The New Historicism
and
Hamlet

by Ross C. Murfin pp. 368–376
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WHAT IS THE NEW HISTORICISM?

The new historicism is, first of all, new: one of the most recent developments in contemporary theory, it is still evolving. Enough of its contours have come into focus for us to realize that it exists and deserves a name, but any definition of the new historicism is bound to be somewhat fuzzy, like a partially developed photographic image. Some individual critics that we may label new historicist may also be deconstructors, or feminists, or Marxists. Some would deny that the others are even writing the new kind of historical criticism.

All of them, though, share the conviction that, somewhere along the way, something important was lost from literary studies: historical consciousness. Poems and novels came to be seen in isolation, as unlike objects of precious beauty. The new historicists, whatever their differences and however defined, want us to see that even the most unlike poems are caught in a web of historical conditions, relationships, and influences. In an essay titled “The Historical Necessity for — and Difficulties with — New Historical Analysis in Introductory Literature Courses” (1987), Brook Thomas suggests that discussions of Keats’s “Ode on a Grecian Urn” might begin with questions such as the following: Where would Keats have seen such an urn? How did a Grecian urn end up in a museum in England? Some very important historical and political realities, Thomas suggests, lie behind and inform Keats’s definitions of art, truth, beauty, the past, and timelessness. They are realities that psychoanalytic and reader-response critics, formalists and feminists and deconstructors, might conceivably overlook.

Although a number of influential critics working between 1920 and 1950 wrote about literature from a psychoanalytic perspective, the majority of critics took what might generally be referred to as the historical approach. With the advent of the New Criticism, or formalism, however, historically oriented critics almost seemed to disappear from the face of the earth. Jerome McGann writes: “A text-only approach has been so vigorously promoted during the last thirty-five years that most historical critics have been driven from the field, and have raised the flag of their surrender by yielding the title ‘critic’ to the victor, and accepting the title ‘scholar’ for themselves” (Infections 17). Of course, the title “victor” has been vied for by a new kind of psychoanalytic critic, by reader-response critics, by so-called deconstructors, and by feminists since the New Critics of the 1950s lost it during the following decade. But historical scholars have not been in the field, seriously competing to become a dominant critical influence.

At least they haven’t until now. In the late 1970s and early 1980s the new historicism first began to be practiced and articulated in the ground-breaking work of Louis Montrose and Stephen Greenblatt. Through their work and that of others, the new historicism transformed the field of Renaissance studies and later began to influence other fields as well. By 1984, Herbert Lindenberger could write: “It comes as something of a surprise to find that history is making a powerful comeback” (16). E. D. Hirsch, Jr., has also suggested that it is time to turn back to history and to historical criticism: “Far from being naive, historically based criticism is the newest and most valuable kind . . . for our students (and our culture) at the present time” (Hirsch 197). McGann obviously agrees. In Historical Studies and Literary Criticism (1985), he speaks approvingly of recent attempts to make sociohistorical subjects and methods central to literary studies once again.

As the word sociohistorical suggests, the new historicism is not the same as the historical criticism practiced forty years ago. For one thing, it is informed by recent critical theory: by psychoanalytic criticism, reader-response criticism, feminist criticism, and perhaps especially by deconstruction. The new historicist critics are less fact- and event-oriented than historical critics used to be, perhaps because they have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened
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Furthermore, no historical event, according to Foucault, has a single cause; rather, it is intricately connected with a vast web of economic, social, and political factors.

A brief sketch of one of Foucault's major works may help clarify some of his ideas. *Discipline and Punish* begins with a shocking but accurate description of the public drawing and quartering of a Frenchman who had botched his attempt to assassinate King Louis XV. Foucault proceeds, then, by describing rules governing the daily life of modern Parisian felons. What happened to torture, to punishment as public spectacle? He asks. What complex network of forces made it disappear? In working toward a picture of this "power," Foucault turns up many interesting puzzle pieces, such as that in the early revolutionary years of the nineteenth century, crowds would sometimes identify with the prisoner and treat the executioner as if he were the guilty party. But Foucault sets forth a related reason for keeping prisoners alive, moving punishment indoors, and changing discipline from physical torture into mental rehabilitation: colonization. In this historical period, people were needed to establish colonies and trade, and prisoners could be used for that purpose. Also, because these were politically unsettled times, governments needed infiltrators and informers. Who better to fill those roles than prisoners pardoned or released early for showing a willingness to be rehabilitated? As for rehabilitation itself, Foucault compares it to the old form of punishment, which began with a torturer extracting a confession. In more modern, "reasonable" times, psychologists probe the minds of prisoners with scientific rigor that Foucault sees as a different kind of torture, a kind that our modern perspective does not allow us to see as such.

Thus, a change took place, but perhaps not so great a change as we generally assume. It may have been for the better or for the worse; the point is that agents of power didn't make the change because mankind is evolving and, therefore, more prone to perform good-hearted deeds. Rather, different objectives arose, including those of a new class of doctors and scientists bent on studying aberrant examples of the human mind.

Foucault's type of analysis has recently been practiced by a number of literary critics at the vanguard of the back-to-history movement. One of these critics, Stephen Greenblatt, has written on Renaissance changes in the development of both literary characters and real people. Like Foucault, he is careful to point out that any one change is connected with a host of others, no one of which may simply be identified as the cause or the effect. Greenblatt, like Foucault, insists on interpreting literary devices as if they were continuous with other representational devices in a culture; he turns, therefore, to scholars in other fields in order to better understand the workings of literature. "We wall off literary symbolism from the symbolic structures operative elsewhere," he writes, "as if art alone were a human creation, as if humans themselves were not, in Clifford Geertz's phrase, cultural artifacts." Following Geertz, Greenblatt sets out to practice what he calls "anthropological or cultural criticism." Anthropological literary criticism, he continues, addresses itself "to the interpretive constructions the members of a society apply to their experience," since a work of literature is itself an interpretive construction, "part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture." He suggests that criticism must never interpret the past without at least being "conscious of its own status as interpretation" (Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*).

