New Historicism and Literary Studies

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Literary studies in the 1980s challenged the literary assumptions of "practical criticism" or New Criticism as practiced by F. R. Leavis, I. A. Richards and others who located and interpreted the literary text within a broader sphere of literary and moral traditions, invariably de-linking it from the social, political and historical context that gave rise to it. The impetus in literary studies to challenge new criticism came from different directions, but mainly it came from a new intellectual ferment in the American and European academia and hermeneutical procedures spearheaded by new methodologies in analytical philosophy, linguistics, phenomenology, discourse theory, speech-act theory, deconstruction and literary studies especially in cultural poetics or new historicism, feminism, cultural materialism, post-colonialism and revisionist Marxism. Old masters who had hitherto interpreted the world for us like Nietzsche, Hegel, Marx, Dilthey and Freud remained as sanctioning authorities, but no longer served as models in social sciences, history or literary studies. New authorities like Michael Foucault, Benjamin, Paul Ricoeur, Jurgen Habermas, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Fredric Jameson and J.L. Austin inscribed the text within a discourse and a context. The social and literary historiographies of yesteryears had lost their power to shape the consciousness of the 1980s generation or explain the text-context relationship. The autonomous aesthetic issues of literary studies were now reinterpreted in the light of Foucauldian discourses, hegemonic institutional practices and individual subjectivities. The questioning of the grand Victorian canon and its canonical texts by new historicists like Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher and Louis A. Montrose led literary theory into an understanding that the production, categorization and analysis of texts were determined by forces of history which in turn shaped the cultural work itself. New historicists were able to demonstrate how a text could be dismantled and the hidden hegemonic discourses lying buried within it exposed. The new historicists acquired this new understanding by directing the methodologies and procedures of deconstruction, feminism and post-structuralism to literature and literary texts. The political and cultural slant that this method gave to the interpretation of literature once again energized departments of English and encouraged literary studies to reestablish a link with the political and social world that gave rise to it.

In House Practice of American New Historicism

Individual subjectivities, rooted in the cultural and political ferment of the 1960s, the rise of feminism and gender identities in the 1970s, the new socio-political reality of the 1980s, and the questioning of assumptions and methods of normative disciplines in the academia since then, opened up the literary canon to experiments in radically different modes of critical
practices. In the last two decades the ethical, aesthetic, hermeneutical and ontological assumptions of traditional literary criticism have been elaborately questioned in the fields of English and American studies, unhinging them, if not dismantling their traditional methodologies.

In the last twenty years new historicism has pulled in professors from diverse intellectual persuasions and beliefs, especially those coming from cultural materialism, feminism, cultural poetics and Marxist revisionist backgrounds, into its orbit. These professors, in their own unique ways, have tried to restructure and resituate English and American studies within the parameters of historical and socio-political necessities. In the process of problematizing the inextricable link between literary discourse and other master narratives, new historicism has made the relation between text and society its predominant concern. By exposing the strongly economic, political and social forces propelling a literary text, new historicism has tried to challenge the deeply entrenched hegemony of American and British new formalism, new critical thinking and historical positivism. This challenge has altered to quite an extent the direction and scope of literary criticism as practiced both in the Anglo-American and non-Anglo-American world.

The social and historical conditions that gave rise to new historicism have been discussed by many scholars in their essays and books, foremost amongst them are Stephen Greenblatt’s Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, and “Racial Memory and Literary History,” Catherine Gallagher’s essay, “Marxism and the New Historicism,” John Bannigan’s New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, John Prakakis’s edited book Alternative Shakespeares, Edward Pechter’s “The New Historicism and Its Discontents: Politicizing Renaissance Drama,” Brook Thomas’ The New Historicism and Other Old Fashioned Topics (1993), Louis Adrian Montrose’s, “New Historicisms,” and “Shaping Fantasies,” Gallagher’s and Greenblatt’s Practicing New Historicism, and new historicism’s own journal Representations published by the University of California Press. These books, essays and journal posit twelve basic lines of argument summed up in the following manner.

First, the opening up of positions in English studies in the 1980s brought scholars to American universities from different ethnic, religious, sexual, political and class backgrounds, who in turn, introduced their own unique cultural, sexual, ideological and class biases in the interpretation and teaching of canonical texts. They simultaneously contested dominant norms and procedures of literary studies transforming the practice of literary criticism and the teaching of literatures on university campuses. British universities were slow to accept the literary practices from the United States due to the presence of more radical politics like Marxism (which was an altogether separate genre) on the one hand, and more traditional orthodoxy of the English establishment, on the other. In Asia the dissemination of these ideas was relatively retarded due to an innate resistance to American ideology (with which any critical practice originating in the U.S. was associated), lack of expertise and understanding of the ideological shift and the tendency of Asian researchers in the U.S. to find employment on American campuses rather than return to the country of their origin.

Second, American scholars of new historicism formed their values as students in the cultural and political turbulence of the 1960s, which was incidentally also a time of burgeoning women’s movement, formation of gender identities, individual subjectivities and avante garde
sub-groups. Confronting the status quo as dispossessed students in the 1960s and then, two decades later, participating in the new socio-political reality of the 1980s as “having arrived,” placed them in an untenable position of academics, who could not say what they believed in. They found themselves unable to apply their own values and assumptions to the new socio-political reality that they confronted.

Third, the arrival of multiple, unstable and competing discourses embodied in poststructuralism, problematized the way meaning and values were produced. This shift in philosophical and methodological perspective also shifted the focus from essential to contextual, from humanist to historical, from signs to society and from closed systems perpetuating fixed meanings to open systems creating significance. The methods of new historicism (though it was never seen as a theory but as a practice by its founders) acquired the force of a theory challenging older methodologies, creating intellectual ferment and destabilizing dominant discourses. Since then a swarm of critics have taken to the literary skies of new historicism, both in the U.S. and England, foremost amongst them are Jonathan Dollimore, Jane Tompkins, Don E. Wayne, Benn Michaels, Jean E. Howard, Arthur E. Marotti, Stephen Orgel, Annabel Patterson, Peter Stallybrass and others.

Fourth, many critics find the new historicist politics terribly “obnoxious” as new historicists present crude versions of Marxism and formalist colonialism in the garb of cultural poetics and cultural criticism. Also though the new historicists use political criticism, their politics is hard to define. There are reasons for this tendency. The idea of historicity, appropriated by the new historicists, originates in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger and travels through the German hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer to the French Marxist-structuralist Louis Althusser. But most of the stuff is really dense and literary critics are put off by it, till they reach the Marxist ideas of Raymond Williams and Terry Eagleton. And last but not least the source of inspiration for new historicists is Michael Foucault’s idea that history moves through a series of epistemes or structures that shape not only thinking but culture itself. It is besides the point that new historicist practices neither question nor extend Foucault’s concept of epistemes in history but swoon and fall in its seductive embrace.

New historicists look at history more as “glorious fragments” than “a set of coherent histories.” They believe that people move restlessly and unpredictably to new places and, finding themselves in new situations, create new literary scholarship, literature or histories. One of the founder-proponent of new historicism, Greenblatt, believes that literary histories need to take account of “accidental judgements” and other disruptive forces more than organic narrative or cultural legitimacy that “shape the history of languages.” We should never forget that a language slips, crosses borders and is mostly unpredictable and uncontrollable.5

Fifth, new historicists have employed three discursive strategies of Foucault—his concept of discourse, the construction of power and knowledge and the question of the human subject—to locate literature and literary texts in their historical and cultural context. At times some new historicists have directed Foucauldian strategies of discourse so strictly that they can see nothing outside discourse, when even Foucault granted that real objects enjoyed a material existence. However Foucault did not see any palpable meaning outside the framework of discourse. The concept of discourse did not elaborate about the existence of things but about the creation and perpetuation of meaning.
Sixth, Greenblatt lays down four “enabling presumptions” of new historicism in *Genre*, which have acquired the force of law. They are:

1. Literature has a historical base and literary works are not the products of a single consciousness but many social and cultural forces. In order to understand literature one has to take recourse to both culture and society that gave rise to it in the first place.

2. Literature is not a distinctive human activity hitherto believed, but another vision of history. This has obvious implications for both literary theory and the study of literary texts.

3. Since literature and human beings are both shaped by social and political forces, it is not possible to talk of an intrinsic human nature that can transcend history. And since history is not a continuous series of events but ruptures, there is no link between one age and another or between men belonging to different ages. This being the case, a Renaissance man is rooted in his Renaissance idiosyncrasies just as a modern man is rooted in his. A modern reading of a Renaissance text cannot be the same as a Renaissance reading. At most a literary interpretation can reconstruct the ideology of the age through a given text.

