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“THIS UNFORTUNATE APHORISM”: OSCAR WILDE MEETS THE NEW HISTORICISTS

...this unfortunate aphorism about Art holding the mirror up to Nature, is deliberately said by Hamlet in order to convince the bystanders of his absolute insanity in all art-matters.

(Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying*)

For Oscar Wilde, who lived “in terror of not being misunderstood”¹, the following paper might initially promise to be a source of comfort. Proposing to point out similarities between the discourse of a Yellow Nineties aesthete for whom “Art never expresses anything but itself”² and New Historicism, a critical orientation focusing – one century later – on the “historical specificity, the social and material embedding of all modes of *writing*”³, might seem an even more paradoxical and “trivial” venture than any of Wilde’s own. But then again, Stephen Greenblatt and the other critics-as-artists among the new historicists themselves are often “trivial” in the rich, Wildean sense.

An apparently endless number of quotations could be added to underline the contrast between Oscar Wilde, for whom “Art reveals her own perfection [...] remote from reality” (DL, pp. 80-81), and the new historicists, questioning the “scene of writing” in favour of a view of literature as a collective production⁴. Wilde rejects action theorizing the importance of doing nothing (“the most difficult thing in the world”, CA, p. 978), while the new historicists centre their attention on writing as an event in the world and of criticism as a mode of action⁵. Wilde expresses his aesthetics in terms of a sharp binary opposition between (capitalized) “Art” and “Nature”, and the new historicists, with delicate, hyper-sensitive relativism and precision, specify, specify, knowing that all representation is unstable and instrumental⁶. The “great artist” in Wilde’s aphorisms bears a close resemblance to the “total artist” – an individual “complete unto himself” – about whose existence Greenblatt expresses more than a little doubt⁷. Wilde does away with the details of history with the flick of a subordinate sentence⁸ and the new historicists base their interpretation on the “thick description” of details found in anecdotes often drawn from marginalized texts found in historical backwaters⁹. It is difficult to close the list.

But the apparently overwhelming contrast implies certain elisions – first among which that of Wilde’s own contribution to that discourse

on “the dialectic between the next and the world”¹⁰ which is one of the main lowest common denominators of the new historicism(s)¹¹, a contribution which, in a somewhat estranged perspective, ends where the new historicist dialectic begins. In a perspective momentarily estranged, that is, from the Marxist, Foucauldian, deconstructionist, cultural materialist and other discourses that have circulated in the century separating Wilde and Greenblatt and influenced the positions of new historicists, the relationship between Wilde’s aesthetic theory and the new historicists’ theory of circulation could be described in terms of a synecdoche rather than an antimony. The theory of the circulation constituted by negotiations taking place between the discourses and materials of the aesthetic and the social sphere can be read as a complex dialectic incorporating Wilde’s theory of life “imitating” art (to speak in terms that will sound hairraising to a new historicist, whose “terror” is probably that of seeing his/her terms and discursive practices simplified and hypostatized). Greenblatt’s observation that

the work of art is not the passive surface on which [the] historical experience leaves its stamp, but one of the creative agents of the fashioning and re-fashioning of this experience¹²

is a complication, a possible completion of Wilde’s perspective.

In addition to this theoretical connection there are common bases and “trivial” similarities to be found between new historicist and Wildean views and ways of writing – such as the fundamental role played by autobiographism, and certain “surface” similarities (and as Wilde would say, “Form is everything”¹³).

Stephen Greenblatt the founder if not of new historicism at least of the “advertising phrase”¹⁴ of “new historicism” (as he will reluctantly acknowledge), has attributed to Shakespeare an awareness of operating “on the boundary between fantasy and reality”¹⁵. Greenblatt’s own writing can be described as an exploration of this boundary (to continue using a geographic metaphor of the kind recurrent in new historicist writing¹⁶). The same can be said of Wilde, though with a crucial difference: Wilde’s is an exploration constantly viewing the boundary from the side of the imagination – violently asserting its autonomy and superiority. Greenblatt’s exploration, on the other hand, presents itself as an exploration without *a priori* expectations, without the precise map of the territory Wilde already has. See for example Greenblatt’s smiling description of the way he had had, in *Shakespearean Negotiations*, to change his initial points of reference during the writing process:

Shakespeare's plays, it seemed, had precipitated out of a sublime confrontation between a total artist and a totalizing society. By a total artist I mean one who, through training, resourcefulness, and talent, is at the moment of creation complete unto himself; by a totalizing society I mean one that posits an occult network linking all human, natural, and cosmic powers and that claims on behalf of its ruling élite a privileged place in this network.[...]

In the book I have written something of this initial conception survives, but it has been complicated by several turns in my thinking that I had not foreseen. I can summarize those turns by remarking that I came to have doubts about two things: "total artist" and "totalizing society" (p. 2).

The different use Wilde and Greenblatt make of their anecdotes is significant in this respect. While the anecdotes Wilde tells in his theoretical dialogues are directly fictional, serving to illustrate his theory, Greenblatt's – which are fictional only to the degree that *history* is considered as fiction¹⁷ – are "what the French call *petites histoires*, as distinct from the *grand récit* of totalizing, integrated, progressive history, a history that knows where it is going"¹⁸. Like some of the great voyagers whose narratives he analyzes Greenblatt does not know where he is going, and his anecdotes are construed as starting points, urging him to theorize, to search for new terms that will illustrate *them*.

