In a small glass case in the library of Christ Church, Oxford, there is a round, red priest's hat; a note card identifies it as having belonged to Cardinal Wolsey. It is altogether appropriate that this hat should have wound up at Christ Church, for the college owed its existence to Wolsey, who had decided at the height of his power to found in his own honor a magnificent new Oxford college. But the hat was not a direct bequest. Historical forces, as we sometimes say—in this case taking the ominous form of Henry VIII—intervened, and Christ Church, like Hampton Court Palace, was cut off from its original benefactor. Instead, the note informs us, the hat was acquired for Christ Church in the eighteenth century—purchased, we are told, from a company of players. If this miniature history of an artifact is too vague to be of much consequence (I do not know the name of the company of players, or the circumstances in which they acquired their curious stage property, or whether it was ever used, for example, by an actor playing Wolsey in Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*, or when it was placed under glass), it nonetheless evokes a vision of cultural production that I find compelling. The peregrinations of Wolsey's hat suggest that cultural artifacts do not stay still, that they exist in time, and that they are bound up with personal and institutional conflicts, negotiations, and appropriations.

The term *culture* has, in the case of the hat, a convenient material referent—a bit of red cloth stitched together—but that referent is only a tiny element in a complex symbolic construction that originally marked the transformation of Wolsey from a butcher's son to a prince of the Church. *The Life and Death of Cardinal Wolsey*, written by Wolsey's gentleman usher, George Cavendish, is a remarkably circumstantial contemporary account of that construction, an account that enables us to glimpse
the hat or, as Cavendish terms it, the pillion, in its place—on the cardinal's head.

And after Mass he would return in his privy chamber again and, being advertized of the furniture of his [outer] chamber with noblemen and gentlemen . . . , would issue out into them appareled all in red in the habit of a Cardinal; which was either of fine scarlet or else of crimson satin, taffeta, damask, or caffa [a rich silk cloth], the best that he could get for money; and upon his head a round pillion with a neck of black velvet, set to the same in the inner side. . . . There was also borne before him first the Great Seal of England, and then his Cardinal's hat by a nobleman or some worthy gentleman right solemnly, bareheaded. And as soon as he was entered into his chamber of presence where was attending his coming to await upon him to Westminster Hall, as well noblemen and other worthy gentlemen as noblemen and gentlemen of his own family; thus passing forth with two great crosses of silver borne before him, with also two great pillars of silver, and his sergeant at arms with a great mace of silver gilt. Then his gentlemen ushers cried and said, "On my lords and masters, make way for my lord's grace!"

The extraordinary theatricality of this manifestation of clerical power did not escape the notice of the Protestant reformers, who called the Catholic Church "the Pope's play-house." When the Reformation in England dismantled the histrionic apparatus of Catholicism, the Protestants sold some of its gorgeous properties to the professional players—not only a mark of thrift but also a polemical gesture, signifying that the sanctified vestments were in reality mere trumpery whose proper place was a disreputable world of illusion-mongering. In exchange for this polemical service, the theatrical joint-stock companies received more than an attractive, cut-rate wardrobe; they acquired the tarnished but still-potent charisma that clung to the old vestments, charisma that in paradoxical fashion the players at once emptied out and heightened. By the time Wolsey's hat reached the library at Christ Church, its charisma must have been largely exhausted, but the college could confer upon it the prestige of an historical curiosity, a trophy of the distant founder. And in its glass case, it still radiates a tiny quantum of cultural energy.
Tiny indeed—it may already seem that I have made much more of this trivial relic than it deserves. But I am fascinated by transmigrations of the kind I have just sketched here—from theatricalized rituals to the stage to the university library or museum—because they seem to reveal something critically important about the textual relics with which my profession is obsessed. They enable us to glimpse the social process through which objects, gestures, rituals, and phrases are fashioned and moved from one zone of display to another. The display cases with which I am most involved—books—characteristically conceal this process, so that we have a misleading impression of fixity and little sense of the historical transactions through which the great texts we study have been fashioned. Let me give a literary example, an appropriately tiny textual equivalent of Wolsey's hat. At the close of Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream, the Fairy king Oberon declares that he and his attendants are going to bless the beds of the three couples who have just been married. This ritual of blessing will ensure the happiness of the newlyweds and ward off moles, harelips, and other prodigious marks that would disfigure their offspring. "With this field-dew consecrate," the Fairy King concludes,

Every fairy take his gait,
And each several chamber bless,
Through this palace, with sweet peace,
And the owner of it blest
Ever shall in safety rest.

(5.1.415–20)

Oberon himself, we are told, will conduct the blessing upon the "best bride-bed," that of the ruler Theseus and his Amazon queen Hippolyta.

