

New Historicism: An Overview

التاريخية الجديدة نظرة عامة

إعداد

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الملخص العربي

ناقش هذا البحث تطور نظرية التاريخية الجديدة والتي جاءت كنتيجة لتطور العلاقة بين التاريخ والأدب. ولذلك يحاول هذا البحث تتبع جذور واشكاليات العلاقة بين التاريخ والأدب بين الاندماج والانعزال واعادة الاندماج بأساليب وتقنيات نقدية وتحليلية جديدة. تعتبر نظرية التاريخية الجديدة تطور نوعي في استخدام التاريخ كأداة لتحليل النصوص الأدبية. لأن التاريخية الجديدة لا تنظر للتاريخ على أنه صورة ثابتة في خلفية النص. بل تبحث في عملية التأثير والتأثر المتبادلة بين الأحداث التاريخية الكبيرة والنصوص التي خرجت من رحمها. وجاءت نظرية التاريخية كنتيجة لعملية طويلة من التساؤل والتشكك في مقدرة التاريخ على تقديم صورة حقيقية ومحادية للماضي. لذلك نجد أن نقاد التاريخية الجديدة أسسوا نظريتهم بعد وقت من ظهور أطروحات كولينجوود وهادين وايت وغيرهم من نقاد مابعد البنيوية الذين طعنوا في انتماء التاريخ للبحث العلمي وأرجعوه للإنسانيات نظرا لتمائل اساليب وادوات كتابة التاريخ و كتابة الأدب واعتماد كل منهم على اللغة. لذلك يتتبع نقاد التاريخية الجديدة علاقات القوة التي خضع لها مؤلف النص والتفاعلات الثقافية والايديولوجيات التي تؤثر على كل من العملية الإبداعية وتلقي النص .

لذلك تعتمد التاريخية الجديدة على الأفاصيص والنوادر الصغيرة كمدخل للتاريخ الغير رسمي وتوظفها في تحليل النصوص الأدبية.

Abstract:

This paper presents an explanation for the development of the relationship between history and literature. This development has led to the evolution of New Historicism and its revolutionary tendency in analyzing literary and non-literary texts. New Historicism was the outcome of a history of questioning history. New Historicism rejects history's attachment to the field of science and its monopoly of representing the past truth. New Historicism developed Robin George Collingwood and Hyden White ideas that discussed the similarities and commonalities between history and literature. New Historicism developed also the poststructuralists' thoughts regarding the power of the society as a formulator of the historical text. So that, New Historicism contemplates the social powers and the ideologies that stand behind the production as well as the interpretation of texts.

This paper is divided into subtitles. These titles tackles: an explanation of New Historicism, New Historicism's tendency towards culture, and the employment of anecdotes in the New Historicist's reading of texts.

Key Word: New Historicism anecdote Culture

Introduction

• A Historical Survey

In the ancient ages, history was considered a branch of literature. An old conflict between history and poetry appeared in Plato's arguments. The case of reality was the ground of this clash. The never old question regarding who was better in creating an accurate representation of the past was answered in the interest of history. Hamilton referred to the frailty of separating history from literature: "despite having expelled poets from his ideal republic, Plato was still constrained to use the myth of his descriptions of the ultimate truths of philosophy" (7). The same prejudice against literature was found in Aristotle's conversations (Onega 9).

The Renaissance was the time for a kind of reconciliation between history and literature represented in Shakespeare's historical plays (Wessling 31-2). Literature and history were inseparable in this period. The historian of this time had an awareness of the narrativity and textuality of history. Thus, in this period, both of history and literature worked together to propagate historical knowledge (Onega 8). The political unrest that came upon some of European countries during the second half of the sixteenth century had led to the evaluation of different kinds of historiographic writings depending on sources and archives. This development in the historical writing was related to the development of legislation. At this time, the French men of law conceived of history as the tool of detecting the development of the "institutional structure's history" (Breisach 171-3).

The historiographers of the seventeenth century considered the bond between history and literature representative of "early stages of civilization's" method of depicting the past (Briesach 183). Besides, this time witnessed a historiographic departure from the domain of philosophy to the domain of science. This change was due to the historiographers' profound desire to deliver accurate accounts. Also, they began at this time wondering about the method of achieving a total subjectivity and pure truth (Briesach

189-192). The nineteenth century witnessed a complete break up between history and literature on the ground of the first's new belonging to the realm of scientism (Briesach 9).

