Manifesto of a Tenured Radical

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How else could we entitle that word “history,” now, except in speechmarks, under the sign of vocative instability, outside any assumed consensus? As perhaps the most over-employed item in the vocabulary of literary-critical and cultural analysis, “history” may well also be the least decisive. We return to history, work toward history, and espouse a historical method, but few of us can say exactly what we mean by history, except in the most gestural way. Those of us who worry about it at all find ourselves necessarily mired in complex theoretical retractions and modifications, bewildering enough to sponsor some fairly radical insecurities. Others, sensing a probable dead end street, run for the cover of the kind of “new historicism” that looks to history as to a safe and approved harbor, a place where one may sleep peacefully, lulled by anecdotal stories, after tossing on the stormy seas of deconstructive and theoretical Marxist uncertainty.

—David Simpson, “Raymond Williams”

The entire development of contemporary epistemology has established that there is no fact that allows its meaning to be read transparently.

—Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Post-Marxism without Guarantees”

In the current critical climate one may easily find proclamations of a “return to history” sharing disciplinary contemporaneity with declarations that objective historical knowledge is impossible. Given the far-reaching and apparently opposite nature of these claims, it is not surprising that many see them not only as irreconcilable but also as competing moral, epistemological, professional, and cultural agendas. They represent, or so we are often urged to conclude, radically different ways of thinking about both historiography and the world itself. I would not want to argue that it is possible to synthesize certainty and doubt as they are embodied in these positions, but rather, as I will argue, that there is reason to take up their relationship as a problematic.

Among the recent developments in literary studies to be most welcomed, I
believe, are some that make such a negotiation possible, especially the increasingly close relationships between the discourses of theory and the discourses of minority scholarship and canonical critique. Through the 1960s and 1970s theory, or what was widely recognized as theory, largely stayed away from these projects of cultural recovery and critique. As I suggested in the opening chapter, what has in some quarters in recent years been variously hailed or mourned as the death of theory in fact represents theory’s productive engagement with and rearticulation to these material social projects. It may be, then, that theory conceived as an abstract, transhistorical metadiscourse has died. If so, I am not persuaded that its death is necessarily to be regretted. Theory that cannot be pursued with an Olympian disdain for its social contexts and effects is in many ways theory that can do more, rather than less, productive work both in academic disciplines and in the public sphere. That this is not obvious to English professors says more about the discipline than it says about the nature of theory.

I am interested in addressing one particular terrain within this general phenomenon—the mutual articulation of theory and the efforts to open up the canon in literary studies. My focus will be on one of my own contributions to this project, *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910—1945* (1989). The effects research for this and subsequent books and essays had on my teaching will be the subject of my fifth chapter, “Progressive Pedagogy without Apologies.” Here I want instead to focus on the book’s general cultural aims, but I want to begin not so much by reflecting on what I did and did not accomplish in that book but rather by laying out some of the intersecting theoretical and practical forces that made the book possible. I also hope thereby to disentangle some of the competing aims in the book, the countervailing pressures that shaped numerous tactical decisions made in the process of composition. Finally, by making those tactical decisions more explicit here than I did in the book itself, I may be able to make both my writing strategies and the broader issues that surround them more available to other critics.

I came to this project with two strong commitments representing what had until recently been quite divergent traditions. I was first of all committed to the necessity of wide reading in the literary past and to the recovery of many forgotten writers whose work I found of great power and interest. At the same time I was also committed to a poststructuralist doubt about the possibility of actually and literally recovering anything. Neither history itself nor the individual text, I believed, had any meaning apart from the effort to reinterpret them within contemporary historical, social, and intellectual contexts. In the current critical scene it was beginning to be possible to experience these two commit-
ments partly—but only partly—as enjoyably and productively competing, rather than as merely impossibly contradictory. But that has not always been the case.