The ceremony—manifestly the sanctification of ownership and caste, as well as marriage—is a witty allusion to the traditional Catholic blessing of the bride-bed with holy water, a ceremony vehemently attacked as pagan superstition and banned by English Protestants. But the conventional critical term allusion seems inadequate, for that term usually implies a bloodless, bodiless thing, while even the tiny, incidental detail of the field dew bears a more active charge. Here, as with
Wolsey’s hat, I want to ask what is at stake in the shift from one zone of social practice to another, from the old religion to public theater, from priests to fairies, from holy water to field dew, or rather to theatrical fairies and theatrical field dew on the London stage. When the Catholic ritual is made into theatrical representation, the transposition at once naturalizes, denaturalizes, mocks, and celebrates. It naturalizes the ritual by transforming the specially sanctified water into ordinary dew; it denaturalizes the ritual by removing it from human agents and attributing it to the fairies; it mocks Catholic practice by associating it with notorious superstition and then by enacting it on the stage, where it is revealed as a histrionic illusion; and it celebrates such practice by reinvesting it with the charismatic magic of the theater.

Several years ago, intending to signal a turn away from the formal, decontextualized analysis that dominated new criticism, I used the term new historicism to describe an interest in the kinds of issues I had been raising—in the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history—and the term has achieved a certain currency. But like most labels, this one is misleading. New historicism, like the Holy Roman Empire, constantly belies its own name. The American Heritage Dictionary gives three meanings for the term historicism:

1. The belief that processes are at work in history that man can do little to alter. 2. The theory that the historian must avoid all value judgments in his study of past periods or former cultures. 3. Veneration of the past or of tradition.

Most of the writing labeled new historicist, and certainly my own work, has set itself resolutely against each of these positions.

1. The belief that processes are at work in history that man can do little to alter. This formulation rests upon a simultaneous abstraction and evacuation of human agency. The men and women who find themselves making concrete choices in given circumstances at particular times are transformed into something called man. And this colorless, nameless collective being cannot significantly intervene in the “processes . . . at work in history,” processes
that are thus mysteriously alienated from all of those who enact them.

New historicism, by contrast, eschews the use of the term man; interest lies not in the abstract universal but in particular, contingent cases, the selves fashioned and acting according to the generative rules and conflicts of a given culture. And these selves, conditioned by the expectations of their class, gender, religion, race, and national identity, are constantly effecting changes in the course of history. Indeed, if there is any inevitability in new historicism’s vision of history, it is this insistence on agency, for even inaction or extreme marginality is understood to possess meaning and therefore to imply intention. Every form of behavior, in this view, is a strategy: taking up arms or taking flight are significant social actions, but so is staying put, minding one’s business, turning one’s face to the wall. Agency is virtually inescapable.

Inescapable but not simple: new historicism, as I understand it, does not posit historical processes as unalterable and inexorable, but it does tend to discover limits or constraints upon individual intervention. Actions that appear to be single are disclosed as multiple; the apparently isolated power of the individual genius turns out to be bound up with collective social energy; a gesture of dissent may be an element in a larger legitimation process, while an attempt to stabilize the order of things may turn out to subvert it. And political valences may change, sometimes abruptly: there are no guarantees, no absolute, formal assurances that what seems progressive in one set of contingent circumstances will not come to seem reactionary in another.

New historicism’s insistence on the pervasiveness of agency has apparently led some of its critics to find in it a Nietzschean celebration of the ruthless will to power, while its ironic and skeptical reappraisal of the cult of heroic individualism has led others to find in it a pessimistic doctrine of human helplessness. Hence, for example, from a Marxist perspective, Walter Cohen characterizes new historicism as a “liberal disillusionment” that finds that “any apparent site of resistance ultimately serves the interests of power,” while
from a liberal humanist perspective, Edward Pechter proclaims that “anyone who, like me, is reluctant to accept the will to power as the defining human essence will probably have trouble with the critical procedures of the new historicists and with their interpretive conclusions.” But the very idea of a “defining human essence” is precisely what new historicists find vacuous and untenable, as do I the counter-claim that love, rather than power, makes the world go around. The Marxist critique is more plausible, but it rests upon an assertion that new historicism argues that “any apparent site of resistance” is ultimately coopted. Some are, some aren’t.

2. The theory that the historian must avoid all value judgments in his study of past periods or former cultures. Once again, if this is an essential tenet of historicism, then new historicism belies its name. My own critical practice, and that of many others associated with new historicism, was decisively shaped by the American 1960s and early 1970s, and especially by the opposition to the Vietnam War. Writing that was not engaged, that withheld judgments, that failed to connect the present with the past, seemed worthless. Such connection could be made either by analogy or causality; that is, a particular set of historical circumstances could be represented in such a way as to bring out homologies with aspects of the present or, alternatively, those circumstances could be analyzed as the generative forces that led to the modern condition. In either mode, value judgments were implicated, because a neutral or indifferent relation to the present seemed impossible. Or, rather, it seemed overwhelmingly clear that neutrality was itself a political position, a decision to support the official policies in both the state and the academy.

To study the culture of sixteenth-century England did not present itself as an escape from the turmoil of the present; it seemed rather an intervention, a mode of relation. The fascination of the Renaissance for me was that it seemed to be powerfully linked to the present, both analogically and causally. This double link at once called forth and qualified my value judgments: called them forth because my response to the past was inextricably
bound up with my response to the present; qualified them because the analysis of the past revealed the complex, unsettling historical genealogy of the very judgments I was making. To study Renaissance culture, then, was simultaneously to feel more rooted and more estranged in my own values.

