

NEW HISTORICISM IN THEORY

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Abstract: *The present paper focuses on New Historicism that emerged in the 80s of the last century, through the contribution of Stephen Greenblatt, the American critic who coined the name of the new school of critical theory and whose 1980 study, Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare, introduces the defining operational concepts of the theoretical and applied approach proposed by the movement.*

As John Brannigan observes, “it is a constant feature of new historian approaches to tend to study a considerable number of texts belonging to the same historical epoch and to postulate, or argue, that each epoch establishes its own way of manifesting itself: power” (Brannigan 2001: 174).

In terms of text analysis, critics of the new historian orientation aspire to identify the way in which literature influences and is influenced by the social, cultural and ideological context in which it fits, either by correlating several texts of different invoices belonging to the same era or by focusing on a particular literary work, most often considered exemplary in that culture.

An example of the new historical analyses devoted to a single literary work is provided by DA Miller’s essay, “Disciplines in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family and Bleak House” (1983). The thesis that the critic argues is that Charles Dickens’ novel, House of Shadows, represents and gives visibility to the prison system in Victorian England, confirming, on the other hand, to readers the feeling of security generated by belonging to the family and/ or the free society outside the detention space and warning them, on the other hand, the dangers of rebellion and nonconformism.

Professor Dana-Andreea Percec's book starts from a premise that has gained more and more academic authority in recent decades, with the development of fields such as (the new) historicism. Literary studies have become increasingly receptive to an interdisciplinary approach to texts, including data from various areas of the social sciences. One of the most profitable associations remains that between literary criticism and history, in the form of the new historicism. The movement emphasizes the importance of the role played by the historical context in the interpretation of artistic creations. Thus, the past becomes open, hermeneutically, like a text, the writings having meaning only in relation to other writings, their value depending on the value given to them, directly indirectly, by the discourses of the time. In other words, in the author's opinion, the meaning given to a text by the initial readers remains unchanged. The difference is that today's critical readers are more aware of the political and cultural conventions of the past than the ancient public, because the latter assumed these models as part of the collective imagination.

Keywords: New Historicism; literary studies; collective imagination; hermeneutics of suspicion; metafictional level.

1. Definition, Assumptions, Implications

New Historicism emerged in the 80s of the last century, through the contribution of Stephen Greenblatt, the American critic who coined the name of the new school of critical theory and whose 1980 study, *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, introduces the defining operational concepts of the theoretical and applied approach proposed by the movement. Stephen Greenblatt is a professor of humanities at Harvard University's John Coogan Department, with a highly regarded academic and editorial background, the coordinator of Norton's anthologies of English literature and Shakespeare's, and the founder of the New School of Literature: Historicism. Maria Ștefănescu, in the article *Introductory commentary on the New Historicism*, published in the magazine *Transilvania*, no. 10/2007, states that, "exploring the path of investigation indicated by

Greenblatt, critics such as Louis A. Montrose, Catherine Gallagher, D.A. Miller, Joel Fineman and Walter Benn Michaels, although heterogeneous in the particularities of the reading approach, converge on the premise that, far from existing in a tight separation, literature and society interact and shape each other” (Ștefănescu, 10/2007: 80).

In L. Montrose’s view, “the new historicism is new in its rejection of unproblematic distinctions between ‘literature’ and ‘history’, between ‘text’ and ‘context’, new in resistance to the prevailing tendencies to postulate a unitary and autonomous entity - either the Author or the Opera - which is to be isolated from any social or literary context” (Montrose, 1998: 780).

