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NEW HISTORICISM AND THE POLITICS OF COMMITMENT

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In the economy of English departments, the critical trend in recent years has been to decenter literature as the privileged object of analysis. Preeminent in the revisionist vanguard, the new historicist enterprise—looking particularly to Michel Foucault as a mentor—continues under a debate about its own political orientations, about whether it is essentially a graft of Marxism and poststructuralism, and about whether it has the courage of its convictions. The project attempts to discredit what has been perceived as the cultural authority of a given text, authority that would impute value independent of time, place, or culture. Thus, a text's meaning is never transhistorical but rather grounded in cultural specificity. In its focus on the contingency and constructedness of culture, new historicism ultimately denies any text an objective status. It is, in fact, precisely objectivity that is under attack. Following Foucault, new historicism rejects the objective status of knowledge as part of an older "Zeitgeist" historicism that synthesizes heterogeneous cultural data into monological narratives, repressing contradictory modes of historical remembering and alternate subjectivities.

Against the Hegelian grain of the old cultural history, new historicism argues that one cannot naively trust a culture's authorized voice or representation of itself. Instead, the "truth" of a culture lies in the subversive or repressed voices, the marginal textualities that ultimately embarrass predominant ideologies. To that end, new historicism's practice compliments the methodology of other modes of politically engaged poststructuralism. In short, we might say that new historicism does with history what deconstruction did with language. Either way, the initial outcome is effectively the same: both deconstruction and new historicism effectively dismantle the cultural

status traditionally assigned the canonized text. New historicism essentially takes deconstruction to its logical conclusion: out of literature and into history. (Although one notes that the very attention given to decentering the canonical text—especially in the case of deconstruction—has only served to reinforce the cultural authority these practices would deny it. After all, siting the margin as the new locus of spectatorly activity simply repositions the center.)

At the risk of reductive historical determinism, we want to examine some of the material conditions that have fashioned new historicism. The materiality of all discourse, a central new historicist tenet, reminds us that the production of historical knowledge cannot itself be external to the very phenomenon it examines. After all, theory itself is a cultural practice and not outside the purview of history. The temptation here is to extrapolate from the kind of cultural critique that Terry Eagleton undertakes in his analysis of the development of new criticism. As he has argued, the swelling enrollment at postwar American universities required a pedagogical method compatible with teaching large numbers. The manageability of a single, hermetically sealed, self-validating text as opposed to more labor intensive, broad historical surveys had a new economy of scale as its reward. Such a materialist analysis of new historicism is all the more appropriate here, for understanding the cultural climate from which any practice emerges is the first directive of this revisionist methodology.

New historicism's coming of age in the last fifteen years has coincided, not incidentally, with the professionalization of the humanities and the concomitant demands for the establishment of professional credentials by frequent and rapid publication. In a field such as Renaissance studies, for example, where scholarship had arrived at a dangerous state of moribundity, choked by years of critical "necrosis," to use Barthes's term, one can readily see the appeal for a methodology that purports anything "new." Yet if the methodology's immediate euphoria celebrates the opening of new critical territory, it is but a temporary fix for an institutional crisis perpetually deferred. For this project implicitly demands a commitment to a re-evaluation of departmental boundaries. The burden is on the young scholar to become a specialist in anthropology, history, sociology, languages, and a host of disciplines heretofore kept separate by the politics of tradition that has codified academic compartmentalization. As Gerald Graff argued last month in his *TLS* review of Pierre Bourdieu's *Academic Discourse* (15 July 1994),

As students move from courses in sociology to art history to psychology, or from the Leavisite literature course to the feminist course, they are exposed to vast differences in assumptions and vocabularies that tend to be presupposed rather than explained and debated. Students are expected to enter an intellectual conversation that they do not see, or see only in disconnected glimpses. Screened from each other by their classroom walls, professors lack the sort of collective discussion that would enable or force them to clarify their ruminations. (9)

The task of humanities scholars will thus be to remap old institutional terrains and reconnect academic discourse. Yet new historicism has failed to provide an adequate compass for the territories it asks us to chart. It rather elides such fundamental issues by a persistent claim to political neutrality—as opposed to cultural materialism’s activism—which has not lightened the burden on young scholars, who are on the front lines of this cultural offensive initiated by those lodged in the bunker of scholarly reputation and academic tenure.