Not all of the critics trying to lead students of literature back to history are as "Foucauldian" as Greenblatt. Some of these new historicists owe more to Marx than to Foucault. Others, like Jerome McGann, have followed the lead of Soviet critic M. M. Bakhtin, who was less likely than Marx to emphasize social class as a determining factor. (Bakhtin was more interested in the way that one language or style is the parody of an older one.) Still other new historicists, like Brook Thomas, have clearly been more influenced by Walter Benjamin, best known for essays such as "Theses on the Philosophy of History" and "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

Moreover, there are other reasons not to declare that Foucault has been the central influence on the new historicism. Some new historicist critics would argue that Foucault critiqued old-style historicism to such an extent that he ended up being antihistorical or, at least, nonhistorical. As for his commitment to a radical remapping of relations of power and influence, cause and effect, in the view of some critics, Foucault consequently adopted too cavalier an attitude toward chronology and facts. In the minds of other critics, identifying and labeling a single master or central influence goes against the very gain of the new historicism. Practitioners of the new historicism have sought to decenter the study of literature and move toward the point where literary studies overlap with anthropological and sociological studies. They have also struggled to see history from a decentered perspective, both by recognizing that their own cultural and historical position may not afford the best understanding of other cultures and times and by realizing that events seldom have any single or central cause. At this point, then, it is appropriate to
history, and power. Historically, the struggle was usually fought by the stronger of the two, but in the case of the present century, the struggle is fought by the weaker of the two. The weaker side, in order to win, must use its intelligence, its strategy, and its determination to the fullest extent possible.

This is the essence of "Machiavellian" politics, the use of the resources available to one's advantage, even at the expense of others. It is a strategy that has been used throughout history, and it is one that is likely to continue to be used in the future.

In conclusion, the present century is one of struggle, of conflict, and of power. It is a century in which the weak must fight for survival, and the strong must be prepared to fight to maintain their position. The struggle is not over, and it will continue to be fought until the end of time.
a "sane" conclusion, she argues, with punishment being visited upon the body of the unwilling subject. In Essex's case, insane ambition was banished when Essex confessed his transgressions before the executioner, prayed for forgiveness, and "affirmed" the "justice" of the "authority" that had condemned him. These kinds of speeches, Coddon argues, were part of the theater of punishment; they reinforced power and predominant cultural values by proving the triumph and reaffirming the validity of both.

Coddon takes the new historicist position that, just as politics is a form of theater, so is theater a form of politics--art and society cannot be understood apart from each other since they are but different forms through which the ideologies of a culture achieve representation and are thus empowered. Certainly, Hamlet ends up showing the tragic results of mad ambition; furthermore, subjectivity is contained and a conservative ideology, if not order, reasserts itself in the play's final scene, where death, as the single absolute authority, has the power to renounce madness and restore identity. Just as the confessional, repentant scaffold speech delivered by Essex just before his execution reestablished his (legitimate) identity (and with it, existing power relationships), so does Hamlet's last-minute apology to Laertes.

But does Hamlet, finally, amount to a typical Elizabethan scaffold speech, a rather predictable apologia for the prevailing ideological currents? Coddon suggests that it does and yet does not. Like many other new historicists, Foucault included, Coddon is interested in the Renaissance, its politics, and its art, because the historical dramas of that period (literary and otherwise) seem, from the vantage point of our own period, to have been liminal or transitional. That is to say, they seem to have represented, reproduced, and reasserted the values of the previous ages while also resisting those values—in ways we call modern. Hamlet performs this cultural role but only while utterly exceeding it. For the play is, after all, among the forces that encouraged subjectivity, inwardness, independence, and alienation. Permeated by Renaissance cultural discourse, Hamlet, like so many of Shakespeare's plays, also changed that discourse unalterably.

Ross C Murfin


Fyodor Dostoevsky, "The Brothers Karamazov," 1880.


A NEW HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVE

KARIN S. CODDON

“Suche Strange Desygnz”:
Madness, Subjectivity, and Treason
in Hamlet and Elizabethan Culture

“For, to define true madness/What is’t but to be nothing else but mad?” reasons Polonius (2.2.93–94). Whether Robert Devereux, second earl of Essex, was actually mad in any clinical sense of the word is not an issue for historicism. But that his “madness” was poor Robert’s — and ultimately, the Tudor state’s — enemy may be as illuminating for discussions of madness in Shakespearean tragedy as the vogue of melancholy. Essex seems to have suffered from what Timothie Bright would have called a “melancolique maddesse,” replete with bouts of near-stuporous despair and religious mania (2). The possibility that the earl was punished with a “sore distraction” is frequently viewed as a kind of colorful biographical sidelight to the rebellion of 1601: Essex, “brilliant, melancholy and ill-fated,” becomes the embodiment of the Elizabethan mai du siècle, his Icarian fall mirroring the fate of a generation of aspiring minds (Wilson 228; Esler 97–99). “The flowre of chivalry” who fell heir in his own lifetime to the heroic legacy of Sir Philip Sidney, Essex has been identified as the historical inspiration for Henry Bolingbrooke, Hamlet, and Antony. But the affinities between Essex and the heroes of Shakespearean drama evoked in contemporary accounts of the earl’s madness suggest a reciprocity more complex than a mere one-to-one correspondence between history and fictions. Essex’s madness, whatever its precise pathological nature, was profoundly engaged in his transgressions as subject, according to John Harington’s diary entry of a few months prior to the insurrection:

It resteth me in opynion, that ambition thwarted in its career, doth the speedilie leade on to madnesse; herein I am strengthened by what I learne in my Lord of Essex, who shyfeth him sorrowe and repentance to rage and rebellion so suddenlie, as well proveth him deviole of good reason or righte mynde; in my last discourse, he uttered suche strange desygnz that made me hastene forthe, and leave his absence; thank heaven I am safe at home, and if I go in suche troubles againe, I deserve the gallowes for a medlyng ye foole: His speches of the Queene becometh no man who ha the mens sana in corpore sano [“sound mind in sound body”]. He hathe ill aduyors, and much evyll hath sprunge from thys source. The Queene well knoweth how to humble the haughtie spirit, the haughtie spirit knoweth not how to yield, and the mans soule seemeth tosse to and fro, like the waves of a troubled sea. (225–26)