4. Caught in his own historicity, a historian cannot escape the social or ideological constraints of his own formation. And, therefore, he cannot fully understand the past objectively on its own terms.

The four presumptions basically imply that new historicism does not try to retrieve the original meaning of a text but locates the original ideology that gave rise to the text, which the text disseminates, within the boundaries of culture and sometimes beyond it. Since literary texts are built in such a way so as to suppress the means through which they create their ideology, new formalism’s assumption that texts are self-contained entities, could not help it unmask the ideological instruments or “representations” that construct the texts. The new historicists claim that since they see the texts as another artifact of the ideology of a given age, they can go directly to the instruments that constructed the text unmasking their hegemony. And in claiming this, new historicists appropriat two assumptions of post-structuralism: firstly, that a text can only be understood if we lay claims to the ideology of the age and not the intention of the writer; and secondly, the doctrine of textuality (that a literary work is another historical document or a text rooted in the context) is the only means to understand the contextual meaning. Both the assumptions are lifted verbatim without original investigations or philosophical arguments. So every historicist worth his salt seeks multiple meanings of a text and relates it to its context without questioning why he is doing what he is doing.

Seventh, given these assumptions new historicists reposition the text in the original discursive reality of the age in which it was produced. Gallagher, for instance, draws a parallel between the representations of fictional character in the 19th century English novel with the parliamentary debates over political representation. Greenblatt sees Iago’s scheming against Othello in Shakespeare’s play as a larger Elizabethan subversive plot to deny the otherness of subjugated people. Montrose in “Shaping Fantasies” reconstructs the political and sexual power of Queen Elizabeth and her ambivalent control of male fantasy. He argues that a typical English Elizabethan male respects her virginal quality and yet, on a subconscious level, desires...
to control her sexually. Montrose reads the subtext of the play as an attempt to valorize patriarchal governance at the expense of the matriarchal. The virgin Queen assuages the typical fear of the Elizabethan male by being barren and not perpetuating matriarchal governance through conceiving a would-be daughter. The social production of the play reinforces the myth both of her virginity and barrenness by her real presence in it.10

These examples raise many questions about new historicist practices. Is it possible for a literary critic to unmask the very ideology that is truly hidden in the text? And how can he find that the unmasked ideology is the truly hidden one and not his own political sympathy masquerading as evidence? Critics are alarmed at new historicists unmasking in literary texts only domination of woman, workers, slaves and peasants by power groups. New historicist interpretations look suspiciously neat and convenient as if their assumptions are not based on solid evidence but drawn from a priori conclusions which are later padded with selective textual and cultural evidence. New historicism seems to err in this regard. It leans heavily towards hypotheses which are emotionally preferable without the backing of substantial evidence. Convictions, prior to evidence, inspire brilliant arguments, but at times convictions can be misplaced (e.g., Greenblatt’s interpretation of Durer’s sketch in The Painted Manual, 1525).11 There seems to be a strong sympathetic leaning in new historicist method towards personal bias, causing opinions to become evidence.

Eighth, new historicism does those very things in practice that it criticizes Marxism to be doing. Gallagher attacks the American Left professors who, since they could not subscribe to meta-narratives of Marxism (class conflict, economic power or state power), insist that political and economic power exist in daily life. And therefore resistance to it must be on a micro-level. And herein lies the problem. The entire Marxist tradition (Lukas, Adorno, Althusser, Gramsci, and even Marx) cautions us against subordinating theory to practical and political goals. And new historicism is doing exactly that. “Critical theories and interpretative frameworks,” argue Gregory S. Jay and David L. Miller in After Strange Gods, “are necessary but unpresentable ghosts of authority—prerequisites to presence that are themselves incapable of appearing except within the shadow of their own effects.”12

Ninth, critics such as Brook Thomas point out that the idea of newness touted by ‘new’ historicism in a postmodern world (that basically questions the possibility of newness) is itself retrogressive. Other critics who do not see anything new in the procedures of the new historicists pick up this argument. Critics of new historicism contend that new historicism has appropriated the critical practices of other disciplines such as anthropology, history and new Marxism repackaging them as new products and escaping the markers used to identify the original brands.

Tenth, located within the traditions of pragmatic historiography in the United States, new historicism battles with liberal humanists to resituate “great books” and reconstitute the pantheon of Western values, both in academia and society. Harold Bloom blames new historicism for seeking the historical roots of every literary object in sheer resentment. He inquires: Why don’t they let literary object float in their own literary spaces? Why belittle literary texts by cutting them to size? Greenblatt finds Bloom’s insinuation rather preposterous. The former asserts that the practice of new historicism to relate a text to its historical and cultural context is to help readers to appreciate literature better. But Bloom remains
unconvinced.

Eleventh, it is interesting to note that new historicism arose more as a practice and less a theory of literary criticism. Early theorists did not function under a single banner. New historicist criticism did not question but appropriated some of the questionable premises of earlier English studies. New historicists saw themselves as seeking evidence to correlate literary text to its historical context. And this practice continues to keep its ideological predilections both eclectic and diverse.

Twelfth and final, many critics see new historicism as a new version of early 1980s-American deconstruction. The impact of the deconstructive method on new historicism can be evinced from the fact that Walter Benn Michaels’ journal Glyph ceased publication in 1981. The first issue of the new historicist journal Representations was brought out by Michaels, Ferguson and Greenblatt of the Berkeley group in 1982. “To compare Glyph to Representations,” Brooks Thomas points out, “not only emphasizes the deconstructive roots of Michaels’s strain of the new historicism, it also challenges the notion that deconstruction is inevitably ahistorical.”

The influence of Michaels’s deconstructive epistemology, especially the impact of his book The Gold Standard and the Logic of Naturalism on new historicist procedures and practices, is inescapable. Michaels’s explains his deconstructive method in The Gold Standard thus: “For writing to be writing, it can neither transcend the marks it is made of nor be reduced to those marks. Writing is, in this sense, intrinsically different from itself, neither material nor ideal.” And this statement becomes the gold standard for the new historicists who embarked on their academic journey in the 1980’s.

Identity Politics and Difference

Both in new historicism and feminist criticism, cultural and political biases, identity politics and the cultivation of difference have shaken up the fraudulent universalist claims of literary theory, history and identity. Cultural poetics and identity politics have invaded departments of English and other disciplines, creating their own academic diasporas. New historicism has always looked at the emerging feminist theory and its critique of gender and sexuality with benign concern, but both employed deconstructionist techniques to achieve their ends. In the United States, Great Britain and some Asian countries such as India and Japan, feminist theory has directed cultural critique towards analyzing the role of literature in understanding social problems. This tendency has led to the practice of a cultural critique, which is effectively used to understand exploitative codes of gender and sexuality and to expose hegemonic construction of social, cultural and domestic relations.

Early feminist criticism tried to remedy stereotypical images of women in the media (portrayed as wives or mothers) with psychologically and socially well-rounded personalities. But this representation of women was based on a mimetic assumption of reality, which saw women as a homogenous social group. Some feminists argued that gender always intersects social identities such as office worker, student, taxpayer, or Asian. Using the constructionist method, it was possible to see sex and gender built upon cultural signifiers and not essences.

The 1960s slogan of the woman’s movement that “the personal is political,” destroyed the dichotomy of private-public spheres meticulously erected by modern capitalism, and brought in issues of women’s position, domestic work, sexual relations, rearing of children, cleaning the
house and family property into the realm of power politics. The growing consciousness of the "personal is political" ideology led to a series of legislation that made sexual harassment and spousal abuse punishable crimes.

Historians chronicling the 1960s decade now agree that it was this political awareness that created the academic fascination with Foucault and post-structuralism in the 1970s and 1980s in New York and the San Francisco Bay Area. Foucault's insistence that power controlled culture, knowledge, human relations, politics, clothing, life styles and sexual preferences provided a philosophical justification to a new political attitude sweeping American society. The American Left opened up channels in the academia where they could hear the voice of political ideas shaping culture or vice versa. Racist and sexist ideas hiding in the garb of scientific truths, such as scientific racism, eugenics, sterilization of women in the 1930s, reiterated Foucault's belief that "knowledge is not made for understanding; it is made for cutting." Todd Gitlin points out in *The Twilight of Common Dreams* that the insurgence of identity politics created new cultural groups and self-enclosures balkanizing American campuses.