Until recently, many people engaged in recovering forgotten authors might easily see themselves as doing real, productive, material work that made high theory seem hopelessly self-indulgent or useless. And theorists, in turn, might see themselves as engaged in settling far more universal and intellectually ambitious problems than literary historians were willing to consider. The project of opening up the canon often seemed intellectually and methodologically unreflective and largely untheorized. And indeed for the profession as a whole, to take a simple but rather indicative example, it seemed impossible to imagine someone interested in theory working in a rare book room or a literary archive. While this kind of self-aggrandizing mutual disdain is not flattering to either position, it does not follow that these two traditions could easily be placed in dialogue with one another, let alone combined in any given project. For there were real adjustments to be made and real losses to sustain in viewing either tradition from the vantage point of the other.

Moreover, ingrained defenses and compensations let each tradition seem self-sufficient to its practitioners. From the perspective of a 1960s feminism or a classical Marxism, the project of opening up the canon might seem already sufficiently theorized. The larger narrative into which individual projects might fit was already written in the metanarratives of class or gender oppression. Those narratives would become more persuasive by being proven in local circumstances, and they would as well continue to produce more detailed new accounts of local historical conditions, but neither their capacity to contain further knowledge nor the validity of the narratives themselves were in doubt. Continued elaborate theorizing was to some degree considered either irrelevant or counterproductive. Conversely, high theory had its own convincing social and material investments. It was engaged in rereading either literary or critical texts (and thus disseminating its discourses) and in efforts to terrorize traditional academic disciplines. Its real-world investments thus appeared to be as important as any projects a polemical and self-assured feminism or Marxism could define.

Through the 1960s and 1970s, then, efforts to expand the canon could continue without much interaction with the more abstract enterprise of pure theory. This situation persisted despite the fact that sophisticated doubt about the objectivity of both textual and historical knowledge was apparent in some quarters as of the late 1960s. By the mid-1970s—as poststructuralism began to replace structuralism; as linguistically experimental French feminism began to be disseminated in the United States; as some British and American feminists began to argue for more complex analyses of the social construction of gender; and as
the new Marxism abandoned an unquestioning belief in the master narratives of its predecessors—the certainty that earlier texts could be recovered with their meaning intact became more difficult to sustain. People of course continued to write as if these developments had not taken place, but only by either repressing their responses to the current state of theory or by actively attacking the new theory. There ensued, for example, the regrettable phenomenon of feminists or Marxists committed to historical certainty attacking other feminists or Marxists who were reflecting on the overdetermination of all knowledge.

The spread of a poststructuralist doubt throughout much of contemporary theory should not, however, be taken as successfully superseding everything that preceded it. Theory develops and changes through its own debates and in response to a whole range of historical forces. But conscious or unconscious allusion to a myth of progress in theory is best avoided, not so much because of the truth or falsity of such a myth but because of its effects: its tendency to block self-reflection and critique, to cover over patterns of difference and repression, and to encourage disinterest in the social consequences of theorizing. Other narratives may also simplify but can also do progressive work. Some of the more polemical feminisms of the 1960s and 1970s, including narratives of victimization that effectively (if unintentionally) de-emphasized the need to read women's writing differentially and in detail, provided exactly what was politically necessary at that moment in time; moreover, these critical works often remain vital today. They are part of the necessary cultural underpinning to feminist work of the 1980s and 1990s. The only serious problem arises when people try to write now as though the last twenty years of intellectual history had not taken place. It is not possible simply to be a 1960s feminist, Marxist, or, for that matter, a 1960s literary historian, without writing a partly reactive prose highlighted with signal resistances, silences, evasions, and anxieties. The certainties of an earlier moment cannot simply be imitated today. Again, it is not that theory has progressed in any straightforward way but rather that it has developed out of its continuing internal dialogue and its negotiation with changing historical conditions. It has not ceased to be blind, but its blindness is differently constituted and serves different strategic ends.