3. Veneration of the past or of tradition. The third definition of historicism obviously sits in a strange relation to the second, but they are not simply alternatives. The apparent eschewing of value judgments was often accompanied by a still more apparent admiration, however cloaked as objective description, of the past. One of the more irritating qualities of my own literary training had been its relentlessly celebratory character: literary criticism was, and largely remains, a kind of secular theodicy. Every decision made by a great artist could be shown to be a brilliant one; works that had seemed flawed and uneven to an earlier generation of critics bent on displaying discriminations in taste were now revealed to be organic masterpieces. A standard critical assignment in my student years was to show how a text that seemed to break in parts was really a complex whole: thousands of pages were dutifully churned out to prove that the bizarre subplot of *The Changeling* was cunningly integrated into the tragic main plot or that every tedious bit of clowning in *Doctor Faustus* was richly significant. Behind these exercises was the assumption that great works of art were triumphs of resolution, that they were, in Bakhtin’s term, monological—the mature expression of a single artistic intention. When this formalism was combined, as it often was, with both ego psychology and historicism, it posited aesthetic integration as the reflection of the artist’s psychic integration and posited that psychic integration as the triumphant expression of a healthy, integrated community. Accounts of Shakespeare’s relation to Elizabethan culture were particularly prone to this air of veneration, since the Romantic cult of poetic genius could be conjoined with the still-older political cult that had been created around the figure of the Virgin Queen.

Here again, new-historicist critics have swerved in a different direction. They have been more interested in unresolved conflict
and contradiction than in integration, they are as concerned with the margins as with the center, and they have turned from a celebration of achieved aesthetic order to an exploration of the ideological and material bases for the production of this order. Traditional formalism and historicism, twin legacies of early nineteenth-century Germany, shared a vision of high culture as a harmonizing domain of reconciliation based upon an aesthetic labor that transcends specific economic or political determinants. What is missing is psychic, social, and material resistance, a stubborn, unassimilable otherness, a sense of distance and difference. New historicism has attempted to restore this distance; hence its characteristic concerns have seemed to some critics off-center or strange. “New historicists,” writes Walter Cohen, “are likely to seize upon something out of the way, obscure, even bizarre: dreams, popular or aristocratic festivals, denunciations of witchcraft, sexual treatises, diaries and autobiographies, descriptions of clothing, reports on disease, birth and death records, accounts of insanity.” What is fascinating to me is that concerns like these should have come to seem bizarre, especially to a critic who is committed to the historical understanding of culture. That they had done so indicates how narrow the boundaries of historical understanding had become, how much these boundaries needed to be broken.

None of the cultural practices on this list (and one could extend it considerably) is or should be “out of the way” in a study of Renaissance literature or art. On the contrary, each is directly in the way of coming to terms with the period’s methods of regulating the body, its conscious and unconscious psychic strategies, its ways of defining and dealing with marginals and deviants, its mechanisms for the display of power and the expression of discontent, its treatment of women. If such concerns have been rendered “obscure,” it is because of a disabling idea of causality that confines the legitimate field of historical agency within absurdly restrictive boundaries. The world is parceled out between a predictable group of stereotypical causes and a large, dimly lit mass of raw materials that the artist chooses to fashion.
The new-historicist critics are interested in such cultural expressions as witchcraft accusations, medical manuals, or clothing, not as raw materials but as “cooked”—complex symbolic and material articulations of the imaginative and ideological structures of the society that produced them. Consequently, there is a tendency in at least some new-historicist writings (certainly in my own) for the focus to be partially displaced from the work of art that is their formal occasion onto the related practices that had been adduced, ostensibly, in order to illuminate that work. It is difficult to keep those practices in the background if the very concept of historical background has been called into question.

I have tried to deal with the problem of focus by developing a notion of cultural negotiation and exchange—that is, by examining the points at which one cultural practice intersects with another, borrowing its forms and intensities, or attempting to ward off unwelcome appropriations, or moving texts and artifacts from one place to another. But it would be misleading to imagine that there is a complete homogenization of interest. My own concern remains centrally with imaginative literature, and not only because other cultural structures resonate powerfully within it. If I do not approach works of art in a spirit of veneration, I do approach them in a spirit that is best described as wonder. Wonder has not been alien to literary criticism, but it has been associated (if only implicitly) with formalism rather than historicism. I wish to extend this wonder beyond the formal boundaries of works of art, just as I wish to intensify resonance within those boundaries.

It will be easier to grasp the concepts of resonance and wonder if we think of the way in which our culture presents to itself not the textual traces of its past but the surviving visual traces, for the latter are put on display in galleries and museums specially designed for the purpose. By “resonance” I mean the power of the object displayed to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to a larger world, to evoke in the viewer the complex, dynamic cultural forces from which it has emerged and for which—as metaphor or,
more simply, as metonymy—it may be taken by a viewer to stand. By “wonder” I mean the power of the object displayed to stop the viewer in his tracks, to convey an arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention.