Feminist criticism has not only contested recent critical theories but also appropriated some of their methods to develop its own critique. The way ideologies construct latent differences in society and language have been problematized by feminism and developed into a discourse of sexism. Barbara Johnson points out that a disagreement if not factual invariably hides the impulse to dominate or control. She provides a sophisticated analysis of differences that emerge between entities such as man and woman or literature and theory within the rhetoric of reading:

> What is often most fundamentally disagreed upon is whether a disagreement arises out of the complexities of fact or out of the impulses of power ... .The differences between entities (prose and poetry, man and woman, literature and theory, guilt and innocence) are shown to be based on a repression of differences within entities, ways in which an entity differs from itself.

In the process of deconstructing discourses Johnson discovers that differences between discourses can be traced to difference "within" themselves and also the way they construct themselves against each other.

Employing the theoretical frameworks of Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, Louis Althusser and Foucault, Butler explores the idea of subjection, which effectively means to possess a consciousness and become a subject. She employs the idea of subjection interfacing it with the concept of identity to understand gay or lesbian identities. She uses the method of bricolage (or the use of bits and pieces) to question the fundamental assumptions of Freudian psychoanalysis, which constructs a person in terms of male or female. She argues that gender is not a social construct but a show or a performance built upon signs, costume or disguise. And the Freudian construction of gender is more in terms of performance than essence.

Discarding the grand narratives of describing woman within the ontological and universalizing phallocentric or biological discourses, Butler introduces the idea of multiplicity
or discontinuities. She rejects the abstract universal category employed by Freud, Jacques Lacan and Luce Irigaray to construct woman. Instead, she sees gender as a subjective process mediated by the “contingencies of personal history” that might not possess any “internal coherence” whatsoever. Readers are increasingly made aware that they are not only influenced but are dependent on social forces. They can at times negotiate or resist the dominant rhetoric of the text or the positions they are persuaded to take.

In *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler argues that the psychic lives of subjects are not only influenced, but also largely dependent on social forces. She analyses the way subjects are formed both socially and psychically. She points out that the Foucauldian and psychoanalytic theories have ignored the intrinsic relationship between social and psychic forces and the way these forces control the subject.

In recent years feminist criticism has deconstructed male hierarchies of sexuality and gender forcing new meanings out of cultures and histories of a wide variety. Feminist discourses have exposed the subtle methods through which women’s voices have been subdued, suppressed or appropriated in and through literary texts. But in the United States feminist theory has been more radical, establishing its own distinctive critique of hegemony and sexuality, quite distinct from new historicism.

Writing in the 1980’s, Janet Todd questioned the widespread belief that feminist perspectives were dominating American universities especially Yale (which boasted Barbara Johnson, Shoshana Felman and Margaret Homans on its faculty) and Princeton (which had Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Margaret Doody). Todd argued that though some of these feminist scholars had formed an academic Mafia they were far from building feminist establishments on these campuses. Todd confessed that till the late 1980s, feminist criticism had not made “any headway in institutions in Britain,” as it had done in the U. S. Whatever success it had in Britain, it had in polytechnics. In universities it was more or less mixed with literary theory, which was disliked by the older academics as some sort of “an abstraction” and loved by young scholars as a way to achieving quick academic fame. Feminist criticism in the United Kingdom, by and large, had had no effect either on politics, university curricula or the literary canon. Todd concludes that the, “American type of socio-historical feminist analysis” hardly flourished in the United Kingdom during this time.

In the initial years both feminist criticism and new historicism were bound together in the concerted attack on the liberal humanist tradition. Feminist criticism attacked the male hegemony while new historicism destabilized the literary assumptions of liberal scholarship. In a way feminist scholars openly confronted the dominant ideology of the liberal humanist tradition that had hitherto justified the literary canon on grounds of its inclusiveness and essentiality, claiming that the literary canon was fair as it encompassed universal human experience. Feminist criticism demystified the claims by liberal humanists that academic scholarship was largely apolitical, interest-free and unbiased through connecting academic practice to socio-political conflict. Of late, new feminist criticism is more interested in searching history to reclaim suppressed texts written by women writers than just attacking male hegemonies per se.
Foucault's Representation

Foucault gave a new turn to the problem of representation. He did not see representation simply as the production of meaning within a given culture, but the production of knowledge itself. This process took place through the method of discourse and was not just another function of language. Foucault wanted to see how human beings understood themselves culturally, how social knowledge was produced and how meanings were shared amongst people in different ages. During his investigations, he uncovered specific ways (which he later formulated into rules) by which meaning was produced; and these ways were coded in specific statements and regulated discourse. He saw discourse functioning as statements, representing knowledge and providing buzz topics in historical periods. And since all social practices were essentially responsible for producing meanings (which influenced and shaped human conduct), discourse was mainly discursive in nature. In other words, a discourse dealt with the ways knowledge was produced, legitimated and perpetuated through the medium of language.

Foucault saw the preponderant power of discourse in constructing topics and legitimizing certain acceptable ways such topics could be discussed in a given cultural milieu. Most of the things that happened in society and in the lives of people took place within the larger framework of discourse. Furthermore, discourse also defined and produced knowledge, the objects of knowledge, the way to reason, the method of implementing ideas and regulating human conduct. Discourse also functioned within defined boundaries, which could not be transgressed. It restricted or prevented people from constructing certain kinds of topics or producing knowledge. A discourse did not necessarily have a single text, statement or action, but repeated its patterns of thinking and knowledge across a wide range of texts, conduct and institutions in society. Foucault called this repetitive pattern an episteme, which acquired a discursive pattern whenever it was shared politically or institutionally through objects, styles and strategies.

Foucault moved away from the semiotics of language and signification of Ferdinand de Saussure and Barthes and concentrated on the relations of power within the "subjectifying social sciences" like sociology, anthropology and other social sciences.24 These disciplines have acquired the force of modern discourses, repositories of knowledge, which revealed the truth about human beings and the world around them, just as religion had done earlier. Foucault moved from "signifying structures" to "relations of force," strategies and tactics.

Just like Foucault, new historicists too rejected the dialectics of Hegelian Marxism and Saussure’s semiotics. In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault argues,

Neither the dialectic, as logic of contradictions, nor semiotics, as the structure of communication, can account for the intrinsic intelligibility of conflicts. 'Dialectic' is a way of evading the always open and hazardous reality of conflict by reducing it to a Hegelian skeleton, and 'semiology' is a way of avoiding its violent, bloody and lethal character by reducing it to the calm Platonic form of language and dialogue.25

To make conflicts intelligible, Foucault adopted the constructionist approach as distinct from the semiotic and dialectical approaches.

By attacking theories of representation and seeing how they constructed meaning, Foucault
altered the very perspectives that created our world. The constructionist approach was a radical departure from the earlier reflective and intentional approaches. The reflective approach saw inherent meaning (in objects, events, ideas, people) in the world which language reflected. The Greeks notion of mimesis employed a reflective approach to show how language and drawing reflected nature. This led them to a mimetic theory through which they saw Homer’s *Iliad* imitating heroic events in the universe. The intentional approach on the contrary argued that the author/speaker imposes his/her meaning on the universe through the medium of language. But language has its own conventions, codes and rules that we must negotiate in order to express our thoughts clearly. Language possesses a distinctive social character, which is more or less free from any intrinsic meaning that things might possess or people might ascribe in the act of speaking or writing. There is no *a priori* meaning of things.

The constructionist approach argued that we construct meaning through a system of symbolic representation by using concepts and signs. The material world exists in its own right but it only acquires meaning when we use a language system. Obviously, the meaning of objects does not remain the same from one culture to another as each culture has different cultural codes, classificatory system and signification. So by and large representation accepts some degree of cultural relativism or lack of one-to-one correspondence in meaning. We therefore require a method of translating mindset or conception of the universe of one culture and another, if we are to succeed in understanding meanings in other cultures partially.

Discourses, representation and knowledge acquire the force of truth only within distinct historical context, and possess no logical continuity from one historical context to another. By historicizing discourse or episteme, Foucault worked against the ahistorical method in semiotics. In *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, Foucault deconstructed the dominant discourse of madness in society. Madness, for instance, was not an objective fact but a function of a discursive formation that defined madness in a specific manner for a madman to appear.

Similarly sexuality and hysteria were also constructed within their own discourses. Sexual desire and fantasy appeared in Western societies at a particular historical moment and not before. Homosexual forms of behavior existed in the past but the homosexual as a specific social category was produced in the late 19th century based on the century’s theories of sexual perversity. The hysterical woman also appeared with the emergence of the 19th century view of hysteria as primarily a female illness.

