



# Historical Figuration: Poetics, Historiography, and New Genre Studies<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This essay has four interconnected goals: 1) to reflect upon some of the major theoretical and methodological developments (since about 1950) in the fields of early modern literary studies and history vis-à-vis the question of historicism; 2) to address, within the context of seventeenth-century England, inter-relationships between poetics and historiography; 3) to examine that “interdisciplinarity” specifically in terms of the seventeenth-century English poetic elegy; and 4) to trace (from Plato to Puttenham) and to argue for a specific theoretical aspect of that inter-relationship, which I will call *historical figuration*. My argument will hinge upon these connecting points, especially the latter two. On the one hand, I will argue that an early modern paradigm shift from theocentric to increasingly secular narrative frameworks for personal and national histories contributes to a transformation in poetic genre. English poets began to formulate a new intra-textual crisis of linguistic signification within the elegy’s construction of loss and spiritual consolation as the experience of death and mourning became less theocentric and communal and more secular and individualized during the seventeenth century. This new intra-textuality to elegiac resistance emerges gradually but consistently from approximately the 1620s onward, facilitating the genre’s new articulations of consolation situated within and against historical contexts rather than projected toward a transcendental horizon. On the other hand, I will also argue that this distinctive inter-relationship between poetics and historiography may be theorized as historical figuration, which may be linked directly to key contributions to the history of poetic theory from Plato to Puttenham. My two-fold thesis thus attempts to engender and engage what some may see as a trans-discursive poetics of culture. However, I would hesitate to place my argument within the new-historicist camp, but would hope instead that this essay may contribute to the emerging, interdisciplinary sub-field of *new genre studies*, which seeks to examine literary genres as manifestations of aesthetic forms and social discourses.

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## 1. *Interdisciplinarity Without Anachronisms?*

But we shall never get all the facts anyway – there is no end to the accumulation of facts. Moreover, mere accumulations of facts – a point our own generation is only beginning to realize – are meaningless. The sylvan historian does better than that: it takes a few details and so orders them that we have not only beauty but insight into essential truth. Its “history,” in short, is a history without footnotes.

It has the validity of myth – not myth as a pretty but irrelevant make-belief, an idle fancy, but myth as a valid perception into reality. (Brooks 164)

Is there anything really new about interdisciplinary scholarship? Virtually all of the fields of knowledge have become increasingly diversified and interconnected since the emergence of area studies in the 1920s and 30s; the impact of political and social movements of the 1960s and 70s; and the inter-related influences of structuralism, semiotics, and poststructuralism. One of the most distinctive characteristics at present about interdisciplinarity is a dynamic lack of consensus – not only among academics working in different disciplines, but (perhaps especially) among those within the same fields of investigation – on key questions of epistemology, interpretation, and methodology. Such contentiousness at worst slides back into the post-modernist relativism of the 1980s and 90s; at best, breaks ground for innovative, collaborative work. While there's nothing new about researchers and educators from different fields disagreeing with one another about guidelines for interdisciplinary scholarship and teaching, the degrees to which hybrid methodologies and objects of knowledge are currently being mapped-out with increasingly specialized vocabularies does strike me as significant, interesting, and generative. Parallel to the more general track of interdisciplinary study, other paths of inquiry now vie for relevance: cross-, multi-, and trans-disciplinarity; as well as varying levels of their integration (e.g., informed, synthetic, conceptual, resistant, etc.) within and against the traditional disciplines themselves.<sup>2</sup>

I recently attended a conference sponsored by the International Society for the Study of Time where these reflections became (at least for me) paramount.<sup>3</sup> The Society's founder, J. T. Fraser, has contributed a lifetime's body of work to the establishment of a unique field of research, time studies, that seeks those principles "which control the integrative levels of nature" (443) at work within and against nested hierarchies of temporality, change, being and becoming. While some may argue that Fraser's method ultimately works toward a unified goal – a synthetic interdisciplinarity in which fundamental questions involve several disciplines in the integrated examination of one distinctive object of knowledge – the heterogeneity of perspectives and materials presented at the conference and the consequent robust discussions all constituted, in my opinion, a compelling and difficult framework for agreements-to-disagree. One scholar's synthetic interdisciplinarity may thus be another's conceptual trans-disciplinarity in which the questions that reciprocally cross more than one field of inquiry have themselves no compelling disciplinary basis. (I will return to such distinctions near the end of section four, below).

While a more detailed account of such theoretical and methodological distinctions lies beyond the immediate scope of this essay, I have invoked those debates in order to suggest some of the possibilities for studying the literary text within and against specific non-literary contexts in the twenty-first century. Since at least the 1950s, there has been much productive

disagreement among literary critics and historians, for example, about inter-relationships between poetry and history within the context of early modern England. Indeed it could be argued that such a lack of consensus has generated one of the most fruitful interdisciplinary avenues for research, publication, and teaching in the field of seventeenth-century studies. These disputes have emerged, at least in part, from recent developments in theory and methodology (as suggested through the above discussions). Such disagreements have also arisen (and have no sign of abating) because critics and scholars are keenly aware of the inherent interdisciplinary temper of early modern thought, and, in this case, of the dynamic inter-relationships between poetics and historiography that go back in time at least as far as Aristotle's *Poetics* (c.330 BCE) and the dialogues of Plato (c.427–347 BCE).

According to the *OED*, the word *interdisciplinary* did not enter the language until 1937, however, which means that in addition to reflecting upon current disputes about theory and methodology we also ought to confront the peculiar dilemma of seeking so-called interdisciplinary objects of knowledge in an era prior to their existence as we may construe them today. And in tandem with that proposition, we would also do well to be mindful that literary critics and historians have many different strategies (empirical, practical, theoretical, etc.) for recognizing and negotiating that important, contingent gap between past and present. Whereas the concept of interdisciplinarity may present a degree of anachronistic resistance to my inquiry here, both *poetic(s)* and *historiography* fortuitously appear on the linguistic scene during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, thereby offering a working synchronic context for this essay's central concern. Although it is virtually impossible to study and interpret old texts and times without introducing the slightest trace of anachronistic predispositions to the enterprise of scholarship, this essay aims to be as mindful as possible of the ethos of the seventeenth century.

This essay has four interconnected goals: 1) to reflect upon some of the major theoretical and methodological developments (since about 1950) in the fields of early modern literary studies and history vis-à-vis the question of historicism; 2) to address, within the context of seventeenth-century England, inter-relationships between poetics and historiography; 3) to examine that "interdisciplinarity" specifically in terms of the seventeenth-century English poetic elegy; and 4) to trace (from Plato to Puttenham) and to argue for a specific theoretical aspect of that inter-relationship, which I will call *historical figuration*. My thesis thus will hinge upon these connecting points, especially the latter two.

