



CHAPTER

6

Connecting the Text

Varieties of Historical Criticism

We know somewhat, and we imagine the rest.

—Samuel Johnson

THE PURPOSES OF BIOGRAPHICAL, HISTORICAL, POSTCOLONIAL, ETHNIC, MARXIST, AND CULTURAL STUDIES

In New Criticism, in reader-response criticism, and in deconstruction, our attention is primarily centered on the text itself: how it is unified, how the reader is reacting to it, how it falls apart. But there is more to life, even English professors would admit, than texts. Inquiring minds want to know about authors, what kinds of lives they led, how they were able to create their works, what was going on in the world around them. Even the most rigorously formal New Critics or the most introspectively responding readers may draw upon biographical or historical information to support their analysis or response. It seems obvious that some historical awareness is very useful if not essential for an understanding of many works of literature. And it's often fascinating.

The traditional view of history and biography assumes that there are "facts" that we can know with some degree of certainty, and as readers we simply need to gather them, and fit them together, and cautiously relate them to literary works. In the last half-century or so, this traditional view of history has become increasingly problematic. In the wake of post-structuralism and deconstruction, altering our notions of language and knowledge, what we really have is not some

set of stable facts, waiting on discovery, but rather a number of texts waiting on a process of interpretation. Rather than trying to determine what “really” happened, new historicists are interested in exploring how different versions of history are motivated and constructed. At any given moment in a culture, there may be a dominant discourse, a way of thinking and persuading that is assumed to be the norm; or there may be a swirl of competing discourses; or there may be a decaying discourse held by one segment of a culture, but under attack and falling apart, and a rising discourse, gaining adherents. There may well be, in reality, as many discourses as there are people—or even more, since some of us change our minds often, or haven’t made up our minds on many things.

Whether the notion that history is somehow up for grabs—that there are competing versions of what has happened, and these stories might be put to different uses—is really a new idea is certainly arguable, but it is a crucial idea for postcolonial and cultural studies as well as new historicism. This chapter will first try to give you some sense of how to do traditional biographical and historical criticism, and then consider how these other emerging and related orientations, linking texts and history, might further enhance your understanding and your critical repertoire.

Biographical and Historical Criticism

If we think of a literary work primarily as a personal achievement, the accomplishment of a great mind, then biographical criticism offers to help us understand both the work and its creator, as we relate one to the other. Take, for instance, the following poem.

When I Consider How My Light Is Spent

John Milton

When I consider how my light is spent,
 Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
 And that one talent which is death to hide
 Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present 5
 My true account, lest He returning chide,
 Doth God exact day-labor, light denied,
 I fondly ask. But Patience, to prevent
 That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need
 Either man’s work or His own gifts. Who best 10
 Bear his mild yoke, they serve Him best. His state

Is kingly: thousands at his bidding speed,
 And post o’er land and ocean without rest;
 They also serve who only stand and wait.

(1655?)

Biographical criticism would insist on the importance of knowing something about the author—perhaps most importantly, in this case, that Milton had lost his eyesight by 1651. Without this fact, it could be argued, the reader might wonder what sense to make of the phrase “how my light is spent,” since “going blind” would be only one of many possible meanings (how my day is spent, how my insight is used up, how my lover is tired out, and more). Knowing about Milton’s life may also help us to appreciate the poem’s significance: The speaker of the poem is not, it may seem, merely a fiction, an assumed character, contemplating some hypothesis; rather, the speaker has some connection to a real man, a writer, contemplating the horror of his own blindness.

Of course, as one guide to writing about literature puts it, you should “avoid equating the work’s contents with the author’s life” (Griffith 115); obviously a piece of writing isn’t the same thing as a person’s life. Still, although the writing and the life “are never the same,” are we obliged to conclude that writers do not sometimes try to express themselves truthfully? If we conclude that “When I Consider” is “fictional” in the same sense that *Star Wars* is fictional, then we may lose some of the poem’s power. Just as Milton’s life may illuminate the poem, the poem may also help us to understand Milton’s life. It has been thought by more than one critic that Milton was a misogynist, a “domestic tyrant” as the *Oxford Companion* puts it (654), cruelly ordering his daughters about, sternly dictating to his successive wives (three in all). This poem may suggest perhaps that Milton tended to think of the entire universe in terms of servants and masters, and that he viewed himself as a servant to God. God’s “yoke” is light, even though it employs thousands speeding “o’er land and ocean without rest,” and the servant’s job is simply to serve in whatever capacity. The servant is in fact so inconsequential that “God doth not need / Either man’s work or His own gifts.” As Milton insists to himself that he must strive to serve even if that serving means simply standing, the submissiveness in the poem reflects the sort of subservience Milton apparently expected (and thought he had earned) from those who served him. He may have treated those around him like his servants, but he also saw himself in the same way, as the servant to another master.

Biographical criticism is the natural ally of historical criticism. We can hardly understand one person’s life without some sense of the time and place in which he or she lived, and we can hardly



© Hulton-Deutsch Collection/CORBIS

understand human history without trying to think about the individual humans who made it. Historical criticism considers how military, social, cultural, economic, scientific, intellectual, literary, and (potentially) every other kind of history might help us to understand the author and work. In the case of Milton's poem, the most obvious historical context might well be the political situation of England: in 1655, about the time the poem is supposed to have been written, England was struggling to recover from a civil war that had ended with the beheading of Charles I in 1649. After this regicide, of which he approved, Milton was deeply involved in politics, serving as Latin secretary to the newly formed Council of State and writing on numerous political and religious controversies. Against the backdrop of this political turmoil, the references in the poem to the "one talent" and the urgency of using it might suggest additional meanings. (He is alluding of course to Jesus's parable, in

Matthew 25:14–30, of the poor servant who simply buried his talent—literally a very valuable coin, but metaphorically any resource—and the good servants who used their talents for profit.)

