

NEW HISTORICISM: A CULTURAL POETICS

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New Historicism gives importance to historical and cultural condition of a text's production, interpretation and evaluation. Literary text is conceived to be situated within the social practices and discourses that constitute the culture of a particular time. Louis Montrose describes New Historicism as "a reciprocal concern with the historicity of texts and the textuality of history." History is considered as a text to be interpreted and literary text is a discourse which consists of representations of ideological products or cultural constructs of a specific historical condition. This approach claims that all levels of society share in the circulation of power through the production and distribution of the most elementary cultural and social texts. Private and public realms are subordinated to the logic of capitalism. Power, a pervasive human dynamic, determines our relationship to others. New Historicism rejects the Western tendency to write history from the top down and in grand narrative strokes. They try to relate interpretive problems to cultural- historical problems. The most influential critics to shape this approach are Stephen Greenblatt, Michel Foucault, Louis Montrose among others. It took shape in the late 1970s and early 1980s prominently in the writings of scholars of English Renaissance and English Romantic period. Stephen Greenblatt, one of the influential practitioners of new historicism calls this approach as "Cultural poetics". He is well known for his writing on culture, Renaissance studies, and Shakespeare. He has a wide range of intellectual and cultural interest with versatility of styles as a writer.

According to Greenblatt, the new historicism erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature. It is less concerned to establish the organic unity of literary works. It is more interested in the fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests occasions for jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses. Renaissance literary works are not fixed set of texts that are set apart from all other forms of expression and that contain their own determinate meanings or as a stable set of reflections of historical facts that lie beyond them. New historicism challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between artistic production and other kinds of social production. These

distinctions are constantly redrawn by artists, audiences, and readers. These collective social constructions link that mode to the complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs that constitute the culture.

Greenblatt views new historicism as a “collection of practices rather than a school or a method” (2005:3). Culture is viewed as a semiotic system that is a network of signs. It is resistant to disciplinary hegemony, finding in inter-disciplinary means of generating new knowledge. History is both what happened in the past and an account of those events. History is a kind of discourse that proceeds with a striking event or anecdote, which has the effect of arousing skepticism about grand historical narratives or essentializing descriptions of a historical period. New Historicists are suspicious of unified, monolithic depictions of cultures of historical periods. All histories are themselves historically contingent on the present in which they are constructed. It reexamines the relationship between literature and history. It is no longer possible to think of the past as an object that is detachable from its textual reconstruction. Social actions are always embedded in systems of public signification. Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction. Our interpretive task must be to grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text.

Culture is in a wider sense, a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs and all habits of man as a member of society. The ensemble of beliefs and practices that form a given culture function as a pervasive technology of control, a set of limits within which social behaviour must be contained, repertoire of models to which individuals must conform. Culture can be used for the study of literature. Western literature has been one to the great institutions for the enforcement of cultural boundaries through praise and blame; attack and celebration; satire and panegyric. These kind of works, when they first appear, seem immensely important, but their power begins quickly to fade when the individuals to whom the works refer begin to fade, and the evaporation of literary power continues when the models and limits that the works articulated and enforced have themselves substantially changed. The footnotes in modern editions of these works can give us the names and dates that have been lost. However, they cannot in themselves enable us to recover a sense of the stakes that once gave readers pleasure and pain. Greenblatt claims, “an awareness of culture as a complex whole can help us to recover that sense by leading us to reconstruct the boundaries upon whose existence the works were predicted”. (2005:12)

New historicists inquire through a set of cultural questions about the behaviour and models of practice enforced through the work, appeal of the work at a particular time and place, the social standing on which the work depends, the freedom of thought or movement constrained implicitly or explicitly by the work and the enlarge social structures with

which it can be connected. Such questions heighten our attention to features of the literary work that we might not have noticed and to connections among elements within the work. A full cultural analysis should be pushed beyond the boundaries of the text, to establish links between text and values, institutions, and practices elsewhere in the culture. These links cannot be a substitute for close reading. Texts are “not merely cultural by virtue of reference to the world beyond themselves; they are cultural by virtue of social values and contexts that they have themselves successfully absorbed.” (2005:12). The world is full of texts, most of which are virtually incomprehensible when they are removed from their immediate surroundings. To recover the meaning of such texts, we need to reconstruct the situation in which they were produced. Works of art contain much of this situation within themselves.

