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## The Theory Junkyard

**junk** . . . [colloq] useless stuff, trash, rubbish.

*Webster's New World Dictionary*

Junk is a useful commodity. The term usually refers to old paper, metal, or rags but can include most anything we wish to discard. Junk is useful because it's worthless. It's useful to designate something as trash or rubbish. That allows us to replace it. We junk clothes, appliances, newspapers, magazines, and theories to make room for new ones. Throwing away ideas is as useful as throwing away newspapers. Both tend to accumulate rapidly and it's nice to have room for what is current. Critics notice when theories get "too old" and replace them ASAP. But where do old theories go? Surely theory junkyards exist--at least in our imaginations. I imagine our "theoretical archives" as personal junkyards--hard-to-reach basement shelves, boxes in attics, files that our current word processors barely recognize if at all. In my study, for instance, there is a huge closet full of blue, plastic milkcartons from OfficeMax crammed with folders containing fading xeroxes of articles by Northrop Frye, Levi Strauss, and other old-fashioned critics. That such places exist raises the question: do theories become obsolete? Are there "theory junkyards"? My premise is that there are. This allows me to raise the question: What's in the theory junkyard that should be reclaimed or recycled?

Many critics, for instance, have junked structuralism and along with it a lot of narratology. Yet, though designated as junk by post-structuralists who distrust them as linear and reductive, some structuralist theories of narrative are still deemed viable by other critics, a circumstance much in evidence in journals such as *Narrative*. Does this mean that the work of Greimas, Genette, the early Barthes, can be recuperated? (Maybe I should take them out of my blue milkcartons.) Or does it mean that one critical school's junk is another's wealth? Still, would either hypothesis account for Jameson's recycling of Greimas, Frye, Propp, *et. al.* in the "Magical Narratives" chapter of *The Political Unconscious*--is his use of

their terms a reclamation, a recuperation, a rewriting, or a rereading of old and worn-out theory? Are these theories recovered in their former state or are they mended in some way? Are they altered so substantively that they require new authorship or have they merely been re-interpreted? Are they obsolete? Do Propp's terms survive Jameson's use of them? Do Frye's? Do Greimas? What about Lacan's?

Lacan's terms are frequently used in current discussions. So, Jameson's use of them seems to require no explanation. But Propp's, Frye's, or Greimas' are not. For instance Propp's use of the term "plot" (a specific arrangement of narrative functions) would appear to be a clear instance of an "obsolete" concept long since tossed into the theory junkyard. It seems fair to say that Jameson is not using Propp's term in the way that Propp used it in *The Morphology of the Folktale*. Most critics regard Jameson as a post-structuralist, associating his work with a critique of the formalist assumptions upon which Propp's work depends. When Jameson uses the term "plot," his readers are likely to assume he reinterprets it or rewrites it as a post-structuralist term. Or, so the argument goes. I take a different view of the matter.

To begin with, is the term "plot" Propp's term? No. It is NOT his intellectual property. His use of the term is "characteristic" of *his* work but the term is not his. No one owns our language. The term plot is shareware, so to speak. I don't own the definition of junk I quoted in my headnote any more than does Noah Webster. The copyright of concepts is a legal fiction. How is it, then, that literary terminology sometimes seems to be "owned" by particular theorists? For instance, we often speak about theoretical uses of words as if they were inventions duly registered at the US patent office whose copyrights were held by their inventors. We seem to say that, though words are public, terminology belongs to particular theorists and their schools of thought. [I'm using "we" in these sentences as a provocation--I'm suggesting that YOU are implicated in the practices I describe along with ME and that WE ought to be worried about what's going on in this case.]

When we discuss a term's relation to other terms, we often locate it in a conceptual network wherein the use of any one term allegedly depends upon the use of all. In a conceptual framework (like deconstruction or New Criticism) the use of any term is said to depend upon its link to the terms that form a "discourse" with it. Thus, Jameson's use of the term, "plot," in relation to Propp's use of it is usually

handled as a classification exercise. The former's usage is grouped with Marxist usages and the latter with Russian formalist usages. If terms belong to a school of thought or discourse community and thereby are integrated in a communal "discourse usage," then Jameson, a Marxist, cannot be using the term, plot, in the same sense as the formalist, Vladimir Propp. By the same token, when Jameson uses Lacan's terms, he is often understood to borrow upon psychoanalytic usage. This assumes--perhaps too easily--that Lacan's uses of the words in his texts are easily understood to function as a set of terms and that such integrated usage can be defined. It also seems to bracket the contexts of experience in which these terms might be used--Jameson does not employ them to interpret psychoanalytic situations involving patients whereas Lacan, presumably, did.