For both Greenblatt and Wilde exploring the boundary between the imaginary and the real means confronting the mystery of the literary "medium" – intended in an almost necromantic sense – conveying "fragments of lost life"⁹. Greenblatt, in his famous introduction to *Shakespearean Negotiations*, confronts his "desire to speak with the dead"²⁰ describing in fascinating/-ed words the way the voices of the dead reach the living:

the dead had contrived to leave textual traces of themselves, and those traces make themselves heard in the voices of the living. Many of the traces have little resonance, though every one, even the most trivial or tedious, contains some fragment of lost life; others seem uncannily full of the will to be heard. It is paradoxical, of course, to seek the living will of the dead in fictions, in places where there was no bodily being to begin with. But those who love literature tend to find more intensity in simulations [...] for simulations are undertaken in full awareness of the absence of the life they contrive to represent, and hence they may skillfully anticipate and compensate for the vanishing of the actual life that has empowered them (p. 1).

Wilde expresses a similar, irresistible fascination for the capacity

of texts to convey, or “transfer”, the will of the dead, a similar sense of wonder at the *presence* of something bodily *absent*:

It is a strange thing, this transference of emotion. We sicken with the same maladies as the poets, and the singer lends us his pain. Dead lips have their message for us, and hearts that have fallen to dust can communicate their joy (CA, p. 977).

Wilde, however, leaves this “transference” “a strange thing”. For him the boundary is an “impenetrable barrier” (constituted by “beautiful style”) (DL, p. 68) and the *real* is on the wrong side of it. He recommends a total absorption in the intense simulations of art – the substitution of life with literary simulations because of their intensity and of the reproductibility of the emotions they induce, “because Art does not hurt us” (CA, p. 977), and because of the infinite possibilities of vicarious “life” art involves. “Don’t let us go to life for our fulfilment and our experience” (p. 977). In literature

We can choose our day and select our hour. We can say to ourselves: “Tomorrow, at dawn, we shall walk with grave Virgil through the valley of the shadow of death,” and lo! the dawn finds us in the obscure wood, and the Mantuan stands by our side (p. 974).

We run to kiss the bleeding mouth of Fantine, and we follow Manon Lescaut over the whole world. [...] There is no passion that we cannot feel, no pleasure that we cannot gratify (p. 977).

Stephen Greenblatt is all but insensitive to the fascination of simulations and of the possibility of not distinguishing truth from fiction²¹. He, too, is “possessed by stories”²², but he is also “obsessed with their complex uses”, and with the “strange transference”, the ways in which the textual traces left by the dead are “empowered”. These he intends to leave “strange”, but not without making it clear that “aesthetic autonomy” is an “enchanted impression” (p. 5). Without any intention of discarding the enchantment he sets out to “inquire into [its] objective conditions” and finds that the conditions empowering the enchantment Wilde recommended plunging into consist in a “dynamic exchange”²³ between the imaginary and the real. Wilde’s “charmed circle” – the one into which art attracts life in order to use it “as part of her rough material”²⁴ – is replaced with a non-supernatural but all the more strange, *wonderful*, charming “circulation”.

Wilde and the new historicists transform the Platonic model seeing art as imitating life²⁵ in two related ways. Wilde reverses it – “life

cheats us with shadows", he says in an allusive appropriation of Plato's imagery (CA, p. 974). The "real" is the unreal ("what are the unreal things but the passions that once burned one like fire?"). The "imitation" is all on the part of life. New historicists replace the middle term – mimesis – with new terms capable of describing art and reality as involved in a circulation in which the traditionally accepted direction of influence life-art and Wilde's aestheticist art-life exist in a complementary relationship.

The dialogue *The Decay of Lying* is one of the main textual settings for Wilde's nonchalant overturning of the unidirectional model seeing art as imitating life. "Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us" (p. 79). Accordingly, the history of the world and of human thought are construed as having their origin in literature. Wilde makes this clear in a passage –

Schopenhauer has analysed the pessimism that characterizes modern thought, but Hamlet invented it.[...] The Nihilist [...] is purely a literary product. He was invented by Tourgénéieff, and completed by Dostoieffski. Robespierre came out of the pages of Rousseau as surely as the People's Palace rose out of the *débris* of a novel. [...] The nineteenth century, as we know it, is largely an invention of Balzac (DL, p. 75)

– reading as a sensational application of Stephen Greenblatt's balanced words in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*:

our own lives [...] are saturated with experience artfully shaped. [...]we insist upon the importance of certain "turning points" and "crises" or, in Freud's famous modern instance, seize upon the plot of a Sophoclean tragedy to characterize our shared "family romance" (p. 6).

To support his reversal Wilde draws from a rich collection of "improbable" ²⁶ anecdotes reading like a Wildean "liar's" illustrations of Louis Adrian Montrose's statement that

Representations of the world in written discourse participate in the construction of the world: they are engaged in shaping the modalities of social reality and in accomodating their writers, performers, readers, and audiences to multiple and shifting subject positions within the world that they themselves both constitute and inhabit ²⁷.

