acts of recognition

essays on medieval culture

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By the early 1980s, the word historicism—indeed, the very word history—had become highly charged both in the local field of medieval studies and in literary criticism generally. And yet the charge was in each instance of a different valence: for the medievalist the phrase “historical criticism” was a code word for a densely annotated and narrowly argued reading of an often aggressively moralistic cast; while for critics concerned with other periods, criticism that advertised itself as historical raised expectations of politically engaged readings of a progressive kind. The answer to the question why this should have been so—why should the historicism of the medievalist have differed so sharply from that of critics working in later periods?—is itself historical, and is inscribed with particular clarity in the history of Chaucer criticism. Hence the focus of my attention here is upon the two great critical formations, Exegetics and New Criticism, that served Chaucer studies for almost twenty-five years as the most effective vehicles
for critical work. Moreover, the opposition they figured remains in force, although with a strange reversal in values. The apriorism and explicitly ideological commitments characteristic of Exegetics are now more likely to be found in work that defines itself as “theoretical,” while the purportedly ideologically free empiricism claimed by New Criticism has attached itself to the kind of historicism now most commonly practiced. These are, to be sure, large generalizations that must accommodate many exceptions, but they do point to the persistence of an opposition that first emerged in the 1950s. Despite this shift in values, these two attitudes—one aggressively historical, the other by and large indifferent to questions of historical understanding—are bound by their shared participation in the development of English studies. Their struggle has been essentially sibling in nature, and all the more violent for that. Here as often, the history of scholarship presents the features of a family romance, and its postures and polemics articulate no simple pattern of thesis and antithesis but a complex interweaving of piety with rebellion, covert borrowings entwined with ostentatious declarations of independence. This dynamic was especially evident in Chaucer studies, where New Criticism and Exegetics were never on speaking terms, although each critical camp remained oddly and even obsessively aware of the other’s presence.

When in the 1950s and early 1960s the work of D.W. Robertson first established Exegetics as a major force in the study of medieval literature, most medievalists hastened to position themselves vis-à-vis this new critical formation. Some issued anathemas (Donaldson, Utley), some offered less global but still severe strictures (Bloomfield, Howard), some rather gingerly signed up as co-workers in the Exegetical vineyard (Kaske). Without exception, however, these responses remained true to the empirical temper of American criticism by engaging Exegetics at the level of practice, attacking it for historical misrepresentation and interpretive inadequacy or, conversely, seeing in it new possibilities for critical work. Indeed, as Talbot Donaldson candidly acknowledged, such an approach was forced on the opposition by its inability to frame a theoretical objection. The result of this pragmatism was that, despite and even because of the force of its practical objections, New Criticism was unable to confront Exegetics at the level of theory. Moreover, the silent but powerful New Critical reliance upon the educated sensibility as the final arbiter of interpretive common sense—a silence all the more impenetrable because of the necessary implicitness of sensibility itself—ensured that those opposed to Exegetics...
would decline to articulate a program of medieval literary studies to challenge Exegetics’s easily replicated paradigm. The result has been that Exegetics remained for all too many years, apparently against all odds, the great unfinished business of medieval studies. The point is not simply that the Exegetical method continued to be practiced but that it continued to arouse passions. Unable to absorb Exegetics and move on, Chaucer studies instead circled back almost compulsively to an apparently irrepressible scandal. Despite attaining a healthy maturity, Exegetics remained as combative and polemical as ever, while its opponents declined the passé title of New Critics but continued to denigrate a critical approach that was presumably beneath their notice.6 And while in the twenty-first century this impasse might now seem to be of merely historical interest, as I have already suggested the confrontation between a systematic hermeneutic like Exegetics, with its commitment to an explicit interpretive method and a set of clear moral and political values, and a more eclectic, formalist, and only implicitly ethical approach like New Criticism, continues to be replayed in a variety of complicated formulations. Too often these formulations are reduced to a simplistic opposition between “theory” and “historicism.” The real issue, however, is the difference between approaches that are systematic—in that they rely upon some system of thought, regardless of its content—and those that are explicitly empirical and therefore usually concerned with some form of historical context.7 In short, the Exegetical mode, however reconfigured, remains with us, and remains a provocation to interpretive procedures that are heir—albeit in complex and often barely recognizable ways—to New Criticism.