Accounts of the effects of membership in a discourse community upon its members tend to be circular (and *vice versa*). Is an individual use of a term--say "irony"--a consequence of a common usage of that term--say among New Critics, or is the common usage (definition) of that term a very broad generalization about individual uses of it? The inference "if unity therefore community" is difficult to distinguish from the inference "if community therefore unity." Either conclusion can be reached with a little ingenuity. Moreover, it is usually quite difficult to separate our perceptions of shared beliefs from the assumption that they form a community of interests; and we often assume that because there is a community of interests it will foster shared beliefs. (This assumption is tantamount to inferring that Chicago Cubs baseball fans are democrats. Yet, who would accept the inference that because persons shared a common interest in the Cubs, they must thereby hold beliefs in common.) Unfortunately, when a common denominator is found, unity seems to appear out of plurality. Though such "denominations" (classifications) can be handy, they are often arbitrary and misleading.

In literary study, the notion that the use of the same term authorized by reference to writings attributed to the same school of thought is an index of a shared practice is quite common. Yet, one of the peculiar effects of assuming that persons who use the same terms (use the same definitions of analytic concepts) belong to the same schools (also use the same methods of reading) is that such a view marks one as a member of the structuralist school of thought. The underlying conception of terms (that they draw their meaning from their function in a terminological system) is palpably structuralist. It would,

therefore, be odd if a post-structuralist thinker held such a view. Contrast this formalist attitude toward the definition of terms to Derrida's warning that his terms are constantly shifting even in the same work. (One might wonder, then, why critics schooled in deconstruction would worry about the way non-deconstructionists use Derrida's terms in their comments on his work; or, why they would accept the term "deconstruction" as a description of their reading habits?)

The notion that terms belong to terminological sets is the "foundation" of the belief that critical schools exist. Here's the logic of it. A critical reading is a description of how a text has been read. If the reading is critical, it depends upon analysis, that is, upon analytical concepts. Thus, a given reading of text is warranted by specific analytic concepts about how texts can be read. In sum, the concepts which provide a model of texts form a framework (a theory of texts) from which a method of reading can be derived, that is, they allow one to describe reading acts; and any description of a text is, in effect, a set of instructions about how to read it. Thus, theoretical models provide critical methods. Being schooled in a specific theory results in specific critical practices. In short, critical readings are concoctions baked from the recipes of Jacques Derrida's theorybook or Fredric Jameson's or Cleanth Brook's'.

This suggests the following provocation: the theory junkyard is a symptom of the schools and approaches mindset in which theory is more or less equivalent to method. Like other machinations, methods wear down. They get old. As vehicles, they no longer take their owners where they wish to go in the same style at the same rate with the same panache. Or, like clothes, theories get ragged. Before that, they go out of fashion and become worthless to the fashion conscious. Thus, they have to be junked. Or, so it would seem. The schools and approaches ideology that permeates histories of literary criticism promotes the notion that theories become obsolete. Thus, new theories can take the place of older ones just as newer critical readings replace older ones. Since new readings are often the product of new methodologies, it is useful to regard older methods as obsolete.

New methods and new readings are disseminated as new schools or movements. When a critic invents a new method, often by extrapolating from interpretive procedures judged to be effective in neighboring disciplines, s/he can produce novel readings of literary texts. If these readings are imitated widely, s/he becomes, in Paul Bové's phrase, "a sublime master."

This pattern is palpable in the strange case of New Historicism. Stephen J. Greenblatt is the master reader of the school having become for many an "exemplary" critic (Veeseer, *The New Historicism*, 244).

Following Clifford Geertz [Victor Turner,] and other cultural anthropologists, the New Historicist critics have evolved a method for describing culture in action. [Taking] Their [cue from Geertz's method of] "thick descriptions" [they] seize upon an event or anecdote--colonist John Rolfe's conversation with Pocohontas's father, a note found among Nietzsche's papers to the effect that "I have lost my umbrella"--and reread it in such a way that the analysis of tiny particulars reveals the [behavioral codes, logics, and] motive forces controlling a whole society. (Quoted from H Aram Veeseer's "Preface" to *The New Historicism* on the back cover. The brackets indicate what was omitted on the cover.)

