Hegel characterizes a profession as an institution that mediates between the individual's work and an encompassing social structure. One way it does so is by offering models that exemplify the practices of competent professionals. The scholar and the critic are two traditional models for literary professionals, and the theorist is an recent addition. Yet the silence of these terms obscures a professional practice that pervades all three and gives literary study its special character: the practice of interpretation. Few literary academics would identify themselves as "interpreters," yet most spend much of their careers training students in the practice of interpreting, presenting interpretations of literary works to students and to one another, and trying to make their own practices as interpreters subtle and perspicuous enough to respond to the capacity of serious writing to provoke endless thought.

What is interpretation? The term's use outside literary study may suggest some guiding hints. Interpret is the ordinary name for someone who translates, particularly in face-to-face situations. Similarly, an interpreter is one who translates spoken words into sign language for the hearing impaired. In performing arts, critics and audiences want to hear how a performer interprets a well-known musical composition or play. At parks or restored historic sites, an interpreter explains the sights or exhibits to visitors. Despite variations, we find here a basic structure. An interpreter is someone who helps another understand the meaning of something. What is to be understood is already there, but it is unable to speak for itself. Its message needs mediation through the interpreter's special knowledge and skill. In Latin, the word interpen refers to a negotiator, mediator, or messenger, as well as to an expounder or explainer. The name for reflection on interpretation, hermeneutics, comes from a Greek word meaning literally to translate, to put into words, or to explain.

Literary interpretation is another specification of this basic structure. The literary interpreter helps someone understand the meaning of a text. Knowledge of a text's language and of relevant historical contexts and reference is presupposed or must be supplied before interpreting can begin. But alieness is also presupposed: nothing in the text or in our distance from it in time and place makes it obscure. The interpreter's task is to make the text speak again. This task is accomplished by "reading" the text and by helping students learn to read it. Interpreting is reading what makes professional literary study distinctive among the academic disciplines in its deployment of extremely complex skills of reading. What is "reading," and where does it go wrong or fail short so that it needs the disciplined help interpreting gives it?
ambiguous and emotive yet also demand a strong response from believers, intense controversy often arises over how to interpret them, sometimes with dire historical consequences. As in law, religious interpreters claim to be reading sacred signs, not acting personal opinion. Even more than in law, religious interpretation raises problems. Questions about what is allowed, what is necessary, what is desired, and what is actually possible are mixed up together in ways that can produce schisms in the community. A few religious claim to address all humankind, and they proscribe among seekers, that is, other communities who may refuse to accept that claim or even find it highly offensive. Religious interpretation thus forcefully raises issues about the source and authority of its signs and messages, about the authority of an interpreter and the interpretation, and about the claim of that authority on communities of believers and nonbelievers.

In both law and religion, a number of paradoxes emerge. Understanding the meaning of a legal or religious text is vital to right action, yet the text is usable to speak for itself. Understanding comes about through the interpreter's agency, yet the meaning conveyed is assumed to belong to the text, not the interpreter. The meaning is something to be done as well as to be known, yet the audience may not welcome this demand to turn meaning into active participation. Meaning is addressed to a community, but specifying the community may be controversial, and those addressed may not feel entitled to the authority of either the message or the interpreter. While literary interpretation has no law's power to enforce decisions nor religion's claim of divine sanction, it contains its own versions of these paradoxes.

In thinking about literary interpretation, one may be tempted to move immediately to a practical concern with the contemporary variety of interpretive methods or approaches, such as deconstruction, hermeneutics, new historicism, and so on. But it may be more useful to begin by making the basic components of interpretation so as to bring out what belongs to all interpretive practices. In the description I propose, these components are text, interpreter, the audience to whom interpretation is directed, meaning, and the resources that help achieve understanding. Wherever the approach or the debate about approaches, interpreting remains a complex social practice situated within a historical moment.