The initial failure that allowed this opposition to continue in force was the inability of criticism to define a strategy of interpretation that would preserve both the indisputable scholarly findings of Exegetics and the humanist values that, as I mean to show, Exegetics sought to annul. Faced with the Exegetical meaning of the Miller’s bagpipes, for example, or the Wife of Bath’s deafness, or the Pardoner’s eunuchry, critics opposed to Exegetics were largely silent, turning away from these iconographical details in favor of other, less apparently unilateral textual elements.8 This evasion was especially marked in relation to the medieval tradition of exegetical reading itself, a tradition that Professor Robertson almost single-handedly brought to the attention of literary scholars but which criticism unwisely ignored.
The task of a fully informed Chaucerian criticism is not, however, to fend off Exegetical findings but rather to place them within a more inclusive understanding. Exegetical reading is, as everyone would agree, an authentically medieval mode of understanding; and it is one that is inscribed within Chaucerian poetry. Chaucer's poems both invite and, I believe, finally resist exegetical processing; and his characteristic poetic strategies are designed not only to evade but to explore the hegemonic power of institutionalized modes of medieval interpretation. Exegesis, in short, is itself one of Chaucer's subjects, and so vulnerable to his characteristic irony; and a fully responsive criticism must accommodate both this interest and the skepticism with which it is regarded. The failure of criticism to accomplish this task was perhaps most vividly shown by the continued production of readings motivated by a wholly unmediated Exegetics. Books and articles continued to appear throughout the 1980s that not only explicated the details of Chaucer's poetry in the terms established by Exegetics, but placed these explications in the service of total interpretations determined by Exegetical norms. In sum, in 1985 John Fleming was able to say that Chaucer “is now widely though not universally regarded as a conservative Catholic Christian of his time”—the epithet (which I have emphasized) meaning to imply that Chaucer's religious beliefs are not simply part of his cultural situation, like his status as a royal servant or his residence in London, but the central concern of his writing.

However much this assumption might foreclose fresh initiatives in Chaucer criticism, it remained in force as long as Exegetics was allowed to stand as the only fully articulated model of specifically historical criticism current in Chaucer studies. This is to say, again, not that there were not many different kinds of work (most of them implicitly ahistorical) being practiced in Chaucer studies, but rather that not only was there no widely known and generally acknowledged paradigm of historical criticism to be set against that defined by Exegetics, but that the issue of historical understanding per se had received virtually no general discussion within the context of medieval studies. This was not, to be sure, a failure unique to medievalists. The inhospitality of Anglo-American literary culture as a whole to a philosophically informed historicism had largely condemned historical criticism to the benighted positivism of the nineteenth century, a darkness that only gradually yielded before the arrival of phenomenological hermeneutics, Marxism, and other European imports. Hence it was
within the context of the development of historical criticism per se that
Exegetics played a progressive role, not merely by its uncompromising in-
sistence on the historicity of medieval poetry but by its careful articulation
of the way in which such a program might be accomplished. And if the
program is, as I hope to show, undermined by systemic weaknesses, it none-
theless remained for almost forty years the only game in town. Indeed, the
opponents of the Exegetical project were for the most part united only by
their opposition to Exegetics.

My purpose here, despite this polemical introduction, is less to argue
a position than to offer an analysis of precisely this opposition. Why did
Exegetics remain unfinished business, an unassimilated challenge to the
mainstream of Chaucer studies? There are, I think, a number of interre-
lated reasons, but all of them have their nexus in the question of what
it means to be a medievalist. This is itself a historical and—above all—
political question, and I therefore offer this chapter, like the book as a
whole, as an exercise in what Professor Robertson would have called his-
torical criticism.

I

The story begins with the medieval revival of the later eighteenth and
nineteenth centuries and its relation to the scholarly effort to recover
the vernacular literature of the Middle Ages. Popular medievalism in
England divided into two major schools or attitudes, the most powerful
representing the Middle Ages as universalist, institutional, and deeply
conservative. Bishops Hurd and Percy, Sir Walter Scott, Coleridge and
Wordsworth, Southey, Carlyle, Kenelm Henry Digby, Disraeli and the
Young Englanders—these enthusiasts of things medieval celebrated the
Middle Ages as a time when a harmonious society was held together by
bonds of common faith and an unquestioned social order. As the lead-
ing Young Englander, Sir John Manners, put it in his poem England’s
Trust (1841),

Each knew his place—king, peasant, peer, or priest—
The greatest owned connexion with the least;
From rank to rank the generous feeling ran,
And linked society as man to man.14
Manners articulated the program of the Young Englanders in, as he said, “a word”: “let society take a more feudal appearance than it presents now.” These medievalists wanted a return to the past not merely in terms of vague ideals or romanticized trappings but institutionally, in the form of a strengthened national church and an authoritarian, hierarchically ordered society.

