

*Hermeneutics, the New Historicism,
and Comparative Literature Studies*

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Inasmuch as Comparative Literature Studies investigate the interrelations between texts from different cultures, they must inevitably address, on the level of methodological self-reflection, the question of how history affects the creation of these texts as well as their critical interpretation. Perhaps this reminder is unnecessary because for many members of the discipline, the importance of history in this sense seems self-evident; on the other hand, Frank Lentriccia, in his impressive history of modern literary criticism, draws our attention to the fact that one of the prevailing influences of the New Criticism can be seen "in the repeated and often extremely subtle denial of history by a variety of contemporary theorists" (xiii). In this situation, it is opportune to rehabilitate history as a central category of literary theory and criticism. My essay discusses the role of history in textual interpretation and offers some tentative suggestions as to the significance of recent historical criticism for Comparative Literature Studies.

I

History enters literary interpretation on at least two dialectically related

levels: the historicity of literature, i.e., the participation of texts in the socio-historical situation of their production and original reception, corresponds to the historicity of the critics (and other readers), i.e., to the dependency of their interpretive discourses on the cultural norms, socio-political formations, ideologies, etc., of their own time. Formulating this principle as the ground of all humanistic disciplines, I would like to emphasize that history is an inescapable factor in any interpretation even if the critic adheres to the assumptions that the literary work is an autonomous, self-contained artifact existing independently from its author and socio-political reality, and that the critic should aim at an objective, disinterested interpretation untainted by any distorting influence of his or her own historical situation and culture.

As to the first assumption: I think that the category of literary autonomy, indispensable as it is for contemporary literary criticism, would be misconstrued if we define it simply and undialectically as the absolute separation of poetic language from empirical reality. Rather, as I will discuss later, the autonomy status of literature can be apprehended much more adequately if the critic shows how individual texts assert their (apparent) aesthetic independence and self-sufficiency within a poetological discourse that defines it particular involvement in social reality through its difference from, and often opposition to, other, primarily pragmatic, discursive formations.¹

As regards the second way in which history affects literary interpretation, i.e., the historically influenced perspective of the critic, we can turn to Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. In opposition to 19th century historicism, attempting to arrive at an objective, disinterested reconstruction of the past by trying to exclude, as far as possible, the historical situation of the interpreter, Gadamer emphasizes that such a methodological procedure is an ahistorical fallacy because it disregards the finitude and temporality of human existence inescapably involved in history and tradition. Gadamer shows that

the critic's pre-judgments ("Vorurteile"), inherited from history, are not necessarily distortive factors in interpretation; rather, they are foremost productive presuppositions for any meaningful appropriation of the past and its texts, because they disclose possibilities of understanding and guide the activity of all interpretation (250-69). In the encounter with the past text, the temporal distance between that text and the interpreter allows for the separation of false prejudices accounting for misunderstandings from the legitimate pre-judgments that make valid interpretations possible (275-83). Understanding, then, always presupposes the critic's continuous self-reflective awareness of the historicity of interpretation, i.e., of his or her finite situation in time and "effective history," by which Gadamer means the continuity of the historical process, tradition, and language encompassing texts and present interpreters. Gadamer explains however that such "effective-historical consciousness" can never attain complete self-transparency as to one's historical situation because of the involvement of the reflecting subject in the very historical process within which it tries to understand its position. Dependent upon the historical perspective of the critic, interpretation as conceived by Gadamer is a fusion of the past horizon of the text and the present horizon of the interpreter: these horizons are mediated by the effective-historical power of language and tradition (284-90), which bridges the alienating difference between the past and the present without erasing it. The process of interpretation requires the text's "application" ("Anwendung") to the situation of the interpreter; in this way, the text preserves its continuing significance and truth for the critic (290-95).²

As this sketchy summary suggests, one of Gadamer's main achievements is to have shown that it is the awareness of the critic's historicity, rather than some unattainable ideal of impartial and pure objectivity, that assures the validity of one's comprehension and evaluation of the past. Although the claim to universality expressed by hermeneutics has not remained uncontested espe-

cially the critique of ideology and poststructuralism have voiced their opposition to this claim-,³ my following discussion of the textuality of history and the critical movement labeled as the New Historicism will be guided by hermeneutical assumptions, because I think that hermeneutics has offered the most convincing philosophical foundation of historical understanding to date.