Harington attributes Essex’s madness to “ambition thwarted in its career,” articulating a Tudor and Stuart commonplace: “Ambition, madam, is a great man’s madness” (Webster, The Duchess of Malfi 1.2.125). But in Harington’s discourse the causal relation between overreaching and insanity is ambiguous; ambition may “speedilie leade on to madnesse,” but madness spurs the subjective overthrow of the pales and forts of reason that should constrain the “haughtie spirit.” The discourse of madness becomes virtually indistinguishable from the discourse of treason: “he uttered . . . strange desygnz”; “His speches of the Queene becometh no man who ha the mens sana in corpore sano”; “the haughtie spirit knoweth not how to yield.” Harington finds Essex’s madness so alarming not because it is irrational but because it speaks “strange desygnz”: reason, or treason, in madness. And yet he represents Essex nonetheless as a victim as well as violator subjected by his own disordered subjectivity: “the mens soule seemeth tosse to and fro, like the waves of a troubled sea.” The man Robert Devereux is, then, as radically self-divided a subject as Hamlet, though not because the fictive prince was “inspired” by the historical earl. Madness is mighty opposite of the ideology of self-government, or what Mervyn James has called the “internalization of obedience” (44). As such, mad-

1Lacy Baldwin Smith has recently argued that the apparent madness of Essex, as well as of a number of other Tudor traitors, was a manifestation of a more insidious “cultural paranoia.” That is, the cause of irrationality need not lie exclusively in the tortured chambers of the mind; it can be external, and the self-destructive traitor can be a symptom of his society as well as a victim of his private insanity” (Treason in Tudor England 12). For an acute commentary and critique, see Christopher Hill’s review.
demanded suppression.

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In conclusion, the petitioned order is a necessary legal step in the process of ensuring that the rights of all parties are protected. However, it should not be viewed as evidence of any wrongdoing or violation of the law. The supporting evidence presented in this document should be viewed as the primary source of information and not as a legal remedy.

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he conspires with it & that it is not here beleved. that which was
sayd of Cato that his age understood him not I feare may be
averted of your lord that he understood not his age: for it is a
naturall weaknes of innocency. that such men want lockes for
themselves and keyse for others. (Qtd. in Bald 108)\(^3\)

While Essex was hardly suspected of putting on an antic disposition,
Donne's comments reveal the degree to which the physical and mental
anguish of the insubordinate earl was subjected to political scrutiny.

"Madness in great ones must not [unwatch'd] go" (3.1.187), Claudius
observes in Hamlet. With Essex's most erratic behavior explicitly
bound up in gestures of disobedience, his inward distress ("he conspires
with it") becomes as suspect as his public comportment. Donne's conclu-
sion "that such men want lockes for themselves and keyse for others"
is of a piece with Harington's comment that "the Queene well
knowethe how to humble the haughtie spirit, the haughtie spirit
knowethe not how to yield," and with Camden's reference to Essex's
"mind that wanted ballast." All three observations imply an antagonism
not only between the subject and power, but between subjectivity and
power, anticipating both the confrontation and the outcome. It is an
agon in which the subject necessarily turns upon the "self" as well as
upon authority. For if, as Foucault has suggested, power is realized
and resisted in its effects, i.e., in its "government of individualization,"
contestation disrupts the "form of power which makes individuals sub-
jects" — subjects in both senses of the word.\(^4\) The problem of contain-
ment becomes one of confinement. The disruption of the internalized
relation between authority and inwardness transforms the dialogue of
"subjectification" into a problem of material subjugation: as authority
gives way to coercion, the body, not subjectivity, becomes its object.
Ultimately, "a mind that want[s] ballast" can be disciplined only by the
exaction of punishment upon the body. In Hamlet, the restoration of
the "mad" hero's wits is necessarily punctuated by the death that swiftly
follows his recovery of sanity. If the deployment of physical punish-
ment transforms as much as fulfills power relations ("The Subject and Power"
794–95), the literal silencing of madness by confinement, constraint, or
extinction of the body is itself an unstable strategy of containment. For
the division of inwardness and the body that enables post-Reformation
subjectivity situates madness nonetheless in the equivocal space between
interiority and exteriority. Neither wholly confined to nor estranged
from inwardness, madness in its semiotic excess problematizes the clos-
ure that is the object of rites of punishment, on both the stage and the
scaffold.

Historian Lacey Baldwin Smith remarks that "by the time Essex
turned to treason, the deterioration in his character had passed beyond
the point of hysteria: it was bordering on insanity which led him to con-
fuse the fantasies of his own sick brain with reality" (Elizabethan World
266). Smith's reference to the rebellion as "an act of political madness"
seems particularly resonant precisely because it may be tacitly redu-
dant: Was Essex's madness — or the madness of great ones, both on-
stage and at court — ever not "political," that is, charged with impli-
cations against the inscription of order, obedience, and authority that
-fashioned and controlled identity in late Tudor and early Stuart Eng-
land? When Essex's "strange desynms" finally bodied forth action on
February 8, 1601, the equivocal boundaries between representation and
rebellion almost wholly collapse, though not quite in the way the earl
had planned. If the playing of Shakespeare's Richard II ("40 times in
open streets and houses") failed to rouse the support of the citizens for
the rebels, the consequences of the failed insurrection produced a spec-
tacle of trial, repentance, and noble death that seemed to duplicate the
form and effect of the tragic denouement. Although Essex repeatedly
declared his innocence during the trial, once his fate was decided para-
noiac self-justifications gave way to compliance with the art of dying.
Entailing confession, repentance, and "the return of the traitor to soci-
ety and to himself," as Steven Mullaney puts it (33), such performances
were commonly described and perhaps, implicitly prescribed in ars
moriendi handbooks, published accounts of executions, and penulti-
mate moments in contemporary tragedy.

On February 25 Essex faced the executioner with a noble set speech
in which he confessed his spiritual and political transgressions, forgave
and prayed for forgiveness, and affirmed throughout the absolute jus-
tice of the authority that condemned him:

Lord Jesus, forgive it us, and forgive it me, the most wretched of
all; and I beseech her Majesty, the State, and Ministers thereof, to

\(^3\) R. C. Bald holds that "the writer shows the kind of knowledge of Essex's condition
that one would expect from an inmate of York house, and more perhaps than the current
gossip would furnish him with" (108, n. 2).