Aware of the political advantages of self-fashioning, Stephen Greenblatt has grounded the “biography” of new historicism in a transformative crisis in his own life story. In “Towards a Poetics of Culture” (in *The New Historicism*, ed. H. Aram Veesser [New York and London: Routledge, 1989]), he locates the seminal moment of new historicism, a moment that originated as a mere semantic distinction but that would give its name to a burgeoning revisionist project. Greenblatt relates an incident that occurred while he was teaching a course entitled “Marxist Aesthetics” at Berkeley in the mid-1970s. Accustomed as he was to teaching Marxism from the perspective of “those figures troubled in relation to Marxism,” it is not surprising that he was challenged by a frustrated student who demanded that he articulate his own political commitments: “You’re either a Bolshevik or a Menshevik,” the student shouted, “make up your fucking mind” (2). In what amounts to little more than semantic gerrymandering—here a simultaneous realignment of theoretical, political, professional, and discursive jurisdictions—Greenblatt renamed his course “Cultural Poetics” in an attempt to deflect accountability for his cultural politics. Such slipperiness has become the initiatory ideological gesture of the new historicist project, one which neatly sidesteps more pressing demands for political commitment and responsibility. The ascendancy of new historicism, although laudable for expanding the theoretical grammar of social inquiry, signals a dis-

tancing of historical criticism from Marxism and its concomitant political demands.

As scholars we are forced to confront new historicism's indecisiveness in *global* politics—i.e. Menshevik/Bolshevik, or Greenblatt's discussion of Reagan's Cold War image politics—because it trickles down into the *academic* arena. For two enterprises could not be farther apart in their objectives than new historicism's interdisciplinary polymathy and the academy's own skewed fiscal priorities. If the methodologies have changed between the new historicism and the old, the two have yet remained strangely allied in the erudition they demand of the scholar. In the 1990s, however, little in university curricula and less in the economy of graduate programs entertain the mandates of a project that requires time-intensive interdisciplinary education. Equivocal attempts to circumvent the practical politics of academic training will disfigure the work of a whole generation of scholars. We note the special problems in Renaissance studies, for example, where the attention focused on vernacular literature has distorted its centrality to the period. In *Habits of Thought in the English Renaissance* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1990), Debora Kuller Shuger makes the point more forcefully: "Indeed, it could be argued that modern Renaissance scholars know less about the intellectual culture of their period, especially after 1520, than scholars working on any other epoch" (3), a claim she supports with simple but incontrovertible arithmetic:

Part of this problem is obviously due to the fact that almost all scholarly books—almost everything of interest on law, medicine, history, rhetoric, philology—were written in Latin. A rough estimate suggests that of the books listed in the 1605 Bodleian catalogue less than 2½ percent were in English. A random sampling of some pages in the catalogue indicates the extent to which the intellectual world of the period remains obscure to us. (3 n. 11)

By our unbalanced focus on the most readily accessible texts, a circumstance perhaps necessitated by the pragmatics of time to academic advancement, we inadvertently marginalize a substantial body of written material from the period, tacitly assuming that countercultural texts only exist in the vernacular. Or even if we sample these other forms of cultural production, it is too often with the assumption that our findings are somehow representative of a unitary ideological perspective.

But to critique new historicism solely by the political expediences that have propelled it, is, admittedly, to do so unfairly. The move to see canonical texts primarily as documents of history rather than as representative (and normative) voices of a culture is predicated on the progressive assumption that all other heretofore uncirculated texts are no less representative—in fact, are likely more so by their resistance to constructed ideologies—of the cultural milieu from which they emerge. Consequently, journals that once reproduced and represented the cultural party-line, so to speak, have now become the enclave of the erstwhile unvoiced, of the ideologically opposed, the oppressed, the dissident, and even those whose politics were affectedly disinterested. New historicism has added theoretical authority to the work of recovering and interpreting forgotten texts censored into silence.

New historicism's persistent global demarcation between subversive voices and orthodox ideology, however, assumes that what is subversive in one time and place is subversive in another. This is flatly ahistorical, as Greenblatt himself has pointed out. Such assumptions tend to bracket out hermeneutics altogether, threatening to abandon historical specificity and thus essentializing subversion. Or put another way, does it not arrogantly suggest that we are all good hermeneuticists, or assume that we agree upon a unified reading of history? Such a static model of subversion derives from the Foucauldian premises of the new historicist project which suggest that all forms of social control generate some kind of resistance. We must remind ourselves, however, that what counts as resistance in our own epoch may in fact be another age's orthodoxy. Thus envisaged, how do we avoid mapping our own expectations over the emerging terrain of former periods and cultures?