These in any case were some of the issues that seemed relevant to me as I began a study of the modern poetry canon several years ago. The result, paradoxically, is a book that insists on the mediated and constructed (rather than preexisting) nature of all historical knowledge, while setting about on an extensive project of recovering forgotten poems and magazines. Indeed, I was concerned to recover as well a number of material features of the literature of the first half of the century: book jackets and pamphlet covers, illustrated poems from books and magazines, and covers to song sheets and magazines. I frequently
urge people to think about what social uses poetry has served in earlier periods, uses that are often different from those it serves in our own. And finally I include seventy pages of footnotes, some devoted to continuing theoretical reflection but many devoted to recovering forgotten information about the lives and careers of the poets I discuss. The index lists about eighty entries devoted to “bio-bibliographical notes.” In short, for a book that argues that texts have no intrinsic meaning, that all history is reconstructed to meet contemporary needs, and that interpretive certainty is unachievable, there seem to be quite a few facts assembled for the reader. That no doubt explains why one reader described the book as “at once postmodern and decidedly old-fashioned.”

Not every reader will recognize this situation as partly paradoxical. Some will recognize no contradiction. Others will see the copresence of historical recovery with poststructuralist doubt as thoroughly disabling, a kind of continual betrayal of one impulse by the other.1 It will not ameliorate but rather exacerbate the problem to acknowledge (as I insist on doing) my own sense that I had to struggle to keep these somewhat competing aims responsive to one another. For the issue remains to decide what status the “facts” I assemble are finally to have. That is not an issue I address directly in the book, though my answer is implicit in my arguments about the interested construction of history and interpretation of texts. I argue at one point that there is no possibility of access to an uninterpreted level of textuality. We cannot jettison our cultural and disciplinary assumptions and psychological needs to perceive some level of sheer uninterpreted textual materiality. If we could do so, the text “in itself,” to echo Derrida, would be nothing more than black marks on a white page. An uninterpreted text would have no meaning at all. The same thing, as Hayden White’s work suggests, is true of the facts historians sometimes see themselves as assembling.2

Facts, of course, are often embedded in interested narratives, but even the decision to assemble a mere list of seemingly neutral facts about an author—birth and death dates, lists of publications—embodies numerous assumptions about how to organize information about the past, what is worth remembering, and what cultural uses people are likely to find for these facts once they are disseminated again. So such facts are in many ways already interpreted when we first see them. The selection and presentation of facts typically embodies implicit narratives about their cultural meaning and value. There are no innocent facts, self-contained and awaiting collection. Facts are icons for cultural investment, an index for what we consider important and worth remembering, a guide to how we organize and categorize the past. They are thus already meaningful, already embedded in relational structures. A sheer uninterpreted fact would have no meaning at all; it is also, one might argue, a largely hypothetical entity.

I suppose that an author’s birth and death dates would represent something
like the zero degree of facticity, an almost material facticity that seems outside any interpretive practice. Yet the effort to retain those dates in current historiography, the belief that a particular writer’s birth and death merits repeated reciting, carries considerable baggage with it, a sense of why that writer’s work mattered then and why it matters to us now. Yeats died in 1939, and for some critics modern literature effectively came to an end at that moment as well. Moreover, that was the year the Second World War began, so Yeats’s death can also be dramatized by narrating it in company with other watershed moments of historical change. (In this case, of course, the relationship between the dates is merely coincidental and the linkage thereby purely symbolic. But it helps suggest that we need always to ask what criteria lead us to conclude that one historical fact stands in an anchoring relation to another.) Similarly, to recite T. S. Eliot’s birth and death dates is to commemorate one of the poets in whom modernism (and our identification with modernism) is most fully invested. Those dates evoke the pathos of that cultural and disciplinary investment. The poet H. H. Lewis’s birth and death dates, on the other hand, suggest little more than the irrelevant detritus of lived time to most modern poetry scholars. Those dates do not matter in the same way; they do not resonate as T. S. Eliot’s do in modern literary culture, though of course H. H. Lewis’s birth and death dates do matter to me. He serves in Repression and Recovery as the most extreme case of a political poet well known in his time but wholly outside any taste a New Critical sensibility could underwrite. On the other hand, the very difficulty of establishing Melvin Tolson’s or Zora Neale Hurston’s birth dates resonates with the exclusions of the canon and the pathos of their rediscovery. So if the abstract notion of birth and death dates appears to suggest a realm of neutral data with no complex semiotic effects, reflection on actual material dates suggests otherwise. We encounter them variously embedded in and thus also variously constituted by webs of meaning or the denial of meaning. Thus we must overcome the notion that the dates themselves are neutral but that our discursive operations convert them from facts into ideological constructs. Their material existence depends on the work of ideology.

