

Narrative, Responsibility, Realism

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How does human culture develop and change? How does a society establish and revise the practices that distinguish it? The question is problematic, not only because culture and society are extremely complex, but also because the study of culture is ill-equipped to address it. As Nicholas Thomas argues, the modern discipline of anthropology was founded upon the exclusion of time, clearing space for a synchronic or atemporal sociology by rejecting historical perspectives.¹ To ask about cultural change, therefore, places us between the horns of a dilemma. An evolutionary model seems reactionary, reverting to attempts of the Cambridge school to uncover the birth and growth of cultural practices. Yet rejecting old-fashioned history leaves the scholar nothing credible to replace it with. Thomas sensibly argues for making use of sources that predate professional, synchronic ethnographies, but does not explain which model should replace evolution or diffusion.² Historicizing and contextualizing studies of the past decade or so broaden the synchronic net from symbolic meanings to political forces without meaningfully addressing change through time.³ We seem to be entering a paradigm shift, becoming aware, as Charles Altieri puts it, that “the dominant perspectives in contemporary theory suppress time,” without having a temporal or dialectical model that can take their place.⁴ At such a point it can be helpful to draw upon fresh

¹ Thomas, *Out of Time* 10–11 and passim. For criticism of his more sweeping claims, see Shore, “Out of Tune.”

² See the pertinent criticisms of Thomas by Hanlon, “Time is History?”

³ Thomas promised to demonstrate new approaches that recuperate history (“Afterword” 125), but the book in question, *Entangled Objects*, simply seeks to contextualize gift exchange, describing not change through time but the “mutual entanglement” (3) of Western and non-Western beliefs and practices.

⁴ Altieri, “Temporality and the Necessity for Dialectic” 133.

or divergent perspectives. An ancient medical treatise helps us do exactly that. In the first part of this paper I look at *Ancient Medicine* and its narrative of cultural development. This treatise offers a sophisticated model of change that I call “cultural hermeneutics” — a model that accommodates change and contingency without requiring a modern trajectory of growth or evolution. This ancient anthropological narrative will then help us revise two modern attempts to recuperate time and change. In the second part of this paper I interrogate Bakhtin’s notion of temporality and his emphasis upon individual freedom, and suggest that *Ancient Medicine* affords a more complex model combining self-interest with collective responsibility. In the third part I look at some recent versions of New Realism that attempt to recover change and agency through a “hermeneutics of identity,” and I suggest how these might be revised in light of the attention in *Ancient Medicine* to incremental, collective development.

Narrative

The story of the origins and development of human culture was popular in ancient Greece, especially in the second half of the fifth century. I begin with two allegorical accounts, the second more complex than the first, and then move on to two naturalistic accounts, the second also being more complex, before turning to the sophisticated narrative in *Ancient Medicine*. Allegorical stories about the development of society use gods to explain the remarkable difference between human culture and the lawless state of *anomia*. In *Prometheus Bound*, for example, the Titan Prometheus claims responsibility for all the cultural institutions that differentiate humans from animals, including agriculture, the calendar, religion, and the reading of omens (Aeschylus, *Prometheus Bound* 436–506).⁵ He describes a Before, in which humans lived “like flimsy ants” (ὄστ’ ἀήσυροι / μύρμηκες, 452–3), blind (447) and witless (443), and an After, in which they are endowed with intelligence (444), able to cure disease (482–3) and read the will of the gods (497–9). He does not explain how he engineered this change, but simply proclaims at the end that

⁵ Citations of Aeschylus follow the edition of West. I accept Aeschylus as author, but my argument does not depend upon this. For recent contributions to this debate, see West, “Authorship,” and Lloyd-Jones, “Zeus, Prometheus.”

“all skills for mortals come from Prometheus” (πᾶσαι τέχνηαι βροτοῖσιν ἐκ Προμηθέως, 506). I call this model Titanic Intervention.⁶

The allegory Plato ascribes to Protagoras is more complex (Plato, *Protagoras* 320c–323a).⁷ In this story there are two phases, one explaining technological discoveries and the other political institutions. In the first, humans were created inferior to animals, lacking those natural faculties such as flight or sharp claws that might help them survive. Prometheus corrected this error by stealing wisdom in crafts along with fire from Athena and Hephaistos (ἔντεχνον σοφίαν σὺν πυρί, 321d). In this case, Before and After explain that technology merely compensates for the physical deficiencies of human beings. In the second phase, humans were still vulnerable to wild animals when alone, and prone to murder when together, so Zeus gave them Respect and Justice to allow them to form effective communities (322c–d). Before and After show that political skills are distinct from technological ones and are shared by all members of a community. The two allegories do not describe the process of change, but rather embody the differences between two kinds of cultural practice.

