

# BATTLE OF LITERARY CRITICISM, CULTURAL CRITICISM, CLOSE READING, AND STYLISTICS IN THE COLLEGE LITERATURE CLASS

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## Abstrak

*Keahlian apa yang lebih bermanfaat dalam memahami karya sastra? Apakah keahlian membaca cermat, kritik sastra, kritik budaya, atau stilistika? Tulisan ini bertujuan untuk menyaring pendapat yang mendukung masing-masing keahlian tersebut di atas. Selain itu, akan diuraikan pula pendapat saya sendiri bahwa dengan semakin luasnya bidang kajian sastra, yang saat ini sudah memasukkan bidang-bidang ilmu lain, ada baiknya memfokuskan pada membaca cermat dan stilistika. Tulisan ini dibatasi pada pertarungan antar bidang kajian dalam lingkup pengajaran sastra Renaisans.*

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**Kata kunci:** *kanon, strukturalis, Sejarahwan Baru, Kritik Baru, negasi determinasi, formalisme.*

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## Abstract

*Which skill is more useful in understanding a literary work: close reading, literary criticism, cultural critique, or stylistics? This essay attempts to filter the arguments of supporters of each of those skills, while inserting here and there my own opinion that with the ever broadening scope of literary studies, which has now included so many other disciplines, it is a good idea to focus on close reading and stylistics. Since the discourse is of such infinite magnitude, I have limited this essay only to the battle of various disciplines within the scope of teaching Renaissance literature.*

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**Key Words:** *canon, structuralists, New Historicists, New Criticism, determinate negation, formalism.*

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## 1. Introduction: Opening up to Larger Intellectual and Cultural Arenas?

“There are many tasks that confront criticism, many things we need to advance our understanding of literature, but one thing we do not need is more interpretations of literary works.” That ever echoing sentence from “Beyond Interpretation,” the 1976 essay that opens Jonathan Culler’s book *The Pursuit of Signs*, has served for more than a decade as a motto for those who want to reform English and Literary studies. Attacking the self-contained interpretations of New Criticism in the name of theory, the structuralists and their successors

were struggling to open our profession to larger intellectual and cultural arenas. We did not need to keep on merely practicing what we already knew how to do, adding instances and refining tools. Rather, we needed to stand back and think about what we had learned to do, so as to make it more broadly available for our students and more useful to society. Culler's own program included, among other things, studies of the history of literature as an institution, of "the role of literature in the psychological economies of both writers and readers," of "the historical, the psychic, [and] the social relationships . . . between the real and the fictive," which is to say, "the ways of moving between life and art" (6). Projects such as these were to promote "the reinvention of literary history" (13). *The Pursuit of Signs* closed with a ringing call for interdisciplinarity in a 1979 piece called "Literary Theory in the Graduate Program," and the thrust of the whole effort was to stake out greater claims for whatever it is that we did or might do as students of literature.

## 2. The Classroom as Interdisciplinary Battleground

Culler's vision has by now been largely implemented. Literature as an institution, the psychodynamics of writers and readers, the fictive construction of the real and the real construction of the fictive, the sociological interpenetration of art and life, and even the renovation of literary history—along with further dimensions and fields of study that Culler did not then yet envision—have joined the stock-in-trade of both scholarship and graduate studies. And yet the discontent remains. Even though we are now doing everything we were told twenty years ago we ought to be doing, the same complaints can still be heard, as evidenced by the session "Do We Still Do Literary Criticism? Should Our Students?," which was one of the titles of the NCTE's "Literate Lives: A Human Right" Conference (July 2007), which stimulated me to write this essay. One thing we still do not need, some appear to feel at the conference, is more literary criticism. We still need theory, cultural studies, interdisciplinarity, freed from the constraints of continuing to do what we have already done.

In echoing Culler, however, we are not simply repeating the past, for his slogan acquires a sense he could not have foreseen at the time. When he wrote, interpretation still stood opposed to theory. But with the passing of time interpretation has grown out of its naïveté and has long become part of theory. Consequently, Culler's problem in the late '70s is no longer quite our problem. The question we now ask is not whether we should turn from literary *interpretation* to literary *theory*, but whether we should transform *literary* criticism into something like *cultural* critique. Even if we advance the same proposition as Culler, in other words, we are calling a different term into question. The debates of the '70s and early '80s about method—interpretation vs. theory—have modulated into debates about field—literature vs. culture.