Since this issue is so readily misunderstood, let me press it further. Yeats’s birth and death dates may mean somewhat different things to an Irish nationalist than they do to a literary critic. An Irish nationalist might well take 1916 as the key modern date and see Yeats’s dates only in relation to it. Ezra Pound’s birth and death dates signify rather differently within a literary paean to his lyrical genius and a legal brief against his fascist radio broadcasts over Italian radio during the Second World War. Of course our sense of history is generally punctuated with dates whose importance is continually reinterpreted and reconstructed. Assuming such dates are not in dispute, the argument, then, is not over
whether such facts exist but over what they mean. Moreover, if they are only available either in consciousness or within some discursive practice, then they do not effectively exist apart from one or another interpretive framework, a framework which even places in doubt the material boundary of a fact. Traditional literary historians often throw up their hands in exasperation at poststructuralist doubt, thinking that it denies the existence of historical fact. If poststructuralism did make such claims, it could then, in effect, be employed by the sort of pseudo-historians who imagine the Holocaust did not take place. What poststructuralism places in doubt, however, is not the existence but the meaning of the Holocaust. Pressed far enough, poststructuralism suggests that facts have no inherent meaning and that they can never be extricated from systems of meaning and apprehended on their own.

Extending this perspective to the problem of writing literary history, and recognizing that there is no innocent information, at one point I actually considered trying to write Repression and Recovery without authors’ names, since I was interested in part in discursive patterns in the poetry of the period, and I felt organizing poetry by author blocked recognition of verbal parallels that cut across the categories in which we habitually place individual authors. Moreover, there were numerous points in the modern period—including the Harlem Renaissance and the Great Depression—when poetry was clearly being written as part of a collective, partly dialogic cultural process, not as the wholly isolated creative effort of individuals. At these times there was, in effect, a chorus of overlapping and divergent voices that took up images, themes, slogans, arguments, and forms in a continual registering of similarity and difference. Poetry in the process became a different kind of social activity than it had been before.

I was prepared to read the poetry in this way by a number of theoretical developments. Marxism had long struggled to define the social and economic determination of art. Poststructuralism, on the other hand, had in other ways broken the links between the image of an organically unified text and a comparably coherent human subject; indeed, it gave us many reasons to stop thinking of people as consistent and unified subjects at all. Postcolonial theory has since taken our sense of the fragmented, conflicted nature of subjectivity still further. Detaching poets’ names from poems helps us recognize as well that many of the discursive elements of poems reflect and contribute to diverse cultural processes. Linking poems with their authors, conversely, sustains a romanticized notion of individual creativity that a wider sense of texts published in a given period tends to undermine. More importantly, to be confronted with texts that are no longer taken to be vehicles of self-expression is to be drawn to consider what other cultural functions poetry may have served.

It is this effort to rethink the social meaning of poetry that required the most
elaborate negotiation of multiple theoretical traditions. Combining in particular the poststructuralism of Derrida and the Marxist cultural studies of critics like Hall and Laclau and Mouffe, I tried to work out a position that I think of as a kind of politicized Saussurianism. From the poststructuralist radicalization of Saussure I drew a semiotics that is differential but also mobile and partly unpredictable. From Marxist cultural studies I drew the recognition that differences are a site of political contestation, that various interests compete to gain power over images and meanings and integrate them into a common persuasive enterprise. The politicized Saussurianism that results is one in which meanings are recognized to come not from inherent and essential identity but from a structured and differential field of struggle. A politicized Saussurianism recognizes the linguisticality of the cultural field but tracks meaning as a discursive struggle involving the continual rearticulation of all discursive domains to one another. Literature, politics, religion, law, all struggle over the limits of a relative autonomy in which all these discursive domains are defined in relation to one another and in which potential social functions are both lost and recaptured. Not only the meaning of poems but also the meaning and social functions of the notion of literariness and the genre of poetry are constructed, I argue, by this sort of cultural process. Far from a book that simply adds a number of poets to the ongoing conversation of the profession, then, *Repression and Recovery* argues for a reconsideration of the shifting, unstable, and contested meaning of poetry.