With the growth (and rigorous fortification) of new historicism as a dominant critical methodology in the study of Renaissance texts in the 1980s, it is surprising that it can in 1994 remain so ambivalent in its convictions. Rarely does one pick up a scholarly piece operating under the aegis of new historicism that doesn't begin with an apology or at least a disclaimer of some kind for its own critical underpinnings. Part of this seeming insecurity results from the methodology's dependence upon archival research to uncover alternate or subversive voices repressed by the culture's dominant ideology or orthodoxy. Perhaps the problem is that practice does not always suffer theory gladly. That is, despite new historicism's axiomatic rejection of authoritative critical closure, certainty and accountability re-

main, pragmatically speaking, the currency of academic reputations. And here the political and theoretical tension mounts. The presence of two competing forces, largely unacknowledged, complicates the new historicist project: the antiauthoritative premise of new historicism itself is in conflict with the practical necessity for scholars to accumulate academic capital by deploying the very authority that their methodology would undermine. The subsequent tension too often registers on the discursive level as rhetorical hedging. A passage from the middle of Jean E. Howard's important new study, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), for example, typifies the persistent rhetorical convolutions that are made necessary by this constitutive contradiction in new historicism:

I am now going to look at some Renaissance plays that involve the representation of dramatic practices. That I do so following a discussion of the antitheatrical tracts *may seem to imply* that I view these tracts as providing the context that will explain the plays with which I am concerned. It is not so simple. Plays, tracts, courtesy books—all are informed by a discourse of theatricality that *does not by itself exhaust the meaning* of any of these texts and is *often deployed* quite differently in each. (47-48, emphasis ours)

With the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* caveat in the second sentence, Howard seems to suggest that scholars need to suspend their readerly expectations of narrative causality; for new historicism disrupts the linear logic of reading, replacing that order with the discontinuous and deferred logic of the anecdotal paradigm. Indeed, the codex book form itself conspires—page after page, chapter by chapter—against new historicism by its insistence on narrativizing and classifying information. In order to do new historicism properly the critic almost needs a Cubist textual canvas to avoid privileging any single perspective or narrative order. (Recent postmodern studies in multimedia hypertext experiment with just such a canvas.) We might locate Howard's attempt to contain the theory/practice conflict in her unwillingness to relinquish both the pleasure and pragmatic advantages of a metanarrative history. (At least *we* cannot deny the guilty pleasure of paradigmatic certainty.) Without metanarrative pretexts, however, Howard and other practitioners of this methodology are left fighting a rearguard action not only against other critical camps but also against the practical mandates of an academic career in an institutional context largely hostile to textual revisionism.

Howard may be disingenuous in her dismissal of these theoretical complexities with an appeal to more undisclosed complexity, but she's not alone. Take a passage from Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1991):

If anecdotes are registers of the singularity of the contingent...they are at the same time recorded as representative anecdotes, that is, as significant in terms of a larger progress or pattern that is the proper subject of a history perennially deferred in the traveler's relation of further anecdotes. A purely local knowledge, an absolutely singular, unrepeatably, unique experience or observation, is neither desirable nor possible, for the traveler's discourse is meant to be useful, even if the ultimate design in which this utility will be absorbed remains opaque. Anecdotes then are among the principle products of a culture's representational technology, mediators between the undifferentiated succession of local moments and a larger strategy toward which they can only gesture. They are seized in passing from the swirl of experiences and given some shape, a shape whose provisionality still marks them as contingent—otherwise, we would give them the larger, grander name of history—but also makes them available for telling and retelling. (3)

Although sophistic in tone, this passage neatly comprises many of the tenets of the new historicist project: the emphasis on local, anecdotal knowledge; contingency; the representativeness of fragments; and now we might add hedging to the bill of particulars. But here, too, is new historicism's double bind. Greenblatt's passage is replete with language curiously reminiscent of new historicism's superseded critical ancestry: "larger progress or pattern," "ultimate design," "larger strategy," and "grander name of history." What are these phrases if they are not the ghostly traces of what early formalists called the "Elizabethan World Picture"? Is this not a disguised critical atavism? Does it not hint at a latent desire for totality more appropriate to a modern rather than a postmodern epistemology? The unspecified "larger strategy" to which Greenblatt alludes must remain conspicuously absent from his own anecdotal narrative. In fact, the passive construction of the last sentence obscures agency at a critical moment that might have allowed us to get a sense of who or what gives shape to history. Greenblatt's nod toward an "ultimate design," much like Howard's own appraisal of the irreducible complexity of interpretation, becomes a synecdoche of new historicism's reluctance to acknowledge the power that modernity and its *grands récits*

continue to have over us. After all, to what "larger strategy" do anecdotes gesture to which Greenblatt himself does not—indeed, must not?