On the one hand, I will argue that an early modern paradigm shift from theocentric to increasingly secular narrative frameworks for personal and national histories contributes to a transformation in poetic genre. English poets began to formulate a new intra-textual crisis of linguistic signification within the elegy's construction of loss and spiritual consolation as the experience of death and mourning became less theocentric and communal

and more secular and individualized during the seventeenth century. This new intra-textuality to elegiac resistance emerges gradually but consistently from approximately the 1620s onward, facilitating the genre's new articulations of spiritual consolation situated within and against historical contexts rather than projected toward a transcendental horizon. On the other hand, I will also argue that this distinctive inter-relationship between poetics and historiography may be theorized as historical figuration, which may be linked directly to key contributions to the history of poetic theory from Plato to Puttenham. My two-fold thesis thus attempts to engender and engage what some may see as a trans-discursive poetics of culture (Gallagher 37; Greenblatt, "Poetics" 12). However, I would (for reasons to be addressed in the next section) hesitate to place my argument within the new-historicist camp, but would hope instead that this essay may contribute to the emerging, interdisciplinary sub-field of *new genre studies*, which seeks to examine literary genres as manifestations of aesthetic forms and social discourses.<sup>4</sup>

These goals carry me back to this section's epigraph that, in turn, pays tribute to the formalist aesthetic of so many of my esteemed professors, who were themselves colleagues with and/or students of the rising stars of the new criticism. In the memorable chapter, "Keats's Sylvan Historian: History Without Footnotes," of his classic text, *The Well Wrought Urn*, Cleanth Brooks puzzles over the central paradox of Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn" and asserts that the urn's cold pastoral revelation – "'Beauty is truth, truth beauty' (line 49) – resides enigmatically in a transcendental "history . . . beyond time, outside time" (163). Brooks's deft attention to the interplay between poetic form and content, his uncanny ability to transpose his own interpretation of the whole work into the internal music of the poem itself, and his occult attunement to the urn's "imaginative perception of essentials" (164) – hallmarks of the new criticism – emphasize the text's aesthetic qualities at the expense of the work's historical context: whether biographical, cultural, literary, or otherwise. Without abandoning formalism and good old-fashioned close reading (which, I would contend, are still indispensable skills for the literary critic and the historian alike) my interpretive framework here aims to strike a balance between aesthetics and context, between poetics and historiography. Whereas Brooks, true to the spirit of his generation, sought a history without footnotes, this essay seeks, through a disciplinary theory of historical figuration and a corresponding synthetic methodology of new genre study, an interdisciplinarity without anachronisms in the early modern era.<sup>5</sup>

## 2. Which Historicism(s): Post-, New-, Neo-, or Pre-?

. . . literary study in the past few years has undergone a sudden, almost universal turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward language as such and has made a corresponding turn toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, the material base. (Miller 283)

I believe that as a profession we do in fact help to keep alive and to circulate what might otherwise be silenced forever . . . (Greenblatt, "Presidential" 423)

To value the nonmodern on its own terms, not merely as a precursor of modernity, is to challenge the notion that chronological earliness in literature should be devalued in comparison with modernity. It may well be that earlier historical writers possessed a praxis of dialogic imagination that puts to shame many writers chronologically more modern; but even those who do not acknowledge its superior excellence should respect its difference. (Woodbridge 602)

These three epigraphs respectively trace – from 1986 to 2003 – a persistent crisis among some critics and theorists that ultimately concerns the status of the literary text when that object is placed within and against various historicisms. In his 1986 *PMLA* Presidential Address, J. Hillis Miller descried (if hyperbolically) the rising interest in social and political methodologies in literary and cultural studies in the US that ostensibly threatened to undermine relationships between Continental philosophy and the American brand of deconstruction that valued textual aesthetics above historical contingency.

While it is indisputable from today's perspective that virtually all of the fields of literary study underwent several phases of political and sociological refashioning during the 1980s and 90s and that those discursive transformations emerged not from a single domain or methodology, Louis Montrose boldly claimed in 1992 that the responsibility for such epistemic changes lay primarily with the first wave proponents of the so-called new historicism, who were uniquely attuned to the radical interdisciplinarity of Renaissance and early modern texts:

The focus of such work had been on a refiguration of the sociocultural field within which now-canonical Renaissance literary and dramatic works had been originally produced, on situating them in relation not only to various other genres and modes of writing from beyond the literary canon but also to other cultural domains, including the social practices and political institutions of early modern England . . . [This] newer historical criticism could claim to be new in refusing unexamined distinctions between "literature" and "history," between "text" and "context," in resisting a tendency to posit and privilege an autonomous individual – whether an author or a work – to be set against a social or literary background. (397–8)

According to Montrose, in this direct reply to Miller, the new historicism's methodology does not impose anachronistic formulations upon literary and cultural materials from the Renaissance and early modern era, but simply uncovers the "sociocultural field within which literary and dramatic works had [always already] been originally produced." Such an axiom, it should be noted, owes perhaps as much to the philosophy of deconstruction (Derrida 140–1) as it does to the trans-discursive methodology of Frankfurt School critical theorists, such as Theodor Adorno (37–45).<sup>6</sup>

As other early practitioners concur, such a critical and theoretical practice describes "culture in action" (Veeser xi); the new historicist examines the work of art as "the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of

creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (Greenblatt, “Poetics” 12); new historicism “entails reading literary and nonliterary texts as constituents of historical discourses” and thereby tracing “connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of subjectivity” (Gallagher 37). This methodological dynamism between writer, text, and social contexts – what has come to be called a trans-discursive poetics of culture – importantly underscores what I would hazard to describe as the intrinsic, synergistic, non-systematic, idiosyncratic, and tropological interdisciplinarity of Renaissance and early modern English literature, especially (though by no means exclusively) of poetic texts. Exemplars abound from Edmund Spenser’s *The Faerie Queene* (1596) to Aemilia Lanyer’s *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (1611) to John Milton’s *Paradise Lost* (1667–74). Prose works, such as Sir Thomas Browne’s *Hydriotaphia* (1658) and Margaret Cavendish’s *Blazing World* (1666), prove no less difficult to classify in terms of genre, “discipline,” and discourse.

Set against Miller’s doubts and Montrose’s confidence concerning the relevance and impact of historicist approaches to literature, the more recent *PMLA* “Presidential Address” by Stephen Greenblatt and “Afterword” by Linda Woodbridge evince the relentless and dispassionate (if ironic) movement of history itself. Whereas the new historicism of Renaissance and early modern literary studies was positioned (during the 1980s and early 90s) as challenging the dominant textual aesthetics of high modernism and postmodernity, the steady dissemination of such contextual methodologies across more modern (and predominantly non-poetic) fields of literary and cultural study has now engendered a diminishment in the institutional significance of (and perhaps funding for) the pre-modern areas of research and teaching. This ahistoricist trend seems especially capricious and cruel to the next generation of Renaissance and early modern historicists for two reasons: the currently fashionable characteristics of heterogeneity and dialogism, alterity, polysemy, and transgressive social agency that cultural and social theorists find most valuable in postmodern literary texts may indeed be discovered to a far greater degree in Renaissance and early modern materials, especially (as I will contend) in poetry; and the new historicism was arguably the first literary (non-sociological) methodology to frame successfully those textual/contextual attributes so that interdisciplinary study could be refocused within English Department curricula on the significance of the literary text as a work of cultural art. In their contributions to the 2003 Special Topic issue of *PMLA* on “Imagining History,” Greenblatt and Woodbridge both prophesize a reduction of professional activity in the non-modern areas. However, their gloominess unconsciously echoes the tenor of Miller’s 1986 address against which Montrose launched his bold defense of the new historicism.

