History Reclaimed: Strategies of Reading and Interpretation in New Historicism

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New Historicism has developed during the 1980's largely in response to the text-only approach espoused by the formalists and new critics. It has marked a significant change in the interpretation of literary texts as it pulls back historical considerations to the centre-stage of literary analysis. The method it has evolved describes culture in action. This new historical method is based on the "parallel reading of literary and nonliterary texts, usually of the same time period."[1] It, actually, "entails reading literary and nonliterary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts and that its practitioners generally posit no fixed hierarchy of cause and effect as they trace the connections among texts, discourses, power, and the constitution of the subject."[2] This move in literary studies towards history has come "almost inevitably after a period of turbulent exercise in what Christopher Lasch terms 'the culture of narcissim' of the 1960's and 70's after the decline of the New Criticism and the ascendancy of post-structuralism in American thought."[3]

The progenitor of New Historicism is Berkley's star English professor Stephen Greenblatt. The very term 'New Historicism' is, in fact, coined by him in his "introduction" to the special issue of Genre-- Spring 1982 to describe his method of interpreting the Renaissance texts, and, by extension, the method deployed by a group of writers associated with this type of literary practice. However, as he himself mentions, "he used the term rather inadvertently and would prefer 'cultural poetics' to New Historicism."[4]

Initially, New Historicism concentrated on Renaissance texts only, but now it has widened its area of operation, "even crossing over its parent location in the United States to newer territories across the globe."[5] This explains why recently academics from Cambridge to Tokyo fly Stephen Greenblatt for lectures and honour his words with a tenaciousness formerly reserved for the French philosophers only.

The interest in history is nothing new in literary studies. If one looks back at the 'old' historicism, so to say, of the 19th century, or, for that matter, even the attempts of the majority of critics between 1920 and 1950, one can clearly see that their assumptions are based on the conviction that to fully appreciate a literary text, one must understand the interplay between the text and its historical contexts (such as the author's biographical events). The question then is : in what way is New Historicism 'new' ?

Wesley Morris in his book Toward a New Historicism (1972), which preceded all current use of the term, identifies four major kinds of traditional historicism:

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1- The **metaphysical** which derives from Hegel's transcendental philosophy and sees a literary work as the "poetic expression of a moment in the unfolding narrative of history as the self-realization of the absolute."

2- The **naturalistic** or **positivistic** in which a literary work is considered as a "medium through which a given historical epoch could be viewed by a scholar who imagined himself in the role of scientific observer."

3- The **nationalistic** which is a relativist variant of the metaphysical, and it sees a literary text as "expressing the native spirit of a given culture or race."

4- The **aesthetic** which differs from the other types in viewing the literary text" not as the reflection or expression of an existing cultural domain but as a way of making cultural meaning and values."[6]

Regardless of their respective differences, all of these kinds of historicism:

> entailed the conviction that poetry either reflected or expressed the human subject, however various may have been conceptions of the nature of that subject. A poetic act was understood to express, to illustrate or to dramatize a stage in the history of consciousness or of human praxis, whether of an individual or collective kind.[7]

All of them "adhered to one or another master narrative that governed the historical critic's interpretation of specific narrative or poetic acts."[8] New Historicism shows no adherence to such a narrative. In fact, the new historicists are more prone to :

> eschew the eschatological or teleological connotations of the term history. Rather, in a way that may be consistent with other aspects of postmodern culture, human subjects are treated by many of these scholars as functions in a structural ensemble of cultural practices at a specific moment in what is still termed 'history', though the term is now employed with a discernible reluctance to specify its referent.[9]

They insist that history is not objective, but a filtered entity which gives itself to subjective interpretation on the basis of a person's own subjective historically conditioned viewpoints. History, as the new historicists see, is an intersection for separate discourses that ultimately establish a dominant ideology, or an episteme. Hence, they acknowledge that the "historiographer is never simply describing or retrieving the past but is constructing a past." The new historicists are aware of the degree to which a reading of the past is "an ideological construction mediated by a desire or a drive to position oneself in the present."[10] But, as Don E. Wayne mentions:

> ... to say that history is always to a degree the construct of ideology is not to say that it is inevitably false. For, of course, that construct, however intentionalized by the historian's subjectivity, is also constrained by the materiality of the texts that the historian selects as the source of historical data (by which I mean such immediate constraints on reading – therefore, on historical evidence- as diction, syntax, orthography, mode of publication and dissemination, etc.) And these texts bear the traces of the history of subjectivity itself within a given culture...[11]