II

Reinstating history as a central category of literary criticism presupposes a thorough reflection on the linguisticity of historiographic transmissions, i.e., the ways in which past historical facts and events are preserved, communicated, interpreted, and ultimately constituted, through language. Concerning the understanding of (literary) texts, Gadamer's hermeneutics shows that the fusion of horizons bringing about the appropriation of the past is always a process grounded in the communicative capacities of language because it is the linguistically constituted tradition that bridges the temporal distance between the period of the text and that of the interpreter, and because it is language that is the very medium of interpretation: "The linguisticity of understanding is *the concretization of the effective-historical consciousness*" (367; my trans.). These features of textual interpretation correspond to the linguistic nature of the historiographical constitution of past reality.

Here Hayden White's theory of the essential rhetoricity and poeticity of history writing is of particular importance because, as I read him, White without, to my knowledge, referring to Gadamer accomplishes for history what hermeneutics does primarily with respect to works of literature: he reflects on the ways in which the communicative structure of language itself constitutes the explanation, interpretation and evaluation of historical facts and events. Actually, Gadamer himself touches upon analogies between historiographical and literary understanding. For Gadamer, philology (the study of literary

texts) and history display an "inner unity," in that both disciplines interpret the past, not through objectifying reconstruction, but by performing essentially similar acts of hermeneutical application. Both fields of study are grounded in the "effective-historical consciousness" of the interpreters' involvement in the tradition containing, and communicating between, themselves and the texts or historical events they try to comprehend. For Gadamer, the philologist understands his text in such a way that he understands himself in the text; in a similar way, Gadamer conceives of history as a "text" as well, of which every historical document is only a fragment, a "letter;" and like the philologist, the historian understands himself in the "text of world history" which he seeks to decipher (323).

By defining literary works and history as texts that require essentially the same strategies of interpretation informed by the historical perspective of the interpreter, Gadamer in a striking way anticipates much of White's theory of historiography, which has been of considerable influence on the New Historicism. In his *Metahistory*, White defines the historical work (histories and philosophies of history alike) as "a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" which "combine a certain amount of 'data,' theoretical concepts for 'explaining' these data, and a narrative structure for their presentation as an icon of sets of events presumed to have occurred in times past." In addition to this manifest structure, historiographical writing contains "a deep structural content which is generally poetic, and specifically linguistic, in nature, and which serves as the precritically accepted paradigm of what a distinctively 'historical' explanation should be" (ix). White postulates four possible tropological strategies which constitute this "metahistorical" level of historiography and the linguistic ground of the mode of historical consciousness held by various historians: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony (xi).

By concentrating on these poetic strategies of historical writing, White

does not call into doubt the possibility of attaining valid knowledge about historically remote periods, but seeks to undermine the traditional assumption, often held by historians and literary critics alike, that historiography differs from poetry and fiction in that it is supposedly able to arrive at a faithful reconstruction of the material actuality of 'real' past 'facts' and occurrences which is unaffected by the constitutive processes of linguistic signification shaping the historian's narrative discourses. For White, the intrinsic linguisticity, rhetoricity, and poetic nature of historical writing erase, or at least open up, the traditional border separating fiction and history. As he says in his essay "The Historical Text as Literary Artifact," "there has been a reluctance to consider historical narratives as what they most manifestly are: verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much *invented as found* and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences" (82). The fictive character of historiography is not a distorting, but, on the contrary, a truly communicative pre-condition for any meaningful appropriation of the past for the present, because, as White shows, by emplotting past events as a story the genre of which (romance, tragedy, comedy, satire, epic, etc.) is, through tradition, known to the readers, the historians are able to familiarize the audience with the original otherness and strangeness of the historical events, rendering the remote past comprehensible within the cultural and historical situation of the readers (85-86).

My preceding discussion, I hope, illuminates the essentially hermeneutic structure of White's argument; both he and Gadamer emphasize the textual character of history that establishes the close proximity of this field to poetic discourse; both thinkers deny the interpreter's capability of attaining any 'direct,' non-linguistic access to history or literary works in their original 'essence'; therefore, for both, interpretation is not a quasi-scientific reconstruction but a textual construct that is necessarily situated in time and history, as it is

always bound to the interpretive conventions and practices of discourse which the historian and the literary critic inherit from cultural tradition. In this sense, as White points out, the world disclosed by historical documents is not "more accessible," "no more 'given'" in its supposed facticity than literary texts. In fact, White draws our attention to the paradox that the "opaqueness" of the historical past is not diminished but increased by the continuous "production of historical narratives": "Each new historical work only adds to the number of possible texts that have to be interpreted if a full and accurate picture of a given historical milieu is to be faithfully drawn" ("Historical Text" 89). This awareness of the textual tradition of historiographical writings as a constitutive factor in the present historian's interpretation of the past corresponds roughly to Gadamer's insight into the effective-historical influence of tradition (which includes the cumulative history of previous interpretations) on the reader of literary works.