Sophocles gives a more naturalistic account of the development of culture in a famous choral ode in *Antigone*, the so-called “Hymn to Man” (*Antigone*, 332–71).⁸ After learning that someone has succeeded in burying Polyneices, the chorus sings about human achievements. “Many things are astounding,” it begins, “but none more astounding than humankind” (πολλὰ τὰ δεινὰ κούδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον πέλει, 332–33). Humans control the natural world by crossing the seas and plowing the land, and they control animals by hunting and harnessing them. How did humans acquire these powers? In the words of the chorus:

καὶ φθέγμα καὶ ἀνεμόεν
 φρόνημα καὶ ἀστυνόμους
 ὄργας ἐδιδάξατο καὶ δυσάλων
 πάγων ὑπαίθρεια καὶ

⁶ Compare the primitivist version of anthropologists in which a happy native Before is replaced with a fallen colonial After by the singular intervention of a “missionary in a row boat” (thus Cohn, “History and Anthropology” 199).

⁷ Citations of Plato follow the edition of Burnet.

⁸ Citations of Sophocles follow the edition of Lloyd-Jones and Wilson.

δύσομβρα φεύγειν βέλη
 παντοπόρος· ἄπορος ἐπ' οὐδὲν ἔρχεται
 τὸ μέλλον. (353–61)

Speech, and thought
 like the wind, and tempers
 that organize towns, these he taught himself,
 and how to avoid harsh outdoor frosts and
 the shafts of evil rain —
 always resourceful. Whatever the future brings,
 he faces it resourcefully.

The human ability to adapt and to acquire new skills is expressed by the middle voice, “he taught himself” (ἐδιδάξατο, 356), and with emphatic repetition, “resourceful in everything; resourceless never” (παντοπόρος· ἄπορος ἐπ' οὐδὲν, 360). All skills are thus shown to derive from a single talent — the ability of humans to invent for themselves. There are but two limits to human abilities. The first is natural and absolute. “From death alone,” the ode continues, “he will get no escape, but from unmanageable diseases has contrived his escapes” (Ἄιδα μόνον/ φεῦξιν οὐκ ἐπάξεται/ νόσων δ' ἀμηγάνων φυγὰς/ ξυμπέφρασται, 361–4). Every obstacle can be surmounted except for the fact that we are mortal and will die. The second limit is moral and religious. “With an ability to contrive skills that is clever beyond belief, he moves now toward evil, now toward good” (σοφόν τι τὸ μηχανόεν τέχνας ὑπὲρ ἐλπίδ' ἔχων/ τοτὲ μὲν κακόν, ἄλλοτ' ἐπ' ἐσθλὸν ἔρπει, 365–67). As the Chorus explains, prosperity depends upon respecting the laws of earth and the gods and rejecting evil and daring (368–71).

Sophocles cannot predict whether human inventiveness will at some point hold back for moral reasons, but he has no doubt that the discovery of new skills will otherwise continue indefinitely. Note that Sophocles never describes *anomia* or the primitive conditions emphasized by Aeschylus and Plato, because for him the potential for cultural achievement is innate in humankind. In other words, he does not conceive of the human condition apart from its inherent talent for invention. To the extent, therefore, that he makes no allowance for significant change, Sophocles is like a structuralist or a modern anthropologist. What for Lévi-Strauss is already given by the

semiotics of cultural relationships is for Sophocles already present in human nature.⁹

A second naturalistic account is more complex, describing two kinds of external constraint. A satyr-play, perhaps by Critias, describes the human condition as originally bestial, without order and ruled by force (Critias, *Sisyphus* 43 F 19 *TrGF*).¹⁰ In this account, the creation of cultural institutions required not astounding invention but utilitarian checks and balances — legal rewards and punishments that would, humans found, “keep violence enslaved” (7). The process of discovery and change is elided in favor of the result, and the speaker explains only: “It was at that time, I believe, that humans established laws for punishing” (κᾶπειτά μοι δοκοῦσιν ἄνθρωποι νόμους/ θέσθαι κολαστάς, 5–6). Yet laws were not enough, since those who found it expedient to obey the laws publicly began to break them covertly (9–11). So an additional constraint was necessary:

<πρῶτον> πυκνός τις καὶ σοφὸς γνώμην ἀνὴρ
 <θεῶν> δέος θνητοῖσιν ἐξευρεῖν, ὅπως
 εἴη τι δεῖμα τοῖς κακοῖσι, κἄν λάθρα
 πράσσωσιν ἢ λέγωσιν ἢ φρονῶσί <τι>.
 ἐντεῦθεν οὖν τὸ θεῖον εἰσηγήσατο,
 ὡς ἔστι δαίμων ἀφθίτῳ θάλλων βίῳ
 νόῳ τ’ ἀκούων καὶ βλέπων ... (12–18)

a wise and clever-minded man first
 invented fear of the gods for mortals,
 to frighten the wicked if they should
 do or say or think anything even in secret.
 Hence he introduced the divine, saying there is
 a god flourishing with immortal life,
 hearing and seeing with his mind ...

By concealing the truth in falsehood (26) and by persuading people that gods dwell where the thunder roars and the stars revolve (31–33), this clever man “extinguished *anomia* with these customs” (τὴν ἀνομίαν τε τοῖς νόμοις

⁹ The contrast between synchronic anthropology and diachronic history is emphasized in Lévi-Strauss, “History and Dialectic” esp. 258–62.