Let me begin with text. The word itself is somewhat strange and of recent vintage. Its increasing use in literary study reflects a stable rhetorical device over time we should think of literature (or discourse) itself as recent, and so literary interpretation focused on so-called great imitative works, most often within a single country and language. The term work suggests that a poem or novel is an object that already has a determinate and permanent form crafted as a mark of some aesthetic ideal. It implies that interpreters should direct themselves to single poems, novels, or plays, rather than parts of a single work.
and reconstituted in a series of copies and editions that vary significantly. William Wordsworth’s Prelude exists in several manuscript versions, each of which became the basis of the posthumous 1850 edition, but modern commentators often prefer to base their interpretations on an earlier version copied out in 1805. They sometimes print materials Wordsworth never worked into the Prelude or even assemble poems of several drafts Wordsworth never brought to a fair copy. Moreover, a text reaches us already saturated with the purposes and expectations of those who transmitted it. Some biblical writings became the conventional canon of Jewish and Christian scriptures; others are apocryphal, accepted by some sects, rejected by others; yet another mass of writing is granted authority by no modern sect. Some texts or written (Shakespeare, Homer, Plato) are already acclaimed; others (Lady Chatterley’s Lover, Marx, Freud) are surrounded by controversy. The way a text is printed or the source, the apparatus of notes and commentary that may accompany it, the circumstances under which we first encounter it—whether we see it in a bookstore, library, or classroom or hear of it through a conversation with a newspaper reviewer, a friend, a teacher, or another book—all shape our initial orientation to it. Interpretations are therefore necessarily interested in how a text got there and how and why it comes to us. Yet if we cannot take for granted the text we interpret, neither do we set it up arbitrarily, willfully, on our individual feet. A text is constituted and transmitted in a complicated social and historical process of which our act of interpretive attention becomes a part. This process and our participation in it presupposes interests that we have or have not been equipped to interpret. What entices and invites an interest in elucidating and appropriating this meaning?

D. C. Greenaway’s chapter “Textual Scholarship” in this book shows that texts are not simply there, waiting for us to find and interpret them. They emerge from a complicated historical process of creation and transmission. Its author may be anonymous or at least almost so. “Homer” was a single poet, he assembled material that endured, or at least was imitated in a rich tradition. In Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, as in Renaissance and Baroque painting, collaboration was common. Ezra Pound’s editing and revision of T. S. Eliot’s Waste Land made it a very different poem. Chance’s Vedas and Cypriote translations, adapts, and expands a poem by Boccaccio. Jane Austen’s Wide Sargasso Sea writes Charlotte Bronte’s Jane Eyre from the perspective of the mad Mrs. Rochester. Texts are constituted...
why expressing it may require a specialized vocabulary. Thus interpreters, whose
aim is to help an audience understand, must take account of that audience's
knowledge, interests, way of talking, and membership—whether students, gen-
erally educated nonprofessionals, or other professional interpreters. But because
interpreters are also responsible to the text and what they think, it is often
to want to lead the audience to different questions and language. Interpret-
ters not infrequently find themselves in the 'tricky' position of having to
impose what their audience ought to be thinking. Particular texts, as we
have seen, are particularly important to this particular audience, ought to
feel the presence of these particular questions and problems, and ought to try
to respond in this particular way.

Both the audience's trouble with specific parts of a text and the interpreter's
choice of words to make the text understandable are basically related re-
sponses. The relation of interpreter to audience can be problematic to say:
that interpreters help another reader understand a text does not exclude divergent
or even antagonistic elements in the relationship. Professional interpreters
are part of a professional interpretive community (or a network of communities)
within which some interpretation and interpretive practices have become
widely accepted while others are the subject of intense debate. If we focus on
an isolated person reading a single text in print, we may lose sight of the
social and dialogic character of interpreting. But its full nature emerges only
in this sense.