According to Peter Hans Reill's account, the rise of historicism and the beginning of the "historical consciousness" started in Germany during the Enlightenment (2). At this time, history grew independent of both philosophy and literature. A full concept of the historiographic techniques was not acquired in this time although "the basic tenets of Rankean historiography were established during the Enlightenment by enlightened thinkers in Germany" (Reill 3). At that time, they assumed the commission of the historian as the "uncoverer of the intellectual presuppositions of a given period" (Reill 3). Thus, the historian in the Enlightenment's thinkers' views, was able to uncover the past and reach to the reality beyond the changes that happen in the society.

Similarly, the literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century withdrew from the historicity and turned to experimentation. This incisive split between history and literature was the subject of Luckacs' critique of modernism (Shaw 22). In Luckacs' words, modernism "distances the already alienated audience" from realizing the total picture of their existence (1164). After the First World War, there were skeptical voices doubtful of the history's ability to convey absolute truth of the past. Then, the doubts in the alleged scientific nature of the historical texts started. This allegation was the reason behind separating the literary and the historical texts.

The historical materialist Collingwood started problematizing the absolute faith in the validity of the absolute truth (Pomeroy 9). First of all, Collingwood broke up the deliberate equation between the research methods in natural sciences and history (208). According to Collingwood, the scientists in their research did not have to think of thoughts and intentions beyond the purposed phenomenon because phenomena had no such side: "the historian

need not and cannot [...] emulate the scientist in searching for the causes or laws of events. For science, the event is discovered by perceiving it [...]. For history, the object to be discovered is not the mere event, but the thought expressed in it (2014).

Collingwood settled the issue of the factuality of the historical texts as he concluded that "history does not present facts" but it presents a tool for understanding something true about the past (Johnson 80). Specifically, Collingwood pinpointed "rethinking" and "reenactment" as methods or tools for acquiring knowledge of the motivation and intention behind a given event (215). The use of these techniques in writing historical accounts was creating differences between what really happened and the historiographers' conception of the historical event (Johnson 58). Accordingly, Collingwood stressed the similarity between the literary and the historical text. He explained: "the historian [...] resembles a landscape writer who tries to ... copy nature...; but however hard he tries to do this he is always selecting, simplifying, schematizing, leaving out what he thinks unimportant and putting in what he regards as essential" (Collingwood 237).

Later on, the structuralist's new concept of language as a sign system affected the position of historical text as a holder of truth. The language in the structuralist and post structuralist view was not an innocent holder of truth (Munslow 30-1). In fact, Structuralism central tenets of the vigorous nature of language whose signifiers have no logical relation to its signifieds refused any trust of language as a medium for historical knowledge: "the link between signal and signification is arbitrary, since we are treating a sign as the combination in which a signal is associated with signification, we can express this more simply as the linguistic sign is arbitrary" (Saussure 75). This approach summarizes what is called the linguistic turn.

The structuralist and poststructuralist linguistic turn believed in the power of the society as a formulator of the historical text (Munslow 31). In other words, the social powers above text impose the ideology that stand behind the interpretation of text. This conviction broke up the idea of historical text's objectivity. Thus, according to the linguistic turn's perception, even the most adherence to the sources creates doubtful historical texts (Munslow 29,67).

The ideas of Hyden White and Roland Barthes are the best representatives of the so called linguistic turn. In his book, *Bruissement de la Langue*, Barthes inquires about the differences and the similarities between the historical texts and the literary ones: "the narration of the past events [...] since the Greece to the sanction of historical "science", placed under the imperious warrant of the 'real', justified by principles of rational exposition_ does this narration differ [...] from imaginary narration as we find it in the epic, the novel and the drama?" (127).

Roland Barthes, in this scene believes in the textual nature of historical records and refuses treating it as sacred texts (Kotte 18). Due to the historical text's construction of language, they cannot represent any reality but only a mimesis of reality. Moreover, Barthes was skeptical in the "very existence of history as an epistemology" (Munslow 69). While in *Metahistory*, Hyden White displayed the commonalities between the literary and historical texts. The historical work, as White put it, is a "verbal structure in the form of narrative prose discourse [which] combine a certain amount of 'data', theoretical concepts for explaining this data, and a narrative structure for this presentation" (xi). He also defined "emplotment", "formal arguments", and "ideological implication" as the implicit technique of historiographical writing. Accordingly, he formulated the different kinds of emplotment as follows: "romance, tragedy, comedy and satire" (x).