An exploration of a particular culture leads to a heightened understanding of a work of literature produced within that culture. Similarly, a careful reading of a work of literature leads to a heightened understanding to the culture within which it was produced. Although culture seems to be the servant of literary study but the fact is that literary study is the servant of cultural understanding. Culture is cultivation- the internalization and practice of a code of manners. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, Orlando's bitter complaint is not that he has been excluded from his patrimony – Orlando accepts the custom of primogeniture but rather that he is being prevented from learning in the manners of his class. The entire world of the play is engaged in articulating cultural codes of behaviour, from the elaborate, ironic training in courtship presided over by Rosalind to the humble but dignified social order by which shepherds live.

Art is an effective tool in the transmission of culture. Through it the roles of lives are communicated and passed from generation to generation. Many artists are highly self-conscious about this function. The purpose of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queen* is “to fashion a gentleman or noble person in virtuous and gentle discipline.” Thus, the culture of mixed motives and conflicting desires seemed to Spenser to generate and interlocking series of models, a moral order and a set of ethical constraints. It gives a warning against the threat of anarchy, rebellion and chaos. Works of art are themselves educational tools. They help to shape, articulate, and reproduce the prevailing ratio of mobility and constraint through their own improvisatory intelligence. In spite of the cult of originality, most artists are themselves gifted creators of variations upon received themes. Even those great writers who are regarded with special awe and who are celebrated for their refusal to parrot the clichés of their culture, tend to be particularly brilliant improvisers rather than absolute violators or pure inventors. These include Dickens, Shakespeare, Spenser to name a few.

Culture is a particular network of negotiations for the exchange of material goods, ideas and through institutions like enslavement, adoption or marriage. A culture's narratives are crucial indices of the prevailing codes governing human mobility and

constrain. Great writers are masters of such codes and specialists in cultural exchange. Their works are structures for the accumulation, transformation, representation and communication of social energies and practices. In any culture there is a general symbolic economy made up of the myriad signs that excite human desire, fear and aggression. Through their ability to construct resonant stories, their command of effective imagery, literary artists are skilled at manipulating this economy. They take symbolic materials from one zone of the culture and move them to another, augmenting their emotional force, altering their significance, linking them with other materials taken from a different zone, changing their place in a larger social design.

According to Greenblatt, the current approaches of criticism separate the study of history from the study of literature. The historians have become increasingly sensitive to the symbolic dimensions of social practice, while literary critics have turned with growing interest to the social and historical dimensions of symbolic practice. The students of literature should read toward a sense of the complex whole of a particular culture, asking fresh questions about the possible functions of works of art. Even if one begins to achieve a sophisticated historical sense of the cultural materials out of which a literary text is constructed, it is essential to study the ways in which these materials are formally put together and articulated to understand the cultural work that the text accomplishes.

In the late 1980s Greenblatt began to prefer the term 'Cultural Poetics' to describe his work rather than 'new historicism'. He defines it as the "study of the collective making of distinct cultural practices and inquiry into the relations among these practices." (1988:5). Cultural poetics had been part of Greenblatt's rhetoric since new historicism was first instituted. It is a critical practice which challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between literary foreground and political background or more generally, between artistic production. This approach requires a practitioner first to identify 'distinct cultural practices' second, to examine how the specific cultural practice was formed, third, to either argue or imply that the formation of the cultural practice was a collective effort and not the work of just one individual and fourth, to trace the relationship between one cultural practice and others. Greenblatt identifies the concerns and questions of cultural poetics as follows:

We can ask how collective beliefs and experiences were shaped, moved from one medium to another, concentrated in manageable aesthetic form, offered for consumption. We can examine how the boundaries were marked between cultural practices understood to be art forms and other, contiguous, forms of expression. We can attempt to determine how these specially demarcated zones were invested with the power to confer pleasure or excite interest or generate anxiety. (1988:5)

Greenblatt is interested in the function of cultural practices. Art has the power to entertain, to stimulate or to confound, and these functions relicensed and approved by a powerful amalgamation of the state, the artistic producers, and a consenting and consuming, public. Artistic cultural practices are part of the network of social relations and functions and therefore ought to be treated in relation to wide cultural social practices. The shift from new historicism to cultural poetics exchanges a stress on the historicity of texts for a concern with the textuality of culture. Cultural poetics is simply an extension of new critical methods from a poem to a culture. Thus new historicism is seen in a new light, not as a practice which historicizes literature and textualises history, but as a practice which hermeticises culture as a self-contained sign system and which considers any notion of reality or history as an effect of this sign system and determined entirely by representations.

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