\(^4\) Foucault writes, "This form of power applies itself to immediate everyday life which
categorizes the individual, marks him by his own individuality, attaches him to his own
identity, imposes a law of truth on him which he must recognize and which others must
recognize in him." There are two meanings of the word 'subject': subject to someone
else by control and dependence; and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self
knowledge, both meanings suggest a form of power which subjudgets and makes subject to
("The Subject and Power" 781).
treme place, in that it is beyond appeal. Nothing ever restores it either to truth or reason. It leads only to laceration and thence to death” (Foucault, *Madness and Civilization* 31–32); the highly stylized return to self before death is unsettled by the madness that outlives the individual subject in the gulf between tragic experience and its final retelling.\(^6\) Madness does not deny authority so much as testify to a fissure in the structure of authority — and subjectivity, an excess that is not recuperated by the “government of individualization,” to disrupt both subjectivity and subjectivity. As such, its discourse of “wild and whirling words,” of a “soule...tossed to and fro, like the waves of a troubled sea,” is peculiarly resistant to strategies of containment.

Accordingly, among the most important mandates of Foucault’s landmark if controversial work is that madness and its representations be investigated in terms of their functions within — and against — structures of power.\(^7\) If the political drama of Essex’s madness, rebellion, and noble death shares marked affinities with the tragedies contemporary to it, so does the theater itself duplicate and reflect upon a more insidious crisis of authority swelling in late Elizabethan England. What will distinguish madness in such plays as *Hamlet* (1601) and *King Lear* (1605) from its depictions in the equally pathologically fixated tragedy of the late 1580s and early 1590s is the subordination to which it will subject other plot elements: madness does not serve narrative so much as narrative serves madness. This narrative *non serviam* constructs a split not so much between “plot” and “character” as between agency and inwardness, a division clearly manifest in the so-called problem of Hamlet but also informing tragedies as early as Marlowe’s *Edward II* (1593) and as late as Webster’s *Duchess of Malfi* (1613). The antagonism between subjectivity and the drama’s “syntagmatic axis” (Moretti 55–64), between disorder and a linear mimics, duplicates the position of power’s subject in relation to the authority that, like the narrative, both constrains and constrains him. But the notion of tragic madness as overtly or even covertly “subversive” is problematic. In fact, madness displaces action, metaphorizing it but also taking its place. If madness seems to privilege and enlarge the tragic hero’s subjectivity, so does it also fragment, check, and defer it. As an inversion of internalized “ideological

\(^6\) Cf. Franco Moretti’s commentary on Jacobean tragedy: “Fully realized tragedy is the parable of the degeneration of the sovereign inserted in a context that *can no longer understand it*” (55).

\(^7\) For critiques of *Madness and Civilization* and of Foucault’s methodology, see Millet and see Feder 29–34. Shoshana Felman offers a comparative critique of Foucault and Derrida on madness in her *Writing and Madness* (35–55).

controls” madness by definition precludes the realization of a stable, coherent subjectivity in opposition to the disorder from without.

Foucault has discussed the historical liminality of the Renaissance madman positioned between the wandering lunatic of the Middle Ages and the construction of bourgeois individualist subjectivity, the rise of the modern “anatomo-politics of the body” that banishes unreason (*Madness and Civilization* 35–64; *History of Sexuality* 139–45). Recent critical works by Francis Barker, Catherine Belsey, and Terry Eagleton have applied the Foucauldian notion of liminality to the Shakespearean subject, particularly in the paradigmatic case of Hamlet.\(^8\) The absolute impenetrability of Hamlet’s mystery, the absence of the full interiority apparently promised in the prince’s claim that “I have that within which passes show” (1.2.85), leads Belsey to conclude that “Hamlet is . . . the most discontinuous of Shakespeare’s heroes,” riddled almost to the point of unintelligibility by the “repressed discontinuities of the allegorical tradition” (41–42). Barker and Eagleton go a step further; because humanist subjectivity has yet to fully emerge in the late sixteenth century, “in the interior of [Hamlet’s] mystery, there is, in short, nothing.”\(^9\) But this nothing is more than matter; because the privatized subjectivity is incomplete, “wild and whirling words” are never wholly opaque, much less transcendent. The discourse of madness, feigned, real, or a combination of both, remains in Shakespeare’s plays as in Harington’s diary a language of “strange designs,” of matter and impertinency mixed. The break between subject and society is equivocal rather than absolute, and the idiom of unreason in Shakespeare retains resolutely social resonances. The idealization of madness as a transcendent world metaphysically autonomous of its material conditions is a Romantic and post-Romantic construct: “Garde tes songes: / Les sages n’en ont pas d’aussi beaux que les fous!” (Guard your dreams: the wise do not have dreams as beautiful as those of madmen) concludes Baudelaire’s poem “La Voix” (the Voice) in *Fleurs du Mal*. But in Elizabethan and Jacobean theater the mad hero is never an absolute exile; even when banished, like Lear, he is accompanied, if only by a parodic progress. His threat transgressive more than nihilistic, the mad tragic hero, unlike the fully demonized savage or “ungovernable man,” violates and recognizes social boundaries simultaneously.\(^10\) In his tragedy

\(^8\) See Barker 25–41; Belsey 41–42, Eagleton 70–75.

\(^9\) Barker 37. Eagleton concurs: Hamlet is a “kind of nothing . . . because he is never identical with himself” (73).

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volume)). That Claudius is so eager to attribute Ophelia’s madness to “the poison of deep grief” (4.5.74), indeed, the filial grief for which he upbraids Hamlet in 1.2, suggests that the feminization of madness in later periods has its seeds in the cultural construction of the rational, obedient male subject (see Foucault, *History of Sexuality* 104, 121).

But the claims of obedience upon inwardness are reflected by “that within which passes show,” by the implication that the wisdom of authority — divine, royal, filial — can neither order nor account for the subject’s perception of his own experience. The moralization of the inward space (“‘tis a fault to heaven”), designed to encourage the subject’s self-surveillance against the possible disruption of “unnatural” passion and madness, fails to dissuade Hamlet from his melancholy. But with the failure of inward constraints, authority seeks to impose its will on the subject’s body: Hamlet must stay in Denmark while Laertes is allowed to return to France. The inward refusal of covert ideological controls moves power to expose and flex its coercive underpinnings. As the play develops and Hamlet’s melancholy intensifies into the more dangerous “antic disposition,” the question of his physical constraint becomes all the more literal and imperative. Denmark does become a prison: Rosencrantz warns Hamlet, “You do surely bar the door upon your own liberty if you deny your griefs to your friend” (3.2.318–19), while Claudius plots the ultimate physical curtailment: “For we will fetters about this fear, / Which now goes too free-footed” (3.3.25–26).

