passivity – a synthesis James F. English calls ‘mixed-methods research’ (xiv).

These methodological conjunctions suggest that the movement against suspicious reading only becomes problematic when it takes a categorically – and unnecessarily – anti-historicist turn. It does so all too often, however, when anti-suspicious critics theorise their models as radical critical departures. Marcus and Best, for example, explicitly reject Jameson’s call to ‘always historicise’ as theological: “‘always historicise’ is a transhistorical imperative whose temporality matches the eternity Augustine ascribed to God’ (15), they claim. To indict the imperative to historicise as transhistorical is reductive reasoning; to call it theological is suspicious reading with a vengeance. Marcus and Best quarrel both with Jameson’s claim that there is ‘only one absent cause, history itself’ and with his uncompromising politics (5). They pose instead ‘the question of why literary criticism matters if it is not political activism by another name’ (2). Not surprisingly, they worry that some will regard their critique of symptomatic reading as ‘political quietism’. But that apprehension is perfectly legitimate insofar as their turn toward textual surfaces is driven by disenchantment with the political idealism of a prior generation of critics. Siding with those who refuse to attribute ‘a measure of heroism . . . to the artwork due to its autonomy from ideology’ or to the critic as ‘a hero who performs interpretive feats of demystification’ (13), Marcus and Best ‘detect in current criticism a skepticism about the very project of freedom’ (16). Their quarrel with the hermeneutics of suspicion thus slides into rejection of the political orientation that, as I suggested earlier, has always been intrinsic to historicism. Felski, too, looks askance at political justifications for criticism:

readings in feminist, African American, and queer theory appeal to the commitments of some of my students, yet even here the vocabularies at their disposal fail to clarify key discriminations in their responses, to shed light on why a student may be entranced by the work of one feminist poet and left entirely indifferent by another. (30)

As the title of a recent talk of hers declares, ‘Context Stinks!’



It should be no surprise, given their resistance to historical or political contextualisation, that some non-symptomatic theorists affirm the ‘presentness’ of certain kinds of aesthetic immersion that might transcend critical preconceptions. Marcus and Best endorse Charles Altieri’s conception of aesthetic contemplation as ‘[a freedom to be able] to enjoy what and where one is without having to produce any supplemental claims that promise some “significance” not immediately evident’ (16). Felski invokes what she calls ‘neophenomenology’ to describe a reading process that is willing ‘to look carefully at rather than through appearances, to respect rather than to reject what is in plain view’. Felski recognises that ‘neophenomenology’ must be a ‘phenomenology after the linguistic turn, cognizant that cultural mediation renders consciousness neither self-contained nor self-evident’ (31). But many affirmations of aesthetic immediacy, like Marcus and Best’s, revert to claims about unmediated experience reminiscent of Kantian aesthetics. Levinson questions whether Altieri, by arguing that artworks offer a ‘realization’ of experience rather than representations of it, advocates ‘the most idealised, subjectivist, and transcendentalist notion of realization’ (564). Felski’s ‘neophenomenology’, by attending to both mediated and undetermined aspects of aesthetic experience, resists such idealism, but only by defining a critical practice that sounds suspiciously like Ricoeur’s.

This brings me to the question of theoretical recycling. Many critics of suspicious reading refashion older theoretical models and deploy them as if they were newly minted. This is no disgrace: Culler has characterised our current moment as one in which ‘the motif of return’ has become ‘salient’ (‘Introduction’ 908). But the theoretical returns characteristic of anti-suspicious theory are significant because they often transform surface reading back into symptomatic reading, while studiously avoiding any reconciliation with historicism. Marcus and Best’s surface readers display this return to symptomatic reading – exclusive of historicism – in several distinct ways. Some assert that ‘hermeneutics is not what critics do to the poem, since interpretation is happening in the poem’ (8) – a strategy familiar in New Criticism and deconstruction, which both identified how texts comment on and perform themselves. As Paul de Man once wrote: ‘The deconstruction is not something we have added to the text but it constituted the text in the first place’ (17). Some trace ‘patterns that exist within or across texts’ (11) – phenomena that used to be called intertextuality. Some call attention to new archives that do not require strenuous decoding but affirm the value of those archives to lie in what secrets they reveal