In opposition to this conservative model the nineteenth century also saw the development of a conception of the Middle Ages as pluralist, primitivist, and above all else, individualist. This was the view made popular by Ruskin and Morris and, to a lesser extent, by the Pre-Raphaelites. Ruskin’s enormously influential “The Nature of Gothic” argued that the medieval cathedral represented not a corporate Christian consciousness but the “out-speaking of the strong spirit” of the men of the north, and that its value resided less in its embodiment of religious values than in the rough imperfection that testified to the unconstrained labor of its individual makers. Similarly, William Morris saw the great virtue of the Middle Ages in a heroic individuality that resisted “the degradation of . . . sordid utilitarianism.” In line with a traditional liberal praise of Anglo-Saxon freedom and the native social forms through which it was expressed, Morris celebrated a voluntary “Fellowship of Men” that characterized medieval life at its best, and that found its finest (and last) expression in the gathering of the commons for the failed revolution of 1381. For Ruskin and Morris, and for others like them, the Middle Ages were valuable not because of their powerful institutions of control and order but despite them. Spared both the classical importations that falsified Renaissance England and the dehumanizing industrialism that was currently disfiguring the nation, the medieval spirit was able to fulfill itself in forms hospitable to its original native vigor. In returning to the primitive origins of the nation these writers sought to recuperate an undergirding identity of spirit that could serve as an ideal of social coherence and unity to set against a contemporary society stratified by class divisions and riven by economic warfare. Rejecting the eighteenth-century idea of culture as the discriminating mark of social superiority, Romantic medievalists instead defined culture as an elemental and universal value that is the birthright of every member of the nation, and one from which too many had been alienated by a postmedieval history that should now be set aside.

Although this conception of the Middle Ages was a minority view in nineteenth-century England, it was particularly congenial to the pi-
One of the reasons for this is the relative lack of state and institutional support for medieval scholarship in England, which meant that it was less easily appropriated by a conservative political apparatus. Nineteenth-century medieval scholarship in England tended to be an entrepreneurial activity, and the self-reliant individuals who engaged in it were naturally admiring of rugged individuality.

Another, more profound, reason was the congruence between the methods of German scientific historicism and liberal values. German scholars were themselves largely committed to a liberal political program that opposed both the absolutism of the right and the egalitarianism and revolutionary rationalism of the left. Their central political value was the protection of individual liberties, which they saw threatened by both church and monarchy and protected only by a powerful secular state.

At a methodological level, they insisted that history is the sphere of the unique, of an irreducible individuality that must be grasped in all its specificity. And they privileged individuality not only as the object of study but also as the subject who studies, the scientific investigator who is able to arrive by painstaking labor at the original truth of things, whether it be the life of Frederick the Great or the Nibelungenlied in its authentic form. In sum, there was a profound affinity between German historical scholarship and liberal progressivism and individualism.

This affinity can be seen in an explicit form in England in politically liberal scholars like J. M. Kemble and F. J. Furnivall. Both of these men became embroiled in controversies that pitted the new methods of German philology against an elitist antiquarianism, Kemble in the so-called Anglo-Saxon controversy of the 1830s, Furnivall in his sulfurous debate with Swinburne about the editing of Shakespeare some forty years later—two technical controversies that were in fact galvanized by political antipathy. Furnivall was profoundly committed to the quintessentially liberal and Arnoldian idea that the study of the literature of the English past could serve to recover the organic unity that the class-divided society of the nineteenth century had lost, and at the opening session of the Working Men's College in Red Lion Square, where he taught for many subsequent years, he distributed copies of Ruskin's "The Nature of Gothic" that he had had printed at his own expense. These instances of explicit political commitment, however, are less important than the fact that the vast majority of nineteenth-century medieval scholars of all political hues shared certain crucial interpretive assumptions. For one thing, despite
their commitment to the idea of historical conditioning, these scholars in fact made little effort to correlate medieval literature to the institutions, whether social, political, or religious, of its period. On the contrary, medieval literature was in large part understood as the expression of a human nature valuably different from our own precisely because it was unconstrained by narrow and dehumanizing institutions. Old English literature was most often understood in the context of a pervasive Germanic primitivism that opposed native Anglo-Saxon values to “the blighting touch of Christianity.” So too with Chaucer, whose poetry was read in terms of an uncritical realism. Chaucer offered, it was thought, a representation of fourteenth-century life unmediated by preconceptions and undistorted by personal commitments; like his latter-day scholarly counterparts, he was above all else an independent individual who saw the truth of things and recorded it accurately. This is the Chaucer of Whig historiography, a disinterested but sympathetic observer, alert to the failings of his time but deeply understanding of the individual lives of his fellow citizens. Far from being engaged in any local polemic, his poetry spoke to concerns that were part of the permanent fabric of human life.

