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Williams - Theory Change - JCRT 4.2
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One striking fact of contemporary criticism is its seemingly relentless change. Change, such that theories or “critical approaches” have half-lives not of a few decades but of a few years, has become a normal, accepted part of our system of professional discourse, inflecting if not driving what the reception theorist Hans Robert Jauss called “the horizon of expectation” of criticism and scholarship. For instance, in the not too distant past, the myth criticism inspired by Northrop Frye dominated much of the critical writing of the 1960s, looking at the Earth Mother in fields spanning from Beowulf to modernist poetry, but now it seems an antiquated memory, a reminder of times past like a water basin in an antiques store. Similarly, the structuralism that proposed a technical revolution toward a more exact scientific description of literature claimed central attention on the scene in the 1970s, now seems an outmoded invention, like a 64k computer. More recently, the vehement debates over the status of a text and the location of interpretation in reader-response and deconstructive criticism that filled the pages of many a critical journal in the late 1970s and 1980s now has been sidestepped, like the 60s debate over long hair. Through the 1990s, it seemed that change, if anything, accelerated, ushering in new critical approaches, frames, and lexicons at every MLA convention.

3. Though unsurprising now, this criterion of change is strange compared to the traditional model of humanistic scholarship, for instance in philology or source studies which were common in the first half of the twentieth century. Those modes assumed a kind of building block model, whereby critical scholarship developed by accumulation, by adding onto previous views, perhaps with slight modifications of the lineage but without displacing it. For instance, in medieval or Renaissance studies one might adduce fabliaux that were possible or probable sources of Chaucer or Shakespeare, which, whatever their corrections or qualifications, added onto the extant edifice. It was an edifice that was enduring, its constancy and durability conferring its legitimacy. It seems that our system is predicated instead on its indurability, its legitimacy conferred by its continual “development” of new critical approaches.
4. Oddly enough, given the prevalence of change, there is relatively little consideration of critical change in literary studies, as there are of science in the philosophy of science. There are of course a number of histories of criticism, but not of the models or mechanisms that drive that the history of criticism. One commonplace is that it is like “fashion,” but this is almost invariably an off-handed surmise, if not cynical quip, and suggests a superficial change of taste, like the current shift from square to pointy-toed shoes. (I take this question of taste, as well as the logic that taste serves, seriously at the end of this essay, but my point is that fashion is a mystified comment rather than a useful, analytical observation.)
5. Another commonplace is that criticism reflects “ideas of the time” or general social history. There seems an obvious way that certain forms of contemporary criticism parallel social movements, particularly feminist, postcolonial, and other identity based critical projects, but there are manifest difficulties in ascertaining the causal connections between social history and particular critical approaches, and many forms of criticism have no overt social dimension.

(for instance, structuralism or reader response). For instance, theory has often been deemed a “politics by other means” of “tenured radicals,” but other critics have argued that theory represents precisely a turn from politics into the safehouse of academe (see Christian and Ahmad). Further, after the death of communism, it is a common quip that the only place where Marxism is taken seriously is in the academy, which is taken as evidence precisely of academic critics’ being out of touch rather than in tune with ideas of the time. This is not to dismiss history, but the most coherent way to consider critical history, as I will argue, is through the specific mediation of the post-WWII university.