To sum up then, all types of old historicism are monological and concerned with disclosing a singular political vision and believe that history is not the "product of the historian's interpretation, nor even the particular interest of a given social group in conflict with other groups," but a " stable point of reference" to which "literary interpretation can securely refer."[12]

In other words, old historicism, as is commonly known, sees literature as a mirror reflecting the beliefs and values of a particular period. New Historicism discredits this mimetic view. Literary texts for the new historicists do not reflect meanings beyond them, nor do they represent priviliged artifacts isolated from the other texts of culture. Representation, for the new historicists, is not mimetic but constitutive of the represented. They reformulate the relationship between 'text' and 'context' by textualizing the context itself. That is to say, New Historicism "turns history itself into a text and treats all texts as literary texts susceptible to the same interpretive techniques." [13] Hence, Judith Newton cites the following as the underlying assumptions of New Historicism:

1- "there is no transhistorical or universal human essence and that human subjectivity is constructed by cultural codes which position and limit all of us in various and divided ways."14

2- "there is no 'objectivity' that we experience the 'world' in language, and that all our representations of the world, our readings of texts and of the past, are informed by our historical position, by the values and politics that are rooted in them." [15]

3- " representation 'makes things happen' by 'shaping human consciousness' and that, as forces acting in history, various form of representation ought to be read in relation to each other and in relation to non-discursive 'texts' like 'events'."[16]

There are many theoretical influences that helped shape the New Historical criticism. The first influence has come from Clifford Geertz's anthropological studies in southeast Asia and north Africa which he has included in his The Interpretation of Culture (1973). Geertz has provided New Historicism with new ways of thinking about not only culture but also the presentation of scholarship (particularly his concept of **thick description**). Geertz "demolishes the myth that culture is an attribute recently acquired by man, the latest stratum to be stacked on top of our biological, social, and psychological dispositions. Far from being a belated, supplementary dimension of our development, the cultural capacity to signify was constitutive of the human animal from the start."[17] There is, he emphasizes:

> no such thing as a human nature independent of culture. Men without culture would be the clever savages of Golding's Lord of the Flies thrown back upon the cruel wisdom of their animal instincts; nor would they be the nature's noblemen of Enlightenment primitivism or even, as classical anthropological theory would imply, intrinsically talented apes who had somehow failed to find themselves.[18]

If we want to understand human beings, in Geertz's view, "we need to grasp them as 'cultural artifacts', whose significance is to be found inscribed in the specificity of local circumstance and concrete detail."[19] Or as Greenblatt formulates "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."[20] In fact, Geertz has provided a model for Greenblatt and all the other new historicists because his anthropology "has a natural attraction for critics anxious to link literature to a wider semiotic system, and ideally equipped to read the whole of human culture as a literary text." [21]

The other influence has come from the works of Michel Foucault, who is perhaps the most influential critic of the last part of the twentieth century. Foucault's interest in issues of power, discourse, subjectivity, ideology as well as his questioning of the principle of disciplinarity have an inspirational influence on the New Historicists especially his chapter on " Panopticism" from Discipline and Punish and volume 1 of The History of Sexuality . In " Panopticism', he traces "two stages in the formation of the modern society of the spectacle. The disciplinary regime of the plague- stricken town and the coercive transperency of Bentham's penitentiary dramatize the sinister logic of a carceral culture we still inhabit"[22] Foucault also "incriminate writing and spectating as vital instruments of surveillance and control."[23] He illustrates how, through panopticism :

> A real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation. So it is not necessary to use force to constrain the convict to good behaviour, the madman to calm, the worker to work, the schoolboy to applications.... He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.[24]

This is very much a rewording of the celebrated thesis of the third influence on New Historicism, i.e., Louis Althusser. Althusser, in his seminal essay "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus" mentions that "ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence." In fact, Foucault himself is Althusserian in some aspects of his work. Althusser demolishes the :

> common misconception of ideology as a cynical mystification of reality foisted upon the exploited by the exploiters to sustain the status quo. Far from being an externally imposed illusion, ideology involves a structural distortion of perception, a subconscious wraping of the imagination, fostered in the individual by the institutions through which she or he is socialized. If the delusion that all is as it should be could be dispelled by rational argument alone, those who own and rule would have been toppled long ago; but from infancy onwards people learn to live their own subjection as the condition they desire, which is what makes changes so difficult to achieve.[25]

Both Foucault's notion of power and Althusser's conception of ideology play a tremendous role in the formation of many of the basic theses of New Historicism.

