Introduction
Old, New, Now

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> History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we made today.
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> – Henry Ford

Historicism has been the dominant mode of literary analysis in early modern studies for more than thirty years, and it is now under attack from a number of quarters. Historicism is accused, for example, of denying literature's relevance to the present moment, of becoming a methodology so dominant that it has smothered other theoretical approaches, and of forgetting that the formal analysis of deliberately wrought texts is fundamental to literary analysis. Once a seemingly "new" and revitalizing method of critical inquiry, its hegemony and the institutional pressures that sustain it have perhaps even caused it to "sicken," in Milton's words, "into a muddy pool of conformity and tradition."[1] At a time when the humanities are under severe cultural and economic pressure, it therefore seems timely and useful to step back and consider what historically committed criticism has accomplished, what it has not done, and whether, why, and how it will be written in the future. The project of the literary critics contributing to this collection, all of whom do some variety of historicist work, is to examine our own practice and to take as salutary challenges some of the criticisms that have been mounted from within and without the field. There is no absolute agreement among us, but there is a shared sense in the essays comprising this volume that the study of literary texts within historical frameworks remains a challenging and important part of the discipline of literary criticism.

Clearly, the term "historicism" is capacious, and many varieties of historicist work are now flourishing. Indeed, given the breadth of historicism's reach, even the broad selection of essays collected here can only address part of its role in early modern literary studies. Among the most influential recent forms of historicism, for example, are the history of the

book and the history of reading, related subdisciplines that are models of interdisciplinary cooperation and collaboration and that have effected a profound shift in textual studies.[2] Book history and textual materialism have allowed us to trace the developing business of book and manuscript production throughout the early modern period, including the social networks among which different kinds of verbal media traveled, censorship mechanisms, and emerging ideas about intellectual property. When theory first shook the British and American academy, the venerable scholarly labor of editing might have seemed a mortal casualty. Instead, the historicist impulse has helped shape a number of major editing projects, including critical editions such as the Yale edition of Marvell's prose, the writings of Elizabeth I, and the new Oxford complete works of Milton.[3] The multiple-text editions of Shakespeare's plays (notably *Hamlet* and *King Lear*) – some designed for the classroom – are also enabled by this movement.

Twenty-five years ago, the call to consider race, class, and gender in Renaissance literature was dismissed by some as well-intentioned, perhaps, but hopelessly presentist. Now, however, scholarship is engaged in careful, increasingly nuanced accountings of the history of sexuality, the emergence of individual subjectivity, national and racial identity, educational practices, and economic change. Feminism, which had already emerged as a powerful force for change in the decade before New Historicism, has combined with historicism in ways crucial to our fuller understanding of the past. The expansion of knowledge about women writers – their texts edited, their place in their culture assessed and reassessed – is one of historicism's most significant contributions. Writers such as Gabriel Harvey, Michael Drayton, James Shirley, or William Davenant, who once seemed doomed to a slow fade into scholarly oblivion, overshadowed by commanding figures like Shakespeare and Milton, have recently become the focus of lively interest under the ministration of editors and historically oriented scholars. Historicist work has broken down the monolithic notion of the "Scientific Revolution" into the many separate components of what we now call science – from mathematics to occult fields such as magic, astrology, and alchemy, to navigation and other forms of technology.[4] Queer historicism offers one of the most effective challenges to previous understandings of the past.[5] And studies of colonial practices and the beginnings of empire are among historicism's signature endeavors.[6] Historicist work has reconsidered the uses of genre and the formal properties of texts, it has deepened and complicated ideas of performance and subjectivity, and it has addressed the knotty complex of liberalism and

fundamentalism at the roots of modernity.[7] In all its forms, historicist criticism endeavors to put literature in the perspective of a richly documented understanding of the past.

