
Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt. *Practicing New Historicism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000. 249p.

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What do potatoes, fifteenth-century religious paintings, mousetraps, Hamlet's suicidal bent, and Dickens' Pip have in common? Plenty, according to Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt in *Practicing New Historicism*, which serves as apology and showcase for historical literary criticism. Complex yet conversational, the work spellbinds the reader by wringing insight after stunning insight from history's seeming incidentals. Using specific fifteenth-century altarpieces as a focus of study, for example, "The Wound in the Wall" posits that a painting's bizarre bleeding wall relates not only to the attempt to justify the burning alive of a Jewish family (including a screaming innocent child, whose father desecrated a Host), but also pertains to warning "believers" of the horrific consequences of doubting transubstantiation. Extending the discussion of transubstantiation into the nineteenth-century potato debates (whether or not the potato should sustain the Irish), "The Potato in the Materialist Imagination" examines how the potato proved one man's Eucharist and another's paradoxical cause of poverty *and* foil of starvation. With dizzying virtuosity, Gallagher and Greenblatt then connect Hamlet's relationship to his father's ghost and Pip's relationship to Magwitch with the problem of the "mousetrap"—the question of whether a mouse, after eating the Eucharist, actually houses the body of God—at one time a bitterly debated issue, with life or death often the debater's trophy. Yet further debates underlie the authors' analyses: to what extent, for example, do all of these convoluted discussions bear witness to Marxist precepts? When the rich pattern of so many tightly woven arguments begins to unravel for the reader, the authors pull the threads back together with well-placed "In other words" paragraphs. Additionally, Gallagher and Greenblatt employ a device rare in contemporary criticism: humor. The potato chapter commences, for example, with ruminations about Vice President Dan Quayle's misspelling of "potato." Few scholars, furthermore, would be brave enough to terminate an erudite argument with a reference to "the holy mouse turd" as these critics do in their final page (210).

The first two chapters, calculated to "explain [Gallagher and Greenblatt's] most consistent commitment . . . to particularity," lack the sparkle of subsequent chapters (19). Still, the entire work represents scholarship at its finest. Since the authors use paintings, historical documents, and non-canonical literature (such as debate pamphlets) to focus their discourse, however, the question remains: is this

literary criticism? The authors register their answer in the introduction, the work's apology for new historicism. Although they concede the impossibility of precisely defining "new historicism," Gallagher and Greenblatt insist that a culture itself should be considered as a text, since the interstices of literature, political realities, collective assumptions—all that constitutes a "culture"—prove too numerous and intertwining to be considered in isolation: "We are trying . . . to deepen our sense of both the invisible cohesion and the half-realized conflicts in specific cultures by broadening our view of their specific artifacts," which would include, of course, the paintings and debate pamphlet "artifacts" the authors examine (13-14). Many will delight in the critically egalitarian perspective outlined in the introduction. But when it comes to waltzing through, no matter how gracefully, what the selected "artifacts" signify, Gallagher and Greenblatt most likely will crush a few toes. In "The Novel and Other Discourse of Suspended Disbelief," for example, the authors impugn Dickens' imagination. The anecdote recounted to convey Dickens' "problem" is nothing short of amusing: upon hearing that Dickens "heard every word said by his characters . . . *distinctly*," a puzzled psychologist could not understand why Dickens' characters, then, spoke a language "so utterly unlike the language of real feeling" and wondered why Dickens could "not be aware of its preposterousness" (203). But the psychologist's "surprise vanished, when [he] thought of the phenomena of hallucination" (203). The authors imply that Dickens' "hallucinations," perpetuating the Marxist notion of debilitating mass delusion (oddly akin, I believe, to Plato's belief in the injurious influence of poets), "[block] the normal perception of reality" (203). Shakespeare is spared a similar condemnation for a variety of well-argued reasons, but one suspects that literary taste rather than adherence to Marxist sensibilities here impairs the authors' judgement. For Dickens, hallucinations aside, certainly represented the plight of the underclass more completely than did the eloquent champion of the Elizabethan court. But Gallagher and Greenblatt warn us in their introduction that "new historicist readings are . . . often skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical, and even adversarial" (9). Had they added "fascinating" and "important," they would have delivered precisely what they promised. ✨