6. Probably the most prevalent model of change, implicit in the construction of most histories of criticism, textbooks, and syllabi, is of a procession. Criticism builds from a lineage of master theorists and their ideas. This model effects an historical sensibility, but generally presupposes a fairly straightforward evolution, such that critical ideas pass, like a baton in a relay race, from great figures (and their epigones) to the next in line. The heuristic of “the conversation” (whether from Kenneth Burke or Mikhail Bakhtin) enlivens this model, and has the virtue of foregrounding the rhetorical dynamic of criticism. Still, it accounts for change as an intra-literary history, as a lineage of ideas largely divorced from any other historical determinants, whether institutional or of larger social factors.
7. Gerald Graff’s *Professing Literature*, widely regarded as the best institutional history of criticism we have, lends some depth to the conversational model, seeing the development of criticism not as a simple accretionary procession but as a struggle for institutional dominance. Thus certain critical positions’ such as the New Criticism’ are established in conflict with previous positions’ such as philology. The strength of Graff’s account is that it foregrounds the institutional placement of criticism’ not just a series of ideas, but of people struggling for institutional power to carry out certain practices. Still, for all its virtues, it focuses for the most part on an internal disciplinary history, and within the discipline, as Graff notes, does not address rhetoric and composition nor creative writing. Further, although it occasionally alludes to the history of the university, it generally does not account for the negotiation of English with other disciplines in the university, and although it alludes to trends such as the post-World War II influx of students, does not account for larger history. (My point, in noting these limitations, is not to derogate *Professing Literature*, but to underscore the tendencies of critical history, even in its best versions.)
8. Probably the most prominently articulated theoretical model of change is that of paradigms, adapted from the philosophy of science, particularly Thomas Kuhn’s classic *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. The best example of a paradigmatic application to literary studies is a little-read but valuable book, Grant Webster’s *Republic of Letters*, which traces the emergence of the “paradigm” of theory from the New Criticism and other mid-century figures (surprisingly from our perspective, he locates the rise of theory with Northrop Frye, Murray Kreiger, and Stanley Edgar Hyman.) Anthony Easthope also invokes this model in *Literary into Cultural Studies*, in which he proclaims cultural studies as a paradigm shift from previous literary studies. While there is a certain descriptive power to both of these accounts’ Webster’s explains the shift largely from the public to the academic location of criticism (the conflict for him is not philology and the New Criticism, but the journalism of the New York Intellectuals and the academic tenor of the New Critics), and Easthope foregrounds the rise of cultural studies, which indeed seems to be the rubric under which much literary studies is now practiced (though how much it actually departs from literary studies remains an open question, as I will discuss below)’I would argue that the paradigm model is fundamentally incommensurate

with humanistic disciplines.

9. Kuhn's formidable insight is that scientific work does not proceed solely by logical protocols but through the institutional and social protocols of scientific communities. Scientific work does not simply discern physical laws, but is governed by the procedures and applications of that community; a paradigm is the consensus of the community. The practice of science is fundamentally social, not only intellectual or by virtue of pure reason. However, Kuhn's is not a radical, constructivist view of scientific knowledge. While he allows for the social determinants of practice, Kuhn still holds that there is empirically verifiable evidence, which is finally what grounds scientific practice. A paradigm breaks down when evidence accumulates with some resistance because of the social entrenchment of a paradigm that are "anomalies" and cannot be explained by standard frames. Like a flood, after a mass of anomalies build, the old paradigm is washed away, while a new paradigm coalesces which offers the most comprehensive explanation of phenomena. Change comes with a certain resistance; as he puts it, "Professionalization leads ... to a considerable resistance to paradigm change" (64). In a sense, the social impedes the workings of pure science, but science wills out.
10. There are a few reasons why this model does not fit literary studies. First, the standard view in literary studies of "schools" and "movements," or what Stanley Fish calls "interpretive communities" suggests the notion of a paradigm. A paradigm is the general frame of an interpretive community. However, the sense of "communities" is much different from Kuhn's; Kuhn's is singular, denoting a general scientific framework, like Newtonian or Einsteinian physics, rather than multiple. Humanistic disciplines are pluralistic rather than paradigmatic. At any given time in literary studies, for instance, scholars might be doing philology as well as deconstruction, textual criticism as well as cultural studies; in physics, this would be akin to doing ptolemaic astronomy alongside contemporary astrophysics.
11. This leads to a second point. Humanistic disciplines are accumulative and traditional. Past practices become part of its history and practice. While this applies to Kuhn's field of the history of science, science itself has no history. It is presentist rather than historical. A third point follows from this: the method of the humanities is interpretive and hermeneutic. The method of science works by what Imre Lakatos calls "falsification" or Karl Popper calls "conjecture and refutation," relying on empirical evidence which falsifies a theory. New interpretations in the humanities do not falsify or refute past interpretations, but become part of the cumulative reception history. This leads to the question of change. For Kuhn, an inherent problem of paradigms is that they are conservative, and resist change. In literary studies, the reverse holds: theories perpetually change, not because they are empirically disproven, but because they are deemed to lack interest.
12. As a case in point, if the deconstructive argument of Paul de Man foregrounding the intractable problematic of language, which captured the attention of a significant group of critics in the 1970s and 80s and was widely attested to be "rigorous," held validity, how did it come to largely disappear, brushstroked out of the picture of thick cultural description and identitarian notions of representation? It was not empirically invalidated, but sidestepped, at the same time that it permeates later terminology and concepts. Rather than a logical model of refutation, it seems that a kind of institutional *forgetting* drives the history of criticism.
13. Yet, there is still a tacit belief or assumption that criticism works by logical protocols, that it operates according to protocols of evidence and proof and by refutation or falsification. When we talk about criticism and theory we use the language of evidence and proof we call

