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Autor: Bezzola Lambert, Ladina
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The Art of Anamorphosis in New Historicist Criticism

Ladina Bezzola Lambert

What is it about new historicist rhetoric, and particularly about the interplay of anecdotes and familiar literary texts that – irrespective of argumentative content – is so convincing? This essay revisits this old question by focusing on the structural characteristics of the formula so successfully used by Stephen Greenblatt and his imitators. I argue that the formula owes its persuasive power to its close structural relation to Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* with its anamorphic image of a skull. The shift in position required from the viewer of the painting to adjust the skull to a recognizable form directly corresponds to the shift in position required from the reader of a typical new historicist essay to naturalize the strange introductory anecdote in the relation to the familiar literary text, with the consequence that the connection between the two elements becomes irrevocable. The way the different elements in *The Ambassadors* relate to and condition each other thus offers an allegorical representation of a new historicist argument in its macrostructure.

This essay has its origins in a period of intense exposure to new historicist criticism, especially to the writings of Stephen Greenblatt, an exposure that was brought about by the task to write an essay on Greenblatt and new historicism for an introduction to literary theory. These circumstances may help to explain the reductive perspective the essay adopts. By disregarding argumentative particulars, it is my aim to reveal a larger rhetorical pattern frequently at work in new historicist writing.

New historicists are notorious for the elaborate rhetorical exordia with which they typically introduce their argument. This is a feature that Greenblatt adapted from Erich Auerbach and Clifford Geertz and that has found many imitators among Greenblatt's followers. The procedure is familiar: the central object of analysis – typically a text from the literary canon – is approached from the "margins" of literature in the form

of an anecdote. Historical documents such as medical treatises, legal records, conduct books, travelogues, as well as other text types are subjected to close scrutiny and, in a next step, are made to reveal surprising hidden connections with the familiar literary text. This practice has been criticized for the historically tenuous grounds on which connections between very different textual sources are established and are made to appear obvious through skilful presentation. The rhetorical virtuosity that characterizes powerful new historicist writing has been condemned as fraudulent.

As a result of frequent imitation, Greenblatt's procedure has acquired a certain formulaic character that gives weight to such criticism. Yet the procedure, especially in Greenblatt's own skilful applications, retains its rhetorical effectiveness. The argument remains persuasive. This is true even in cases where, on closer consideration, the historical tenability of the connections drawn appears doubtful. At the same time, it is often difficult to distill a clear-cut argument out of these essays: we have been persuaded, but persuaded of what exactly? Rather than making explicit historical claims, new historicists often imply the relatedness of phenomena by placing them in contiguity with each other and letting their similarities speak for themselves. In consequence, the new historicist's own critical position remains largely non-committal. There appears, then, to be something about the way Greenblatt and his more skilful imitators structure an argument, rather than about the argument's actual content, that has uncommon persuasive force. This essay focuses on how and why this works, not in the particular case, but in terms of a rhetorical macrostructure. The concern here is thus not whether the specific claims made in new historicist essays are tenable, but with the structural characteristic of a general formula.

My claim is that Greenblatt's argumentative formula depends on the structure of anamorphosis. More particularly, it is based on the structure of Hans Holbein's painting *The Ambassadors* which includes an anamorphic representation of a human skull at the bottom (Figure 1).