It is, in fact, these unresolved questions of modernity that loom large over the new historicist project. Despite the postmodern eviction notice, we seem reluctant to abandon the premises of Enlightenment modernity. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that the "age of the world picture," a concept made familiar by Heidegger, will not so easily relinquish its control over us. A second double bind results from Greenblatt's attempts to steer a course between the French and German interpretations of modernity and history, a treacherous path between Scylla and Charybdis. His project is not so much "tacking" back and forth between methodologies, to use Geertz's term, as it is a more ambitious but ultimately unsuccessful act of sounding the channel and then dredging where the waters are too shallow. In doing so, Greenblatt attempts to chart a course that others may follow. A passage from his "Towards a Poetics of Culture" helps to articulate the point:

The problem is not simply the incompatibility of two theories—Marxist and poststructuralist—with one another, but the inability of either of the theories to come to terms with the apparently contradictory historical effects of capitalism. In principle, of course, both Marxism and poststructuralism seize upon contradictions: for the former they are signs of repressed class conflicts, for the latter they disclose hidden cracks in the spurious certainties of logocentrism. But in practice [Fredric] Jameson treats capitalism as the agent of repressive differentiation, while [Jean Francois] Lyotard treats it as the agent of monological totalization. (5)

Although Greenblatt doesn't cite pragmatism as among new historicism's critical forebears, this methodology has, nonetheless, been remarkably adept at bricolage, drawing from the French and German traditions what is useful in conceptualizing (post)modern history and subjectivity, discarding with aplomb the more unwieldy premises of each.

Subjectivity remains caught between the French and German traditions, and is the card most frequently palmed in new historicism's shuffle of continental theories. On the one hand is Marxism's transhistorical, ontologically stable subject, struggling to reproduce itself in conflict with an essential nature, and on the other is poststructuralism's historically shifting "subject-effect," a construct mediated by language and culture. Too often new historicists, although

favoring the poststructuralist model of subjectivity as more supple, backslide into their old Marxist ways. Or they turn to Louis Althusser to provide a convenient bridge across this theoretical rift, for the Althusserian model posits a subject constructed and interpellated by culture and ideology without jettisoning the Marxist foundations of the self.

In the absence, then, of a clearly articulated theoretical manifesto for new historicism, let us turn to a passage in Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions* that—although ostensibly a look at the genre of travel narrative—provides a curiously appropriate epilogue to our own anecdotal narrative on new historicism. Greenblatt writes:

It will not escape anyone who reads this book that my chapters are constructed largely around anecdotes, what the French call *petite histoires*, as distinct from the *grand récit* of totalizing, integrated, progressive history, history that knows where it is going. As is appropriate for voyagers who thought that they knew where they were going and ended up in a place whose existence they had never imagined, the discourse of travel...is rarely if ever interesting at the level of sustained narrative and teleological design, but gripping at the level of the anecdote. (2)

New historicism has criticized what it perceives as the sustained and utopian narratives of Marxist and poststructuralist practices by authorizing the accumulation of contradictory fragments that do not embarrass any one critical model.

Greenblatt's interpretation of the European critical tradition responds to the established reading of the dichotomy: the German tradition, the Frankfurt School in particular, has insisted upon the centrality of Marxism and Enlightenment modernity in social theory, whereas the French tradition influenced by linguistic skepticism, a theoretical hub of which deconstruction was the most memorable spoke, has been harshly critical of the Enlightenment will-to-knowledge and rejects modernity outright. The Germans, so the wisdom would have it, continue in the system-building tradition, while the French have abandoned systematicity altogether.

However, Greenblatt, in an interesting reversal, points out that it is actually the German tradition that insists on the fragmentation of social life under capitalism and a certain strain of French thinking—the work of Jean Baudrillard, for instance—that argues for capitalism as a great unifying force. For Greenblatt neither the German nor the French tradition—represented, for him, by Jameson and Lyotard, respectively—has been able to account for capitalism's contra-

dictory historical trajectories. That is, for Greenblatt, critics from both traditions have missed history's "rapid oscillation" between the simultaneous aggregation and disaggregation of social life under capitalist modernity. Despite new historicism's desire for the concurrent explanatory value of the unvoiced bigger picture (read German and modern) and the textual productivity of an anecdotal paradigm (read French and postmodern), it neither theorizes nor commits to totality or fragmentation. Thus envisaged, is our most recent historical turn a dialectic unwilling to engage its radical implications? Or as Foucault augured, will we always turn the next corner—only to be surprised by Hegel?