New historicism obviously has distinct affinities with resonance; that is, its concern with literary texts has been to recover as far as possible the historical circumstances of their original production and consumption and to analyze the relationship between these circumstances and our own. New-historicist critics have tried to understand the intersecting circumstances not as a stable, prefabricated background against which the literary texts can be placed but as a dense network of evolving and often contradictory social forces. The idea is not to find outside the work of art some rock onto which literary interpretation can be securely chained but rather to situate the work in relation to other representational practices operative in the culture at a given moment in both its history and our own. In Louis Montrose’s convenient formulation, the goal has been to grasp simultaneously the historicity of texts and the textuality of history.

Insofar as this approach, developed for literary interpretation, is at all applicable to visual traces, it would call for an attempt to reduce the isolation of individual “masterpieces,” to illuminate the conditions of their making, to disclose the history of their appropriation and the circumstances in which they have come to be displayed, to restore the tangibility, the openness, the permeability of boundaries that enabled the objects to come into being in the first place. In most cases an actual restoration of tangibility is obviously impossible, and the frames that enclose pictures are only the ultimate formal confirmation of the closing of the borders that marks the finishing of a work of art. But we need not take that finishing so entirely for granted; museums can, and on occasion do, make it easier to recreate the work imaginatively in its moment of openness.

That openness is linked to a quality of artifacts that museums obviously dread: their precariousness. But though it is perfectly rea-
sonable for museums to protect their ob-
jects—I would not wish it any other way—
precariousness is a rich source of resonance.
Thomas Greene, who has written a sensitive
book on what he calls the “vulnerable text,”
suggests that the symbolic wounding to which
literature is prone may confer upon it power
and fecundity. “The vulnerability of poetry,”
Greene argues, “stems from four basic condi-
tions of language: its historicity, its dialogic
function, its referential function, and its de-
pendence on figuration.” Three of these con-
ditions are different for the visual arts in ways
that would seem to reduce vulnerability:
painting and sculpture may be detached more
readily than language from both referential-
ity and figuration, and the pressures of con-
textual dialogue are diminished by the ab-
sence of an inherent logos, a constitutive word.
But the fourth condition—historicity—is, in
the case of material artifacts, vastly in-
creased—indeed, virtually literalized.
Museums function, partly by design and
partly in spite of themselves, as monuments to
the fragility of cultures, the fall of sustaining
institutions and noble houses, the collapse of
rituals, the evacuation of myths, the destruc-
tive effects of warfare and neglect and corro-
sive doubt.
I am fascinated by the signs of alteration,
tampering, even destructiveness that many
museums try simply to efface: first and most
obviously, the act of displacement that is es-
sential for the collection of virtually all older
artifacts and most modern ones—pulled out
of chapels, peeled off of church walls, re-
moved from decayed houses, seized as spoils
of war, stolen, “purchased” more or less fairly
by the economically ascendant from the eco-
nomically naive, the poor, the hard-pressed
heirs of fallen dynasties, and impoverished
religious orders. Then too there are the
marks on the artifacts themselves: the at-
ttempts to scratch out or deface the image of
the devil in numerous late-medieval and Ren-
naissance paintings, the concealing of the gen-
itals in sculptured and painted figures, the
iconoclastic smashing of human or divine rep-
resentations, the evidence of cutting or re-
shaping to fit a new frame or purpose, the
cracks or scorch marks or broken-off noses
that indifferently record the grand disasters of history and the random accidents of trivial incompetence. Even these accidents—the marks of a literal fragility—can have their resonance: the climax of an absurdly hagiographical Proust exhibition several years ago was a display case holding a small, patched, modest vase with a notice, “This vase broken by Marcel Proust.”

As this comical example suggests, wounded artifacts may be compelling not only as witnesses to the violence of history but as signs of use, marks of the human touch, and hence links with the openness to touch that was the condition of their creation. The most familiar way to recreate the openness of aesthetic artifacts without simply renewing their vulnerability is through a skillful deployment of explanatory texts in the catalog, on the walls of the exhibit, or on cassettes. The texts so deployed introduce, and in effect stand in for, the context that has been effaced in the process of moving the object into the museum. But insofar as that context is partially, often primarily, visual as well as verbal, textual contextualism has its limits. Hence the mute eloquence of the display of the palette, brushes, and other implements that an artist of a given period would have employed, or of objects that are represented in the exhibited paintings, or of materials and images that in some way parallel or intersect with the formal works of art.

Among the most resonant moments are those in which the supposedly contextual objects take on a life of their own, make a claim that rivals that of the object that is formally privileged. A table, a chair, a map—often seemingly placed only to provide a decorative setting for a grand work—become oddly expressive, significant not as background but as compelling representational practices in themselves. These practices may in turn impinge upon the grand work, so that we begin to glimpse a kind of circulation: the cultural practice and social energy implicit in map-making is drawn into the aesthetic orbit of a painting, which has itself enabled us to register some of the representational significance of the map. Or again, the threadbare fabric on an old chair or the gouges in the wood of
a cabinet juxtapose the privileged painting or sculpture with marks not only of time but of use, the imprint of the human body on the artifact, and call attention to the deliberate removal of certain exalted aesthetic objects from the threat of that imprint.

