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New Historicism and the Interpretation of the Text

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In the wake of the revisionist historiography spawned by the New Historicists in the United States a significant change has occurred in the method of interpretation of literary texts. This change is evident in the way literary critics are increasingly employing 'thick description' borrowed from history and anthropology for elucidation of literary texts, suggesting thereby the conflation of history and literature. In a similar way, professional historians are using techinques of literary interpretation in their study of society and culture. This turn in literary criticism towards history and in historiography towards literary method has come almost inevitably after a period of turbulent exercise in what Christopher Fasch terms 'the culture of narcissism' of the 1960 and 70s, after the decline of the New Criticism and the ascendency of post-structuralism in American cultural thought. Through their filiatory acts of mutual constitution, history and literature seem to have finally come together in an inextricable way.

Initially focused upon the Renaissance texts, New Historicism has now come to occupy a wider area of operation, even crossing over its parent location in the United States to newer territories across the globe. It has made useful contribution to the growth and development of post-colonial and multi-ethnic discourses coming out of the Third World and developing nations. In India, historians of subaltern studies have been employing the methodological insights of the New Historicists. But in spite of their common goal and method of analysis, the New Historicists have not yet settled into a homogeneous group with a common programme or doctrine. In their ramifying heterogeneity they have remained somewhat amorphous, bound only loosely together by their need to overhaul literary studies with an openness denied them earlier by the idiosyncrasies of ideological criticism dominated both by the new critics and deconstructionists. This amorphousness and heterogeneity are sources of their strength, for some conditions allow them to explore what Foucault says 'gray' areas without any ingrained bias. The term 'New Historicism' was coined by Stephen Greenblatt in 1882 to describe his method of interpretation of Renaissance texts, and, by extension, the method employed by the group affiliated to his practice. Although, as he says, he used the term rather inadvertently and would prefer

'cultural poetics' to New Historicism, it has, through its wide currency, succeeded in giving a new orientation to literary studies. In his highly lyrical account of the significant features of the new historicist method of interpretation of the text encapsulated in his essay. 'Resonance and Wonder', he sums up brilliantly what he considers singularly the most important task of the New Historicist enterprise; to reclaim the text's resonance:

> The 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 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 in history and our own.[1]

By resonance, Greenblatt means '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'.[2] Greenblatt locates the source of the text's resonance in both the complex context of its formation and its subsequent transmissions. As Louis Montrose puts it succinctly: 'the historicity of the text and the textuality of history'[3] chiastically formulates New Historicism's dialogic relationship between history and literature.

New Historicism emerged as an inevitable reaction against the failure of both new critical and deconstructive approaches to grapple with the complex constitution of the literary text. 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 encroachment of the outside world. Deconstruction, on the other hand, looked down upon literature as a bourgeois phenomenon. The New Historicists tried to negotiate between these extreme positions in order to see if a common ground could be created for their mutual transaction. By dismantling the conventional structure of hierarchy in their relationship highlighted by old historicists like Tillyard and Dover Wilson in their work on English Renaissance and Shakespeare, the New Historicists effected a refiguring of their relationship by placing them on a horizontal plane where contiguity determined their mutual imbrication. In such a context the interaction between them becomes a two-way process in which the discursive function of literature can be understood in terms of its social relevance and vice versa. As Fredric

Jameson states candidly: 'History is inaccessible to us except in textual form.... It can be approached only by way of prior (re)textualization'.[4] By discarding the conventional distinction between text and context made much of by earlier historians of ideas under the impact of the rational logic of the Enlightenment, the New Historicists have tried to redefine the context-text relationship through the dynamics of their 'negotiation and exchange', to use Stephen Greenblatt's phrase. History as a repository of knowledge providing a base for literature was the product of the binarism of the West which resulted in the hegemonic discourse of history drawing its power and ideology from the belief that there is an unbridgeable gap between the self and the Other, the 'emergent' and 'the residual,' to use Raymond Williams' famous distinction. Michel de Certeau's concept of history as it was being practised in the West over the centuries was in fact a critique of the dogmatic notion of old historiography engendered by the wishful thinking of the powerful West trying to subjugate the rest of the world with the help of its entrenched determinism. Michel de Certeau's impact on the New Historicists is substantial, as is Foucault's Bakhtin's and Clifford Greetz's. In their subtle critque of what Greenblatt calls 'forms of power' and 'power of forms' immanent to old historiography the New Historicists have conflated the rhetorical strategies of literature with the material base of history.