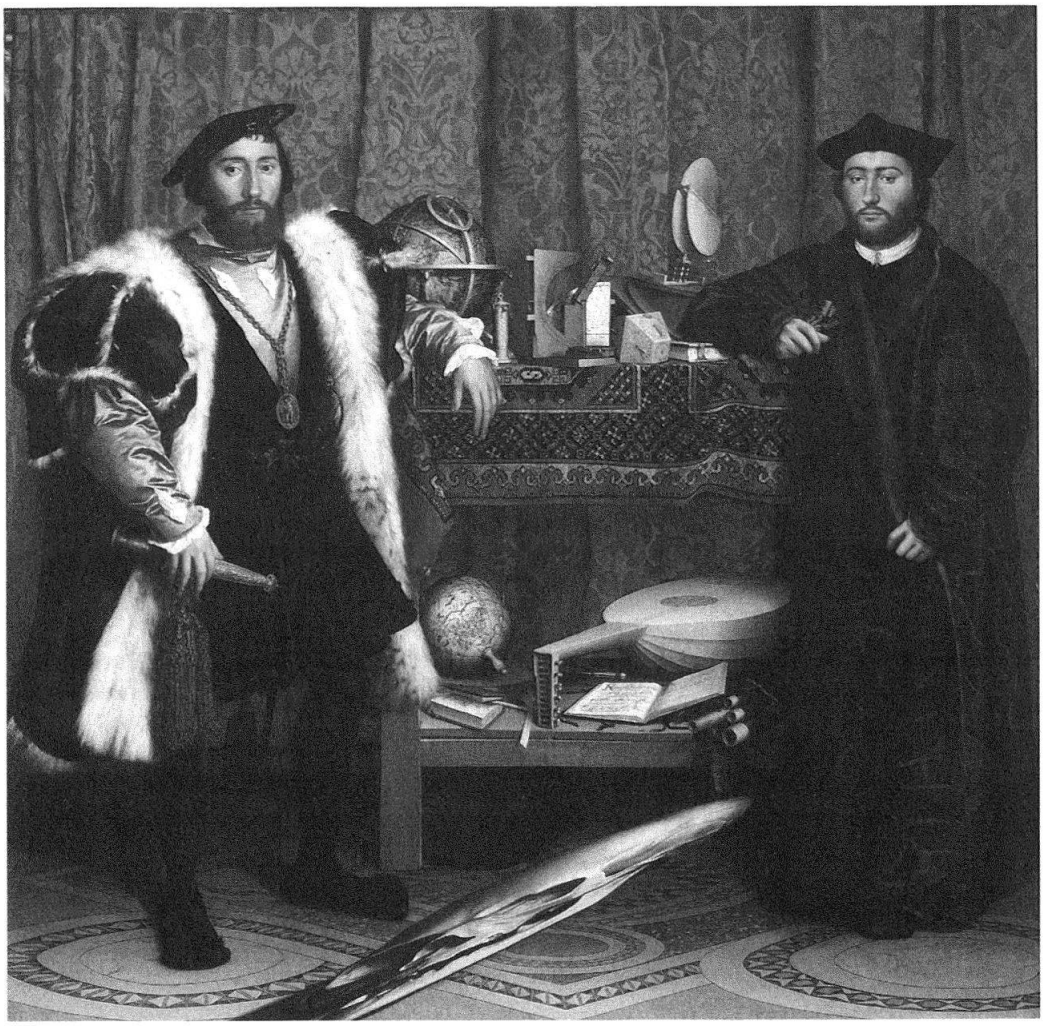

Figure 1: Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (1533).
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The skull is represented in a way that makes it appear unrecognizably distorted when viewed from a central position vis-à-vis the painting. It only becomes recognizable with the viewer's move to a marginal position (Figure 2). This play with perspectives, I argue, is central to the structure of new historicist criticism.

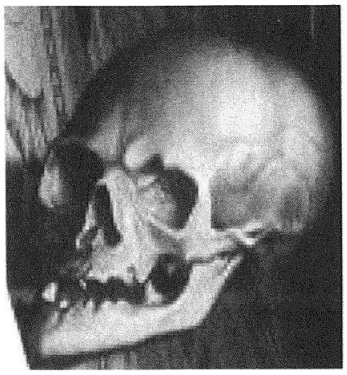

Figure 2: Detail from Hans Holbein, *The Ambassadors* (1533).
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Greenblatt discusses Holbein's painting in the first chapter of his early study *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980), the book that put his critical practice on the map of literary criticism and made a decisive beginning for a movement that has long since become an established academic powerhouse. His discussion of the painting is very clearly modeled on the famous analysis of Velázquez's *Las Meninas* that Foucault offers in the introduction to *The Order of Things*. Foucault presents this analysis both as rhetorical exordium and as an allegory of the historical development that constitutes the main focus of his book: the rise of what he calls the modern *episteme*. The allegorical relationship between exordium and main argument corresponds, very roughly, to what was to become the characteristic argumentative structure of new historicist criticism. Greenblatt refined this structure on the basis of Holbein's painting and his discussion of it. The way the different elements in this painting relate to and condition each other thus offers an allegorical representation of a new historicist argument in its macrostructure.