We shouldn't do literary criticism, one argument runs, because literature is an outmoded designation. Instead we should open up the canon and free ourselves from the biases of selection implied by the term literature. Yet opening up the canon should properly be seen as an embracing gesture rather than a demystifying one; by opening up the canon you are not abolishing literature but rendering ever more things literary. Almost any text can become literary when read critically: just look at Subur Wardoyo's reading of Brendan Gill's psychobiographical text *Here at the New Yorker* ("Literary Criticism in Theory and Practice," 41-58). Culler and many others long ago abandoned the category of the literary as a substantive, exclusivist entity. (Stanley Fish, "Anti-Professionalism" 235-36, puts the case well.) But that doesn't free us from either the obligations or the pleasures of literary criticism, an activity that continues and should continue, over ever-broadening domains.

"Do we still do literary criticism? Should our students?" My answers to these questions are the following: many of us—teachers and students alike—do literary criticism, and more of us should. Doing literary criticism, I shall be suggesting, is how we hear other voices as we read, instead of projections of ourselves. Kant's famous aphorism about intuitions and concepts comes in handy here: while criticism without critique (critical analysis) is empty, critique without criticism is blind. Doing literary criticism does not mean studying a particular body of texts, but studying texts in a particular way. My main purpose is to take up the study of style as the vehicle of literary criticism, which is to say, of criticism generally.

Indeed, if you say no, we shouldn't do literary criticism, we should do some other kind of criticism instead, then you still need to clarify what it is you are doing when you do that other kind of criticism, or that other kind of intellectual activity, and how it differs from the literary criticism we used to do as well as from the activities of scholars in other disciplines into which we might otherwise get absorbed. Before we ask whether we do or should do literary criticism, those of us who were brought up doing it need first to ask a question that sounds almost silly, but, as I shall suggest, isn't at all—namely, how can we do anything other than literary criticism?

Jonathan Arac has recently described literature (he specifies fiction, but I think unnecessarily) as writing "that does not fit any defined marketing genre" (26). If we take this way of thinking seriously enough, we can infer from it a notion of literature as *the other* whose content is not predictable from any experience limited to ourselves or to the immediate circumstances of our present culture. It falls outside norms and thus calls them into question. Literature and criticism then turn out to be interdependent terms: works of any sort function as literature when they are used critically. But if literature is inherently critical because its nature is to explode categories, then our questions become almost pointless: criticism constitutes literature; there is no

criticism that is not literary criticism. This view rests on a long and politically diverse tradition, explicitly associated with names as various as Arnold and Adorno, Mallarmé and Wilde, and implied by many others, including Benjamin and Bakhtin. And the same tradition, it seems to me, has inspired much of the recovery of marginalized expressions, to the extent that they are valued for their resistance to dominant norms.

The thesis that literature is critical by nature is familiar, as are many arguments for and against it. I am not going to enter the battle directly. My purpose here is to sketch a supporting indirect argument. I'll ask what the consequences are of *not* doing literary criticism. The people I want to describe as having stopped are many of the Renaissance New Historicists. They are perhaps not the ones I might be expected to point out, since they continue to write about literature—whatever that is— and to use many of the traditional tools of our trade. But many prominent recent studies of Renaissance culture share two characteristics that make a surprising pairing, leading me into the heart of my message. For purposes of debate, I will charge these two characteristics of much Renaissance New Historicism with being uncritical and hence unliterary.

The first characteristic has been widely observed, most finely perhaps by Alan Liu. It is the mirror- like quality of many New Historicist studies. The Renaissance that they describe mirrors the contemporary world the New Historicist critics see around them. Notorious is the opening of Stephen Greenblatt's *Shakespearian Negotiations*: "I began with the desire to speak with the dead" (1), which is reiterated in the conclusion of the same essay: "if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice" (20). While Greenblatt's meaning is more complicated than my report makes it sound, the superficial appearance remains relevant: this school, in its obsession with power, authority, display, containment, and subversion, discovers what it already knew about. The increasing displacement of the designation "Renaissance" by "early modern" (which has been criticized by Leah Marcus and more sharply by Heather Dubrow) is a symptom of the risk that voyages of self discovery will collapse difference, as if earlier ages were merely more primitive, less developed, or else purer versions of our own era. We practice literary criticism, I shall suggest, not when we speak with the dead, but when we recognize voices interpellating us—literary history as provocation, to adapt Wardoyo's formula of *mutiple consciouness and the observer- narrator* (*The Observer-Narrator as Thematic and Structural Device* in William Faulkner, 1-26).

