

E. BEAUMONT BISSELL

## Reinventing the Wheel: Deconstruction, New Historicism, and the Compulsion to Repeat

THIS PAPER STARTS FROM a symptom—a symptom which, to introduce another psychoanalytic term, literary theory itself might well experience as uncanny, since it takes the form of a strange duplication. Continuing the polemic begun in his 1986 presidential address to the Modern Languages Association, in 1989 J. Hillis Miller announced that:

The era of “deconstruction” is over. It has had its day, and we can return with a clear conscience to the warmer, more humane work of writing about power, history, ideology, the “institution” of the study of literature, the class struggle, the oppression of women, and the real lives of men and women in society, as they exist in themselves and as they are “reflected” in literature .... We can return, that is, to what the study of literature has always tended to be when it is not accompanied by serious reflection on the specificity of literature as a mode of language .... We need to get on with it. Taking seriously what deconstruction says about the language of literature or about language as such might cause an indefinite delay or postponement of our desire to turn attention to the relations of literature to history, to society, to the self.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hillis Miller, “Is There an Ethics of Reading?” *Reading Narrative: Form, Ethics, Ideology*, ed. James Phelan (New York: Columbia UP, 1989) 80.

Hillis Miller's elaborate sarcasm here, of course, is directed at the New Historicists; and the effect of that sarcasm, unsurprisingly, is paradoxical, since he accuses them simultaneously of regressiveness and of precipitancy. Far from proceeding from the old deconstructive era into a new and better one, he suggests, and precisely because of its own anxiety to do so, the historical turn in literary study has become a retreat, a turn towards its own history, a reversion, as he puts it, "to old-fashioned biographical, thematic, and literary-historical methods that antedate the New Criticism."<sup>2</sup>

On its own, Hillis Miller's complaint might be seen as rather old-fashioned itself—the belated protest of one of deconstruction's establishment figures against its displacement by an upstart theoretical movement, which was by this time already nearly a decade old. But his irascible broadside becomes more interesting when it is compared with the New Historicist rejoinder that it anticipates and indeed parodies.

For Hillis Miller is quite right in attributing the critical abandonment of many deconstructive precepts to New Historicism's urgent desire "to get on with it." Brook Thomas nicely captures this sense of frustration with deconstruction's interminable preliminaries in his 1991 book *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics*, in a passage from which, indeed, I have taken the title for this paper:

My problem with de Man's argument is not the implication that the attempt to construct a permanent rational foundation for historical investigation is doomed to failure. It is instead the implication that because those investigations are forced to rely on inherently unreliable language they cannot get started until they have answered fundamental questions that by nature are unanswerable. We are being prodded not only continually to reinvent the wheel, but also to invent it knowing that it will be asked to serve the function of a firm and stationary foundation. Meanwhile, numerous other questions of historical importance go unexplored.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Miller, 79.

<sup>3</sup> Brook Thomas, *The New Historicism and Other Old-Fashioned Topics* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991) 75.

Whilst Hillis Miller accuses the New Historicists of precipitancy, Thomas here makes the corresponding accusation of procrastination. If the historicists in Miller's view shirk the sheer difficulty and rigour of deconstructive reading in favour of uncritical and impulsive activity, according to Thomas, deconstructionists avoid the real questions that face literary criticism by insisting upon a ceaseless reinterrogation of first principles—principles whose legitimacy they anyway refuse by definition to admit.

So far, so consistent.

There is, however, another correspondence between Miller and Thomas here which tends to disrupt the consistency of the first, and which does perhaps deserve the name of "symptom" that I invoked at the beginning of this paper. For although New Historicism and deconstruction each accuse the other of opposite failings—procrastination in the one case and precipitousness in the other—the effects of these failings are oddly similar. Both seemingly result in an atavistic preoccupation with going over old ground, whether it be the precritical operations of an "Old Historicism," or the exhausted profundities of deconstruction's overwhelming questions. In this paper I hope to investigate the meaning of this peculiar parallel for deconstruction, for New Historicism, and indeed for the future of literary theory itself—with this latter emphasis upon the future ultimately becoming decisive for my argument as a whole.