Although the absolute novelty of this type of approach, says Maria Ștefănescu, may appear debatable (given the similar concerns of re-contextualizing the literary text of critics of Marxist, feminist or gender studies), the interest remains a central fact. Representatives of the new historicism for redefining the relations between the literary work and the historical and social framework(s) in which it is part. The wording proposed by L. Montrose, “the historicity of texts and the textuality of history” (781), pleads, on the one hand, for the recognition of social immersion and historical determinations that mark any type of text, and on the other part for assuming the (post-structuralist) argument of the impossibility of access to a historical past ‘in itself’, not immediately by the succession of texts that seek to describe and interpret it. Consequently, the author states, “the interest of the new historicism is not directed towards the recovery of a supposed social and historical background that a given literary work would reflect, but towards the exploration of what is perceived as the interaction between literary and historical, in the form constant and inevitable contaminations and bidirectional influences” (Ștefănescu 10/2007: 781).

The promoters of the new historicism argue that power structures (understood, in the Foucauldian sense, not only

as punctual manifestations of physical, political or economic force, but as a network of relations that permanently interconnect the entire social gear) penetrate the literary productions of a historical period, participating in the consolidation or pursuit of the subversion of the hegemony of the group or of the dominant Weltanschauung. In addition, says S. Greenblatt in the volume *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare*, what gives a special complexity to the pressure of power structures is that individuals belonging to a particular community end up self-censoring and repressing their desires and initiatives, thus making the brutal exercise of coercive force superfluous. Linguistically and ideologically conditioned, the self spontaneously reproduces the mechanism of surveillance of power so that, from this perspective, representations and discourses that reiterate the validity of the existing social order have a more important role in consolidating it than the repressive apparatus of the state.

Representatives of the new historicism, compared to Marxist critics, who when interested in discovering and analyzing the subversive dimension of literary works, claim a militant and emancipatory contribution to their approach, tend to pay preferential attention to the ways in which a given hegemonic system succeeds to maintain the status quo either in spite of or by manipulative assimilation of resistance attempts. A re-reading of the European canon, focusing on potentially victimized characters (women, heretics, settlers, the poor, the insane, etc.), leads to the conclusion that often the opposition itself is only a form of benign manifestation that structures of power manage to divert towards conformity. This is the argument developed by S. Greenblatt in his famous essay *Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion* (1981). Greenblatt argues that in any historical period, power structures need subversive gestures to become visible and inspire fear (to the extent that seemingly conformist texts include nuclei of resistance), but these

forms of opposition themselves become, involuntarily, tools for consolidating the given social order. To argue his hypothesis, Greenblatt analyzes the travel notes of Thomas Harriot (author of an account of the first British colony in America) and the first part of Shakespeare's historical play, *Henry IV*, and concludes, in both cases, that power generates the appearance of subversive manifestations only in order to be able to monitor and control more effectively any form of resistance.

At the basis of this way of reading and understanding the cultural and ideological contents expressed through the literary (or other) texts of a certain historical period can be recognized a series of implicit premises that Judith Newton (1988) summarized, in the context of a discussion concerning the relationship between feminism and the new historicism, in the form of the central hypotheses attributed to the latter: "there is no universal and transhistorical human nature, and the subjectivity of each of us is constituted by cultural codes that limit us, therefore 'objectivity' does not exist; our experience of the 'world' is always mediated by language"; all representations of the world or readings we apply to past texts are influenced by our own historical position, values and the ideology rooted in it;—"representations generate effects, shaping human consciousness so that, as forces that in history, different forms of representation should be interpreted in relation to each other and to non-discursive 'texts' such as facts and events" (Newton, 1998: 88-89).

Obviously, says Maria Ștefănescu, this set of premises leads to an approach to literary texts from a very different perspective from that encouraged by the (now older) new Anglo-American critique or, in the European context, by formalist and structuralist orientations. Far from being seen as an autonomous entity that, evaded from any historical context, can communicate general human meanings to different generations of performers, the literary work is perceived as a vehicle of ideological content, understood, in the broadest sense, as "processes

through which social subjects are shaped, re-modeled and allowed to act as conscious agents in a world that preserves the appearances of meaning” (Montrose, 1998: 778). Thus, the aspects that hold the interest of a new historical reading of literary works refer to the type of power relations suggested by the text, to the form of their manifestation (explicit or masked), to the subversive nuclei that the text contains and to their possible diversion towards the aims pursued by a hegemonic group or, from a more broadly intertextual context, to the connections that can be made between a given literary work and other contemporary texts (historical, administrative, private, etc.) that confirm or contest our vision of the world.