For instance: perhaps Milton felt called to straighten out his country by employing his gift for language; the government and the church must have seemed at times to be falling apart before his eyes. With his one talent, his gift for writing, perhaps Milton felt he should be saving the nation. But he puts this self-imposed burden in a new light in the poem when he reminds himself that God does not need his help—that others do God's bidding, and that his own job description may have changed dramatically with his impairment. He is telling himself that all he must do now is "stand and wait," ready to serve when he can. (As it turns out, Milton's accomplishments were prodigious while he "waited" to write his masterwork, *Paradise Lost*.)

The history of literature itself has also been considered especially important for the understanding of particular works. Milton's reader needs to recognize that "When I Consider" is a sonnet, but it would also be nice to know what sonnets Milton had read or might have read, how this sonnet relates to others, and what other poems or other kinds of works Milton knew. Such literary background is almost always helpful and often seems essential. In the study of renaissance literature, for example, students have for decades read E. M. W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* in order to understand the background of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, Christopher Marlowe, and other Elizabethan writers. Tillyard aimed, as he said, to explain the Elizabethans' "most ordinary beliefs about the constitution of the world" (viii), and he showed clearly and repeatedly how this basic knowledge is essential to our understanding. For example, Tillyard says English citizens who lived during the reign of Elizabeth (1558–1603) believed in "a doctrine of plenitude." They imagined an order in the universe whereby every entity filled a particular position in a "chain of being," stretching from the lowest possible inert element to the highest, from the lowest plant to the highest, and from the lowest creature to the highest (25–33). In *Paradise Lost*, Milton's Raphael, an angel, explains this "chain of being" to Adam, showing him how everything is ranked, and every level of possible being is filled. And Adam explains to Eve one consequence of this hierarchical "plenitude," as Tillyard notes (32):

Millions of spiritual Creatures walk the Earth
Unseen, both when we wake, and when we sleep:
All these with ceaseless praise his works behold
Both day and night.

Imagining that Milton inherited the Elizabethan idea of the chain of being may help to understand the ending of "When I Consider." Specifically, we get a better sense of the reference to the "thousands" who speed at God's bidding, without rest. They are part of the "millions" of possible creatures existing in the scale between Milton and God; and, if God has a place (but not a need) for those who actively serve him, he also must allow in the scheme of things for some who serve in every other possible way—including standing and waiting. Thus, Milton's passive role is required of him; it is right; it is his current place in the universal chain of being.

Historical research can provide us with a richer understanding of what an author is saying. Consider however the following assertion: "Once one knows . . . that *King Lear* first played at King James' court and that many things in the play refer to conflicts between Parliament and the court, one can more readily grasp what the play is in fact about. It is less a tragedy with universal values than a quite partisan polemic whose meaning is provided by the historical world in which it was produced" (Ryan 159). In this case, it seems that historical awareness actually diminishes the play's significance: It's not so much about "universal values" as it is about a particular time and place. But if Shakespeare's play is alluding to, interpreting, reflecting some particular events of his day, does that relationship really limit the play's tragedy, its engagement with what is deeply human? Or does our historical understanding help us to appreciate better how the specific might relate to the general? Does Milton's actual blindness suggest that his poem is any less concerned with the profound questions of why we are all here, and whether the universe needs us? The varieties of historical criticism are so powerful precisely because they can be used to shape our understanding of how a work relates—or fails to connect—to other times and places.

Cultural Studies

"History" includes, of course, not only those great and obviously influential persons and events that we usually think of, but also the ordinary, the everyday, the apparently trivial. The development of plumbing is clearly very important to civilization, but few people, I would venture, know much about its evolution. And who would think that the history of sewers and toilets would be pertinent to the study of literature? And yet, to take only one example, Jonathan Swift's famous poem "A Description of a City Shower" (1710) makes considerably more sense if we know that the residents of London in 1710, lacking flushing toilets and sewer systems, collected their waste

in chamberpots, which were often emptied into open trenches (called "kennels"). Swift's contemporaries, expecting "A Description of a City Shower" to be an idyllic celebration of the beauty of the rain, were no doubt stunned by the poem's grandiose depiction of their smelly reality. The modern reader who is unaware of the sanitary problems in Swift's day may find the poem's imagery incredible. Consider, for instance, the poem's resounding conclusion:

Now from all parts the swelling kennels flow,
And bear their trophies with them as they go:
Filtth of all hues and odours seem to tell
What streets they sailed from, by the sight and smell.
They, as each torrent drives, with rapid force 5
From Smithfield or St. Pulchre's shape their course,
And in huge confluent join at Snow Hill ridge,
Fall from the Conduit prone to Holborn Bridge.
Sweepings from butcher's stalls, dung, guts, and blood,
Drowned puppies, stinking sprats, all drenched in mud, 10
Dead cats and turnip-tops come tumbling down the flood.

For Swift's reader, or for the modern reader who knows a little something about everyday eighteenth-century life, the poem is not an exaggeration of the city's repulsiveness. Instead, the poem describes in serious and inflated language what everyone saw and tried to overlook every time it rained, and thus Swift's vision becomes both strangely amusing and disturbing. If "history" ought to encompass everything, from international treaties to eating utensils, by the same token "literature" should be seen as more than just the great works that we usually think of. It should include also the second-rate, third-rate, and even too-bad-to-rate writings that actually compose the bulk of literary history. It is in fact probably presumptuous for us to assume the accuracy of our own perspective on what is historically important, in literature or society. The stock of many writers, including Milton, has gone up and down dramatically over the centuries.