As Nietzsche would remind us, this inter- and intra-generational struggle to devise and defend the fields and objects of professional study demonstrates

the threefold must of modern historicism: “the origin of historical culture . . . *must* itself be known historically, history *must* itself resolve the problem of history, knowledge *must* turn its sting against itself” (102–3). And yet – as Nietzsche understood (and as I will concur) – all our knowledge gained through diverse historicisms must also eventually yield to the supra-abundance of life (121) that breaks forth from the mystery of the fictive (97), from the “awakening to life of a word” (117) through poetry rediscovered by hopeful youth (121). While the ferocity of Nietzsche’s rhetoric speaks to his own historical and cultural milieu, the tenor of his thought resonates with the bracing idealism of many poets in seventeenth-century England, such as Sir Philip Sidney, who grasped a powerful dynamic between historical discourse and poetic figuration.

These debates chart on-going critical, scholarly, theoretical, and pedagogical concerns in the profession with relationships between literature and other disciplines (such as politics) but especially – for the purposes of this essay – between poetry and history. Such critical perspectives today on the significance of the literary text are *post*-historicism because the so-called *new* historicism is simply no longer new – already more than a quarter century old – and has deeply inflected a wide range of current methodologies in the field of Renaissance and early modern English literary studies (e.g., theories of sexuality, race, class, gender, print and material culture, competing nationalisms) to the extent that it is no longer possible to speak of The New Historicism as a unified critical practice, but of several sorts of historicisms, including *neo*-historicism.<sup>7</sup> These continuing developments signal the emergence of second and third wave historicist methodologies at the start of the twenty-first century. Even first wave proponents (among literary critics) in the 1980s held the view that the new historicism was always already multiple: “far from a hostile united front or a single politics, ‘the New Historicism’ remains a phrase without an adequate referent . . . a site that many parties contend to appropriate” (Veese x). At the same time it should be noted that artistic and scholarly investments in relationships between poetry and history are also *pre*-historicism – that is, prior to the modern historicist methodologies of either literary criticism or history – although not prior to the ancient field of *letters*, which, during the early modern era, encompassed the sister genres, the *ars poetica* and the *ars historica* (Kelley and Sacks 1–10).

Historians, of course, have long been aware of the empirical, methodological, practical, and theoretical concerns that many new historicist and cultural materialist literary critics have championed since the 1980s. In their outstanding introductory essay (1–27) to *Neo-Historicism*, the editors offer this decisive reflection:

In its moderate form New Historicism shares many of the methodological assumptions of traditional historicism: a sense of the otherness of the past; a sceptical attitude towards generalisations about period mentalities; a recognition of the fact that our own attitudes, assumptions and opinions inevitably colour

not just our judgment of the past, but our selection of the writers and the facts on which those judgments are based; an endorsement, despite the inadmissibility of empiricist claims to complete or entirely objective knowledge of earlier historical periods, of the value of disinterested pursuit of historical truth; a belief in the importance of historical knowledge as a means of providing a perspective on the present; a sense of the irreducibly complex nature of great art. (13)

Two critical perspectives, though, strike the editors as more distinctive of recent literary critical contributions to the study of the past: matters of gender and of politics. Wells, Burgess, and Wymer construct a detailed genealogy of historicism (as devised, contested, and defended by generations of historians) from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century founders of objectivist methodologies (such as Herder, Winkelmann, and von Ranke) to recent proponents of narratological and rhetorical methodologies (such as Ankersmit, Zagorin, and Berkhofer). They also offer an equally capacious account of historicism for generations of literary critics: for example, from the empiricism of Tillyard and the contrasting phenomenological hermeneutics of Wellek and Warren in the 1940s to the new historicism of Greenblatt and Cox and the cultural materialism of Wilson in the 1990s. Taken together, those rich overviews illustrate the on-going dynamic, complementary, and contradistinctive nature of critical developments within, between and against each of the fields.

During the early modern era, poetry and history also offered parallel (often interwoven) paths to truth: the one by way of imagination; the other, of memory. For Aristotle, imagination was the a priori condition for the possibility of memory (“On Memory” 206–7), which, by logical extension, would imply poetry’s primacy. Hence Puttenham’s assertion, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), that poets are the “first observers of all naturall causes” (6). Within the scope of his challenge to Platonism and Aristotelianism, Francis Bacon sought to support the understanding “with weights [of memory] to keep it from leaping and flying” because he found the mind to be so easily moved by imagination (*New Organon* 364). Despite his best efforts, however, Bacon could neither easily nor completely differentiate poetry from history. In *The Advancement of Learning* (1605), for example, Bacon attempts to distinguish poetical or “feigned history” from “true history” on the grounds that the latter “buckle[s] and bow[s] the mind unto the nature of things” (184), but his discourse goes on to grant an even higher purpose to “poesy parabolical” that teaches of the secrets inherent in history, religion, policy, or philosophy (184). In early modern England, poetry and history were classified within the more general field of letters, making the distinction between them a technical anachronism. And history, as Kelley and Sacks observe, functioned essentially as a literary genre, having “begun its public life . . . with an assured place in the humanist program of the liberal arts (*studia humanitatis*)” (5). Within the scope of the seventeenth century alone, such persistent inter-animation between the twin “fields” engendered a startling diversity of poetic and historical discourses, genres, and modes of



inquiry, as scholars have recently attested through some of their more compelling and popular discursive and/or periodizing concepts, such as “forms of nationhood” (Helgerson 9) and “the Historical Renaissance” (Dubrow and Strier).

As mentioned above, “poetic(s)” and “historiography” enter the English language during the Renaissance and early modern era: the first in 1530; the latter in 1569. By 1610 poetics concerns not only matters of diction, but also the nature and structure and objects proper to the realm of the fictive. (That expanding etymological horizon would also complement the persistent influence of Aristotelianism). While historiography (as meaning simply, the writing of history) has currency throughout the seventeenth century, the word and concept do not attain similarly capacious and precise connotations (as pertaining to methodology and theory) until the eighteenth century. However, that vital nexus – among imagination and memory; past, present and future; language, rhetoric, the world of human events and their interpretation – seems to have been grasped with distinctive skill by the poets of England, especially those who experimented with the changing modalities of the elegy. An examination of the seventeenth-century elegy from the interdisciplinary perspective of new genre studies, therefore, yields a unique window into the individual’s apprehension of emerging secular notions about time and the possibilities for poetry to constitute a distinctive, early modern object of knowledge through historical figuration.

### 3. *In Strictest Measure Even: Intra-Textuality and Historicity*<sup>8</sup>

What bulky Heaps of doleful Rhymes I see!  
 Sure all the world runs mad with Elegy;  
 Lords, Ladies, Knights, Priests, Souldiers, Squires, Physicians,  
 Beaux, Lawyers, Merchants, Prentices, Musicians,  
 Play’rs, Footmen, Pedants, Scribes of all Conditions.  
 – Anonymous, 1695 (qtd. in Draper, *Funeral Elegy* vii)

By the end of the century, as the anonymous elegist intones with gentle irony, the market for elegiac poetry had reached new heights. Within this era of unprecedented losses of life due primarily to disease and warfare, the poetic elegy bears witness to the individual’s heightened difficulty to achieve unqualified consolation in an increasingly secular society. For poets the genre’s trope of elegiac resistance consequently plays a key role in the poetics of loss. Whereas in earlier elegies and elegiac works from the Middle Ages and Renaissance the text’s resistance to consolation signified a limit to poetic discourse and the concomitant submission of the mourner to extra-textual, higher powers of the spirit and God’s will, in the early modern period elegiac resistance increasingly comes to signify the poem’s intra-textual construction of loss, the mourning process, and the forms of and places for consolation within the realm of human time. This new temporality, however, does not emerge uniformly during the century, but follows a persistent, albeit meandering, path of development.