But while madness addresses and reproduces the problematical of authority, the internalization of disobedience precludes taking arms against a sea of troubles. The radical inutility of unreason divides subjectivity and agency, and hence the question of Hamlet’s “delay” should be considered in light of the more pervasive antagonism between inwardness and authority. The appearance of the ghost does not counter the vacuity of the preceding exercises in patriarchal authority but rather duplicates and even literalizes it in the equivocal space of the supernatural. Hamlet’s initial address to the ghost identifies its ambivalence:

Be thou a spirit of health, or goblin damn’d,
Bring with thee airs from heaven, or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked, or charitable,
Thou com’st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak to thee.

(1.4.40–44)

As a figure of boundless semiotic ambiguity the ghost is aligned with madness and “breaking down the pales and forts of reason” (1.4.28). Horatio, the paradigmatic reasonable man, is even more intellectual than Claudius against unreason:

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dread summit of the cliff
That beetles o’er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form,
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason,
And draw you into madness?

(1.4.69–74)

The threat of madness or demonic possession, like Claudius’s admonishment of unnatural grief bound up in the ideology of self-vigilance, holds no sway over the prince, who “waxes desperate with [imagination]” (1.4.87).

The uncertain origins of King Hamlet’s ghost have been well documented. But its eschatological ambiguities may be less significant than the rhetoric of filial duty and natural bonds, the very idiom that Claudius employs in 1.2, in which the ghost couches its exhortations to revenge: “If thou didst ever thy dear father love”, “If thou hast nature in thee, bear it not” (1.5.23, 81). But unlike the apparitions of *The Spanish Tragedy* and Antonio’s Revenge, the specter of King Hamlet is a figure of contamination as much as one of justice. “Taint not thy mind” (1.5.85), it urges Hamlet, yet it is not revenge but its own sickly idiom that the ghost inscribes within the “distracted globe” of Hamlet. The ghost claims in what is actually a mode of *occupatio*:

But that I am forbid
To tell the secrets of my prison-house,
I could a tale unfold whose lightest word
Would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood,
Make thy two eyes like stars start from their spheres,
Thy knotted and combined locks to part,
And each particular hair to stand an end,
Like quills upon the fearful porpentine.

(1.5.13–20)

But in reappearing to Hamlet in Gertrude’s closet the ghost seemingly effects its own prophecy on Hamlet, whom Gertrude describes almost exactly as the ghost has hypothetically in 1.5:


Although speaking from a conventional position of justice, the ghost's

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(3.119-22)

Start up and stand in end,

Your body dead, his life in extremities,

and the secular, doctrinal in his heart.

For at your eyes your spirit, which, as part,
ual nature of Gertrude’s betrayal, the source of Hamlet’s melancholy even before he learns of his father’s murder. As madness impedes narrativity, purpose degenerates into repetition, a motif Shakespeare manifestly explores in King Lear. In Hamlet, a play still marked by the absent linear form of revenge narrative, hollow gestures toward purpose are approached only to be reversed. The sudden appearance of the ghost functions not only to remind Hamlet of his “almost blunted purpose,” but also to rehearse the earlier encounter. Yet when it departs, Hamlet promptly returns to another argument for sexual self-restraint (“Assume a virtue if you have it not”). As for Polonius, whose corpse has been almost comically forgotten for over a hundred lines, Hamlet asserts rather decorously that

For this same lord,
I do repent; but heaven hath pleas’d it so,
To punish me with this, and this with me,
That I must be their scourge and minister.
I will bestow him, and will answer well
The death I gave him.

(3.4.172–77)

But identity—as noble revenger—is no sooner restored than overthrown by madness, which resists closure and subverts purpose. Hamlet requests “One word more, good lady,” then launches into an “antic” tirade upon Gertrude’s sexual relations with “the bloat king.” And in overt contradiction of his lofty repentance of lines 172–77, Hamlet announces that “I’ll lug the guts into the neighbor room” (212) and far from “answering well” for Polonius’s slaying, stashes the body in a cupboard.

The fragmentation displaced in the grotesque mutilations of earlier revenge tragedies has become in Hamlet the condition of the hero’s subjectivity, the principle governing dramatic structure, the violence inscribed on the body of the play instead of on the body of the villain. Indeed, Hamlet’s strange business with the body of Polonius replaces what is in the source stories the actual dismemberment of the spying minister. In the very brief scene 4.2, often cut from stage productions, and in the ensuing interrogation by the king (“Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?” / “At supper,” [4.3.16–17]), Hamlet’s mysterious inwardness intersects with the contradiction of the body, the body that is at once absent and material, a thing and a thing of nothing. Madness, a
discourse that collapses the ostensible distinction between the body and the “self,” speaking an idiom that conflates and confuse the political and the “private,” here posits as its referent the great leveling of differences, death. As Michael Bristol has commented, “Hamlet’s ‘extreme show of doltishness’ reinterprets the basic distinctions of life: between food and corrupt, decaying flesh, between human and animal, between king and beggar. Temporal authority and indeed all political structures of difference are turned inside out” (187).

Your worm is your only emperor for diet: we fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots; your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service, two dishes, to one table—that’s the end.

(4.3.20–24)

Madness, then, is not so much metaphor as metonymy for death, a moment in which the materiality of the body overturns the authority of distinctions out of which coherent, unified subjectivity is constructed. For in Hamlet subjectivity is still engaged in materiality even as the autonomy of the “self” (“is”) from the body (“seems”) is being asserted. By the graveyard scene the death-madness of 4.2 and 4.3 has become externalized, literalized in the representation of a grave-digger who “sings in grave-making” (5.1.63–64), in Hamlet’s hypothetical histories of the skulls of courtiers, politicians, as “Imperious Caesar” (5.1.199) whose dust may stop a bunghole. There is Yorick, too, the “mad rogue” whose literal antic disposition was “wont to set the table on a roar” (178). The prince and the grave-digger discuss “Young Hamlet, he that is mad and sent to England,” in the third person, as though the radically fragmented hero of acts 2 through 4 has been banished across the imaginary sea. Madness, death, fragmentation, heretofore located in Hamlet’s “wild and whirling words,” are in 5.1 presented as conditions of the play’s world. Hamlet is again “good as a chorus,” pointing out, commenting upon, and interpreting the old bones in the graveyard, the “maimed rites” of Ophelia’s funeral. At once justification and nearaparodic literalization of the stuff of Hamlet’s privileged subjectivity, the gross materiality of the grave seems to claim an authority that subsumes inwardness and difference. If the scene owes a debt to the memento mori tradition, the skulls emblemize not so much the vanity of the world as the material necessity that implicates subject and authority alike.14 Hamlet recognizes the authority of death.
Phenomenological reflections were actually prompted by my ill-fated, yet powerful, and moving experience of the first act of "Hamlet," during which I encountered the tragic hero's conflict between the ideals of honor and duty. The play's themes of identity, power, and the nature of human existence resonated deeply with me, leading me to consider the moral implications of the action and its impact on the audience. In "Hamlet," Shakespeare uses the character of Hamlet to explore the complexities of human nature, and the play's enduring relevance lies in its ability to provoke thought and reflection on the nature of existence.