A second characteristic seems not to have been noticed publicly. It is that Renaissance New Historicists do not discuss and certainly do not theorize style. Appearances of the word "style" are rare and sometimes deformed. In a quick check, for instance, I noted the word "style" only once in Greenblatt's *Shakespearian Negotiations*, in a footnote quotation from Pierre Bourdieu, and likewise only once in Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood*, in a quotation

from the poet Samuel Daniel. While Jonathan Goldberg's *James I and the Politics of Literature* has a section called "The Style of Gods" (28-54), "style" there has its archaic meaning of designation—kings are styled gods—and only by erroneous usage does the modern meaning misleadingly get attributed to "the Roman style" (53). Richard Halpern's *Poetics of Primitive Accumulation*, a kind of critique of New Historicism from within, does have a chapter subtitled "Ideology and Style Production in Tudor England" (19-60). But its conclusion revealingly makes style "the sign that textual decoding had ultimately been unified . . . into a system of regular differences" (56); Halpern, that is, equates style with structure, leaving no realm for free play and change. "The ideological force of writing," as he says in a later chapter, "is the specific pressure that its virtual regimes can exert . . . either to reinforce or to oppose the reproduction of the social order" (84). And by "oppose" the book clearly understands outlawry and destruction. There is no middle ground between tyrannical imposition and violent revolt. This is, finally, not far from an idea buried in Greenblatt's work: in its only supportive analysis of style, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* analyzes what a summary calls Wyatt's "deliberate stylistic roughness" (160) as a sign of manliness, but then inconsistently blames Wyatt for "aggression, bad faith, self-interest, and frustrated longing" (156).

Critiques like these betray the fear of style and of stylistics implicit in many Renaissance New Historical projects. Often the fear is coded as a rejection of "close reading." Helgerson sees close reading as an "institutional" imperative rather than as a personal engagement (*Forms of Nationhood* 311 n. 55). In a recent PMLA roundtable Stephen Orgel has professed himself "not much interested" in "close reading" ("Status" 29). Even more resolutely, the Foucauldian music historian Gary Tomlinson has condemned "close reading" as a "constraining notion" complicit with "the aestheticism and transcendentalism of earlier ideologies" ("Musical Pasts" 21-22). But like the best of his fellow archaeologists of knowledge, Tomlinson in fact does not engage in a new kind of reading; rather, he merely displaces his close reading from the (musical) texts provided by his home discipline to "other voices that have seemed too distant to hear" (*Music* 43). Self-evidently, when Tomlinson proposes a "new reading of the same passages" of Ficino as a previous critic and when he claims that "we will need to read again the specific passages from his writings that Walker's interpretation misconstrued" (*Music* 101, 105), he is aiming at better close reading, and by no means rejecting the enterprise altogether. Whatever his precepts, his practice proves congruent with the conclusion of Douglas Mao's articulate defense of New Criticism, namely, "that reading things is our business"

(252). (For another recent defense of New Criticism see Geoffrey Hartman, "The Fate of Reading Once More.") Among those who profess to reject stylistics and close reading, however, Greenblatt is again the most

revealing. His essay "The Circulation of Social Energy" (in *Shakespearean Negotiations*) begins by conceding that "close reading" of what he calls "formal and linguistic design" belongs in the classroom, but he has already stacked the cards by designating formalism and stylistics as design rather than energy or invention, and he immediately disclaims any interest in studying them. Indeed, there is a distinctly hostile note in this opening gesture. "The textual analyses I was trained to do had as their goal the identification and celebration of a divine literary authority, whether that authority was ultimately located in the mysterious genius of an artist or in the mysterious perfection of a text whose intuitions and concepts can never be expressed in other terms" (3). It cites a sentence from William Wimsatt's essay on the concrete universal: "In each poem there is something (an individual intuition—or a concept) which can never be expressed in other terms" (165). Now of all the New Critics, Wimsatt was the great student of style, and Greenblatt's rejection of this teacher in particular has many implications for the resources and mission of literary criticism.

Greenblatt attributes to Wimsatt a belief in "mysterious perfection." These are not Wimsatt's words; he prefers the concepts of "maturity or sophistication or richness or depth" ("Concrete" 82). Wimsatt follows his sentence about something inexpressible in poems with this clarification, which concludes the essay: "It is like the square root of two or like pi, which cannot be expressed by rational numbers, but only as their *limit*. Criticism of poetry is like 1.414 . . . or 3.1416 . . . , not all it would be, yet all that can be had and very useful" (83). To the stylistician, poetry is precise, irrational, and powerful, but neither mysterious nor perfect. (The casual misstatement of the value of pi, which should be 3.1415 . . . , is very much in the spirit of Wimsatt's humility.) Greenblatt misrecognizes Wimsatt's "individual intuition" as a mystical flight, when Wimsatt clearly intended a different sense of "intuition," Kantian *Anschauung*. Poetry continuously presses us to revise our approximations; it affords us better, more exact, more rigorous concepts than any that our imperfect language allots us. It does not magically inspire us but tests us.

