

## 71. Speaking with the Dead: New Historicism, Its Roots and Development as an Epoch-making Approach<sup>1</sup>

*"I began with the desire to speak with the dead."*  
(Greenblatt, 1990, p. 1)

**Özlem SAYAR<sup>2</sup>**

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### Abstract

This paper aims to examine the status, roots and development of New Historicism as an epoch-making approach in the context of critical analysis. After Stephen Greenblatt coined the term "New Historicism," Louis Montrose and Greenblatt improved the theory and applied it in different studies, thus contributing to the area. Afterwards, Catherine Gallagher and Greenblatt edited *Practicing New Historicism* as a guidebook to New Historicists, and through their studies, various critics contributed to the embodiment of this theory in the critical environment. Alternative to Historicism, New Historicism as a theory provides unconventional ways for the analysis of historical processes from different angles. This theory allows multiple perspectives in historiography, thus featuring the experiences, struggles and contributions of the minorities, the weak, the suppressed, or the invisible social groups in history. Thereby, it aims to create a more comprehensive understanding by evaluating the historical background from the eyes of different social units. New Historicism also claims that historical events are to be considered within their social, cultural, environmental and economic context, which provides a new and unconventional method of criticism. Therefore, this paper analyses New Historicism as an epochal approach with the analysis of its roots, arguments, challenges, and techniques, in addition to its relation to various theories such as Marxism, Foucauldian theory, Thick Description, Deconstruction, Historicism, and Cultural Materialism.

**Keywords:** New Historicism, History, Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose

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## Ölülerle Konuşmak: Yeni Tarihselcilik, Kökleri ve Çığır Açan bir Yaklaşım Olarak Gelişimi<sup>3</sup>

### Öz

Bu makale, literatürde çığır açan bir yaklaşım olan Yeni Tarihselciliğin eleştirel düşünce ve analiz bağlamında konumunu, köklerini ve gelişimini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Stephen Greenblatt "Yeni Tarihselcilik" terimini türettikten sonra Louis Montrose ve Greenblatt teorii geliştirerek ve farklı çalışmalarda uygulayarak alana katkı sağlamışlardır. Daha sonra Catherine Gallagher ve Greenblatt, Yeni Tarihselciler için bir rehber kitap olarak *Practicing New Historicism*'i yayımlamış ve çeşitli eleştirmenler, yaptıkları çalışmalarla bu teorinin eleştirel ortamda somutlaşmasına katkıda bulunmuştur. Tarihselciliğe alternatif bir teori olarak Yeni Tarihselcilik, tarihsel süreçlerin farklı açılardan analizi için yenilikçi ve alışılmadık yollar sunar. Bu teori tarih yazımında çoklu bakış açılarına imkan sağlayarak tarihteki azınlıkların, zayıfların, bastırılmışların veya toplum tarafından ezilip görünmezliğe itilen toplumsal grupların deneyimlerini, mücadelelerini ve katkılarını da ön plana çıkarır. Böylece tarihsel arka planı farklı toplumsal birimlerin gözünden değerlendirerek daha kapsamlı bir anlayış oluşturmayı amaçlamaktadır. Yeni Tarihselcilik ayrıca daha geniş bir açıdan bakarak tarihi olayların sosyal, kültürel, çevresel ve ekonomik bağlamları içinde de değerlendirilmesi gerektiğini iddia eder ve bu da yeni ve kendinden önceki eleştiri yöntemlerine meydan okuyan özgün bir eleştiri yöntemi sağlar. Bu nedenle, bu çalışma Yeni Tarihselciliği, bu teorinin Marksizm, Foucaultcu teori, Yoğun Betimleme, Yapıbozum, Tarihselcilik, ve Kültürel Materyalizm gibi çeşitli teorilerle ilişkisinin yanı sıra, kökleri, argümanları, iddiaları ve tekniklerinin analiziyle yenilikçi bir yaklaşım olarak analiz etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Yeni Tarihsel Teori, Tarih, Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose

### Introduction

As a prolific American Shakespearean, critic, theorist, academician and writer, Stephen Greenblatt blazed a trail in history. Together with Louis Adrian Montrose, who was also an American scholar and theorist, Greenblatt pioneered the reconsideration of the literary and non-literary texts in the context of history, thus shedding light on the active role of these texts besides historiography in reflecting the past (Barry, 2017, pp. 175-176). In *The Greenblatt Reader*, edited by Michael Payne, Homi K. Bhabha states about Stephen Greenblatt that, as a founder of this theory, Greenblatt "has done more than establish a critical school; he has invented a habit of mind for literary criticism, which is indispensable to the temperament of our times, and crucial to the cultural of the past" (2005, n.p.). By his initiatives and

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success in leading this newly emerging theory, Greenblatt directed literary criticism into a new path and shaped the attitude towards historiography.