Anglo-American literary theory today is less dominated by a single paradigm than at any other time in its youthful history. At first this might seem to be a wholly beneficial development, a truce in the so-called "theory wars" enabling the discipline to become less polarized and more plural, open to a wider variety of influences and possibilities. Such a view might be confirmed by the burgeoning in the 1990s of new literary canons and preoccupations—post-colonial and minority literatures, genre fiction, new media. Along with these opportunities, however, have come equally new and increasingly acute uncertainties as to the nature and the destination of literary study itself.

In 1989, J. Hillis Miller could confidently recommend "that departments of literature should reduce their function to a kind of linguistic hygiene, that is, to a study of the rhetoric of literature, what might be called 'literariness'."<sup>4</sup> And in the same year Louis

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<sup>4</sup> Miller, 99.

Montrose could make an equally strong and quite different recommendation on behalf of the New Historicism: "It is by construing literature as an unstable and agonistic field of verbal and social practices," he wrote, "rather than as the trans-historical residence of ... 'great works, ideas, and minds'—that literary criticism rearticulates itself as a site of intellectually and socially significant work in the historical present."<sup>5</sup>

In today's historical present, however, such assertions concerning the vocation of literary study start to seem increasingly presumptuous, and in their place have come speculations about a crisis. It has become questionable as to whether literary criticism is still, or can long remain, "a site of intellectually and socially significant work" at all in its own right. More and more, it seems to require the justification, if not of other disciplines, then at least of other considerations—historical, ethical, political—which are no longer alternative ways of construing literature so much as needful excuses for doing so. As for Hillis Miller's demand for so-called "linguistic hygiene," this now appears particularly distant from us, even distasteful, offending against the postmodern eclecticism of contemporary theory with an exclusivity which has come to seem culpably modern. As long ago as 1991, indeed, Ronald Bush had observed a resemblance between Hillis Miller's position here and what he called the "totalitarian aesthetics" of High Modernists such as Ezra Pound.<sup>6</sup>

At this point it might seem as though I have digressed considerably from the "symptom" that was my initial pretext. In another sense, however, to have arrived at the borders of modernism is to have acknowledged the indispensable condition of that symptom's diagnosis. For in returning to the theoretical paradigms of deconstruction and of New Historicism from what Richard Bradford has called "the postparadigmatic condition" of our theoretical present, modernism, along with the postmodernism that succeeds it, is precisely what always remains in question.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Montrose, "The Poetics and Politics of Culture," *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veveser (London: Routledge, 1989) 31.

<sup>6</sup> Ronald Bush, "Paul de Man, Modernist," *Theoretical Issues in Literary History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1991) 35–59.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Bradford, "Preface," *The State of Theory*, ed. Richard Bradford (London: Routledge, 1993) x.

The very psychoanalytic terminology with which I began, after all, is itself implicated in a modernism to which it was integral, as well as being scrutinized by a postmodernism which continues to qualify and question its explanatory power. For this reason it now becomes necessary to clarify the precise way in which I am using psychoanalytic terms like ‘symptom,’ and ‘uncanny,’ and ‘repetition compulsion,’ and indeed why I am using them at all, compromised as they are by their involvement in the phenomena that they are attempting to describe.

In the first place, it should be emphasized that my adoption of the vocabulary and the assumptions of psychoanalysis is a strategic one, which does not imply any kind of direct assent in psychoanalytic assertions. I am not using psychoanalysis either to explain or to justify a particular reading of the history of literary theory, but rather because it provides that reading with a powerful alternative to historiography—a quite different approach to the interpretation of the past which nevertheless retains a practical (therapeutic) relation to it. And Lacanian psychoanalysis in particular explicitly theorises a set of problems, including the inevitable involvement of any act of retrospection in its own objects, that have been critically—symptomatically—neglected by literary theory’s historical turn.

Accordingly the relevance of psychoanalysis here—if also one of its dangers—is its very implication in theory’s modernist past, both through direct influence on theorists and literary writers, and as a more general instance of that splitting of the concept of the subject upon which so much of modernist thought has been predicated. More specifically to my argument here, moreover, deconstruction and New Historicism themselves respond to psychoanalytic theory in different ways which prove telling for the relationship between them.