¹⁰ Citations of “Critias” (=88 B 25 D–K) follow the edition of Snell in *TrGF* vol. 1.

κατέσβεσεν, 40). The notion of a clever, even devious, inventor underscores the fact that the discovery was not a foregone conclusion. Religion is not a given feature of human culture but one that arises in response to particular needs, and cultural institutions more generally are the opportunistic result of a struggle for security. Critias is the first of these authors to emphasize the accidental nature of cultural practice, which arises neither from the external necessity of divine intervention nor from the internal necessity of human nature but in response to particular circumstances. Yet he pays little attention to the *how* of change, to the process of cultural development, describing instead the *why* of change, the cynical self-interest that led to the establishment of laws and religion. In Critias the quasi-allegorical “wise man” embodies the principle of advantage, not the process by which religion arose.¹¹

Embedded in the early Hippocratic treatise *Ancient Medicine* is a narrative more attentive to change.¹² In arguing for an empirical method in medicine, the author of this treatise describes medical practice as both analogous to, and a literal extension of, the original discovery of human diet. In medical terms, this reminds us how much ancient medicine relied upon dietetics. In anthropological terms, it associates the practice of medicine with Lévi-Strauss’ famous dichotomy between the raw and the cooked. Like Sophocles, the medical writer describes a progression in which more and more cultural skills are acquired, first in preparing food and then in practicing medicine. In the medical text, however, the *course* of change is explicitly progressive, since humans first had to learn which foods were edible, then learn how to bake and boil, and finally how to combine foods (4). The medical text is also explicit about the *mechanism* of change, which results from the necessity of circumstances:

Τὴν γὰρ ἀρχὴν οὐτ’ ἂν εὐρέθη ἢ τέχνη ἢ ἰητρικὴ οὐτ’ ἂν ἐζητήθη — οὐδὲν γὰρ αὐτῆς ἔδει — εἰ τοῖσι κάμνουσι τῶν ἀνθρώπων τὰ αὐτὰ διαιωμένοις τε καὶ προσφερομένοις ἅπερ οἱ ὑγιαίνοντες ἐσθίουσί τε καὶ πίνουσι καὶ ἄλλα διαιτέονται συνέφερον καὶ μὴ ἦν ἕτερα τούτων βελτίω. Νῦν δὲ αὐτῇ ἢ ἀνάγκῃ ἰητρικὴν ἐποίησεν ζητηθῆναι τε καὶ

¹¹ Davies, “Sisyphus and the Invention of Religion” 31–32 compares the cynical rationality of Enlightenment writers. He does not address the motive of collective advantage, which is absent in the texts he cites.

¹² Citations of *Ancient Medicine* follow the edition of Jouanna.

εὑρεθῆναι ἀνθρώποισιν, ὅτι τοῖσι κάμνουσι ταῦτὰ προσφερομένοισιν ἄπερ οἱ ὑγιαίνοντες οὐ συνέφερον, ὡς οὐδὲ νῦν συμφέρει. Ἔτι δ' ἄνωθεν ἔγωγε ἀξιῶ οὐδ' ἂν τὴν τῶν ὑγιαίνόντων δίαιτάν τε καὶ τροφήν, ἢ νῦν χρέονται, εὑρεθῆναι, εἰ ἐξήρκει τῷ ἀνθρώπῳ ταῦτὰ ἐσθίοντι καὶ πίνοντι βοί τε καὶ ἵπῳ καὶ πᾶσιν ἐκτὸς ἀνθρώπου, οἷον τὰ ἐκ τῆς γῆς φυόμενα, καρπούς τε καὶ ὕλην καὶ χόρτον· ἀπὸ τούτων γὰρ καὶ τρέφονται καὶ αὐξοῦνται καὶ ἄπονοι διάγουσιν οὐδὲν προσδεόμενοι ἄλλης διαίτης. (3.1–3)

In the beginning the craft of medicine would not have been found or searched for (since there was no need for it), if sick people in their way of life and diet benefited from the same things which the healthy eat and drink and otherwise make use of, and if there was nothing better than these. But necessity itself caused men to search for and find medicine, since the sick did not benefit from the same things as the healthy, just as they do not today. Going further back, I do not think that the way of life and food which the healthy now use would have been found, if it were enough for a human to eat and drink the same things as a cow and a horse and all other animals, namely things that grow from the earth — fruits and wood and grass. On these, animals are nursed and grow and live without trouble, and need no other food.

In Critias, change is the passive filling of a need: the community is impaired by the absence of laws or religion, and inventions (somehow) answer the demands of circumstances. *Ancient Medicine*, by contrast, describes the circumstances necessary for discovery and the active responses that may (or may not) follow. Human digestion, for example, happens to be different from that of horses, and our inability to digest wood and grass is the necessity that causes a search for new foods and eventually the development of cooking, just as the inability of those who are sick to tolerate normal food leads eventually to the invention of medicine. The author states explicitly that if circumstances had been different, these arts would never have developed. As he puts it later, if the same foods were suited to healthy people and to the sick, no one would ever have discovered medicine (5.1).

