

Introduction

Part I:

New Historicism

Any discussion of New Historicism must start with Stephen Greenblatt and his *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* in the 1980s. The New Historicist journal, *Representations*, has been described as being “self-reflexive” and concerned with “the intertextuality of texts and discourses” (Shea, 124). The school emerged to study the mutual and interactive relationship between literature and history in literary works, and how far it could reshape the concepts of people by reconstructing their culture that changes their behavior.

To understand New Historicism fully, we must compare it to its British counterpart Cultural Materialism, as both object to old historicist assumptions, and share an interest in the relationship of literary texts to historical surroundings. Nostbakken compares Cultural Materialism to New Historicism in Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory, and argues that both resist “the distinction between history as static background and literature as foregrounded subject by seeing history more a subjective interpretation than as objectifiable fact and by including literature as an interactive part of history”(22-3):

Cultural materialism shares its reaction to older approaches with New Historicism, a theory having a similar impact in the study of Renaissance texts ... Both cultural materialism and New Historicism share a focus on

power and ideology and a view that writers challenge political power by exploring its representations and exposing its inconsistencies. Dissolving the boundaries between literature and other disciplines, both likewise share the assumption that literature is completely integrated with political, social and economic forces.

(Makaryk, 23)

Arguably, both tend not to “study the text and its context, not literature and its history, but rather literature in history”(Brannigan, 3). Cultural Materialism examines the implication of literary texts in history which rely on the cultural field in which they are situated. New Historicism highlights the impact of history on literature and clarifies the contribution of literature in interpreting and reshaping history:

Greenblatt believes that the formal aspect of texts----be it historical, poetic, novelistic, or dramatic----needs to be understood through the sociological determinants at the time of production. What needs to be uncovered is the “givens” in a particular text...and so on-in order to determine the range of possible contextual meanings as well as those meanings that are excluded by definition. On the other hand, according to Greenblatt, literature needs to be reinserted into its historical context; on the other, all history needs to be read as history. (Bedford, 1)

Greenblatt, the founder of New Historicism, is influenced by two prominent thinkers: Raymond Williams and Michel Foucault.

The combined forms of expressing human experience are what called “culture”, and [Raymond William’s] analysis of these forms in what he referred to in 1977 as “Cultural Materialism.” His critical practice...[anticipates] the wide range of cultural references found in New Historicism and cultural material practices which [are] followed in 1980s. (Brannigan, 38)

Cultural Materialism and New Historicism are based on Marxist approaches. Cultural materialism has British Marxist origins as ‘[it rests upon the assumption that most of sociocultural reality is determined and thus predictable from a knowledge of material infrastructure’ (Western, 639). It is concerned with issues of class, economics, and commodification, while New Historicists are interested in questions of circulation, negotiation, profit, and exchange. Both search the sites of subversion and containment inside the literary historical criticism. While the former focuses on subversion of dominant ideologies and institutions represented in literature, the latter concentrates on containment in emphasizing that the dominant is necessarily defined by the subversion it dominates. New Historicist and Cultural Materialist critics argue that “literature does not have powerful effects on history, and vice versa, and have paid considerable attention in their work to the effects of literature both in containing and promoting subversion, and to instances of state and hegemonic control over cultural expression.”(4). In spite of their slight differences, they remain closely attached. Cultural materialists, Alan Sinfield and Jonathan Dollimore, include New Historicist articles in *Political Shakespeare: Essays on Cultural Materialism*.

It is worthwhile, within this context, to enumerate the differences between New Historicism and Historicism. New Historicism is not an extension of Historicism; rather, they are different of ideologies and methods. While Historicists conceive of literature as a passive tool to mirror society, New Historicists see the social function of literature to amend and change reality. Both are concerned with the subject of history but in different ideologies:

Both [Historicism and New Historicism] utilize an imagination capacity to step beyond the bounds of the