This conflation makes it difficult to accept the new critical notion of literature as a verbal icon accessible through its graphic inscription. In a similar way, it is also equally difficult to subscribe to the Derridean notion of textuality ('wall-to-wall textuality') encompassing the world and remaining elusive in its perpetual fluidity. 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 needed to be preserved and canonized, the literature and the values it promoted were thought to be sacrosanct phenomenon 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 discovery of the mystery.

The problem with this kind of reading, as the New Historicists suggest, lies in the belief that both the text and 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. Here the New Historicists and Readers-Response theorists have something in common.

The deconstructionist's notion of the text as an ever expanding phenomenon blurring its boundary with context is equally unacceptable to New Historicists. In spite of their somewhat radical preposition involving the shifting relationship between the text and context, they never abandon the distinction between the two. In their conception of cultural poetics, history and literature still maintain their separate spheres although their model or relationship continues to remain problematic. In a deconstructive reading, on the other hand, both literature and history, text and context lose their clarity of configurations and become subsumed under the highly abstract and aporetic notion of textuality. In their mutual interaction, as the New Historicists suggest, literature and history generate tremendous 'social energy' which circulates through the entire cultural space and makes the circumambient surrounding resonate with multiple echoes. Greenblatt's word 'circulation' has a Derridean echo, as it is analogous to Derrida's 'dissemination'. But while Derrida's 'dissemination' implies the notion of centrifugality culminating in an aporia of blankness, an ultimate abandonment of meaning, and hence, by implication, the end of the quest, Greenblatt's 'circulation' suggests the constant reworking of culture through its self-renewal and self-fashioning, a process, as Greenblatt feels, is germane to all cultures. Unlike the deconstructionists, the New Historicists accord literature its unique function, a function which lifts literature from its materiality and transforms it into a dynamic mode of cultural resonance. As Greenblatt explains:

> The literary text remains the central object of my attention in this study ... because ... great art is an extraordinarily sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture.... So from the thousands (of writers available) we seize upon a handful of arresting figures who seem to contain within themselves much of what we need, who both reward intense, individual attention and promise access to larger cultural patterns.[5]

As one can see here, Greenblatt does not do away with the notion of canonicity; on the other hand, he accepts the incredible cultural role that a canonical writer exerts on others. He seems to suggest that a canonical author contains in his work the dominant ideology of his culture as well as subverts that ideology from within. This dual task, which a canonical author performs, makes the notion of the canon so much interesting for a new

historicist.

Allied with this notion of the canon is the notion of 'wonder', which Greenblatt addresses and dismisses in favour of 'resonance' in his eassy 'Resonance and Wonder' which I have already mentioned. The notion of 'wonder' is a formalist idea, associated with the text's 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. On another occasion, Greenblatt employs Benjamin's metapher of culture as 'fields of force' creating occasions for the 'Gostling of orthodox and subversive impulses.'[6] Greenblatt suggests that resonance originates in wonder and that if a text does not contain in it the elements of wonder it will fail to resonate. He concludes his essay, 'Resonance and Wonder' with this cryptic statement highlighting the subliminal connection between the two notions: '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'.[7] Although, Greenblatt suggests, both wonder and resonance work complementarily, one can only pass from wonder to resonance, not vice versa. This one way traffic seems to limit new historicism's otherwise expansive horizon and perhaps complicates the dynamic interaction between the text and context.