The same nexus of attendant circumstances and responses to them comes into play at all stages in the process, as skills are gradually acquired and refined:

Τὰ δὲ νῦν διαιτήματα εὐρημένα καὶ τετεχνημένα ἐν πολλῷ χρόνῳ γεγενῆσθαί μοι δοκεῖ. Ὡς γὰρ ἔπασχον πολλά τε καὶ δεινὰ ἀπὸ ἰσχυρῆς τε καὶ θηριώδους διαίτης ὡμά τε καὶ ἄκρητα καὶ μεγάλας δυνάμιας ἔχοντα ἐσφερόμενοι — οἷά περ ἂν καὶ νῦν ὑπ' αὐτῶν πάσχοιεν πόνοισί τε ἰσχυροῖσι καὶ νούσοισι περιπίπτοντες καὶ διὰ τάχους θανάτοισιν. Ἔησον μὲν οὖν ταῦτα τότε εἰκὸς ἦν πάσχειν διὰ τὴν συνήθειαν, ἰσχυρῶς δὲ καὶ τότε, καὶ τοὺς μὲν πλείστους τε καὶ ἀσθενεστέραν φύσιν ἔχοντας ἀπόλλυσθαι εἰκόσ, τοὺς δὲ τούτων ὑπερέχοντας πλείω χρόνον ἀντέχειν, ὥσπερ καὶ νῦν ἀπὸ τῶν ἰσχυρῶν βρωμάτων οἱ μὲν γὰρ ῥηϊδίως ἀπαλλάσσονται, οἱ δὲ μετὰ πολλῶν πόνων τε καὶ κακῶν. (3.3–4)

Present ways of life were found and fashioned, it seems to me, over much time. For they suffered greatly and terribly from a violent and bestial way of life when they took food that was raw and unmixed and of strong qualities — just as today they would also suffer from these things, falling with violent pain and disease and swift death. At one time they probably suffered less, being used to it, but severely even then, and most of them, having weaker natures, probably died, while the stronger ones held out for a longer time, just as today some deal easily with harsh foods, while others do so with great pain and trouble.

Because the process of discovery is complex, we cannot predict when and where it will occur — or that it will occur at all. Our author points out that foreign peoples and some Greeks failed to develop medicine altogether (5). He points out that in the early stages of medical practice, mistakes would have been made that did more harm than good (5–6). The process of discovery is therefore neither innately driven nor inevitable. Unlike Critias, our author goes beyond the circumstances necessary for invention to ask what course of action will then be sufficient. He agrees with Critias that humans will seek their own advantage; unlike Critias, he also explains why this may or may not translate into new discoveries.

First of all, a craft based on sensory data is required. The treatise criticizes those who start from suppositions or theories (ὑποθέσεις) about the workings of the body. Rather than start from unprovable theories (1.2), the doctor should remember that the only criterion in health is the human body: “you cannot find any measure, neither number nor weight, that you can appeal to for accurate knowledge except bodily sensation” (μέτρον δὲ οὐδὲ

ἀριθμὸν οὔτε σταθμὸν ἄλλον πρὸς ὃ ἀναφέρων εἴση τὸ ἀκριβές, οὐκ ἂν εὔροις ἄλλ' ἢ τοῦ σώματος τὴν αἴσθησιν. 9.3). Second, the accumulation of empirical observations forms a craft or *technē* with a body of experience that can be passed from one practitioner to another, thus making continued discoveries possible:

Εἰσὶ δὲ δημιουργοὶ οἱ μὲν φλαῦροι, οἱ δὲ πολλὸν διαφέροντες· ὅπερ, εἰ μὴ ἦν ἰητρικὴ ὄλως μὴδ' ἐν αὐτῇ ἔσκεπτο μὴδ' εὔρητο μὴδὲν, οὐκ ἂν ἦν, ἀλλὰ πάντες ἂν ὁμοίως αὐτῆς ἄπειροί τε καὶ ἀνεπιστήμονες ἦσαν, τύχη δ' ἂν πάντα τὰ τῶν καμνόντων διοικεῖτο. Νῦν δ' οὐχ οὕτως ἔχει, ἀλλ' ὥσπερ καὶ τῶν ἄλλων τεχνέων πασέων οἱ δημιουργοὶ πολλὸν ἀλλήλων διαφέρουσι κατὰ χεῖρα καὶ κατὰ γνώμην, οὕτω δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ ἰητρικῆς. (1.2)

Some practitioners are poor and some are much better, which would not be the case unless medicine fully existed and involved continual inquiry and discovery — but all would be equally ignorant and inexperienced of it, and all care of the sick would be governed by chance. That is not how it is, but just as the practitioners of all other crafts differ greatly in skill and knowledge, so also in medicine.