While we recognize the accomplishments of historicism, we hope that this collection also reflects honestly on its inherent challenges. The tradition of literary historicism itself provides an illuminating history of key debates and disciplinary disputes. It demonstrates, for one, that historicism has been a vital practice for a very long time. The term "historicism" or *Historismus* was coined in the nineteenth century to describe the hermeneutics of Schleiermacher and others, but the concept is much older.[8] The practice of reading texts in their historical context has strong roots in the early modern period, which experienced a major shift in historical consciousness and practice. Historical consciousness has been a defining feature of the Renaissance since Jacob Burckhardt, who wrote sweepingly that the "Italians were the first of all European nations who displayed any remarkable power and inclination accurately to describe man as shown in history."[9] Burckhardt surely overstates what has been understood as a "historical revolution" that swept northward with the Renaissance.[10] Yet a defining shift occurs in this period, which need not be seen in such triumphalist terms, in which the rich chronological layering and collapsing of medieval representations came to appear as anachronistic to a culture newly obsessed with historical discrimination. Major textual reconstructions, such as the philological recovery of the Bible or the exposure of the Donation of Constantine, resulted from the historicist impulse among Renaissance humanists. Philologically oriented editorial projects, such as Erasmus's retranslation of the New Testament in 1516, were accompanied by interpretively oriented historicist commentaries on the text. At the same time, the intense early modern interest in history – in such writers as Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and Bodin – gave rise to an institutionalized academic discipline, albeit not without controversy. The first European professorship in history was endowed in 1622 at Oxford University by the Elizabethan antiquarian William Camden, who appointed Degory Wheare and then had to defend his interest in "civil history" and not just ecclesiastical history.[11] Five years later, Sir Fulke Greville founded a chair in history at Cambridge and made the contentious choice of the Dutch republican Isaac Dorislaus, who was dismissed shortly thereafter for lecturing too enthusiastically on the republican implications of Tacitus.[12]

In contrast to academic history, literary historicism would remain largely the provenance of theologians and literary figures until the establishment of the first English departments in the nineteenth century.

Historicism as a modern academic practice arrived essentially with the first English departments and remained as a mainstay in literary studies until the advent of New Criticism and other formalisms that developed after (and perhaps as a consequence of) the world wars.[13] Indeed, the "new" in New Historicism, while denoting a radical revision of an implied "old" historicism, also acknowledged a return to the historical interests of the scholars who had been rejected by New Criticism. In some versions of its disparate practice, New Criticism had studied the literary text as an autonomous verbal artifact, whereas, in others, it studied the text as necessarily imbricated in the literary system of Western culture. One way or the other, though, for New Criticism the text itself was paramount. New Historicism, in contrast, opened its field of study to "cultural poetics,"[14] unbinding analysis from the category of the literary. Nevertheless, there is important common ground. New Historicism challenged the same "old" historicism the New Critics had, and even as it repudiated the notion of a literary text separable from history, New Historicism did not abandon the textual commitments of New Criticism. To understand the historical reading practices now dominating our profession as a significant development from, rather than a rejection of, twentieth-century "practical criticism" – such as that of I.A. Richards – allows us a wider vantage on the place of history in literary studies.[15]

Recent historicisms differ most sharply from New Critical precepts in their embrace of cultural and political history, as well as in their enduring, if at times troubled, relationship with biography and authorial intention. This kind of historical work began to mark early modern literary studies even before the early 1980s when Stephen Greenblatt and others inaugurated the New Historicist movement.[16] In 1977 and 1978, respectively, for example, Christopher Hill's *Milton and the English Revolution* and Annabel Patterson's *Marvell and the Civic Crown* placed major literary figures in their historical context, understanding Milton's and Marvell's literary works as consciously engaged with their contemporary world. Hill and Patterson thereby challenged the long-standing New Critical principle that the work of art, although shaped by its maker and the moment of its making, should stand alone as a verbal artifact. Crucially, too, Hill and Patterson crossed their own disciplinary lines: Hill, a historian, engaged closely with Milton's prose and his poetry, and Patterson, a professor of literature, took an author whose poems had been used selectively by New Critics and widened both the range of questions to be asked about Marvell and the range of his works to be considered. Other scholars had also employed a form of historicism before 1980: Steven Zwicker, for

example, who also crossed disciplinary lines in his collaborative work with historians, or John M. Wallace, a pioneering historicist critic whose influence crossed disciplinary boundaries. In the related field of the history of political thought, Quentin Skinner and other members of the so-called Cambridge School began to theorize Skinner's contextualist approach to the history of ideas using paradigms borrowed from literary criticism.[17] This contextualist method would in turn have a particularly profound impact on historicist approaches to seventeenth-century literature.