At this point, I wish to emphasize that Gadamer's and White's affirmation of the historicity and linguisticality of understanding does not mean that they advocate some kind of joyfully distorting relativism or subjectivism that uncritically projects the present interpreter's personal biases and categories of thinking Gadamer would say: prejudices on the past, thereby denying any possibility of explicating older periods and literary texts in their true historical perspective (cf. Hoy 68-72; Lentriccia xiv). On the contrary: any interpretation that is theoretically and practically valid requires, as its methodological foundation, the literary critic's or historian's philosophical reflection on the nature of understanding as a linguistic event conditioned by time, socio-political influences, and effective-historical, textually transmitted tradition. We should recognize these factors as positive and productive, rather than subversive, presuppositions because they disclose texts and past events in their own historical situation and, at the same time, reveal the continuing significance of these

occurrences and texts for our own present time. Grounding interpretation in these principles, rather than in the fallacy of objective reconstruction, in other words, does not undermine but sustain our hope for authentic historical and literary understanding.

III

Here the question arises of course how these theoretical insights can be transformed into a methodology of practical literary criticism. Quite a convincing answer, I think, is offered in Louis A. Montrose's programmatic essay "Renaissance Literary Studies and the Subject of History,"⁴ offering a "tentative" assessment of the theoretical assumptions and methodological principles of the New Historicism which has developed in contemporary Renaissance studies as a response to formalist tendencies in structuralist and poststructuralist theories whose notions of textuality tend to marginalize or suppress the categories of history and historical understanding (Montrose 5; Howard 14-15; Pechter 292). While Montrose is not necessarily representative of the ideological and methodological diversity of the New Historicism, I wish to focus on his ideas here because of their high level of self-reflection as to the historicity and discourse-bound nature of literary criticism.⁵ Although in his essay Montrose does not seek recourse to Gadamer's hermeneutics, he articulates similar notions about the interpreter's historicity, the linguisticity of criticism, and explicitly relying on White's theory the textuality of history. It is indicative of Montrose's self-reflective mode of argumentation that he defines the principles of the New Historicism, as he perceives them, not in an ahistorical manner but in their relation and opposition to those of earlier versions of historical criticism.

As far as the concept of history itself is concerned, Montrose appropriates Lentriccia's critique of certain "metaphysical senses of history" prevalent in

"vast areas of contemporary criticism." By this Lentriccia means versions of history characterized by one particular principle (teleology, continuity, repetition, 'tradition', discontinuity), and based on "a temporally and culturally uncontaminated ideal meaning situated at some primal origin, or at the end of things, or within temporality as its secret principle of coherence." For Lentriccia, these notions of history as "unity" and "totality" resist "forces of heterogeneity, contradiction, fragmentation, and difference," and "go hand in hand with the antihistorical impulses of formalist theories of literary criticism" (xiii-xiv).

Such a non-idealistic, pluralistic conception of history certainly would not be reconcilable with Gadamer's view of tradition as a unified, monolythic whole containing all historical changes and discontinuities which Gadamer does not deny in the continuity of unceasing fusions of horizons and interpretive applications (289-90, 295; Eagleton 72-73). Lentriccia's reconceptualization of "history" as a heterogeneous conglomerate of various "histories" is much more in agreement with Michel Foucault's Nietzschean philosophy which rejects among many other notions not only (we could add: like Gadamer) "a suprahistorical perspective" on the past, the ideal of objective historical knowledge, ahistorical "constants," and strictly teleological views of history, but also (quite unlike Gadamer) a conception of history as totality, continuity, and homogeneity; metaphysical foundations; "a history that always encourages subjective recognitions and attributes a form of reconciliation to all the displacements of the past"; instead, Foucault develops a genealogical philosophy of history, emphasizing "not the anticipatory power of meaning, but the hazardous play of dominations"; advocating an historical sense "that distinguishes, separates, and disperses" the heterogeneous forces in history, "that is capable of liberating divergence and marginal elements," and of "shattering the unity of man's being through which it was thought that he could extend his sovereignty

to the events of his past"; in short: a conception that does justice to the complex diversity, "marginal elements", discontinuities, and "haphazard conflicts" of history (80-90; Howard 22-23).

