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that was its subject.

From a formalist perspective, then, the disparate terms that constituted extrinsic literary history formed a paradox that resisted all efforts at resolution: "literature" and "history" designated two radically incommensurate modes of cultural production that require sharply different analytic procedures. As Jakobson (1960, 356) put it, the poetic function, "by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy of signs and objects"—deepens, that is, the split between writing and the world that it is the literary historian's task to traverse. Or in the words of W. K. Wimsatt (1954, 217), the leading theoretician of American New Criticism, "In most discourse we look right through th[e] disparity [between words and things]. But poetry by thickening the medium increases the disparity between itself and its referents. Iconicity enforces disparity." The historical text, on the other hand, far from being a free-standing literary artifact that can lay claim to transhistorical value, derives its significance from its specific historical moment and remains meaningful in terms of that moment. It is a witness to local processes and concerns, a *document* whose significance derives from the events to which it testifies. Moreover, and crucially, a historical text is controlled by its author's specific and determinate intention. Rather than seeking to produce a disinterested work of art, the writer of a historical document designs his product to do actual work in the world, to participate in and to shape the historical processes of his own time. Consequently, his text cannot be understood in terms of its own literary dynamic, as an internally consistent verbal artifact governed by the laws of literary production, but must at every point be referred to and understood in terms of the instrumental purpose it sought to fulfill.

Conversely, the formalist emphasis upon the self-referentiality of the literary artwork foreclosed any effort to understand literature in terms of the historically specific intentions of its author. For one thing, in entering into the system of literary discourse, every author takes upon him or herself highly traditional modes of signifying—through structures of narrative, modes of external organization (verse forms, dramatic structures, length, etc.), patterns of imagery, and so forth—that entail meanings inherent within the literary system itself. And for another, in creating an artwork the author—regardless of his or her own understanding of an author's task—is in the position of a disinterested observer who is more concerned with the needs of the text as an internally consistent object than as a vehicle for the promotion of certain historically determined views and values. It should nonetheless be added, however, and especially in reference to American New Criticism, that formalism never embraced the "art-for-art's sake" hedonism of which it has been conventionally accused. On the contrary, both Russian and American formalism insisted that literature was a humanizing force in the world, a mission that the New Critics understood in terms of a powerful if largely unexamined Arnoldian humanism that saw literature as the bearer of permanent truths about the human condition. And in consonance with the ahistoricism of formalism, these truths were understood as having no merely local historical relevance but were, on the contrary, true for all time.

Given the inherent ahistoricity of literary writing, then, any attempt to locate literature within the causal processes of historical explanation must fail. Since historical documents are inextricably dependent upon the events of their historical moment, they can be accounted for by the same covering laws that govern historical explanation *per se*. But literature evades explanation entirely. On the contrary, it both signifies in ways unique to itself and refers not to merely local historical process but to transhistorical values implicit within the human condition as a whole. Consequently, as a long tradition of cultural studies has insisted, the literary text is an object that can never be *explained* as the effect of local historical causes but only *interpreted* as a bearer of cultural significance. While literature necessarily arises from a historical matrix it can never be adequately understood in terms of that origin, no matter how carefully the scholar seeks to reconstruct it. As René Wellek said (1982, 72), expressing with admirable directness an opinion that few recent scholars would articulate but that has nonetheless silently governed a wide range of critical practices, "We must concede the final inexplicability of a great work of art, the exception of genius." In the largest sense, the insistence upon the specialness of literary writing (however its characteristics may be defined) serves to sever the originary link between the literary text and a context constituted of other sorts of events, and to replace the text within this context requires us to apply to it crude techniques of understanding that traduce its essential nature.