Indeed, in the last few decades, many scholars have even expanded their view of literature to include those "texts" that aren't in the usual sense "literary" at all—advertisements, cartoons, films, romances, television shows, popular music, and much more. "Cultural studies," as this ambitious field of research has often come to be called, considers any cultural phenomena to be worthy of serious analysis. Take body piercing, for instance. Have you ever wondered why it has recently become so popular in Western countries? Why are so many people getting their belly buttons, nipples, noses, and/or other parts pierced? What are they

trying to communicate through this action? How is this activity related to other cultural events, such as tattooing? While such questions might be investigated by sociologists or anthropologists or psychologists, a "cultural studies" stance would encourage an interdisciplinary and interconnecting approach to such phenomena, relating them to the whole spectrum of popular and literary culture. Cultural studies has thus brought attention to neglected and suppressed writers, providing a richer understanding of the cultural contributions of minorities, the excluded, the oppressed. Cultural studies is in fact often associated with a kind of scholarly activism, as literary and historical study is brought to bear on contemporary concerns.

We have ventured no doubt light-years from Milton (who had no pierced parts whatsoever, so far as I know), but let us adopt a cultural studies stance and imagine the possibility of linking contemporary body piercing to Milton's poem. (You may smile skeptically here if you like.) Body piercing, like tattooing, is surely an effort to draw attention to oneself, to stand out from other people, to say, "I am extraordinary, even doing nothing; I have a unique value; I am myself a work of art." While registering resistance and apartness from the conventional culture, my recent student, with purple-striped hair and a large ring in his nose, was also declaring his membership in another community. In tribal cultures, such body markings, scarrings, deformations, and ornamental punctures allow for quick identification of one's membership and status.

Although the coding for body piercing in late twentieth-century Western culture is not so well established, jewelry through one's nose or eyebrow or cheek or tongue undeniably makes a statement. It says *something*. In his cultural studies classic, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), Dick Hebdige noted how the outrageous styles of British lower-class youth—rockers, mods, punks, skinheads, and others—created an alternative value system. By their "style" (in the largest sense), the members of these various groups indicated that they did not belong to the mainstream culture, but that they were clearly part of some different culture. Their personal value might be negligible by the standards of conventional society, but by rejecting that society, making themselves by their very appearance virtually unable to find ordinary employment, they were able to reassure themselves of their value in an alternative community. Body piercing, like other expressions of "style," simultaneously asserts that the practitioner is unique and part of a community.

Milton's poem certainly focuses on the problems of assessing one's own value, and of finding one's place in society. Milton has not purposefully deformed himself, but he did think his eyesight had been

weakened by excessive study. He thus finds himself unable to contribute to his community in any ordinary sense. What he is able to do, his "talent," seems "useless" (line 4) in his present physical state. Milton's problem is how he sees, and not how he is seen, but the poem indicates that he considers himself as unemployable as a skinhead applying to be a bank teller. He has become what cultural critics would call a "subaltern" writer—someone who is excluded from power, an "other." But Milton also invokes an alternative value system, for his talent is "useless" only from the point of view of ordinary utilitarian society. For Milton's life to have value in the alternative community, he does not need to make any meaningful contribution. He doesn't need to work or *do* anything to be valuable. His burden of blindness, which is also his warrant for inactivity, he calls a "mild yoke," as if it were no more than a minor inconvenience, like a ring through one's nose or cheek. He has value simply in being his unique self, waiting, serving by doing nothing as one of the community of faithful.

Thus, both Milton and someone with facial piercings and a bone through the nose find themselves rendered physically unfit for work in the conventional sense. Their lives, which might therefore seem to be of questionable value, are made meaningful in terms of an alternative community. No productive action is required. They serve by existing. Cultural studies clearly draws on standard historical work, but in its inclination to leap across the boundaries of disciplines and textual genres, doing subversive work, it also is often drawing on the energies of what has come to be called new historicism. Let's have a look at that now.

New Historicism

The kind of historical background provided by Tillyard depends, as Jean Howard says, on three assumptions:

1. "that history is knowable";
2. "that literature mirrors or at least by indirection reflects historical reality"; and
3. "that historians and critics can see the facts of history objectively" (18).

These assumptions, which seem reasonable enough at first glance, have been persuasively called into question by an outpouring of theory and practice, including deconstruction and reader-response criticism. The starting point for this work is a simple observation: "history" is textual. We read about it; we experience it in words, which

are used to explain the physical evidence. We don't have access directly to the past; we have a "story" about it. The Battle of Antietam, for instance, is now a textual phenomenon. It does not exist. Our tendency to separate history and literature—seeing one as fact, the other as fiction, one as the background to the other—is collapsed by this insight. So we cannot directly observe history, nor be entirely scientific or objective about its facts or remains, because history must be interpreted; our reading of it is as subjective as our reading of any other texts.

To see how subjective history is, you probably need only read two accounts of the same event (preferably from newspapers with different political stances). There simply isn't any objective historical "reality" out there, since the past is always absent, gone by, removed. As Hayden White puts it, history becomes "a story of a particular kind" (60). History is shaped by its necessary textuality. The pastness of the past means, again, that it exists now only as an absence, an empty space that is written upon ultimately by language. The crucial insight here, let me emphasize, is that history's content and meaning are open to interpretation. The popularity in recent years of chaos theory has underscored for many people the tentative nature of historical explanations. In the 1960s and 1970s, Edward Lorenz concluded that long-range weather forecasting was unavoidably unreliable because weather patterns were in the final analysis chaotic. Any patterns that we might see in the short term tended to evaporate in the long run—in part because a huge cause may have a tiny effect, and a tiny cause may have a huge effect. The air currents moved by a butterfly's wings, as Lorenz's most famous illustration goes, might set off a chain of meteorological events that would result in a hurricane on another continent. Chaos theory, starting from Lorenz's notion of the strange and potentially unfathomable connections between causes and effects, has been extended to many diverse fields, including literary criticism. For history, chaos theory obviously compounds the problem of history's textual nature by proposing that the reality historians try to describe is itself random, nonlinear, ever-changing, chaotic. But a problem is always also an opportunity, and while one might despair of the uncertainty of historical insight, another might celebrate the wider spaces opened up for innovation and creativity.