Stephen Greenblatt first coined ‘New Historicism’ as a term in his introduction to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982)—which also appeared in the 15<sup>th</sup> volume of *Genre* in the same year. He described it as an attitude that “erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature. It tends to ask questions about its own methodological assumptions and those of others...” (1982, p. 5), emphasising the unsettling principles of New Historicism. New Historicism supports the idea that literature and history have developed hand in hand and the historical process can also be traced in texts in many areas; that is, texts, not necessarily historical or literary, reflect history while history itself is a text already written by a writer, which questions the objectivity in history recording. In this respect, New Historicism is an epoch-making approach which challenges the overall belief and trust in historical texts. According to this theory, while the historical events affect the literary works of a society, the written works in that society also shape its history and collective mind by interpretation so that literary texts can also lead the history and upcoming works (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 2).

The life story of a convict, Gary Gilmore, about which Greenblatt wrote in “Towards a Poetics of Culture”, exemplifies it (1989, p. 10). In 1976, Gilmore, as a convict, demanded to be executed in Utah, though this practice was forbidden years ago in the USA, and his demand resulted in chaos. A novel on his story with the letters between Gilmore and his girlfriend was published, and he became eminent in the media thanks to those texts. Then, within the ongoing discussions, he was executed by firing squad. Shortly, the texts related to Gilmore intervened in history and made execution practicable again, though it was abolished beforehand. Thus, literary and non-literary texts could shape history. Additionally, besides unsettling, the act of challenging was leading New Historicism to deal not with organic unity in literature but mostly with such “fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses” (Greenblatt, 1982, p. 6), which implied that the new way of criticism would unsettle the bases of analysis.

In addition to Greenblatt, Louis Adrian Montrose was also one of the forerunners of New Historicism. In this context, Montrose defined New Historicism as “a reciprocal concern with the historicity of the texts and the textuality of the history” (1989, p. 20), which, as a criterion, grounded the basis for the New Historicist method. The historicity of texts refers to the cultural, social and historical traces in the texts. At the same time, the textuality of history means firstly the inaccessibility of the complete and authentic knowledge about the past, which makes history a lived and narrated experience; secondly, the subjective story-telling of narrators who call themselves historians and their works history. The linearity in the sequence of events in history was questioned, and historians were regarded as writers who linked and united parts of history with comments and fantasies. Thus, the borders between literature and history were removed, and the Renaissance canons were resituated interrelatedly with other genres and texts “in relation to contemporaneous social institutions and non-discursive practices” (Montrose, 1989, p. 17). As a result, the privilege of literature was eliminated on behalf of “parallel reading” and “equal weighing” among the texts of different kinds, such as letters, documentaries, and historical recordings, which resulted in the inclusion of non-literary works in research, and caused the transformation of the study of “contexts” into “co-texts” (Barry, 2017, pp. 175-177). Therefore, because literary texts were analysed with equal standards and read in parallel with the non-literary ones, literature was often discussed in the frame of non-literary texts in the New Historical studies.

The purpose of this method was to draw attention equally to the literary and non-literary works with the historical period, culture and society in which they were written. Montrose also supported this notion in “Of Gentlemen and Shepherds: The Politics of Elizabethan Pastoral Form” by presenting literary and non-literary texts as an integral part of social and historical progress in society; for example, the pastoral forms in Elizabethan period prevailed not only in literature but also “in religious, political, and didactic texts and in figurative discourse of letters, speeches, and recorded conversations” which had in common “a nexus of conventional persons, places, animals, objects, activities, and relations” (1983, p. 420). Therefore, “the written word is self-consciously embedded in specific communities, life situations, structures of powers” (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 7); by analysing the texts parallelly, the researchers would ascertain the political, social, cultural and historical aspects of the period when the texts were produced. Thus, in light of its challenging arguments and methods, this paper will analyse New Historicism’s roots, development, and relations with other theories as an epoch-making approach which speaks with the dead in history both to unveil the hidden and ignored parts of historical background and to present a more comprehensive understanding of the past.

### **Literature, Culture and History**

Attributing Shakespeare, Montrose defined poets as lunatics shaping fantasies of society with their writings as applied in Elizabethan literature (1988, p. 31). In the patriarchal period, Queen Elizabeth represented the social paradox with her position as a queen and gender as a virgin female because the male-dominant society was being ruled by a virgin female power who was neither politically nor sexually possessed and suppressed by the male. Her political position and virginity were emphasised and maintained thanks to literature—especially drama—as frequently highlighted in plays and literary works. Montrose implied that the virginity and political power of Queen Elizabeth were conveyed today thanks to literary works and also often mentioned in historical texts; hence, it was evidence of the historicity of texts and the textuality of history, which enabled the maintenance of literary and historical processes hand in hand (1988, pp. 45-55). Thus, the literary work in the Elizabethan period was “a creation of Elizabethan culture: for it also creates the culture by which it is created, shapes the fantasies by which it is shaped, begets that by which it is begotten” (Montrose, 1988, p. 56).

The part of literature in the bodies of culture and history was clearly emphasised, and the objectivity and truth in history were critically questioned in this sense. Greenblatt declared that “the historical evidence is unreliable”, of which colonial history was the most evident proof (1990, pp. 22, 33). To New Historicism, like literature, history is a type of writing based on experienced facts, either deliberate or indeliberate imagination, subjectivity and interpretation, which does not have certainty and clarity. Similarly, literature also has imagination, interpretation and subjectivity with experienced facts. In this context, Hayden White implied that writing history was a kind of story-telling and the task of the historians was to form a coherent story on facts “the story to be told about the facts is constituted as a story of a particular kind”, which was history (1986, p. 59). Thus, the New Historicists regarded historical texts as works grounded on some significant events in general but including the subjective thoughts and comments of the author in detail, which is why they familiarised it with literature and eliminated the margins between literature and history.