As the cover also points out, "the rise of New Historicism" is "One of the most talked about developments in contemporary criticism." This verdict seems justified. According to a recent MLA survey, 39.7 % of MLA members now regard New Historicism as an "influential theoretical approach." Until the 90s, anthologies of literary criticism did not include New Historicism in their texts. Such texts are excellent barometers of institutional influence. This is reflected in recent anthologies. The percentage of New Critics represented in these anthologies has been dropping rapidly even though the school is still regarded by 64% of MLA members as influential. We can expect that soon New Critics will disappear as humanists did--Irving Babitt is no longer much included in anthologies and humanism is not even listed as a "theoretical approach" in the MLA survey. As the cover of Veeseer's collection indicates, New Historicists are "Seeking alternatives to the orthodoxies ranging from New Criticism to contemporary Franco-American literary theory."

*Theory*. The volume is divided into approaches, scholars, and terms which are listed for the readers convenience. Meticulous in her efforts to be discriminating, Irena Makaryk, the editor, identifies 49 approaches to literature still current in literary studies and 134 scholars who exemplify them. That this is a considerable increase over Vincent Leitch's identification in *American Literary Criticism* of some 13 schools of criticism (though he does identify 157 scholars who exemplify them) is easily explained. The *Encyclopedia* covers the world of criticism and Leitch only covers America. However, since Leitch admits in his Introduction that he left out many schools, we arrive at the number 46 if we subtract European schools such as Croation Philological Society, Nitra school, and Tartu school from Makaryk's list.

In her Introduction, Makaryk writes that "this volume is intended to suggest the immense scope of current theoretical approaches. She determined her list on the basis of the "most frequently cited" schools in various bibliographic indices, certainly a useful indication of contemporary literary critics views. Remarking on her list of scholars, Makaryk notes that they were "Not always neatly pigeon-holed into any particular school or approach." (viii). I take it then that sometimes they were considered to be an exemplar of a particular school of thought. And, of course, many of the essays do this. For example, Cleanth Brooks is "described as 'the quintessential New Critic'" quoting Robert Con Davis's demarcation of critical schools in *Contemporary Literary Criticism*. This is a judgment which Leitch shares.

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Cleanth Brooks, the quintessential New Critic, is surely the best instance of a match-up between an American critic and an American school of criticism. It is this pervasive fiction that I wish to address. Though Brooks is regarded in textbooks and histories on literary criticism as the New Critic, statistically speaking a larger percentage of his work is devoted to philology and historical study. Of his 40 year career, only eleven of those years saw the publication of close readings. In his later writings, Brooks expresses concern that his emphasis on the text has been misread as a disregard for its various historical contexts. In an interview I conducted with him in 1985, not only was he quick to point out that a substantial portion of his scholarly work is devoted to understanding the social, political, moral, religious and biographical contexts of Faulkner's, Milton's and Percy's work, but he insisted that the critics who

complained that he disregarded history simply did not read all of his work.

Brooks' first book published in 1935 was on philology--*The Relation of the Alabama-Georgia Dialect to the Provincial Dialects of Great Britain* as was his final project--*The Language of the American South* (1985). In the early fifties, after he wrote the texts with we associate him (1938-1949), an editor at Knopf asked Brooks if he would do a history of literary criticism. He then approached Wimsatt, who already had such a book in mind and was the guiding spirit of *Literary Criticism: A Short History* (1957). Nonetheless, Brooks contributed "Part IV," the final section of the history, on contemporary critics, focusing on Richards, Empson, Eliot, Pound, Ransom and Winters and the influence of Nietzsche, Freud and Jung on literary critics.

In 1963 Brooks published *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha Country*, the first of three books on Faulkner, which represents a departure from his earlier work. This initial study attempted "to deal with William Faulkner's characteristic world." (vii) In it, Brooks shows how Faulkner developed out of a particular milieu and how this manifested itself in terms of ethical and religious themes in his work. The opening chapters attempt to connect Faulkner with other regional writers and to delineate the social strata upon which his work depends. After briefly considering the relationship between Faulkner's nature poetry and his later fiction, Brooks then turns to a consideration of his Yoknapatawpha novels. The remaining chapters of the book explore various themes central to Faulkner's work: the role of the community, the themes of isolation and alienation, puritanism, the contrast between the old order and the new, the crumbling of the old, honor, and the past.