Perhaps no topic in the theory of interpretation has been more debated in
our century than the nature of the meaning that emerges in the complex social
process called interpreting and the relation of various and varied texts that occasion it.
Meaning in these cases has a paradoxical character: it is not simply there and waiting for us;
and yet, though it cannot exist without our activity, it is not a product simply of that activity.
This paradox emerges in Plato's dialogues, the Poetics, where Sophocles and
Aristotle discuss the meaning of a poem by Simmias in order to find then
inquiry into whether virtue can be taught. Commenting on texts was a staple
of the Greek Sophists' pedagogy, and Sophocles shows that interpreters can
interpret the poem as nobly as they do, if need be. But in the end, he objects to the way the
argument becomes inconclusive when it becomes a matter of passing over what a
text means, and he compares interpreters to vulgar people who bring in 'false
girls' to entertain at a party, to increase supposedly educative knowledge. He
entertain another with their own conversation (347b-348a). Why not just
examine our own ideas to see which are true or false? If a text's meaning is so
obscure that it needs interpreting, why bother with it? In fact, the word 'meaning' is somewhat misleading. Interpretation does not
just aim to state a 'theme' in the form of a proposition about the human
gender or general social issues, a proposition that could be formulated separ-
ately from the text and with which we could agree or disagree on the basis of a
quite different kind of evidence. Our comparisons with just and religion suggest

that "what the text says" has something of the character of a command, a word spoken to us whose consequences in and for our lives we feel obliged to consider, even if we decide to reject it. To say that an interpretive helps a text speak again underscores the complexity of interpretation's aim. In speaking, meaning has the form of an event in an intricate and historically situated social process with manifold ramifications that neither the speaker nor the hearer controls fully. A literary text is an instrument we can use to understand human experience, which means that it enables us to take up complex, detailed, and nuanced " Shutterstock's " of our lives. In a well-known formulation, Elizabeth Brinkley has argued that interpretation aims not at paraphrase but at making the experience of the text available to the reader ("Heresy of Paraphrase").

In the Poetics, Aristotle already grasps the philosophical depth of this kind of meaning. Tragedy, he says, aims to arouse and "purge" certain emotions (ch. 6). Like Aristotle, speaking is a means of knowledge, he remarks that poetry is "more philosophical and serious than history." This somewhat cryptic phrase suggests that, far better than records of fact, stories repay an attention aimed at gaining "appreciable insight into human experience." Stories, he adds, express the "universal," by which he means not some abstract proposition but the coherence of events in the story's plot (ch. 9). Aristotle does not explicitly coordinate the twin ideas of purging and the universal, but he seems to mean that the coherence of plot that gives tragedy a self-subsistence in a thing also gives to the flow of our feelings an exemplary formulation, an identifiable character we can "call on" in our ordinary lives. From this perspective, interpretation neither states a proposition as the meaning of a text nor anatomizes a fixed textual structure. It aims to "sec the weave of thought, feelings, words, sounds, images, and representations in a text, a weaving taken up into the talking and feeling that constitutes readers' diverse responses.

This difficult idea has been repeatedly lost and recovered in the history of interpretation, but unless we grasp it, we miss the aim of interpretation. What characterizes interpretation is that the interpreter anticipates more meaning than a text appears to deliver. This anticipation may be due to a text's cultural resonation or standing. It may arise from a conviction that a text is symptomatic of larger cultural forces or that it contains in some psychological or philosophical insight. But in any case, interpretation begins when a text appears to stand out from a background and invite commentary. Consequently, the literary poetic text is exemplary for interpretation, but what makes a text both poetic and enigmatic?

A student once told me he found, on the kitchen table in his apartment, an envelope on which his roommate had scribbled the following words: "Investigate the death of bears." As it happened, his roommate was a zoologist noting a possible dissertation topic. Yet the words are resonantly enigmatic. Encountered by chance, stripped of discursive context, they seem bound together by an internal rhythm. Four syllable lines animate imperative verb balances from Anglo-Saxon non-syllables forming a poem phrase, the whole sentence is idiom
to confine interpretive practices to literary study, and yet the consequences of those practices cannot be controlled or guaranteed in advance.