But Chaucer’s ability to trace what Blake had called “the Physiognomies or Lineaments of Universal Human Life” required him, paradoxically, to rise above the very historical circumstances that scholars were, from another perspective, attempting to describe in all their specificity. In other words, there was within historicism a largely hidden debate between a conditioning historical context and a transhistorical humanism—a debate that continues in force in current criticism. In the nineteenth century this debate was virtually always silently resolved in favor of an idealist humanism, but in the work of the second generation of Chaucer scholars—Root, Kittredge, Manly, Lowes, Hammond, Tatlock, Patch, Dempster, Spurgeon and Malone—the paradox at the heart of the historicist project began to become visible. These scholars dominated the field from the death of Furnivall in 1910 until the midpoint of the century. Their work falls into two sharply defined categories, which correspond not to differences among them—almost every scholar is represented in both categories—but to the internal division within historicism itself. On the one hand is an enormous and enormously valuable mass of sheer information, almost always presented in impressively learned articles and now enshrined in the notes to Benson’s edition. This work was accomplished
through a laborious attention to detail, polyglot inclusiveness, and mas-
tery of accurate techniques of recovery and restoration—through, that
is, those procedures and values that successfully transformed the study of
medieval literature from uncritical amateurism into a profession.

But the terms of this success prescribed inevitable and ultimately
irremediable limitations upon the whole historicist project as originally
conceived, limitations that are in certain ways still in force. Believing that
natural science was successful because its methodology partook of the cer-
tainty and universality of the natural laws it sought to uncover, historicism
in its positivist phrase assumed for itself a similar methodological purity.
Since the results of its investigations were thought to be untouched by
human hands, historicism ascribed to them an unqualified objectivity and
an explanatory power that no merely thematic interpretation could pos-
sibly attain. In thus privileging extratextual data, historical criticism came
to depend upon an unreflective factualism that foreclosed interpretive
possibilities. Analogous, and equally prejudicial to the intersubjectivity
upon which the humanist recovery of the past depended, was historicism's
uncritical indulgence of its inevitable predilection for genetic explanation.

After all, much of nineteenth-century historicism had been motivated by
a desire to use the past, and specifically the medieval past, to prescribe a
future, whether it was the restoration of the ancien régime in France, the
reunification of Germany, or the dismantling of industrial techniques of
labor management in England. Polemical explanation was virtually the
raison d'être of historicism: knowing whence we came, so ran the argu-
ment, we would know what we should become. The mission of historicism
was quite simply to historicize, to show that the present entities that had
previously been understood in terms of universal principles or natural laws
were instead the effect of prior causes. And this historicizing applied as
much to literary texts as it did to political institutions.

The effect of these cognate aspects of historicism was to decompose
the past in the very process of trying to recover it. By so definitively allow-
ing the lines of explanatory force to run vertically, as it were, from the text
back into the past that was to account for it, this brand of historicism de-
valued the possibility of lateral explanation in terms of function within
the text itself. The first question it invariably asked of a puzzling element
in the text was genetic, while the prevailing factualism disposed the an-
swer to be a newly discovered item whose significance was taken to be
self-evident. This procedure was most explicitly at work in the ubiquitous source study that characterized this phase of scholarship, but it was also visible in Manly's attempt to understand the pilgrims in terms of Chaucerian contemporaries, for instance, or in the persistent (and continuing) attempts to tie the poems to specific occasions.30 In all of these cases Chaucer's poems were seen as effects to be explained by reference to their extratextual causes, explanations that were all the more powerful just because the causes were extratextual and therefore thought to be peculiarly objective in comparison to internal or subjective interpretations.