Third, since the craft is no better than its practitioners, it is fallible, and depends upon careful observation and deduction. The extended comparison of most doctors with poor pilots (9) emphasizes that errors often pass unnoticed and that even the very best doctor cannot avoid mistakes. “I would strongly praise that doctor who makes small errors,” he concludes, “for precision is rarely seen” (κἂν ἐγὼ τοῦτον τὸν ἰητρὸν ἰσχυρῶς ἐπαινέοιμι τὸν σμικρὰ ἀμαρτάνοντα, — τὸ δὲ ἀτρεκὲς ὀλιγάκις ἔστι κατιδεῖν, 9.4). The author hopes that further medical discoveries will be made in the future and makes it clear that these depend upon three conditions: “many excellent discoveries have been made in the course of time, and the rest will be discovered — if one is competent — and aware of prior discoveries — and starts one’s own inquiry from these” (πολλά τε καὶ καλῶς ἔχοντα εὔρηται ἐν πολλῷ χρόνῳ, καὶ τὰ λοιπὰ εὔρεθήσεται, ἦν τις ἰκανός τ' ἐὼν καὶ τὰ εὔρημένα εἰδὼς ἐκ τούτων ὀρμώμενος ζητῆ. 2.1).

This treatise has often been taken as a forerunner of modern empirical science.¹³ In its emphasis upon observation, this is certainly true, but no-

¹³ E.g. Festugiere, *L’Ancienne Médecine* and Jones, *Philosophy and Medicine*.

where does it presuppose the positivism that plays such a large part in modern science. The medical practitioner has no absolute knowledge of how the body “really” works and would deny that such knowledge is even possible. Instead he collects observations, building upon the knowledge of his predecessors.¹⁴ Given the absence of *a priori* certainties and the dependence upon prior knowledge, I call this process a “cultural hermeneutics.” As in Gadamer’s literary hermeneutics, there is no objectively “correct” knowledge; rather, understanding changes and develops through interaction with new observations and through incorporation of inherited information. This, as Gadamer observes, is a never-ending process:

But the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process. Not only are fresh sources of error constantly excluded, so that all kinds of things are filtered out that obscure the true meaning; but new sources of understanding are continually emerging that reveal unsuspected elements of meaning.¹⁵

In one respect, the medical writer might seem to be a positivist; as I have noted, he considers bodily sensation a criterion — yet it is not a criterion for knowledge, simply a criterion for making useful observations. Let us take his own example: cheese. If we observe that cheese is harmful for a patient, we cannot then conclude that cheese in itself is bad (20). Rather, we must find out how much he ate, what kind of pain it produced, and in what part of the body. We have to make use of inherited observations that some people can eat all the cheese they want, not only without harm but with a remarkable gain in strength (ἰσχὺν ... θαυμασίως παρέχεται, 20.5), and that different people, depending on their physical make-up, are affected by cheese in different ways. The skillful doctor, like Gadamer’s reader, must be open to new observations and draw from them a coherent understanding — whether of a text or of cheese.

¹⁴ On the sophisticated empiricism of Ancient Medicine, see Dunn, “*On Ancient Medicine*.”

¹⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method* 298.

Responsibility

By equating the cultural practice of cooking both with the specialized discipline of medicine and with the broad question of knowledge, our treatise invites the modern reader to rethink familiar categories. This is true in particular of time and change.

If time is the measure of change, it has little to measure in the allegorical narratives of Aeschylus and Plato. There is a time Before (bestial *anomia*) and a time After (human culture) and a Titan or god who bridges the two — and in doing so mystifies the fundamental difference between them. For all of his skeptical rationalism, Critias in his naturalistic account likewise describes not change through time but static states Before and After, somehow mediated by the wise man's Great Deception. Sophocles, by contrast, is the first gradualist. The Ode to Man describes successive developments as humans learn to cross the sea, plough the earth, hunt and harness animals, and develop speech, towns, and medicine. Yet these achievements of humankind are invariable and predictable. At any moment in the story of human culture we see the same thing — human resourcefulness producing new inventions. This is change without uncertainty, time without meaningful temporality. A modern equivalent is the atemporality of structuralism and poststructuralism, in which at any moment we see the same thing — the semiotic operations of culture described by Lévi-Strauss or the machinations of power described by Foucault. In these grand systems of meaning and control, the order of things does not change or develop; it can only be annihilated or “erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea.”¹⁶

Ancient Medicine is different. At any given moment in cultural development, many small changes are taking place as individuals make observations and try to improve their procedures. There is no privileged agent driving these changes. In the earlier stages, all humans are involved in trying new foods. In the later stages, doctors try to tailor diet more specifically to various kinds of sickness just as athletic trainers, the author points out (4), constantly experiment with diet and nutrition in their attempts to enhance performance. Yet improvement is never guaranteed. At any given moment, change may be for the better, or for the worse, or somewhere in between. Some groups have failed to make progress at all; others have advanced despite errors and obstacles. Some doctors are excellent “pilots,” most of them

¹⁶ Foucault, *Order of Things* 387.

are not. There is plenty of change here for time to measure; what is lacking is predictability. The many factors at play cannot be reduced to a single sufficient or determining cause.