our practices “arguments,” assert their rigor or lack thereof, and accumulate examples’but, I believe, the overriding protocol is finally *aesthetic criteria’judgments of taste*. For the most part, *theories are not disproven but disregarded, they are not refuted but reconfigured, they are not deemed illogical but deemed to lack interest*. They become quaint, available perhaps through nostalgia, like “80s Night” at a local club. After their centrality, they become consigned to what James Sosnoski calls “the theory junkyard.” Sosnoski gives the example of structuralist terms, that were once prevalent but now rarely appear, except in some very technical forms of narratology; a more recent example I would cite is that of reader-response theory, which was a counterpart of poststructuralism, in a distinction that Paul de Man made carrying out the hermeneutic arm of the poetics of deconstruction.

14. So, if not through proof and refutation, why does criticism change? In recent criticism, why did theory (often synecdochically represented by the label “deconstruction”) come to be the name of criticism in the late 1980s? Why did theory cede, presumably to the portmanteau of practices called cultural studies and the various manifestations of identity studies? Why did the spate of autobiographical and other kinds of more journalistic criticism, or what I call “the new belletrism,” take center stage through the 90s?
15. I would like to propose some alternative ways to account for critical change. Elsewhere I have written about the rhetoric of narrative and how the institutional currency of particular critical modes derives as much from narrative as from argument. For instance, a significant component of the displacement of deconstruction from its predominant position was through the assertion of the *Citizen Kane*-like scandal of Paul de Man. de Man came to personify deconstruction and theory in general (as John Guillory shows in *Cultural Capital*), and was the primary protagonist of its rise. Through the circulation of the story of his wartime writings, de Man and deconstruction met the fate, as the headlines spinning across the screen in *Citizen Kane* read, of “Scandal, infamy, ruin.” In other words, in terms of falsification, the narrative of the fall of Paul de Man worked rhetorically to falsify deconstruction and to some extent theory.
16. Another alternative “model” of critical change I have analyzed is “generations.” The concept of “generations” provides a way to describe changes in criticism not just as innovations in thought but as social responses to institutional formations. It emphasizes that criticism is the activity of a cohort embedded institutionally, rather than a unique product of discrete individuals, as the processional model otherwise suggests. In part borrowing from feminism, which has foregrounded the role of generations, I use “generation” to designate not simply an age group, as in its colloquial sense, but in a more specific sense, similar to what the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls “the habitus.” Bourdieu uses “habitus” to explain how institutions work over time; though they are “objective structures,” they only endure through their flexibly incorporating “agents” as particular moments, by producing a common set of “dispositions.” A generation is formed and held together by a common set of “dispositions,” such as theory, dispositions which for us are inculcated particularly in graduate training as well as other professional channels and protocols. The concept of generations, I believe, helps to explain the shift from “the theory generation” to the “posttheory generation” as an institutional response to the conditions of the university.
17. Here I would like to elaborate three other factors that I think are fundamental to critical change but have been insufficiently accounted for: (1) the *research protocol*; (2) what I’ll call “*disciplinary emulation*”; and (3) the humanistic *imperative of aesthetic appeal*. If I have an