While grief pertains to the individual's personal (and internalized) experience, mourning concerns social practice – that is, the externalized, public manifestation of emotional and psychological forces that remain largely hidden within those who struggle with loss (Houlbrooke, *Ritual* 14). Because the poetic elegy combines three fundamental modes of expression integral to both grief and mourning – lamentation, praise, and consolation – the genre is therefore uniquely poised to negotiate tensions between private and public spheres of discourse. An elegy serves as a vehicle for the transformation of loss into gain, absence into presence, sorrow into solace and also – by logical extension – of the past into the wished for present and/or future. The genre thus is inherently implicated in the philosophy of time. Prior to the early modern era the English elegy articulates a place for sorrow in the realm of earthly temporality and particularity; for solace, in that of heavenly atemporality and universality. As Zacharie Boyd writes in *The Last Battell of the Soule in Death* (1628), “Nowe that which *Time* can doe to a *Pagane*, let *Grace* doe it to a *Christian*” (1237), implying that since grief perishes with time, grace, for a Christian, extinguishes anguish and engenders true rest from earthly contingency. In the seventeenth century, however, the poetic elegy begins to situate consolation within temporal contexts, offering intra-textual resistance as a form of and place for both solace and the poem's contribution to historical discourse. The elegy thus comes to illustrate the individual's most inward apprehension not only of their own spiritual self-reckoning, but of their historical imagination; the genre itself thereby takes on a heightened chronotopic significance and reveals – far more intimately than Sherman's (1–28) cultural-material genealogy of horology, chronometry and chronography – an early modern poetics of temporality particular to the aesthetics of literary discourse.

The seventeenth-century English elegy has only recently been investigated as a form of historical discourse (Howard, “An Collins,” “Landscapes”). The striking historiographic dimensions of some of the genre's exemplars – such as Donne's “An Anatomie of the World” (1611) and Milton's “Lycidas” (1638) – warrant that analysis. Landmark texts by Lambert (1976), Smith (1977), Pigman (1985), Sacks (1985), Kay (1990), and Curr (2002) analyze the seventeenth-century English elegy's psychoanalytic dimensions, but do not address the genre's relationship to historiography. Most elegies and elegiac poems from the first half of the seventeenth century – such as, for example, Milton's “On Time” (1633–37), an anonymously published broadside poem titled “An Elegie on the Death of the Thrice Valiant and worthy Collonell, John Luttrell” (1644), An Collins's “A Song Manifesting the Saints Eternall Happinesse” (1653) and Katherine Philips's “On her Son H. P. at St. Syth's Church where her body also lies Interred” (1667) – involve a rhetorical progression from lamentation to praise to consolation grounded in Christian tenets of the soul's immortality and transcendence of historical contingencies. Within and against the cultural, literary, and theological contexts informing poems such as these, however, the early

modern English poetic elegy begins a new rhetorical and experiential turning: not away from, but through increasingly subjective, internalized apprehensions of human temporality.

That cultural and intra-textual turning becomes more keenly articulated throughout the century, as in the following elegies and elegiac poems, for example: Shakespeare's Sonnet #74 (1609), Milton's Sonnet #7 (1632), An Collins's "A Song composed in time of the Civill Warr" (1653), Philips's "On the death of my first and dearest childe, Hector Philipps, borne the 23<sup>rd</sup> day of Aprill, and dy'd the 2d of May 1655" (1667), and Milton's invocation to Book 3 of *Paradise Lost* (1667/1674) – all of which articulate consolations with regard to temporal causes, within cultural contexts, and as vehicles for the writing of history. These transformations in poetic discourse and genre complement an early modern paradigm shift from theocentric to secular narrative frameworks for history. Such cultural change in the idea of history informs seventeenth-century notions that secondary causation and human understanding could provide not only a sufficient basis for historical reflection (as Raleigh asserted), but also the raw material for cultural progress (as Bacon held). Many twentieth-century literary critics and historians confirm this general paradigm shift, including Pocock (1957), Hill (1965), Quinones (1972), de Certeau (1986), Guibbory (1986), Houlbrooke (1989, 1998), Lamont (1996), and Engel (1995, 2002).

The elegy's early modern concerns with temporality, though, follow an uneven path of emergence, as illustrated by Milton's elegy, "On Time," and elegiac sonnet, "How Soon Hath Time." Although both works first appeared in the 1645 edition of Milton's poems, "On Time" was perhaps composed as late as 1637; "How Soon Hath Time," in 1632. "On Time" achieves the more conventional formulation of atemporal consolation by celebrating the loss of physical, earthly "mortal dross" and the spiritual gain of the soul's blissful "individual kiss" (line 12). The elegy accordingly places solace within a timeless realm where, "Attired with stars, we shall for ever sit, / Triumphant over Death, and Chance, and thee O Time" (lines 21–2). "How Soon Hath Time," though written five years before "On Time," tenuously accommodates the timely realm of human action to the timelessness of God's providence and thereby offers one of the best examples of an early seventeenth-century elegiac poem poised on the cusp of new secular ideas about time, human history, and historical interpretation.

Within time's intra-textual "strictest measure even" (10), the poet's spiritual fulfillment "shall be still" (10) – revealing at once, as Milton's apt use of "still" implies, both the temporality and atemporality of the poet's elegiac resistance. Thus his "inward ripeness" (7) will nevertheless remain (*still*) within time and will also be timelessly at rest (*still*) within God's suspension of time. Time thus leads the poet, in both of these senses, to God's providential reckoning: "Toward which time leads me, and the will of heaven" (12). Time's measure is God's eternal "As ever" (14). Milton's subtle qualifications – *yet, or, however, if, as* – throughout the sestet further

emphasize this paradox of elegiac resistance posited as a form of and place for consolation. According to the tally of grace, as the sonnet's last two lines assert, the poet's use of earthly time will manifest a heavenly measure: "All is, if I have grace to use it so, / As ever in my great task-master's eye" (13–14). Milton's final and ironic image of God as a great task-master underscores again the sonnet's balanced combination of virtuous human acts, which unfold within time, and divine acts, which comprehend time. The poem's consolation therefore imbricates the temporal present (*all is*) within the atemporal eternal (*as ever*) through the text's *strictest measure even* – that is, the work's trope for both sacred and secular historicity achieved through the sonnet's elegiac resistance.

The elegy was the most widely published of poetic genres during the seventeenth century (Draper, *Funeral Elegy* 27, 94) and ranged from popular broadsides (which were inexpensively sold to commemorate the deaths of politicians, soldiers, and other prominent citizens) to works privately commissioned by and printed for patrons, such as John Donne's "Anniversary" poems for Sir Robert Drury on the untimely death of his daughter, Elizabeth. The genre thus provides a wide spectrum of testaments to changing attitudes toward death, grief expression, mourning practices, and apprehensions of human temporality during the early modern era. John W. Draper's *A Century of Broadside Elegies* presents a collection of ninety works printed in England between 1603 and 1702, the majority of which were "sold at a bookseller's stall for a half-penny or, after 1678, for a penny" (xvi).