of the queen’s last favorite is ultimately less important than the pervasive crisis of inwardness and authority, enacted in *Hamlet*, acted upon by the earl of Essex. The ambiguous boundaries between treason and madness in Elizabethan England testify to the politicization of subjectivity, the traces of which essentialist readings of Hamlet — and of the history of “the self” — have repressed but not effaced.\(^\text{15}\)

WORKS CITED


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\(^{15}\)In each of its many metamorphoses, this essay has benefited from the criticism, guidance, and encouragement I have received from Louis A. Montrose; to him I extend my gratitude.


Mullaney, Steven. “Lying Like Truth: Riddle, Representation, and
Glossary of Critical Terms

and Theoretical Terms

AUTHORIAL INTENTION—Renaissance Reader-Response Criticism

The idea that the author's intention, as expressed in the text, to determine the reader's understanding of the text.

AFFECTIVE FALLACY—Recent Focus on Women and Minority Groups

The idea that the reader's affective response to the text is more important than the text itself.

BLOOM'S TAXONOMY

A framework for classifying educational objectives into six levels: Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation.

CAMELOT—The Renaissance

The term used to describe the period of the 15th and 16th centuries in England, marked by a rise in learning, art, and culture.

THE NEW HISTORICAL CRITICISM

A method of literary analysis that focuses on the historical context of a text.

THE ENGLISH REVOLUTION

The period of radical social and political change in England, from the late 17th century to the 18th century, marked by the restoration of Charles II and the Glorious Revolution.

THE ENGLISH LITERARY REVOLUTION

The period of literary change in England, from the late 17th century to the 18th century, marked by the rise of the novel and the decline of the epic.

THE RENAISSANCE

The period of reawakening in Europe, from the 14th to the 17th century, marked by the revival of interest in classical culture and the arts.

The first part is a quick overview explaining the concept of "literary theory." That part was on pp. 1931-1932.

Here are the specific pages for the article you have attached:

- the section on Formalism pp. 1932-1933
- the section on Biographical Criticism pp. 1937-1939
- the section on Historical Criticism pp. 1942-1943
- the section on Psychological Criticism pp. 1947-1950
- the section on Gender Criticism pp. 1959-1960
- the section on Reader-Response Criticism pp. 1963-1966
- the section on Cultural Criticism pp. 1973-1976

44 Critical Approaches to Literature

Literary criticism should arise out of a debt of love.
—George Steiner

Literary criticism is not an abstract, intellectual exercise; it is a natural human response to literature. If a friend informs you she is reading a book you have just finished, it would be odd indeed if you did not begin swapping opinions. Literary criticism is nothing more than discourse—spoken or written—about literature. A student who sits quietly in a morning English class, intimidated by the notion of literary criticism, will spend an hour that evening talking animatedly about the meaning of R.E.M.'s lyrics or comparing the relative merits of the three Star Trek TV series. It is inevitable that people will ponder, discuss, and analyze the works of art that interest them.

The informal criticism of friends talking about literature tends to be casual, unorganized, and subjective. Since Aristotle, however, philosophers, scholars, and writers have tried to create more precise and disciplined ways of discussing literature. Literary critics have borrowed concepts from other disciplines, such as linguistics, psychology, and anthropology, to analyze imaginative literature more perceptively. Some critics have found it useful to work in the abstract area of literary theory, criticism that tries to formulate general principles rather than discuss specific texts. Mass media critics, such as newspaper reviewers, usually spend their time evaluating works—telling us which books are worth reading, which plays not to bother seeing. But serious literary criticism is not primarily evaluative; it assumes we know that Othello or The Metamorphosis are worth reading. Instead, it is analytical; it tries to help us better understand a literary work.

In the following pages you will find overviews of ten critical approaches to literature. While these ten methods do not exhaust the total possibilities of literary criticism, they represent the most widely used contemporary approaches. Although presented separately, the approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive; many critics mix methods to suit their needs and interests. For example, a historical critic may use formalist techniques to analyze a poem; a biographical critic will frequently use psychological theories to analyze an author. The summaries neither try to provide a history of each approach, nor do they try to present the latest trends in each school. Their purpose is to give you a practical introduction to each critical method and then provide representative examples of it. If one of these critical methods interests you, why not try to write a class paper using the approach?
HISTORICAL CRITICISM

Historical criticism seeks to understand a literary work by investigating the social, cultural, and intellectual context that produced it—a context that necessarily includes the artist's biography and milieu. Historical critics are less concerned with explaining a work's literary significance for today's readers than with helping us understand the work by re-creating, as nearly as possible, the exact meaning and impact it had on its original audience. A historical reading of a literary work begins by exploring the possible ways in which the meaning of the text has changed over time. The analysis of William Blake's poem "London" for instance, carefully examines how certain words had different connotations for the poem's original readers than they do today. It also explores the probable associations an eighteenth-century English reader would have made with certain images and characters, like the poem's persona, the chimney sweep—a type of exploited child laborer who, fortunately, no longer exists in our society.

Reading ancient literature, no one doubts the value of historical criticism. There have been so many social, cultural, and linguistic changes that some older texts are incomprehensible without scholarly assistance. But historical criticism can even help us better understand modern texts. To return to Weldon Kees's "For My Daughter" for example, we learn a great deal by considering two rudimentary historical facts—
the year in which the poem was first published (1940) and the nationality of its author (American)—and then asking ourselves how this information has shaped the meaning of the poem. In 1940 war had already broken out in Europe, and most Americans realized that their country, still recovering from the Depression, would soon be drawn into it. For a young man like Kees, the future seemed bleak, uncertain, and personally dangerous. Even this simple historical analysis helps explain at least part of the bitter pessimism of Kees’s poem, though a psychological critic would rightly insist that Kees’s dark personality also played a crucial role. In writing a paper on a poem, you might explore how the time and place of its creation affects its meaning. For a splendid example of how to re-create the historical context of a poem’s genesis, read the following account by Hugh Kenner of Ezra Pound’s imagistic “In a Station of the Metro.”