The rise of industrial society in 17th century Europe created a sense of intolerance towards madmen. Madmen, together with idlers, prostitutes, sick and unemployed were interned as capitalist society could not tolerate “groups of vagabonds.” Foucault argues that the “incapacity to work is the first criterion of madness.” In the 18th century the situation changed for other categories of vagabonds except madmen. As the speed of industrial development accelerated in the 19th century, unemployed proletariats were seen as reserve labor force and were let out into society. But those who could not work were still considered mad and remained confined. Foucault concludes: “It could be said that the madman is an avatar of our capitalist societies, and it seems that, at bottom, the status of the madman does not vary at all between primitive societies and advanced societies. This only demonstrates the primitivism of our societies.”

In *The Birth of the Clinic*, Foucault explores the shift in medical understanding of the nature of disease. The classical notion explained the existence of disease as separate from the
The modern notion altered this understanding by introducing the notion that disease was mapped on the contours of the body. The doctor should therefore direct his gaze at the visible contours of the body to chart anatomical route of the disease. Since such medical understanding is culturally and historically specific, it could not exist outside the discourse, which produced such knowledge. Also there have been ruptures, breaches and discontinuities between one discursive practice and another.

The new historicists like Gallagher, Greenblatt and Montrose embrace Foucault's episteme, representation, discourse and discursive formations of madness, sexuality and disease in order to relocate the literary text in its context or historical moment. They visualize literary works as cultural products and agents of ideology. They see literature as mediating rather than imitating human action; and in that sense literature shapes rather than reflects an age. A dialectical relationship begins to exist between history and literary texts as production and producer. New historicists see history not as blind scholarship but a process, an ideology that completes itself upon the completion of a work of art. All this sounds familiar to a Foucauldian reader.

The scholarship of new historicists focus attention on the upper echelons of social hierarchy (church, monarchy, privileged classes) corroborating their conclusions from researches in the disciplines of political science, anthropology and sociology. They enter into the dynamics of negotiation, profit-exchange and circulation, trying to see literature not above market forces, but very much rooted in it and governed by the economic principle of demand and supply. By and large new historicists see all cultural activities as having an important bearing on historical analysis of a literary text—from hermaphrodite trails to methods of cartography in Renaissance England, especially the plays of Shakespeare. Questions of power and culture, the supposed autonomy of the self and cultural political hegemony controlling the self, all fall within their area of research.

The questioning of a text employed by the new historicists and the selection of topics for discussion are Foucauldian. Issues in a text concerning power relations, containment and subversion of authority, historical-cultural pointers, language-knowledge-power connection, models of human personality, mapping of physical body and truth-authority nexus are employed in interpreting a text. The constructionist representation of identity in the 19th century novel linked to parliamentary representation; Elizabethan colonization and subjugation; the construction of otherness in Renaissance England; the discourse on matriarchal monarchy in Shakespeare’s plays are but easy tropes learnt from Foucault finding expression in new historicist scholarship.

Forgetting of History

The recent efforts at debunking historical consciousness or the “forgetting of history” in American society and academia have revived the interest of many scholars in historical and socio-political aspects of literary studies. Appropriating history through incorporating it in the daily consciousness of lived experience of human beings and reducing innumerable details of lived experience to essences, are the twin ways dominant discourses have denied the role of history in forming both details and essences. This was something that has been happening for quite sometime now.
Since the time of Descartes, the concept of subjectivity has been the most fundamental and foundational concept in modern philosophy. Hegel saw the concept of self-referentiality as the reference point of the modern age. "The greatness of our age," Hegel writes, "rests in the fact that freedom, the peculiar possession of mind whereby it is at home with itself in itself, is recognized."\(^{32}\) The ability of the mind to be "at home with itself in itself" is the ability of the knowing subject to self-reflect and become conscious of objects and their representation. In this way we enter into a mode of acquiring evidence on the basis of which we can doubt or criticize everything. "Thus modernity," Jurgen Habermas points out, "prides itself on its critical spirit, which accepts nothing as self-evident except in light of good reasons."\(^{33}\) This develops a self-critical attitude towards tradition and reinforces a normative belief in self-determination and self-realization. Normative belief, Hegel would have us understand, arise as a consequence of the rational structure embodied in the principle of subjectivity. No longer bound by the logic of their tradition, free subjects need to make new commitments through their own communicative skills. Individuals have to narrate their own stories and suffer the anxieties of making their own decisions.

From the early 1950s to late 1970s the traditional narrativizing approach in historical studies gave way to a structuralist approach that substituted structures for events. Structuralists, (Barthes, Fernaud Braudel and the Annales group) and narrativists debated about two issues: First, how the past should be constructed (data, records, structures etc.,)? And second, how the past should be represented in ideological discourse (stories, diaries, personal account etc.,)? But before these two questions could be satisfactorily answered a new player appropriated the debate. The philosophy of composition, or the written text historians used to narrate their findings, acquired an ontological status.

Historical events were now arranged as stories of human agents and not as scientific narratives to represent reality. Ricoeur, Barthes, Gadamer, Arthur Danto, Habermas, Foucault and others revived interest in narrative techniques and the function of time. All this led to the philosophy of modalization and a new interest in the works of Spinoza.\(^{34}\)

The rise of formalism, the collapsing distinction between form and content and the rise of critical historiography (that welcomed all historical theories) became anathema to both Left and Right wing historians. The textualists endorsed the idea that the Real could only be represented and it had no ontological pre-existence. The real past could only be made accessible through representation and that there were commensurable representations as index, icon or symbol. The textualist theorists saw description as objects that were also inscribed in a historical discourse. If discourse was narrativized then the objects representing the discourse must also possess historicity and narratability.

The contradictory nature of historical events affecting historical research also had a strong bearing on literary theory as well. The resurgence of socio-political historical reflection in literary studies encompassed this problem. It captured the mood and temper of the times by shifting the focus of literary analysis from verbal paradigms (symbols, technique, tone or meaning) to the analysis of ideological practices (discursive structures, textual subversion, social and political meridians). The engaging concern with socio-political origins of cultural artifacts now tended to reduce literature to a historical footnote, thereby neglecting the complexity and uniqueness of texts per se.
In *Marxism and Form*, Frederic Jameson explains that the reality of the external world is largely “interiorized” in discursive forms such as the novel. Storytelling is not something demeaning but a “coming to self-consciousness of narration.” But Jameson warns that it is naïve to believe that history “just happens,” as do many new historicists. Somehow they fail to ask questions such as: How and why history happens? And who are the people affected by it? Althusser’s injunction to be wary of ideas in society as they might carry hidden messages of institutions or bureaucracy ought to be taken seriously. Our aim should be to demystify these ideas and expose their construction.

The eagerness with which new historicists connect literature to politics forces Eve Kosofsky Sedgwich to call new historicist criticism as “good dog/bad dog” criticism where “progressive” writers are eulogized and “reactionary” ones are chastised. New historicist practice fails to enter into a more nuanced kind of criticism that accepts dichotomies and inherent problems within cultures and acknowledges that writers invariably grapple with these problems in their own unique ways without attempting to or being able to resolve them.

**Text and Context**

In recent years the theory of the text has undergone many changes beyond the confines of intentional fallacy and affective fallacy. Structuralists and post-structuralists would have us believe that the text enjoys autonomy uninfluenced by the intentions of the writer. A critic must only evaluate the signifiers within the codified structure of the text. Yet intentional theorists see the text quite the opposite. Quentin Skinner in “Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas,” contends that in order to understand a historical text fully, it is necessary to first understand the intention of the author and the context in which the text was written. Paul Ricoeur points out that a text (or a cultural product such as a poem, novel, play or painting) is above all a consciously crafted work with an identifiable author (unlike a myth), and that intentionality ought not to be dispensed with in understanding it. Ricoeur introduces the theory of textual distanciation or the distance text travels from the conditions of its original production. But Anthony Giddens is quick to point out that distanciation is not a quality of the text but “a characteristic of social life generally that its products escape the intentional input of its creators.” Giddens further argues that a text must also be understood in its context: “To grasp the meanings of a text as they might have been understood by those who produced it involves investigating the conditions of their knowledgeability.” Both Ricoeur and Giddens are effectively supporting three practices—an understanding of a text beyond a context, an analysis of a text within a context and the study of a text in the making.