Wilde first brings out a "vulgar" instance of popular literature

shaping “the silly boys who, after reading the adventures of Jack Sheppard or Dick Turpin, pillage the stalls of unfortunate applegirls”. But there is also the typically Wildean case of the woman who, seeming “to have no personality at all, but simply the possibility of many types” (DL, p. 77)²⁸, illustrates – caricature-like – the new historicist awareness of identity being not “innate and unchanging”, but “culturally constructed and therefore unstable”²⁹. This heroine finds herself compulsively living after a Russian feuilleton appearing in a French magazine, looking forward “with a feeling of real terror” to the last chapters of the story – and illustrating Clifford Geertz’s view, central to new historicism, of humans as cultural artifacts³⁰. Wilde’s mouth-piece, Vivian, also tells his interlocutor of a governess who is said to have partly suggested to Thackeray the character of Becky Sharp. Vivian has been told that

oddly enough, some years after the appearance of *Vanity Fair*, she ran away with the nephew of the lady with whom she was living, and for a short time made a great splash in society, quite in Mrs. Rawdon Crawley’s style, and entirely by Mrs. Rawdon Crawley’s methods. Ultimately she came to grief, disappeared to the Continent, and used to be occasionally seen at Monte Carlo and other gambling places (p. 76).

Wilde goes on: “Shortly after Mr. Stevenson published his curious psychological story of transformation, a friend of mine, called Mr. Hyde, was in the north of London...”. The rest – predictable, knowing Wilde – is (literary) history:

being anxious to get to a railway station, [he] took what he thought to be a short cut, lost his way, and found himself in a network of mean, evil-looking streets. Feeling rather nervous he began to walk extremely fast, when suddenly out of an archway ran a child right between his legs. It fell on the pavement, he tripped over it, and trampled upon it. Being, of course, very frightened and a little hurt, it began to scream, and in a few seconds the whole street was full of rough people who came pouring out of the houses like ants. They surrounded him and asked his name. He was about to give it when he suddenly remembered the opening incident in Mr. Stevenson’s story. He was so filled with horror at having realized in his own person that terrible and wellwritten scene [...] that he ran away as hard as he could go. He was, however, very closely followed, and finally he took refuge in a surgery, the door of which happened to be open, where he explained to a young assistant, who happened to be there, exactly what had occurred. The humanitarian crowd was induced to go away on his giving them a small sum of money, and as

soon as the coast was clear he left. As he passed out, the name on the brass door-plate of the surgery caught his eye. It was "Jekyll". At least it should have been (p. 76).

"At least it should have been": few of Wilde's provocative aphorisms are as effective as this anecdote in displaying his nonchalant casting aside of reality.

In the essay *Towards a Poetics of Culture* Stephen Greenblatt gives one of his compelling accounts of the bidirectional relationship between the discursive and the real, having as point of departure an anecdote in which the two spheres are seen involved in a complex reciprocal exchange. Read as an answer to Wilde's Mr. Hyde story this "fable" brings to light the synechdochical relationship between Wilde's and Greenblatt's theories.

The case in question (it is as painful to sum up Greenblatt's stories as it is Wilde's) is that of the convict Gary Gilmore, whose case attracted the attention of Norman Mailer. The latter wrote *The Executioner's Song*, "a 'true life novel'" (p. 1), on the basis of material on Gilmore. So far, so good: "art" uses "life" "as part of her rough material". The novel's success was followed up by a mini series for television – which "helped to sell cars, soap powder, and deodorant" ("art" feeds capitalist "life"). But

Mailer's book had further, and less predictable, ramifications. While he was working on *The Executioner's Song*, there was an article on Mailer in *People* magazine. The article caught the attention of a convict named Jack H. Abbott who wrote to offer him first-hand instruction on the conditions of prison life. An exchange of letters began, and Mailer grew increasingly impressed not only with their detailed information but with what he calls their "literary measure". The letters were cut and arranged by a Random House editor, Erroll McDonald, and appeared as a book called *In the Belly of the Beast*. This book too was widely acclaimed and contributed, with Mailer's help, to win a parole for its author (p. 11).

After his release Abbott stabbed a young waiter (and aspiring actor and playwright) to death, and these latter events were incorporated into a play – *In the Belly of the Beast*. And the complex interrelation between aesthetic and "real" material revealed in this succession of events formed the material for Stephen Greenblatt's triggering anecdote. Here is what it triggered:

Literary criticism has a familiar set of terms for the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to which it refers: we

speaking of allusion, symbolization, allegorization, representation, and above all mimesis. Each of these terms has a rich history and is virtually indispensable, and yet they all seem curiously inadequate to the cultural phenomenon which Mailer's book and Abbott's and the television series and the play constitute. [...] We need to develop terms to describe the ways in which material – here official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth – is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property. *It would, I think, be a mistake to regard this process as uni-directional – from social discourse to aesthetic discourse – not only because the aesthetic discourse in this case is so entirely bound up with capitalist venture but because the social discourse is already charged with aesthetic energies* (p. 11, italics mine).

The story of the “real life” Mr. Hyde-Jack Abbott urges Greenblatt to theorize the bidirectional interaction between the discursive and the real. In so doing he is recovering the *other* direction: Wilde did consider the relation unidirectional, but the direction he pointed out was from aesthetic to social discourse, the direction he followed to its extreme. Wilde's view is thus a *part of* Greenblatt's circulation, and the development of the Platonic model seeing art as imitating life could be read as a dialectical movement with Wilde's and the new historicist theories as respectively second and third phase. Wilde's reversal of the model corresponds to a withdrawal into the *other*, and the new historicist “dialectic between the text and the world” is the solution incorporating Wilde's “alien”, anti-traditional aestheticist theory.