**Hugh Kenner** (b. 1923)

**Imagism**

For it was English post-Symbolist verse that Pound’s Imagism set out to reform, by deleting its self-indulgences, intensifying its virtues, and elevating the glimpse into the vision. The most famous of all Imagist poems commenced, like any poem by Arthur Symons, with an accidental glimpse. Ezra Pound, on a visit to Paris in 1911, got out of the Metro at La Concorde, and “saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another, and then a beautiful child’s face, and then another beautiful woman, and I tried all that day to find words for what they had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worthy, or as lovely as that sudden emotion.”

The oft-told story is worth one more retelling. This was just such an experience as Arthur Symons cultivated, bright unexpected glimpses in a dark setting, instantly to melt into the crowd’s kaleidoscope. And a poem would not have given Symons any trouble. But Pound by 1911 was already unwilling to write a Symons poem.

He tells us that he first satisfied his mind when he hit on a wholly abstract vision of colors, splotches on darkness like some canvas of Kandinsky’s (whose work he had not then seen). This is a most important fact. Satisfaction lay not in preserving the vision, but in devising with mental effort an abstract equivalent for it, reduced, intensified. He next wrote a 30-line poem and destroyed it; after six months he wrote a shorter poem, also destroyed; and after another year, with, as he tells us, the Japanese *hokku* in mind, he arrived at a poem which needs every one of its 20 words, including the six words of its title:

**In a Station of the Metro**

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Arthur Symons: Symons (1865–1945) was a British poet who helped introduce French symbolist verse into English. His own verse was often florid and impressionistic.
CULTURAL STUDIES

Unlike the other critical approaches discussed in this chapter, cultural criticism (or cultural studies) does not offer a single way of analyzing literature. No central methodology is associated with cultural studies. Nor is cultural criticism solely, or even mainly, concerned with literary texts in the conventional sense. Instead, the term cultural studies refers to a relatively recent interdisciplinary field of academic inquiry. This field borrows methodologies from other approaches to analyze a wide range of cultural products and practice.

*Aufgehen*: German for “taken up” or “lifted up,” but this term can also mean “canceled” or “nullified.” Hartman uses the term for its double meaning.
To understand cultural studies, it helps to know a bit about its origins. In the English-speaking world, the field was first defined at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies of Birmingham University in Great Britain. Founded in 1964, this graduate program tried to expand the range of literary study beyond traditional approaches to canonic literature in order to explore a broader spectrum of historical, cultural, and political issues. The most influential teacher at the Birmingham Centre was Raymond Williams (1921–1983), a Welsh socialist with wide intellectual interests. Williams argued that scholars should not study culture as a canon of great works by individual artists but rather examine it as an evolutionary process that involves the entire society. “We cannot separate literature and art,” Williams said, “from other kinds of social practice.” The cultural critic, therefore, does not study fixed aesthetic objects as much as dynamic social processes. The critic’s challenge is to identify and understand the complex forms and effects of the process of culture.

A Marxist intellectual, Williams called his approach cultural materialism (a reference to the Marxist doctrine of dialectical materialism), but later scholars soon discarded that name for two broader and more neutral terms, cultural criticism and cultural studies. From the start, this interdisciplinary field relied heavily on literary theory, especially Marxist and feminist criticism. It also employed the documentary techniques of historical criticism combined with political analysis focused on issues of social class, race, and gender. (This approach flourished in the United States, where it is called new historicism.) Cultural studies is also deeply antiformalist, since the field concerns itself with investigating the complex relationship among history, politics, and literature. Cultural studies rejects the notion that literature exists in an aesthetic realm separate from ethical and political categories.

A chief goal of cultural studies is to understand the nature of social power as reflected in “texts.” For example, if the object of analysis were a sonnet by Shakespeare, the cultural studies adherent might investigate the moral, psychological, and political assumptions reflected in the poem and then deconstruct them to see what individuals, social classes, or gender might benefit from having those assumptions perceived as true. The relevant mission of cultural studies is to identify both the overt and covert values reflected in cultural practice. The cultural studies critic also tries to trace out and understand the structures of meaning that hold those assumptions in place and give them the appearance of objective representation. Any analytical technique that helps illuminate these issues is employed.

In theory, a cultural studies critic might employ any methodology. In practice, however, he or she will most often borrow concepts from deconstruction, Marxist analysis, gender criticism, race theory, and psychology. Each of these earlier methodologies provides particular analytical tools that cultural critics find useful. What cultural studies borrows from deconstructionism is its emphasis on uncovering conflict, dissent, and contradiction in the works under analysis. Whereas traditional critical approaches often sought to demonstrate the unity of a literary work, cultural studies often seeks to portray social, political, and psychological conflicts it masks. What cultural studies borrows from Marxist analysis is an attention to the ongoing struggle between social classes, each seeking economic (and therefore political) advantage. Cultural studies often asks questions about what social class created a work of art and what class (or classes) served as its audience. Among the many things that cultural
studies borrowed from gender criticism and race theory is a concern with social inequality between the sexes and races. It seeks to investigate how these inequities have been reflected in the texts of a historical period or a society. Cultural studies is, above all, a political enterprise that views literary analysis as a means of furthering social justice.

Since cultural studies does not adhere to any single methodology (or even a consistent set of methodologies), it is impossible to characterize the field briefly, because there are exceptions to every generalization offered. What one sees most clearly are characteristic tendencies, especially the commitment to examining issues of class, race, and gender. There is also the insistence on expanding the focus of critical inquiry beyond traditional high literary culture. British cultural studies guru Anthony Easthope can, for example, analyze with equal aplomb Gerard Manley Hopkins’s “The Windhover,” Edgar Rice Burrough’s Tarzan of the Apes, a Benson and Hedges’s cigarette advertisement, and Sean Connery’s eyebrows. Cultural studies is infamous—even among its practitioners—for its habitual use of literary jargon. It is also notorious for its complex intellectual analysis of mundane materials such as Easthope’s cigarette ad, which may be interesting in its own right but remote from most readers’ literary experience. Some scholars, such as Heather Olen, however, use the principles of cultural studies to provide new social, political, and historical insights on canonic texts such as William Blake’s “London.” Omnivorous, iconoclastic, and relentlessly analytical, cultural criticism has become a major presence in contemporary literary studies.