The fourth influence has come from Jaques Derrida. Derrida disseminates the view that "we can have no access to reality that is not mediated by language, no glimpse of history that is not refracted through representation." He has promoted among the new historicists the "contraction of history to story, on the grounds that narratives are all that we know, and the disappearance of the world behind the web of textuality woven round it."[26] He picks up the Saussurean proposition that "language has neither ideas nor sounds that existed before the linguistic system, but only conceptual and phonic differences that have issued from the system" and takes it to the point where the :

> differential play of meaning is not only the precondition of thought itself, but the causeless cause of our capacity to think historically in the first place, to divide past from present and present from future. The differential effects of language have obviously been produced, Derrida admits, 'but they are effects which do not find their cause in a subject or a substance', because 'there is no presence before and outside semiological difference'.[27]

The fifth significant influence comes from Raymond Williams. Williams views both "Foucault's notion of power and Althusser's version of ideology" as "intolerably

monolithic."[28] Instead, he turns to the concept of hegemony developed by the Italian Antonio Gramsci in his attempt to find a more complex model of culture that "can account for the fact of change and cope with the movement of history." Gramsci's notion of hegemony acknowledges the "depth to which ruling beliefs and values can saturate society, while refusing (unlike Foucault) to dispense with the reality of class conflict and the brute fact of domination." In fact, it has allowed Williams to "trade in the crude Marxist theory of economic base and cultural superstructure for an incomparably subtler analysis of culture as a whole way of life in motion."[29] He views Marxist cultural analysis to be :

> Very much more at home in what one might call epochal questions than in what one has to call historical questions. That is to say, it is usually very much better at distinguishing the large features of different epochs of society, as commonly between feudal and bourgeois society, and different moments within these phases: that true historical process which demands a much greater precision and delicacy of analysis than the always striking ephocal analysis which is concerned with main lineaments and features. [30]

Hence, in the theoretical model he tries to work with, he distinguishes between the **dominant,** the **residual,** and the **emergent** dimensions of a given culture. By dominant culture he means that in any society, in any particular period, there is a central system of practices, meanings and values which is dominant and effective.[31] By residual culture he means that :

> some experiences, meanings and values, which can not be verified or can not be expressed in terms of the dominant culture, are nevertheless lived and practised on the basis of the residue-cultural as well as social – of some previous social formation.

This residual culture, in Williams's view, is usually :

> at some distance from the effective dominant culture, but one has to recognize that, in real cultural activities, it may get incorporated into it. This is because some part of it, some version of it – will in many cases have had to be incorporated if the effective dominant culture is to make sense in those areas. It is also because at certain points a dominant culture can not allow too much of this kind of practice and experience outside itself, at least without risk. Thus the pressures are real, but certain genuinely residual meanings and practices in some important cases survive.[32]

By emergent culture he means that "new meanings and values, new practices, new significances and experiences, are continually being created. But there is then a much earlier attempt to incorporate them, just because they are part – and yet not a defined part – of effective contemporary practice."[33]
Hence, he mentions that :

> We have … to see, first, as it were a temporal relation between a dominant culture and on the one hand a residual and on the other hand an emergent culture. But we can only understand this if we can make distinctions, that usually require very precise analysis, between residual – incorporated and residual not incorporated, and between emergent – incorporated and emergent not incorporated.[34]

Williams sees that "no mode of production, and therefore no dominant society or order of society, and therefore no dominant culture, in reality exhausts the full range of human practice, human energy, human intention."[35] As for literature, he sees that it "is not restricted to operating in any one of the sectors" he describes in his model. Yet,

he feels that "most writing, in any period, including our own, is a form of contribution to the effective dominant culture."[36]

The situation in English in the final two decades of the previous century has put greater emphasis on method than ideas. Generally, there was a sense that literary study had reached a deadend. On the one hand there were the adherents of the New Criticism who were still conducting readings of long – accepted texts, and on the other there were the adherents of deconstruction showing how texts undo themselves. Both positions seemed far from the interests of the new professoriat, which had opened its eyes to the slogans of the sixties. As Jean E. Howard mentions in his defence of the new movement, by the early eighties professors had become tired of teaching texts as "ethereal entities" floating above the strife of history. [37] New Historicism, then, surfaced to the scene as an inevitable reaction to the failures of both New Criticism and Deconstruction. New Criticism "suspected history and considered it inimical to literature. Therefore, it put a strong emphasis on the autonomy of the work to shield it from the enchroachment of the outside world." Deconstruction, on the other side, "looked down upon literature as a bourgeois phenomenon." New Historicism attempted to negotiate between these positions in order to see "if a common ground could be created for their mutual transaction." [38]