According to White, the historian adds more temporal adjustment to the chronological order of the actions_ which he/she deals with_ in order to turn them to a story (5). The historical narratives, in White's discussion, "become a problem when we wish to give to real events the form of story" (4). Emplotment in the historical texts is thus defined as "the arrangement of the data from unprocessed historical record in the interest of rendering that record more comprehensible to an audience of a particular kind " (White 5). This transformation turns the simple temporal analysis of the actions to a dramatic representation which has a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The structuralists and poststructuralists of the linguistic turn refer to language interference between the historiographer and his text during the recording process (Kotte 20). There is no escape of the tropological language. Consequently, the historical truth does not imply any notion of the outer reality. The imprisonment of historical writing in the prison-house of language make its claim as a truth holder fragile. That's why Foucault asks historians to admit the literariness of their historical construction and to stop the search for original meaning: " (130).

According to the above discussion, the time of postmodernism witnessed the prosperity of the interrogation of the sources of historical knowledge (Jameson 71). The historicity of postmodernism does not arise from the conviction of Man's ability to get past knowledge, but it is due to the questions and interrogations of that knowledge of past. History in the postmodern moment becomes histories and questions. It asks whose history gets told. In whose name? For what purpose? Thus, New Historicism is about histories not told, retold, untold. History as it never was. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered unimportant, changed, eradicated. (Marshall 4). New historicism is the concept which emanated from postmodernism to order the scattered postmodern views in historiography and the relation between the text and the historical context.

- **What is New Historicism?**

The term New Historicism was coined by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt and Catherine Gallagher in 1980 (Barry 172). Yet, the concept of New Historicism became more evident two years later with the publication of the journal *Representation* (Greenblatt 4). New Historicism is defined in *Practicing New Historicism* as a revolutionary theory in handling the relation between history and literature to create a balanced "field of literary history" (Greenblatt 1). Peter Barry defined New Historicism as "a method based on the parallel reading of literary and nonliterary texts usually of the same historical period" (172). According to Christina Kotte, New Historicism is a theory handling the relationship between history and literature. It contemplates the textual elements in historiographic texts and the historic elements in the literary texts without rejecting their interaction (35).

There is a difficulty in setting up a specific definition of New Historicism_ a definition that seems suitable for the understanding of the public. Greenblatt describes his progress in producing the theory of New Historicism and its development throughout his work over the years in his book *Learning to Curse* by referring to its origin in his thought. In this sense he defines New Historicism as a "trajectory that led from American literary formalism through the political and theoretical ferment of 1970s to a fascination to one of the best new historicist critics calls the historicity of the text and the textuality of history" (4). Luis Montrose defines it as an "orientation" rather than a perception of practices in interpretation (Hens-Piazza 60). Consequently, New Historicism is less than a coherent well-established theory (Greenblatt *Practicing* 3). It does not present a strict method of interpretation. So, New historicism can be understood as a

perspective on literature [which] views texts as caught up in the social processes and contexts of which they emerge. Though identified with a single author, texts are generated by communities. One community produces a

text, while another community interprets it. Thereby producing another text. Hence the text is constantly under production. (Henz-Piazza 60)

In his short essay "Resonance and Wonder" (1990), Greenblatt tries defining New Historicism by identifying the difference between resonance and wonder of a given piece of art or literary work. Resonance, according to this account, is the ability of the literary work to extend beyond its boundaries depending on repetition. In this way the work carries its culture and its cultural complexities. Wonder on the other hand is the works of art's ability to strike the senses to realize its uniqueness or for being strange (Greenblatt 42). Using this preliminary comparison, Greenblatt connects New Historicism to "resonance". So New Historicism can be identified as the analysis of the work of art's resonance. Analyzing the resonance of the work of art requires understanding the interpenetrated circumstances that surround the work of art. Studying the surrounding circumstances of a given work of art does not mean looking at the cultural background as a "stable" or prefabricated" but as "dense network of evolving and often contradictory social practices" (Greenblatt 42). The process of accessing and analyzing these social practices are not different from the methods applied to understand the works of art. This account and definition from "Resonance and Wonder" explain the previous quote.

New Historicism allows smashing the borders between "history, anthropology, art, politics, and economics" (Veeser New xi). It challenged Marxism by focusing its attention on fractions of historical events and not grand narratives. In other words, New Historicists are more interested in the small incidents or the "marginal aspects of human experience" (Koenig 376). New Historicism as Veeser puts it avoids "overarching hypothetical constructs in favor of surprising coincidences" like their interest in the incidents of "window-smashing suffragette street," the "ancient roman tax bracket and the trach system in modern high schools", or "literary incest in popular 40s novel" (New vii).