In the end, while pursuing that wider inquiry into the social meaning of poetry, I decided to retain authors’ names and to present biographical information about them. I did so in part because the sheer quantity of unfamiliar poets cited in the book can, on its own, persuade people that the narrow story of modern poetry we constructed and now repeatedly retell is wholly inadequate. Moreover, the citation of this wide range of interesting modern poets suggests that the slow process of reevaluating individual poets for possible recovery is insufficient; we need as well a more thorough critique of our cultural memory and of the role literary scholarship plays in constructing and maintaining it. Finally, authors’ names remain one of the major ways we select and recover texts of interest from the almost overwhelming number of texts actually published. Tracking an author through journals, books, and archives was one of the major ways I worked, so I preserved that structure for the reader. But that is not a disinterested decision, and I still feel the project of writing about modern poetry—and about literature in general—without authors’ names remains unfinished.

How to realize that goal, however, remains quite another matter. I gave a draft of the book that excluded poets’ names to a few friends to read, and all of them found it intolerable to read large numbers of quotes unmoored to any
writer's identity. A year or so later I wrote an essay on 1930s political poetry without any authors' names linked to the quotes and had the same results. The sense of literary discourse as inherently and necessarily authored is so strong now that people are generally unwilling to process it in any other way. For a critic to withhold a writer's name is, in any case, clearly an affront, one for which I have not yet found a way to gain a hearing.

Some other deliberate aims and strategies were probably more successful. One of these was to make it clear that this historiography could never actually contain or fully represent the history it engaged. The actual literary history of the times would remain elsewhere, outside our grasp. I was not, therefore, aiming to invoke the familiar claim that texts are primary and commentary secondary. Neither in any historical reconstruction nor in the original poems would we find the lived time of history. It is no longer available to us. Conventional literary histories often aim for a confident sense that history is effectively relived within their narratives. I wanted to make it clear that I consider that goal impossible and that effect of narration either illicit or misleading.

One simple way to register the inadequacy of the presence of history in my narratives, I decided, was to limit most of my quotations to fragments, rather than complete poems. For the most part, the texts I discuss are always elsewhere, sometimes in an elsewhere difficult to recover, since many of them are out of print. That was frustrating to some readers, but it had partly the disabling effect I wanted. My book would thus always display a certain lack.

Another deliberate strategy was to be inconsistent about what kinds of information and what sort of prose I placed in the text and the notes. I once read a reader's report on someone else's manuscript that expressed annoyance that the text and notes were not devoted to different kinds of writing and different categories of knowledge. A reader has a right to know, the report argued, what to expect in the main body of the book versus what to expect in the notes. I wanted to take that "right" away, to overturn the implicit hierarchical relation between text and notes. I did not want the sort of confident relationship of mastery between these textual domains that prevails in most academic writing. So while I did put most bibliographic information in the notes I also deliberately saved some particularly enjoyable stories for the notes and included in the text information about some authors that in other cases was relegated to notes. Some reviewers have found this frustrating; others have recognized what I was doing. One recognized that my decision to place one illustration in the notes was a way of signaling my intentions about their status. In any case, the overall aim was not to deny the presence of hierarchized domains of knowledge but to put them into question in terms of both the book's argument and its structure.
A more complex historiographical strategy was built into my decision not to break the book into chapters and to mix chronology with a spatial presentation of different texts and styles. In part this reflects my conclusions about the diverse and often distinctly nonlinear nature of literary influence during the modern period. Modern poetry, in other words, did not develop in a clear progressive fashion. Some of its most radical innovations—notably in Gertrude Stein’s poetry—came almost immediately and took decades to gain wide influence. All its familiar traditions and styles overlapped and interpenetrated. There were, moreover, recoveries of earlier styles under new names and conservative countereactions along with unexpected experiments. Dividing literary history into chapters tends to segregate discursive impulses that should be seen relationally. When the resulting categories—minority poetry, women’s poetry, imagism, political poetry—become mutually exclusive, the effects are both political and discriminatory. Eliminating chapters and mixing chronological narration with cultural and stylistic groupings spanning several decades made all our descriptive categories unstable and subject to contemporary critical intervention. Nothing was to be taken as given to us unproblematically.