For the effect of resonance does not necessarily depend upon a collapse of the distinction between art and non-art; it can be achieved by awakening in the viewer a sense of the cultural and historically contingent construction of art objects, the negotiations, exchanges, swerves, exclusions by which certain representational practices come to be set apart from other representational practices that they partially resemble. A resonant exhibition often pulls the viewer away from the celebration of isolated objects and toward a series of implied, only half-visible relationships and questions. How have the objects come to be displayed? What is at stake in categorizing them as being of "museum quality"? How were they originally used? What cultural and material conditions made possible their production? What were the feelings of those who originally held these objects, cherished them, collected them, possessed them? What is the meaning of my relationship to these same objects now that they are displayed here, in this museum, on this day?

It is time to give a more sustained example. Perhaps the most purely resonant museum I have ever seen is the State Jewish Museum in Prague. This is housed not in a single building but in a cluster of old synagogues scattered through the city's former Jewish town. The oldest of these, known as the Old-New Synagogue, is a twin-nave medieval structure dating to the last third of the thirteenth century; the others are mostly Renaissance and Baroque. In these synagogues are displayed Judaica from 153 Jewish communities throughout Bohemia and Moravia. In one there is a permanent exhibition of synagogue silverworks, in another there are synagogue textiles, in a third there are Torah scrolls, ritual objects, manuscripts, and prints illustrative of Jewish beliefs, traditions, and customs. One of the synagogues shows the work of the physician and artist Karel Fleischmann, principally drawings done in the Terezin concentration
camp during his months of imprisonment prior to his deportation to Auschwitz. Next door, in the Ceremonial Hall of the Prague Burial Society, there is a wrenching exhibition of children’s drawings from Terezin. Finally, one synagogue, closed at the time of my visit to Prague, simply has a wall of names—thousands of them—to commemorate the Jewish victims of Nazi persecution in Czechoslovakia.

“The Museum’s rich collections of synagogue art and the historic synagogue buildings of Prague’s Jewish town,” says the catalog of the State Jewish Museum, “form a memorial complex that has not been preserved to the same extent anywhere else in Europe.” “A memorial complex”—this museum is not so much about artifacts as about memory, and the form the memory takes is a secularized kaddish, a commemorative prayer for the dead. The atmosphere has a peculiar effect on the act of viewing. It is mildly interesting to note the differences between the mordant Grosz-like lithographs of Karel Fleischmann in the prewar years and the tormented style, at once detached and anguished, of the drawings in the camps, but aesthetic discriminations feel weird, out of place. And it seems wholly absurd, even indecent, to worry about the relative artistic merits of the drawings that survive by children who did not survive.

The discordance between viewing and remembering is greatly reduced with the older, less emotionally charged artifacts, but even here the ritual objects in their glass cases convey an odd and desolate impression. The oddity, I suppose, should be no greater than that in seeing a Maya god or, for that matter, a pyx or a ciborium, but we have become so familiarized to the display of such objects, so accustomed to considering them works of art, that even pious Catholics, as far as I know, do not necessarily feel disconcerted by their transformation from ritual function to aesthetic exhibition. And until very recently, the voices of the tribal peoples who might have objected to the display of their religious artifacts have not been heard and have certainly not been attended to.

The Jewish objects are neither sufficiently distant to be absorbed into the detached ethos of anthropological display nor sufficiently fa-
miliar to be framed and encased alongside the altarpieces and reliquaries that fill Western museums. And moving as they are as mnemonic devices, most of the ritual objects in the State Jewish Museum are not, by contrast with Christian liturgical art, particularly remarkable either for their antiquity or their extraordinary beauty. They are the products of a people with a resistance to joining figural representation to religious observance, a strong antiiconic bias. The objects have, as it were, little will to be observed. Many of them are artifacts—ark curtains, Torah crowns, breastplates, pointers, and the like—whose purpose was to be drawn back or removed in order to make possible the act that mattered: not vision but reading.

But the inhibition of viewing in the Jewish Museum is paradoxically bound up with its resonance. This resonance depends not upon visual stimulation but upon a felt intensity of names and, behind the names, as the very term resonance suggests, of voices: the voices of those who chanted, studied, muttered their prayers, wept, and then were forever silenced. And mingled with these voices are others—those of Jews who in 1389 were murdered in the Old-New Synagogue, where they were seeking refuge; that of the great sixteenth-century Kabbalist, Jehuda ben Bezalel, known as Rabbi Loew, who is fabled to have created the Golem; that of the twentieth century’s ironic Kabbalist, Franz Kafka.

It is Kafka who would be most likely to grasp imaginatively the State Jewish Museum’s ultimate source of resonance: the fact that most of the objects are located in the museum—were displaced, preserved, and transformed categorically into works of art—because the Nazis stored the articles they confiscated in the Prague synagogues that they chose to preserve for this very purpose. In 1941 the Nazi Hochschule in Frankfurt had established an Institute for the Exploration of the Jewish Question, which had in turn initiated a massive effort to confiscate Jewish libraries, archives, religious artifacts, and personal property. By the middle of 1942 Heydrich, as Hitler’s chief officer with the so-called Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, had chosen Prague as the site of the Central
Bureau for Dealing with the Jewish Question, and an SS officer, Untersturmführer Karl Rahm, had assumed control of the small existing Jewish museum, founded in 1912, which was renamed the Central Jewish Museum. The new charter of the museum announced that “the numerous, hitherto scattered Jewish possessions of both historical and artistic value, on the territory of the entire Protectorate, must be collected and stored.”