Bakhtin's term for this is "unfinalizability." His theory of the chronotope ascribes to each literary genre its own understanding of space and time. In his view, the great achievement of realistic novels such as those of Dostoevsky was to portray events as open and undetermined. In "Epic and Novel" he offers a schematic yet effective contrast between the epic, which describes a past that is closed and complete, and the novel, which depicts a present that is open and unfinished: "There is no place in the epic world for any openedness, indecision, indeterminacy. There are no loopholes in it through which we glimpse the future; it suffices unto itself, neither supposing any continuation nor requiring it."¹⁷ In the novel, however, "through contact with the present, an object is attracted to the incomplete process of a world-in-the-making, and is stamped with the seal of inconclusiveness. No matter how distant this object is from us in time, it is connected to our incomplete, present-day, continuing temporal transitions, it develops a relationship with our unpreparedness, with our present."¹⁸ The novel describes the openedness and uncertainty of human experience without imposing the larger perspective by which epic implies the necessity of events, just as *Ancient Medicine* describes the uncertainty of cultural development without imposing an evolutionary model which implies that things had to happen as they did.

An interesting paradox in Bakhtin's discussion is that Dostoevsky, in heightening the novel's openness to time, also annihilates it. In Dostoevsky, "the independence, internal freedom, unfinalizability, and indeterminacy of the hero"¹⁹ are so pronounced that all things are seen as coexisting in an open present without past or future "as if they existed in space and not in time."²⁰ That "which is valid only as past, or as future, or as present in relation to past or future, is for him nonessential and is not incorporated into his world. That is why his characters remember nothing, they have no biography

¹⁷ Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 16.

¹⁸ Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 30.

¹⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 63.

²⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 28.

in the sense of something past and fully experienced." The hero's freedom, in other words, constitutes a "triumph over time."²¹

The paradox arises from the antithetical scheme Bakhtin uses to describe the novel's virtues. The timeless freedom of the protagonist is defined in opposition to historical necessity and as a liberation from its claims.²² The novel constitutes a "revolution in the creative consciousness of man"²³ because it frees personal, individual experience from a totalizing, impersonal tradition. "The epic world is an utterly finished thing ... it is impossible to change, to re-think, to re-evaluate anything in it" because it is remote and walled-off from human touch, "from personal experience, from any new insights, from any personal initiative in understanding and interpreting, from new points of view and evaluations."²⁴ By contrast, the novel describes a world-in-the-making where the individual is free and always possesses a "happy surplus" of "unrealized potential and unrealized demands."²⁵ Against the impersonal necessity of a collective past, Bakhtin constructs a transcendent moment of individual freedom.

In his essay on Goethe, "The *Bildungsroman*," Bakhtin turns from a broad categorical contrast to a more specific historical one. The "novel of education" was a critical form in the history of realism that by fully imagining historical time paved the way for Dostoevsky.²⁶ To state this more explicitly, the great achievement of the realistic novel is the liberation of its protagonist from the clutches of a temporal world first articulated in the novel of education. In Goethe's *Italian Journey*, for example, "man's individual emergence is inseparably linked to historical emergence. Man's emergence is accomplished in real historical time, with all of its necessity, its fullness, its future, and its profoundly chronotopic nature."²⁷ Hence the experience of the individual is inseparable from historical time and historical causation, and inherent in visualizing time are "the aspect of an *essential link* between the past and present, the aspect of the *necessity* of the past and the

²¹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* 29.

²² The antithesis presumably reflects Bakhtin's rejection of totalizing systems such as structuralism, Russian Formalism, and Marxism: thus Morson and Emerson, *Mikhail Bakhtin* 27–32.

²³ Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 38.

²⁴ Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 17.

²⁵ Bakhtin, "Epic and Novel" 36 and 37.

²⁶ Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman*" 19.

²⁷ Bakhtin, "The *Bildungsroman*" 23.

necessity of its place in a line of continuous development, the aspect of the *creative effectiveness* of the past, and, finally, the aspect of the past and present being linked to a *necessary future*.²⁸ Dostoevsky and the realistic novel react against this necessity by trying to separate the individual from history: “there is no causality in Dostoevsky’s novels, no genesis, no explanations based on the past, on the influences of the environment or of upbringing, and so forth.”²⁹ In freeing the individual from the clutches of historical time, Dostoevsky can now situate “creative effectiveness” in the protagonist.

In this liberation from temporal succession we have a general and a particular paradox. The general paradox is that temporality is defined by opposition, a moment of freedom and absolute autonomy by contrast to the long march of historical necessity. The very notion of an open present therefore invites deconstruction since it is defined in relation to the closed succession of history. More interesting perhaps is the particular paradox that as necessity is upstaged by freedom, a lone individual, the novelistic hero, takes over the agency once ascribed to history. This is a heavy burden to bear — too heavy, it seems, since postmodern criticism has relieved the individual of this weighty responsibility and has situated agency not in the causal chains of history nor in the liberal autonomy of the individual but in the powerful, relentless cogs of ideology.