The “end” of “playing”, Hamlet says to the First Player, is “to hold as 'twere the mirror up to nature: to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure” (3.2.21-24). This “unfortunate aphorism”, appropriated and reversed by Wilde, having been “appropriated” also by Greenblatt, is a rich ground for the investigation of the relationship between Wilde's and Greenblatt's aesthetic theories.

Wilde was not completely satisfied with the use of the mirror image as metaphor relating “art” and “life”. Art “is a veil rather than a mirror”, he hints tentatively in *The Decay of Lying* (p. 73). But almost immediately (“Who wants to be consistent?”, (p. 58)) he goes on to claim that “life holds the mirror up to art” “life in fact is the mirror, and art the reality” (p. 74). From this moment the image of the mirror reappears relatively undisturbed in Wilde's theoretical writings. In the introduction to *The Picture of Dorian Gray* art itself is even admitted to “mirror” again:

The nineteenth-century dislike of Realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in the glass.

The nineteenth-century dislike of Romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in the glass.

[...]

It is the spectator, and not life, that art really mirrors (p. 5-6).

This indecision is connected with the fact that Wilde still sees the relationship between art and life as unidirectional. For the purpose of his reversal reading the image of the mirror as "the emblem of instantaneous and accurate reproduction; it takes nothing from what it reflects and adds nothing except self-knowledge" ³¹ (in Greenblatt's words) is only appropriate.

With Greenblatt, it is of course different. He finds in the image of the mirror something different from a metaphorical term for the "curiously inadequate" term mimesis. *His* comment of Hamlet's words is the following:

Perhaps this is what the players really thought they were doing, but it is worth considering how convenient and self-protective the image of the mirror must have seemed. Artists in a time of censorship and repression had ample reason to claim that they had taken nothing from the world they represented

Greenblatt finds in the image of the mirror a metaphor for his new term: exchange.

Yet even in Hamlet's familiar account, the word pressure – that is, impression, as with a seal or signet ring – should signal to us that for the Renaissance more is at stake in mirrors than an abstract and bodiless reflection. Both optics and mirror lore in the period suggested that something was actively passing back and forth in the production of mirror images, that accurate representation depended upon material emanation and exchange. Only if we reinvest the mirror image with a sense of pressure as well as form can it convey something of its original strangeness and magic. And only with the recovery of this strangeness can we glimpse a whole spectrum of representational exchanges where we had once seen simple reflection ³².

The mirror, considered not as a neutral surface but as a site of exchanges, with "something [...] actively passing back and forth", reappears in the specularity at the basis of the chiasmic forms almost as recurrent in new historicist titles and formulas as in Wilde's aphoristic writing. If Wilde's aphorisms nearly always have symmetry and

specularity as propulsive factor, and are often directly chiasmic (“I like looking at geniuses, and listening to beautiful people”³³), the very début of the phrase “new historicism” occurred under the chiasmic title *The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance* in 1982. This “mirror”, far from being an “impenetrable barrier” separating two distinct spheres, is a “permeable boundary”³⁴, a membrane allowing an exchange between the two spheres.

Montrose’s successful chiasmus “the historicity of texts and the textuality of histories” is a particularly appropriate example.

By the *historicity of texts*, I mean to suggest the historical specificity, the social and material embedding of all modes of *writing* – including not only the texts that critics study but also the texts in which we study them; thus I also suggest the historical, social and material embedding of all modes of *reading*. By the *textuality of histories*, I mean to suggest, in the first place, that we can have no access to a full and authentic past, to a material existence that is unmediated by the textual traces of the society in question [...] In the second place, those victorious traces of material and ideological struggle are themselves subject to subsequent mediations [...] ³⁵.

This chiasmus is doubly specular: Montrose himself, explaining the popularity of chiasmic formations in new historicism, points out their capacity to “figure forth from within discourse itself the model of a reciprocally constitutive and transformative relation between the discursive and material domains” (p. 411). Brook Thomas underlines the same capacity when, describing a chiasmus used by Greenblatt, he notes that “its balanced structure mimes the very circulation that he writes about”³⁶.

The specularity and symmetry at the basis of chiasmus appear in other characteristic new historicist forms. See for example the proliferation of present/past participle pairs “miming” the new historicist circulation – as Montrose’s words in the following passage:

The writing and reading of texts, as well as the processes by which they are circulated and categorized, analyzed and taught, are now being construed as historically *determined* and *determining* modes of cultural work ³⁷ (italics mine).

The biunique relationship expressed by the combination of present and past participle is expressed by Montrose in a contracted version in the title to a study of Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*. “Shaping Fantasies” sets as its aim that of suggesting “the

dialectical character of cultural representations: the fantasies by which the text [...] has been shaped are also those to which it gives shape" ³³, and the present participle which might have "fantasies" as either its subject or its object "mimes" the coincidence between what is shaped and what shapes, construing aesthetic discourse as at the same time passive and active – as recipient of influence and as creative agent of the fashioning of historical experience.