For whilst deconstruction has always remained interested in psychoanalysis—most obviously through the theoretical exchanges between Lacan and Derrida—New Historicism, following Foucault, has tended to be suspicious of it. This suspicion proceeds in part from New Historicism’s general impatience with theory—the need, once again, to “get on with it” without becoming becalmed in supersophistication, especially where it relates to the individual rather than to societies or cultures. But I should like to suggest that such a suspicion also reflects the association that exists between psychoanalysis and modernism.

It is noticeable, after all, that New Historicism has never felt comfortable in the presence of modernism. There are relatively few New Historicist studies of modernist writing, and those that do exist tend to be confrontational, reiterating the familiar charges of totalitarianism; elitism, and indeed ahistoricism, by which the postmodernists have sought to distance themselves from the moderns. We should not be surprised at this; indeed it serves to confirm the quite reasonable conclusion that New Historicism—with its anecdotal aversion to grand narratives and its citational approach to the past—is in fact a form of postmodernism itself.

To make any assertion whatsoever concerning the nature of postmodernism, of course, still more concerning its differences from modernism, is already to cease to be completely reasonable. Almost nothing may be said about either of these concepts that is not immediately open to contradiction: modernism itself was always a system of paradoxes—totalizing and yet fragmenting, innovative and archaeological, austere elitist and responsive to mass culture. And postmodernism has inherited all of these paradoxes, only to compound them with an insistent desire to supersede modernism which, as many commentators have pointed out, conforms entirely to a modernist logic.

One thing that may reasonably be said about the postmodernism debate, however, is that its unreasonableness is at least partly the consequence of our incestuous familiarity with it. As Steven Connor has exemplarily written:

In seeking to understand modernity and its much-trumpeted sequel, postmodernity, we are forced to use modes of understanding that derive from the periods and the concepts under consideration, forced to repeat histories of concepts that we might wish to stand clear of. But there is no way to avoid this, no way to duck the consequences of having to think about the relationship of experience and knowledge, present and past, with terms and structures that derive from these things .... We are in and of the moment that we are attempting to analyse, in and of the structures we employ to analyse it.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (1989; repr. Oxford: Blackwell, 1995) 5.

Whatever we may choose to affirm concerning modernism or postmodernism, thus, including everything that I have already said here, and even including Steven Connor's very warning as to the abysmal dangers of such affirmations, is already implicated in modernism and postmodernism themselves—an observation which, conveniently enough, returns us to the consideration of the symptom, since as Slavoj Žižek has observed “the symptom as a ‘return of the repressed’ is ... an effect which precedes its cause.”<sup>9</sup>

There is much in Žižek's understanding of the symptom here to reaffirm its relevance to the literary-theoretical instance from which we began. Before turning to the paradoxical formulations of Žižek and of Lacan, however, it is first necessary to address literary theory's symptom in its more straightforward Freudian sense. At its most basic, ‘symptom’ signifies no more than a pathological manifestation—nightmares; parataxes; the doubling, in the present case, by which two apparently opposed phenomena turn out to replicate one another—seminally attributed by Freud to the return in a new guise of some repressed traumatic event. This return, as Freud explains in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, takes under therapy the form of a “compulsion to repeat”: the patient, he writes, “is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past.”<sup>10</sup>

There are obvious parallels here, not only with the symptoms of deconstruction and New Historicism, but with Steven Connor's description of postmodernism as “forced to repeat histories of concepts that we might wish to stand clear of.” Just like a transference—neurosis, postmodernism perpetually compels us to re-experience the problems of modernism in the present, even as we try to resolve them and consign them to the past. But if the repressed material that returns in postmodernism is quite clearly modernist, it is less clear as to what trauma might give rise to the compulsive repetitions that we have observed in deconstruction and in New Historicism. What is it that these two theoretical movements have repressed, and what is it that returns under the forms of their perpetual preliminaries and precritical persistences?

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<sup>9</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989) 56.

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey (1950; repr. London: Hogarth Press, 1974) 12.