In 1963, he also published *The Hidden God: Studies in Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot, and Warren*. This volume brings together five lectures he delivered in June of 1955 at a conference on theology at Trinity College, Hartford, CT. In it he argues that Hemingway, Faulkner, Yeats, Eliot and Warren each profoundly explored issues that preoccupy theologians. In this volume, Brooks defends modern writers against the view that they have nothing to say to Christians, an enterprise which we would not typically associate with New Criticism.

*A Shaping Joy: Studies in the Writer's Craft*, published in 1971, is a collection of the papers Brooks read at various places during the previous ten years, including those he delivered while Cultural

Attache at the American Embassy in London, England. By this time, Brooks' work had been the subject of so much commentary that he felt it necessary to remark:

"The pigeonhole assigned to me carries the label 'The New Criticism'. Now, it is bad enough to live under any label, but one so nearly meaningless as 'The New Criticism'--it is certainly not new--has peculiar disadvantages. For most people it vaguely signifies an anti-historical bias and a fixation on 'close reading'." (xi)

Brooks hoped in *A Shaping Joy* to "mitigate the effects of an overshadowing generalization." (xix)

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Brook's response to his typification as the quintessential New Critic ought to give us pause. With him we might well ask: why do we employ these "overshadowing generalizations"? Ultimately the answer is: to help us organize our work into manageable categories. There are thousands upon thousands of critics writing millions of essays and books. We need some way of managing this information glut. Consequently, we fall back on our accustomed matrices--the alphabet, chronology, and language. These help considerably. However, it is difficult to sort out the connections among critics and so we have to find other ways of organizing their works.

Under the influence of disciplinary thought, we organized our work alpha-numerically according to fields, identifying Arnold, Austen, Barnes, Beddoes, Borrow, Bowles, Braddon, Bronte and so on as 19th century British writers. As the information glutted, we added additional categories--genre, for instance. Then we could bring Austen and Bronte together and keep them away from Arnold and so on. But a terrible thing happened--the theory industry. To cope with it, we had to borrow again from our colleagues in the scientific disciplines and add the category: method or more humanely, approach. This gave us schools of thought. In his history of criticism, *Republic of Letters*, Grant Webster describes how it all started. (Please forgive me the lengthy quote, but Webster cites many texts long forgotten in a very concise history of the schools and approaches movement.)

Among the most common sources of critical ideologies in the post-World War II period have been terms and values drawn from the contexts of other disciplines and applied to literature. These

sources of literary charters are usually referred to as "approaches" to literature or "perspectives" on it, and the most common approaches were first expressed in John Crowe Ransom's *The New Criticism* (1941), where, despite his title, he classifies Richards as a psychological critic, Eliot as a historical critic, and Winters as a logical critic, and titles his last chapter "Wanted: An Ontological [or new] Critic." This formula was extended in precision and influence by Stanley Edgar Hyman in *The Armed Vision* (1948), in which twelve critics are discussed as representatives of possible approaches to criticism on the thesis that "what modern criticism is could be defined crudely and somewhat inaccurately as *the organized use of non-literary techniques and bodies of knowledge to obtain insights into literature*" (AV 3). Thus Yvor Winters represents evaluative criticism, Constance Rourke folk criticism, Kenneth Burke the criticism of symbolic action, Caudwell Marxist criticism, and so on. By centering on a single person and showing how he represents a kind of criticism (the past history and current use of each approach is traced explicitly) Hyman takes into account both the individual accomplishment and its representative nature (see AV 390). These various approaches were also considered by Wellek and Warren in *Theory of Literature* under the heading "The Extrinsic Approach," where the relation of literature to biography, psychology, society, ideas, and the other arts is treated fully with the purpose of showing the limitation of these approaches compared with the (to these authors) central study of the work itself (the "intrinsic approach"). In a 1961 essay, Wellek reclassifies the tendencies of modern criticism as Marxist, psychoanalytical, linguistic and stylistic, organismic formalism, mythic, and existentialist, but reaffirms his continuing belief that "formalist, organismic, symbolistic aesthetics ... has a firmer grasp on the nature of poetry and art [than existential or mythic criticism]" (CC 363-64).