Wilde would have approved of this "figuring forth from discourse itself" of the model the discourse is related to – a move in harmony with another fundamental principle in his aesthetic discourse: the correspondence between "form" and "substance". Art owes its superiority to the capacity to create a "fine correspondence between form and spirit" (CA, p.977). But "it is not merely in art that the body is the soul. In every sphere of life Form is the beginning of things.[...] Form is everything" (p. 991).

Another "form" that is "everything" in Wilde is that of paradox, another characteristic the new historicists share with Wilde the interest in paradox. In Wilde's case, of course, "interest" is a stark understatement. For Wilde paradox is the way to truth: "To test Reality we must see it on the tightrope" ³⁹. For the new historicists paradox could be described as a form of wonder "figured forth from within discourse itself".

Wonder is a by-product of Wilde's typical move: all in the space of one sentence *placing* reality on the tightrope creating, by undermining commonplace phrases or by means of symmetry, the reader expectation he is simultaneously reversing ("Even things that are true can be proved" ⁴⁰). "Truth" (that is, for Oscar Wilde, the questioning, by means of a reversal, of preconceived truths) is the outcome of the momentary alienation produced with this verbal acrobacy.

New historicist discourse carries a sense of being surprised and desiring to surprise (specularity is contagious) which *might* be explained as a response to "the seductions of the new" or to the "institutional demand for its production" ⁴¹, but which it would not be naive to explain also as the result of a fascinated longing for insight, for those "new terms", for the impossible "originary moment" of exchange ⁴².

New historicists do not need to place reality on the tightrope: they see the discourses of reality as *already* complicated into paradox and their own discourse shares the wonder of this *seeing*.

A compelling instance is the "exemplary fable of capitalist aesthetics" Greenblatt reads in the organization of Yosemite National Park. Here Greenblatt has led his reader through various zones of the park, and they are now standing in front of Nevada Falls – *and* in front

of a photograph of the fall and an aluminium plaque with an inscription of “vaguely Wordsworthian sentiments” inspired by the view of the waterfall:

The pleasure of this moment – beyond the pleasure of the mountain air and the waterfall and the great boulders and the deep forest of Lodgepole and Jeffrey Pine – arises from the unusually candid glimpse of the process of circulation that shapes the whole experience of the park. The wilderness is *at once secured and obliterated* by the official gestures that establish its boundaries; the natural is set over against the artificial through means that render such an opposition meaningless. The eye passes from the “natural” image of the waterfall to the aluminium image, *as if to secure a difference* (for why else bother to go to the park at all? Why not simply look at a book of pictures?), *even as that difference is effaced*⁴³ (italics mine) .

Differences secured while obliterated, cultures rehearsed so that they may be effaced, power itself producing subversion in order to contain it and thus reinforce itself⁴⁴. The most classical (to sound hairraising again) new historicist observations are observations of paradox.

The first half of Montrose’s chiasmus – the historicity of texts, the historical specificity, the social and material embedding, of all modes of writing and of reading⁴⁵ – is related to a necessity that is a fundamental element in both Wilde’s and the new historicists’ discourse: the necessity of autobiography.

ERNEST: Ah! you admit, then, that the critic may occasionally be allowed to see the object as in itself it really is.

GILBERT: I am not quite sure. Perhaps I may admit it after supper. There is a subtle influence in supper (CA, p. 971).

After supper Gilbert may even agree with Matthew Arnold. “Things are because we see them”, and what we see depends on what has influenced us whether it be literature or supper. Since “out of ourselves we can never pass” (CA, p. 984), every form of criticism must be “a mode of autobiography”⁴⁶. The necessity for the critic to “see the object as in itself it really is not” (CA, p.969) is a consequence of the awareness of the “impossibility of leaving behind one’s situation”⁴⁷ – an awareness constantly present in new historicist discourses. As Greenblatt says: “there is no escape from contingency”⁴⁸.

The new historicists accordingly tell – among other stories – autobiographical stories of reading and writing. I have already re-

ferred to Greenblatt's fascinated introduction to *Shakespearean Negotiations*, opening with the confession-like "I began with the desire to speak with the dead". *Marvelous Possessions* opens with an indication of Greenblatt's favourite childhood readings. *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* closes with an uncanny autobiographical anecdote. Joel Fineman, while writing a paper on "the history of the anecdote", in *Fiction and Fiction*, is at the same time writing – in the margin – an autobiographical anecdote on trying to write a paper on "the history of the anecdote" ⁴⁹.

Such autobiographical moves manifest a sense of having to develop, in Montrose's words, a "sharper sense of our own historicity" ⁵⁰ in the awareness that "the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are ourselves historical subjects" ⁵¹. Cox and Reynolds provide a practical example of the influence of socio-historical context on new historicist discourse:

one could argue that if the new historicism emphasizes the powers of institutions, it is perhaps in part because literary scholars, especially feminists, ethnic minorities, and Marxists are so aware of the shaping and at times oppressive power of the institutions of which they are a part. And, if some historicists have emphasized the impact of readers, editors, compositors on the final creation of any literary text as a social product, it may reflect the time academics spend interacting with colleagues, outside readers, journal editors, copy editors, and others involved in the publication process ⁵².