During the following months, tens of thousands of confiscated items arrived from 153 Jewish communities in Bohemia and Moravia, the dates of the shipments closely coordinated with the “donors’” deportation to the concentration camps. The experts formally employed by the original Jewish museum were compelled to catalog the items, and the Nazis compounded this immense task by also ordering the wretched, malnourished curators to prepare a collections guide and to organize private exhibitions for SS staff. Between September 1942 and October 1943, four major exhibitions were mounted. Since these required far more space than was available at the existing Jewish Museum’s modest location, the great old Prague synagogues—made vacant by the Nazi prohibition of Jewish public worship—were partially refurbished for the occasion. Hence in March 1943, for example, in the seventeenth-century Klaus Synagogue, there was an exhibition of Jewish festival and life-cycle observances. “When Sturmbannführer Günther first toured the collection on April 6, he demanded various changes, including the translation of all Hebrew texts and the addition of an exhibit on kosher butchering” (quoted in The Precious Legacy: Judaic Treasures from the Czechoslovak State Collections, from which my sketch of the genesis of the State Jewish Museum has been largely paraphrased). Plans were drawn up for other exhibitions, but the curators—who had given themselves to the task with a strange blend of selflessness, irony, helplessness, and heroism—were themselves at this point sent to concentration camps and murdered.

After the war, the few survivors of the Czech Jewish community apparently felt they could not sustain the ritual use of the syna-
gogues or maintain the large collections. In 1949 the Jewish Community Council offered as a gift to the Czechoslovak government both the synagogues and their contents. These became the resonant, impure "memorial complex" they are today—a cultural machine that generates an uncontrollable oscillation between homage and desecration, longing and hopelessness, the voices of the dead and silence. For resonance, like nostalgia, is impure—a hybrid forged in the barely acknowledged gaps, the caesurae, between words like State, Jewish, and Museum.

I want to avoid the implication that resonance must necessarily be linked to destruction and absence; it can be found as well in unexpected survival. The key is the intimation of a larger community of voices and skills, an imagined ethnographic thickness. Here another example will serve. In the Yucatan there is an extensive, largely unexcavated late-Classic Maya site called Coba, whose principal surviving feature is a high pyramid known as Nahoch Mul. After a day of tramping around the site, I was relaxing in the pool of the nearby Club Med Archaeological Villa in the company of a genial structural engineer from Little Rock. To make conversation, I asked my poolmate what he as a structural engineer thought of Nahoch Mul. "From an engineer's point of view," he replied, "a pyramid is not very interesting—it's just an enormous gravity structure. But," he added, "did you notice that Coca Cola stand on the way in? That's the most impressive example of contemporary Maya architecture I've ever seen." I thought it quite possible that my leg was being pulled, but I went back the next day to check—I had, of course, completely blocked out the Coke stand on my first visit. Sure enough, some enterprising Maya had built a remarkably elegant shelter with a soaring pyramidal roof constructed out of ingeniously intertwining sticks and branches. Places like Coba are thick with what Spenser called the Ruins of Time—with a nostalgia for a lost civilization, in a state of collapse long before Cortés or Montejo cut their paths through the jungle. But despite frequent attempts by colonists to drive them, or imagine them, out of existence, the Maya have not in
fact vanished, and a single entrepreneur's architectural improvisation suddenly had more resonance for me than the mounds of the "lost" city.

My immediate thought was that the whole Coca Cola stand could be shipped to New York and put on display in the Museum of Modern Art. And that impulse moves us away from resonance and toward wonder. For the MOMA is one of the great contemporary places, not for the hearing of intertwining voices, not for historical memory, not for ethnographic thickness, but for intense, indeed enchanted, looking. Looking may be called enchanted when the act of attention draws around itself a circle from which everything but the object is excluded, when intensity of regard blocks out all circumambient images and stills all murmuring voices. To be sure, the viewer may have purchased a catalog, read an inscription on the wall, switched on a cassette—but in the moment of wonder, all of this apparatus seems mere static.

The so-called boutique lighting that has become popular in recent years—a pool of light that has the surreal effect of seeming to emerge from within the object rather than to focus upon it from without—is an attempt to provoke or to heighten the experience of wonder, as if modern museum designers feared that wonder was increasingly difficult to arouse, or perhaps that it risked displacement entirely onto the windows of designer dress shops and antique stores. The association of that lighting—along with transparent plastic rods and other devices that create the magical illusion of luminous, weightless suspension—with commerce would seem to suggest that wonder is bound up with acquisition and possession, yet the whole experience of most art museums is about not touching, not carrying home, not owning the marvelous objects. In effect, modern museums at once evoke the dream of possession and evacuate it. Alternatively, we could say that they displace that dream onto the museum gift shop, where the boutique lighting once again serves to heighten acquisition, now of reproductions that stand for the unattainable works of art.