But if historicism was in danger of mummifying the very past it sought to revive, it remained nonetheless an essentially humanistic venture. The entire historicist project, we should not forget, was underwritten by the assumption of a transhistorical humanness that at once motivated and legitimized historical study. In the first volume of his Grundriss der romanischen Philologie, Gustav Gröber, the high priest of mechanistic positivism, echoed the idealistic Wilhelm von Humboldt in defining the object of philology as "the human spirit in language," and it was that Geist, ever varying in its manifestations but identical in its essence, that stood as the goal of historical study.31 And while the idea of periodization, and the specialization of knowledge that it entailed, challenged the continuity between past and present that was at the center of humanist historicism, it never managed to destroy it.32 Hence the other kind of work that the positivist literary historian produced in this period was the explicitly appreciative survey of Chaucer's poetry written by virtually every major scholar. The list begins with Root's The Poetry of Chaucer in 1906, includes Kittredge's famous 1915 lectures, Lowes's only slightly less celebrated ones of 1934, and Dempster's Dramatic Irony in Chaucer (1932), and concludes at mid-century with the career-capping books by Patch (1949), Tatlock (posthumously, in 1950), Lawrence (1950), and Malone (1951).33 Two things stand out about these books. All of them present essentially the same Whig Chaucer as nineteenth-century criticism, and indeed except for greater accuracy could all have been written then. And with only the barest of exceptions none of them makes any real use of the massive historical detail that scholarship had succeeded in accumulating about Chaucer's poetry. In fact, there is in these books by eminent and powerful scholars a marked tendency to devalue scholarship itself.

This paradox is especially striking in perhaps the best of these books, John Livingstone Lowes's Geoffrey Chaucer and the Development of His
Genius (1934). Lowes begins by assuring his audience that they will be spared "the awe-inspiring chevaux de frise of technical Chaucerian scholarship" and uses an agricultural metaphor to let us know what he thinks of it: "technical erudition . . . may safely be left by the lover of poetry until its results have fertilized the common soil." But having dismissed the very scholarship to which he had himself made such remarkable contributions, Lowes then offers in his first lecture a masterful summary of what he calls "the determining concepts of Chaucer's world," by which he means the kind of medieval astronomical, medical, and geographical knowledge that C. S. Lewis was later to anatomize in The Discarded Image. Furthermore, in the second lecture he offers a biography of the poet and in the third an account of his reading, with an emphasis on Machaut, Froissart, and Deschamps. Having now prepared his audience with a substantial amount of scholarly information, Lowes then reverses field again and provides three scintillatingly appreciative lectures on the poetry that make virtually no reference to the preceding material at all. In short, historical scholarship and literary understanding have here little to do with each other. For Lowes, as for his colleagues, there were in effect two Chaucers: one is the fourteenth-century writer whose every word requires elaborate annotation, while the other is the purveyor of God's plenty who, as Root predictably said in 1906, "was in the world, but not of it," and who speaks with an immediacy that obviates the need for interpretation. Either an antiquarian curiosity or an occasion for appreciative paraphrase, Chaucer's poetry fell prey to the ironic law of positivist historicism that decrees that the more that is known about a text the less it can be said to mean.

II

It is in the context of the perceived failure of this perhaps uniquely American brand of historicism that the rise of both New Criticism and Exegetics should be understood. As a general movement New Criticism was of course explicit in its opposition to historicism, both as a methodology and as a literary ideology entrenched within the university. Profoundly libertarian in its orientation, New Criticism sought to free poetry from the historicity in which scholarship had mired it so that it might become once again an agency for cultural reconstruction. For all its celebration of the work of art as a value in and for itself, New Criticism never abandoned the
Romantic and Arnoldian claim that literature offers the alienated reader a saving knowledge. Hence it was also opposed to a merely descriptive or appreciative criticism that devalued the capacity of literature to bear significant meaning. Moreover, New Criticism had very specific notions about the kind of meaning that poems could yield. Despite its insistence upon the objectivity of its interpretive procedures, New Critical practice was in fact underwritten by a familiar set of liberal and humanist values. It privileged pragmatic empiricism over a priori theorizing, an ethics of attitude over a code of rules, secular pluralism over doctrinal conformity, and above all the independence and self-reliance of the individual, who was understood not as conditioned by social practices and institutions but as an autonomous being who creates the historical world through self-directed efforts. In effect, New Criticism read all poetry as enacting a continual dramatization of this liberal humanist ideology. For the New Critical "poetics of tension," poetry was a battleground where the abstract certainties of the angelic imagination were subjected to the healthful testing of experience. The formal struggle within the poem between logic and texture (Ransom), or reason and emotion (Winters), or extension and tension (Tate), or the universal and the concrete (Wimsatt) was thematized into what R. S. Crane rightly identified as a set of "reduction terms": order and disorder, reality and appearance, nature and art, emotion and reason, and so on. These are the topoi that the poem was then seen as figuring in a perpetual and irresolvable dialogue, the final meaning being the value of complexity itself. And even beneath this finality was the far stronger claim that meaning itself is a function of a deliberate act of choice. For New Criticism the poetic act is quintessentially the imposition of significance upon that which is otherwise without meaning, a gesture of creation that asserts the autonomy of the individual, just as the act of reading is best undertaken without social or institutional constraints.