New Historicism believes in the power of political agenda but their fascination with the poetics of culture leads them to approach the effect of politics as a pack with other criteria. New Historicism is fascinated with studying the power relations which take part in the creation a given work of art. Phrased differently, it legitimates the interrogation of "the exchanges between culture and power-its politics, its novelty, its historicity, its relationship to other prevailing ideologies all remain open questions" (Veeser New xi).

New Historicism is neutral regarding all the social groups which suffered from exploitation or alienation: "the insane, the prisoners, the homosexuals, [and] the women oppressed by the society" (Ukkan 6). Hermeneutically, New Historicism approaches the past through interpreting its literary and non-literary texts. The universal textuality of New Historicism "not only blurs all distinctions between different texts but also literalize and aestheticize history. It turns history into a tapestry of texts that cover up real lived history (Berghahn 144).

Summarizing the main characteristics of New Historicism Veeser indicates:

1)every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices; 2)every act of unmasking, critique and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes; 3) literary and non-literary texts circulate inseparably; 4) no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths, or expresses unaltered human nature; and 5) a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. (1989 xi)

New Historicism reverses the traditional hierarchies of power. It is concerned with issues regarding the mechanism of "power, authority and repression in the production of writing itself. Such mechanisms play a role even before any communication can come about between author, work, and reader" (Kaes 151). This appears in its interest in the victims of oppressive power. New Historicists give the defeated a chance to record their history which the official history ignored, erased, altered, and deformed (Veaser Remembering 4).

What is unique in New Historicism is its questioning of the strict boundaries of the historical periods and ages. They wonder about who set the date of the Renaissance for example. They try to answer the question of who appeared first the strict boundaries and age periods or the texts and cultural periods which formed them. To find answers to these questions, New Historicist approach "cultures as texts" (Greenblatt Practicing 7,8). The notion of conceiving culture as texts is so wide. It started with the New Historicists' interest in anthropology and geography. Contemplating in these new domains, the New Historicists "expand the range of objects available to be read and interpreted"(Greenblatt Practicing 9).

According to Prafalla C. Karl, New Historicism is a revolution against both New Criticism and Deconstruction. It refuses New criticism marginalization of history. Thus, they resist New Criticism segregation of literature from the outside environment (76). To be more specific, New Historicism is not against Deconstruction because of the latter's ahistoricity. New Historicism tries to get Deconstruction a step further towards the search in "the problematics of materiality in signification" (Thomas 118). Thus New historicism tries to make an agreement among the extremists to find commonalities. In this sense, New Historicism includes an agreement between the social, the personal and the literary. It contemplates a chart in which history and literature stand in the vertical lines. The negotiations between them are shaped through the interplay between "plural or

disturbed array", the "motive or action" and the governing line is the "cultural dominance" (Liu 733).

- **New Historicism and Culture**

New Historicists seek to find the artistic features in cultural texts but not "to aestheticize an entire culture" (Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 12). The interest in the cultural aspect of the text does not mean giving importance to everything from the past. Instead, New Historicists believe that the author of a given text does not emerge from nowhere. Therefore, the accomplishments of a given author "draw upon a whole life-world and that life-world had undoubtedly left other traces of itself" (Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 12).

New Historicists' interest in contemplating cultural traces is directed to understand the representation of the events in the literary works more than only identifying them. They investigate the effect of these representations on the human subjects who live with those events. New Historicists openness is best represented in their analysis of "the unsettling of the relation between imitation and action, between background and foreground, between representation and bodily reality gives rise to a sense of archival and interpretive inexhaustibility" (Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 15). In this sense, New Historicism never depends on history alone. They think that history is not suitable when the subject of analysis become the "flimsy limits between the sayable and thinkable" (Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 16). In other words, according to the New Historicists, culture is the larger and it is impossible for them to identify clearly the important components of the cultural text and the trivial ones. Besides, in the large cultural texts it is impossible to identify the boundary between the "representation and the event" in the larger perspective of the cultural text (Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 15). In this sense, New Historicism never depends on history alone as history can be effective for the analyses "that sought to declare the limits of the sayable and the thinkable." (Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 16).

Contemplating the cultural side of the text does not mean studying only the social and historical factors that take part in formulating the texts. It involves, also, an analysis to the present-day reader's reaction to that text. Whereas language is shaped by culture, New Historicists not only investigate the spoken language, they extend their interest to embody "discourse, writing literature, social actions and any social relationships"(Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 185). If art is a human creation, the human is a cultural artifact (Greenblatt Renaissance 3). Culture's authority over the author is best represented through the "control mechanism" of the family, the state and the religion (Greenblatt Renaissance 1). New Historicism thus employs cultural and anthropological dimensions due to a belief that "men are born unfinished animals" which means that people are formed and reformed through the factors of culture and anthropology.