overarching thesis, it is that the primary motor of change in contemporary criticism is the development of the research university: the history of contemporary criticism is inseparable from the history of the research university, its material circumstance, its ensuing protocols, and its symbolic negotiation with its public. As a corollary to this, change is driven by the specific disciplinary negotiation of the humanities among departments of what Clark Kerr called the multiversity, in the contest for funds and prestige among departments as well as in disciplinary emulation, that is, garnering legitimation not through competition but through imitation and assimilation. One conclusion of this is that Theory rose and fell as a contingency of the rise and fall of the postwar research university.

18. Why I think this account is important is because the history of criticism is, as I have mentioned, still usually conceived in terms of literary history, operating by its own codes and parameters that project a stable continuity. Despite the turn toward historicizing phenomena from Dickens' novels to Victorian underwear, we still tend to account for criticism or theory itself as an autonomous realm of thought rather than an historical practice, assuming that critical practices are established by the will of critics, rather than because of the socio-institutional and historical needs that criticism might fulfill. Criticism or theory names not only a set of texts but the material relation of the humanities.
19. The period after World War II witnessed the exponential growth of established U.S. universities and the founding of many new state universities. Both private and public universities were seeded with a massive infusion of government and foundation money to perform research directly and indirectly for industry, military, and other governmental services. Before World War II, the federal government contracted with independent labs for research, and there was far less state funding for such ends. But after the war, as R.C. Lewontin shows in "The Cold War and the Transformation of the Academy," the cost of research was massively socialized "in the face of American antistate ideology" through the unprecedented continuation of a war economy in peace time. This was driven ideologically by the specter of the Cold War, as well as enabled by the emergence of the liberal, welfare state initiated with the New Deal. A correlated effect was the opening of higher education to returning G.I.s from classes previously excluded, and then their baby boomer children.
20. Though hard to imagine now, before the war universities were suspicious of government mandates and much more guardedly accepted external funds, but afterwards, and following upon funding shortages during the Great Depression, universities changed their policies, readily drawing on federal and other sources (see Lowen). In turn they adopted a research rationale, which progressively gained prominence over teaching, as their official modus operandi. Teaching of course did not disappear, but became integrated with (if not subordinate to) the goals of the research university, particularly in the vast expansion of graduate education.
21. This likewise transformed the professional bearing of faculty. By 1970, as Jencks and Riesman observe in *The Academic Revolution*, the predominant rationale of faculty became research rather than teaching. And the profession at large became the adjudicator of value, over the individual campus. As Lawrence Veysey, the author of the standard *Emergence of the American University*, recounts, "The 1950s brought about a great elevation of the research-centered ideal in American higher education.... For the first time, research chairs became fairly common, at least toward the top of the academic system. Some would go so far as to say that this change ushered in an entirely new era because it meant that leading professors no longer had to bid for students in order to gain prestige" (17), instead bidding for it and gaining it through

research.