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REVIEWS

IVAN ILLICH, *In the Vineyard of the Text: A Commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon* (Chicago and London: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1993), 154 pp.

As many have noted, medievalists of the early twentieth century were among that era's most influential humanist scholars.¹ Writers such as E. R. Curtius, Johan Huizinga, Erich Auerbach, and C. S. Lewis interpreted the significance of western cultural origins for several generations of general readers, a task that now seems to have passed largely to students of the early modern era. Ivan Illich's new book, *In the Vineyard of the Text*, in many ways hearkens back to these grand interpreters of the Middle Ages. While it is by no means a product of old-fashioned humanism, it vividly demonstrates how medieval studies can still bring fresh perspectives to contemporary concerns.

Illich takes for his subject a moment in the early twelfth century, exemplified by Hugh of St. Victor's *Didascalicon*, when he claims the modern habits of "bookish reading" began. By "bookish," Illich means an attitude towards the written word which sees it as an abstract object, a text conceptually separate from the page upon which it appears. Implicit throughout the work is a contrast with contemporary attitudes, in which Illich sees the end of the epoch that the twelfth century began. He invites readers to consider their own habits of literacy in a historical context, not, as he puts it, "as a logically necessary step in the progress toward the rational use of the alphabet" (3). In this respect, Illich presents a gentle rebuke to those who have loudly proclaimed the death of literature, as if the habits of reading in which we have been traditionally schooled were an inevitable apex of humanist achievement, from which any deviation is necessarily a decline.

¹See, for example, chapter 1 of Lee Patterson's *Negotiating the Past: The Historical Understanding of Medieval Literature* (Madison and London: Univ. of Wisconsin Press, 1987).

Although a thin book, the low page count should not be taken as a sign of light intellectual weight. Illich's writing is both compendious and considered, his footnotes an excellent introduction to further study. Illich states in the introduction that he does not attempt to provide a new scholarly tome for medievalists, but to use the twelfth century to reflect upon current debates over the role of literacy in society. Such expansive contemplation is a salutary addition to the more specialized studies upon which he builds.

As reflected in the subtitle, Illich uses the techniques of medieval commentary to structure his analysis. He begins by examining Hugh's incipit in order to unravel, word by word, the differences between Hugh's assumptions about literacy and our own. Illich first explores how Hugh understands the purpose of reading. Wisdom, for Hugh, is synonymous with God, and study, by increasing wisdom, brings one closer to God. This wisdom brought both metaphorical and literal illumination, for according to medieval understanding of optics the eye projected beams of light in order to see. Reading thus illuminates and redeems, lifting the reader from the darkness of original sin. Although the *Didascalicon* belongs to a long line of propaedeutic literature, it simultaneously reflects a concern with the self as an individual new to the twelfth century. Hugh wants the pilgrimage of study to lead not to the community of the celestial Jerusalem, but to an awareness of self.

Illich next examines the notion of order, which for Hugh was not arbitrary convention, but objective reality. As an instructional handbook, the *Didascalicon* gives the student rules for constructing an internal, ordered storehouse of knowledge. Hugh revived the memory training of antiquity, but where the Greek and Roman rhetoricians used this *techne* for public oratory, Hugh employed it for religious understanding. Where antiquity organized memory around the image of a rich garden or villa, Hugh used biblical history.

The monastic reading which the *Didascalicon* teaches is both meditative and active. Readers vocalize their texts, a habit reflected in the many metaphors of chewing and digesting associated with reading. This kind of reading was a lifetime's pursuit, a way of life rather than mere activity. For Hugh, it was the only legitimate way to read, and in this opinion he represents the end of an age. Later, such pious meditation would be only one of a number of different ways to read.

To the tradition of monastic reading, Illich then contrasts the growing practices of scholasticism. He interprets the *Didascalicon's*

preface as addressing a community of uncloistered readers, and the entire work as straddling the line between monastic and scholastic worlds, at once valorizing the old habits of reading and creating the conditions necessary for the new ones. A series of different but related practices abruptly became normative in the twelfth century: the spacing of words, alphabetic and subject-based indexing, the layout of glossed texts, increased use of paper—all contributing to silent reading and to that shift in which a text ceased to be heard as an author's speech, but was seen as the manifestation of unvoiced thought.

