

a week or two on each of the dominant kinds of theory. Insofar as such courses recognize the importance to literary study of reading theory, they are all to the good. But as soon as deconstruction, or any other “theory” for that matter, becomes “just one intellectual option among others” it is dead. No doubt about that. And a “crisis in Western metaphysics” that is studied in the same way one studies Neoplatonism or gender relations in the Renaissance in order to understand sixteenth-century sonnets is of course no longer a crisis at all but an object for disinterested historical study. The historicization of theory is being carried out actively today, even by people who are sympathetic to theory and do not intend to do it any harm, far from it. But literary theory is nothing if it is not praxis, that is, active, performative, productive. What it produces are readings. It is these readings that have political force in the sense of implicitly or explicitly calling for new arrangements of the institution (curricula, courses, departments) and of the society that institution serves. To make a theory “merely theory,” “just one intellectual option among others,” is to render it useless, but the same would apply as much to the presuppositions of Foucaultian new historicism or feminist theory or any other theory as to deconstruction.

I shall conclude by saying a word in response to the forceful letter from Elizabeth Sánchez. She says she is puzzled by what is meant by the “material base.” So am I, and my discussion of it was meant to suggest what is puzzling, in part by indicating the wide and to some degree heterogeneous applications of the term. In the end, I was trying to argue, the term is enigmatic. It is not something that can be taken for granted as a starting point but rather something that arises in a different way depending on how it is approached, as Sánchez’s list of five possible meanings indicates. Many others could be added. This suggests that the material base, far from being a self-evident starting point, is a kind of ghostly reflex or phantom ground that arises as a necessary presupposition of some specific field of signs and therefore in a different way each time. The material base cannot be approached and identified as such, however necessary it may be as a presupposition of cultural studies.

Finally, I think what Sánchez says about the difference between Spanish-speaking America and English-speaking America is of great importance. I agree that it is chauvinistic to say “America” when you mean North America or the United States, but it will not do to make this opposition too absolute. The history of the interaction of the two cultures, the Spanish-speaking and the English-speaking, with the Indians was certainly different in the ways Sánchez suggests. But the history of Central and South America also has its long list of massacres, exploitations, and displacements of the Indians, events that are still going on today. In any case, the point of my discussion of Williams’s *In the American Grain* was to suggest that no culture, not even the “indigenous” Indian one, is rooted in the soil on which it takes place, though

we may need to project an ideal of such rootedness back on the cultures we mix with or displace. The incommensurability of “material base” and superimposed culture remains a constant, though it takes many forms and though it is certainly our business as historians and students of literature to study those forms and to discriminate among them.

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The New Historicism

To the Editor:

I have no quarrel with the list of new-historicist shortcomings in Edward Pechter’s “The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama” (102 [1987]: 293–303), but I believe that there are further problems with the approach that he does not fully address. As I understand the new historicists, while they reject the notion that a text is self-explanatory (i.e., New Criticism), they do appear to believe in a text, as shown by Maureen Quilligan’s statement, which Pechter quotes: “[T]he text does not, at the surface level, want said what the critic finds in it to say” (299). Can we rightly say what it doesn’t want said unless we can say what it says? How do we command this text, and if we do not come to grips with it, how can we (or it) logically question its assumptions? As Pechter points out, failure to regard the text does lead the new historicists into such absurdities as “refuting the ending.” Pechter would have them consider the affective components of the work; I would have them consider the ways in which the text interprets itself. The new historicists would claim that history itself is sufficient to establish both the text and the questioning substructure. I would suggest that although history is a necessary corrective to the New Criticism, it is not a sufficient means of establishing a text, that we still have to understand how the text expresses itself before we can establish how it expresses history. This is one way in which the new historicists fall into error.

But it is also because they take a too superficial view of history. The premise, cited by Pechter, that “the Renaissance is an age of power expansion” (298) cannot, as one new historicist says it does, by itself justify the conclusion that the text of *The Tempest* is concerned with colonialism. But the problem here is not simply an unwarranted conclusion; we are also dealing with a naive impression of the historical background.

I suggest that truly historical criticism of the Renaissance, even a true Marxist criticism, would address itself to an exhaustive description of the ideology of the ruling class in the Renaissance. One agrees with Marx that no text can be innocent of an ideological component. The Elizabethan world picture, whatever its shortcomings,

was an attempt to describe such an ideology. If the new historicists reject this formulation, it is their responsibility to provide something better, instead of blindly attacking institutions that they personally abhor. An ideology is, after all, not just some vague entity like monarchy or colonialism but a cluster of *ideas* that rationalize some status quo or some status devoutly to be wished. Not just the thing but the reasons for the thing. If the rationale is present in the text (and if it agrees with the text's self-explanation), then we may safely say that the text is concerned with an ideology and seek for our rebuttal of this ideology in the substructure. But my impression is that the new historicists would rather debate the negative entirely without reference to the affirmative.