22. These changes in the university decisively influenced criticism. To start with the New Critics, Ransom's "Criticism, Inc.," a manifesto announcing the New Criticism pre-World War II, is not an argument for New Critical tenets (in the way that, say, "The Intentional Fallacy" is), but for the value of criticism as the distinctive practice that asserts the distinctive professional position of academic professors of literature. That is, the New Critical call is one for legitimation and autonomous disciplinary control on the order of a business monopoly, hence "Criticism, Inc." "before it is one for a particular methodology, or the methodology is not "disinterested" but precisely expresses a *professional interest*. And they did this programmatically through teaching, through a slew of anthologies' *Understanding Poetry*, *Understanding Fiction*, etc.' more than "research," and in fact published relatively few books compared to a later generation. As Graff remarks in *Professing Literature*, the New Critical practice provided a reproducible pedagogical method for the massive postwar influx of students and burgeoning American university system. It thereby was adopted as the dominant professional practice because it fulfilled this need and offered the most consequent professional rationale. *The university is not a necessary cause of the practice of the New Criticism, but its success was a contingent result of the conditions of the university.*
23. In contrast to the pedagogical need that the New Criticism fulfilled, Theory gained dominance because it fulfilled a different need, that of the research protocol of the multiversity, from the 1960s through the 1980s. Theory reconstituted our work and professional rationale explicitly as research rather than teaching. It projected a distinctive research agenda for literary study, that we study the nature of language, sign systems, the processes of interpretation and knowledge, and the formative forces of gender and other social factors in human life, rather than merely poems or novels.
24. Within the university, it provided a technocratic expertise and prestige for literature, in competition with or measured against other faculties, in particular the social sciences, which deal with human rather than physical matters, and in emulation of the physical science faculties. (A commonly accepted view is that the humanities, with a kind of chip on its shoulder, competed with the hard sciences. In "A Short History of a Border War," a corrective of the "Two Cultures" view, Elizabeth Wilson shows how the humanities shaped itself in contest with the social sciences.) Though the humanities have notoriously little utilitarian value (at least for modern industry), the humanities piggy-backed onto the massively funded sciences through the administrative tax of "overhead." As the biologist R.C. Lewontin observes of the research university, "Some *discrepancy* in teaching obligation is tolerated between molecular biologists and literary critics, but there is a limit to how much *discrepancy* can be maintained within an institution. Lower teaching loads in science have meant lower teaching loads in the humanities" (30; my emphasis). One way to see the impetus for interdisciplinarity in the current university is as a new form of piggy-backing. Interdisciplinarity configures disciplines as equal participants on a level field, which is much to the advantage of the humanities, where discrepancies in actual funding and grants is much less. Interdisciplinarity, in this sense, is a symbolic compensation for this ever-widening discrepancy, or an assertion of prestige to redress the lacking of actual capital.
25. The various practices now named under the rubrics of "cultural studies" and "the new belletrism" 'personal criticism, public criticism, and the aesthetic revival' respond to a yet different need and historical conjuncture, of the decline of the research university, in particular

the no longer supportable “piggybacking” of the humanities onto the applied sciences. They distance themselves from previous claims of specialized, quasi-scientific theoretical research to reassert precisely the *discrepant* and distinctive value of the literary or the cultural. This is obvious in revived modes of belletristic critical writing, which assert the traditional aesthetic enjoyment and fulfillment of literature, and in a sense re-asserts its spiritual or quasi-religious function, which promises to salve the injuries of our profit-mad world (hence why so many medical schools now have medical humanities). It is less obvious in cultural studies, but my contention is that cultural studies as it is most often practiced reproduces the aesthetic imperative of literary studies.