While the early 1950s saw the appearance of a number of New Critical readings, it was Talbot Donaldson's edition and commentary of 1958, significantly entitled Chaucer's Poetry: An Anthology for the Modern Reader, that marked the full arrival of the New Critical Chaucer. Suppressing all signs of the editorial and philological learning upon which it was based, and eschewing scholarly annotations and bibliographies, Donaldson's text proclaimed Chaucer's liberation from the erudite antiquarianism to which historicism had consigned him. And in his persuasively discreet commen-
tary, Donaldson began to show the subtlety and depth of meaning that Chaucer's poetry could be made to yield when subjected to the interpretive procedures of New Criticism. Not surprisingly, the tenor of this meaning was consistent with the liberal humanism that underwrote the New Critical enterprise itself. Donaldson's Chaucer was a poet who persistently engaged his readers in a debate between the imperatives of cultural and religious authority, on the one hand, and, on the other, the irreducible complexity of lived experience.

But Donaldson went beyond thematics to argue that this is a debate implicit in Chaucerian form itself. Subscribing to the New Critical conception of poetry as dramatic rather than rhetorical, he both sharpened Kittredge's notion of the *Canterbury Tales* as a collection of monologues and applied the dramatic principle to texts, such as the General Prologue and *Troilus and Criseyde*, which had previously been ascribed to an authorial voice. The effect of this strategy was twofold. First, in opening a gap between author and persona Donaldson allowed entrance to the New Critically sanctified principle of irony. No longer could Chaucerian statement, no matter how orthodox or conventional, be read as unqualified assertion, for it was now subject to the continual negotiations required by context. But secondly, he showed how these negotiations could be brought to a close. For the dramatizing of Chaucerian poetry meant that the referent of every statement was not an extrinsic system of value, whether or not historical, but the fictionalized personality who spoke it. At the center of Chaucer's poetry was character, and every statement should be read in the first instance as a characterizing device. What motivated Chaucerian poetry, then, was an aesthetic impulse toward mimetic fidelity regardless of the requirements of the absolutist morality of the Christian Middle Ages.

In effect, the New Critical revanche served to rewrite the traditional conception of the Whig Chaucer in terms that would resist the unwitting depredations of positivist historicism while allowing for the articulation of a more complex and powerful poetic meaning than descriptive criticism could elicit. Indeed, the New Critical preservation of the traditional image of the Chaucerian author, far from being just a pious gesture toward Chaucer scholars of yore, was itself a necessary part of the liberal humanism that New Criticism was anxious to protect. For just as Chaucer's poetry is an affirmation of the individual self, so must it be itself the effect
of a commensurate individuality, of an author who is suitably distanced from his creation but remains the unmoved mover to whom responsibility can ultimately be referred. Even the distance itself is significant: masked by a series of ironic figurations, the poet is everywhere present but nowhere visible, a displacement that is the authorial equivalent of a poetry whose ultimate meaning is always implied but never stated (and hence requires the interpretive ministrations of the reader in order to be made explicit). Similarly, the aesthetic assumptions of New Criticism contained a powerful specific against historicism. As we have seen, the aetiological impulse of historicism sought continually to refer the elements of a text back to some prior cause, while its prevailing methodological factualism allowed these referrals to stand as sufficient explanation. But by insisting that the Chaucerian texts found their immediate origin in the fictive self of a pilgrim or narrative persona, New Criticism perforce invested their details with human value. No longer was it possible, for instance, to explain the mysterious Lollius as simply the mistranslation of a Horatian line that served to answer Chaucer’s need for a Latin auctor. On the contrary, since the speaking voice was itself now a character, it too was endowed with a story, and Lollius, whatever his origins, necessarily played a part in it. Once identified, Lollius could no longer drop from critical sight but became a function in the narrative of the poem’s telling, part of the speaker’s ethical universe. So too, then, for historical scholarship in general. It could be seen as a kind of semantics, providing a glossary for Chaucer’s topical lexicon but unable to read his poetic syntax, the organizing pattern by which meaning is made. And this was the task that could now be performed by a suitably informed criticism.