about more familiar canons (Cohen, for example, contends that sea adventure fiction constitutes the hidden origin of literary modernism). Some read literally what others have read figuratively – another operation perfected by deconstruction. Others reintroduce symptomatic reading by displacing the spatial opposition of surface/depth with a temporal opposition: what can be seen ‘now’ as opposed to what could be seen ‘before’, that is, before textual patterns had been rearticulated by interpretive acts. Best and Marcus may reject Jameson’s assumption that the interpreter ‘rewrites the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code’ (3). But if we drop the word ‘stronger’ and substitute ‘particular’ for ‘more fundamental’, we have a formula for what most of their surface readers are doing.

Anti-suspicious theorising often accompanies original, productive textual analysis. But it inadvertently reveals the categories ‘visible’, ‘surface’, and ‘literal’ to be contingent, as many of us who once wrestled with New Critical and structuralist distinctions between denotation and connotation ultimately concluded. Contingent distinctions may be effective analytical instruments, but settling large theoretical paradigms upon them invites instability. This particular theoretical problem has a very long history. It haunted the efforts of seventeenth-century Protestant theologians to repudiate figural Catholic interpretations of sacred texts by arguing that, as William Whitaker put it, ‘we bring no new sense, but only bring out into the light what was before concealed in the sign. . . . For although this sense be spiritual, yet it is not a different one, but really literal’ (Lewalski 120–1). Michael McKeon has shown that this strategy created new mystifications by claiming texts were self-illuminated with meanings preferable to Protestants (40–1). Romantic and modern theories about the irreducibility of aesthetic symbols operated on similarly unstable ground.

To put the case for suspicious reading, by contrast, very simply: what I see in a literary work may not be what you see, unless I show you what was ‘there all the time’ by redescribing it through an interpretive filter I persuade you to accept as legitimate. In the moment we perceive something about a text that others have not, we can all be accused of suspicious reading. But if what we perceive derives from a situated understanding of a text’s cultural difference, our ‘suspicion’ can be construed as an effort of sympathetic understanding across temporal barriers, rather than adversarial interpretation. In the name of that dialectical historicist project, I affirm: long live suspicion!

Sophisticated critics like Marcus recognise that surface reading remains an act of interpretation: 'just reading recognises that interpretation is inevitable: even when attending to the givens of a text, we are always only – or just – constructing a reading' (*Between* 75). In practice, her specific objectives, like those of Freedgood, Cohen, and others who are energetically engaged in historical recuperation, include resistance to particular forms of over-reading rather than to interpretation absolutely. One readily appreciates these critics' historicist attention to textual details formerly regarded as beneath notice. The critique of symptomatic reading becomes problematic only when linked by some of its adherents to an attack on historical and political reading, and to the broader repudiation of interpretation now bubbling up in debates about the future of the humanities.

Indeed, perhaps the strongest motivation behind the critique of suspicion is the desire to appeal to students and the general public by disavowing critical arrogance, and by building 'better bridges between theory and common sense, between academic criticism and ordinary reading', as Felski puts it (31). This hope, more than anything else, explains why twentieth-century criticism is often scapegoated as uniformly adversarial and arcane. Marcus and Best, who urge us to 'take texts at face value' (12), point to familiar recent images of social oppression – Abu Ghraib, the botched response to Hurricane Katrina, 'the Bush regime' (2) – as self-evident prompts for social change that do not require subtle analysis. Yet because the political sub-currents shaping these events are hardly uncomplicated or obvious, as the current mainstreaming of right-wing extremism in the US shows, repudiating interpretation may not be the best way to enhance our claims to social relevance.