Within the scope of Draper's gathering of broadsides, as well as throughout the research I have so far conducted on the sub-genre, it is only after about 1620 that these ephemeral publications begin to portray, with greater frequency in their border designs, an iconography of time represented through various images of the hourglass. This distinctive feature has not yet been addressed either by literary scholars or cultural historians. Hourglasses (also known as sandglasses) were used as early as the fourteenth century aboard ships to assist with navigation and became popular domestic items in England during the late sixteenth century (Dohrn-van Rossum 117–18, 243–5; Landes 20–2). The broadside elegy goes back at least as far as 1590. Why should hourglasses begin appearing in the border designs only around 1620 and thereafter become one of the most prevalent of the sub-genre's visual motifs? What do these hourglasses signify about the elegy's new concerns with time in the seventeenth century?

For example, a 1644 broadside elegy by William Mercer for Collonell Luttrell (Draper, *Funeral Elegy* 84–5) includes the following wood-cut, which also appears identically in another elegy (c.1640), "Divine Meditations on Death," printed by Anthony Wildgoos (Draper, *Century* 58–9) (Fig. 1).<sup>9</sup> This image on the Mercer broadside underscores his elegy's articulation of a wish for more earthly time – so that "wee had found th'effect, / . . . of [Collonell Luttrell's] prosperous glory" (lines 22–3). According to the poem's sentiment, Luttrell was cut down before his time. Grains of sand still remain

✱

**A N E L E G I E,**  
**ON THE DEATH OF THE THRICE VALIANT**  
 and worthy Collonell, *John Luttrell*; VVho in defence o! the *King and Par*  
*liament*, and for the Maintenance of the true Protestant R E L I G I O N, was slaine the  
 28. of *January*, 1644.  
 At *Milverton* in *Summerfet-shire*.



Fig. 1. Woodcut by Anthony Wildgoos, c. 1640, from the broadside elegy, "Divine Meditations on Death" by Anonymous. Reproduced from: John W. Draper, *A Century of Broadside Elegies* (London: Ingpen and Grant, 1928), 59.

suspended in the upper phial of the two-coned hourglass beside the skeleton's head, as if these timely aspirations were also preoccupying the officer's departing thoughts. As the seventeenth-century English subject increasingly became the nexus of cultural and discursive transformations from theocentric to more secular ideologies of private grief expression and social mourning rites, the poetic elegy comes to reflect the individual's growing sense of new distinctions (rather than continuities) between death and life, body and soul, time and eternity. The early modern elegy thus not only contributed significantly to the nation's civil refashioning of death and burial, grief and mourning – what Graunt defined as "observations" upon mortality "both Political, and Natural" (6) – but also to the emergence of the individual's historical imagination.

Through such contextually situated forms of intra-textual resistance to transcendent consolation, early modern English poets made unprecedented historical claims for the elegy's expression of grief and negotiation of mourning. That major development rejoins the genre to one of the oldest debates about the social and ethical value of poetry: Plato's and Aristotle's quarrel between philosophy, poetry, and history.

#### 4. Historical Figuration: Plato to Puttenham

The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose . . . The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. (Aristotle, *Poetics* 55)

Socrates argues, in book 10 of *Republic*, that death must be praised, not feared; heroes of the state must not be represented in fits of agony, sorrow, or grief while in battle; and the Gods must certainly not be shown to lament tragedies necessary for the human endeavor to imagine and live under an idea of the Good. Therefore, the dirge, the lament, and the threnody are expelled. (I will quote the entire passage, despite its length.) To an attentive Glaucon, Socrates asserts:

[It] is best to keep quiet as far as possible in calamity and not to chafe and repine, because we cannot know what is really good and evil in such things and it advantages us nothing to take them hard, and nothing in mortal life is worthy of great concern, and our grieving checks the very thing we need to come to our aid as quickly as possible in such case.

What thing, he said, do you mean?

To deliberate, I said, about what has happened to us, and, as it were in the fall of the dice, to determine the movements of our affairs with reference to the numbers that turn up, in the way that reason indicates would be the best, and, instead of stumbling like children, clapping one's hands to the stricken spot and wasting the time in wailing, ever to accustom the soul to devote itself at once to the curing of the hurt and the raising up of what has fallen, *banishing threnody by therapy*.

That certainly, he said, would be the best way to face misfortune and deal with it.

Then, we say, the best part of us is willing to conform to these precepts of reason.

Obviously.

And shall we not say that the part of us that leads us to dwell in memory on our suffering and impels us to lamentation, and cannot get enough of that sort of thing, is the irrational and idle part of us, the associate of cowardice?

Yes, we will say that. (829–30, my emphasis)

Socrates claims that grief unhinges the rational mind. Grief, like laughter (*Republic* 3:633), signifies a form of violent psychological and social transgression against reason and the ethical laws that should govern the ideal State. Grief takes many shapes and involves unpredictable outbursts of passion; reason follows logic and remains unmoved by the passions. Therefore, argues Socrates, grief lends itself to forms of artistic representation while reason does not: “And does not the fretful part of us present many and varied occasions for imitation, while the intelligent and temperate disposition, always remaining approximately the same, is neither easy to imitate nor to be understood when imitated, especially by a nondescript mob assembled in the theater? For the representation imitates a type that is alien to them” (10:830). Since poets appeal primarily to the emotions rather than to reason, Socrates concludes, poetic representations of grief must especially be excluded from the *Republic* because their effect “establishes [uncontrollable passions] as our rulers when they ought to be ruled” (10:832).

From these principles Socrates derives his famous “quarrel between philosophy and poetry” (10:832). Because the mimetic arts in general represent human actions that fluctuate from one occasion to the next, poetry

can not convey an understanding of the Good, which does not change over time. Moreover, because poetry appeals to the emotions, which by definition are irrational, poetic expressions of grief pose one of the greatest threats to the ideal city. This critique bears especially hard upon the poetry of loss that strives to represent not only human actions, but the condition of the soul, which Socrates judges to be incorruptible and immortal. While usually identified as a quarrel between philosophy and poetry, Socrates's argument also concerns history, which is the record of human actions. Indeed, Socrates and Glaucon dismiss poetic representations of grief and suffering precisely because the poetry of loss corrupts the writing and teaching of the history of their ideal State. Plato's shrewd student, Aristotle, hears this muted histrionic note and thereby draws his famous distinction between poetry and history as a way of responding to Plato's charges against the poets (in favor of philosophy).

Aristotle's statement, in section 9 of *Poetics*, that poetry imitates not "what has happened, but what may happen" (55) initiates a theory of the poet's shaping activity (i.e., plot) which, in so far as it presents a unified action, turns upon the element of the probable impossibility (or credible impossibility, as latter theorists would call it). In this way, tragic poetry may derive subject matter from history and may infuse dramatic form with the ideal, or an image of things not as they are, but as they ought to be. Poetry may thus improve upon nature, teach, and delight (51):

It is, moreover, evident from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen – what is possible according to the law of probability or necessity. The poet and the historian differ not by writing in verse or in prose . . . The true difference is that one relates what has happened, the other what may happen. Poetry, therefore, is a more philosophical and a higher thing than history: for poetry tends to express the universal, history the particular. By the universal I mean how a person of a certain type will on occasion speak or act, according to the law of probability or necessity; and it is this universality at which poetry aims in the names she attaches to the personages . . . It clearly follows that the poet or "maker" should be the maker of plots rather than of verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions. And even if he chances to take a historical subject, he is none the less a poet; for there is no reason why some events that have actually happened should not conform to the law of the probable and possible, and in virtue of that quality in them he is their poet or maker. (55)