Roughly the same division of the subject was used by William Van O'Connor in *An Age of Criticism, 1900-1950*, which isolates as principal modern critical movements the New Humanism and social, analytical, psychological, and myth criticism. Walter Sutton's *Modern American Criticism* likewise has chapters on New Criticism, Early (Freudian) Psychological Criticism, Psychological (Jungian) and Myth Criticism, Liberal and Marxist Criticism, as well as the Neo-Aristotelians.

So, the New Critical Theorists ushered in an emphasis on method or approach which indeed was the title of Brook's most famous work--*Approaches to Literature*. This passage from Grant Webster's *Republic of Letters* reveals the schools (and surely their signature terms) which have been thrown into the theory junkyard. Organismic Formalism and Folk Criticism sound discarded and Myth Criticism sounds at best antique whereas New Humanism has the ring of the archaic.

What may have begun as an attempt to identify various approaches to literature has given way to a reified classificatory system which does, if Brooks testimony is any evidence, pigeon-hole critics into schools of thought. In short, the usefulness of this system (which ought to be its *descriptive power*) is no longer a sure thing. Rather the classificatory category "approach" as it is employed in reference works like the MLA bibliography and textbooks on critical theory has become meaningless--just as Brooks warned. Recall that Makaryk used as the basis of her identification of approaches the counting of citations. This does not ensure that because a group of critics are lumped together into a category, for instance the one called the "Yale school," that their critical practices are, in fact, tantamount to a shared method. That notwithstanding, we can readily admit that many critics use "signature concepts," that is, concepts which not only warrant their ad hoc practices but also identify them, however misleadingly, with a school of thought.

These considerations allow us to modify our governing question to read: which signature concepts should be placed in the theory junkyard; which should be kept there; and which should be recycled? Before I undertake to answer this question, however, I want to take up the most obvious objection to my remarks: that critical schools are invented categories or fictions used to organize our history is true enough, but the point is that it is a useful fiction.

If schools of thought are fictions, are they useful fictions?

The "schools and approaches" frame we give to the development of literary study suggests that discourse communities dominate our work. As I have suggested, this is a dubious surmise. The histories

we have invented for ourselves, organized around shifts from one school of thought to another, disguise highly individualistic critical work in the cloak of interpretive communities. This cloak may be the invisible one only its wearer sees. Is Foucault a structuralist? Is Fish deconstructive? Is Mary Louise Pratt a speech act theorist? Is Derrida Derridean if J. Hillis Miller (who has explained in the *New York Times Book Review*) also is? To which school of thought does Kenneth Burke belong?--choose from among the several in which he has been included (formalist, psycho-analytic, Neo-Aristotlean, Pragmatist, Marxist, and of course dramatic). We are accustomed to labels. We need to defamiliarize them. Is Lacan Freudian? Is Jane Gallop Lacanian? Wouldn't it be easy to marshal evidence against such claims?

Our recognition of schools is rooted in the recognition of signature terms. Yet, the uses of terms are notoriously disparate. The criticism of criticism is a stockpile of accusations that critics are unfaithful in their espousal of terms. However, we often overlook the disciplinary force of signature terms: that they warrant critical practices. "Deconstruction" is not only a signature term that tells us with which school of thought a critic identifies, it is also the name for a critical practice.

Schools of thought allegedly have "disciplinary force": as we have seen, they produce methods of reading. This is characteristic of a discipline. You might say "that's the good news." However, there is a "bad news" angle to this story. In the history of criticism, once critics are institutionalized as a school--no matter how vigorously the founders may disown a shared methodology, their practices are converted into methods in the name of pedagogy. This is why textbooks and journals play such crucial roles in maintaining schools. Through selective excerpts, they promulgate an apparently unified methodology. Students are taught to read after a fashion. They learn various "approaches" or methods of reading.