Montrose stated, “The Elizabethan playhouse, playwright, and player exemplify the contradictions of Elizabethan society and make those contradictions their subjects” (1980, p. 57). By discussing the Elizabethan background, he deduced, “If the world is a theatre and the theatre is an image of the world, then by reflecting upon its own artifice, the drama is holding the mirror up to the nature” (1980, p. 57).

Referring to Montrose's statements, Greenblatt inferred that literary pieces were neither fixed works on fixed expressions nor mere stable mirrors of the historical facts behind them. Literature and texts would present happenings with interpretation, imagination, and assumptions shaped by the cultural and social forms as they were in nature as a constructed unity. To New Historicism, the individual would represent a construct, not an essence, which means his culture, history, and society constructed man. An interpreter individual textualised history as a historian; therefore, history was not an objective overall truth but a narration based on cultural, social, political and historical phenomena (Howard, 1986, p. 23).

Greenblatt mainly challenged the division between the "literary foreground" and "political background", in addition to the artistic works and other social productions (1982, p. 6). Focusing on the distinctions, he defended that these divided parts were interrelated, and the division was not intrinsic to the texts. However, it was determined by the outer subjects such as artists or readers. The determiners were the "collective social organizations" which link the divided parts within "the complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole"; "in this light, the study of genre is an exploration of the poetics of culture", New Historicism (Greenblatt, 1982, p. 6).

### **Representations**

As a theory, approach or movement, New Historicism was neither planned nor formulated beforehand; instead, it emerged as a reaction by some critics who were dissatisfied with American New Criticism, rethinking the interdisciplinary, literary and cultural readings as a result of "an unsettling of established norms and procedures, a mingling of dissent and restless curiosity" (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 2). After several meetings, the group of restless critics decided to publish a journal for their studies on literature and culture. Thus, *Representations* was launched; however, because of interdisciplinary analysis and different areas of studies "which were the explosive mix of nationalism, anthropology, poetry, theology, and hermeneutics" (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, pp. 4-5), the editorial statement could not be written (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, pp. 3-5). Then, to present instruction about New Historicism and a guide for New Historical studies in 2000, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt published *Practicing New Historicism*, including some earlier essays in *Representations*.

In the New Historical studies, generalisation was not appreciated because the variety in culture, art, history, and society provided the diversity of materials to evaluate individual adaptations. That is why the urges behind *Representations* were "the fascination with the particular, the wide-ranging curiosity, the refusal of universal aesthetic norms, and the resistance to formulating an overarching theoretical program", with the contribution of Johann Gottfried von Herder's theory on "the mutual embeddedness of art and history" (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, pp. 6-7). Observing the interaction between art, history and society, namely folk and the spirit of time, New Historicism emerged as a theory investigating the process of adaptation and contact of art with the social, historical and political bodies. *Representations* played the role of shelter for the New Historical writings in the birth of this challenging approach.

### **"Self-Fashioning" in Poetics of Culture, Cultural Poetics or New Historicism**

Before Greenblatt used the term 'New Historicism', he applied "poetics of culture" and "cultural poetics" in a similar context in 1980 in *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, which he wrote a new preface to and republished in 2005. Again, in his essay in H. Aram Veenser's *The New Historicism*

and the first chapter of his *Shakespearean Negotiations*, he preferred to call his study “poetics of culture” (1990, p. 5). In “Resonance and Wonder”, he used the term “New Historicism” to define “the scholarly practice that I myself represent” (1991, p. 42). Indeed, he explained the emergence of “cultural poetics” in “Towards a Poetics of Culture” (1989), which was later published in Veese’s book. Greenblatt was teaching courses named ‘Marxist Aesthetics’ at Berkeley in the 1970s, and a student accused him of being a Bolshevik or Menshevik. Being none of them, Greenblatt changed the name of his course to ‘Cultural Poetics’ (1989, p. 2). Then, Greenblatt frequently applied ‘Cultural Poetics’ instead because ‘New Historicism’ sounded like something that replaced an old theory—historicism in this context—and created arguments in the field (Brannigan, 1998, p. 91). Though Greenblatt preferred different terms, the practice was widely accepted as ‘New Historicism’ in literary discourse.