In some cases, I chose both to imitate and undermine standard critical structures. The decision to have notes at all, while making them distinctly textual, was one choice of that sort. Another was the choice to include an introduction but let the separation between the introduction and the main body of the text be somewhat arbitrary. Though physically divided, the introduction and the main body of the text in fact flow together. None of these decisions, however, carries with it a moral or political imprimatur for future work. These may be exemplary strategies, but they are chosen within history and in response to immediate professional and cultural needs. They have no inflexible warrant over other peoples’ work or my own work in the future. I feel free to abandon these strategies myself; while I hope other people find them suggestive, I do not offer them as models to be imitated uncritically. The style and structure of the book, I would hope, match the provisional nature of its interpretive claims.

So I do not, in summary, see the facts assembled about numerous writers in the text and in the notes as neutral, innocent, or uninterpreted. A similar recognition informs my readings of poems and poets throughout the book. While I try to make persuasive claims about how we might read these poets and why we might value their work, my readings make no pretense to be permanent and decisive statements. From feminism, Marxism, and poststructuralism I have learned that criticism is an interested, politically implicated, strategically positioned, and historically specific activity. My readings are efforts to influence how we might read these poets now; I am not interested in the fantasy of commentary that pretends it may last for all time. From time to time I comment
on how readings of particular poets have shifted to meet contemporary interests. To avoid being tiresomely repetitive, I decided not to repeat that argument continuously, so not all my analyses are framed in those terms. But the general claim, I hope, will remain implicit throughout: When I make a strong assertion about a poem, it is not a claim about the poem’s essential nature but rather an urgent claim on the interests and commitments of contemporary readers.

Some would argue that poststructuralism’s insistence on the undecidability of texts makes such strategically designed readings either impossible or fraudulent. And it is true that one current in poststructuralism is an ecstatic assertion that texts can mean anything, that texts are polymorphously inventive and perverse. But the claim that texts can mean anything does not necessarily imply that they can mean anything here and now. There are too many constraints on how we see texts and too many constraints on how we can imagine using them for an infinite range of meanings to be immediately available. This claim for unlimited potential meaning is often balanced within poststructuralism by a commitment to trying to understand the nature of the interpretive inducements and constraints in both our own and other periods. It is that strain within poststructuralism that I have adopted and tried to put to use. That sense of variable but positioned and multiply determined meaning to some degree opens up a potential to argue for interpretations that are designed for a contemporary audience and that are responsible to the current social environment. Indeed, if a text has no inherent, immutable meaning, then the struggle over what kinds of meanings will be important is all that is left. To say that poststructuralism denies that possibility is to collapse a series of positions disingenuously into a single spectacle of excess.

That is not to say, however, that my belief in the undecidability of texts and the ultimate impossibility of historical knowledge places no strain on a project of recovering forgotten texts. When recovering texts that have clearly been repressed or marginalized for political reasons or because of the culture’s history of racism and sexism, there is a strong desire not only to disseminate the texts again but also to come to understand the experience of their authors and even to imagine that disseminating these texts gives their authors a voice in the culture and an opportunity to communicate again. Thus, when people first began to recover slave narratives, they wanted to believe the texts were reliably representational, that they gave us secure access to the experiences of their authors and the communities of which they were a part. In this commendable desire to compensate for a century of cultural repression, the well-known unreliability of language’s mediations was forgotten. Forgotten too was the knowledge that authors often have purposes other than straightforward communication or representation when they write. And not so much forgotten as unthought
was the still more knotty problem of our own historically determined interests and perspectives, interests that can never be fully cast aside. These are interests, moreover, that we cannot even expect entirely to recognize.