Such an emphasis on the plurality, multiplicity, and heterogeneity of mutually contesting forces in history informs Lentriccia's critique of formalist tendencies in contemporary literary theory and, in a similar way, influences Montrose's attack against the assumptions of various older versions of historical Renaissance criticism; among them are the combination of literary and intellectual histories with close reading, the postulation of a "stable, coherent, and collective Elizabethan world picture," and the positivistic search for "one-to-one correspondences between fictional characters and actions, on the one hand, and specific historical persons and events, on the other." Montrose's aim is clear: he seeks to overcome the established view of history as a unified, stable, self-evident constellation of facts that can be reconstructed objectively. In opposition to this conception, Montrose proposes what could be called a deconstructive critique of traditionally "unproblematized distinctions between 'literature and history,' between 'text' and 'context'." Moreover, Montrose, following the critique of the subject initiated by Foucault and other, mostly post-structuralist thinkers, revises idealist notions of autonomy, i.e., "a prevalent tendency to posit and privilege a unified and autonomous individual whether an Author or a Work-to be set against a social or literary background" (6).

Montrose, then, criticizes the assumption, characteristic of much (although, we should add, not all) traditional versions of historical criticism, that there is a clearly definable, ontological difference between the empirical reality of political and economic history on the one hand, and human consciousness (e.g., that of the author) and the fictionality of literature, on the other. Taking this difference for granted, older historicisms often elevate the socio-historical situation to the status of a stable and reliable reference system on the basis of which the

critic can determine the meaning of the texts produced and received in that historical period. Montrose's New Historicism intends to overcome this methodological fallacy by appropriating poststructuralist theories of textuality (as far as they do not suppress history and historical understanding) and discourse for the historical analysis of the mutually defining and contesting interactions between literary texts and the socio-political situation of their production and original reception. Especially Foucault's notions of how historically changing discursive practices constitute human subjects and objects of knowledge within ideologies and social institutions of power and domination have been of significant influence on the New Historicists. Employing Foucauldian terminology, Montrose summarizes the goals of this movement as follows:

Briefly and too simply characterized, its collective project is to resituate canonical literary texts among the multiple forms of writing, and in relation to the non-discursive practices and institutions, of the social formation in which those texts have been produced while, at the same time, recognizing that this project of historical resituation is necessarily the textual construction of critics who are themselves historical subjects.(6)

As this passage indicates, the New Historicism as Montrose describes it could, in my opinion, be characterized as a transformation of Foucauldian theories of discourse and the hermeneutical self-reflection upon the historicity and linguisticity of interpretation into a methodology of literary historical criticism. These two aspects are not incompatible because hermeneutics and Foucault's genealogical conception of history, different as they are with respect to their definitions of tradition, knowledge, truth, and interpretation,⁶ do share a common ground in that both philosophies reject the ideal of an objective reconstruction of the past and an historical consciousness that asserts its neutrality and disinterestedness against its involvement in time and history; against these assumptions, hermeneutics and Foucault's thinking affirm, explicitly acknowledging the influence of Nietzsche, the historically conditioned perspectivity of

knowledge (Gadamer 286-87; Foucault 90).⁷ My contention, in other words, is that Montrose's New Historicism, without explicitly relying on particular hermeneutical philosophers like Gadamer, nonetheless appropriates Foucault's definition of history and discursive practices in a manner typical of the specifically hermeneutical reflection on the interaction between language, history, and textual interpretation. Situating Montrose's program within the larger tradition of hermeneutics is a metacritical construct that allows us, I hope, to see the New Historicism as a methodology of literary criticism that promises possibilities of mediating between Foucault's thinking and hermeneutics with respect to the historicity of interpretive discourses without erasing other differences between these two philosophies.

In line with such mediating tendencies of the New Historicism, Montrose combines the Foucauldian project of studying "that interplay of culture-specific discursive *practices* in which versions of the Real are instantiated, deployed, reproduced and also appropriated, contested, transformed," and the hermeneutical preoccupation with the historicity of the interpreter's discourse, as opposed to the fallacy of historical objectivism:

Integral to this new project of historical criticism is a realization and acknowledgment that the critic's own text is as fully implicated in such an interplay as are the texts under study; a recognition of the agency of criticism in constructing and delimiting the subject of study, and of the historical positioning of the critic vis-a-vis that subject; and thus a renunciation of the illusory quest of an older historical criticism to recover objective, authentic, or stable 'meanings' (7-8).