Let me briefly revisit Holbein's painting, a task which Greenblatt performs so admirably in his essay on Thomas More (*Renaissance Self-Fashioning* 17-22). The painting presents Jean de Dinteville, the French king's ambassador to the English court, and his friend Georges de Selve, the future bishop of Lavaur, standing in assertive pose at either side of a

two-shelved table. The table is laden with instruments and books, all of which have symbolic value. They relate to the quadrivium of the liberal arts: Arithmetic, Geometry, Astronomy and Music. As such, they record the two men's wide-ranging interests. The mastery of the Trivium (Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric) is implied by the profession of the two figures: politics and theology (Hervey, quoted in Greenblatt 17). Several of the objects (globe, clock, lute), moreover, appear in textbook illustrations of manuals on the art of perspective. The most obvious reference (the lute) is to an etching by Dürer, which was widely known in Holbein's time (Baltrušaitis 93; Figure 3). Such intertextual references point to the fact that the painting is intensely preoccupied with perspective. This is further emphasized by the painterly precision, the meticulous detail and the strong colors with which the scene is rendered and which give the painting a hyperreal intensity when looked at from a distance. In his influential study of anamorphic art, Jurgis Baltrušaitis argues that the whole painting is conceived as *trompe l'oeil* (92).

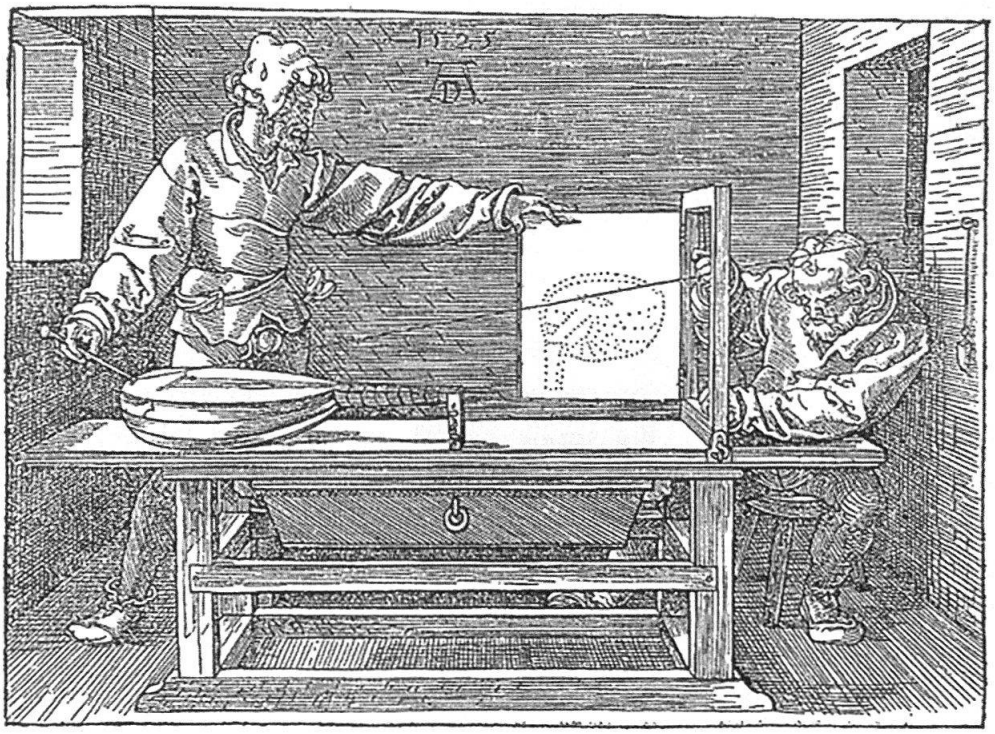

Figure 3: Albrecht Dürer, *Underweysung der Messung* (1525).

The detail that interests me most here is the one object that is *not* immediately recognizable in the picture: the blur slashed across the pavement turns out to be a human skull. Because of its peculiar perspectival representation, the skull only assumes a recognizable shape as the viewer walks to the right hand side of the painting.[1] This movement from center to margin causes the epistemological "leap from looking to seeing" (Maleuvre 20). The effect is arresting; it takes us by surprise, and its consequence for the way we see the painting as a whole is both devastating and irrevocable. The skull throws the shadow of death over the painting: it is the common denominator of all human existence (including the viewer's) and stands as a symbol for the vanity of human ambition to acquire knowledge and power.