Self-fashioning constituted the essence of New Historicism, poetics of culture or cultural poetics. ‘Fashioning’ as a word was used by Edmund Spenser in 1589 to refer to the “designating the forming of a self, ... a distinctive personality, a characteristic address to the world, a consistent mode of perceiving and behaving” (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 2), inspired by Spenser, Greenblatt emphasised the essentiality of the analysis of self-fashioning to highlight ‘poetics of culture’. In this context, literary criticism was considered an interpretation of literature as a system in a culture, and its main aim was to appreciate ‘poetics of culture’. In this sense, the texts written in the sixteenth century were essential for the New Historicists because

Each of these texts is viewed as the focal point for converging lines of force in sixteenth-century culture; their significance for us is not that we may see through them to underlying and prior historical principles but rather that we may interpret the interplay of their symbolic structures with those perceivable in the careers of their authors and in the larger social world as constituting a single, complex process of self-fashioning and, through this interpretation, come closer to understanding how literary and social identities were formed in this culture. (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 6)

Greenblatt emphasised that the purpose of ‘poetics of culture’ or ‘cultural poetics’ was not merely to comprehend history but to analyse the career of the author, the literary developments, and social life in the period by interpreting the text. In this process, self-fashioning meant designing the ‘self’ according to the culture, history and language; thus, cultural poetics aimed to analyse ‘I’ and

... to achieve a concrete apprehension of the consequences for human expression—for the “I”—of a specific form of power, power at once localized in particular institutions—the court, the church, the colonial administration, the patriarchal family—and diffused in ideological structures of meaning, characteristic modes of expression, recurrent narrative patterns. (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 6)

The representation of self-fashioned ‘I’ in the texts would enable the New Historicists to access the forms of power such as state, church, family and ideologies in culture in the sphere of ‘I’. In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Greenblatt studied six writers, most of whom somehow experienced social mobility and had reflected the life, culture, customs and structures of lower and upper classes in their works so that Greenblatt could have a broad scope in the analysis of the English Renaissance. Thus, the poetics of culture, cultural poetics or New Historicism deduced in texts provided a comprehensible understanding of the age at which the works were written.

### Marxism and New Historicism

Marxism was one of the factors that influenced New Historicism. Greenblatt stated that he was teaching courses named “Marxist Aesthetics” in the 1970s, and he felt uneasy about the lack of enough attention to the literary aspects of Marxism (1989, p. 2). To begin with, according to Marx and Engels, the ruling

class, which held economic and political power, would determine the interests, ideologies, cultures, and politics of society (1991, p. 114). It created the question of the representation of subjects in mass, which resulted in class distinctions and the suppression of peasants with a falsely stimulated conscience shaped by the ruling class's ideology. In "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", while describing the peasants, Marx and Engels (1968) said that:

They are consequently incapable of enforcing their class interests in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented. Their representative must at the same time appear as their master, as an authority over them, as an unlimited governmental power that protects them against the other classes and sends them rain and sunshine from above. (p. 171)

The peasants, as subalterns, were repressed and eliminated from social mobility and were not recognised as acting individuals. In this sense, as the ruling class was the master who determined the progress of peasants, it as the hegemonic class also controlled the historical process in the direction of its ideology. At the same time, the history of the oppressed was being shadowed. Thus, by shedding light on the contradiction and conflict in history and representation, Marxism "opened the way for a full-scale examination and challenge of the processes and forces of ideology or power, and this is the task of New Historicism ..." (Brannigan, 1998, p. 29). Thus, observing society's ignorance and the upper class's control of subalterns, New Historicism mainly focused on representing the marginalised ones, such as the politically, socially and economically suppressed individuals in history, by challenging the idea that history was objectively written.

Inspired by Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Marxism defended that literature was shaped by and could reflect the historical process and the dynamics in society, which already had conflicts in themselves; therefore, Marxism displayed a resistant attitude against the supremacy of history and led the forthcoming theories to question the reliability in historical works and featured the relation between art and history (Eagleton, 2012, pp. 18-22). In addition, the glossary that Greenblatt applied in his writings would remind the Marxist discourse. For example, in "Towards a Poetics of Culture," words such as production, consumption, currency, oscillation and exchange, which have connotations on the economy, were often used; thus, a new discourse in New Historicism was shaped. Greenblatt considered producing a work of art to be the negotiation between the creator and society. Then, the artist as a creator would present his/her currency—his work—as a means of exchange, and s/he would get a return from society—the interest and pleasure of reading his work (1989, p. 12). By applying these words, Greenblatt displayed how to include Marxist terminology in literature and underlined the literary aspects of Marxist theory.

### **Michel Foucault and New Historicism**

Michel Foucault was also one of the key figures in the emergence and development of New Historicism. In the preface of *Renaissance Self Fashioning from More to Shakespeare*, Greenblatt explained how Foucault changed Greenblatt's horizon in the late 1970s. Foucault's seminar at Berkeley stood as the turning point for Greenblatt. Beforehand, at Cambridge, Raymond Williams was supervising Greenblatt, which influenced him on Cultural Materialism, which had similar tendencies with New Historicism as a theory (Brannigan, 1998, p. 36). When Greenblatt listened to Foucault's speech at Berkeley, he felt excited because of Foucault's innovative ideas on the relation between individual experiences and social institutions: "There was, in short, a deep, hidden, necessary relation between the sense of self and a social institution that claimed for itself the power to reward and to punish" (Greenblatt, 2005, p. xv), and the possibility of observing the retreat and resistance against the totalising institution and "the project of grasping how we have become the way we are" (Greenblatt, 2005, p. xvii) were the points that

interested Greenblatt most. With the help of his courses at Berkeley, University of California, Foucault taught and influenced many New Historicists such as Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, Catherine Gallagher and Jonathan Goldberg (Brannigan, 1998, p. 36).