History as Text

If history and literature are both texts, then literature is potentially as much a context for history as history is for literature. Elizabethan plays may be seen to "reflect" political events, but Elizabethan politics

may also be seen as the consequence of theatrical conventions. We may think of certain political events, the coronation of Elizabeth or state trials for treason, for instance, as being "staged" like plays. In this light, let's consider "When I Consider."

Even the reality of Milton's blindness as a "background" for the poem is produced textually for us, and it must be interpreted. It cannot be taken simply as a freestanding fact. What did blindness mean? Would it have been seen as a punishment? As a special gift or calling? Would Milton see himself as a Homeric figure, in the tradition of ancient Greece's great blind poet? Was Milton's blindness a kind of protection, affording him some exemption from prosecution when the new government failed and Charles II returned to the throne? Why does Milton see himself as essentially helpless, unable to work, to do "day-labor," even though he can still compose—as the poem itself testifies? Was writing not considered work? Is Milton putting forward an image of himself as inactive and helpless, aiming thereby to evade responsibility for Charles I's death?

Although such speculative questions might also be pursued by traditional biographical and historical criticism, new historicism encourages a new way of addressing them. A new historicist critic might elect to examine the whole issue of vision in Milton's day, of "light" versus "darkness," of insight versus sight, of writing versus working, and much more, as a textual matter. Since Milton's blindness is for us a textual phenomenon, the new historicist would feel free to study medical texts, economic texts, optics texts, rhetoric, and any other texts that might help explain how "blindness" functions in seventeenth-century discourse: How is "blindness" constructed? Whether Milton would actually make such connections could be considered, but it would not necessarily be essential to the significance of the investigation. The new historicist critic would be more likely than the traditional historical critic to consider the possibility that Milton's blindness was psychosomatic, or feigned, or any other hypothesis that might be productive, because the new historicist assumes that history is a story, a construct, necessarily written and rewritten.

One of the most catalytic figures in this rethinking of history has been Michel Foucault, who persistently attempted, in the words of Eve Bannet, "to break down the familiar units, categories, continuities and totalities through which history, society and the symbolic order are traditionally interpreted" (96). We should note that Tillyard did not himself claim that every Elizabethan endorsed every aspect of "the Elizabethan world picture"; in fact, he repeatedly qualified his position by citing contrary opinions. Still, Tillyard does call his work *"The" Elizabethan World Picture*, and the exceptions are designed to support his

generalizations. New historicists, following Foucault, endeavor to expose the complexities, exceptions, divergences, gaps, and anachronisms in our characterizations of any period. While Tillyard sees the chain of being as a reassuring and pervasive principle of order for Elizabethan thinkers, Stephen Greenblatt considers how such myths serve the ideological interests of Elizabethan culture, discouraging dissent and subversion, and he shows how *King Lear*, for example, both affirms and undermines such cultural directives. Greenblatt's argument thus becomes an intervention into the traditional way of looking at Elizabethan England.

In addition to opposing or questioning traditional schemes of history, new historicism also tends to focus on the production of "knowledge" at a particular time and place. Foucault, for example, shows how the modern conception of "the mentally ill" came into being, as the insane are assigned to the same cultural position that those with leprosy had held. Most startling, Foucault argues that "madness" has not been a stable historical event, but is rather an invention, a construct, creating an excluded "other" category. Reversing the idea of asylums as benevolent and rehabilitative, Foucault describes their character as judicial and punitive—judging without appeal and incarcerating without trial. Similarly, Foucault reverses the widespread view that sexuality has been repressed in modern Western culture, arguing instead that sexual behavior has been increasingly discussed, classified, prohibited, authorized, and exposed. Drawing on texts from widely diverse fields, Foucault describes how the categories of the perverse and abnormal have been invented and constructed and perpetuated.

Since new historicists are interested in how historical "knowledge" is produced, they are naturally interested in the effects of power and ideology, whether these appear in "literature" in the usual sense or in any other texts. How we see the "facts"—indeed, whether we see a set of facts—depends (to some degree) upon the controlling system of assumptions and operations (or ideology). This unavoidable interest in power has made new historicism especially appealing to those critics interested in economy and class—often designated as Marxist criticism. Marxist critics see the individual person as a product of society's system of value and therefore exposing how the individual is constructed by class and economy is vitally important.

Marxist Criticism

Marxism is a theory of history, a way of thinking about labor, society, and economy that predicts the inevitable demise of capitalism. Marxist theory begins of course with Karl Marx, whose response to the

industrial revolution in the nineteenth century focused on the way that profits are generated in capitalism. The laborer, Marx noted, adds value to raw materials, but only part of that value is returned to the laborer because the business owner takes out a profit. The laborer becomes nothing more than a commodity himself and is "alienated" from his work, losing his humanity. The worker is just a tool for the owner. How can this economic base of society, given its fundamental unfairness, possibly survive? Why do the workers continue to allow themselves to be exploited? Marx's answer focuses on what he called the "superstructure," which consists of all the cultural directions, blatant and subtle, that support the status quo. Art, literature, philosophy, religion, political institutions—everything that shapes the ideas of the workers, the culture's "ideology"—all serve to reinforce the injustice of the capitalist system, making it seem right and normal. The superstructure, Marx argued, is an illusion, and the workers (or the proletariat) will eventually recognize their exploitation and revolt.