We do not often speak about "method reading." Put in such juxtaposition, the terms collide. Yet, we seem to promulgate "method reading" by the way we have organized our discipline, that is, by narrating the history of criticism as a succession of schools and approaches. One of the tangible effects of this mode of organization is that students, especially graduate students, feel compelled to learn the latest method of reading (thereby placing other "schools" and their signature terms in the theory junkyard). Who wants to learn how Cleanth Brooks read "The Waste Land" when they can learn how Derrida reads "The Purloined Letter"?

(I choose this example advisedly because many contemporary students cannot perform formal analyses of literature since formalism is in the theory junkyard and yet a strong case can be made that no analysis of a text can be conducted without attention to textual forms whether or not their interpretive force is construed to be centripetal or centrifugal.)

Last week a student in my undergraduate Introduction to Criticism class (I'll call him Keith), when asked to write a brief interpretation of James Joyce's "Araby," wanted to know what point of view he was to take. Keith knew that there were approaches to literature but he was uncertain what they were. When I responded that he could take any approach he wanted, he remarked that he had come into my class to learn what they were so that he could produce readings of texts like the readings about which he had been hearing rumors from his friends--deconstructive readings, post-colonial readings, new historicist readings, and so on. Admitting that, indeed, certain critics in the past (in the history of criticism) had been associated with specific methods, I suggested that for starters we would find out what was bothersome or brilliant (in need of criticism) about "Araby" in order to learn what needed further analysis. Keith's expectations about literary criticism are quite common. Normally, students expect to be shown a recent method for reading so that they can apply it to the texts they read whether or not the texts they are reading call for it.

I am reminded of a conversation with another student (I'll call her Ellen) who read *Hamlet* in a Shakespeare seminar. She knew the Hamlet story from the Kevin Kline and Kirk Browning film which her high school English teacher brought into class. Finding herself now in graduate school and assigned a paper on a Shakespeare play, Ellen heard that New Historicists have much to say on the matter. So, she bought H. Aram Veese's *The New Historicism* and started to read. The Introduction informed her that "the New Historicism has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics" (ix). She was happy to discover that "It retains at the same time, those methods and materials that gave old fashioned literary study its immense interpretive authority" (xii). She quoted in her paper the five assumptions New Historians have in common. Though Ellen received an "A+" for her seminar paper, she was a bit troubled (which her conversation with me reflected) by various disclaimers in some of the essays in the collection and quite disconcerted by

Brook Thomas' essay, "The 'New Historicism and other Old-fashioned Topics," but reassured by Vincent Pecora's observation in "The Limits of Local Knowledge" that New Historicism "is an attempt to find a methodology that could avoid the reductiveness both of formalist ... and of the Marxian treatment of the aesthetic object ..." (243). Knowing that New Criticism is no longer new and that Marxism is still a bit shady, she felt she was on the right track toward a method of reading that would produce decent papers for her seminars and allow her to feel like a competent graduate student. On the basis of her successful experience in the Shakespeare seminar, Ellen now calls herself a New Historicist and has begun to complain about the "naive formalists" of her acquaintance and their "essentialist" methods.

Such are the conditions under which new methods are disseminated. But, what about the disclaimers in Veese's text that troubled Ellen momentarily? Indeed, when we turn to "Towards a Poetics of Culture," an essay by the alleged founder of New Historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, we read:

I feel in a somewhat false position, which is not a particularly promising way to begin, and I might as well explain why. My own work has always been done with a sense of just having to go about and do it, without establishing first exactly what my theoretical position is. A few years ago I was asked by *Genre* to edit a selection of Renaissance essays, and I said OK. I collected a bunch of essays and then, out of a kind of desperation to get the introduction done, I wrote that the essays represented something I called a "new historicism." I've never been very good at making up advertising phrases of this kind; for reasons that I would be quite interested in exploring at some point, the name stuck much more than other names I'd very carefully tried to invent over the years. In fact I have heard--in the last year or so-- quite a lot of talk about the "new historicism" (which for some reason in Australia is called Neohistoricism); there are articles about it, attacks on it, references to it in dissertations: the whole thing makes me quite giddy with amazement. In any case, as part of this peculiar phenomenon I have been asked to say something of a theoretical kind about the work I'm doing. So I shall try if not to define the new historicism, at least to situate it as a practice--a practice rather than a doctrine, since as far as I can tell (and I should be the one to know) it's no doctrine at all. (1)