I read this quotation as the intertextual cross-section of Foucauldian and hermeneutical insights into the mutually defining interaction between the historical situation of the interpreted text and the historicity of the critic's perspective, defined by Gadamer as the fusion of the text's and the interpreter's horizons premised upon the "Anwendung" (application, appropriation) of the text within the interpreter's situation; this process is central to the her-

meneutical project whose “true position” is found between the poles of the historical alienation of the cultural inheritance and the interpreter’s belonging to a continuous effective-history and tradition (279). Montrose articulates the New Historicist’s affirmation of the interrelations between texts, history, and literary criticism in terms strikingly similar to Gadamer’s:

In brief, to speak today of an historical criticism must be to recognize that not only the poet but also the critic exists in history; that the texts of each are inscriptions of history; and that our comprehension, representation, interpretation of the texts of the past always proceeds by a mixture of estrangement and appropriation, as a reciprocal conditioning of the Renaissance text and our text of the Renaissance. (8)

With reference to Hayden White’s theory of historiography, Montrose establishes a dialectical correspondence between the historicity of texts and criticism, on the one hand, and the textuality of history, on the other; i.e.,

the unavailability of a full and authentic past, a lived material existence, that has not already been mediated by the surviving texts of the society in question those ‘documents’ that historians construe in their own texts, called ‘histories,’ histories that necessarily but always incompletely construct the ‘History’ to which they offer access. (8)

Like White’s theory, Montrose’s conception of history should not be construed as denying or marginalizing the material reality of socio-political institutions, power relations, economic mechanisms, etc., and their equally material influences on human subjects. The implication is rather that such interactions between human consciousness and historical actuality can only be conceived and comprehended through those mediating institutions of language, discourses, and texts which people use to describe, interpret, and contest socio-political reality. Textuality of history means furthermore that such linguistic apprehension of reality is preserved for posterity likewise always as texts, such as documents, chronicles, historiographic writings.

As White has demonstrated, the textual nature of history necessarily contains elements of narrativity, poetic discourse, and fictionality, while, converse-

ly, all literature is always inscribed with the traces of the socio-historical situation in which they were produced; this dialectical interaction between the textuality of history and the historicity of texts significantly undermines the ontological difference between historical facticity and literary fictionality maintained by various versions of traditional, especially positivist, historicism and literary criticism. The "current emphasis on the dynamic, unstable, and reciprocal relationship between the discursive and material domains" necessitates for Montrose the revision or rejection of several standard definitions of literature:

as an autonomous aesthetic order that transcends the shifting pressure and particularity of material needs and interests; as a collection of inert discursive reflections of 'real events'; as a superstructural manifestation of an economic base. (8)

Opposing these definitions (identifiable as idealist and orthodox Marxist, respectively), the New Historicism "emphasizes both the *relative* autonomy of specific discourses and their capacity to impact upon the social formation, to make things happen by shaping the consciousness of social beings." In other words, a text is "socially produced" and "socially productive": it is "the product of work" and at the same time "performs work in the process of being written, enacted, or read" (8-9).

Methodologically effective as Montrose's definition is for Renaissance studies in stressing the social influence of texts upon authors and their audiences, it implies the danger of simply replacing the category of aesthetic autonomy characteristic of aesthetics since the late 18th century by transforming an earlier, historically specific function of texts that of Renaissance works more or less explicitly articulating, affirming, or criticizing the feudalistic and courtly institutions and ideologies of their time into a critical category claiming essentially metahistorical validity for literature of all periods. As Peter Bürger has shown, such a generalization of an historically specific character of litera-

ture is typical of the self-formation of aesthetic theories (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* 15). At the end of his essay, Montrose articulates his awareness of this problem by explicitly acknowledging the origin of his concept of the literary text in the situation of Renaissance culture and poetics. Here he summarizes several typical features of Renaissance literature the as yet incomplete separation of literature and art from "didactic and political discourses or from such disciplines as history or moral and natural philosophy," as well as the "rhetorical models in Renaissance poetics and the predominance of patronage as a mode of literary production" and suggests that these cultural phenomena "may have worked to foreground rather than efface the status of texts as social and not merely literary productions." Consequently, canonical texts from "the earlier period may more immediately and actively invite socio-historical analysis than do the later works that were actually produced within an ideology of aesthetic disinterestedness" (12). Here, in the context of his reflection on the historicity of his concept of the literary text, Montrose suggests that the notion of aesthetic disinterestedness which, after all, is inseparable from the category of autonomy (Raval 91-100) that he proposes to revise or even reject earlier in his essay be considered as an actual historical stage in the development of literature, although it certainly has not remained unchallenged in contemporary poetological discourse:

Because we now seem to be moving beyond this modern, essentialist orientation to 'Literature,' [i.e., disinterestedness] we can begin to grasp it as an historical formation that had barely begun to emerge at the turn of the seventeenth century. (12)

The recognition of disinterestedness as an actual historical formation, however, means that the New Historicism should incorporate into its critical discourse the category of autonomy as well, rather than seeing it merely as an anachronism to be overcome by more adequate concepts.

Following Peter Bürger,⁸ I propose to define autonomy as the central

category of a poetological discourse that, dominating increasingly since the rise of the bourgeoisie to political and economic power in 18th century Europe, defines itself as an aesthetically “free” and “purpose-less” system of signification in relation to, demarcation from, and often critical opposition to, other discourses of pragmatic, moral, religious, or scientific nature. Protesting against the increasingly felt alienation and practical rationalism of social reality, the discourse of aesthetic autonomy enabled authors to assert their artistic identity as “original genius” whose unique spontaneity and imagination allowed for the creation of “organic,” self-sufficient works proclaiming to overcome alienation through the unity of form and defying the aesthetic rules and conventions of tradition; furthermore, the discourse of autonomy described the role of the reader as a solitary act of contemplative reception, as a self-forgetful immersion of the interpreters in the work of art which promised them a temporary emancipation from the constraints of empirical reality. As Bürger emphasizes, autonomy is not merely a subjective concept on the part of the artist; rather, it is an actual, historically and socially conditioned process of the emancipation of art from pragmatic society, although autonomy was subsequently hypostatized as the “essence” of art generally (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* 35-36, 46). Although the discourse of autonomy was radically questioned and subverted by the Avantgarde movements, it does continue to have considerable influence on much of contemporary aesthetics and literary criticism (Bürger, *Kritik* 9).

For this reason, the category of autonomy has to remain a central object of debate and criticism in our present discourse about literature, including the New Historicism. Texts written within the “ideology of aesthetic disinterestedness,” to use Montrose’s terminology, are as “socially produced” and “socially productive” as Renaissance (or any other) works, although they fulfill this function within the different institutionalized framework of autonomy,⁹ and therefore “invited socio-historical analysis” as “actively” as any other text. In

this way rehabilitating the category of autonomy, the New Historicism can against Montrose's own apparent doubts transform itself from a specific approach to Renaissance literature into an effective methodology of general literary criticism and theory.

IV

I wish to conclude by briefly offering some suggestions as to the significance of the preceding arguments for Comparative Literature Studies. Even more than scholars studying the literature of their own culture and nationality, Comparatists, dealing with works usually from cultures and historical periods other than their own, are inescapably confronted with the problems which the historical, linguistic, and cultural differences between the texts they read and their own interpretive situation pose for the activity of understanding. I do not believe that the critic can, or should, overcome these differences by appealing to the universality of certain basic human values, ideas, and beliefs that are shared by various times and cultures and therefore help the interpreter to bridge the gap between his or her situation and the otherness of the texts. Such an empathetic concept of interpretation is, I think, a fallacy because, no matter whether or not we accept the poststructuralist denial of a unified, stable essence of the human subject, it is at least safe to say that such apparently constant human values and ideas are actually much too culture-specific, language-bound, and conditioned by particular historical periods to function as the only sufficient pre-conditions for successful textual understanding.