It is interesting that, for all their differences, Bakhtin and postmodern criticism share the assumption that agency and autonomy must rest either in the individual or in the impersonal realm of history or culture. This dichotomy, however pervasive in modern thought, is a false one, and *Ancient Medicine* offers a clear and useful alternative. The medical treatise locates agency and responsibility in the interactions of nature with culture, individual with community, and present moment with accumulated tradition. The human body was by nature poor at digesting raw foods; ingenious individuals responded by discovering how to make food more digestible; discoveries became useful only when shared throughout the community; moreover, the process continued as new individuals further adapted foods to human nature by drawing upon a knowledge of past successes and failures. Thus in the early stages of human culture, change was the result of a complex process that served the interests of the community. In the course of time this process

²⁸ Bakhtin, “The Bildungsroman” 36.

²⁹ Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 29.

became institutionalized in practices or *technai* such as medicine and sports nutrition.

This complex and collective model has an important point of convergence with Bakhtin. Bakhtin asks, “how is it that the characters in novels surprise us, and do things we did not expect?” His notion of heroic autonomy now seems misguided, but his attention to undirected change brings out the merits of the medical treatise. *Ancient Medicine* asks, “how is it that human culture surprises us, and has taken a form we could not have predicted?” Its answer is a reaction against Sophoclean naturalism — that is, against the belief expressed in *Antigone* that cultural developments arise from innate human faculties. And its answer locates the engine of change neither in individuals nor in a system outside them, but in the interactions between the needs and constraints of the human situation on the one hand, and human skill, common interests, and knowledge of the past on the other. In other words, Bakhtin describes the *possibility* of change, whereas *Ancient Medicine* describes the *actuality* of change. Bakhtin describes an opening or aperture, a space free from the chains of history where the individual can choose and bring about change; *Ancient Medicine* describes an accumulation of quantum events arising from collective needs to change the shape of culture. These points of contact and divergence pose the question of responsible freedom, of the considerations that can and should constrain human choices.

For some critics, change is not a concern. New Historicism conceives culture as an essentially static field of power relations — there are negotiations and resistances but no real change. Other critics are directly concerned with change and draw upon models in the sciences and social sciences to explain how and why it takes place (chaos theory and game theory, for example). Are we left then with a critical relativism? That is in fact what Josh Ober implies when he proposes, like Solomon, to divide the baby: let those interested in change play by their rules, and let the new historicists keep to theirs.³⁰ In other words, we can look at the world through synchronic glasses or through diachronic ones, but not both. I suggest restoring responsibility in two senses. First, a model that cannot accommodate change is less complete than one that can. Our responsibility as critics requires that we take into consideration as much of the complexity of the world as possible. Second, a model that concentrates upon the individual at the expense of the system evades complexity as much as one that merely concentrates upon the system.

³⁰ Ober, “Social Science History.”

Every human being is in some sense like the doctor in *Ancient Medicine* — part of a group and constrained by it, yet not entirely within its clutches. It is the doctor's responsibility to his community and its traditions that enables him to bring about cultural change.

Realism

The critic's realism involves describing and analyzing the world while attending to its complexity and its capacity for change. The doctor's realism involves attending to the complexities of his situation and his tradition. But is it possible to talk about responsibility and realism in a postmodern world? Simply to posit a doctor able to understand his world and make decisions about it flies in the face of postmodern claims that all knowledge is culturally mediated and all practice is culturally controlled. An emerging New Realism answers that the rejection of positivist assumptions and of liberal autonomy need not entail a rejection of subjectivity. To claim that the doctor is in a position to deliberate and take effective action is not the same as claiming he has absolute freedom or autonomy. The realist argument is often sharpened by considering how identity is fashioned.³¹ Even if the category "Hispanic woman," for example, is in many ways a construction of Anglo male society, this does not mean that Hispanic women as individuals are not subjects. To put the case more strongly, New Realism finds an active counterweight to cultural hegemony in the experiences and perspectives of those viewed as "other." Superficially, this might seem to replicate in ethnic studies the debate between essentialist and constructivist feminists. The difference is that "postpositive realists" (as Satya Mohanty and others call themselves) reject foundationalism without fully embracing constructivism. Rejecting the view that experience is "given" need not imply it has no objective status or authority. Let us take two examples.

Mohanty critiques Naomi Scheman, who develops the constructivist position using the example of a woman, Alice, in a feminist consciousness-raising group. At issue is the anger that women often come to feel as a result of group discussions, and the tendency to describe this anger as inner and personal. Scheman argues that describing Alice's anger as an inner well of feeling uncovered by group discussions is to essentialize and de-politicize

³¹ See the useful collection by Moya and Hames-García, *Reclaiming Identity*.

the process.³² Emotions, she says, are mediated by the social environment and involve notions of what a woman may or may not feel angry about. In this case, Alice's anger is produced by the group's political and theoretical critiques which allow her to feel differently about herself and her relationships. So far, Mohanty agrees, but he does not agree that Alice's anger is *only* a social construction, nor that her personal feelings lack authority. In his words,