Benedict Anderson points out that nation states invariably recognize themselves more easily through the print forms of the novel and the newspaper than scientific or empirical studies. Members of a nation form an imagined community and an “image of their communion” with others, even in diversity through these two media. The novel provides to them a proxy text representing “the solidity of a single community, embracing characters, authors and readers” negotiating time. But this does not mean that the novel is an unmediated discourse of the nation or national life. The whirligig of taste, taste forming groups, publishers, critics and readers play an equally important role. The novel however attempts to embody or imagine the sensibility and aspirations of the middle class.
Edward Said wants us to believe that it is both the concern and responsibility of the critics to bring literature to “performance” and to induce the articulation of specific voices, “dominated, displaced, or silenced by the textuality of texts.” For texts are powerful forces that privilege a dominant discourse cloaking themselves “in the particular authority of certain values over others.” We must guard ourselves, Said cautions, against this monocentrism. “Texts are a system forces institutionalized by the reigning culture at some human cost to its various components. For texts, after all are not an ideal cosmos of ideally equal moments.”

The English novel itself is the product of an unhealthy combination of English bourgeois aspirations and expansionist ideas of the Empire. In *Culture and Imperialism* Said writes:

For the British writer, ‘abroad’ was felt vaguely and ineptly to be out there, or exotic and strange, or in some way or other ‘ours’ to control, trade in ‘freely’, or suppress when the natives were energised to these feelings, attitudes, and references and became a main element in a consolidated vision, or departmental cultural view, of the globe.

Said sees the nineteenth century novel as a cultural discourse strengthening the political hegemony of the British Empire in its colonies with its universalist notion of Englishness and legitimizing logic of territorial possessions. And now the third world novel must overthrow the imperial hegemony, heal its psychological wounds and find its own voice. Said writes:

Many of the most interesting postcolonial writers bear their past within them—as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices—as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from the empire...

But only the elite, globalized middle class “natives” can speak to the “empire,” once the Empire authorizes them. The postcolonial Indian novelist writing in English occupies a privileged position in his own world while he is destabilizing the hegemony of the West. In other words the postcolonial novel functions within the hegemonic intersection of privilege and dissent. And in this position the postcolonial writer narrates the nation, subverting the system that privileges him—the irreverent elite, the subversive artist-historian. Though this point is well taken it marginalizes the ingenuous ways in which the colonized world constructed and contained the English West psychologically.

In *On Deconstruction*, Jonathan Culler talks about critical theory as “a heterogeneous genre” that must be privileged. In *The Pursuit of Signs*, he explains further:

If works were indeed autonomous artifacts there might be nothing to do but to interpret each of them, but since they participate in a variety of systems—the conventions of literary genres, the logic of story and the teleologies of emplotment, the condensations and displacements of desire, the various discourses of knowledge that are found in a culture—critics can move through texts towards an understanding of the systems and semiotic processes which make them possible.
Culler draws our attention to the fundamental distinction between theory and different forms of cultural criticism. Critics can employ cultural criticism as a framing device to understand the system and semiotics of culture in which a text was created.

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning*, Greenblatt justifies the centrality of the literary text in his own critical writing. He finds, “great art is an extraordinary sensitive register of the complex struggles and harmonies of culture and in part because by inclination and training, whatever interpretative powers I possess are released by the resonance of literature.” It is interesting to note that the new historicists, such as Greenblatt and others, were trained as literary critics; and therefore literature remains significantly important to them to apply their expanded literary training to it. It is not at all difficult to understand from this perspective the new historicist revolt against New Criticism.

By challenging the tendency of New Criticism to portray discursive (language, literary techniques, theory etc.) and social (history, culture, class, gender, politics or ideology) domains as separate, new historicism underscored the idea that “theory” was not separate from or above ideology. In fact, contrary to J. Hillis Miller’s belief, theory was rooted in ideology. Undoubtedly there are points of contact and compatibility between theory and ideology, between a purely discursive reading of a text and a cultural critique based on history, culture, politics, class or gender. For example, the ideological techniques developed by deconstructive criticism are effectively employed to expose the hierarchical and binary structures central to the Western intellectual tradition. Jacques Derrida points out that a deconstructive reading and writing are not just concerned with “conceptual and semantic contexts” but also with “political and institutional practices.” And if we subscribe to a Jamesonian concept of material necessity with the proviso that history is “inaccessible to us except in textual form,” then we need must endorse the premise that discursive discourses largely reflect some essential and empirical historical reality rooted in “the political unconscious.”

Literary narratives and images always invariably reflect cultural issues, obsessions and aspirations. And interpretative techniques ought to address these issues. Literary critics ought to ask questions such as these: Why, for instance, Hamlet does not kill Claudius as the latter prays? What were the Christian debates about themes relating to salvation, trans-substantiation, purgatory, church legitimacy, monarchical legitimacy or succession? Since writers equally participate in society like we ordinary citizens do, they also share in its dominant prejudices and misconceptions, though they might be more circumspect than an average man on the street. Criticism ought to function in such a way so as to show instances in a text where the writer’s attitude differs from ours, and highlight those factors that have shaped that attitude. Some pertinent questions to ask would be: Why in *Hard Times* Charles Dickens condemns utilitarianism and yet does not refuse its social benefits? What are the colonial attitudes of Europeans shipwrecked on a primitive island in Shakespeare’s play *The Tempest*? Or what are the Elizabethan attitudes to women and love in *The Taming of the Shrew*? And these are the very the questions new historicists are asking.

By positing such questions, new historicism pulled itself away from both new critical formalism and positivist historical criticism. Stephen Greenblatt in the introduction to *Representing the English Renaissance* rejects the assumption that there are, “fixed set of texts that are set apart from all other forms of experience and that contain their own determinate
meanings or as a stable set of reflection of historical facts that lie beyond there." He does not see literary texts as "fixed" in their meaning or reflecting some "stable" historical facts. The boundaries of art and literature too are socially and historically determined by social and artistic modes of production extraneous to the text. And the writer and readers constantly mediate these boundaries redefining and resituating the text in its context. Tony Bennett calls the reader-writer nexus a "reading formation" that constantly negotiates meaning between the reader, text and the context.

Early in the development of new historicism, new historicist critical practices were applied to the study of English Renaissance literature. Since new historicists like Greenblatt, Gallagher, Montrose and others were already working in the area of Renaissance Studies they conveniently applied the procedures and political assumptions to works published in this period. A lot of non-canonical literary and dramatic works produced during the Renaissance period in England were resituated in relation to social and cultural practices and political institutions of early modern England. Through the method of foregrounding the texts, produced during Renaissance England against the sociology and politics of the period and political concerns of the present, new historicists reconstituted the ability of cultural texts to commune with us. So they said. The practice has led critics to worry whether Renaissance Studies in the hands of new historicists was nothing but just troubling disclosures about Shakespeare's politics.

The procedures of new historicism were obviously a radical departure from the way English Studies were constituted or practiced. English Studies had combined four linguistic, ideological and historical practices as part of its methodology: a general discursive analysis, status quo ideology, non-contextual histories and a limited correspondence between text and context. These four practices allowed English Studies to employ formal and rhetorical techniques in analyzing texts, construct a general history of ideas (or literary genres), and celebrate the dominant socio-political identity organically referred to as the "spirit of the age," in most texts published till the 1970s. English Studies also saw a close connection between fictional characters and events in texts and historical persons and events in reality. In the 1980s this inter-connective perspective changed. Literary critics were seen as privileged readers whose knowledge and subjectivity constructed a past that they were able to present analytically. They were in no way outside the writer-reader context but implicated and co-opted within contextualized reading formation.

Symbolic Anthropology

The rise of symbolic anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s, significantly influenced in shaping the course of cultural poetics, later known as new historicism. Clifford Geertz, an American liberal humanist of sorts, simultaneously confronted the data collecting approach in social sciences and the universalizing discourses of Marxism. He understood culture as symbolic "patterns of meaning" that men and women employ to communicate and develop "attitudes toward life." His ethnographic model employed "thick description" to explain social expressions of an alien culture that were somewhat confusing and enigmatic to Western minds.

Geertz in *After the Fact* elaborated upon the post-positivist critique of empirical realism,
which questioned the traditional theories of truth and knowledge and introduced an indefinite “quest” after the fact in anthropology. In the beginning symbolic anthropology was “suspected as European, literary, or worse, philosophical.” And to quite an extent those suspicions were well founded. In an attempt to restructure anthropology and formulate graduate programs in it, anthropologists overhauled curricula driven beyond the boundaries of their discipline into an area of new intellectual practices arising out of a combination of “the linguistic, the interpretative, the social constructionist, the new historicist, the rhetorical, or the semiotic.”