Marxist thinkers after Marx have noted that culture in fact doesn't always support the economic base. A novel, a film, a political speech, a sermon, any human creation, may also challenge or undermine the capitalist system. In fact, cultural works may have complex and even contradictory relationships to the superstructure. The work of Marxist analysis involves understanding how a culture's ideology creates the individual's self-perception. The Western tradition, especially from the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, thinks in terms of a stable self, a person who has an identity. Although it may feel as if you are discovering yourself, or perhaps as if you have invented yourself, Marxists assert that the self is actually socially constructed, the product of the various ideologies that one inhabits. Rather than referring to a "self," Marxists talk about a "subject," emphasizing the way in which one's identity is subservient to myriad cultural forces.

For Louis Althusser, for instance, a culture's system of ideas, its ideology, tells us who we are. "Interpellation" is Althusser's term for the process whereby a culture creates a space that a "subject" then fills. Consider how any advertisement offers a role for the viewer: I am looking at an ad in today's *New York Times* for Tourneau watches which has a picture of a watch, a listed price of \$3950, and the caption "Time for Elegance." This ad, as Althusser would say, is "hailing" or calling me, saying that I'm supposed to be the sort of person who appreciates elegance, expensive watches, and puns, a savvy guy who knows what time it is. I may not answer this call (I may deny this subject position), but I am nonetheless responding to it, registering my awareness of the lack of this watch. For Mikhail Bakhtin, what is most important about the relationship between the viewer/reader and the work is the kind of

language that is used. Bakhtin famously opposes monologic language to dialogic, preferring subject relationships in which multiple meanings and voices appear. Similarly, Michel Foucault exposes the various ways that culture restricts meaning and disciplines its citizens.

We do not have to decide whether Marxism is hopelessly flawed as a political philosophy in order to see that it is often strikingly useful as an analytical strategy. Certain features of "When I Consider," for instance, can be highlighted by Marxism's drive to see the world in terms of economic classes, to identify who is being oppressed and exploited and by whom. Let's look in particular at the reference to "day-labor" in line 7, which may seem merely a synonym for "work," a longer word for "labor." The line, "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied," appears clearly to be a question, although Milton's text lacks a question mark. Some later editors have added a question mark, and sometimes quotation marks too, and the question seems clear enough, once the reader straightens out who is talking—that "I" speaks, and not "He." But "day-labor" is an unusual word, and one might well wonder if Milton intends it to mean something more than just "work."

To find out about the meaning of "day-labor," one could research the history of labor or of economy in the seventeenth century. Or one could see how the term is used by other writers at that time and place. Those investigations could well be fascinating but time-consuming. More directly, we could look in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, which gives the meanings for words at various points in their histories. Or, even more directly, we could see how the term is defined in a dictionary of that time period. The first great dictionary of the English language is Samuel Johnson's famous *Dictionary* of 1755, which defines "daylabour" as "Labour by the day; labour divided into tasks." Johnson then offers illustrations, the first of which, interestingly enough, is the line we are talking about: "Doth God exact *daylabour*, light deny'd, / I fondly ask." Here's the second:

Did either his legs or his arms fail him? No; but daylabour was but an hard and a dry kind of livelihood to a man, that could get an estate with two or three strokes of his pen.

Southey

Johnson's definition and the Southey illustration begin to suggest how "daylabour" differs from "work." Someone who is employed by the day, or part of a day, is more likely to be a worker at the bottom of the social hierarchy than someone who has a position. Today we distinguish between those workers who are paid an hourly wage (they "punch the clock") and those who are salaried. Johnson's illustrations

for "Daylabourer," which also include an example by Milton, make these hierarchical implications clearer:

In one night, ere glimpse of morn,
His shadowy flail hath thresh'd the corn
That ten *daylabourers* could not end.

Milton

The *daylabourer*, in a country village, has commonly but a small pittance of courage.

Locke

A "daylabourer," the Milton quotation implies, is the kind of worker who does such messy, mind-numbing jobs as threshing corn. The pay would be poor for such nonspecialized labor, and the social status would be somewhere below the seventeenth century's equivalent of a hamburger flipper. Locke's quotation further indicates the lowly standing of a "daylabourer" by disparaging the character of that whole group.

From a Marxist perspective, Locke's attitude would also suggest precisely why the working class (the proletariat) should unite and overthrow the middle and upper classes. According to Marx's labor theory of value, the true value of something reflects the amount of labor used to make it. Within a capitalist system, someone who does "day-labor" would be unjustly undervalued: rather than being compensated fairly for "the amount of labor" contributed, the underclass worker would instead be exploited by the private owner. Naturally (as Marxist thinking would go), someone like Locke, a physician and philosopher, certainly not part of the working class, would seek to justify the economic system's suppression of day-laborers by assuming their inferiority: No wonder they're poorly compensated; they have very little courage, for starters.

Such a Marxist stance, focusing on the economic and social implications of "day-labor" alone, certainly deepens and complicates our sense of Milton's poem. Let's consider what happens for a moment, beginning by looking only at the poem's first seven lines:

When I consider how my light is spent,
Ere half my days in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide,
Doth God exact day-labor, light denied, . . .

