

NEW HISTORICISM AND JEROME MCGANN

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Abstract

New Historicism opposes formalist method of dealing a text in isolation from historical context. It considers a text to be situated in a 'discourse' of particular time. It is a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and textuality of history. Text and history interact with each other. It is a method of reading to examine textual traces of the past. It views past as available in form of textuality. A critic is not an objective chronicler as he is always implicated in the discourses which help to construct the object of knowledge. New historicism took shape in late 1970s and early 1980s in the writings of scholars of Romanticism like Marilyn Butler, Marjorie Levinson, Jerome McGrann and David Simpson and scholars of English Renaissance like Jonathan Goldberg, Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose. Stephen Greenblatt named the 'New Historicism' in 1988. The present paper shows how McGrann marks the beginnings of a move away from formalist concerns, advocating a more historically oriented and particularized engagement with text. He attributes textual authority to the cumulative social history of the work including contributions by author, editor, publisher, printer and all others who have cooperated in creating and producing a book. McGrann argues for the recognition of poetry as a social act. His focus is on the circulation and reception of texts.

Key Words: *New Historicism, discourse, textuality...*

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New Historicism opposes formalist method of dealing a text in isolation from historical context. It considers a text to be situated in a 'discourse' of a particular time. In this mode of study literary and non-literary texts are given equal weight.

Louis Montrose defines it as a combined interest, 'a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and textuality of history'. There is a juxtaposition of literary material with contemporary non-literary texts. Everything about the past is only available to us in textualized form. The historical data is not subordinated as context but as co-texts. The text and co-text are expression of same historical moment. It makes a 'close reading' of non-literary texts in the literary-critical manner. It is claimed that many texts consist of a diversity of dissonant voices of subordinated and subversive forces of the period in which the text was produced. The real tension of the conflicts of power, class, gender and diverse social group underlie the surface meaning of a literary text.

The term 'new historicism' was coined by American critic Stephen Greenblatt in his introduction to a special issue of *Genre* vol.15(1982). It took shape in writings of scholars of Romanticism like Marilyn Butler, Marjorie Levinson, Jerome McGann and David Simpson and scholars of Renaissance studies like Jonathan Goldberge, Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose.

Jerome McGann marks the beginning of a move away from formalist concerns, advocating a more historically oriented and particularized engagement with texts. He attributes textual authority to the cumulative social history of the work including contributions by author, editor, publisher, printer and all others who have participated in creating and producing a text. All these components are valid determinants of a text and its meaning, considered as social constructions. McGann also stresses the material features of a text including its typography, paper, format, and even pricing and advertising as cooperative with its verbal element in generating its total significance. His focus is on the circulation and reception of texts. McGann argues for recognition of poetry as a social act.

McGann's work *The Beauty of Inflections* (1988) is a literary investigation in historical method and theory. It is a study with dual purpose: to explore the fault lines that mark various kinds of ahistorical literary studies from New Criticism to Post structuralism; and to develop a fully elaborated socio-historical criticism for literary works. He investigates the relation between the so-called "autonomous" poem and its political / historical contexts; the relation of reception and history to literary interpretation; the problems of canon and the characterization of period; and the ideological dimension of both literary works and criticism of such works. He considers as an experience or an event, a literary work is a nexus of various concrete social dimensions. The book is a coherent, cohesive and forceful argument where he addresses a number of persuasive instances from the writings of Lord Byron, John Keats, William Blake, Emily Dickinson, W.H. Auden and others to demonstrate the intricacies and intercurrents of textual production and transmission. He proves that beneficial knowledge for scholarship and pleasurable fascination for the critic result from a reconceived and enlarged definition of textual scholarship and bibliography. The essays exhibit a wide and careful reading in the service of criticism.

According to McGann, intrinsic criticism views historical studies as not going to the heart of literary object. They face the problem of historical method in the areas of extrinsic criticism in bibliography, textual criticism, philology, biography and literary history. In this respect the works of many scholars seem irrelevant to the overall understanding and appreciation of poetry. McGann refers to Immanuel Kant's *Critique of Judgment* professing a novel philosophy of art grounded in the notion that aesthetic works were integral phenomena. Its finality was exhausted in the individual's experience of the work. Twentieth century critical practice uses Kant's modern concept of 'the poem itself' as a self-referential linguistic system. A poem is taken as no more than a self-sufficient verbal object.