Now the ethnographer’s task was not only to reconceptualize his discipline but to adapt the new methodologies to his discipline. In *Available Light*, Geertz explored issues in political philosophy, religion and psychology through a postmodernist and multiculturalist perspective. Here he brought to the surface the symbolic significance of the concepts of nation, country, identity or self and how their unstable meanings change through time and place. But he made an interesting remark in the beginning of the book, which would gladden the hearts of literary critics. Geertz wrote,” A lot of people don’t quite know where they are going, I suppose; but I don’t even know, for certain, where I have been. But all right already. I’ve tried virtually every other literary genre at one time or another. I might as well try Bildungsroman.” Geertz’s light-hearted statement of becoming a novelist and writing a Bildungsroman has far-reaching implication both for anthropology and literature. A Bildungsroman narrates the story of the psychological development and moral education of its protagonist, and now anthropology is called upon to do the same. The thin margin that once separated the imaginative text of a writer and the scientific text of an anthropologist has almost disappeared by now.

The interpretative and exhaustive method of anthropology has been quickly appropriated by cultural historians, and subsequently by literary critics, more as a narrating practice than as a cultural theory. Literary critics particularly employ the interpretative narrative technique of this ethnographic model to understand literary culture and the literary ethos. Interestingly Geertz’s interpretative ethnography was criticized within the field of anthropology by fellow anthropologists as reducing economic and material conflicts in society to impressionistic understanding of local cultures. His use of thick description failed to relate “cultural texts” to a larger tradition of literary, economic and social change.

The Geertzian method of finding indigenous cultural significance to the exclusion of social laws has drawn criticism from critics such as Roger Keesing, Dominick La Capra, Vincent Pecora and Aletta Biersack. These critics point out that cultures can be both mazes of “mystification” or streets of signification. It all depends on who constructs cultural meaning and interprets culture; and what are his ulterior motives.

Naturally new historicist practices have also come under attack. Hayden White in *Tropics of Discourse* sees literary conventions and linguistic constraints impacting on the writing of history. The historical discourse now becomes a narrative prose discourse that represents past structures as models in order to explain their meaning. In *Metahistory*, White sees the historian functioning as a chronicler of events that happened in the past and constructing a story from it. The controversy about the new methodology continues. The linguistic turn towards culture in history, sociology and anthropology has been dealt with exhaustively in *Beyond the Cultural Turn* which analyses different aspects of the narrative mode and offers a postmodernist critique of knowledge seeing the body and self as important sites intersecting culture and society.
Walter Cohen sees the new historicist reliance on "arbitrary connectedness" between different aspects of social reality as a significant lack of an "organizing principle." 62

Roger Kimball in *Tenured Radicals: How Politics Has Corrupted Our Higher Education*, finds the tendency in new historicism and radical feminism to substitute sociology and ideology for literary criticism and literature somewhat irksome. "Is there something about the literary experience that transcends contingencies like time, race and sexual orientation?" And Kimball answers yes. The Western canon, which has been under assault by the 1960s radicals, is central to a complete liberal arts education in the United States, an education through which students can explore the profound dramas of life and seek answers to our existential dilemmas. 63 Dominick La Capra in *Soundings in Critical Theory* calls the method as "cut-and-paste bricolage." 64 Education (literary criticism and literature including) has become an ideologically contested ground and the entire Western civilization a contentious area.

Being a practice of literary criticism, new historicism has somehow failed to develop a sustained theory about its literary method or cultural model. Furthermore, the belief in arbitrary connectedness has led many practitioners of new historicism to assume that there is a natural inter-connectedness in social and literary realities rooted in the idea of cultural determinism.

**Cultural Poetics**

In *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* and later in *Shakespearian Negotiations*, Greenblatt defined his practice of cultural poetics as a study of "cultural practices understood to be art forms and other, contiguous, forms of expression" (p. 5). 65 Granting autonomy to literary and cultural histories, Greenblatt reorganized cultural poetics by emphasizing the inter-textuality of literature and society, which according to him arose out of an organically unified cultural system. He attempted to study the relations within the grand structural enterprise rather than see the sequence of autonomy of various discourses. Greenblatt's argument about tropes functioning as both objects and conditions echo the views of Geertz and Foucault. Greenblatt explains:

The relation I wish to establish between medical and theatrical practice is not one of cause and effect or source and literary realization. We are dealing rather with a shared code, a set of interlocking tropes and similitudes that function not only as objects but as the conditions of representation. 66

The anti-historicist idea of dealing with "a shared code" in medical and theatrical practices takes its cue from Geertz's notion of collective and symbolic cultural system and Foucault's epistemic rather than causal construction of history.

In an essay "Return to History" published in *Aesthetics, Method and Methodology*, Foucault rejects historical causality in order to seek discontinuity and to find the emergence and center of an event. He concludes:

Structuralism, by defining transformations, and history, by describing types of events and different types of duration [duree], make possible both the appearance of discontinuities in history and the appearance of regular, coherent transformations.
Structuralism and contemporary history are theoretical instruments by means of which one can—contrary to the old idea of continuity—really grasp both the discontinuity of events and the transformation of societies.

In effect, Foucault argues that both the structuralist and historicist methodologies help us to understand the discontinuities of events and the change in societies.

The new historicist cultural model, however, seems to function within a closed ideological framework, quite similar to the framework built on formalist assumptions. If culture is a symbolically shared system then it is ideologically closed too. And if tropes are more important than causes, the critic analyzing the text in an intercultural framework becomes limited by the very nature of his singular perspective. Also cultural processes have an uncanny mind of their own, and are invariably incompatible with ideological conflict and change.

The ideological assumptions of new historicists and the models they used to analyse cultural processes limited the scope and nature of their analysis. Their study of European Renaissance drew upon the twin problems of ideology and resistance to ideology within a culture, which was later reframed in the binary terms of “containment” and “subversion.” This was a procedure easy to apply but gave limited results as it was not sophisticated enough to encompass the subtle dynamics and change in cultural processes. But after nearly two decades these terms are seen as vestiges of a Cold War ideology somewhat incongruous to the globalizing processes of the post-Cold War era. And within Anglo-American criticism there seems to be a new shift in position, just as there is one in the ideological and psychological construction of the West after September 11, 2001 suicide attacks on American cities.

New historicism, together with colonist critics, has unsettled idealist interpretations of The Tempest as the repository of universal values. They see Prospero’s treatment of Caliban rooted in the myth of colonialism. But the play is too large, claim critics like Carolyn Porter, to fit into a new historicist or colonial discourse. There are undoubtedly other discourses and rhetorical strategies that the play also addresses. It is possible to hear Jungian archetypes, Arthurian legend, Freudian psychosis, fecund vegetation beliefs, Plato’s soul and good-bad angel allegories, theory of the drama, magic, about playing chess and so on. Obviously we can see Prospero’s anger motivates him to colonize and later tyrannize and enslave Caliban. But there is much larger issues here than what new historicists see. Meredith Anne Skura points out that British colonial records were not accessible to Shakespeare when he wrote The Tempest as England was still in the romanticizing phase of colonization, though the colonial misdeeds of other nations were made available. Critics like Frank Lentricchia, Gerald Graff and Brook Thomas have criticized the somewhat naive and simplistic application of the Foucauldian method to Renaissance England. But the rejection of the valorizing version of The Tempest was carried out by Lytton Strachey in 1906 and then by John P. Cutts without the new historicist fad. Strachey objects to Prospero’s “spirit of wise benevolence” and sees him (as does Ariel in the play who would suffer ten years imprisonment in the oak tree for expressing the opinion) as a boring monologist and an opinionated sourpuss who has offended practically everyone at least once. In a late 1960s study of the play John P. Cutts sees Prospero as a Shakespearean version of Faustus who derives a malicious pleasure in controlling and manipulating others. He seems to be cut for damnation and like Faustus his repentance comes
rather late. 73

The Politics of Culture

In the 1980s, as "the problem of ideology" gained wider acceptance in American academia, there was a marked shift in cultural and sociological analysis. From themes of sameness, cooperation and acceptance, the emphasis shifted to themes dealing with difference, hegemony. This led to resistance causing national debates in the United States about the future direction of English and American Studies and the humanities at large. Literary canons, that did not privilege a wide variety of political, racial, ethnic and sexual identities and literatures, were passionately contested on campuses and in the media leading to a reprioritizing of funding in the humanities by government agencies, private funding bodies and the universities themselves. Since then, a new politics of culture has emerged displacing other dominant modes of cultural practices and ideologies. Within this climate, bounded by the extremes of containment and subversion, new historicism constructs its practices and locates itself in the environment. It is possible to see a clear divide emerging between those who campaign for individual agencies fighting domination, assimilation and exclusion and those who valorize early modern state and its capacity to contain dissent, even if it in some cases actually produced, subversive forms of domination.