In defining literature as its object of study, literary historians provided themselves with a *Fach*—a subject matter—that was equivalent to that which legitimized the other academic disciplines. But in designating that object as by definition different from other forms of writing, they erected a barrier that prevented it from being situated within a total historical account. In fact, of course, the arbitrariness of the definition of literature has always been something of an embarrassment to the literary historian. Browne's *Religio Medici* has traditionally been taken to be a literary text, while Spratt's *History of the Royal Society* is accorded only "background" status; Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus* is literature, but Marx's *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* is not. Despite the difficulty of justifying these discriminations, any essentialist theory of literature must assert them as absolute. And if there is an unbridgeable gulf fixed between *these* classes of documents, then how can the literary historian negotiate the space between more disparate texts—between, say, Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which literary historians locate at the center of modernism, and the writings generated by the general strike of 1926, which they typically ignore? Moreover, and more seriously, the essentializing of literature makes it impossible to understand literary production as itself a form of social practice, to understand it as itself part of both the cultural and material activities of its historical moment.

If literary writings were to be relocated within a nonliterary context, what needed to be sacrificed was nothing less than the very idea of "literature" as a special kind of writing. And this change entailed another, larger critique, an attack on the distinction between subjective literary studies and objective historical science that had originally driven literary critics to erect "literature" into an object of study sequestered away from other forms of cultural practice. In the late 1960s and 1970s these changes were accomplished through the intersection of two very different kinds of interests. On the one hand was a deconstructive textual analysis that appeared at times to be simply formalism writ large but that in fact subverted formalism's most deeply held assumptions. And on the other was a politically committed criticism that insisted that literary scholars could not escape from social engagement by taking refuge in the realm of the-aesthetic. The combined effect of these movements has been itself twofold. First, literary critics have come to realize that the distinction between objective and subjective forms of cultural study cannot be sustained, that every historical account is constructed only by recourse to practices that are themselves as thoroughly interpretive as those that characterize literary criticism. And second, the term "literature" has been revealed as functional rather than ontological, as designating a kind of writing whose difference from other kinds is a matter not of its essential being but of its cultural function. In other words, a piece of writing is "literature" not because it possesses certain characteristics that other pieces lack, but because its readers regard it—for a variety of reasons—as literature.

While this syncretism has at times been felt by English departments as threatening, the refiguring of the relation of literature to other kinds of writing has in fact made possible a return to the extrinsic literary historicism with which the professional study of literature first began. But this is a return with a difference—or at least it should be. As originally conceived, the defining feature of extrinsic literary historicism was not the particular historical formation that served as the privileged category of explanation, nor even (as Jakobson charged) the invocation of a confused congeries of categories. Rather, what was definitive of this brand of literary history was its pervasive reliance upon the notion of *explanation* itself, of a cause-and-effect model of cultural production: first history, then literature. Hence the shift in recent years away from the more “idealist” of these categories of explanation (biography, history of ideas, period consciousness) and toward more “materialist” formations, especially socially determined patterns of gender definition and economically based political oppositions, has not, in and of itself, brought about a significant redefinition of the practice of literary history.

What *has* brought about a change, however, is the philosophical revision entailed by deconstruction. By insisting that all modes of writing are located at an equal distance from reality, deconstruction has established, as Fredric Jameson (1976, 205) has succinctly said, the

methodological hypothesis whereby the objects of study of the human sciences . . . are considered to constitute so many texts which we *decipher* and *interpret*, as distinguished from the older views of those objects as realities or existants or substances which we in one way or another attempt to *know*.

The deconstructive argument that all writing stands at a distance from that which it seeks to represent entails both the dethronement of historicism as an objectivist discipline and the recognition that every document, no matter how closely tied to the events from which it arises, is itself a text that requires interpretation. In other words, the traditional attitude that would set a historicism that deals with objective facts over against a literary criticism that must rely upon the subjective interpretation of texts can no longer be maintained. Similarly, it is no longer possible to believe that an objective realm of history can serve to measure the correctness of the interpretation of literary texts, since history is itself as much the product of interpretive practices as are the literary interpretations it is being used to check. Both literary history and history *per se* deal with materials whose undeniable differences are less important than their shared status as verbal artifacts, a similarity that renders the methodology of the two disciplines essentially the same. So that the quest after causal explanation that had traditionally been taken as the hallmark of historicism—and that had distinguished it from, set it against, and served to devalue literary criticism—is now replaced by interpretive practices applicable across the field of historical studies as a whole.