In a "confession" of the kind Frank Lentricchia sees as ritual *mea culpas* ⁵³ Montrose declares himself aware of being

incapable of offering any description or explanation that is located at some Archimedean point outside the history I study, in some ideal space that transcends the coordinates of gender, ethnicity, class, age, and profession that plot my own shifting and potentially contradictory subject positions ⁵⁴.

The potential contradictions arise from the new historicists' existence outside of that "Archimedean point" and "within a regime of power and knowledge that at once sustains us and constrains us" ⁵⁵ (the paradox concerns the new historicists themselves, this time). Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, too, confess that they are "well aware of the irony of presuming to occupy an oppositional position as employees of one of the state's most powerful ideological apparatuses and as beneficiaries of institutional support" ⁵⁶. But the irony is – paradoxically – an empowering condition:

The irony of our predicament is not unique, however, despite its extremity; in fact, its prevalence is a key insight of much new historicist scholarship. [...] And as the essays [in *New Historical Literary Study*] turn to the past to explore the negotiations between power, subversion, and containment, as they investigate the tangled relations between the world, the text, and the critic, they help illuminate the present, making self-consciousness of our acts, values and negotiations both a possibility and a necessity. In such self-consciousness lies the beginning of the liberation we believe to be the goal of historicist scholarship.

Wilde's most extensive treatment of the necessity for criticism to be autobiographical can be found in *The Critic as Artist*, which is in the first place a declaration of the critic's independence from the "primary" text and of the arbitrariness of the distinction between the creative and the critical faculty (p. 959).

The meaning of any beautiful created thing is, at least, as much in the soul of him who looks at it as it was in his soul who wrought it. Nay, it is rather the beholder who lends to the beautiful thing its myriad meanings (CA , p. 968).

This proto-Iserian consideration is followed by the statement that "to the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own" (p. 969). For deconstructionists and even more for Harold Bloom⁵⁷ this provocative statement places Wilde in the position of the predecessor in asserting the creative and "primary" nature of criticism. For new historicism, focusing less on the weight of the interpreter and attempting a "return" to referentiality, the awareness of the critic's "creativity" is less central and more an implicit necessity. But this is not to say that new historicists do not often produce striking examples of creativity and (relative) "independence" in criticism, of criticism as art.

Again Stephen Greenblatt is an irresistible example (this paper is vulnerable to accusations of having been partly mistitled). Greenblatt has been "accused" of writing too well – of mesmerizing his readers and listeners so that they could say, like Wilde's Ernest to Gilbert in *The Critic as Artist*, "while you talk it seems to me to be so" (p. 964). This makes him resemble Wilde's "liar".

The ideal "great artist" portrayed in *The Decay of Lying*, the "liar", must have "distinction, charm, beauty, and imaginative power" (DL, p. 63), and his aim is "to charm, to delight, to give pleasure" (DL, p. 72). Brian Rosenberg, for his suggestion that "New Historicist

critics write historical fiction whose subjects are not people in history but texts in history" ⁵⁸ calls attention to the centrality of the "imaginative act" in Clifford Geertz' anthropological writing which has been so influential in new historicism. In Greenblatt's writing the "imaginative act" is performed with such decision that few "liars" would stand to the test.

It is paradoxical, of course, that the "great artist" Wilde is theorizing could be Greenblatt, a writer who would never consider himself "complete unto himself", and would argue that Wilde's ideal artist is impossible. But the fact that Greenblatt's proposed aim is *not* to charm, makes his writing no less *charming*. Nor does the fact that he does not "write over the door of [his] library the word 'Whim'" (p. 58) (at most he admits to having to allow some space to coincidence ⁵⁹), and that he does not ask "Who wants to be consistent?", make him "the dullard, the doctrinaire, the tedious [person carrying out his] principles to the bitter end of action".

On the contrary. And so much so that we can almost *imagine* Wilde reading, say, *Shakespeare Bewitched* ⁶⁰ – sweeping through stories, told with a masterly use of *coups de scène*, of witches and witchmongers, of narrators of stories of witches, of *Macbeth*. We can almost *imagine* (though this, of course, would almost place *Greenblatt* "in the position of the witch" ⁶¹) Wilde won over to the new historicist view of "art" and "life" – especially since it presents itself as an enrichment of his own.

What is the point of interrogating the status of literature – of challenging the cult of autonomy, undermining the illusion of aesthetic aloofness, questioning the very existence in the Renaissance of an independent aesthetic sphere – if we are not to insist that the power of a work like *Macbeth* must be a power *in* the world, a power *for* something? (p. 112).

Perhaps after supper.

CRISTINA SAFFIOTTI

¹ Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist* (hereafter referred to as CA), in *The Works of Oscar Wilde*, London, Methuen, 1960, pp. 948-998, p. 955.

² Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying* (hereafter referred to as DL), in *De Profundis and Other Writings*, London, Penguin, 1982, pp. 57-97, p. 80.

³ Louis Montrose, *New Historicisms*; in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, New York, The Modern Language Association of America, 1992, pp. 392-418, p. 410.