That evacuation or displacement is an historical rather than structural aspect of the
museum's regulation of wonder: that is, collections of objects calculated to arouse wonder arose precisely in the spirit of personal acquisition and were only subsequently detached from it. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance, we characteristically hear about wonders in the context of those who possessed them (or who gave them away). Hence, for example, in his *Life of Saint Louis*, Joinville writes that "during the king's stay at Saida someone brought him a stone that split into flakes":

> It was the most marvellous stone in the world, for when you lifted one of the flakes you found the form of a sea-fish between the two pieces of stone. This fish was entirely of stone, but there was nothing lacking in its shape, eyes, bones, or colour to make it seem otherwise than if it had been alive. The king gave me one of these stones. I found a tench inside; it was brown in colour, and in every detail exactly as you would expect a tench to be.

The wonder-cabinets of the Renaissance were at least as much about possession as display. The wonder derived not only from what could be seen but also from the sense that the shelves and cases were filled with unseen wonders, all the prestigious property of the collector. In this sense, the cult of wonder originated in close conjunction with a certain type of resonance, a resonance bound up with the evocation not of an absent culture but of the great man's superfluity of rare and precious things. Those things were not necessarily admired for their beauty; the marvelous was bound up with the excessive, the surprising, the literally outlandish, the prodigious. They were not necessarily the manifestations of the artistic skill of human makers: technical virtuosity could indeed arouse admiration, but so could nautilus shells, ostrich eggs, uncannily large or small bones, stuffed crocodiles, fossils. And, most importantly, they were not necessarily objects set out for careful viewing.

The experience of wonder was not initially regarded as essentially or even primarily visual; reports of marvels had a force equal to the seeing of them. Seeing was important and desirable, of course, but precisely in order to make reports possible, reports which then circulated as virtual equivalents of the marvels
themselves. The great medieval collections of marvels are almost entirely textual: Friar Jordanus' *Marvels of the East*, Marco Polo's *Book of Marvels*, Mandeville's *Travels*. Some of the manuscripts, to be sure, were illuminated, but these illuminations were almost always ancillary to the textual record of wonders, just as emblem books were originally textual and only subsequently illustrated. Even in the sixteenth century, when the power of direct visual experience was increasingly valued, the marvelous was principally theorized as a textual phenomenon, as it had been in antiquity. “No one can be called a poet,” wrote the influential Italian critic Minturno in the 1550s, “who does not excel in the power of arousing wonder.” For Aristotle, wonder was associated with pleasure as the end of poetry, and in the *Poetics* he examined the strategies by which tragedians and epic poets employ the marvelous to arouse wonder. For the Platonists too, wonder was conceived of as an essential element in literary art: in the sixteenth century, the Neoplatonist Francesco Patrizi defined the poet as principal “maker of the marvelous,” and the marvelous is found, as he put it, when men “are astounded, ravished in ecstasy.” Patrizi goes so far as to posit marveling as a special faculty of the mind, a faculty that in effect mediates between the capacity to think and the capacity to feel.

Modern art museums reflect a profound transformation of the experience. The collector—a Getty or a Mellon—may still be celebrated, and market value is even more intensely registered, but the heart of the mystery lies with the uniqueness, authenticity, and visual power of the masterpiece, ideally displayed in such a way as to heighten its charisma, to compel and reward the intensity of the viewer's gaze, to manifest artistic genius. Museums display works of art in such a way as to imply that no one, not even the nominal owner or donor, can penetrate the zone of light and actually possess the wonderful object. The object exists not principally to be owned but to be viewed. Even the fantasy of possession is no longer central to the museum gaze—or, rather, it has been inverted, so that the object, in its essence, seems to be not a possession but instead the possessor of
what is most valuable and enduring. What the
work possesses is the power to arouse wonder,
and that power, in the dominant aesthetic
ideology of the West, has been infused into it
by the creative genius of the artist.

It is beyond the scope of this brief talk to
account for the transformation of the experi-
ence of wonder from the spectacle of propri-
etorship to the mystique of the object—an
exceedingly complex, overdetermined history
centering on institutional and economic
shifts—but I think it is important to say that at
least in part, this transformation was shaped
by the collective project of Western artists and
reflects their vision. Already in the early six-
teenth century, when the marvelous was still
principally associated with the prodigious, Dü-
rer began, in a famous journal entry describ-
ing Mexican objects sent to Charles V by Cortés, to reconceive it:

I saw the things which have been brought to
the King from the new golden land: a sun all
of gold a whole fathom broad, and a moon all
of silver of the same size, also two rooms full
of the armour of the people there, and all
manner of wondrous weapons of theirs, har-
ness and darts, wonderful shields, strange
clothing, bedspreads, and all kinds of won-
derful objects of various uses, much more
beautiful to behold than prodigies. These
things were all so precious that they have
been valued at one hundred thousand gold
florins. All the days of my life I have seen
nothing that has gladdened my heart so
much as these things, for I saw amongst them
wonderful works of art, and I marvelled at
the subtle ingenia of men in foreign lands.
Indeed, I cannot express all that I thought
there.