In as far as the recognition of the skull conditions the viewer's perception of the painting, the two scenes are connected with each other. Yet in all other respects, the scene involving the two men and that with the image of the skull belong to two separate realities coexisting on the same canvas. Mary Hervey has observed that the skull's shadow falls in a different direction from those cast by the ambassadors or the objects on the table (205). It is a point Greenblatt also emphasizes, suggesting that the different shadow cast by the skull both affirms and denies the skull's presence. The lights and the shadows have, however, yet another implication. They suggest that the two scenes in the painting are illuminated by the viewer's gaze from the two positions outside the painting that present each scene in its proper perspective: the two men from the center, the skull from the right margin. In consequence, the reality of each scene is indissolubly tied to the viewer. This gives extra weight to Greenblatt's claim that the "gaze is reality-conferring" and that "without it, the objects so lovingly represented in their seeming substantiality vanish" (20). It, moreover, inscribes the viewer's movement from center to margin into the structure of the painting, making it a central component of the serial viewing the painting prescribes.

The aspect of connection and separation also applies in the case of the third reality: that of viewer and painter, who share the same position in space if not in time. The viewer's position is both inscribed in the painting's perspectival structure and defined in opposition to the canvas.

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[1] Baltrušaitis points out that Holbein conceived *The Ambassadors* in terms of a theater in two acts and gave precise instructions for hanging the painting so that viewers would first approach it from the opposite wall and would walk away from it through a door to the right of the painting (104).

The movement the viewer performs to bring the skull into perspective is at once necessary to realize the painting's potential and set in clear contrast to the immobile figures on the canvas. The viewer's "movement to 'clarity' involves the collapse of distance between subject and object." What Lyle Massey notes as a typical effect of anamorphic art, also applies in this case: "The viewer is strangely but almost literally absorbed into the picture." Vision is almost "*de-spatialized*" (1186). But only almost. The proximity of viewer and painting only emphasizes the ultimate incompatibility of the two (or three) realities. Before being absorbed by Holbein's painting, the viewer will bump against the canvas.

By forcing the viewer to move close to the canvas, the skull points to the artificiality of artistic representation and exposes the two imposing human figures as mere color pigments. This is ironic in as much as the image of the skull is the most supreme instance of artifice in the painting: after all, it is a vision only available in representation. We would never see a real skull in such distorted form. It is also a supreme proof of Holbein's artistic mastery. It has been suggested that the skull represents the artist's punning signature: Holbein signing with a *hohles Bein*. If we accept this reading, the painter has included a symbol for himself on the canvas. Yet in order to read or recognize his own signature, Holbein needs to set down the brush and assume a viewer's position to the right hand side of the painting. Paradoxically, it is, moreover, only in death that he will be able to "live up" to his name. The two visions belong to separate realities in time and in space, but Holbein inscribes himself in both: as the person responsible for the design of the canvas, which is here to endure, and as a human being who, sharing the common destiny of all flesh, moves on to face death.

The conflict between represented and living existence is also a focal point of Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*. Given the clear influence of Foucault's discussion of this painting on Greenblatt's analysis of *The Ambassadors*, it is useful briefly to point out structural similarities and important differences between the two paintings before turning to the anamorphism involved in new historicist criticism. *Las Meninas* shows Velázquez in the act of painting a canvas that is turned away from the viewer (Figure 4). Foucault notes that the painting's center lies outside of the material painting, in the space facing the canvas, the space toward which almost all of the figures represented are gazing (15). This space – both fictional and real, both past and present – appears to contain the