One rather neat and persuasive answer to this question is that deconstruction and New Historicism have repressed one another, or at least one another's theoretical preoccupations. That deconstruction should repress the experience of history, and in particular the experience of its own history, seems plausible enough, especially to postmodernists. Deconstruction, as we have already observed, resembles in its rarified textualism, in the implicit elitism of its sheer difficulty, the modernist past that postmodernism itself can be seen to repress. In its inability, seminally articulated by Paul de Man's *Allegories of Reading* "to progress beyond local difficulties of interpretation," moreover, deconstruction seems to expound, even to celebrate, the repetitive-compulsive effects of its own symptom—whose repressed cause may immediately be discovered, not so much in de Man's unwritten "historical reflection on Romanticism," as in the details of his own personal history.<sup>11</sup> By narrating this history *as* history, by contrast, as something belonging in the past, the New Historicists are able to present themselves as lifting deconstruction's repression, "resist[ing]," as Joseph Litvak has put it, "the repetition-compulsion to which [Paul de Man's] ... totalizing and potentially totalitarian unreliability would consign them," and thereby therapizing the literary-theoretical psyche.<sup>12</sup>

The converse proposition to this, however—what one might fancifully call its counter-transference—that New Historicism is constituted by the repression of deconstruction, is perhaps a more surprising one, though ultimately no less plausible. Once again, the experience of postmodernism helps us to understand why a theoretical movement might need to repress its immediate precursor, the effects of that repression, and why, paradoxically, in repressing deconstruction the New Historicism itself is also in fact refusing (its own) history.

"The New Historicist 'Renaissance,'" Alan Liu has observed, "is coincident with the corridors and vaults of the postmodern intellect."<sup>13</sup> If proved, such a claim would seem to be a particularly dangerous one for New Historicist theory, exposing its founding desire for the alterity of the past, "to know the spirit of past cul-

<sup>11</sup> Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1979) ix.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph Litvak, "Back to the Future: A Review Article on the New Historicism, Deconstruction, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction," *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 30 (Spring 1988): 127.

<sup>13</sup> Alan Liu, "The Power of Formalism: The New Historicism," *ELH* 50 (1989): 749.



ture," as Liu puts it, as no more than a present narcissism. Rather than speaking with the dead, in Stephen Greenblatt's famous formulation, New Historicism would seem, like some bogus spiritualist, to be speaking for them.

According to Liu's understanding, however, this anachronism is neither avoidable nor damaging to New Historicism: "we *should* see our own prejudices and concerns in such constructs as the 'Renaissance,'" he writes, "and that which will redeem such vision from mere partiality is research into the contexts and texts of the prejudices intervening between past and present."<sup>14</sup> This argument seems reasonable enough when applied to the Renaissance—ignoring, of course, the recursiveness of a prejudice which will inevitably interfere with its own investigation—but when New Historicism attempts to contemplate more recent phenomena such as modernism, it discovers the limitations of its detour. For once the New Historicism attempts to investigate a modernism in which, as a postmodernism, it is still implicated, there is no longer the possibility of any intervention between past and present, research into historical prejudice becomes potentially illimitable, and theory finds itself condemned, once again, to compulsive repetition.

This symptom is necessarily at its most acute, moreover, when New Historicism turns to deconstruction, its immediate theoretical precursor, from which it has a constitutive need to separate itself, just as postmodernism does from modernism. For the very urgency of this attempt at separation ensures that deconstruction too coincides with the corridors and vaults—or as T.S. Eliot might have it, the cunning passages—of New Historicism's postmodern intellect. By repudiating what it sees as the obsessive, founding anti-foundationalism of deconstruction—its perpetual preoccupation, as Brook Thomas puts it, with reinventing the wheel—New Historicism finds itself uncontrollably repeating, indeed reinventing, that very reinvention.

And ultimately reinvention, as the title of this paper implies, turns out to be the decisive term here. For the idea of reinvention not only comprehends the compulsive repetitions that constituted our original symptom—deconstruction's persistent posing of unanswerable questions, and New Historicism's retrogressive renovation of the past—but imposes itself, through Lacan's own reinvention of the Freudian symptom, upon and as the future of literary theory itself.