Notice that, observing the poem's original punctuation, we must initially assume on a first reading that it is "my Maker," returning to chide, who says "Doth God exact day-labor, light denied." Spoken by God, the statement would seem to be a rhetorical question: "Does God expect anyone to do the sort of work that day-laborers do, picking crops, threshing corn, digging ditches, etc., when there's no day-light?" The answer in this case might well appear to be "no": no day, no day-labor. Of course God wouldn't require such a silly thing.

The beginning of line 8; "I fondly ask," completely reorients our reading, however, assigning the statement to the speaker. Rather than a rhetorical question, line 7 instantly becomes a complaint, and the level of Milton's frustration is indicated by "day-labor." The absurdity of God expecting anything of him, now that his "light is spent" and his talent is "useless," is reflected in the absurdity of the image of one of the most learned men in Europe, who has devoted his life to cultivating his literary talent, engaging in "day-labor." It's as if a rocket scientist has been asked to deliver pizza. Surely God cannot require anything like day-labor of Milton.

The word "fondly," however, necessitates another level of reversal, for in Milton's day "fondly" meant, as Johnson's *Dictionary* defines it, "Foolishly; weakly, imprudently; injudiciously." To be "fond" of something was to be "foolishly tender" or "injudiciously indulgent." The question that Milton asks is, therefore, a really foolish one, as the rest of the poem reveals. Its answer shouldn't be "no"; it should be "yes indeed." In fact, however, as the rest of line 8 begins to disclose, Milton's voice does not ask this question that we have just encountered, because "Patience" is able to "prevent / That murmur" by pointing out that (1) God doesn't need anyone's day-labor or any other kind of labor and (2) some people, even though they may seem incapable of having a job, have the job of simply waiting to see if they have a job of any sort to do. The poem is thus creating a subject position for the reader, as we are interpellated here, to use Althusser's term: We should all be happy, the poem seems to assert, to serve in whatever fashion we are called upon.

Marxist criticism strives to see literature in terms of its relationship to society, and a work is assumed to reinforce the current social structure, or undermine it, or some combination of the two. The reading of "When I Consider" that I have just rehearsed—a reading that considers the experience of moving through the poem (and is probably indebted to Stanley Fish's famous reader-response version of this poem in "Interpreting the *Variorum*")—takes on yet another dimension in this Marxist context: the poem becomes propaganda for the status quo. It is part of a discourse that disciplines and controls the laboring classes, as

Foucault might put it; and the key to this insight is, again, "day-labor." How so? Specifically, the experience of the poem reinforces the emerging capitalist system in Milton's England by undermining any potential resistance by the lower classes to their exploitation. The poem first poses the idea of resisting unreasonable demands for labor, then immediately dispels such opposition. All workers, the poem indicates, need to do their jobs, whatever they might be. This poetic message, in Bakhtin's terms, is monologic, silencing in a sense other voices about labor and resistance. Marx says that all should give according to their means and take according to their needs. Milton stresses the value of work even for those who don't: "They also serve who only stand and wait."

Postcolonial and Ethnic Studies

New historicist critics not only highlight the way power has produced "knowledge" in the past, but they are also often self-consciously aware of the possibility that literary criticism might be used as a political instrument in the here and now. When Greenblatt shows how Elizabethan culture discouraged dissent, he is unavoidably raising questions about how other cultures, including our own, have suppressed, shaped, or encouraged dissent. When Foucault strives to expose the invented status of madness or perversity in the past, he is inevitably challenging the authority of current sexual or psychological norms. Such boundaries, Foucault is implicitly asserting, are based on fictions, not facts; nurture, not nature.

This creative relationship between power and knowledge is especially evident when strikingly different cultures interact. "Knowledge" for a nuclear physicist in California may not be "knowledge" for a pygmy tribesman in central Africa. Is one form of knowledge better than the other? Wouldn't anyone reading this text agree that the physicist is likely to have a more accurate understanding of the universe than the pygmy? When I am sick, I think that a virus or a bacterium, not an evil spirit, has probably invaded my body. But isn't it unfair and inaccurate to value one culture over another? Aren't I being ethnocentric, placing my own ethnic group at the center of things, assuming that my own Western worldview is superior, when it is in fact just different? To be sure, characterizing whole groups is always dangerous: Some very wacky people live in California (even perhaps some nuclear physicists), and some very sensible pygmies no doubt live in Africa. On some issues, the pygmy and the Californian might agree that *my* ideas are absurd. Such considerations have obviously helped to energize multiculturalism, which seeks to appreciate, understand, and respect the uniquely different viewpoints of different

cultures—even if we disagree. Some practices and beliefs, however, seem so obviously unethical and erroneous that a simple multicultural celebration of difference becomes problematic. At the least, a multicultural stance invites us to attempt to understand the subjectivity of our own views—to see where we are standing within our own culture as we look in on other cultures.

The powerful effects of cultural bias were compellingly exposed in 1978 when Edward Said published *Orientalism*, showing how European culture in the nineteenth century created and perpetuated the idea that Middle Eastern and Asian cultures were inferior to their own. The idea that “Oriental” cultures were less advanced was used, as Said demonstrates, to justify European colonization and exploitation. Following Said, in-depth examinations of the various relationships between dominant and subjugated cultures, races, and ethnic groups have been carried out by a growing number of scholars. “Postcolonial studies,” the name now usually given to such investigations, explores in particular the effects of this history upon formerly colonized peoples. Postcolonial criticism thus considers the role that literature has played as an agent of oppression and resistance, distortion and understanding. What did European imperialists say about the people they colonized? How did the colonized people talk about themselves and their masters?