Finally, Illich explicitly considers how the thesis that the twelfth century created the abstract notion of the text affects our understanding of the history of the book. In his interpretation, the advent of print does not inaugurate a new age, but adds additional features to already established ideas. The true era of the bookish text, he argues, extends from the mid-twelfth to the late twentieth century, when the new technology of the computer has broken the old paradigm. Illich freely admits himself to be a product of the old age, and exhibits more than a little identification with his subject when he admits a fondness for the notion of a quasi-monastic house of reading in which one can retreat from the world to pursue an older form of study.

There is much in Illich's analysis that is provocative and persuasive. The twelfth century was clearly the beginning for many of the reading habits we now take for granted. More than anything else, he demonstrates that these habits are not the inevitable consequence of literacy itself. Instead, they arose from the demands of a particular historical moment. At the same time, his analysis seems too schematized, partly as a result of his deliberate choice to examine the conceptual understanding of reading and writing divorced from the practical exigencies that encourage their use. If Illich's account of the twelfth century revises conventional notions about the era of the book, his own periodization can also be questioned at both ends.

Illich generally ignores the Carolingian age, which Rosamond McKitterick's recent work shows to have had a well-developed literary culture extending beyond clerical circles.² Many concepts Illich attributes to the twelfth century were also exhibited by the Carolingians. Careful attention to page layout and a hierarchy of script forms both indicate that Carolingians understood the text as a visual

²Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1989).

unit. They were also systematic catalogers, book collectors, and even textual editors, demonstrating a desire for organization parallel to their twelfth-century descendants. Indeed, the great glosses of the twelfth century depended on the basic work of library building initiated by the Carolingians and continued through the Gregorian reforms.

Further, the claim that the Roman alphabet "became a phonetic recording device for the registration of actual speech" only in the twelfth century is highly questionable (73). Illich himself mentions some counter-examples, dismissing them with the unargued assertion that the exception proves the rule. In fact, before the twelfth century the Roman alphabet was frequently used to represent other languages where there was a practical need. Old English literature, which Illich mentions, is no mere exception, but testifies to an active culture of the written word in a vernacular language, symbolized largely with the Roman alphabet. King Alfred's program of translations demonstrates an effort to create a bilingual educational system parallel to the training in both Greek and Latin of the Roman Republic and Empire. Old English did not have the religious prestige of Latin, but it clearly had the status of a full language.

Illich entirely omits mention of Old Irish, where the Roman alphabet was used to transcribe a language with significant phonemic differences from Latin. Like the Anglo-Saxons, the Irish largely abandoned their old epigraphic script, ogham, for Roman letters, in part, presumably, because the later were easier to write and less likely to be misread. In contrast to their insular neighbors, the Irish did not add new characters although Latin lacked, among other things, many of Irish's fricatives. The letter *m*, for example, was used for the conventional nasal, as well as two voiced nasal fricatives. Perhaps even more significantly, consonants in Irish can have two phonemically distinct qualities: broad or slender. The Old Irish scribes solved the representational problem by introducing "glide-vowels," which were themselves unpronounced but indicated the pronunciation of an adjoining consonant. The evidence of Old Irish orthography indicates that its developers undertook a rather impressive abstract analysis of the phonemes available in Latin and devised a series of representational rules based upon but by no means identical to Latin pronunciation.

At the other end of Illich's period, his idea that computers have splintered the habitual notion of a static text also seems overstated. First, the attack upon the notion of bookish texts has largely come

from poststructuralist thought, developed years before computers gained widespread importance. Second, an alternative view of computers might argue that they represent a more efficient development of the same technologies developed in the twelfth century. A hypertext is nothing more than a mechanized index, and the constellation of software devoted to drafting and transmitting the written word seems designed to produce an even more reliable final product: the abstract text. The computer speeds writing and revision, but it is unclear how attitudes towards the text have changed because of it. Modern user interfaces employ the old visual metaphors of desktop and paper document, and even inveterate computer users still do most reading away from the computer screen. Early predictions that computers would create a paperless society have proven wildly off the mark. Instead, there has been an explosion of documents. The computer screen itself has become the modern wax tablet, ideally suited for provisional composition, but still an intermediate stage.

If the transition between different types of reading habits is less pronounced or drastic than Illich would have it, many important changes did occur in the twelfth century. His book provides a valuable focus on a key moment in western cultural history and shows how relevant the twelfth century can be for understanding our own situation.

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