A bit of explanation is perhaps in order here. I shall use Greenblatt's anecdote about Cardinal Wolsey's hat which opens his essay, 'Resonance and Wonder'. The movement of the hat from its original location to its present destination as a rare exhibit in a glass case at Christ Church College, Oxford represents a complex process of cultural appropriations and usage which a text undergoes in its long trajectory. The small and seemingly obscure hat suddenly acquires a resonant character by not only its association with Cardinal Wolsey but by its successive ownership and its connection with theater. What might have been dismissed at first encounter as a mere object of wonder for its intrinsic beauty or antiquarian splendour becomes through the symbolism of its brief legend an object of uncanny resonance. It is suddenly lifted out of its materiality and is invested with a glory common to a museum piece surrounded with an 'anemonic' context. If one takes the hat as a text, its intrinsic wonder invites one to its context which reverberates through its long associations. As Greenblatt remarks: 'The peregrinations of Wolsey's had suggest that cultural artifacts do not stay still, that they exist in time, and that they are bound up with personal and institutional conflict, negotiations and appropriations'.[8] Here the word 'appropriations' does not represent connotations of commodity fetishization; it is used in the sense of the artifact's successive transformations for cultural use.

It might be useful here to connect Greenblatt's story of the hat's cultural transformation and appropriations to Jorge Luis Borges's story of Pierre Menard, the author of *The Quixote*. In a famous story titled 'Pierre Menard,

Author of the *Quixote*' (Labyrinths) Borges ponders over Menard's re-writing of parts of Cervantes's text. Although his re-writing was an euphemism for copying word for word, Borges is inclined to give him the authorship of the text. His logic seems to be similar to the one given by Greenblatt about processes of cultural appropriations. If one places the other writings by this twentieth century French author which were found after his death along with this text about the *Quixote,* one is likely to get a different picture about Menard's compelling reason to 're-create' the Cervantes text from the one which one possibly derives at first glance of his bizarre production of the earlier Spanish text. The point that Borges seems to be making is that no text can claim absolute originality to its material; its so-called purity of conception and execution is lost through its successive stages of migration through time and space. Thus a seventeenth century Spanish text is transposed into a twentieth century French text, which, in turn, generates Borges' story and this meditation by me on the nature of textual transmission. As Borges notes in his story, while the language of both texts remains the same, their respective resonance differ because their temporal contexts are different. While Cervantes's text is rhetorical, Menard's is ironic, although the language seems common to both. The celebration of rhetoric in seventeenth century Spain takes on an ironical color in twentieth century France. Therefore, as Borges says, Menard has 'enriched, by means of a new technique, the halting and the rudimentary art of reading: this new technique is that of the deliberate anachronism and erroneous attribution'. This is more or less similar to Rushdie's defence of his historical inaccuracies in *Midnight's Children* against the attacks of critics concerned about the text's deliberate manipulation and juxtaposition of historical events and topographical transpositions.

One of the charges levelled against the New Historicists is that they have displaced the centre from its original location and have relocated it on the margins without bringing about any substantive change in the system of their relationship. But this accusation, made mostly by supporters of deconstruction, does not seem to be substantiated by any internal proof. For example, J. Hills Miller's assertion that the 'turn toward history' is recent critical theory is only a kind of readjustment of positions of the center and periphery[9] seem more a defensive strategy for deconstruction than a well-directed attack against new historicism. Stephen Greenblatt is aware of this kind of criticism, and therefore, has tried to obviate it by clearly formulating the centre-margin relationship in the New Historicists thinking. According to him, the New Historicists have 'been more interested in unresolved conflict and contradiction than in integration; they are as concerned with margins as with the centre; 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'.[10] Thus the New Historicist project, as Greenblatt describes, involves not the reversing of the existing order, but problematizing that order by shifting the order of attention within the broad thematic

framework of a text. For example, an insignificant and bizarre notion like excorcism may provide a central paradigm along the chain of other paradigms to a Renaissance text.