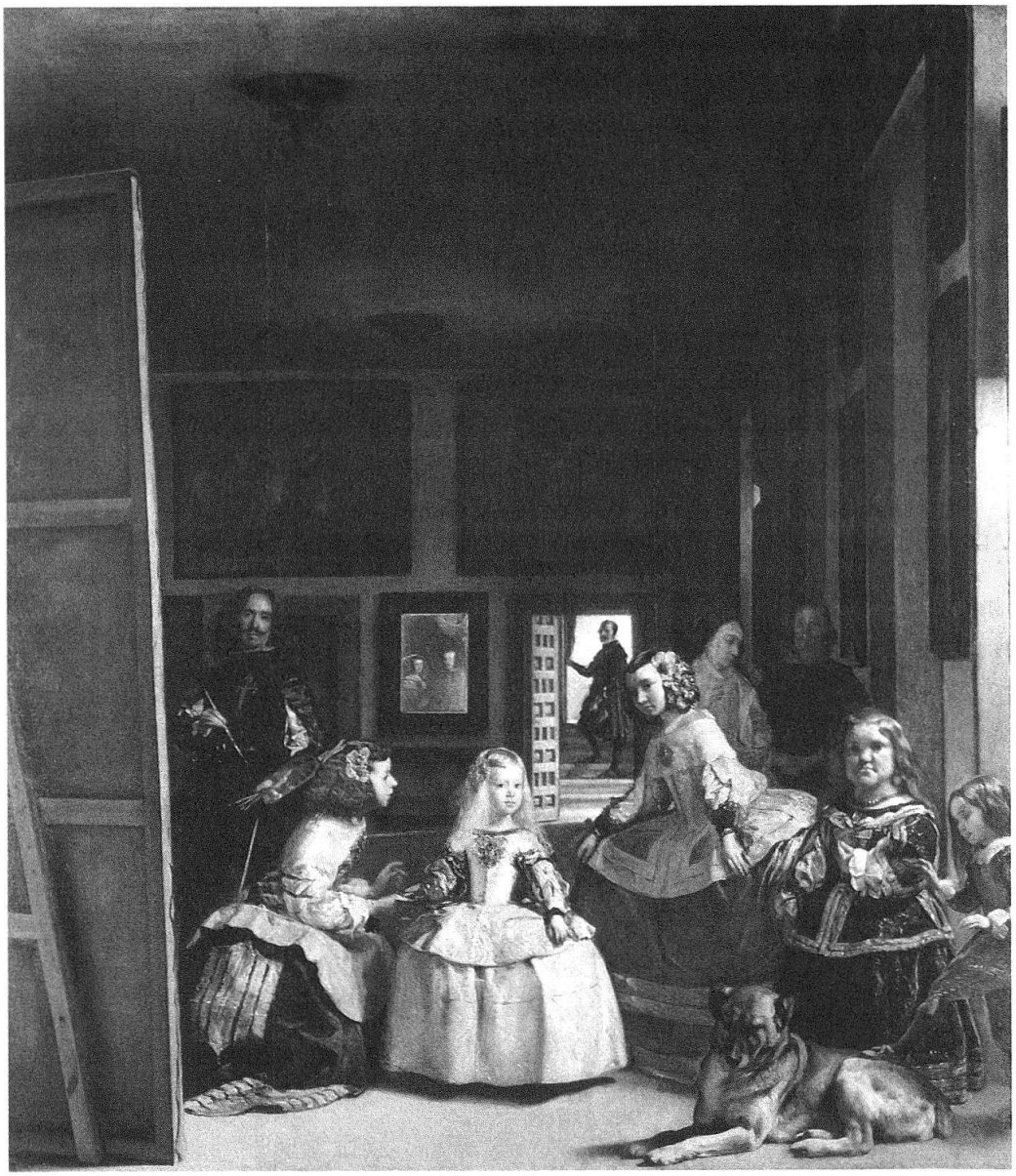

Figure 4: Diego Velázquez, *Las Meninas* (1656).
© Museo Nacional del Prado, Madrid.

potential model(s) of the painting in process: the two sovereigns reflected in the mirror, Velázquez at the time he was painting Las *Meninas* and the present viewer. The fact that the mirror excludes both painter and viewer from its reflection contrasts the fleetingness of the reflection with the painted canvas and emphasizes the living painter's/model's/viewer's unstable position vis-à-vis the painting, that is to say, the fact that he/she keeps being replaced over time. Indirectly, however, the painting's center lies also in the realm of representation or, rather, in the unrepresented representation on the canvas facing away from the viewer, in that virtual painting forever hidden from view.

Like Holbein's *The Ambassador*, Velázquez's painting thus contains a riddle. In *Las Meninas*, the riddle arises from the fictional space created by the arrangement of figures inside and (by implication) outside the painting. Its (exclusively fictional) resolution lies in the materially inexistent painting in progress on the hidden canvas. The question as to what is represented on that canvas can only be answered by a look behind the easel. This is a possibility open, fictionally at least, to all the figures in the painting, including the two sovereigns in the mirror. It is obviously not available to the real Velázquez and any viewer of *Las Meninas*. For them, the riddle must remain unresolved. The situation is reversed in the case of the riddle posed by the skull in Holbein's painting, where the two ambassadors are confined to ignorance not just about the riddle's solution, but about its existence. This riddle can only be resolved outside the painting, by the viewer's movement from center to margin. The moment of recognition and the subsequent establishing of a connection between the two spheres of the painting in this case result from an act of reading. The same holds for Greenblatt's characteristic juxtapositions.