The playing field for postcolonial, racial, and ethnic studies is huge, as indicated by its diversity and geographical expansiveness (from Canada to Sri Lanka, from Australia to Jamaica, from India to Senegal) or by its theoretical sophistication and diversity (as suggested for example by *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, the landmark 1989 study by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin). Still, as a special kind of historical interpretation, postcolonial studies would appear to be limited in scope, focusing upon certain authors and works (those who write in or about European colonies). By the same token, racial and ethnic studies, oriented toward a historical stance, might also seem somewhat constrained.

Milton’s “When I Consider,” for instance, might seem to be an unpromising work from a postcolonial perspective, as it was written well before England’s massive global expansion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and it says nothing at all about colonies or colonizing. Still, one might note that European nations were already striving toward empires well before the mid-seventeenth century. And shouldn’t it be possible, in theory, to decipher England’s imperialistic aspirations from almost any text, just as any one cell thoroughly analyzed may tell us a great deal about the body it was taken from? Indeed, if we return once more to “When I Consider” with postcolonial vision,

we may notice that Milton does in fact depict God as an autocrat (“His state / Is kingly”) who is elsewhere, but who might “returning chide” the speaker for a lack of production, for a falsified account. Milton thus sees himself (or the speaker) as a subjugated person, one who is in fact in colonial servitude, although the absent master’s “yoke” is “mild.” Milton cannot avoid implicating the ideology he inhabits, and therefore in his effort to glorify God, he thinks of “Him” as a king who appropriately controls the most extensive empire. With “thousands at his bidding” posting “o’er land and ocean without rest,” we can imagine that the sun never sets on His subjects, just as the sun in later centuries would never set on the British empire. Milton’s poem thus reinforces concepts essential to justifying British expansion and exploitation, as we see implicitly that the master rightly expects complete loyalty and service from an inferior being. The speaker in this poem, the “subaltern” (as Gayatri Spivak would put it), has no business questioning his particular situation. The speaker indeed relinquishes his rights, since his place is simply to do whatever is asked of him—including even to stand and do nothing. Those who are blind, as a group, have some common ground, and some distinct differences, with the status and perception of ethnic and racial groups.

To notice the logic assumed by Milton’s poem is to begin to question it, and it is easy to see how the potential for political activism in postcolonial criticism in particular and in new historicism in general would be especially appealing to many scholars who may understandably have wondered through the years if their research is having any real influence on the world beyond academe. From one point of view, new historicism simply acknowledges that some political agenda has always inevitably been involved in historical and critical work; the implications of new historicist work are just more visible and radical—and compelling.

In other words, against the assumptions of the traditional history of the sort practiced by Tillyard, we may place the assumptions of the new historicism:

1. History is knowable only in the sense that all texts are knowable—that is by interpretation, argument, speculation.
2. Literature is not simply a mirror of historical reality; history in fact isn’t a mirror of historical reality. Literature is shaped by history and even shapes history; it is also distorted by history and is even discontinuous with history.
3. Historians and critics must view “the facts” of history subjectively; in fact, the “facts” must be viewed as their creation.

HOW TO DO HISTORICAL CRITICISM

To do biographical criticism, you need to know as much as you can about the life of the author and then apply that knowledge, being careful not to equate the author with a narrator or character, drawing conclusions cautiously, and supporting them solidly with evidence from the literary text itself, and not only from the author's life. To do historical criticism, you need to know the relevant history and use it in some way. The difficulty here, besides the work of mastering history, is determining just what is relevant. One way to look at this: if the history helps you understand the work, then it's relevant. New historicism complicates things a bit, because you ought to know the author's biography—even though the author's personality is a cultural construct, a textual effect; and you ought to know the history (or histories)—even though the “facts” are always subject to questioning, supplementation, and opposition. Thinking from a new historical point of view, you are encouraged to be particularly imaginative in making connections, and to think about how particular documents participate in, or help to create, systems of assumptions and meanings.

To do postcolonial criticism, you need to know the history (social, economic, political, cultural) of the imperial and the colonized peoples, and you want to apply that history somehow to literary texts (or art, music, fashion, whatever). The most influential work in postcolonial theory has dealt with India, Africa, Australia, Canada, the Caribbean, and New Zealand, and typical moves involve revealing how the colonial power depicts the native population as in need of domination. The men of India, according to pervasive cultural propaganda, are effeminate and unambitious; Africans are savage and lazy; Oriental people are mysterious and threatening. Postcolonial criticism can show how these images are perpetuated or undermined or transformed in various literary works.

Similarly, cultural studies might be most accurately presented as more of a set of goals than a clear-cut method. The fundamental idea of cultural studies, one could argue, is that the products of a culture are shaped by underlying assumptions and values; and a variety of strategies, ranging from psychoanalysis to deconstruction to feminist criticism and so forth, can be used to explain the artifacts and activities of a culture. A recent book by Richard Lee, *The Life and Times of Cultural Studies* (Duke UP, 2003), notes a shift in cultural studies from issues of working-class culture toward questions involving race and gender. Whatever the object of cultural studies—high culture, low culture, popular culture, elite culture; class, race, gender—“doing” cultural studies means not only attempting to illuminate culture but also intervening in it. Part of the

academic popularity of cultural studies no doubt stems from this commitment, allowing scholars and teachers to act on their political allegiances, working for change by producing knowledge. Given the origins of cultural studies in the 1960s in Great Britain's New Left, and particularly in Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, the social change that cultural studies typically advocates is progressive and liberal. In bringing an academic rigor to the analysis of all sorts of things previously ignored or dismissed, such as motorcycle gangs, soap operas, tattoos, advertising, or rock music, cultural studies has indeed made some startling contributions to our understanding.