Greenblatt in his essay, "Invisible bullets: Renaissance authority and its subversion, Henry IV and Henry V," argues that the ability of the status quo to generate subversion so as to use it to its own benefit highlights "the very condition of power." 74 Analyzing the subversive nature of Shakespeare's dramas, Greenblatt argues,

It is precisely because of the English form of absolutist theatricality that Shakespeare's drama, written for a theater subject to State censorship can be so relentlessly subversive: the form itself, as a primary expression of Renaissance power, contains the radical doubts it continually provokes. 75

Producing and containing subversion, the status quo or the modern state organized under a ruling monarch, mocks at the ability of individual subjects to counter state domination. But liberal humanists and cultural critics are alarmed by the containment-subversion approach.

The liberal humanists, on the one hand, fear that if a dominant ideology operates in this devious and subversive fashion, then it might in the final run circumvent efforts at individual self-determination. The cultural critics, on the other hand, worry about their discursive effectiveness to intervene in ideological practices. An extreme containment approach might wish to read a Foucauldian historical discontinuity and control of subjects as offering no hope for contestation or change.

Frank Lentricchia in "Foucault's Legacy: A New Historicism?" finds that a "monolithic agency" produces "opposition" as political delusion. 76 But Foucault draws a more complex argument. He does not see power as monolithic but multiple. And therefore he sees resistance to power as many and varying in its intensity and effectiveness. In "Sex, Power and the Politics of Identity," Foucault explains this in the following manner:
You see, if there was no resistance, there would be no power relations. Because it would simply be a matter of obedience. You have to use power relations to refer to the situation where you're not doing what you want. So resistance comes first, and resistance remains superior to the forces of the process; power relations are obliged to change with the resistance. So I think that resistance is the main word, the key word, in this dynamic.77

Foucault argues against the position of individual entrapment in the politics of power; as the individual always possesses the power to resist. Foucault, therefore, does not endorse the containment-subversion paradigm of power, but provides a more complex argument for both the forces of status quo containment and individual subversion or resistance.

Raymond Williams in Marxism and Literature addresses the problem of ideology by introducing heterogenous and shifting ideological “movements and tendencies both within and beyond a specific and effective dominance.”78 The constantly shifting and redefining nature of “movements and tendencies” against dominant ideologies and against themselves provide an ideological ground for both contestation and redefinition. Dominant ideologies are maintained by a grouping of gender, ethnicity, class, profession or age that individuals use as cultural producers; they are also maintained by the consumers or resisters of cultural production (readers/resisters) and by the autonomy of the cultural medium. Williams explains that “hegemony” as a concept goes beyond culture and encompasses a “whole social process,” including ideology. He argues: “To say that ‘men’ define and shape their whole lives is true only in abstraction. In any actual society there are specific inequalities in means and therefore in means to realize this process.”79 Williams explains that specific cultures overwhelm the individual to the extent that he cannot think or act in specific historical situations. And this Marxist position challenges the basic premise of American cultural anthropology that individual agencies possess the ability to act upon and change historical situations.80 An acceptable model of culture must employ the methodology of cultural poetics to incorporate both the dominant and subordinate ideologies that give rise to identity and difference. Williams explains:

Essentially, all three agencies—production, consumption/appropriation and reproduction—are involved in the ideologies of dominance, transforming and getting transformed in the process. A dynamic model of culture involves a constant interplay of dominant and subordinate ideological positions that create identity and difference in an ever-shifting paradigm of cultural poetics.81

In recent years cultural politics has tried to unravel the supposedly hidden text in writers such as Shakespeare, a text subversive of its own canonicity. The notion that subversion is clandestinely woven in the very fabric of texts might seem maliciously historical, but it is more formal than historical in practice. Jonathan Dollimore finds the notion of a clandestine subversion in texts of famous canonical writers somewhat ludicrous. In the Introduction to Political Shakespeare: Essays in Cultural Materialism he argues,

Nothing can be intrinsically or essentially subversive in the sense that prior to the
event subversiveness can be more than potential; in other words it cannot be guaranteed a priori, independent of articulation, context and reception. Likewise the mere thinking of a radical idea is not what makes it subversive: typically it is the context of its articulation: to whom, how many and in what circumstances; one might go further and suggest that not only does the idea have to be conveyed, it has also actually to be used to refuse authority or be seen by authority as capable and likely of being so used. It is, then, somewhat misleading to speak freely and only of “subversive thought”; what we are concerned with ... is a social process.82

Dollimore points out that clandestine subversion needs a “context of its articulation,” which is historically verifiable in terms of its reception and action or supposed refusal of authority. In the absence of a context to speak of a hidden subversion is “somewhat misleading.” What we are actually dealing with is a “social process” not a subversive agenda. Texts are ideologically inscribed and when they show instability in the canon it is a consequence of the badly constructed canon and not their intrinsic unstable nature.

**Neo-Conservative Backlash**

American establishment, neo conservative intelligentsia and the conservative media see the shift in literary studies from neo-formalism to socio-political contextualization by Leftist professors as a degradation of literature, humanities and society. The curriculum reform by the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) to resituate traditional values (which have seemingly fallen into disrepute since the permissive 1960s) have been largely aimed at restructuring the syllabi that reemphasizes the traditional American values of stability and cohesion. William Bennett and Lynne V. Cheney of the NEH, Roger Kimball and others have tried to discredit alternate perspective of history, politics, sexuality, race, class and gender.83 The status quo political and bureaucratic groups regard the formation of new cultural canons and critical theories in American academia as essentially a struggle for power. The power of the establishment seems lately threatened or weakened by academic power. Academic discourses have deconstructed social and political hegemonies latent in rhetorical and discursive models. And in that sense the repositioning of American critical practices, reorganization of methodologies and deconstructing of ideologies and discourses have brought literary theory and the social sciences from their ivory tower isolation into the frenetic activity of society. The danger that academic politics now pose to government politics by destabilizing its hegemonies has developed a climate of dissent and change that will alter either for good or for ill. But these victories are not free from side effects. Culturalism and cultural politics have also radically altered campuses in the United States and other parts of the world wherever academics is seen as a serious business.

**Scapegoating**

New historicisms and other forms of critical inquiry such as feminism, cultural studies, postcolonial studies or deconstruction developed on American and British campuses, have established a tradition of scapegoating, leaving no room for individual respect or social obligation. Departments of English have become hotbeds for political and ideological
contestation where professors press their own ideological agendas and do not see eye to eye with their rivals. LaCapra writing about the state of “Criticism Today” points out that in the past scapegoating had not been all that bad. It had given rise to “solidarity and socio-cultural identity” apart from other subtle forms of “metaphorical identity” and “narrative closure.” But now the situation is somewhat different. There is more bickering, less tolerance and acceptance of another position. But this situation in the final analysis can prove detrimental to both professors and serious critical inquiry. To set matters right LaCapra suggests the strengthening of both the concepts of alterity and obligation. “The critical task,” he states, “is to work out alternatives to it. A different understanding of institutions as settings for the interaction of social individuals, marked by internal alterity yet committed or obligated to one another is a necessary step in this respect.”

Greenblatt agrees with LaCapra seeing another unsettling consequence of the culture of scapegoating—an unstable theory of art. An “unsettling circulation of materials and discourses” in the contemporary world do not allow the formation of “a stable, mimetic theory of art.” Instead, they direct literary practices toward “an interpretative model” that negotiates and exchanges understanding in “hidden places” of discourses.

In the last two decades literary theory has becomes one of the most contentious grounds for marginalizing some theoretical models and privileging others. The politics of theory seem to connect theory with diverse areas such as progressive thought (Michael Warner’s concept of zones of privacy and zones of theory), sexual harassment (Janet Halley’s application of judicial theory to sexual harassment), what remains of theory (Gayatri Spivak’s notion of theory—remains) and the literary dimensions (Butler’s notion of the literary in theory). In the introduction to What’s Left of Theory? Butler, John Guillory, and Kendall Thomas argue that the political dimension in literary theory have redefined the concept of “theory,” separating theory from literary analysis and the study of literature. They wonder if there is a glut of theory in the market of literature; and what changes literature per se has suffered after a confrontation with literary theory. The write:

Are there ways of pursuing a politically reflective literary analysis that have definitively left theory behind, and must ‘theory’ be left behind for left literary analysis to emerge? Has the study of literature passed beyond its encounter with theory? If so, in passing beyond theory, has it remained unchanged? Does the recent cry for a ‘return to literature’ signal the surpassing of theory, the fact that literature remains after theory? Does literature remain (the same) after theory?