Foucauldian theory was rooted in Nietzsche's ideas on history, which combined ideologies with anthropological figures in cultural and social interests (Brannigan, 1998, p. 47). Foucault stated that the new understanding of history did not favour linearity in the historical process anymore, but the discontinuities and ruptures were crucial in the new age. "The history of thought, of knowledge, of philosophy, of literature seems to be seeking, and discovering, more and more discontinuities, whereas history itself appears to be abandoning the irruption of events in favor of stable structures" (Foucault, 2002, p. 6). The new understanding of history was resisted by eliminating the standards in practice. Thus, the rejection of linearity in history led the New Historicists to focus on the discontinuities, ruptures, ignored and hidden spaces in literature and social, cultural and historical processes.

To Foucault, genealogy, a term borrowed from Nietzsche, as a method would pursue not the origins of the historical events or patterns but the associations, "etymological, psychological and ideological ancestors of modern social, cultural or political practices", which evaluated each event as a single and an apart discontinuity (Brannigan, 1998, p. 44). In addition, Foucault applied 'episteme' for the total set of discursive practices, systems, languages, formations, and, shortly, the factors represented in a community (Foucault, 2005, p. 211). The history of a nation was shaped by the episteme, social and cultural phenomenon in that society. Foucault applied an archaeological method to untie the knots that historians tied. He supported the idea that history was made up of discontinuities and ruptures, and the ideas of historians linked the discontinues to make a linear flow; therefore, to analyse history, a researcher had to study layer by layer like an archaeologist to distinguish the historian's episteme from the flow because while, on the one hand, there were historical events, on the other hand, the episteme of the historians took part in shaping the history transmitted from generation to generation (Foucault, 2005, pp. 159-90). In addition to 'episteme', Foucault also emphasised that the discourse, which was the "practices that systematically form the objects of which they [community] speak" (Foucault, 2005, p. 54) and signs in those practices, would also direct historian's attitude in writing. Thus, historians had to be aware of their biases and individual approaches influenced by episteme and discourse, which would support the idea that objectivity in history was to be questioned (Bressler, 1994, p. 132). The fact that history was not linear and objective inspired the New Historicists to reconsider and remove the borders between history and literature.

Additionally, Foucault guided the New Historicists in studying the Renaissance period in Britain in the context of power relations in society. He stated that "power is everywhere; not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere" (1978, p. 93), implying that power would be implemented in every aspect, such as in social relations, discourse and institutional regulations. With the turn from the classical episteme to the modern, the Renaissance period was to be analysed regarding power relations in society, which directed the New Historicists to it (Brannigan, 1998, p. 50). While Marxist theory referred to the class distinctions and power applied by the ruling and hegemonic class, the Foucauldian approach attributed a broader aspect to it by handling the subject and power relations in general. Foucault did not focus on class distinctions; his objective was to consider the individual as a subject and the power relations around him/her as the dominating force controlling his/her interests.

In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1995), Foucault associated the social control mechanisms with the panopticon eye by referring to Jeremy Bentham's "The Plan of Panopticon", which



described an architectural figure in the centre of which would be a tower with an observer in it who was invisible from outside, around of which with the individuals in cells that had two walls with the other adjacent cells and two windows one towards the tower and the other to the outside and the cells were to be all lighted that would make the resident in the cell visible all the time by the observer so that while guaranteeing the protection of the resident from the others in cells, the control mechanism in the tower would serve as an ultimate power by continuously watching his/her actions (Foucault, 1995, p. 171). There would be a dilemma in the situation of the resident in the cell because the observer was not seen, and it would be uncertain if the resident was being watched or not, which is why, taking account of being observed by the observer, s/he had to always act according to the rules that the controller determined. At this point, the resistance and activity of the individual would determine the power relations.

In “The Subject and Power,” Foucault describes subjection as the surrenderer of individuals to forms of power and emphasises the possibility of struggle against subjection (2001, pp. 320-333). He wrote that

the struggle against ... the submission of subjectivity, [in addition to the] forms of domination and exploitation ... in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries ... should be analysed as a great crisis of the Western experience of subjectivity and a revolt against the kind of religious and moral power that gave form ... to this subjectivity. (Foucault, 2001, p. 332)

In the Renaissance period, Western society was experiencing a movement of awakening against the subjectivity enforced during the Middle Ages. Foucault affirmed that the reversal in the position of adversaries would depend on the resistance against the forms of subjectivity (Foucault, 2001, p. 347), which declared the possibility of overcoming subjectivity as a free individual if the individual struggled enough. Thus, the individual started to intervene in history in the Renaissance, so the New Historicists studied the process of the individual’s inclusion in the social, historical and cultural process within the mutual relations and effects between them.

### **Clifford Geertz: Thick Description**

Geertz defined men as “cultural artifacts” (1973, p. 51) and emphasised the role of culture’s effects on the nature of individuals by declaring that “there is no such thing as a human nature independent of culture” (1973, p. 49). Including cultural elements would sustain the process of shaping men’s identity: “By submitting himself to governance by symbolically mediated programs for producing artifacts, organizing social life, or expressing emotions, a man determined, if unwittingly, the culminating stages of his own biological destiny. Quite literally, though quite inadvertently, he created himself” (1973, p. 48). The idea of man creating himself as cultural artefacts inspired the New Historicists in terms of self-fashioning, which was also seen in Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self Fashioning from More to Shakespeare* (Brannigan, 1998, p. 33).