The New Historicists see literature as a social force that contributes to the making of individuals and functions as a form of social control. Hence, they reject the new critical notion of literature as a "verbal icon accessible through its graphic inscription." In the same manner, they also find it difficult to accept the "Derridean notion of textuality (wall–to– wall textuality) encompassing the world and remaining elusive in its perpetual fluidity." [39] Literary texts for them are not privileged artifacts isolated from other texts of culture nor do they either reflect meanings or facts beyond them. In fact, they reject both the formalist new critical notion of literature as an autonomous aesthetic order that transcends needs and interests and the reflectionist notion that writing simply mirrors a stable and coherent ideology endorsed by all members of society. Representation for them is not an instance of mimesis but is constitutive of the represented. Texts do not represent culturally constructed forms of knowledge and authority but actually reproduce in readers the very practices and codes they embody. P. C. Kar mentions :

> As the New Historicists imply, the new critical emphasis on the teleology of structure and aesthetics of closure was produced out of the modernist process of legitimization of the ideology of the West enshrined in its literature. As that ideology was needed to be preserved and canonized, literature and the values it promoted were thought to be sacrosanct deserving preservation against the impingement of both history and science. A literary text, therefore, for a New Critic, was a specular model for an ontologically-defined world in terms of its self-sustaining logic of coherence. A reader of such a text, the implication is, seems like a God or a magician called upon to decipher the text's hidden mystery from the position of his transcendence. Thus in a new critical reading the reader is removed from the internal dynamics of the text threatening to transgress its pre-determined boundary foreclosed in the desire of its creator. Like the text, the reader, in a new critical thinking, is a stable phenomenon blessed with the power of insight needed for the forensic act of the mystery.
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> The problem with this kind of reading, as the New Historicists suggest, lies in the belief that both the text and the reader are stable entities occupying clearly- demarcated space. This belief seems untenable for the New Historicists who maintain that , like the text which is porous, the reader is historically constituted and therefore carries with him the forces of contingency. Therefore, his reading of a text is always determined by the position from which he reads, and the "position" here is defined not by its determinate cultural location or ideological status but by its intricate process of "self-fashioning" possible through the self's simultaneous internalization of several contradictory impulses.

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Individual agency, for the New Historicists, is constituted by a process that Stephen Greenblatt calls "self-fashioning" and Louis Montrose calls "subjectification" which means that culture produces individuals who are endowed with subjectivity and the capability of agency on the one hand, and positions them within social networks and subjects them to cultural codes that exceed their comprehension and control on the other. Having said this, however, the New Historicists are divided on whether literary texts can contest dominant ideologies of their time or not. Some like Jonathan Dollimore and Allan Sinfield think that literary texts can contest religious and political ideologies of their time, others claim that state hegemonic powers are so powerful that they can neutralize dissident behaviour.

Furthermore, the new historicists, unlike the deconstructionists, give a unique function for literature. They also object to the deconstructionist's notion of the "text as an ever-expanding phenomenon blurring its boundaries with context." In fact, they, inspite of their suggestion involving the "shifting relationship between the text and the context," have never abandoned the distinction between the two. " In their conception of cultural poetics history and literature still maintain their separate spheres although their mode of relationship continues to remain problematic." They suggest that, they, in their mutual interaction "generate tremendous 'social energy' which circulate through the entire cultural space and make the circumambient surrounding resonate with multiple ehoes."[41] This idea of cultural resonance is central in Greenblatt's new historical thinking. As the following quotation from one of his books shows:

> the effects of resonance...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 [in a museum] often pulls the viewer away from the celebration of isolated objects and toward a series of implied, only half-visible relationships and questions.[42]