This issue, however, is irascable, and it is already apparent in ancient interpretative practice. As social scientists charge, the "resistance to language," that is, a rigorous philosophical reaction on the way careful reading shows how every text's language undermines any attempt to articulate a meaningful horizon from which to be put to some further intellectual or practical use, De Man himself explicitly recognized that his idea was paradoxically close to those of Reuben Brower and other New Critics ("Return to Philology" 23-24).

De Man stated his belief that literary study should focus on the reading of texts, by demonstrating the inseparability between meaning and the way meaning is conveyed in language, would reveal both the defining nature of literature and the function of textual study. De Man tried to show the impossibility of precisely that uniting.

In ironic terms, it follows Horace's advice to start an epic "in the midst of things," and the exciting event gives Vergil an opportunity for much vivid description. Thematically, it shows the cosmic scale of the story, in which human beings live out their fate subject both to natural forces beyond their control and to inescapable purposes of some hostie hostile gods who may or may not reward human virtue. Intertextually, by echoing a storm in Homer's Odyssey, it defines a tradition within which Vergil wishes to appear as a competitor for high rank.

An obscure grammarian named Fulgentius, writing more than five hundred years after Vergil died, offered a quite different interpretive to the epic context that had changed grandly since Vergil. As a schoolteacher, he used the poem to train young boys Latin and induct them into Roman culture, which retained its prestige even though the Italian peninsula had fallen to the Ostrogoths and had to be reconquered in the seventh century. As a Christian, Fulgentius had to reconcile the values implicit in pagan culture with the values of a still alien religion. Christianity was adopted by the emperor Constantine early in the fourth century, repudiated by Julian the Apostate (260-312) and recovered only after his death in 363.

Adapting a self-conscious and sophisticated form that maneuvered neatly through this tangled cultural situation, he staged his interpretive work as a schoolroom dialogue, between himself and his sources from the two traditions, which he calls up for the occasion. Vergil can thus authoritatively explain his moral meaning, and Fulgentius can agree with it where it is consistent with Christianity. Where it is not, Vergil can graciously concede that Christianity's insight is superior. Instead of an epic beginning in medias res, Fulgentius seeks to make the poem an exemplum of a virtuous man, an oratorical form that was supposed to begin at birth. Therefore, Fulgentius contends, the storm and shipwreck symbolize the birth of the soul. Interpretive practices to a particular, the god of childbirth.

The god who directly releases the storm is Aeolus, and Fulgentius corrects his name to the Greek word oלים (ailon + olos), which
he translates as "the destructiveness of time," using an authority, a verse from Homer's Iliad (though the verse makes no mention of Aeolus)." By such devices, Fulgentius transforms the epic from the story of Homer's founding into a general allegory of moral development, preserving cultural continuity while rendering Vergil's text within a changed cultural context.

I do not suggest that we could endorse, will less adopt, Fulgentius's interpretative practice, though it is similar in ambition to that of Barthes. But we can see the potential of such a practice: it does not reduce the text to the ideological form; it does not render it meaningless; it does not ignore the text's potential for meaning. Indeed, just the opposite is true. Interpretation, we recall, presupposes that a text does not speak its meaning for itself. It holds itself back from us in some ways. Even when the meaning of the text seems self-evident to us, that meaning is still not the meaning of the text itself. Interpretation is the process of discovering the meaning of the text itself. It is the process of finding the meaning of the text in its context, not in the context of some other text or in some other time or place.

Interpretation is not just a matter of finding the meaning of the text. It is a matter of finding the meaning of the text in the context in which it was created. This context is not just the time and place of the text's creation, but also the social, cultural, and historical context. Interpretation is not just a matter of understanding the text. It is a matter of understanding the text in its context.

The text itself is not the meaning of the text. The meaning of the text is not the text itself. The meaning of the text is the interpretation of the text. Interpretation is the process of discovering the meaning of the text in its context.

So, in this sense, interpretation is not a matter of finding the meaning of the text. It is a matter of finding the meaning of the text in its context. Interpretation is not a matter of understanding the text. It is a matter of understanding the text in its context.