In its medievalist phase, then, and despite the polemical chasteness of Donaldson’s textbook, New Criticism sought less to extract the poem from its historical context than to find strategies by which to reaffirm the humanist values that had motivated the historicist recovery in the first place. Rejecting the positivist factualism and academic mechanization that had brought about the mutual alienation of scholarship and criticism, this new generation of scholars reinstated the values of liberal humanism at the center of their procedures, using them as the interpretive principles by which they could make sense of the historical materials gathered by their predecessors. Donaldson’s situating of character at the origin of Chaucerian discourse was one of the most powerful ways in which the materi-
als of historical scholarship could be interpreted according to the values of liberal humanism. Similarly powerful, and theoretically more explicit, was the historical stylistics promoted by Charles Muscatine in *Chaucer and the French Tradition* (1957), a book that represents the most substantial and influential achievement of this phase of Chaucerian scholarship.40

The critical tradition against which Muscatine reacted was, as we have seen, one that privileged realistic immediacy while devaluing a highly figured and rhetoricized poetic, and it read the course of Chaucer’s poetic career, and the history of virtually all later medieval poetry, as a progress from an empty courtly artificiality toward a vigorous and democratic realism—a progress, of course, that matched the analogous development of society as a whole. But as the New Critics realized, while such a reading of literary history might make good sense politically, it contained an unwitting and devastating attack upon literature itself. For it assumed that the best kind of art is that which is most like life and therefore least like art. Committed as they were to defining and defending the literariness of literature as an essential quality that both protected literature from being misjudged by inappropriate standards and established it as an independent *Fach* worthy of professional study, New Critics found any scheme that devalued the artfulness of literary art unacceptable. Hence the announced goal of Muscatine’s project was to show that realistic writing, far from representing an unmediated access to the world, was itself a product of verbal art and therefore as conventional as the high style of courtly poetry—which meant by the same token that courtly poetry was worthy of being taken seriously. And as the subtitle of his book suggested (*A Study in Style and Meaning*), he argued that both the high and low styles of medieval literature were best understood as agencies of significance, deliberately chosen means by which values could be articulated.

This does not mean, of course, that Muscatine and his New Critical colleagues wished to attack the Whig account of literary history, with its optimistic story of the emancipation of the poetic imagination from the tyranny of imposed forms. On the contrary, Muscatine’s account of medieval literature is underwritten by and supportive of precisely this liberal historiography, although his version is both less explicit and more sophisticated than its nineteenth-century precursors. Attacking in the first instance the fossilizing pressure of positivism, Muscatine insists that both the courtly and bourgeois styles themselves and the values they articulate
are unconditioned by any specific historical formation. Each style is “an almost independent literary tool, tied less to a specific social class or specific genres than to a characteristic set of attitudes” (p. 59). “A conventional style,” whether it be courtly or bourgeois, highly figured or conversational, is “independent of historical association” (p. 2), precisely because it articulates values that are transhistorical. These values are then themselves defined as expressive of different “levels of human apprehension of experience” (p. 3), apprehensions that are either idealistic or phenomenalistic, committed either to spiritual transcendence or to a practical and materialistic engagement with the world. And while Muscatine located this opposition at the heart of medieval culture in general and saw it as articulated in the disjunctions and juxtapositions of Gothic form, the very generality with which he described these values made it clear that they were in some sense common to all cultural life and that, indeed, their confrontation represented the energy at the heart of cultural history.