The whole idea of cultural studies as an “approach” might be questionable for some people, since one could argue that cultural studies is really distinguished by the objects it studies (the products of popular culture and subcultures) or its goals (progressive social change), and not by any distinctive method. Lamenting the porous boundaries of cultural studies, Michael Berube has recently observed that “cultural studies now means everything and nothing. It has been associated with a cheery ‘Pop culture is fun!’ approach” (*Chronicle Review* B10, September 18, 2009). But you'll find, I think, that your analytical imagination can be stirred simply by deciding to bring critical analysis to a much larger body of works, or deciding to work from a particular political stance. And so “how to do” cultural studies involves simply looking at certain things with a certain goal—and seeing what happens. Thinking through political stances different from your own can be healthy and invigorating: see what the world looks like from other perspectives. I would therefore encourage the most open version of cultural studies, one that embraces the study of just about any cultural phenomenon from just about any political stance. (But “local programming may vary,” as the television networks say.)

The approaches covered in this chapter all direct you to make connections (which can include breaking down fences) between and among the products of history, biography, and culture. Literature, from this perspective or these perspectives, is not something that we study for its own sake. Literature is part of life. And what we call “literature,” or at least give a literary sort of attention to, may well be a text (or object or activity) that is not literature in a traditional sense. It is nonetheless possible to give some general guidance about using historical, postcolonial, and cultural studies to write about a literary text, however you define it:

1. Determine the historical setting of the work—when and where it was written and under what conditions. Investigate the author's biography, including of course race, class, gender, and so forth.

2. Consider how the historical background helps us to understand the work, or consider how the work contradicts or stands apart from the consensus historical or biographical background. Are there individuals or groups that are characterized in politically significant ways?
3. Identify other texts of the same time period that might be related to the text under analysis. Identify the ideology (or ideologies) driving these texts, constructing a system of meaning. Expose the cultural significance of the literary text.

Although these approaches require some research and patience, they are interesting and often very rewarding. With the ongoing expansion of electronic resources, historical materials are becoming increasingly accessible. There is no substitute for the thrill of examining (carefully) a first edition of Samuel Johnson's great 1755 *Dictionary of the English Language*; but the digital version of the dictionary allows one to search the entire huge work for a particular word or phrase. Even such basic resources as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* can be accessed online. Museums and libraries now host Web sites containing informational riches; historical organizations provide links to scholarly journals and primary sources. You need information about railroads in the nineteenth century? Check out the Railroad History Database. Or maybe it's the history of the Air Force: there's the Air Force Historical Research Agency, of course. Although chat rooms and e-mail and online shopping are nice, the Internet's most stunning potential lies in its power to teach us. The vastness of resources available may seem overwhelming at times, so don't hesitate to seek advice. Librarians and teachers are ordinarily delighted to help. The various search engines, Google, Bing, and many others, are constantly being refined—but the websites and the information out there must be carefully assessed, of course.

THE WRITING PROCESS: SAMPLE ESSAYS

The work I want to focus on in this section is a compelling short story, first published in the October 27, 1962, issue of the *New Yorker*.

Reunion John Cheever

The last time I saw my father was in Grand Central Station. I was going from my grandmother's in the Adirondacks to a cottage on the Cape that my mother had rented, and I wrote my father that I would be in New York

between trains for an hour and a half, and asked if we could have lunch together. His secretary wrote to say that he would meet me at the information booth at noon, and twelve o'clock sharp I saw him coming through the crowd. He was a stranger to me—my mother divorced him three years ago and I hadn't been with him since—but as soon as I saw him I felt that he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom. I knew that when I was grown I would be something like him; I would have to plan my campaigns within his limitations. He was a big, good-looking man, and I was terribly happy to see him again. He struck me on the back and shook my hand. "Hi, Charlie," he said. "Hi, boy. I'd like to take you up to my club, but it's in the Sixties, and if you have to catch an early train I guess we'd better get something to eat around here." He put his arm around me, and I smelled my father the way my mother sniffs a rose. It was a rich compound of whiskey, after-shave lotion, shoe polish, woollens, and the rankness of a mature male. I hoped that someone would see us together. I wished that we could be photographed. I wanted some record of our having been together.

We went out of the station and up a side street to a restaurant. It was still early and the place was empty. The bartender was quarreling with a delivery boy, and there was one very old waiter in a red coat down by the kitchen door. We sat down, and my father hailed the waiter in a loud voice. "Kellner!" he shouted. "Garçon! Cameriere! You!" His boisterousness in the empty restaurant seemed out of place. "Could we have a little service here!" he shouted. "Chop-chop." Then he clapped his hands. This caught the waiter's attention, and he shuffled over to our table.

"Were you clapping your hands at me?" he asked.

"Calm down, calm down, *sommelier*," my father said. "If it isn't too much to ask of you—if it wouldn't be too much above and beyond the call of duty, we would like a couple of Beefeater Gibsons."

"I don't like to be clapped at," the waiter said.

"I should have brought my whistle," my father said. "I have a whistle that is audible only to the ears of old waiters. Now, take out your little pad and your little pencil and see if you can get this straight: two Beefeater Gibsons. Repeat after me: two Beefeater Gibsons."

"I think you'd better go someplace else," the waiter said quietly.

"That," said my father, "is one of the most brilliant suggestions I have ever heard. Come on, Charlie, let's get the hell out of here."

I followed my father out of that restaurant into another. He was not so boisterous this time. Our drinks came, and he cross-questioned me about the baseball season. He then struck the edge of his empty glass with his knife and began shouting again. "Garçon! Kellner! Cameriere! You! Could we trouble you to bring us two more of the same."

"How old is the boy?" the waiter asked.

"That," my father said, "is none of your God-damned business."

"I'm sorry, sir," the waiter said, "but I won't serve the boy another drink."