The increasingly collective enterprise of historicism found perhaps its most galvanizing expression when Greenblatt and others seemed to inaugurate something thrillingly "new." A similar trend emerged in the United Kingdom around the same time, identified by Raymond Williams's term "cultural materialism."[18] Both forms of historicism were politically interested: Cultural Materialists employed the historically progressive models of Williams and Marx, whereas New Historicists were more influenced by Foucault's model of power and subversion.[19] Of course, there was never any such thing as "Old Historicism" – no one ever called him- or herself an Old Historicist, or set up a sign denoting such a school for others to join. The avatar of this practice, E.M.W. Tillyard, represents not a school or a methodology but an example of a reductively straightforward way of thinking about the relationship between history and literature. *The Elizabethan World Picture* was not a work of literary interpretation so much as a handbook supplying historical "background" – a word that became so problematic in the new movement.[20] "We cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice," Raymond Williams wrote influentially, and thus "background" could not exist, both because all forms of cultural representation and belief were subject to the same forms of analysis, and because it falsely suggested a monolithic cultural unity.[21] Part of the interest of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism was to understand the relations between different forms of cultural belief, especially the relationship between power and subversion, or – using Williams's paradigm – between the residual, dominant, and emergent aspects of culture.[22]

Troping on the metaphor of world pictures, Alan Liu wrote memorably that "New Historicism" hung "those pictures anew – seemingly by accident, off any hook, at any angle."[23] New Historicism's conception of early modernity as possessing a more fragmented and more skeptical worldview than Tillyard's enabled its signature use of the anecdote as a way of reconstructing historical meaning. The "invisible bullet" of Harriot's colonial report might be brought, following Greenblatt's influential essay,

to illuminate moments of contained subversion in Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and *Henry V*.[24] Elizabeth's evocative exclamation, "I am Richard II. Know ye not that?" similarly served to illustrate the extraordinary topicality of early modern drama during the Essex rising, as well as the queen's willingness to condone this subversive form of cultural production.[25] Text and context were seen as interchangeably open to literary analysis; in Louis Montrose's chiastic formulation, New Historicism was concerned with "the historicity of texts and the textuality of history."[26] New Historicism and Cultural Materialism promulgated a rich array of procedures with a theoretical underpinning that looks somewhat dizzying in retrospect: the sociological models of Foucault, the economic language of Marx, the political theory of Gramsci, and the anthropology of Geertz.

But while New Historicism was once distinguished by its methodological self-consciousness, in the past twenty years things have changed. Responding to corrective criticism and chastened in its ambitions, literary historicism has grown far more fact-oriented and precise. Historicist criticism has, at the same time, grown less speculative (or perhaps less sophisticated) in drawing connections between text and context, and literary historicists talk much less about methodology. The lack of conversation about method may in part stem from the diminishing number of methodologies practiced by early modernists today. To some extent, this may also reflect a justified weariness with the posturing, schools, "-isms," and labels once bandied about. Yet an unexamined acceptance of historicism as our default method risks, at the least, naïveté and pedantry. If we maintain a blinkered pursuit of evidence, we run the danger of simply doing history, with the potential of doing it badly.

Challenges and recalibrations are therefore vital for the ongoing life of this (or any) method, and historicism is fortunate to have acute critics. Significant objections or reorientations of historicism fall under three broad categories: presentist, formal, and disciplinary. Throughout this volume, contributors will engage with, test, and question the venerable – and recently reasserted – call to consider literature solely as it is meaningful to present readers. They also address concerns that historicism has displaced attention to important literary subjects such as genre, rhetoric, imagery, form, and the words themselves.

The first wave of objections to historicism was disciplinary, directed by historians toward the New Historicist movement. Such criticism has had lasting effects since many literary critics hoped to collaborate with historians. Indeed, implicit and often explicit in the historicist movement was a demand that literary studies become more historically responsible.