It was, in short, by positing a Hegelian conflict of idealist thesis and realist antithesis that Muscatine’s humanistic literary history reinstated a realm of value above the world of otherwise inert scholarly facts. As well, the movement from thesis to antithesis told a story, and one that issued in the triumph of those values that are themselves central to liberal humanism. One of these values was the commitment to the growing emancipation of the individual, expressed here as the developing capacity of medieval writing to represent the self in all its depth and independence. So that while Muscatine agreed that the great weakness of courtly style is its “liability to lose that ultimate, delicate contact with human concerns that gives it meaning,” he recuperated a master like Guillaume de Lorris by ascribing to his narrative “a kind of characterization” that is “created less through vagrant excursions into realism than through a richness and complication of the symbolic texture itself” (p. 40). No matter at what distance Guillaume’s personification allegory stood from the historical world nor how homogenous its values, it remained validated by “a particular interest in psychology” (p. 40). Given the fact, then, that courtly style was justified by its capacity to represent character, it was inevitably the case that insofar as the bourgeois style articulated that psychology with greater density and detail it would surpass its courtly predecessor. Hence Jean de Meun’s representation of La Vieille “shows the poet . . . catching into the web of the discourse elements dictated less by traditional satire than by a sense of the round, complex existence of the speaker herself” (p. 85),
while on the contrary Faus-Semblant’s disjunctive alternations between hypocrisy and honesty reveal an “abandonment of the literary approach,” a failure that is stigmatized as “incomplete dramatization” (p. 92). In sum, Jean’s invention of the dramatic monologue was presented by Muscatine as a grounding of traditional discourses in a self that encompasses and ironizes them but that is itself autonomously validated. On this account, the project of Jean’s writing, and beyond him of the Chaucer who completes his initiative, is not to judge but to represent a self that stands as an ultimate and irreducible category of understanding, exempt from further analysis.41

In thus privileging, like Donaldson, the critical category of character, Muscatine witnessed to a similar loyalty to what a more recent criticism has called the ideology of the subject. This is, in the largest sense, a conception of the self as a self-identical entity defined through its difference from an externalized reality designated as society, or history, or the world; in a literary context, it is a positioning of the author as the efficient cause of the text who is also the origin, and the proprietor, of its significance. As the central tenet of liberal humanism, this conception of the largely autonomous individual self is the foundation of Muscatine’s literary historiography, where it functioned as both object and subject of the poetic process. For when Muscatine defined the goal of the medieval literary project as the representation of individual psychology, he necessarily posited as its source a poet who is motivated by a disinterested quest for mimetic accuracy and is therefore largely uncircumscribed either by programmatic commitments or by more profound social determinants. Chaucer’s psychologized representation of the self presumes a corresponding autonomy on his own part: it is because he is free of polemical purpose or conditioning social ideology that he is able to give a sympathetic but carefully distanced representation of his world. Since objectivity is possible only to a dehistoricized and socially unconditioned subject, Chaucerian mimesis stands as the poetic equivalent of the liberal assertion of the freedom of the individual from a determining historical context.

This claim of disinterested sympathy was articulated by Muscatine in terms of the New Critical values of complexity and maturity. Subscribing to the New Critical principle “that the perennial significance of great poems depends on the multiplicity of meanings they interrelate” (p. 9), Muscatine saw Chaucer as the supreme instance of the poet who reconciles opposing values within a supervening order.
He sees the courtly and bourgeois modes, idealism and practicality, in ironic juxtaposition. He holds them in balance, sympathetically and critically, exploring each for its own essence and for the light it casts on the other. . . . He makes, more than any of his European contemporaries, a capacious, comprehensible order out of his legacy of style and meaning from the French tradition. (p. 120)

But where does Chaucer himself stand as he performs this act of stylistic counterpointing? Far from evading this question, Muscatine gave a forthright and powerful answer: securely within his own time. In defining that time, however, Muscatine turned not to the social conditions of the fourteenth century but to an idealist definition of the Gothic promoted by the Hegelian Geistesgeschichte of Wilhelm Worringer and, above all, Max Dvořák, one that sees Gothic style as an aesthetic characterized by a juxtaposition of disparate forms and a distrust of the singular or monolithic attitude. The effect of this representation of the Chaucerian context is to dehistoricize history, both by defining it at a level of idealistic abstraction and, more tellingly, by reading it as the external reflection of a determining Chaucerian selfhood. Muscatine tells us, in other words, not how Chaucer is a fourteenth-century poet, but rather how the fourteenth century is Chaucerian. By thus invoking an idealist definition of the Gothic, Muscatine was able to define a period style that was simultaneously conditioning and liberating, capable of standing outside itself and yet preeminently of its time. He defined, in sum, a mode of historical being that was by definition transhistorical, a paradox that corresponded with brilliant felicity both to a poet who is in but not of his time and to the needs of a critical tradition that was mired in its own hyperhistoricized consciousness and yet aspired to a vision of permanent truths.

III

Readers of Professor Robertson’s work know that Exegetics represented a root-and-branch, no-holds-barred, take-no-prisoners attack upon the liberal humanist ideology that has dominated Anglo-American literary studies since their inception in the nineteenth century. It is precisely the absoluteness and ferocity of that attack that made Exegetics valuable, al-