⁴ Leah H. Marcus, in *Renaissance/Early Modern Studies*, in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, pp. 41-63, p. 57, discusses the “shift away from the valorization of autonomous self-hood” in psychoanalytic approaches to Renaissance/early modern literature. Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn, in their introduction to the same volume, note that “the scene of writing” “has been repeatedly depicted as a hermeneutic fiction” (p. 3). Greenblatt proposes that we take “seriously the collective production of literary pleasure and interest. We know that this production is collective since language itself, which is at the heart of literary power, is the supreme instance of a collective creation” (*Shakespearean Negotiations*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1988, p. 4).

⁵ Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, in their introduction to *New Historical Study*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1993, pp. 33-38, call attention to the fact that “new historicism tends to regard texts in materialist terms, as objects and events in the world, as a part of human life, society, the historical realities of power, authority, and resistance”, p. 4. Louis A. Montrose, in *The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, in *The New Historicism*, ed. by H.A. Veenser, New York, Routledge, 1989, pp. 15-36, suggests that current critical practices “speak of the social production of ‘literature’ or of any particular text [...] to signify not only that it is socially produced but also that it is socially productive – that it is the product of work and that it performs work in the process of being written, enacted, or read” (p. 23); “the emergent social/political/historical orientation in literary studies is pervasively concerned with writing, reading and teaching as modes of action” (p. 26). See also Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield’s *Political Shakespeare*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1985.

⁶ Louis A. Montrose, *New Historicisms*, in *Redrawing the Boundaries*, p. 408: “Much of the most interesting work now being produced within our discipline is by younger scholars whose graduate studies have endowed them with a poststructuralist sensitivity to both the instability and the instrumentality of representation”.

⁷ *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 2.

⁸ “But, to get rid of the details of history, which are always wearisome, and usually inaccurate...”, *The Critic as Artist*, p. 960.

⁹ In H.A. Veenser’s resumé the new historicists “taking their cue from Geertz’s method of ‘thick description’ [...] seize upon an event or anecdote – colonist John Rolfe’s conversation with Pocahontas’ father, a note found among Nietzsche’s papers to the effect that ‘I have lost my umbrella’ – and re-read it in such a way as to reveal through the analysis of tiny particulars the behavioural codes, logics, and motive forces controlling a whole society”. H.A. Veenser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, p. xi.

¹⁰ Louis A. Montrose, *New Historicisms*, p. 392.

¹¹ Montrose significantly entitles his contribution to *Redrawing the Boundaries* “*New Historicisms*”, to underline the relative variety of critical practices referring to themselves as “new historicist”.

¹² Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *Representing the English Renaissance*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 31-64, p. viii.

¹³ Oscar Wilde, *The Critic as Artist*, p. 991.

¹⁴ In *Towards a Poetics of Culture*. H.A. Veenser (ed.) *The New Historicism*, (pp. 1-14), Greenblatt gives the following account of the origin of the phrase “new historicism”: “A few years ago I was asked by *Genre* to edit a selection of Renaissance essays and I said OK. I collected a bunch of essays and then, out of a kind of desperation to get the introduction done, I wrote that the essays represented something I called a *new historicism*. I’ve never been very good at making up advertising phrases of this kind; for reasons that I would be quite interested in exploring at some point, the name stuck much more than other names I’d very carefully tried to invent over the years. [...] So I shall try if not to define the new historicism, at least to situate it as a practice – a practice rather than a doctrine, since as far as I can tell (and I should be the one to know) it’s no doctrine at all” (p. 1).

¹⁵ *Shakespeare Bewitched in New Historical Literary Study*, ed. by Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 108-135, p. 123.

¹⁶ See Leah H. Marcus, *Renaissance/Early Modern Studies*, p. 41: “we need to ask why we think of our subject in such pervasively geographic metaphors: as a ‘terrain’, an ‘area’, a ‘field’, that is being ‘remapped’ or ‘explored’, or an ‘enterprise’ that, like travel across a space that is not our accustomed terrain, requires us to take along ‘baggage’”.

See, for example, in the introduction to the same volume, Stephen Greenblatt's and Giles Gunn's extended metaphors of the frontier and the boundary.

¹⁷ For a discussion of the origins of "the notion that history is really fiction in disguise" see David Simpson, *Literary Criticism and the Return to "History"*, "Critical Inquiry" (Summer 1988), pp. 721-747, p. 725.

¹⁸ *Marvelous Possessions*, (Oxford, The Clarendon Press, 1991) p. 2.

¹⁹ *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 1.

²⁰ A similar desire is expressed by Dominick LaCapra, who asks for "dialogues [with] the dead" (*History, Politics, and the Novel*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1988, p. 1), and by Jerome McGann who writes of "encounter[s] between the past and the present" (*The Beauty of Inflections*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1985, p. 5). Quoted in: Brian Rosenberg, *Historicizing the New Historicism*, "Modern Languages Quarterly" L, (1989), pp. 375-392, p. 385.

²¹ See for example the chapter on Thomas More in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, pp. 11-73: "At the Table of the Great"

²² Stephen Greenblatt, *Marvelous Possessions*, p. 1.

²³ *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 11.

²⁴ See Wilde's theory of the evolution/involution of art: "Art begins with abstract decoration, with purely imaginative and pleasurable work dealing with what is unreal and non-existent. This is the first stage. Then Life becomes fascinated with this new wonder, and asks to be admitted into the charmed circle. Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in new forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment. The third stage is when Life gets the upper hand, and drives Art out into the wilderness. This is the true decadence, and it is from this that we are now suffering" (DL, p. 68). The second "stage" in this development, the elaboration of "rough material" from life, sounds as a poetic, simplified version of new historicist descriptions of the aesthetic discourse appropriating material from "real life".