I believe that the two characteristics of many Renaissance New Historicists are related. First, they are not critical: they see themselves, their own concerns, their modernity in looking into old texts. Second, they do not study style. Syllogistically they see themselves in the texts *because* they do not study style. For style is the irreducible otherness of irrational precision that does not fall into the general categories to which uncritical reading reduces texts. As Stanley Fish has written, in the wake of a critique of the fashion for mechanistic categorization that briefly passed for stylistics, genuine stylistic features are "local and temporary." Dependent on a "finite but infinitely flexible ability" and recognized through "a personal knowledge of what it means to have it," the study of style "can have no rules in the sense of discovery procedures" ("What Is Stylistics" 95). And, as Marjorie Sabin has forcefully argued, style, critically

displayed, is literature's challenge to the timeless universals hiding the action of cultural expressions. Renaissance New Historicism, it is often alleged, lacks an adequate conception of subjectivity or of personal agency. (See, for instance, Kerrigan; Mikics 3-14; and, most recently, Strier 67-79. A similar critique could be made of Steven Mailloux's pragmatist American historicism; "rhetoric," in his usage, problematizes ideologies and discursive formations, but vitiates the critical force of "style" by relegating meaning to institutional forces of the past and present.) Through their style, cultural expressions become literary by resisting the idealizing universals into which our ideologies otherwise slide. That is the way literature *acts* critically in expressing its difference from all imposed thoughts.

That is my conclusion but not my end. I append a pair of elucidations, in the second of which I attempt to say a few more, necessarily brief words about what style means in this context.

### 3. Conclusion

First elucidation. I have been careful to limit my negative examples largely to Renaissance New Historicists. I by no means intend to impeach historicists generally. Many noted Romantic historicists, for instance, have subtle ears for style which they use to make revealing critical distinctions between epochs and among authors and within texts: I could instance Jerome McGann and David Simpson, Marjorie Levinson and Marilyn Butler, and many more. And so likewise our great latter-day Adorno, Fredric Jameson.

Second and final elucidation. I want to propose a definition of style. According to Wimsatt and Fish alike, the study of style is the study of the minute precisions that correct any and all generalizations. A writer's style is the way he or she continues to differ from anything you have yet said about her or him. Its resistance to our critical mastery (like Wimsatt's *pi*) forces ever-increasing precision. At once impalpable and exact, style is a cardinal instance of what Hegel calls determinate negation. In contrast to general negation—the raw conflicts of subject and object or master and servant analyzed in a famous, early section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*—a later analysis of "the matter itself" (*die Sache selbst*) highlights the qualitative negativity ("Negation als Qualität," *Phänomenologie* 289) that allows reason to flower into spirit. Even without a detailed account of what Hegel specifically means by such determinate negation (for which see Brown's "Why Style Matters" 85-86), the term itself usefully suggests what is at stake in a return to stylistics. For in their specularly and their neglect of the *critical*, stylistic dimension, the Renaissance New Historicists I have instanced lack a vital means of determining specification. In its absence, they fall into what Catherine Gallagher cleverly calls "indeterminant negativity" (41); that is why their categories so characteristically turn

oppositional and global, as with Halpern's Hobson's choice between reinforcing or tearing down the social order. Critique then keeps slipping into crisis, as Reinhart Koselleck illustrated in his beautiful study of the ideological origins of the French Revolution. We retain the critical edge when we refine, modify, and correct instead of resisting, and we do that when we study in literary, critical, and diacritical fashion.

I'll close by mentioning Fredric Jameson, whom I have already invoked as a genuinely critical reader (which doesn't mean that I always agree with him). Jameson proposes the concept of determinate negation in the chapter concerned with style in his book on Wyndham Lewis. (The chapter is called, "Hairy, Surgical, and Invisible," which isn't a bad paraphrase for the actions of critical thought.) And in *Marxism and Form* Jameson writes as follows, "To define style as language which deliberately calls attention to itself . . . is to reassert the profoundly historical nature of the phenomenon" (335). The word to stress there is "profoundly." The return to style is a return to language in its function as the determinate negation constituting history from deep within as a continuously modulating process. Without literature, which is to say, without literary criticism, our tools are crude, our concepts inexact, and our history one of uncomprehending collisions. We have all read histories like that, and literary criticism is what we need in order to strive toward better ones.

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