New Historicism can be defined as a sort of "literary criticism that has affinities" to culture and anthropology and aware of their own status as interpretation and "intent upon understanding literature as a part of the sign system of signs that constitute a given culture" (Greenblatt Renaissance 4). New Historicists "wanted to delve as deeply as possible into the creative matrices of particular historical cultures and at the same time we wanted to understand how certain products of these cultures could seem to possess a certain independence" (Greenblatt Practicing 16). New historicists have special fancy toward the texts that have the ability to deviate and evade from the restrictions of their society. New Historicists try to understand how these literary representations demand and acquire their special status and how they "contrive to move from... time period to another without losing all meaning" (Greenblatt Practicing 17). New Historicism analyzes the text to disassemble the "thick description" of a given text (Gallagher 2000 21). By thick description, Gallagher means the network of "framing intentions and the cultural meaning of the act". To achieve this, and to evade the cooked events in historical writings New Historicists give a great interest to the anecdotes.

- **New Historicism's culture and the anecdote**

New Historicism makes a parallel between history and historiography with their literary interest in the anecdote. As the smallest minimal unit of historiographic fact", anecdote represents the dense combination of literature and reference (Fineman 57). If history can be defined as the combination of "being and time", anecdote can be defined as the events that "happen when you combine being and time" (Fineman 61). The uniqueness of anecdote lies in its raw form because it is not really "cooked up" (Greenblatt Practicing 22). Fineman defined the anecdote as follows:

The literary form that uniquely lets history happen by virtue of the way it introduces an opening into the teleological, and therefore timeless narration of beginning, middle, and end. The anecdote produces the effect of the real, the occurrence of contingency, by establishing an event as an event within and yet without the framing context of historical successivity [...] its narration both comprises and refracts the narration it reports. (61)

In other words, the anecdote combines both features: literariness and historicity. The relation between the anecdote and the literary event resembles the relation between the mouth of the hole and the hole. The anecdote creates this relation throughout the techniques of narration. A small narration that is complete within itself. In this sense, the anecdote can be differentiated from the other non-literary references by its conciseness.

The challenge that confronts the New Historicist is concealed in the method of choosing the small units of anecdotes suitable for the analysis of the required text. However, this movement from the literary text to a social text does not mean keeping away from literature and give interest to an extraneous domain. The New Historicists' tendency towards anecdotes clarifies their fashioning of the relationship between history and literature. Fineman

considers the anecdote a revolutionary historiographic tool against history as it "determines the destiny of a specifically historiographic integration of event and context" (56). The revolutionary relation between anecdotes and history is due to the former's rejection by the mainstream historians. So that, New Historicism uses anecdotes to recreate history and opens up the field of literary criticism. . New Historicism's relation with the anecdote revives and renews the traditional relation between history and literature: "the anecdote would open the history, or place it askew, so that literary texts could find new points of insertion" (Fineman 51). According to Gallagher and Greenblatt, the New Historicist anecdote opens up the way in front of a coup against the canonical literary text by "making the literary and non-literary seem to be each other's thick description" (Practicing 31). At the same time, using the anecdote in the literary analysis revives the canonical writings.

New Historicism uses anecdotes to interrogate the formal accounts of history to find new explanations. It is the tool of finding out the fingerprints of the accidental suppressed, defeated, uncanny, objected, or exotic. The anecdote makes a contact between the representation of literature and the representation of the small events that "historians cannot assimilate into typicality or coherent signification" (Greenblatt Practicing 51). Thus, using the history from anecdotal viewpoint differentiates between the New Historicist and the historicist treatment of history because "the anecdote was not merely background: it demanded attention; it threatened indeed to take over the whole enterprise...And the anecdote satisfied the desire for something outside the literary, something indeed would challenge the boundaries of the literary. It offered access to the everyday, the place where things are actually done" (Greenblatt and Gallagher Practicing 48).

Conclusion:

According to the previous discussion, the typical New Historicist essay begins with a historical anecdote to find a new cultural reading of texts. The anecdote in the beginning of the analysis presents a petite historical narrative of the other whose resistance and outrage is faced with the authorities with tactics of containment. New Historicist approaches history using the anecdotes to contemplate the social energy that leads the author of a given work to write his literary piece. Anecdotes is the New Historicists revolutionary technique used in the purpose of contemplating and explaining the power relations that stands behind creating literary works. Thus, history in the New Historicist's method of analysis is not a context. It is a co-text.

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