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The text itself is not the meaning of the text. The meaning of the text is not the text itself. The meaning of the text is the interpretation of the text. Interpretation is the process of discovering the meaning of the text in its context.
that we can master a literary work or its interpretation. Within the humanities, we carry on a conversation that is partial and endlessly open; we do not speak from a position of authority based on total knowledge. It would be equally mistaken either to ignore what has already been written or to think one must read it all before saying anything. As in all modern social experience, we are members to a greater or lesser degree in an overlapping network of variously constituted groups. Interpretation is the practical activity, the concrete substance, of the social group or groups for whose meaning a text or a body of texts is a matter of concern. Professional interpreters are simply those who have given their working lives to that concern, and within the profession we find a further overlapping network of specializations. Some interpreters, of course, may misunderstand that profession and speak as though interpretations are new discoveries that contribute to collective progress toward a unified and final understanding of a text. And there is some justice to the fear that such a large and dispersed profession will lose its sense of common purpose, its mutually intelligible ways of working, and its shared standards for estimating which professional work is valuable. But if we see professional interpretation as a set of collective practices for holding in mind texts worth the effort of understanding, then joining in that profession requires only that we read widely enough to develop a sense for when our own interpretations may justifiably claim other professionals’ attention. Above all, we should seek out interpretations that stretch and challenge our own understanding, because the more varied and diverse the contexts within which the text has been enabled to speak, the deeper that understanding will become.

To be sure, interpretations do not just coexist peacefully, as the following, much debated poem by Wordsworth illustrates:

A slumber did my spirit seal;
I had no human fears;
She seemed a thing that could not feel
The touch of earthly years.

No motion has she now, no force;
She neither hears nor sees;
Rolled round in earth’s diurnal course,
With rocks, and stones, and trees.

(216)

This short lyric may seem too obvious to invite much interpretation, but dozens of comments, often in sharp disagreement with one another, have been directed to it. A first-time reader might simply wonder who “she” is. An interpreter might point out that this poem is one of a series that Wordsworth wrote about a young girl he named “Lucy,” who died young. Historical investigations have identified no actual “Lucy,” and she appears to have been a fictional creation.

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In saying these things, the interpreter has taken for granted that a reader feels it is explanatory to set a poem in the context of the author’s other writings and to supply documented historical context. The historical approach is not just a method but a way of making sense that is deeply embedded in our individual and social life. That way could be theory-challenged: this particular text does not say how old "she" is, nor does it explicitly instruct a reader to group this text with any others. To refuse historical explanations, therefore, is not indefensible in theory, though it may seem quaint or perverse. The important point is that the force of even so "self-evident" an interpretive remark rests implicitly on practices that make sense to a social group.

The tone of the second stanza and the relation of the second stanza to the first stanza have evoked disagreement between interpreters. Some hold that the second stanza expresses the speaker’s horror as he moves from illusion to the harsh reality that the girl has been reduced to a motionless, dead thing. This interpretation also rests on cultural presuppositions. Dying occasions grief, and the shuttering of illusion is painful. But the text does not use the word death, nor does the second stanza name the speaker’s feelings. Are other attitudes toward death possible? A well-attended alternative is to see a dead person as reassembled into the endless cycles of nature. It would follow that the tone of the second stanza is resigned, perhaps to some degree celebratory. Some interpreters have tried to document that Wordsworth held such beliefs in the period when he wrote this poem. They are using a biographical and historical approach to supporting their side in a dispute over a psychological approach to the poem.