What emerged from Greenblatt's essay was a "poetics" of culture that provided a method, a way of

generalizing a practice. The practice shifts attention away from texts as such to their various social contexts. It is a reaction to prior practices. It existed without a name for years in the work of Stephen Orgel, Roy Strong, and D. J. Gordon to mention only the scholars identified by Veese. If we add the work of Foucault, Jameson, and other prominent post-structuralist thinkers, the list gets longer. Suddenly, a name surfaces--the New Historicism. According to Louis Montrose the term seems to have been introduced into Renaissance studies ... in Michael McCanles, "The Authentic Discourse of the Renaissance" (*Diacritics* 10: 1 Spring 1980, 77-87) but "gained currency from its use by Stephen Greenblatt in his brief, programmatic introduction to 'The Form of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance,' a special issue of *Genre* (15: 1-2, 1982, 1-4)" (32, fn 6). The puzzling aspect of the "conditions" under which New Historicism was invented is the role advertising played--the marketing of a conception. No less an authority on New Historicism or Neohistoricism than its "alleged" founder considers it one of many "advertising phrases" whose "kind" are names of schools of thought or, to stay with his idioms, "theoretical camps."

I think Greenblatt is right. New Historicism gives a name, a logo, to work that "has always been done with a sense of just having to go about and do it, without establishing first exactly what ... theoretical position [it] is" (1). Giving a name to work done by several hands comes post-facto. The conditions under which schools of thought appear to be necessary are historiographical. Historians would seem to need to find ways of linking critics together into critical movements. However, in the 90s, having a history has given way to inventing one. Since stories about the past are stories, then mystery becomes possible if it can also be yourstory. The message is the medium, a "sound bite." The "schools and approaches" is less an ideology than a mythology--a *mythos*, thoughts about thoughts embodied through narrative. Mythos returns us to method.

We left Ellen upon her discovery that she indeed had a method with which to reread *Hamlet*--a poetics of culture. She had learned that Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* is an important document in this school of thought. So, having read his "Magical Narratives" she now sees that the plot of *Hamlet* is itself a repetition of a story that has since been repeated. What if, hearing about Ellen's idea for a paper on *Hamlet* entitled "The Political Unconscious of Hamlet," a friend had suggested that she read

Peter Brooks who has a lot to say in a post-structuralist way about repeated plots. This could have introduced Ellen to the notion of a masterplot (of which *Hamlet* is merely one instance). Then, avoiding the collision of viewpoints (Jameson on Propp / Greenblatt on Jameson / Brooks on *Hamlet* and so on), Ellen might have forged the following thesis:

Propp's seminal insight into the morphology of tales allows us now to perceive how Shakespeare's masterplot reveals a colonialist ideology surging up from the play's political unconscious. She didn't do this but had she we would, indeed, have had a new reading of *Hamlet* to rival those produced by other method readings of the play. Yet, what would be its value? New meaning? As Chomsky points out, every sentence we utter produces a new meaning. So, there is no limit to the number of readings a variety of new methods can produce. In sum, literary criticism is a discipline which has no delimiters. This might make us wonder if the pedagogical process in which Ellen is being schooled should be abandoned. If so, shouldn't we discourage efforts to describe our work in terms of the schools and approaches ideology? I believe that an answer to our "main question" sheds light on how we might answer this one. So, let me return to it: which signature concepts should be placed in the theory junkyard; which should be kept there; and which should be recycled?

iv

one person's junk is another's antique

The promotion of schools and approaches seems to invite us to replace one school of thought with another. This is tantamount to replacing one group of terms with another, for instance, Propp's with Jameson's. Leaving aside the question, "why?," let's consider what is involved in replacing one use of a term with another. To avoid confusing this issue by taking another New Historicist example which would make these remarks seem to be a critique of that school, let's construct for ourselves a scenario in which a new school started up. Let's stipulate that Peter Brooks' *Reading for the Plot* is the inaugural moment for a group of like-minded critics who find themselves being called Neo-narratologists. Let's situate Brooks' practice by situating one of his key terms, "masterplot."