Yet for many historians, historicism was simply irresponsible history. In an especially perceptive essay, Gabrielle Spiegel wrote in 1990 that "the achievement of cultural history lies in its reintroduction of a historicist consideration of literature; its failure lies in its refusal to differentiate between text and context or to establish an intelligible relation between them that does not lead to their mutual implication in a textually conceived universe."[27] Inverting Montrose's formulation, Spiegel went on to assert, "if we want to contextualize texts, we cannot achieve this by merely textualizing the context."[28] One problem never properly faced in New Historicist criticism is that the same level of speculation allowable in the interpretation of literary meaning cannot hold in the interpretation of events and facts. Still, as Marjorie Garber points out, interpretation of facts was not what New Historicism had originally set out to do. Instead, New Historicism stressed the idea that "history, or histories, could not be understood as determinative or lineal causes but rather as complex networks of cultural effects." Paradoxically, she continues, "New Historicism began by reading history as a text, but it created, despite its best efforts, a desire for history as a ground."[29] Historicism has largely and somewhat unconsciously moved in the last century from an enterprise that used history to interpret the text to an enterprise that uses the text as a means to explain history.

It is important to acknowledge the ways in which New Historicism wrought significant changes in the discipline of history itself. Historians too were drawing inspiration from Foucault and Geertz at the end of the 1970s, and a cultural and linguistic turn was a major feature of historiography in the 1980s and 1990s. Established political historians such as Kevin Sharpe would take a sharp, and permanent, methodological detour in the 1980s after being exposed to literary historicism. Many now-vibrant areas of research in the political historiography of the seventeenth century (news and libel, discourse under censorship, the politics of representation, the performance and contestation of authority) were initially opened up by historicist literary critics.[30] Post-revisionist political historians followed suit: both Peter Lake and Thomas Cogswell, for example, have devoted significant attention to "literary" texts in their political and religious histories; Ann Hughes turned to the history of the book; Richard Cust has a memorable essay on the Earl of Strafford and his so-called change of sides, which moves the problem to a whole different terrain by casting it in terms of self-fashioning and the manipulation of alternative authoritative political narratives and roles; and Alastair Bellany has combined historical and literary analysis in his work on libels.[31]

There are potential gaps in this disciplinary interaction, of course. On a basic level, literary criticism asks different questions from those of history, and operates with different methodological presumptions. Practitioners of these disciplines often discover this during interdisciplinary conferences: a lengthy argument among literary scholars about the significance of Abdiel in Milton's epic, to cite one recent example, provoked in the attending historians a profound sense of bemusement that anyone could care so much about a fictional character, and that this interpretive problem could have any bearing on the narrative of history. Along similar lines, a social historian might wonder what the representations of a single extraordinary individual such as Shakespeare can really tell us about what people thought, or why we should choose such an individual to understand history. There is a basic problem in the oft-expressed desire to "satisfy the historians": in many cases they simply may not be satisfiable, because the questions a literary critic asks might have a fundamentally different orientation. Knowledge of textual meaning is not the same as the collective historical knowledge of people and events. There are also ideological struggles within these two disciplines, and especially within history, where there is a methodological divide between functionalist explanations of social upheavals such as the English civil war and ideational and cultural explanations. Historians such as Lawrence Stone have denounced the practices of New Historicism in part because they believe in a more empiricist approach, one that studies "events and behavior."[32] Revisionist historiography has similarly affected seventeenth-century literary studies in its rejection of ideological origins for major social and political movements during the period.

This is a debate – emanating from the field of history, but penetrating the walls of literature departments – that poses a serious challenge to literary historicists. For if there were no ideological foundations or even tensions behind social movements (to use a loaded term), what historical role would thoughts – or the written word – have at all? With some degree of ironic understatement, perhaps, the editors of a recent volume of first-rate historicist essays respond to this deterministic charge with the statement: "we think literature has something to offer."[33] The sentence stops there, but it might have been completed with the phrase *to our understanding of history*. In another generation, the study of literature might not have felt it needed to defend itself quite so much against the older discipline of history, a discipline whose terms have come to dictate much of what literary critics do now.