In this context, the New Historicists searched for the answer to how culture influenced the shaping of an individual’s self. In “Culture”, Greenblatt stated that culture had power over the constraint and mobility of the individual in society because it would serve as a control mechanism with its standards on social behaviour and rules that the individual had to conform to; thus, the analysis of culture in texts would reveal the accumulation, exchange, transformation and communication in the social institutions and practices (1995, pp. 225-230). Culture and the literature produced in a society were considered unified because, in that society, the analysis of culture would give information about its literature while the literature would reflect its culture. That is why “art is an important agent then in the transmission of culture. It is one of the ways in which the roles by which men and women are expected to pattern their

lives are communicated and passed from generation to generation” (Greenblatt, 1995, p. 228). In New Historicism, culture was considered a controller, regulator and limiting factor in the individual’s life, and a transmitted heritage by art and literature as a form of accumulation from previous generations.

As an anthropologist, Geertz regarded culture as a text and borrowed the term “thick description” to define how cultural and literary texts were to be analysed (1973, p. 6). Thick description was an anthropological method of data collection, close reading and detailed analysis of the texts. To Geertz, the researchers had to “in short, descend into detail” (1973, p. 53) and study the texts layer by layer as anthropologists did to elicit the stages of accumulation and exchange in literature, culture and history. Starting from Geertz’s ‘thick description’, the New Historicists determined their way of analysis; thus, beyond close reading, the New Historical readings became “more often skeptical, wary, demystifying, critical and even adversarial” (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 9). In this context, women’s studies and feminism encouraged the New Historicists to study new objects that were neglected or not studied beforehand to unsettle the hierarchies (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 11). The ignored texts and minor authors were read side by side with the canonical works; thus, the canons could be compared and judged in the same standards as non-canonical or ignored works, which created the idea of equal weighing of texts analysed in New Historicism.

Additionally, attributing to Montrose’s ‘the textuality of history, the historicity of text’, Barry explained “equal weighing” as “parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts”, which eliminated the privilege of literary ones, which is why “a new historical essay will place the literary text within the ‘frame’ of a non-literary text” (2017, pp. 175-176). Since New Historical studies also looked for the political and ideological conflicts of culture in which the texts were produced and focused on the representation of historical events “in newspapers, magazines, tracts, government documents, stories, speeches, drawings, and photographs”, they supported the parallel reading and equal weighing of the texts to discover “what do these representations tell ... about how ... [the historical event] shaped and was shaped by the culture that represented it” (Tyson, 2006, p. 282). In this concern, literary text lost its privilege in a New Historical study because it “is not about “demoting” art or discrediting aesthetic pleasure; rather it is concerned with finding the creative power that shapes literary works outside the narrow boundaries in which it had hitherto been located, as well as within those boundaries” (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 12). The inner concept or aesthetics in literary texts and the outside of boundaries meant that the factors that feed and shape those texts were essential in the New Historical analysis. Shortly, starting from the thick description, the New Historicist researchers would read the texts in detail, acting like anthropologists, then study both literary and non-literary texts in equal weight, and lastly, analyse both the contextual elements in a text and the outside factors that shape it. Geertz provided a ground for the New Historical studies through thick description. Thus, New Historicism determined its particular way of analysis by removing boundaries between canonical and non-canonical, literary and non-literary products.

### **Jacques Derrida, Deconstruction and New Historicism**

Adopting Jacques Derrida’s statement, “there is nothing outside the text” in analysis (Derrida, 1997, p. 163), New Historicism displayed a deconstructive attitude because one of its arguments was the textuality of history; however, it differed from deconstruction in its evaluation of the historicity of different types of texts and in its aim “to specify the intriguing enigmas of particular times and places that distinguishes our analyses from the contemporary pan-textualism of the deconstructionists”

(Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 14). Moreover, Gallagher and Greenblatt detailed the difference between Deconstructivism and New Historicism by stating that:

Although maintaining that there is nothing outside of the text, no place of simple and transparent meaning where the slipperiness of the sign system can be escaped, deconstructionists nonetheless tend to draw their examples from the literary canon. While we frequently explore other kinds of texts, they urge that literary language uniquely exposes to scrutiny a textuality that operates everywhere and throughout history. Hence, in addition to skipping the levels of analysis that interest us most—the culturally and historically specific—deconstructionism also seems to re-erect the hierarchical privileges of the literary. (2000, p. 14)

New Historicism's insistence on the equal weighing of literary and non-literary texts made it distinctive from Deconstructivism. Deconstructive studies considered literary texts privileged, while the New Historicists supported parallel reading of the texts from different areas in addition to literature. 'There is nothing outside the text' meant different in these theories because while the Deconstructionists emphasised literary canons by this statement, the New Historicists applied it to challenge the objectivity of history that was widely appreciated beforehand.