Aristotle's claim that poetry imitates not "what has happened, but what may happen" (55) underscores the centrality of anagnorisis in his theory of plot – that is, the organically shaped poetic imitation of human activity that engenders the soul of tragedy (53). Aristotle identifies three constitutive elements to plot: anagnorisis (discovery), pathos (suffering), and peripeteia (reversal), devoting considerably less time to his discussions of the latter two components. (Definitions of these three terms, of course, vary widely, as Terence Cave (1988) thoroughly demonstrates). Anagnorisis, on the other hand, receives

extended treatment in three sections of *Poetics* (chapters 11, 14, and 18). Noting this epistemological imbalance, Cave insightfully claims that anagnorisis

is a decisive moment in a class of plot structures; yet, unlike its sibling peripeteia, it carries within its etymology and its definition the theme of knowledge. The analysis of form suddenly – though not perhaps without preparation – warps in an unexpected direction, leaving a space open which may be filled in innumerable ways according to the objects of knowledge . . . supplied by text or reader. Structure and theme, poetics and interpretation, are thus curiously combined in this term, as if the attempt to separate them had broken down. (3)

Following Cave's definition, anagnorisis delivers a blinding shock of insight, conditioning the possibility of a transition from ignorance to knowledge. Anagnorisis introduces an element of the implausible without which a plot's resolution would not be possible. According to Aristotle's theory, tragedy may thus derive its subject matter from history, infusing poetic form with the ideal, or an image of things not as they were or are, but as they might have been or ought to be. Poetry may thus improve upon nature, teach, and delight (51) in a manner more philosophical than history. In response to Plato's initial charge that the poetry of loss (i.e., the dirge, the lament, and the threnody) distorts history, Aristotle affirms that, under certain artistic conditions, poetry can reveal historical truth. In turn, I argue that Aristotle's principle of anagnorisis, or poetic discovery, articulates the nexus of these discursive relationships between poetry and history and thereby signifies, particularly within the context of early modern England, the elegy's potential to do more than represent events, but to constitute a unique apprehension and experience of human temporality, which I will call *historical figuration*.

In recent publications, I have used the phrase *figural historicity* to define this distinctive aspect of the early modern English poetic elegy, but here I wish to update my terminology in order to formulate a less anachronistic framework. Although "figural" (meaning figurative) dates back to 1450, according to the *OED*, "historicity" does not enter the language until 1880. Both "historical" and "figuration" commence their linguistic currency in 1561. Defined specifically in terms of the seventeenth-century English elegy, the concept of historical figuration apprehends a relationship between, on the one hand, poetic anagnorisis (translated as discovery) which shapes both the elegy's rhetorical soul and the matrix of historical reflection, and, on the other hand, the early modern paradigm shift (as noted above) from theocentric to secular and rationalistic views of human history. On both accounts, the poetic elegy becomes particularly attuned to emerging, secular, and individualized notions about and experiences of temporality.

Such a theory of historical figuration links the seventeenth-century English elegy's nascent historiographic concerns to a longstanding poetic tradition that begins with Plato and Aristotle and also includes Renaissance theorists (such as Scaliger, Castelvetro, Mazzoni, Tasso, Sidney, and Puttenham) who extend the debate about poetry and history into an early modern context.



In particular, Scaliger's and Tasso's theories of character and contemplation, Castelvetro's and Mazzoni's ideas of the verisimilar, and Sidney's notions of poetic foreconceit and praxis each augment this interpretation of the seventeenth-century English elegy's contribution to historical discourse.

Julius Caesar Scaliger formulates a view very close to Aristotle's distinction between poetry and history, arguing in his *Poetics* (1561) that history constitutes the basis of poetry (141) and that the poet's shaping activity (i.e., the selection of historical events and the artful arrangement of them into an organic whole) endows poetry with an element of the probable impossibility that delights, instructs, and presents an image of the Good. (In this regard, Scaliger agrees with Horace as well (72), but not entirely with Castelvetro (140) who contends that, except in the case of historical tragedies and epics, poetry only pleases). However, Scaliger adds a significant new interpretation of Aristotle's theory. Aristotle's crux concerns shaped action, or plot; he writes that "plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy: character holds the second place" (53). Aristotle further contends that "without action there cannot be a tragedy; there may be without character" (53). Scaliger rejoins the conversation on this very point concerning the role of character and argues that the poet teaches through a shaped representation of a character's mental disposition, which conditions not only the character's action, but the viewer's identification with that action. "Action, therefore," Scaliger writes, "is a mode of teaching; disposition, that which we are taught. Wherefore action is, as it were, the pattern or medium in a plot, disposition its end. But in civil life action is the end, and disposition its form" (143). By disposition, Scaliger here means the activity of a character's thought. Thus, in a very subtle but important way, Scaliger introduces a new twist to Aristotle's reply to Plato: that is, since poetry imitates action, it may justly imitate a character's activity of contemplating the Good. This notion becomes central for both Tasso and Sidney.

Lodovico Castelvetro's *The Poetics of Aristotle Translated and Explained* (1570) also begins with a defense of Aristotle's distinction between poetry and history by associating poetry with the credible impossibility, or, as Castelvetro calls it, the "verisimilar" (145). Although Castelvetro at first seems to denigrate poetry (because it cannot instruct, but can only delight), he goes on to praise poetry (and in particular tragedies and/or epics based upon historical themes) on the grounds that the poet's foreconceit shapes the particulars of history into a unified whole. (In this way Castelvetro anticipates Sidney's theory of the poetic foreconceit). The poet's greatest challenge, maintains Castelvetro, lies in blending the marvelous, or the probable impossibility, with the actual. Therefore, poets who derive their plots from history may both delight and instruct. On this point, Castelvetro's endearing anecdote of Michelangelo and the river god's missing beard illustrates the importance in his argument of Aristotle's two key ideas (i.e., the poet's shaping of human activity; and poetry's probable

impossibility). That is, as the anecdote suggests, the poet, by artfully shaping the materials, may improve upon human activity (i.e., history) and thereby approximate an image of the Good.

Jacopo Mazzoni is perhaps the most perplexing of these Renaissance figures, for he formulates a position that seems strikingly modern. Mazzoni writes, in *On the Defense of the Comedy of Dante* (1587), that “the arts . . . are classified not by their objects in so far as they are things, but by their objects insofar as they are (I cannot say it otherwise if I wish to speak accurately) capable of being devised” (164). He carries this “modernist” observation to his revaluation of Aristotle’s initial distinction between history and poetry, contending that the two arts differ not so much in their objects, but in their treatment (i.e., shaping activity) of those objects. Poetry thus imitates the verisimilar (i.e., Aristotle’s probable impossibility) and forms an imaginative image, or what Mazzoni calls an idol (165). However, as he continues this meditation, Mazzoni emphasizes the difference between poetry and history. At one point (in a lengthy and playful footnote worthy of Jacques Derrida) he argues that the idols of poetry only “represent and resemble,” but that the idols of history “recount the truth of what has happened” (167, n. 17). History attempts to present an image (or idol) that will “leave behind a memory of the truth”; poetry presents an image (or idol) that will “leave behind a simulacrum, insofar as it is a simulacrum, of the truth.” Yet in allowing that every discipline forms idols, Mazzoni reveals not only the influence upon his thought of Aristotle’s notion of form (as shaped action and/or thought), but the influence as well of Aristotle’s idea of the credible impossibility. That is, if history, for Mazzoni, also fashions idols, then the proper subject of history would also be the probable impossibility.