26. I’ll talk more about this in a moment, but first a few more words on “disciplinary emulation.” I use this phrase in contrast to the usual view of the “contest of faculties”; while disciplines work to distinguish themselves from other pursuits, one remarkable tendency of literary studies has been its imitation and assimilation of alongside its material “piggybacking” on other disciplines. The early formation of English was a bastard, a lesser heir of the classics. And “scholarship” in English first emulated the philology of the classics to call upon its professional legitimation. It did so to distinguish itself from common literary journalism, which presumably required no particular expertise.
27. The New Criticism attempted to call upon a distinctive rationale for literary studies. One can see this especially in documents such as R.S. Crane’s “History versus Criticism in the Study of Literature,” as well as Ransom’s “Criticism, Inc.” What is remarkable about these justifications is that the New Critics, contrary to received opinion, did not fear science along the lines of the “Two Cultures” argument. In fact, they frequently invoked scientific metaphors; if anything, they emulated the rhetoric if not practice of science. Their effort was to distinguish English literature from other humanistic disciplines, like history, and especially from the rising social sciences, such as sociology or psychology, and from outside the university, literary journalism or biography. This is both the strength and weakness of the New Critical rationale, and the problem that still haunts literary studies in the age of cultural studies’what makes what we do distinctive compared to other humanities or social sciences.
28. In the 1970s, Theory explicitly emulated the technicist social sciences (calling itself a “human science”). In contrast to the pedagogical efficacy of the New Criticism, this gave literary studies cachet or prestige within the research university; as mentioned, Theory was successful because it provided a better research agenda. Cultural studies represents a renewed emulation of the traditional humanities’obviously history’from which literature had distanced itself under both the New Criticism and Theory, as well as of the softer social sciences, notably cultural anthropology. (This differs markedly from the British version of cultural studies, which gravitated toward sociology rather than literature.)
29. One explanation for the success of cultural studies is that it provides a flexible new rubric for the disparate practices of literature departments’especially English departments, which encompass an otherwise capacious concatenation of fields and practices (Graff underscores the “field coverage” model of English). It lends a unifying and seemingly transparent heuristic. To some degree, Theory did this as well, providing a kind of lingua franca for those in diverse fields. But cultural studies projects a rubric more indigenous to customary notions of literature and to customary practices of literary scholarship. It also provides a revived tenor of relevance, renewing the public justification of literature departments, in an era of public pressure for “accountability,” as culture. Though Theory claimed a mediated political efficacy (“by other

means”), “culture” promises a more direct relation to the so-called real world, its investigation of cultural practices pushing precisely away from the presumed rarefication of theory. That is, whatever cultural critics wish to do *for* “society,” cultural studies gives *them* a renewed legitimation of literature departments when our usefulness is in question.

30. A significant way that cultural studies has been assimilated into literary studies, as Grant Farred argues in “Cultural Studies: Literary Criticism’s Alter Ego,” is through its reliance on standard practices of close reading. That is, rather than drawing on sociology and political theory, as Birmingham critics like Stuart Hall do, it draws on literary methodologies and focuses. (There are of course critics who decry this tendency—for instance Cary Nelson in “Always Already Cultural Studies”—but they testify to its establishment.) In particular, it has adopted a certain aesthetic imperative of literary studies, but displacing the aesthetic moment from the literary object to the novel observation of a cultural field. The goal of the conjunction of the literary and the cultural thus becomes novelty and interest over historical knowledge or political effect.
31. The primary mechanism through which cultural studies does this is conjunction. The prevalent tendency of current practice is the apposition of a standard literary field *and* _____, the blank filled by a specific cultural field, which marks that practice as cultural studies. To take some examples from a job committee that I recently served on—admittedly an unscientific sampling, but one that I think is especially telling, as job searches offer a window into the normal practice of literary studies at a particular point in time and predict the future of the field—almost without exception candidates defined their projects not as “the 18th century novel,” the nominal field of the search, but as gambling culture and the novel, or farming and the novel, or travel culture and the novel, or sexual culture and the novel, or gardens and the novel, or print culture and the novel. They all purported to do a form of cultural studies, illuminating literary texts not through a focus on their intrinsic properties or theoretical implications but through the exposition of their cultural contexts.
32. One might embrace this tendency as a return to history, but it is a peculiar kind of history. First, it is singular and partial. It adduces a discrete cultural field—gaming culture, medical culture, or travel culture, or sexual culture, or legal culture—without pretense to a whole history. Second, it is a culturalist view of history. These fields are often called “material culture,” taking the colloquial sense of materiality: they deal with bodies, or practices that have a material effect on bodies, like the law or sexual mores. But it is an anti-materialist version of history, following poststructural caveats against master narratives, which evacuates any conception of social totality. That is, it does not read cultural phenomena as arising from a comprehensive web, not to mention the modes of production, but as particularized practices arising within their specific cultural field. This prioritizing of culture represents the contemporary inversion of the distinction between base and superstructure, whereby the superstructural rather than material realm—culture—generates social distinctions and history.
33. Third, its method is not historical causality but figural analogy. The late Marxist critic Michael Sprinker pointedly dissected this method:

For example, Greenblatt’s famous essay on *Twelfth Night*, “Fiction and Friction,” argues for the constructedness of Renaissance sexuality by juxtaposing materials from an obscure trial in Normandy with the gender confusions that animate Shakespeare’s play. Greenblatt nowhere claims—how could he?—that Shakespeare knew

about this trial. He does assert, however, that the ideology of sexuality it bespeaks was part of common cultural knowledge in Elizabethan England: 'The relation I wish to establish between medical and theatrical practice is not one of cause and effect or source and literary realization. We are dealing rather with a shared code, a set of interlocking tropes and similitudes that function not only as the objects but as the conditions of representation' (86). But how, one cannot help asking, did this 'shared code' come to be constructed in the first place; and how, to make the relevant point about the relationship between Shakespeare's play and Renaissance medical discourse on hermaphroditism, did it come to be widely 'shared'? (158-159)

34. Sprinker's point is that the "historical" criticism that Greenblatt does is not recognizable as nor accountable to protocols of evidence in history. It does not represent historical knowledge that can be validated or invalidated; as its conjunction is analogical, in a sense it represents an imaginative figuring of a cultural sensibility. Though Greenblatt's work is usually assigned to new historicism, he himself calls it "cultural poetics," and it is the general method that informs the literary version of cultural studies.
35. The conjunctive method is a shift from the days of theory, when critical projects were generally defined by the apposition of a theoretical rubric and a literary field. For instance, one did deconstruction and Romantic poetry, or Marxism and the Victorian novel. But the use of theory functioned differently: it was adjectival. One provided a deconstructive reading of *Heart of Darkness*, or a feminist reading, or a Marxist reading. In a sense, Theory worked by what Richard Rorty calls redescription, describing literary texts in a particular lexicon and framework. De Man famously claimed that the deconstruction of language constituted the distinctiveness of the literary object. This controversially presented a negative knowledge as the foundation of literature, to the chagrin of traditionalists because it evacuated a positive content that they believed was indelible and permanent in a literary work. But it was traditional in still holding that literariness was inherent in literary language. The task of criticism was to discern the qualities that texts exhibited; in fact, many critics claimed that they were not imposing a frame on a text, but bringing out the qualities that the text already held. As de Man put it: "The deconstruction is not something we have added to the text, but it constituted the text in the first place" (17).
36. The use of culture functions not adjectivally but analogically. While one might loosely call current practices "cultural" or inflect them adjectivally (perhaps with multiple adjectives), the object is not to redescribe literary texts, but to juxtapose them with analogous cultural texts, and the task turns to the description of the cultural text. The literary object is *indistinctive* from its cultural context; what is distinctive is not the literary object itself but the cultural conjunction.
37. In this, cultural studies displaces the aesthetic moment from the literary object to the conjunction of a particular novel context. What becomes innovative and original about a work of criticism, in a crowded field of competing views (which is also why I use the example of a job search), is the introduction of a novel context. It substitutes the cultural field for the literary as the moment that induces interest and wonder, fulfilling an aesthetic imperative indigenous to literary studies—the heightened moment of sublime apprehension or of beautiful appreciation. Its primary goal is not the positive knowledge of an external, comprehensive history, nor the negative knowledge of an internal aporia, but the production of interest, as it were, without

interestedness. The criterion of criticism thus becomes not a judgment of historical validity, but a judgment of taste. One chooses which cultural phenomenon that induce one's interest.

38. This suggests the general conclusion that, insofar as cultural studies fulfills the aesthetic imperative indigenous to literary studies, critical change operates not according to judgments of reason, in a logical model of testing and increasing knowledge, but according to judgments of taste. The motor of change thus is not logic but aesthetic.

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