### **Historicism and New Historicism**

To begin with, New Historicism was not the opposite theory of historicism; it was instead a different approach. The difference between historicism and New Historicism lay firstly in their treatment towards the text. Historicism regarded text as an objective mimesis of historical facts; however, New Historicism questioned the objectivity of history by attributing it to the cultural and social factors that shape the texts. New Historicism challenged the accuracy of the context in the texts because it claimed that the interpretation of the narrator and the interconnectedness of cultural, political and social factors behind the text were the determinants of its context and content. Thus, the text was neither a unity nor a complete form; it was a heterogeneous combination of cultural, social, textual, and individual factors. To define "the relationship between a work of art and the historical events to which it refers", Greenblatt stated that literary critics applied some terms and "speak of allusion, symbolization, allegorization, representation, and above all mimesis. Each of these terms has a rich history and is virtually indispensable, and yet they all seem curiously inadequate" (1989, p. 11); he implied that the techniques that had been applied to study history did not correspond to the needs of the method of New Historicism. That is why, because today was regarded as the accumulation of yesterday according to New Historicism, the materials had to contain not only the historical texts but also the "official documents, private papers, newspaper clippings, and so forth" (Greenblatt, 1989, p. 11), which pointed to the equal weighing and parallel reading of varied kinds of texts. In this concern, Historicism was based on the mimesis of the past in history, while New Historicism supported the mutual shaping of historical, cultural, political and social integrities.

To analyse a text from a New Historical perspective, "we must know ... the societal concerns of the author, of the historical times evidenced in the work, and of other cultural elements exhibited in the text before we can devise a valid interpretation" (Bressler, 1994, p. 131). In other words, while Historicism widely accepted the reliability of one narration of the historical process—mainly in the canonical texts—and treated it as an overall past, New Historicism handled the past in different dimensions within cultural, social, political and literary concerns. It approved the diversity in the perception of history. Thus, the New Historicists read texts such as letters, documentaries, diaries, recordings, and newspapers alongside the historical texts to analyse and interpret the process. Besides, as a return of this attitude, the ignored, denigrated, or minor texts were considered major ones, eliminating the

canons' dominion in the area (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, pp. 10-11). Additionally, Historicism focused mainly on the chains of events and the relationships among some significant characters. At the same time, New Historicism featured the individual, who was primarily a marginalised or oppressed one, as an acting and active agent in society so that every individual in the community would get a chance to be seen in the flow of history.

### The English Renaissance

*“A new kind of activity is gaining prominence in Renaissance studies: a sustained attempt to read literary texts of the English Renaissance in relation to other aspects of the social formation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.”*

(Howard, 1986, p. 13)

To Greenblatt, the reason why the New Historicists studied mainly the Renaissance period, in the beginning, was the uniqueness of the 16<sup>th</sup> century as the age of selves and fashioning and the fact that there was “less autonomy in self fashioning in the sixteenth century than before, that family, state and religious institutions impose a more rigid and far-reaching discipline upon their middle class and aristocratic subjects” (2005, p. 1) proved that the self-fashioning reflected the impacts of institutions on the identity of selves. That “Perhaps the simplest observation ... is that in the sixteenth century there appears to be an increased self-consciousness about the fashioning of human identity as a manipulable, artful process” (Greenblatt, 2005, p. 2) was the core of the Renaissance-focused New Historicism because, on the one hand, awareness on self-fashioning was rising; on the other hand, it was observed that the control mechanisms such as religion, state, society and culture shaped the human identity, which justified the undeniable role of these mechanisms in self fashioning.

Foucault was the critical theorist who directed the New Historicists by considering the Renaissance “as the turn from the classical episteme to the modern episteme, and [the New Historicists] ... have followed both Foucault's conceptions of power and his analysis of critical transformations in Western discourse” (Brannigan, 1998, p. 50). The Renaissance was a transitional period between the ancient and modern ages because of being “a cultural epoch ... [as] the age of discovery of man the individual, the age of the revival of classical culture, the age of the secularization of life” (Howard, 1986, p. 15). It was the process of individual awakening and discovery of the self in the mass-like self-fashioning of man in New Historicism, proving that the atmosphere in the late-twentieth century was similar to the Renaissance's.

... the new historical critics so often make the period intelligible by narratives of rupture, tension, and contradiction, as, for example, when Greenblatt talks about the gap between the Renaissance ideology of human freedom and the actuality of Renaissance man as the subject of determining power relations or, as we shall see, when Louis Montrose stresses the enormous contradictions in the social formation which Renaissance literature attempted to mediate. And, as I have been hinting, these narratives of discontinuity and contradiction are narratives which owe much to the way late twentieth-century man construes his own historical condition. (Howard, 1986, p. 17)

The New Historicists searched for the discontinuities, ruptures, and breaks in history because they objected to the idea that history was linear. The Renaissance period served well for their project because it was the discontinuity and break in the history of individuals. In the Renaissance period, the individual started to question and suspect the hegemonic institutions such as the state and church, which created a contradiction between representation and reality. For example, in theatre, plays mainly emphasised the control of the state over society while the individual was gradually changing and questioning reality

(Howard, 1986, p. 17). Likewise, the New Historicists unsettled the established norms about textual and historical analysis and created a break, a rupture and a discontinuity in the field.