This tactic forces us to admit that the term, "masterplot," is a bit troubling. It is designated by

Brooks as a "model for the uses of plot," "a model that would provide a synthetic and comprehensive grasp of the workings of plot" (90). It is not a master-narrative. Nor is the conceptual equivalent of Vladimir Propp's term, nor Lévi Strauss', nor Roland Barthes', nor Tzvetan Todorov's. It seems almost the obverse of Ross Chamber's "story" but is hardly the minimal story of which Gerald Prince writes. Despite the title of his essay, "Freud's Masterplot: A Model for Narrative," we wouldn't want to say it's a Freudian term. Nor would we wish to suggest it means what archetype means in Jung. However we situate this term, there would be no apparent motive for replacing any of these conceptions of plot or story with Brooks' or *vice versa*. But, if there is no reason to throw away, say, Ross Chamber's term "story" and replace it with Brooks' "masterplot," what reason could make us throw away Propp's use of "plot" and replace it with Brooks' "masterplot"? I can't think of any lexicographic motive. There is no obvious reason for putting Propp's view of plot in the junkyard. In fact, Brooks uses Propp's sense of a plot to clarify his model. So, it does not make sense in this context to "throw away" Propp's use of the term.

What if we argued that Propp's method is outdated & Brooks' is not. Would this count as a reason to throw away Propp's usage and replace it with Brooks'? We might say that Brooks uses Propp's term without employing his method, that he updates Propp's use of the term. If we take this position, however, then we have to admit that Brooks' use of the term is also already dated. It may not be as old as Propp's but it is dated. All terms are dated. They all have histories. This raises the question: is the use of a term dependent upon its history?

Surely, no term being used is an OLD term as long as it is used. Used now, it makes sense now. The use of a term is existential. This use is this use. Or, to express this tautological relation in another way--If my use of the term plot corresponds to Propp's conception of repeated narrative functions, this does not make it any less a conception / use. Though I might express indebtedness to Propp, chances are that the way I use the term is not identical to his use and chances are that his use is inconsistent. If I choose to use a term in a sense approximate to Propp's, the usefulness of that term for my project is not dependent upon the original context by which the term was defined.

Terms are not defined by proxy. They are reformulated by the inquiry undertaken. Every project has its special terms. The term "plot," for instance, is negotiated by the persons who use it when they are

using it. A term used in the sense that someone else used it is nonetheless used in the discourse in question and does not necessarily depend upon the earlier discourse for its meaning.

Method reading confuses this issue. The promulgation of methods derived from schools of thought leads easily into the meat-grinder style of reading. Any text read is ground up into the theoretical terms applied to it. Methods produce new readings as surely as recipes produce meals. But, as in the case of cooking, old terms (like old recipes) can often be quite fulfilling. The recipes may change the style of cooking but they do not necessarily change its purpose. Propp's method of analyzing texts is no longer much in vogue. That this is so, however, does not make his terms unfulfilling. Old terms do not become useless until they are "archaic," until they have no senses useful to present day speakers.

Schools sometimes have a noxious effect on the free use of terms. We sometimes think critics are misusing terms because they use the same words other critics use in different ways. Schools often seem to claim the right to use terms distinctively and make persons not willing to pledge allegiance to their school feel like miscreants if they use a term associated with the school in a different sense. As a negation of a use, the attribution of misuse is little more than a confirmation of that usage. In order to stipulate misuse, some use has to be privileged. What could count as a privileged use--that someone else used it? In such a contract, authority or authorship becomes ownership. Yet, terms are not usually regarded as commodities.

Commodificaiton is routine. In the past, we did not sell water in grocery stores. In the past, we did not advertise presidential candidates. Times have changed. Now we commodify both water and presidents. Recently, we have been marketing terms. Critics have learned from businesses that concepts can be sold. Persuading your clients that a product is old is the first step toward persuading them to buy a new one. It's an old marketing technique. Though it seems to promulgate innovation, it actually promotes imitation. To sell a new product, you must first create a market for it; and, to market a new product line, one must reproduce thousands of the *same* desire. Moreover, new models of a product do not insure consumer benefits. The auto industry teaches this sad lesson. The theory industry teaches the same sad lesson.

As with terms, so with the schools they are the signatures of. Critical practices tend to be ad hoc

and historically specific, that is, local. Generalizing them into methodologies is a distortion and a fiction even when it is a helpful one. I believe the schools and approaches mode of organizing our work is no longer helpful. It has given us the theory industry and that has produced the buying and selling of signature concepts. It makes sense to rethink our mode of historicizing ourselves. I have some thoughts on this matter but they require another essay.