It is hard to say what this return to literature will ensue for the students after the theory wars are over. Will our study of literature be more comprehensive? Will our evaluation be richer and more nuanced? It is hard to say.

After Two Decades, A Reassessment

Recently Gallagher and Greenblatt, who spearheaded the new historicist movement in the 1980s, wrote Practicing New Historicism in which both express their sense of incredulity at finding their new interpretative practice acquire the false status of a “field” or a speciality. New
historicism they recollect always “resisted systematization” and was from the beginning “an extraordinary assortment of critical practices” disenchanted with the norms and procedures of the New Criticism. Though Gallagher and Greenblatt admit that new historicism has been “insufficiently theorized” they remain highly skeptical of even being able to formulate an abstract system to be applied to works of art. There are however certain ideological predilections that surface under their pretense of not being able to develop a theory.

The new historicist journal *Representations* could never come up with an editorial policy. Nevertheless, the national hermeneutics of Giambattista Vico, late 18th and early 19th century German historians and the ideas of social diversification of Gottfried von Herder influenced its method. The new historicism like Herder saw multiple stories, different human models and diverse sites in which culture was located. New humanists went along with Herder’s belief that human beings were born “almost without instinct” and their identity was formed “only through lifelong training toward humanity, and this is the reason our species is both perfectible and corruptible.” What else can we call these personal preferences if not ideological biases practiced as methodology?

It is increasingly becoming difficult for neo-formalists, historians or traditional social scientists to remain disinterested in the politics of culture, culturalism or the linguistic turn and continue to teach canonical texts in a trouble-free zone. The rhetorical and discursive strategies have brought politics, culture and identity into the marketplace of ideology, hegemony and discourse. The grand universalist narrative of Marxism has shriveled up into analytical tools to understand exploitation, enslavement, globalization, market economy and sub cultures. The universalist projects have all been either abandoned or sent back to people with religious convictions. Whatever bogus universalism remains in popular culture (such as MTV, Michael Jackson, Mickey Mouse and Madonna) is both primitive and puerile. Only liberal constitutions of powers and superpowers such as the United States (American Declaration of Independence), Great Britain (The Magna Carta) and France (The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen) remain to catch the failing twilight of universalism. The politics of recognition built upon the ideas of Herder and Rousseau have given way to the politics of difference. There is no human project worth the name, except individual projectiles travelling at their own trajectories finding their own self-fulfilling, selfish targets.

The yarn methodologies have spun has woven a magic web ensnaring text, human agents and context. Whether we teach history (which is emplotment, argument, identity or poetic structure) or cultural literary theory (which is narrative, interpretation or discourse) we increasingly become aware of ideological differences. We also feel the need for cohesion and some unifying force. In *Postethnic America*, historian David A. Hollinger hopes that Americans would go beyond the historical constraints of ethnicity and race, which have hitherto exerted such a powerful influence over culture. He suggests that a truly postethnic America should move towards a country that can be “more than a site for a variety of diasporas and of projects in colonization and conquest.” In a world getting increasingly divided into different “frameworks of difference” Geertz in *Available Light* campaigns for “a practical politics of cultural conciliation.” This politics must seek a common strategy and direction, which would create a certain “unity of intent,” howsoever fragile that might be. Whatever light is still available, we must make a commitment to “the moral obligation of hope” before
darkness envelopes us.”

Notes
1 Being a liberal humanist, Leavis approached the literary text more from a moral position than a formalist; he became less interested in the formal aspects of a literary text such as structure, symbol or design and more concerned about the moral values that can be learned from it. His disciple I.A. Richards carried the interpretation of literature to the other extreme of encouraging his students to arrive at a ‘true judgment’ of a text by isolating the text. In a few decades this decontextualizing approach to literature became boring and meaningless and gave way to new literary practices.


3 Jean A. Howard, “The New Historicism in Renaissance Studies, English Literary Renaissance, 16 (1986), Howard points out that by the 1980s American professors were tired of teaching literary texts which floated like “ethereal entities” above the mundane struggles of history in some terra incognita (p. 5).


8 Catherine Gallagher, The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and

9 Stephen Greenblatt, Renaissance, pp. 222–54.

10 Montrose, “Shaping Fantasies.”

11 Greenblatt, “Murdering Peasants: Status, Genre and the Representation of Rebellion,” Representations 1 (1983), pp. 1–29. In a recent article in PMLA, January 2001, “Racial Memory and Literary History,” Greenblatt endorses Linda Hutcheon’s claim of “a utopian strain in current literary history” but believes that the tendency lies more in the faith of large national categories such as English or Italian and not in “the resurgence of volkisch ideology,” which encode a dream of containing difference “across races.” Based on this position Greenblatt goes on to see Thomas More’s Utopia as an attempt to obliterate differences by erasing or marginalizing those things that do not serve this all-encompassing narrative. Greenblatt succinctly concludes: “More’s Utopia, let us remind ourselves, is built on a hidden bedrock of shamming, coercion and enslavement” (p. 57)


16 Todd, Gitlin, The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America Is Wracked by Culture Wars, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996). Gitlin writes, “The dynamics if identity politics is self-confirming. A people against whom boundaries were drawn respond by fortifying those very boundaries. The newcomers gain dignity: they are a ‘culture.’ Cultures are not to be tampered with. Cultures are entitled to respect, recognition. By insisting on culture, one fights the power. Group secession undercuts whites’ (and others) opportunities to demonstrate openness and tolerance, whence they decry balkanization as if shocked, shocked, to discover it was invented yesterday” (pp. 153–54).


19 Also see Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990 ); Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex (New York: Routledge, 1993) where she builds upon the ideas of Freud, Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan to establish interconnections between sex, politics, and identity and build her theory of gender as performance.

20 From Modernism to Post-Modernism: An Anthology, Lawrence Cahoone, ed., (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1996). Sigmund Freud, “Civilization and its Discontents.” Freud writes, “Since civilization obeys an internal erotic impulsion which causes human beings to unite in a closely-knit group, it can only achieve this aim through an ever-increasing reinforcements of the sense of guilt, What began in relation to the father is completed in relation to the group” (p. 217). Luce Irigaray, “‘The Sex Which is Not One.’” Irigaray concludes the essay with the clear male-female dichotomy:
“Let women tacitly go on strike, avoid men long enough to learn to defend their desire notably by their speech, let them discover the love of other women protected from their imperious choice of men which puts them in a position of rival goods, let them forge a social status which demands recognition, let them earn their living in order to leave behind their condition of prostitute—These are certainly indispensable steps in their effort to escape their proletarization on the trade market” (p. 468). Also see Jacques Lacan, Ecrits: A Selection, Alan Sheridan trans., (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1977). Lacan writes, “The fact that femininity finds its refuge in this mask, by virtue of the fact of the Verdrangung inherent in the phallic mark of desire, has the curious consequence of making virile display in the human being itself seem feminine" (p 291).


23 Todd, Feminist Literary History, ibid., p. 13.


28 E. Showalter, The Female Malady, (London: Virago Press, 1987). Showalter points out that the French psychiatrist and neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot became popular because he demonstrated that “hysterical symptoms such as paralysis could be produced and relieved by hypnotic suggestions.”(p. 148).


34 Hayden White, Keynote Address, “History as Fulfillment,” November 12, 1999 provides a detailed account of changing methods in historical research and the problem of constructing and representing the past.


42 Giddens, ibid.,
44 Anderson, p. 27.
52 Frederic Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, (Ithaca & New York: Cornell University Press, 1981). Jameson writes that, “history is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and that our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious” (p. 35).
54 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, 1973). In the opening essay, “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretative Theory of Culture,” Geertz remarks, “Analysis is sorting out the structures of signification—what Ryle called established codes, a somewhat misleading expression, for it makes the enterprise sound too much like that of the cipher clerk when it is much more like that of the literary critic—and determining their social ground and import” (p. 9). This statement had a great impact upon the method and procedures of literary critics in the middle of 1970s.
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73 John P. Cutts, Rich and Strange: A Study of Shakespeare’s Last Plays, (Pullman: Washington State


Williams, ibid., p. 108.

Williams’s diluted Marxism saw hegemony as another element of culture, a necessary condition in the modern world to preserve peace, liberty and equality. He campaigned for intellectual autonomy within the Marxist and socialist frameworks and at the same time accepted Mao Tse Tung’s injunction that writers would be merrily absorbed in new ways of popular “collaborative” writing. For a more detailed analysis of Williams’s Marxist position see Maurice Cowling, “Raymond Williams in retrospect,” *The New Criterion*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (February 1990).


*Political Shakespeare*, ibid., p. 13


Geertz, ibid. p. 260.