### **New Historicism and Cultural Materialism**

British critic Raymond Williams, the instructor of Greenblatt, initially coined ‘Cultural Materialism’ as a term, which was theorised by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1990, p. 91). “A cultural history must address not only texts, but the institutions and formations that organize, and organized by, textualities, inscribing in and through them the contests of ideologies, of subjectivities” (Dollimore & Sinfield, 1990, pp. 98-99). Thus, the textual analysis emphasises that politics, institutions, theories, and history were grounds for Cultural Materialism. In this term, the word ‘culture’ would include all kinds of culture, such as in musical or televisional forms, regardless of high or low, and the word ‘materialism’ was the opposite of idealism, which meant that culture could neither transcend the material forms nor be detached from them (Barry, 2017, p. 186). Thus, the researchers would analyse culture in a detailed study of other forms, such as fictional, social and political forces.

New Historicism and Cultural Materialism are similar because the first deals with analysing texts and history, while the latter mainly focuses on the relationship between texts and culture. However, they differed from each other in some ways. For example, Cultural Materialism was a British-based theory, while New Historicism was American-based. Moreover, Cultural Materialism highlighted the struggle of men and women for their history while New Historicism underlined the ideological and social interventions in the process of their struggle; that is why Cultural Materialism had “political optimism” while New Historicism included “political pessimism” (Barry, 2017, p. 187). Barry claimed that by differing from New Historicism, Cultural Materialism did not take the risks of post-structuralism as New Historicism did by getting influenced by the post-structuralist methods. To Cultural Materialists, post-structuralism did not guarantee the truth or knowledge in a text; however, the New Historicists defended themselves by declaring that being affected by post-structuralism did not mean rejecting either truth or knowledge, but it meant getting a chance to discover new aspects of the field despite the risks. Additionally, in the process of analysis, the co-texts in the New Historical studies would include the contemporary texts while the cultural materialist co-texts would be within the current period regardless of the age difference; that is, “the New Historicist situates the literary text in the political situation of its own day, while the cultural materialist situates it within that of ours” (Barry, 2017, p. 188).

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the ground of the New Historical criticism was based firstly on regarding man as a construct—constructed by forms like culture, society, politics, and ethics he was born in—and secondly on accepting that history was textualised by an interpreter called a historian; thus, history was not objective because of the interpretive narration (Howard, 1986, p. 23). In this context, history was produced by the man shaped by the forms mentioned above, which is why history was relative and interpretive as a textual body. Greenblatt stated that any kind of literary criticism related to this practice “must be conscious of its own status as interpretation and intent upon understanding literature as a part of the system of signs that constitutes a given culture; its proper goal, however difficult to realize, is a poetics of culture” (2005, pp. 4-5). Culture, literature, politics, and history interact and cooperate in the New Historical literary criticism.

New Historicism was mainly concerned with the marginalised, ignored and forgotten details and items. “To try to track what can only be glimpsed, as it were, at the margins of the text ... [with an] insight into the half-hidden cultural transactions through which great works of art are empowered”, a New Historical study had to “look less at the presumed centre of the literary domain than at its borders”, and the priority in the analysis had to be the “subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a negotiation between joint-stock companies, ... complex, ceaseless borrowings and lendings” (Greenblatt, 1990, pp. 4, 7). Thanks to its principles of equal weighing and parallel reading of the texts, the ignored or unheeded topics would be studied, and new perspectives would be brought to the field.

New Historicism also brought some transformations into the field:

(1) the recasting of discussions about “art” into discussions of “representations”; (2) the shift from materialist explanations of historical phenomena to investigations of the history of the human body and the human subject; (3) the discovery of unexpected discursive contexts for literary works by pursuing their “supplements” rather than their overt thematics; (4) the gradual replacement of “ideology critic” with discursive analysis. (Gallagher & Greenblatt, 2000, p. 17)

Analysing the representation of supplements in art and literature would give information about the social discourse, culture, politics, history and society that shape human identity. That is why the factors behind and beyond the text rather than the items that the text would overtly present became essential in New Historicism. Considering the text as a social production, Bressler defined the areas successively to focus on for a New Historicist as “(1) the life of the author; (2) the social rules and dictates within a text; and (3) the reflection of a work’s historical situation as evidenced in the text”; because the author was a body that society moved, the text would reflect the social codes and history, and these areas were highly related; so, “if one area is ignored, the risk of returning to the old historicism, with its lack of understanding concerning a text as a social production, is great” (1994, p. 134). Thus, in addition to history, the New Historicists are to trace the historical situation of a work’s reflection and the impacts of social rules and the author’s life in the text. New Historicism also challenges canonical theories and rules by touching on and revealing the uncanny sides of history and literature. Therefore, by the New Historical studies, the privilege of dominant approaches will be eliminated, and the undermined points will be highlighted.

In short, New Historicism as a theory has roots in and relations with various theories such as Marxism, Foucauldian theory, Deconstruction, and the theory of Clifford Geertz on ‘thick description’. Adopting the ‘speaking with the dead’ idea as a principle, it mainly deals with the ignored or hidden details such as minority or suppressed groups in history to analyse consider as a whole. In light of this purpose, it looks for references to the past in both literary and non-literary texts, which brings forth the ‘equal weighing’ of texts. Therefore, as an alternative to Historicism, New Historicism makes a breakthrough in the critical analysis of history with its methods and purposes in analysis.

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