The tripartite structure of Holbein's painting and the way its different elements relate to each other corresponds very closely to the typical structure of a new historicist argument. There is, first of all, the central literary text analyzed (the two ambassadors) and, secondly, the little vignette or anecdote offered in the introduction (the skull). As in the painting, these two domains share the same historical canvas: they motivate each other without bearing a direct relation. Thirdly, there is the historically distinct position of the critic and his/her reader, which corresponds to the painter's/viewer's position outside the painting. The challenge lies in establishing a relation between the first and the second phenomenon, a relation, moreover, that appears to be historically moti-

vated. This challenge is solved through the essay's anamorphic structure which requires the adjustment of the narrative offered in the exordium through a shift in position. Just like the skull in Holbein's painting when viewed from a central position, the exotic material presented in the exordium of new historicist essays appears weird and unrecognizable. Here a quotation from Greenblatt is illuminating:

> The anecdote functions less as an explanatory illustration than as a disturbance, that which requires explanation, contextualization, interpretation. That which we cannot stand not understanding. (*Learning to Curse* 5)

This makes a change of perspective desirable. The shift to a passage from a familiar literary text that resembles the anecdote has the effect of familiarizing the strange and making it recognizable. The anecdote, in turn, generates a new perception of the literary text by showing it from a different perspective. The situation in the painting is remarkably similar. First perceived as a blur, the skull, when looked at from the side, appears in the same representational mode as the rest of the painting. Yet now the two ambassadors and their gadgets suddenly appear fabricated. The skull and the anecdote change the focus on the familiar scene and give the viewer/reader a sense of its artificial texture, of the material/cultural fabric out of which it is made. Just as the skull in Holbein's painting signifies the one truth no-one can elude (mortality), even as it represents a supreme instance of artifice, the anecdote, too, uniquely combines factuality and literariness. In Joel Fineman's words, it "produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency" in fictionalized form (61). It supplies the literary text with what Greenblatt has called "cultural resonance," i.e., it makes evident how imaginative literature participates in a shared culture (*Learning to Curse* 70). At the same time, it emphasizes the fictional nature of the literary text, its status as organized representation. The literary text, in turn, binds the anecdote into a narrative context and lends it purpose. It is a give and take that both suggests connection and relativizes the validity of static perception. The reader is urged to perform.

Once the strange image or anecdotal narrative has been naturalized in the connection, the connection becomes irrevocable. The correspondences the new historicist draws between familiar and unfamiliar texts are authorized through the movement from one domain to the other which the argument's anamorphic structure requires. By pretending to hold the power to clarify and explain, this movement bridges what, in an

early critique, Alan Liu has called "the fantastic interdisciplinary nothingness of metaphor" (743). However, strictly speaking, all that the structure does is repeat the unfamiliar in the familiar with the effect of naturalizing and domesticating it.

The repetition remains a fact, of course. There is evidently material for metaphor. The question for the historian is whether the interdisciplinary leap nullifies the resemblance. Yet the structure of the new historicist essay does not leave room for this question. The juxtaposition of phenomena and its gratifying effect create a very exclusive, limited focus: a fish-eye lens through which the literary text is newly perceived. A similar effect is created in the painting: once the viewer has recognized the skull, this image irrevocably monopolizes his/her perception of the entire painting. It is now the skull alone that appears real and is all that really matters in the existence of the two ambassadors. The telescopic vision frequently adopted in new historicist criticism conveys the sense that God, rather than the devil, resides in the detail, which therefore invites and legitimates the extrapolation of an entire culture.

The naturalization of the strange in the familiar is confirmed by the duplication of this process in the reader's own experience. The reader shares his/her position with the historian, who – as the frequent references to an experiencing "I" in new historicist texts suggest – presents himself/herself emphatically as a reader of cultural texts, rather than as an author. The experience of recovering cultural coherence in a shared act of reading contributes importantly to the authorization of the analogy. Yet the new historicist's identification as reader is ambiguous in its implications. Besides referring to a community of outsiders interpreting the text of a different culture, it is also a clear reference to the ingenious person who manages to recover cultural coherence through felicitous findings. Again, the parallelism to Holbein's painting is striking: as noted earlier, the skull as Holbein's signature may be read as an ambiguous reference to the self-confident artifex as well as to the painter as common mortal, himself subject to the anamorphism of human fate. By posing as a perceptive reader, a member of a community of readers, the new historicist critic only establishes correspondences that are already implicit in the text of culture. There is no need to affirm and therefore no lie.