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<sup>14</sup> Liu, 753.

In the first place, the strange doubling by which New Historicism and deconstruction apparently reproduce one another, though symptomatic, is not, in fact, a genuine duplication. What the repetition-compulsion actually repeats is neither the literal past, nor even the material, as such, of past repressions. Even for Freud, as Derrida has shown in "Freud and the Scene of Writing" and elsewhere, unconscious material always presents itself to consciousness in a modified form—and consequently it is precisely nowhere *present* as such, that is as material, whether modified or not. Lacan likewise describes the unconscious as "ideally inaccessible."<sup>15</sup>

According to Lacan, indeed, the return of the repressed "doesn't come from the past, but from the future."<sup>16</sup> This is the paradoxical explanation for Slavoj Žižek's no less paradoxical claim that it constitutes "an effect which precedes its cause." "Symptoms are meaningless traces," Žižek asserts, "their meaning is not discovered, excavated from the hidden depth of the past, but constructed retroactively—the analysis produces the truth; that is, the signifying frame which gives the symptoms their symbolic place and meaning."<sup>17</sup>

For New Historicism, the implications of this insight are profound. The suggestion that the past of its compulsive repetitions—whether the distant past that it desires, or the too-recent past which continually imposes itself upon the theoretical present—has been "constructed retroactively" is a devastating one, which should not be confused with some bland post-structuralist aperçu about the limits of representation. For here it is the very alterity of the past, and not merely the adequacy of historical facts, that is in question.

Ironically, for the very reason that New Historicism concerns itself so critically with the alterity, the unassimilable difference, of the past, it finds that past to be as ontologically ineffable as the unconscious itself. Just like the neurotic, its particular theoretical pathology will not permit it to remember the past merely as past, with all the (representational) limitations that memory implies; and, obliged yet necessarily unable to re-experience that past in the present, it becomes trapped in a cycle of perpetual reinvention.

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<sup>15</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: Book I, Freud's Papers on Technique 1953–1954*, trans. John Forrester (New York: Norton, 1991) 158.

<sup>16</sup> Lacan, 158.

<sup>17</sup> Žižek, 55–56.

In the case of deconstruction, however—and this is where my argument openly turns in its favour—reinvention turns out to have a much more positive theoretical value than it does for New Historicism. This is because, rather than fixating itself upon the alterity of a past that is strictly inaccessible, deconstruction instead acknowledges a future to whose provisionality reinvention is always a necessity rather than a frustration. If New Historicism tries to talk through and dissolve literary theory's symptom, thus, deconstruction follows the more radical Lacanian model of identification with the symptom.

And accordingly, if deconstruction does indeed, as Brook Thomas has asserted, "continually reinvent the wheel," then this is by no means as pathological as it appears; or if it is pathological, then it is necessarily so. Such reinvention takes place, not in the attempt to establish "a firm and stationary foundation" for literary-critical practice, but for the very reason that such foundations are mobile and unstable. Each act of criticism, it argues, must invent its own foundations rather than expect to receive them directly from the past, and must justify that invention in the only way that it can be justified—which is precisely as an invention; an appeal to the future; "an event," as Derrida puts it, "through which the future comes to us."<sup>18</sup>

The immediate practical effect of this demand for reinvention, as the early New Historicists feared, may well be an expansion of literary criticism's prefatory burden. But at a time when theory's common assumptions are becoming more scarce, the necessity of stating particular premisses is anyway increasing, as is the amount of legitimating work that those premisses must do. Moreover, the emphasis that recent deconstructive statements have placed upon an ethical relation to the future of the specifically literary text (for example in Derrida's *Passions* or Thomas Keenan's *Fables of Responsibility*) offers literary theory the opportunity to take the responsibility for its own legitimation, rather than continuing to cede that responsibility to adjacent disciplines. By identifying with its deconstructive symptom, therefore, literary theory may just be able to reinvent, and so retain, its own identity as an (academic) subject.

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<sup>18</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Psyche: Inventions of the Other," trans. Catherine Porter, *Reading de Man Reading*, ed. Lindsay Waters and Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989) 46.