It is instructive to remember – not only when considering the disciplinary debate but also the concerns and objections of formalist and presentist critics – that the critical world once assumed an opposite set of values. Don M. Wolfe's pioneering study of Milton's polemical prose in 1941 ends, for example, with a tentative reading of the "political implications" of *Paradise Lost*. With a note of apology that would seldom occur to a current Miltonist, Wolfe claims to write with "some hesitation," as he worries that any reading of the poem as having political implications "would be construed as an unfavorable judgment of the poem as a whole."[34] Precisely such an unfavorable judgment can be found in Wolfe's contemporary, C.S. Lewis, who condemns Spenser's "political allegory" as poetic weakness. In *The Allegory of Love* (1936), Lewis admits that the poem's political engagement gives it a "certain topical attraction," but observes that "Time never forgives such concessions to 'the glistering of this present.'" "What acted as a bait to unpoetic readers for some decades has become a stumbling-block to poetic readers ever since," Lewis continues. "The contemporary allusions in *The Faerie Queene* are now of interest to the critic chiefly in so far as they explain how some bad passages came to be bad; but since this does not make them good … we shall not lose very much by ignoring the matter."[35] Texts that transcend history are thus the only texts worth reading. As Ann Astell wrote of this passage, "At the present moment, when 'historicizing' modes of criticism predominate in early modern and medieval studies, Lewis's remarks sound quaintly outrageous."[36]

Quaintly outrageous, maybe, but also strikingly self-assured: Lewis's perspective is one in which literature as an art and literary criticism as a discipline need not question or assert their relevance. For Lewis, literature not only has value outside of history; it loses value when it becomes involved in history. Most literary critics today would dismiss this second judgment outright (although see the discussions of Stanley Fish in this volume), but the basic contention of literature's transcendency still holds considerable force – if not always for the theoretical procedures of professional critics, at least for students and the general public. Rather than getting drawn into a knotty philosophical question of the actual role of literature or culture in shaping the course of history, we might more productively ask why it is at this juncture that we have taken a defensive position about the enterprise of literary criticism, and even about the value of literature itself. Perhaps the problem of self-doubt is endemic to the larger enterprise of the humanities; determinism derives, after all, from scientific positivism, and the fissure that has riven history may itself derive from an

external challenge to its own epistemic status as a field. Fields that once identified themselves as belonging to the humanities have sought in one way or another to define themselves as "social sciences," a change dictated perhaps more by the need to survive under the shifting academic funding structures than by the actual merit of the research.[37]

In one of the most damning statements against the historicist scholarship of this generation, cited with justifiable concern throughout this volume – Stanley Fish's "Why Milton Matters: or, against Historicism" – Fish laments that "the best scholarship now being produced by the most intelligent, learned, acute students of Milton is designed, not self-consciously of course, to ensure that in time he won't matter. No one will care."[38] This is all due, Fish argues, not just to historicism, but to politics: "The practitioners of cultural studies or cultural materialism generally situate themselves on the left and for them the rejection of formalist criticism is a political act that demonstrates their political virtue" (9). Contemporary historicists seek, Fish goes on, to "link the so-called literary work with revolutionary sentiments … or with the emancipation of the liberal subject from the hegemony of religion and political tyranny" (10). As a result, while these critics might be doing themselves a favor, they are not, according to Fish, doing anything good to the text, which is destined to fall from the hands of such irresponsible criticism into obscurity. Much of what Fish writes here is worth heeding, but the fault lies neither in historicism nor in politics per se. So why is there such a crisis – or, to put it another way, why is part of what Fish is saying disturbingly true? Why do a significant number of critics think that historicism is to be blamed for stealing the text from the classroom, or for not sufficiently defending the relevance of literature *as* literature?

The answer partially lies in a contradictory conjunction of field interests. The cross-disciplinary dialogue between history and literary scholarship may, of course, be representative of an internal dialogue within literary scholarship. Literary critics who were also serious students of history could be as trenchant in their criticism of other critics as historians. But whether the criticism came from within or without, the problem remains the same: when the field of history responded negatively to the New Historicist movement, literary critics were forced into a dialogue that sometimes falsified their interpretive and textual aims. There is great potential in cross-disciplinary conversations between fields. But literary critics need to be careful before getting caught up in the problems and interests of historians, because the field of history has a different set of priorities. The struggle between disciplines becomes still more dangerous