McGann points out that in modern criticism, the word 'text' is used to deal with the material of poetry in a purely physical or impersonal frame of reference as if it were a timeless object unconnected with history. It is considered totally aside from the events and materials describable in their bibliographies. McGann puts that no literary work is definable in purely linguistic terms. He proposes to use the term 'text' to deal with poems as they are part of productive process. Poetry is a social phenomenon. His usage of 'text' transcends their concrete and actual textualities.

McGann's two important illustrations of the composition and publication are by Lord Byron and William Blake. In 1818 Lord Byron had given the manuscript of *Don Juan* cantos I and II to his publisher John Murray. When Murray went through the writing, he

saw it full of immorality, obscenity, blasphemy and libelous attacks upon the poet laureate and the policies of English government. Murray and his friends pressed Byron to withdraw or revise the objectionable parts. When Byron threatened to publish his poem elsewhere, Murray conceded to publish it. To avoid the legal action against him, Murray decided to print only 1500 copies of the poem in quarto edition, without poet's name or even publisher. The price was set up very high to ensure a limited circulation in a conditioned elite class. When Hugh J. Luke, Jr, called the work as 'a contradictory one', thousands of copies of *Don Juan* were issued in cheap pirated editions and the moral outcry was raised against it. In the cheap piracies, some published it with obscene engravings and others in weekly numbers.

Another illustration, McGann takes from William Blake. Blake's works operate in an integrated and much higher verbal and visual medium. Linguistic level of his work corresponds to the entire mixed medium. Each of Blake's engraved works was a unique publication in itself. This original method of publication was probably most private, individualistic and artistic. Critics recognize the necessity of reading Blake in facsimile editions. These editions do deliver more of Blake's work to the reader. He has achieved his purpose most notoriously in his masterwork *Jerusalem*. There are less than ten original copies of this work that have survived and each is quite distinct, in which he achieves extraordinary degree of artistic freedom. Blake's special way shows the presence of impinging social factors as he strove to produce work that was wholly his own. Had Blake published his work through the publishing institutions of his days, it would have been a very different product as it would have received and read by many people.

In connection of the illustrations from Byron and Blake, McGann thinks:

..... a work of art-a poem , in this case- is no more the isolate creation of an artist than ' the poem it self ' is defined either by some particular text on the one hand, or by the ideal text on the other. Poems are artistic works produced and maintained, under specific socialized condition. It is the business of analytic criticism to isolate and categorize the various social factors which meet and interact in various works of art and finally, to explain these interactions.

[McGann, *Modern literary theory* : p. 297]

The physical differences between the several texts stand as sign of a productive process which is different in each case and which consequently, produces several different artistic works. A poetic work is the product of social engagement. The local publishing relationship among author, printer and publisher needs a critical analysis. This enables the critic to explain the often less visible but more fundamental engagement which meets in and generates the work. Another important figure that participates in the artistic process initiated by the artist is the reviewer. It is the function of the contemporary reviewer to make explicit the lines of interpretation. McGann mentions, it is assumed that we can establish the author's final intentions but we would still have merely one text of the work or as scholars- the means for producing a number of possible editions of texts:

In reality, there is no such text; there are only texts, of various kinds, prepared by various people, for particular and various purposes every work of art is the product of an interaction between the artist, on the one hand, and a variety of social determinants on the other..... The fact is that the works of an artist are produced, at various times and places, and by many different sort of people, in a variety of different textual constitutions (some better than others) .Each of these texts is the locus of a process of artistic production and consumption involving the originary author, other people (his audience[s], his public etc.), and certain social institutions.

[McGann , *Modern literary theory* p 295-96]

McGann's examples from Lord Byron and William Blake illustrate the need for a systematic theory and method of historical criticism. Criticism cannot analyze poems or reveal their special characteristics and values, if it abstracts away from their so- called accidental features. Historical criticism tries to define what is most peculiar and distinctive in specific poetical works. It reveals poem as a special sort of communication event. It defines poetry not as a formal structure or immediate event but as a continuing human process.

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