It would be easy to add other examples of this interaction between detailed readings of a text and a more or less explicit, more or less systematically stated, body of prior presuppositions. A feminist reading might attend to the silence of Lucy throughout these poems, to the male poet’s particular variant on the traditional theme of the female muse, or to the association of the female figure with nature. Arabella Patterson’s essay “Historical Scholarship” in this book discusses new historicism. Representatives of that approach might be struck by the poet’s passivity or by his strong investment in rural nature as a locus of value, and they might seek to understand the political, social, and economic forces that influence the development of an individual writer who sees experience in these terms. Proponents of any of these readings might deploy such approaches or draw on elements of them. In actual critical practice, however, we encounter not just disagreement within a single framework of presuppositions but both a mix of approaches used to support or contradict interpretations and potential disagreement over the legitimacy of different approaches and of mixing them.

How can we settle these various disagreements? If the text’s own words were decisive, the debate would not have arisen in the first place. We seem to have no choice but to go “outside” the text. The author and the author’s intentions seem temptingly close at hand. The New Critics argued that a poem is a public utterance, so that the author’s intentions are irrelevant because private (Wimsatt and Beardsley). Their critics have argued that only the author’s intentions constitutes meaning and provides a basis for validating interpretations (see Hirsch; Juhl, Harris). In our ordinary social experience, when we do not understand what others say, we ask them to explain their meaning. Wordsworth is long dead, but we might hope that a document would not survive and could provide a basis for other documents. But obviously, those documents, too, need interpretation, as does their relation to the particular poem. We quickly find ourselves in a circle. To determine the text’s intentions, we have to interpret texts, but that intention was supposed to tell us how to interpret those very texts. In fact, what we are doing is not moving from texts to the author’s intention but widening the circle of interpretation to include more and more texts and using those we find in order to interpret those we find most obscure. We have not discovered facts that settle the dispute; we have widened its arena.

The idea that a text must have a single, clear meaning and that interpretation should aim to state it is highly questionable, and it has deep roots in our culture. When interpreters discover that what some other interpreters say either fails to capture their own understanding or even conflicts with it, they enter into disputes and eventually ask how to resolve those disputes. But the supposition that interpretive controversies should be the end of the circle of interpretation has proved to be an unanswerable question. It is tempting to suppose that if we could find the right method, we could be sure of our interpretive results. Yet many contemporary philosophers of science have argued that scientific inquiry is far more complex than the traditional model allows. It seems even more evident that our understanding of literary texts is open to the whole range of activity in our lives.

In the materials collected in Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religion, Belief, the philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach observed, “In order to put clear about aesthetic words, you have to describe ways of living.” (11) What we call “science,” he argues, consists not just of statements of assumed fact but also of elaborated ways of disputing facts and theories and resolving disputes. To try to subject the elaboration of an individual writer who sees experience in these terms. Proponents of any of these readings might deploy such approaches or draw on elements of them. In actual critical practice, however, we encounter not just disagreement within a single framework of assumptions (11-28). He argues that both artworks and the texts we take to be our immediate experience of them are rooted in “forms of life,” that is, in an indeterminate background of theories, convictions, commitments, practices, and experiences. Controlled experiments or texts against numerically precise predictions are not possible here, and, consequently, disagreements in these matters cannot be brought to a narrow focus that could decide between competing hypotheses.

For instance, Wordsworth wrote his poem about “Lucy” during one of the coldest winters on record in the German village where he and his sister Dorothy
were living in line poverty and studying the German language. He sent the poem in a letter to Samuel Coleridge, who speculated to another correspondent that "in some glimpse of moment (Wordsworth) had fancied the moment in which his sister might die" (p. 52). Like the fine-tune reader I postulate, Coleridge also saw "she" as and then pursues a characteristic interest in the poet's creative process, which he locates in Wordsworth's emotional and imaginative life. Some recent interpreters take a psychoanalytic approach and say that by imagining that death has left Lucy, a symbolic substitute for his sister, beyond his reach, Wordsworth has defended himself against an anguished wish. We might find this interpretation convincing if it seems consistent with how we make sense of human experience and that helps us understand what the text is saying. If we reject a psychoanalytic interpretation, we do so because the Freudian way of telling no longer seems plausible—perhaps because Freud's biology seems reductive, perhaps because we find recent criticisms of psychoanalysis by many of his contemporaries, such as Joseph J. Margraf and the full range of issues. David classical the leading concerns of various interpretive practices, gives a particularly useful demonstration of the different ways each practice would read Wordsworth's. Lacon's short novel The Bear, and then tries to integrate them within an approach to interpreting. Butler addresses the challenge to established interpretive practices from constructionism and deconstruction, as well as interpreting the relation to beliefs or ideologies, such as Marxism, that the interpreter may wish to promote. Anthology by Gayle L. Ormiston and Alan D. H肝och and by Kurt Mueller-Vollmer provides key selections on the theory of interpretation since the Enlightenment.