Rarefied language and excessive detachment have certainly done us a disservice. Nuanced attention to undervalued forms of reading can help repair that damage. But construing such attention as 'common sense' or purely descriptive reading is a bargain with the devil. If humanistic interpretation tries to appease skeptics by claiming it merely registers what is there for all to see, it makes itself superfluous. Our more anti-intellectual freshmen will gleefully agree that 'tearing apart' works of literature ruins them. It also renders us powerless to counter reactionary arguments about what seems 'obvious' – the evils of big government, say. Moreover, if we argue that works of art confirm the worlds of common sense and everyday affect, we make them epiphenomenal add-ons to the empirical reality that natural and social scientists will gladly claim to explain more accurately by revealing the physical world's secret essences. Philosophers, too, would be delighted

if we admit we teach students merely to enjoy ‘naïve reading’, as Robert Pippin admonished us recently in *The New York Times*. Pippin encourages literary critics to accept that we teach people how to enjoy literature and to use it as a mirror of self-development, presumably leaving it to philosophers to produce real knowledge. Even enlightening reader-oriented approaches (such as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s ‘reparative reading’ or Michael Warner’s ‘uncritical reading’) will be relegated to this minor disciplinary status unless tempered with historical and cultural contextualisation.

Troubled by our lack of public credibility, some Victorianists have been tempted to repudiate the project of cultural history altogether. ‘Why don’t we just say that we introduce people to great literature?’, Catherine Gallagher asked at the NHC conference (‘Scholars’ 6). But if critics are driven back to teaching literary appreciation (‘under the general sign of love rather than knowledge’ [6], as the NHC puts it) they will make themselves peripheral to disciplines that offer substantive knowledge. That will be our fate because the twenty-first-century student is no longer conditioned to see literature as cultural capital necessary to success. We could sell ourselves as experts in how to fall in love with literature at a time when students came to us believing that literature was something they needed to love. We may yet instill that love in individual readers. But it would be folly to believe we can buck the anti-belletristic tide of the general culture.

### **Historicism’s Future**

Attempting to counter self-defeating retreats to common sense, pure description, and ‘appreciative’ literary analysis, Menand once reminded us that our special talent lies in our ability to demonstrate the importance of the counter-intuitive and the irrational:

Culture is the medium in which we act, and it is, from a purely rational point of view, always a distorting medium. Culture is why paradigms of social and scientific theory don’t work, why people tend never to do what social theory predicts they will do. Kant once said that humanity is a crooked timber from which nothing straight can be cut. That’s what humanists study. We study the warp. (15)

Literary critics can offer the public tools to explain what underlies behavior and experience, whether we call that a hermeneutics of suspicion, symptomatic reading, or, simply, interpretation. While excessive critical skepticism turns us into cranks more skilled at undermining everyone else’s positions than advancing our own, we will

never be valued by the general public unless we stand on the knowledge we produce through our suspicion of purely rational or universalising models of explanation. As Menand put it, 'being an intellectual and thinking theoretically *are* going outside the parameters of a common culture and common sense. . . . Why is that a scandal?' (16).

One of the tangible goods suspicious reading can give us – perhaps the most important, in terms of our standing with the non-academic public – is an account of the historicity of culture, one which explains why it remains important to study cultural objects of the past. For this reason, I argued earlier that Victorian historicism must address the relationship between its synchronic and diachronic modes more directly. Trying to articulate the relationship between past and present is the most obvious way to keep historicism from sliding into antiquarianism. Yet that project can never trump efforts to know cultural history disinterestedly. The two modes of historicism need not be antithetical, but they will seem so without a crisp conceptual synthesis. Unless historicists clearly theorise our collective commitment to knowing the past in the present as well as the presentness of the past, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot, we risk charges of irrelevance and incoherence.

There are many ways to justify literary criticism, but historicism will always be centrally entwined with them. Literary critics do not pronounce upon how feelings, language, pleasure, identity, or social justice actually work. If we did, we would only be interested in the latest, best research on such subjects. We leave that venture to philosophers, psychologists, linguists, and political scientists. We discuss the history of how these subjects have been represented by particular writers, at particular times. Our study of the cultural archive can tell us a great deal about the quest to know such things and the trajectory our conversations about them should take, but the knowledge we produce will always be historically inflected. For that reason, affirming the role suspicious reading plays in historical contextualisation and clarifying the methodologies and objectives of historicism are tasks that still lie urgently before us, in the future.

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