Torquato Tasso’s *Discourses on the Heroic Poem* (1594), which had no small influence upon Milton’s poetics, complements Aristotle’s defense of poetry and also revives Aristotle’s split between poetry and history. Following Scaliger, Tasso argues that the poet may justly imitate the human activity of contemplation (176), but strengthens this claim’s response to Plato by asserting further that such contemplative action may be a consideration of the Divine, which can only be humanly grasped by way of particular events. Again, the poet makes this possible through an artful arrangement of incidents, or the shaping of human activity. On this point, Tasso then challenges Aristotle’s distinction between poetry and history by noting the following three aporias in Aristotle’s theory of tragedy: there’s no room in Aristotle’s *Poetics* for chance occurrences; there’s no account in that treatise of reading as an active interpretation and consideration of the Good; and there’s no room in the *Poetics* for a theory of Providence.

Tasso consequently asserts his claim for the value of epic poetry: the epic poet “moves . . . more powerfully” (180) by imitating the human, noble action of contemplating the Divine. From this postulate it follows, argues Tasso, that Aristotle should not have separated poetry and history in order to elevate tragedy because history does not precede poetry. In fact, claims

Tasso, historians make use of figural language (which they learned from the poets) and the maker of epic (i.e., historical) plots considers the verisimilar (i.e., Aristotle's probable impossibility) only in so far as it is universal (181). In this respect Tasso extends the earlier theory of Saint Thomas Aquinas who, in *The Nature and Domain of Sacred Doctrine* (1227), links the literal sense of figurative language to the historical as well as to the spiritual sense:

So, whereas in every other science things are signified by words, this science has the property that the things signified by the words have themselves also a signification. Therefore that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called the spiritual sense, which is based on the literal, and presupposes it. (118–19)

Following in this tradition, Tasso's theory of the marvelous in epic poetry links the verisimilar – that which remains irreducibly particular (literal and spiritual, probable and impossible) in figurative language – with the universal. Epic poetry, argues Tasso, reveals historical truth: “In fact when Aristotle says that poetry deals rather with the universal, he implies the function of history, which is to narrate the particular” (181). Through an imitation of the most noble act of divine contemplation the epic poet “moves compassion in order to move wonder” (180).

Within this context of Renaissance theories concerning relationships between poetic and historical discourses, Sir Philip Sidney's “An Apology for Poetry” (1595) offers the most comprehensive and extreme position, combining the insights of Scaliger, Castelvetro, Mazzoni, and Tasso into a theory that elevates poetry high above both philosophy and history. Sidney begins by positing poetic discourse as the origin of both philosophy and history:

So that, truly, neither philosopher nor historiographer could at the first have entered into the gates of popular judgments, if they had not taken a great passport of poetry, which in all nations at this day, where learning flourisheth not, is plain to be seen, in all which they have some feeling of poetry. (156)

In this respect, of course, Sidney also echoes the thoughts of his contemporary, George Puttenham, who, in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), advances a similar hypothesis:

So as the Poets were also from the beginning the best perswaders and their eloquence the first Rethoricke of the world . . . The same also was meetest to register the lives and noble gests of Princes, and of the great Monarkes of the world, and all other the memorable accidents of time: so as the Poet was also the first historiographer. Then forasmuch as they were the first observers of all naturall causes and effects in the things generable and corruptible, and from thence mounted up to search after the celestiall courses and influences, & yet penetrated further to know the divine essences and substances separate, as is sayd before, they were the first Astronomers and Philosophists and Metaphisicks. (6)

Although hyperbolic, Puttenham's ambitious claims for poetry nonetheless complement Sidney's more nuanced theory of poetic foreconceit (157–60),

which extends Aristotle's two tenets of organically shaped plot and the credible impossibility to a new privileging of poetry above both philosophy and history. Philosophical discourse, argues Sidney, excels in delivering a moral precept; historical discourse, in the example (160); yet neither provides both. Only the poet, "freely ranging only within the zodiac of his own wit," delivers a golden world compared to nature's brazen world (157). Only the poet "perform[s] both" (160). Through an artistic foreconceit of the work's organic whole – that is, an imaginative construction of "the knowledge of a man's self, in the ethic and politic consideration, with the end of well doing and not of well knowing only" (159) – the poet not only delivers the moral precept that is particular to philosophical discourse and the example that is particular to historical discourse, but also achieves a bridge between gnosis (knowledge) and praxis (action). Poetry thus embodies an architectonike principle for Sidney, which he defines as a praxical effect that moves the world, through the reader or audience, one step closer toward perfection (159):

And that moving is of a higher degree than teaching, it may by this appear, that it is well-nigh the cause and the effect of teaching. For who will be taught, if he be not moved with desire to be taught, and who so much good doth that teaching bring forth (I speak still of moral doctrine) as that it moveth one to do that which it doth teach? For, as Aristotle saith, it is not *gnosis* but *praxis* must be the fruit. And how *praxis* cannot be, without being moved to practice, it is no hard matter to consider. (163)

Sidney's theory of poetic fictions thus also returns to the earlier argument of Giovanni Boccaccio who, in *Life of Dante* (1477), claims that poets "should not . . . be charged with falsehood, since they neither believe nor assert [their works] as a fact, but only as a myth or fiction" (131). Just as Boccaccio posits figural language as "physical theology" by which poets "clothe many a physical and moral truth . . . including within their scope not only the deeds of great men, but matters relating to their gods" (135), Sidney's assertion that the poet "nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth" (168) underscores poetry's unique relationship to that which is universal (i.e., philosophical) and that which remains particular (i.e., historical).

These Renaissance authors contributed their voices to an evolving interdisciplinary conversation about relationships and distinctions among three of the oldest western fields of knowledge – philosophy, poetry, and history – in so far as those disciplines were informed decisively by the foundational thought of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle. That conversation was one of the most energetic of dialogues among humanists during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries concerning the transmission and transformation of knowledge from classical times into the contexts of the present. All of the seventeenth-century English poets and writers discussed in this essay (e.g., Collins, Milton, Philips, Shakespeare) were educated in the humanist tradition, which was the dominant (though not the only) pedagogical track during the early modern era.<sup>10</sup> As noted above (in section two of this essay) the field of letters, for humanists, encompassed the subjects

of poetry (poetics) and history (historiography). The theoretical disputations examined here (in this section of the essay) illustrate that dynamic and contestable inter-relationship.

From the anachronistic (yet entirely relevant) perspective of our own moment in time, how may we grasp the nature of that so-called interdisciplinarity? On the one hand, we can trace the evolution of that conversation (from Socrates to Scaliger, etc.) in terms of the language of the texts themselves; on the other hand, we can also compare and contrast that discourse with contemporary reflections on disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies. (The first step in that approach would, of course, become even more complex and interesting if we were to work with those documents in their original languages.) The second step may yield provocative insights about varying degrees of interdisciplinarity within and against the context of that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century dialogue. For example, I would assert that the arguments of Boccaccio, Scaliger, Tasso, and Sidney demonstrate the greatest synthetic interdisciplinarity because their critiques of the Platonic-Aristotelian framework engender nuanced integrations of the different fields of knowledge; Puttenham's thesis, the least synthetic, closer to cross-disciplinary inquiry; and the formulations of Castelvetro and Mazzoni, the greatest trans-disciplinarity because their investigations pose questions that reciprocally differentiate the fields of knowledge. None of those arguments seem truly multi-disciplinary to me, but that statement itself reveals perhaps more about my own disciplinary perspective, which, in this essay, specifically concerns the integrated study of an object of knowledge distinctive to the seventeenth-century English elegy: historical figuration.