Rather, I think, we can assume, following Gadamer's hermeneutics,¹⁰ that it is the communicative structure of linguistic signification and the translatability of languages, together with certain undeniable continuities in history and traditions (prevailing over the equally undeniable ruptures, breaks, and discon-

tinuities) that are the actual grounds of interpretation in Comparative Literature Studies. Thanks to the efficacy of these hermeneutical factors, the insight that the texts to be interpreted and the interpretive activity of the critic are equally bound to their respective historical, cultural, and linguistic situations is not an obstacle to adequate understanding that needs to be overcome or suppressed. On the contrary, only if we, as Comparatists, affirm the historical, linguistic, and cultural differences between texts and interpreters; in other words, only if we remain equally aware of the traces of socio-political reality in literary texts and of our own involvement in the social and ideological forces of our time even when we are critically opposed to them! can we describe and interpret the "otherness," the culture-specific individuality of texts without imposing against our will our own historical and cultural biases upon them. In this way, we may be able to illuminate the cross-cultural relations between the texts and preserve their significance for us and our audiences, our students and the readers of our articles.

Here again I am taking up ideas offered by Montrose's New Historicism; in his essay, he points out that the New Historical "shift of emphasis from the formal analysis of verbal *artifacts* to the ideological analysis of discursive *practices*, its refusal to observe strict and fixed boundaries between 'literary' and other texts (including the critic's own)" help us "to rearticulate literature as a social practice; and, by so doing, to rearticulate criticism as a social practice" (11-12). By the critics' "social practice" Montrose does not necessarily mean any direct involvement in socio-political activity but their ability, by reading texts as historically inscribed discourses, to undermine the view "that history is what's over and done with," that history is some kind of remote past that has no bearing whatsoever upon the present political and cultural situation; for Montrose a New Historical reading can replace this notion by the acknowledgment that "history is always now," thus bringing critics and their stu-

dents “to an apprehension of [their] own historicity, [their] own ideological inscription” (12).

What Montrose says here with special reference to Renaissance literature holds, I think, equally true for Comparative Literature Studies in general. By alerting us and our students to the ways in which texts from cultures and historical periods different from ours construe, affirm, contest social reality, and by showing how our interpretations of these textual practices reflect our participation in our own culture and time, we attain a more profound insight into the texts we analyse, into our own historical situation, and into the ways in which various cultures interact, influence, and challenge each other through their textual and discursive practices.¹¹

NOTES

1 "Autonomy" as a central category of aesthetics has received renewed attention in recent critical theory which stresses its importance for contemporary literary criticism. See Raval 73-106 and, esp., the publications of Bürger.

2 For the preceding discussion of Gadamer, see Hoy, esp. 41-72, and the "Editor's Introduction" to Linge's collection of important articles by Gadamer. Hoy's book offers one of the best discussions of hermeneutics in the context of other theories, such as the critique of ideology, reception aesthetics, and post-structuralism.

3 For the position held by the critique of ideology, see Hoy 101-30; for that of poststructuralism, see the debate between Gadamer and Derrida, and the other articles, in Forget's anthology.

4 For an excellent application of Montrose's theory to the study of Renaissance literature, see his "The Elizabethan Subject and the Spenserian Text."

5 My discussion of Montrose is much indebted to the critical survey articles by Howard and Pechter, which provide excellent discussions of the wide range of methods and interpretive practices of the New Historicists. My own goal is different from theirs in that I am more interested in certain basic theoretical assumptions of Montrose and their affinity with Foucault, Hayden White, and Gadamer.

6 For the relation between Foucault's philosophy and hermeneutics, I have found the discussion by Dreyfus and Rabinow of particular help. Thorough analyses of Foucault, pertaining to my argument, can also be found in White, "Foucault Decoded;" Lentriccia 188-210; and Said, esp. 178-225.

7 For Gadamer's notion of the historicity of interpretation, the influence of Heidegger has of course been of even greater importance. See *Wahrheit und*

Methode, esp. 240-56.

8 Here I am trying in an admittedly sketchy manner to reformulate in terms of discourse the conception of autonomy in idealist aesthetics as analyzed by Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, esp. 15-54, and *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik*, esp. 53-140.

9 The category of the "institution of art" as the socio-historical framework regulating the production, distribution, reception of, and views about, art during a particular period is Bürger's. In his theory, the term applies particularly to art's status of autonomy in bourgeois society. See his *Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion* 173-99; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, esp. xlix-lv, 15-27; *Zur Kritik der idealistischen Ästhetik*, esp. 9-16.

10 See *Wahrheit und Methode* 361-465. I consider the explication of the hermeneutical foundations and problems in intercultural interpretation one of the most important issues in Comparative Literature Studies. See Scheiffele's interesting discussion of these and related topics.

11 This is the revised and expanded version of a paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Japanese Comparative Literature Association, June 1988, at Nihon University, Tokyo.

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