²⁵ The view of art as an imitation of nature is already at the basis of Plato's negative assessment of art seen as "copying" a reality which is itself a "copy" of the "ideas". See *The Republic*, Book X, 597a-598ed.

²⁶ "Now produce your explanation, and pray make it improbable". Algernon to Jack in *The Importance of Being Ernest*. In *Plays*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1985, p. 258.

²⁷ Louis Montrose, *New Historicisms*, p. 396.

²⁸ With her "vagueness of character" (DL, p. 77) and her "seeming to have no personality at all, but simply the possibility of many types", this woman bears a resemblance to Sybil Vane and the protagonist of *The Sphinx without a Secret*, all embodying Wilde's ideal woman who, like art itself is able to "contain" all possibilities. For a discussion of the status of women in Wilde's theory see Giovanna Franci, *Il sistema del dandy*, Bologna, Pàtron, 1977.

²⁹ Leah H. Marcus, *Renaissance/Early Modern Studies*, p. 45.

³⁰ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, New York, Basic Books, 1973, p. 51, quoted in: Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 3.

³¹ *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 8.

³² *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 8. It would be interesting to study the portrait of Dorian Gray as a case of art "mirroring" life with "something [...] actively passing back and forth".

³³ *An Ideal Husband*, in *Plays*, p. 164.

³⁴ Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, in *The Historicist Enterprise*, their introduction to *New Historical Literary Study*, pp. 38.

³⁵ Louis A. Montrose, *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, in H.A. Veeger (ed.) *The New Historicism*, pp. 15-36, p. 20.

³⁶ Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*, New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1991, p. 184.

³⁷ *New Historicisms*, p. 392.

³⁸ "Shaping Fantasies": *Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture*, in Stephen Greenblatt (ed.), *Representing the English Renaissance*, p. 31.

³⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, p. 48.

⁴⁰ *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 5.

⁴¹ Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds, *The Historicist Enterprise*, in *New Historical Literary Study*, p. 7.

⁴² "Whereas most collective expressions moved from their original setting to a new place or time are dead on arrival, the social energy encoded in certain works of art continues to generate the illusion of life for centuries. I want to understand the negotiations through which works of art obtain and amplify such powerful energy.

If one longs, as I do, to reconstruct these negotiations, one dreams of finding an originary moment, a moment in which the master hand shapes the concentrated social energy into the sublime aesthetic object. But the quest is fruitless, for there is no originary moment, no pure act of untrammelled creation. In place of a blazing genesis, one begins to glimpse something that seems at first far less spectacular: a subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies. Gradually, these complex, ceaseless borrowings and lendings have come to seem to me more important, more poignant even, than the epiphany for which I had hoped". *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 7.

⁴³ *Towards a Poetics of Culture*, p. 9.

⁴⁴ See especially Steven Mullaney, *Strange Things, Gross Terms, Curious Customs: The Rehearsal of Cultures in the Late Renaissance*, in *Representing the English Renaissance*, pp. 65-92; and Stephen Greenblatt, "Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and Its Subversion, 'Henry IV' and 'Henry V'".

⁴⁵ Louis A. Montrose, *New Historicisms*, p. 411.

⁴⁶ *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, p. 411.

⁴⁷ Stephen Greenblatt, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, p. 5.

⁴⁸ *Shakespearean Negotiations*, p. 3.

⁴⁹ Joel Fineman, *The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction*, in H.A. Veesper (ed.) *The New Historicism*, pp. 49-76.

⁵⁰ *New Historicisms*, p. 416.

⁵¹ *Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, p. 23.

⁵² *The Historicist Enterprise*, p. 8.

⁵³ See H.A. Veesper's introduction to *The New Historicism*, p. xiv.

⁵⁴ *The Poetics and Politics of Culture*, p. 30.

⁵⁵ Montrose, *New Historicisms*, p. 416. See also Dollimore and Sinfield, *Political Shakespeare*.

⁵⁶ *The Historicist Enterprise*, p. 9.

⁵⁷ See Harold Bloom's *Kabbalah and Criticism (La Kabbalà e la tradizione critica)*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1981, pp. 125-127).

⁵⁸ Brian Rosenberg, *Historicizing the New Historicism*, p. 385.

⁵⁹ Fineman lightly caricatures the "characteristic air [new historicism has] of reporting, haplessly, the discoveries it happened serendipitously to stumble upon in the course of undirected, idle rambles through the historical archives" (*The History of the Anecdote: Fiction and Fiction*, p. 52).

⁶⁰ *Shakespeare Bewitched*, in Jeffrey N. Cox and Larry J. Reynolds (ed.) *New Historical Literary Study*, pp. 108-135.

⁶¹ One of Greenblatt's *coups de scène*: "For Shakespeare the presence of the theatrical in the demonic, as in every other realm of life, only intensifies the sense of an equivocal betwixt-and-between, for his theatre is the space where the fantastic and the bodily, *energia* and *enargeia* touch. To conjure up such a theater places Shakespeare in the position neither of the witchmonger nor the skeptic. It places him in the position of the witch". Stop. (p. 127).

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