This notion of resonance is associated with the notion of "wonder". And they both form Greenblatt's sacred dichotomy. But Greenblatt dismisses wonder in favour of "resonance." Wonder is a "formalist idea, associated with the texts inner mystique, with its magical dimension, or what Walter Benjamin calls its 'auratic' character. Because of the presence of the elements of the 'marvelous' in the texture of a literary text, the text occupies a special position in a culture and thereby becomes the agent for cultural vibration which ultimately leads to textual resonance." [43] Hence, he says : "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 exalted attention." [44] Greenblatt argues that resonance "originates in wonder and that if a text does not contain in it the elements of wonder it will fail to resonate." Yet, although he sees that both resonance and wonder function complemantarily, "one can only pass from wonder to resonance; not vice versa." This one-way movement, Kar sees, "seems to limit new historicism's otherwise expansive horizon and perhaps complicates the dynamic interaction between the text and the context." [45]

Undoubtedly, New Historicism adds a new colour to the already – colourful contemporary critical scene. Critics may continue to complain that it reduces literature to a footnote of history or that it lacks a theory of history or that its emphasis on connecting literature to politics resembles "good dog / bad dog" criticism where critics applaud writers for their progressive views, and chastise them for reactionary ones, nevertheless, it remains a very significant development in the history of literary studies and criticism. At least, it provides an answer to the question : 'what comes after post – structuralism?'

Notes

1- Margaret Faye Jones, "Bringing New Historicism into the American Literature Survey" , TETYC, December, 2000, p. 186.
2- Catherine Gallagher, "Marxism and the New Historicism" in Kiernan Ryan (ed.), New Historicism and Cultural Materialism : A Reader (London : Arnold, 1996), p. 45.
3- Prafulla C. Kar "New Historicism and Interpretation of the text", in R. S. Pathak (ed.), Indian Response to Literary Theories vol. 1 (New Delhi : Creative Books, 1996), p. 168.
4- Ibid, p. 169.
5- Ibid, p. 168.
6- Cited in Don E. Wayne, "New Historicism" in Martin Coyle et. Al (eds.), Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism (London : Routledge, 1991) , p. 794.
7- Ibid, p. 794.
8- Ibid, p. 794.
9- Ibid, pp 794 – 795.
10- Ibid, p. 795.
11- Ibid, p. 795.
12- See Stephen Greenblatt "Introduction", Genre, Spring, 1982.
13- Kiernan Ryan, "Introduction", in Kiernan Ryan (ed.), New Historicism and Cultural Materialism : A Reader (London : Routledge, 1996), p. xiv.
14- Judith Newton, "History as Usual? : Feminism and the 'New Historicism', Cultural Critique 9 (1988), p. 88.
15- Ibid, p. 88.
16- Ibid, pp. 88-89.
17- Kiernan Ryan, "Sources" in Kiernan Ryan (ed.), New Historicism and Cultural Materialism : A Reader (London : Arnold, 1996), p. 1.
18- Clifford Geertz, "The Impact of the Concept of Culture on the Concept of Man" in Kiernan Ryan (ed.), New Historicism and Cultural Materialism : A Reader (London : Arnold, 1996), p. 7.
19- Ryan, p. 1.
20- Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder" in Ryan Kiernan (ed.) New Historicism and Cultural Materialism : A Reader (London : Arnold, 1996) , p. 55.
21- Ryan, p.1.
22- Ibid, pp. 1-2
23- Ibid, p.2
24- Michel Foucault, "Panopticism" in Kiernan Ryan (ed.) New Historicism and Cultural Materialism : A Reader (London : Arnold, 1996) , p. 16.
25- Ryan, p. 2.
26- Ibid, p. 3.
27- Ibid, pp. 3-4.
28- Ibid, p.3.
29- Ibid, p.3.

30- Raymend Williams, "Base and Superstructure in Marixist Cultural Theory" in Kiernan Ryan (ed.), New Historicism and Cultural Materialism : A Reader (London : Arnold, 1996) p. 22.
31- Ibid, p. 23.
32- Ibid, pp. 24 – 25.
33- Ibid, p. 25.
34- Ibid, p. 25.
35- Ibid, p. 26.
36- Ibid, p. 27.
37- Jean E. Howard, "The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies", English Literay Renaissance 16 (1986), p. 15.
38- Kar, p. 170.
39- Ibid, p. 171.
40- Ibid, p. 171.
41- Ibid, p. 172.
42- Stephen Greenblatt, Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture (New York : Routledge, 1990), pp. 172 – 173.
43- Kar, p. 173.
44- Greenblatt, Learning to Curse , p. 170.
45- Kar, p. 173.

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