Dürer’s description is full of the conventional
marks of his period’s sense of wonder. He
finds it important that the artifacts have been
brought as a kind of tribute to the king, that
large quantities of precious metals have been
used, that their market value has been reck-
oned; he notes the strangeness of them, even
as he uncritically assimilates that strangeness
to his own culture’s repertory of objects,
which includes harnesses and bedspreads.
But he also notes, in a perception highly
unusual for his time, that these objects are
“much more beautiful to behold than prodi-
gies.” Dürer relocates the source of wonder
from the outlandish to the aesthetic, and he understands the effect of beauty as a testimony to creative genius: "I saw amongst them wonderful works of art, and I marvelled at the subtle *ingenia* of men in foreign lands."

It would be misleading to strip away the relations of power and wealth that are encoded in the artist's response, but it would be still more misleading, I think, to interpret that response as an unmediated expression of those relations. For Dürrer gives voice to an aesthetic understanding—a form of wondering and admiring and knowing—that is at least partly independent of the structures of politics and the marketplace.

This understanding—by no means autonomous, and yet not reducible to the institutional and economic forces by which it is shaped—is centered on a certain kind of looking, a looking whose origins lie in the cult of the marvelous and hence in the artwork's capacity to generate in the spectator surprise, delight, admiration, and intimations of genius. The knowledge that derives from this kind of looking may not be very useful in the attempt to understand another culture, but it is vitally important in the attempt to understand our own. For it is one of the distinctive achievements of our culture to have fashioned this type of gaze, and one of the most intense pleasures that it has to offer. This pleasure does not have an inherent and necessary politics, either radical or imperialist, but Dürrer's remarks suggest that it originates at least in respect and admiration for the *ingenia* of others. This respect is a response worth cherishing and enhancing. Hence, for all of my academic affiliations and interests, I am skeptical about the recent attempt to turn our museums from temples of wonder into temples of resonance.

Perhaps the most startling instance of this attempt is the transfer of the paintings in the Jeu de Paume and the Louvre to the new Musée d'Orsay. The Musée d'Orsay is at once a spectacular manifestation of French cultural dépense and a highly self-conscious, exceptionally stylish generator of resonance, including the literal resonance of voices in an enormous vaulted railway station. By moving the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist master-
pieces into proximity with the work of far less well-known painters—Jean Béraud, Guillaume Dubuffe, Paul Séruisier, and so forth—and into proximity as well with the period's sculpture and decorative arts, the museum remakes a remarkable group of highly individuated geniuses into engaged participants in a vital, conflict-ridden, immensely productive period in French cultural history. The metamorphosis is guided by many well-designed informative boards—cue cards, in effect—along, of course, with the extraordinary building itself.

All of this is intelligently conceived and dazzlingly executed. On a cold winter day in Paris, the museum-goer may look down from one of the high balconies by the old railway clocks and savor the swirling pattern formed by the black and gray raincoats of the spectators below as they pass through the openings in the massive black stone partitions of Gay Aulenti's interior. The pattern seems spontaneously to animate the period's style—if not Manet, then at least Caillebotte; it is as if a painted scene had recovered the power to move and to echo.

But what has been sacrificed on the altar of cultural resonance is visual wonder centered on the aesthetic masterpiece. Attention is dispersed among a wide range of lesser objects that collectively articulate the impressive creative achievement of French culture in the late nineteenth century, but the experience of the old Jeu de Paume—intense looking at Manet, Monet, Cézanne, and so forth—has been radically reduced. The paintings are there, but they are mediated by the resonant contextualism of the building itself and its myriad objects and its descriptive and analytical plaques. Moreover, many of the greatest paintings have been demoted, as it were, to small spaces where it is difficult to view them adequately—as if the design of the museum were trying to assure the triumph of resonance over wonder.

But is a triumph of one over the other necessary? I have, for the purposes of this exposition, obviously exaggerated the extent to which these are alternative models for museums (or for the reading of texts). In fact, almost every exhibition worth the viewing has
strong elements of both. I think that the impact of most exhibitions is likely to be greater if the initial appeal is wonder—a wonder that then leads to the desire for resonance—for it is easier to pass from wonder to resonance than from resonance to wonder. Why this should be so is suggested by a remarkable passage in his *Commentary on the Metaphysics of Aristotle* by Aquinas's teacher, Albert the Great:

Wonder is defined as a constriction and suspension of the heart caused by amazement at the sensible appearance of something so portentous, great, and unusual, that the heart suffers a systole. Hence wonder is something like fear in its effect on the heart. This effect of wonder, then, this constriction and systole of the heart, spring from an unfulfilled but felt desire to know the cause of that which appears portentous and unusual: so it was in the beginning when men, up to that time unskilled, began to philosophize.... Now the man who is puzzled and wonders apparently does not know. Hence wonder is the movement of the man who does not know on his way to finding out, to get at the bottom of that at which he wonders and to determine its cause. ... Such is the origin of philosophy.

Such too, from the perspective of new historicism, is the origin of a meaningful desire for cultural resonance. But while philosophy would seek to supplant wonder with secure knowledge, it is the function of new historicism continually to renew the marvelous at the heart of the resonant.

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