Interpretive practice is as old as culture, and the history of reflections on interpretation is nearly as old. In Western antiquity, three interpretive practices dominate: Allegorical interpretation arose among the Greeks as a way of forging a relation between current cultural realities and the poetic and mythological tradition recorded in Homer, Hesiod, and other poets. Plato was skeptical of allegory, and yet he also practiced it in his own way. As a result, philosophical schools also Plato elaborated various techniques for making an examination of traditional poetic texts the occasion for leading students into the philosophical life. A different strand of interpretive practice arose among the Jews, whose religious life was largely conducted by the elaboration and interpretation of received religious texts. Gradually, what is called "textualism" emerged as a mode of meditating on, elaborating, and debating the meaning and implications of Scripture. A third strand, which emerged among the librarians of Talmudic Alexandria in Egypt, was carried on among teachers of grammar and rhetoric. They worked to establish texts and developed techniques for analyzing and expounding them, usually line by line, in a school setting. Good introductions to the allegorical tradition include those by Jon Whitman and James A. Culley. Michael Fishbane is a leading scholar of Jewish interpretation. Several recent
ANNABEL PATTERTON

Historical Scholarship

IN A powerful essay on the "three cultures" in Germany, defined as Old, New, and Popular, Karl Heinz Bohrer entered a salutary reprimand to those who regard themselves as heralds or even observers of the "new":

"The category of the "new," advanced primarily by way of formal innovation, has conformed, even since the emergence of an aesthetic concept of modernism, the variation by which contemporary art is to be comprehended. As a consequence it may well suffer the fate experienced by the hare in the fairy tale who imprudently entered into a war with the hedgehog only to discover that the latter was always at the front line ahead of him. This, to be sure, was a deceptive maneuver: the cunning hedgehog had placed his wife there, who looked exactly like him. Yet the hare failed to notice this before he fell at his estimation."

(135)

Although in its tragic form Bohrer's ancient fable applies only to those driven continuously to seek the cutting edge, to be members or discoverers of yet another avant-garde, it must also more gently warn any project such as this collection of essays, which assumes that our disciplines (the academic approach to modern languages and literatures) change so much every decade that a new description is warranted of the shape of the profession, its necessary skills and dominant assumptions.

It is my task, therefore, to consider what has happened since Barbara K. Lewalski wrote the 1981 account of historical scholarship. I define this assignment neither as replacing her broad-ranging survey (an invaluable foundation that readers of this volume should also be sure to consult) nor precisely as following in her footsteps. Lewalski herself began by assenting what had changed since her predecessor, Robert E. Spiller, wrote his account of literary-historical scholarship: "the high wall thrown up in the 1930s to safeguard the purity of literary criticism ... from the supposed encroachments of literary history" had "been largely demolished," and it was no longer possible simply to do either one or the other (Lewalski 53). This relatively modest statement now sounds inadequate to describe the extraordinary explosion of literary criticism and scholarship that either is, or claims to be, "historicist"; my essay focuses primarily on this phenomenon and explores developments that were only in the air or peripheral to Lewalski but that can now be seen as dominant paradigms (at least until they, too, succumb to the bulk-in obscuredness of intellectual movements).

Lewalski's categories of historical inquiry were still predominantly "literary." They included literary biography; sources and influences; "contexts," subdivided into scientific thought, intellectual history, theology, contemporary