Alice's experience of the emotion anger leads us to conclude that she has just come to *know* something, something not merely about her repressed feelings, but also about her self, her personhood, and the range of its moral and political claims and needs. She comes to know this by also coming to discover or understand features of the social and cultural arrangements of her world that define her sense of self, the choices she is taught to have, the range of personal capacities she is expected to exploit and exercise.³³

We can reclaim individual experience, in other words, not by returning to an essentializing feminism in which latent anger lies waiting to be uncovered, but by viewing Alice's anger as a reinterpretation of her situation. And we can reclaim the authority of individual experience by viewing Alice's anger as a more appropriate interpretation, now based upon a fuller understanding of her social world. Individual experience is important not because it is essential or "given" but because it involves what we might objectively call an improved understanding. In the hermeneutics of identity, Alice comes to a better and more coherent understanding of who she is.

Mohanty's argument would seem to invite the objection that if understandings change, there are no grounds for claiming that one is better than another. Before joining her group, Alice felt guilty and depressed. Are not guilt and depression correct understandings of her situation earlier, just as anger is afterwards? William Wilkerson defends a non-essentializing realism with a second anecdote of personal experience. He begins with a realist epistemology. If we look at dots arranged on paper and after some time recognize a pattern, we are not belatedly seeing something that was "really" there all along but we are nevertheless revising our perceptions to produce an ob-

³² Scheman, "Anger and the Politics of Naming."

³³ Mohanty, "The Epistemic Status of Cultural Identity" 48–49.

jectively improved understanding.³⁴ Wilkerson illustrates this argument with his own experience of coming out. Finding that one is gay does not involve revealing an identity that was there all along:

It is more coherent to construe coming out as *transformation*: the development of a new identity based on a reinterpretation of experiences. This new identity reflects a new and more accurate understanding of who one is in the world and how one can act in the world. Coming out allows gays or lesbians to better organize salient aspects of their experience, to gain an understanding of themselves that will help them to understand their place in the world and to develop modes of life and personalities that stem from this new understanding.³⁵

The realist argument allows Wilkerson to make the particular claim that the construction of a new gay identity involves correcting prior mistakes, moving from an understanding of the self limited by homophobic standards to a fuller understanding made possible by revised notions of what is normal or acceptable. He can then make the general claim that the postmodern rejection of experience and identity is mistaken: the fact that identity is theoretically and politically mediated does not prevent an individual's experience from helping him find a more adequate understanding of the self.

New realist theory restores authority to individual experience and uses a hermeneutics of identity to explain how we build up a coherent picture of ourselves and our place in society. Yet in this form, realist theory gives an extremely limited account of experience and change. It replaces an atemporal essentialism (Alice's anger was there all along but needed the consciousness-raising group to reveal it) with a partially temporal realism (her experience has been transformed from depression to anger). The model of change is analogous to my first example from *Prometheus*. In Aeschylus, Titanic Intervention transforms human culture from a feeble, antlike existence to one of godlike power and knowledge. The transformations of Alice (from depression to anger) and of Wilkerson (from homophobic to gay identity) are likewise singular changes from Before to After. Instead of development through time, we have a largely atemporal shift from one state to another. As in Aeschylus, this involves an exceptional moment. The raising of Alice's

³⁴ Wilkerson, "Is there Something You Need to Tell Me?" 264.

³⁵ Wilkerson, "Is there Something You Need to Tell Me?" 266.

consciousness and Wilkerson's coming-out are both unrepeatable life events, defining moments for the one as a woman and the other as a gay man, just as Prometheus' intervention is the defining moment for human culture.³⁶ Although the analysis here is more naturalistic than in Aeschylus, since it relies upon encounters with new people and new perspectives, nevertheless this transformative — even transcendent — experience is not a very useful model for change.

Let us think about Alice for a moment. What did Alice do with her anger? How did she confront or challenge the members of her family and those she worked with? How hard was it to renegotiate those relationships? Did the process of renegotiation modify or qualify her anger? The change that produced her anger may in some ways be pivotal, but it is not the end of the story. Equally "real" (in a postpositive sense) are the changes in her feelings and in her relationships from day to day. Just as Alice did not have an essential female identity waiting to be uncovered, she does not construct from her encounter a single liberated identity; rather she must constantly seek a coherent and viable sense of who she is, both from her past ideas about herself and from present observations and relationships.

So realism requires a more complex and gradual hermeneutics, one that situates individual experience in a larger context of friends, relatives, and cultural norms, and in a longer continuum of past and present beliefs and observations. The traumatic and transformative model of New Realism might therefore learn from Bakhtin, who describes a prosaic time of ordinary experience, neither directed to a known end nor basking in the glow of a definitive transformation. It might also learn from *Ancient Medicine*, which describes an unending process that constantly engages the individual with both the community and the past.

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³⁶ After Wilkerson comes out, his new identity not only corrects his previous view of himself but gives him privileged political knowledge: "Anyone who adopts a gay or lesbian identity but ignores the political implications of this action has not fully grasped the meaning of the coming out experience," Wilkerson, "Is there Something You Need to Tell Me?" 267.

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