The most fundamental aspect of New Historicism is the concern with the definition of context. The word 'context' poses some difficulty in definition for a New Historicist. Since a text sometimes produces a context for another text, like Norman Mailer's novel *The Executioner's Song*, it is not at all easy to separate the text from context in absolute terms. Since context is both proleptically and analeptically constituted in the New Historicist's definition, it remains the most fluid concept among the other concepts. To return to Borges' story, one may be curious to ask this apparently naive question: Why did a twentieth century French writer choose the rather ludicrous way of re-writing the seventeenth century Spanish text? Can one dismiss his act as an example of whimsicality? How does one define his brand of plagiarism? Why did Borges give him authoriship for a text that was not his own ? How does one contextualize Menard's text of the *Quixote* in relation to the other texts he has left behind? To answer these questions, one needs to redefine the meaning of 'context' as both determined by the contingencies of the text's originary moment of production and its displacement to a new location charged with fresh resonance. Borges also asks a very serious question in the story regarding the epistemological distinction between the original and the counterfeit. How can one distinguish the original from its reproduction? But, as Walter Benjamin makes clear, in an age of mechanical reproduction the boundary between the original and fake quickly disappears. So to talk about the purity of the original is perhaps irrelevant now. It is said that when artists like Michaelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci were creating their masterpieces, their imitations were also produced by lesser known artists interested in making some quick money. The originals and counterfeits were circulating simultaneously, threatening to dislocate the balance between high art and low art. But with the passage of time and change of context the same imitations of the originals produced during the Renaissance are now considered masterpieces along with canonical works. If a work of art acquires the status of canonicity and becomes the object of veneration through time, how can then one call one genuine and the other fake? One may also think that the so-called original painting produced by a canonical artist may have been modelled on an obscure piece by a hack artist, the trace of which may not now be available. The famous Mona Lisa which we see in the Louvre gallery today may be one of the spurious ones produced by an obscure artist in imitation of Leonardo's masterpiece. Since the painting had disappeared from the gallery for a few days and reappeared mysteriously, one has strong reasons to doubt its authenticity. But its lack of authenticity does not take away its capacity to please.

But if the measure of a work's originality is dependant on the status of its author, one is inclined to contest such a contention on the ground that the author is not a singular being but a function. The New Historicist definition

of the author is like Foucault's. In his well-known essay, 'What is an Author?' Foucault suggests that the authority of the author is derived from various institutional forces that disperse the role of the author into a complex network of power. Greenblatt also has a similar point to make with regard to the individuality of Mandeville whose paradigmatic *Travels* at the beginning of European colonialism may be taken as fictional accounts of someone who may not have existed at all. The author of *Mandeville's Travels* known as Mandeville may well have been a fictional construct. In his *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991) Greenblatt makes this sensational point in order to suggest the complex network of relationship between what is called an author and the institutional and cultural forces which determine the function of the author under a set of regulated mechanisms. Like the text, the author, in a New Historicist reading, also becomes an object of constant appropriations. As Greenblatt remarks, a work of art is 'the product of a negotiation between a creator or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society.'[11]

It is perhaps premature to predict the future of new historicism as a pedagogical activity, but its increasing popularity in the United States may indicate that it is almost under way to replace deconstruction. But it is difficult to claim that deconstruction is on the wane and has accepted its defeat from new historicism. Derrida is aware of the changing role of a cultural critic at a time when politically and culturally significant events are taking place around the globe; events which need to be addressed directly, not just through discursive metaphors. That is why, in his recent book on Europe titled *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today's Europe* (1992) he tries to grapple with the question of European re-unification by employing his deconstructive method. This direct mode of inscription, as against the typical rhetorical reading, indicates the new direction that deconstruction has taken. This direction makes deconstruction in the 1990s almost similar to new historicism. So instead of saying that deconstruction and new historicism have taken opposite paths, it is proper to suggest that they have finally met on a common ground after their diverging ways. This is perhaps a happy union, because both have developed methods of interpretation which have far-reaching implications for literary studies.

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