The elegy becomes a significant vehicle for the poet's most intimate apprehensions of temporality during the seventeenth century in England because of the genre's inherent concerns with negotiating levels of continuity and/or discontinuity among past, present, and future. A critical perspective of new genre studies may be brought to bear upon the elegy's aesthetic development within that time-frame in order to study changing cultural and intellectual attitudes toward related disciplines. Historical figuration may thus be grasped as an discipline-specific object of knowledge unique to the elegy's close attunement to a distinctive early modern historical imagination that emerges within and against at least two interdisciplinary contexts: a genealogy of poetics and historiography from Plato to Puttenham; and an increasingly secular society in which the individual confronts and struggles with new, tangible concerns about their private and public relationships to time and eternity.

### 5. *The Sense of a Beginning?*

... one can speak of specifically modern concord-fictions, and say that what they have in common is the practice of treating the past (and the future) as a special case of the present. (Kermode 59)

Sidney's ambitious claim for poetic praxis at once comprehends and exceeds all the arguments of his predecessors and contemporaries by grounding the poet's foreconceit and the work's architectonike principle in the figurative language of poetry that moves an audience to virtuous action (163). Poetry thus not only delivers a philosophical truth, but constitutes textual and readerly historicity. Sidney ultimately undermines this pivotal claim for poetic praxis, however, by elevating poetic discourse so high above both philosophy and history. For how can a poetic fiction constitute both philosophical and historical reality if poetry displaces (perhaps ultimately surpasses) both of those realms of experience and fields of knowledge? Furthermore, if Sidney's theory turns principally upon the reader's reception of the poem (i.e., the work of the poem in the world), then which episteme (i.e., philosophy, poetry or history), which path to truth, will shape the worldly particularity of that action? Perhaps, from our perspective today, one could argue that Sidney's "Apology" ultimately achieves a perspective that could be described as cognitive interdisciplinarity – one for which no distinctively discipline-specific object of knowledge exists – despite his stated objective of defending poetry.

A discipline-specific theory of historical figuration, considered within the inter-related, early modern contexts discussed above, would level and differentiate the ground between the parallel (often overlapping yet distinctive) fields of poetics and historiography in a way similar to Frank Kermode's notion of the modern concord fiction "between past, present, and future" that brings "significance to mere chronicity" (56). Literary fictions actually constitute new forms of temporality – a hypothesis first explicitly articulated by Boccaccio (130–1) – which means that all of the genres and sub-genres experience their own shifting levels of modernity and historicity (whether post-, new-, neo-, or pre-) within and against specific cultural contexts. The emerging interdisciplinary methodology of new genre studies is distinctively attuned to that dynamic inter-relationship.<sup>11</sup>

In the history of English literature, the unique experience of *kairos*, or fullness of time, that (following Kermode) literary discourse may deliver – the intellectual and visceral discovery that somehow time itself has been transformed by the worldly action of figurative language – may be keenly sensed at a beginning point (as I have argued) during the early modern era. The shifting sands of the seventeenth-century elegy provide a striking apprehension (between genre and culture) of that strictest measure even.

### Notes

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<sup>1</sup> This essay is dedicated to Hazard Adams.

<sup>2</sup> Brief definitions here may be helpful. *Interdisciplinarity* involves the more nuanced integration of different fields of study while *cross-disciplinarity* engenders less complex interactions among various disciplines. *Multi-disciplinarity* juxtaposes, but does not synthesize, disciplinary perspectives. And *trans-disciplinarity* poses questions that reciprocally cross disciplines. See the following publications,

for example: Julie Thompson Klein, *Crossing Boundaries: Knowledge, Disciplinarity, and Interdisciplinarity* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996); Lisa R. Lattuca, *Creating Interdisciplinarity: Interdisciplinary Research and Teaching Among College and University Faculty* (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2001); John D. Aram, "Concepts of Interdisciplinarity: Configurations of Knowledge and Action," *Human Relations* 57.4 (2004): 379–85; and Jennifer Bowers, "Knowledge Out of Bounds: Reflections on Disciplinary and Interdisciplinary Research," *Research Within the Disciplines: Foundations for Reference and Library Instruction*, ed. Peggy Keeran and Michael Levine-Clark (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2007) [forthcoming].

<sup>3</sup> For a gathering of essays first presented as papers at this conference, see: *KronoScope: Journal for the Study of Time* 4.2 (2004).

<sup>4</sup> My work, in this regard, extends related studies by scholars such as Helgerson, Smith, and Engel (*Death and Drama*), whose publications inform what I would describe as a cultural approach to literary genres within the context of early modern England. For a more extended discussion and demonstration of this methodology, see: Howard ("An Collins," "Landscapes").

<sup>5</sup> I will address these differentiations in more detail in sections four and five, below. Briefly, however, I would add here that my goal ultimately is to grasp historical figuration as a discipline-specific object of knowledge distinctive to the poetic elegy that also shapes (and is reciprocally shaped by) interdisciplinary relationships with other fields of knowledge, such as history.

<sup>6</sup> For a skeptical appraisal of the new historicism's informed (dis)engagements with history, see: Catherine Gimelli Martin, "The Ahistoricism of the New Historicism," *Fault Lines and Controversies in the Study of Seventeenth-Century English Literature*, ed. Claude J. Summers and Ted-Larry Pebworth (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 22–49.

<sup>7</sup> Neo-historicism may be defined as the study and interpretation of the past within its own context with as little recourse as possible to anachronistic thinking. See: Wells, Burgess, and Wymer.

<sup>8</sup> A brief portion of this following section first appeared, in a different form, in: W. Scott Howard, "'Mine Own Breaking': Resistance, Gender, and Temporality in Seventeenth-Century English Elegies and Jonson's 'Eupheme,'" *Grief and Gender 700–1700*, ed. Jennifer C. Vaught (New York: Palgrave, 2003), 215–30.

<sup>9</sup> The woodcut image reproduced here has been scanned from my own library copy of John W. Draper's *A Century of Broadside Elegies* (London: Ingpen and Grant, 1928), 59, from the anonymously authored broadside elegy reproduced therein, "Divine Meditations on Death," which was originally printed c.1640 in London for Anthony Wildgoos. The copyright for this text by Draper has expired. My reproduction of this material conforms to fair-use policies for educational purposes.

<sup>10</sup> For thorough overviews of humanism and other intellectual/social movements and topics that shaped the development of arts and letters in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, see: Isabel Rivers, *Classical and Christian Ideas in English Renaissance Poetry*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (1979, New York: Routledge, 1994). For a more detailed account of standard educational practices vis-à-vis the experience of women, see: Hilda L. Smith, "Humanist Education and the Renaissance Concept of Woman," *Women and Literature in Britain 1500–1700*, ed. Helen Wilcox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 9–29.

<sup>11</sup> For a useful collection of theoretical examinations of literary genres and their relationships with cultural discourses, see: David Duff, ed., *Modern Genre Theory* (Essex: Longman, 2000).

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