In the end we need to admit that we will never know for certain what it was like to live in an earlier period. Of course we need the kind of empathy that allows us to construct a simulacra of access, but the experience of gaining full access to another author’s consciousness is a fantasy. And the histories we devise are constructed in the service of our own needs, compulsions, plans, and interests. That is not to say, however, that the desire to make repressed and forgotten traditions visible again, or to give them special moral and ethical claims on the present, is illicit. But the process of recovery is as much a process of current cultural critique as it is one of restoration. And what we “recover” in many ways will never have existed before. Nor is it inappropriate to try to understand the dynamics of an earlier period. It is merely that we will never finally distinguish ourselves from them, and we will never have in hand a set of unmediated facts that are clearly of the past and not of the present.

In writing *Repression and Recovery* I confronted these issues as a problematic, as an arena of work rather than as a problem to be solved. A partly Marxist recognition of my own social and economic positioning and the necessarily historically determined nature of my own interests was frequently in tension with an older and admirably passionate Marxism that aimed straightforwardly to give voice to what our culture had repressed. A poststructuralist doubt about what can be known was in conflict with a desire to know and often with a sensation of having gained access to a past we had quite forgotten. Not infrequently I was dealing with letters and diaries and poems that were not only unpublished but unread. At times an unpublished, unheard tape or record of an author’s voice was available. As historians will agree, it is hard to imagine circumstances in which a sense of recovering the past would be much stronger. I did not try to resolve these conflicts but rather to play them off against one another. At times, indeed, my book is a record of self-correction and theoretical counterpointing, as these aims and recognitions reflect on one another. At other times, succumbing to a certain will to power, to a wish to persuade and provoke change, I write over the seams between doubt and certainty, in a prose of advocacy and conviction.

This tonal instability seems to me to reflect the mix of relativism and commitment appropriate to an informed and responsible engagement with history. Once we realize that history’s meaning is always open to dispute, the work of interpretation and persuasion becomes crucial, not irrelevant. The situation is exactly parallel with relativism’s impact on moral and ethical standards, a subject continually exploited by the political Right over the last decade.
The New Right's attacks on relativism have made calm, serious discussion of this important issue nearly impossible. When academics argue that the world exists but is in some ways unknowable—a position with a credible history dating back to Kant—conservatives counter that we are clowns who believe there is no external reality. When poststructuralists point out that we have no unmediated access to material reality—that all sensation is interpreted, mediated, organized, and made meaningful by language—conservatives shout again that we believe the world does not exist. When we warn that moral values are not transcendent and guaranteed—that they must be continually rearticulated, defended, and relearned in context—reactionary commentators wail that we have opened the door to barbarism.

If we concede that there are no universally guaranteed human values—that being human can mean anything at various times and places, as our century has repeatedly proven—then the work of winning consent to certain judgments about history and to certain standards of behavior becomes more, not less, urgent. History shows us that human beings are capable of anything. Knowing that does not empty values of meaning but rather grants them the only meaning they have ever had—contingent meaning that is open to negotiation, transformation, and dispute.

We cannot plausibly argue for transhistorical values but we can argue on behalf of the purchase particular values should have on our own time. That is actually the only power we have ever had in such matters. Conservative critics have claimed to the contrary that poststructuralism—and particularly its deconstructive incarnation—makes all moral argument empty. And indeed American deconstructive critics like Paul de Man were inclined to avoid larger moral issues. But Jacques Derrida, the founder of deconstruction, has for years regularly written cultural and political essays of clear moral urgency; he has written about apartheid, nuclear war, racism, and the politics of academia. Recognizing how fragile and contingent both moral and historical consensus is only increases the need for advocacy and interpretation. The lesson is admittedly a painful one, especially when we see how quickly historical events that matter to us can be emptied of the meaning we thought was guaranteed. The interpretive claims need to be made anew for each generation; the work never ends. False certainty about the permanence or historically transcendent status of what are actually vulnerable local assertions is no substitute for the work of rearticulating meanings to new cultural contexts. Thus I argue for the purchase these forgotten poems should have on our lives, indeed for the moral value inherent in recovering repressed traditions, but I can do so only for my own time.