So far, much emphasis has been placed on the establishing of relations. Yet just as in Holbein's painting, it is the complex combination of connection and isolation between the different domains which is char-

acteristic of new historicist criticism. This becomes most evident in the references to "contingency." *Contingency* is a crucial word in the new historicist vocabulary. Greenblatt uses it repeatedly in his methodological reflections to refer both to the historical phenomena under analysis and to his own situation as critic. It is, however, an elusive, ambiguous word. Etymologically, the word comes from the Latin verb *contingere*, which refers to two things touching each other. There is also the evidently medieval Latin noun *contingentia*, which refers to a close connection and affinity between two things. The modern meaning of "contingency" refers to the quality or condition of being free from predetermining necessity, of being subject to chance; it thus suggests a lack of connection. In the new historicist use of the word, both meanings are at work, though this is never acknowledged or commented on. The meaning of the word is always taken for granted. "Contingency" is, I argue, a central term in the new historicist vocabulary precisely because of its simultaneous negation and affirmation of connection.

With respect to the historical period under investigation and the new historicist's task to detect hidden relations in the text of history, the "contingent" character of history invoked by new historicism holds both a challenge and a promise. The *challenge* lies in the dramatic increase of material open to investigation once culture (following Raymond Williams) is defined as "a whole way of life" in which all texts, including imaginative literature, are considered as "signs of contingent social practices" (Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations* 5). Social practices are "contingent" – or a matter of chance – in as much as they are not part of a single author's plot. They are related among each other – or "contingent" – in as much as authorship is made communal and includes all participants in a given culture. Yet since authorship is all-inclusive and since all texts of a culture participate in mutual negotiation and exchange, there is also the *promise* that careful search and wide-ranging reading habits will reap results.

A great deal thus depends on the applicability of the concept of contingency to cultural processes. If we accept that it is applicable, the surprising connections between domains of culture not usually compared with each other acquire a plausible foundation. This obviously provides useful support for constructing connections between very different texts. To maintain the argument's rhetorical force, it is, however, useful to emphasize the element of chance and incalculability. This will preserve an element of recklessness, of "intellectual *sprezzatura*" in the

practice of combining disparate objects. It will bring into play what, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was called *wit*. In his discussion of the main new historicist paradigms, Alan Liu points to the central preoccupation, especially in Renaissance studies, with illusionistic perspectives. The creation of a unified master-perspective serves to control cultural plurality and secure power (722-5). The anamorphic vision that new historicist essays create for their readers works in much the same way even though, as cultural critics, new historicists are the first to note that dominance is always precarious, always threatened by plurality and dissent. The power of wit in new historicist essays lies in the way they present the encounter of phenomena as fortuitous, adventurous as well as irrevocable. The illusion of a shared adventure in a reading process that is shared between critic and reader conveys a sense of power to the reader, who, in truth, has no choice but to perform and complete that which the anamorphic structure of the essay demands so as to harmonize perspectives.

In Greenblatt's reading of *The Ambassadors*, the viewer's gaze is privileged. It is this gaze which confers reality onto the painting. It is this gaze which is in a position to recognize the metaphysical doom looming over life in and beyond the painting. However, in order to be able to see the skull correctly, the viewer needs to move so close to the painting that he/she loses sight of the rest of the scene. By way of contrast, the ambassadors never lose sight of any of their viewers. This is a well-known effect of perspectival representation which Nicolas of Cusa describes in the famous preface to *De Visione Dei*: a well-painted image of a face placed on the wall will perform the curious act of seeming to watch the viewer who moves from side to side in the room. Each viewer becomes aware that these eyes must follow all other viewers as well. The Cusan compares this effect with the divine gaze which watches everything. In Holbein's painting, it is not clear whose gaze is controlling whom. After all: here they are still standing, the two Ambassadors, preserved in their prime, their gaze inscrutable, while generations of critics have fallen to dust.

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