Since the new historicists are disciples of Marx, why not ask Marx what we should be looking for? Looking back at the conflict that produced capitalism, Marx gives this account of the dialectical process at work in the Renaissance:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations. It has pitilessly torn asunder the motley feudal ties that bound man to his "natural superiors," and has left remaining no other nexus between man and man than naked self-interest, than callous "cash payment." It has drowned the most heavenly ecstasies of religious fervor, of chivalrous enthusiasm, of philistine sentimentalism, in the icy water of egotistical calculation. It has resolved personal worth into exchange value, and in place of the numberless indefeasible chartered freedoms, has set up that single, unconscionable freedom—Free Trade. . . . The bourgeoisie has stripped of its halo every occupation hitherto honored and looked up to with reverent awe. . . . The bourgeoisie has torn away from the family its sentimental veil, and has reduced the family relation to a mere money relation.

(*Communist Manifesto*, Chicago: Regnery, 1954, 12–13)

Though Marx, with his references to feudal ties, patriarchy, the family, religious fervor, chivalrous enthusiasm, and honored occupations, has shown the way, the new historicists, who set great store by Elizabethan conduct books, have still to produce a full catalog of the ethical precepts that rationalize the ideology of the ruling class in the Renaissance. I suggest this ideology is to be found very close to home, in the European idea of a gentleman, so much admired by Conrad, Hemingway, and Faulkner, and that it originates in the Christian doctrine of self-sacrifice melded with the ancient concept of honor. The new historicists (as well as the old) have ignored, in particular, Cicero's *De officiis*, the most important moral authority of the period, well known to every schoolchild, which contains a thoroughgoing rationalization of all the precepts that go to make up the genteel ideology. Instead, they prefer to fix on such details as the apparently self-serving aspects of Castiglione's "sprezzatura," while ignoring the thrust of his book as a whole. The task of assembling the ideology of the ruling class in the Renaissance is still before us.

Only when we have accomplished this task can we rightly identify the surface of a Renaissance work. And only after we have shown how the text represents the values of the ruling class in terms of itself can we question that surface. Say, if you wish, that these values have the function of maintaining the ruling class in power, but at least admit that they exist in history and in the text.

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Reply:

Ben Ross Schneider links his critique of the new historicism to mine, but I can recognize in his commentary neither the new historicism nor my critique, so these are links I wish to sever. According to Schneider new historicists "claim that history itself is sufficient to establish the text," but since "history itself" replicates the self-generating and self-contained text-in-itself against which new historicists situate their work, I doubt they'd want to make any such claim. I know I wouldn't—and didn't. In pointing to new-historicist tendencies to refute or even erase the ending, I was not objecting to their "failure to regard the text" but rather questioning the value and interest of the assumptions that enabled them to see the text in such a way that the ending (in the sense of a powerfully involving terminal action) was simply not there to *be* regarded. It seems rather to be Schneider who wants to revive this concept of the text-in-itself, as in his urging new historicists to "consider the ways in which the text interprets itself." On the related question of textual ideology, I find myself again disagreeing with Schneider's representation of new-historicist ideas and agreeing more with them than with him. Despite Schneider's claims, many new historicists basically accept the notion of ideology as "a cluster of *ideas* that rationalize some status quo": a lived relation to the real, the representation of a particular arrangement of social experience as if it were an immutable fact of nature. But neither they (probably) nor I (certainly) would agree with his contention that this "rationale is present in the text" and therefore consistent "with the text's self-explanation." Texts do cultural work, but not in and of themselves. Texts are used by the people who produce and receive them. If this sounds too much like liberal humanism, you can always put it the other way round and say that people (subjects) are used by the texts that produce and receive *them*. But even in this formulation, textual power should be conceived not as self-generated and self-revealing but rather as derived from a mobile and always contestible relationship between the text and various discursive systems that are themselves interpretive constructs rather than self-interpreting structures.

I can put my disagreement with Schneider in the terms he himself uses in advocating his own project. What we should do, he tells us, is to "describe" (twice) or "assemble" the components of the Renaissance ruling-class