Vincent B. Leitch (b. 1944)

Poststructuralist Cultural Critique 1992

Whereas a major goal of New Criticism and much other modern formalistic criticism is aesthetic evaluation of freestanding texts, a primary objective of cultural criticism is cultural critique, which entails investigation and assessment of ruling and oppositional beliefs, categories, practices, and representations, inquiring into the causes, constitutions, and consequences as well as the modes of circulation and consumption of linguistic, social, economic, political, historical, ethical, religious, legal, scientific, philosophical, educational, familial, and aesthetic discourses and institutions. In rendering a judgment on an aesthetic artifact, a New Critic privileges such key things as textual coherence and unity, intricacy and complexity, ambiguity and irony, tension and balance, economy and autonomy, literariness and spatial form. In mounting a critique of a cultural “text,” an advocate of poststructuralist cultural criticism evaluates such things as degrees of exclusion and inclusion, of complicity and resistance, of domination and letting-be, of abstraction and situatedness, of violence and tolerance, of monologue and polylogue, of quietism and activism, of sameness and otherness, of oppression and emancipation, of centralization and decentralization. Just as the aforementioned system of evaluative criteria underlies the exegetical and judgmental labor of New Criticism, so too does the above named set of commitments undergird the work of poststructuralist cultural critique.

1974 CRITICAL APPROACHES TO LITERATURE
Given its commitments, poststructuralist cultural criticism is, as I have suggested, suspicious of literary formalism. Specifically, the trouble with New Criticism is its inclination to advocate a combination of quietism and asceticism, connoisseurship and exclusiveness, aestheticism and apoliticism. . . . The monotonous practical effect of New Critical reading is to illustrate the subservience of each textual element to a higher, overarching, economical poetic structure without remainders. What should be evident here is that the project of poststructuralist cultural criticism possesses a set of commitments and criteria that enable it to engage in the enterprise of cultural critique. It should also be evident that the cultural ethicopolitics of this enterprise is best characterized, using current terminology, as “liberal” or “leftist,” meaning congruent with certain socialist, anarchist, and libertarian ideals, none of which, incidentally, are necessarily Marxian. Such congruence, derived from extrapolating a generalized stance for poststructuralism, constitutes neither a party platform nor an observable course of practical action; avowed tendencies often account for little in the unfolding of practical engagements.

Cultural Criticism, Literary Theory, Poststructuralism

Mark Bauerlein (b. 1959)

What Is Cultural Studies?

Traditionally, disciplines naturally fell into acknowledged subdivisions, for example, as literary criticism broke up into formalist literary criticism, philological criticism, narratological analysis, and other methodologically distinguished pursuits, all of which remained comfortably within the category “literary criticism.” But cultural studies eschews such institutional disjunctions and will not let any straitening adjective precede the “cultural studies” heading. There is no distinct formalist cultural studies or historicist cultural studies, but only cultural studies. (Feminist cultural studies may be one exception.) Cultural studies is a field that will not be parcelled out to the available disciplines. It spans culture at large, not this or that institutionally separated element of culture. To guarantee this transience of disciplinary institutions, cultural studies must select a name for itself that has no specificity, that has too great an extension to mark off any expedient boundaries for itself. “Cultural studies” serves well because, apart from distinguishing between “physical science” and “cultural analysis,” the term provides no indication of where any other boundaries lie.

This is exactly the point. To blur disciplinary boundaries and frustrate the intellectual investments that go along with them is a fundamental motive for cultural studies practice, one that justifies the vagueness of the titular term. This explains why the related label “cultural criticism,” so much in vogue in 1988, has declined. The term “criticism” has a narrower extension than does “studies,” ruling out some empirical forms of inquiry (like field work) that “studies” admits. “Studies” preserves a methodological openness that “criticism” closes. Since such closures have suspect political intentions behind them, cultural studies
maintains its institutional purity by disdaining disciplinary identity and methodological uniformity.

A single approach will miss too much, will overlook important aspects of culture not perceptible to that particular angle of vision. A multitude of approaches will pick up an insight here and a piece of knowledge there and more of culture will enter into the inquiry. A diversity of methods will match the diversity of culture, thereby sheltering the true nature of culture from the reductive appropriations of formal disciplines.

But how do cultural critics bring all these methods together into a coherent inquiry? Are there any established rules of incorporating “important insights and knowledge” coming out of different methods into a coherent scholarly project of cultural studies? How might a scholar use both phonemic analysis and deconstruction in a single inquiry when deconstructionist arguments call into question the basic premises of phonetics? What scholar has the competence to handle materials from so many disciplines in a rigorous and knowing manner? Does cultural criticism as a “studies” practice offer any transdisciplinary evaluative standards to apply to individual pieces of cultural criticism? If not, if there is no clear methodological procedures or evaluative principles in cultural studies, it is hard to see how one might popularize it, teach it, make it into a recognized scholarly activity. In practical terms, one does not know how to communicate it to others or show students how to do it when it assumes so many different methodological forms. How does one create an academic department out of an outspokenly interdisciplinary practice? What criteria can faculty members jointly invoke when they are trying to make curricular and personnel decisions?

Once again, this is precisely the point. One reason for the generality of the term is to render such institutional questions unanswerable. Cultural studies practice mingles methods from a variety of fields, jumps from one cultural subject matter to another, simultaneously proclaims superiority to other institutionalized inquiries (on a correspondence to culture basis) and renounces its own institutionalization—gestures that strategically forestall disciplinary standards being applied to it. By studying culture in heterogenous ways, by clumping texts, events, persons, objects, and ideologies into a cultural whole (which, cultural critics say, is reality) and bringing a mélange of logical argument, speculative propositions, empirical data, and political outlooks to bear upon it, cultural critics invent a new kind of investigation immune to methodological attack.

_Literary Criticism: An Autopsy_

Heather Glen

The Stance of Observation in William Blake’s “London” 1983

In choosing to present his vision of social disaster thus, Blake was engaging with a familiar literary mode. The assumption of a stance of “observation,” freely passing judgment on that which is before it, is common to much eighteenth-cen-