As John Brannigan observes, “it is a constant feature of new historian approaches to tend to study a considerable number of texts belonging to the same historical epoch and to postulate, or argue, that each epoch establishes its own way of manifesting itself, power” (Brannigan, 2001: 174).

In terms of text analysis, critics of the new historian orientation aspire to identify the way in which literature influences and is influenced by the social, cultural and ideological context in which it fits, either by correlating several texts of different invoices belonging to the same era or by focusing on a particular literary work, most often considered exemplary in that culture.

A classic illustration of the first type of approach is L. Montrose’s essay, *Shaping Fantasies: Figurations of Gender and Power in Elizabethan Culture* (1983), in which the Shakespearean play *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, a travelogue of Walter Raleigh, a dream recorded in the autobiography of an Elizabethan physician, and other writings of the time are analyzed from the perspective of their contribution to the creation of a mythical image of Queen Elizabeth I, says the author. Montrose does not give it a precedent in terms of the quality of information it can provide for understanding 16th-century England, nor

does it see it as less involved in validating (ambiguous) representations of power. In the critic's reading, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* indicates the ambivalence of the position of English nobles who accept the authority of Queen Elizabeth I, however, celebrating her virginity and thus counteracting, through this very gesture, the potential danger of matriarchy.

An example of the new historical analyses devoted to a single literary work is provided by D.A. Miller's essay, *Disciplines in Different Voices: Bureaucracy, Police, Family and Bleak House* (1983). The thesis that the critic argues is that Charles Dickens's novel *House of Shadows* represents and gives visibility to the prison system in Victorian England, confirming, on the other hand, to readers the feeling of security generated by belonging to the family and/ or the free society outside the detention space and warning them, on the other hand, about the dangers of rebellion and nonconformism.

In the author's opinion, the criticisms that have been brought to the new historicism from outside and, occasionally, from within the orientation refer both to the theoretical premises that substantiate it and to the practice of text analysis. On the first point, Carolyn Porter observed in a 1988 article, *Are We Being Historical Yet?*, That the new historicism rejects the 'great Enlightenment narrative' of social and individual progress on which the old historicism is based, but only in order to replace it with its own globalizing narrative: the understanding of all historical events as being determined by the intervention of ubiquitous and inescapable power structures.

Another objection in principle to the new historian premises is formulated by D.G. Myers (1988-89), who questions the a priori perspective on the ideology that the representatives of the current tend to promote. In what ways, Myers wonders, can the new historian critic have the certainty that the ideology he thinks he discovers in the literary work under analysis really belongs to that historical moment, rather than to the contemporaneity of

the performer (himself inevitably feeling his own ideological constraints, his epoch and, therefore, being vulnerable to the temptation to bring with him, in the effort to understand the past, presuppositions of the present).

Referring to the applied studies proposed by the new historians, the critical reactions aimed first of all “the tendency to subject the texts to extremely superficial and generalizing readings, which reflect the interest for the function of the literary work, rather than for its possibilities of interpretation” (Brannigan, 2001: 177). In this regard, in his inaugural address as president of the Modern Language Association in 1986, J. Hillis Miller reproaches the new historian with the tendency to cultivate “the euphoric experience of liberation from the obligation to read” (Miller, 1986/1991: 313) and Kiernan Ryan, himself a practitioner of the new historicism, deplores the fact that the orientation “undoubtedly self-limits itself due to its lack of availability to respond to the complex demands of writing and the formal structure of texts” (Ryan, 1996: XVIII). Refusing the literary work both the understanding in terms of presumably recoverable authorial intentions and in those of an *intentio operis*, the new historian project aims to reorient the “axis of intertextuality, substituting the diachronic text of an autonomous literary history with the synchronic text of a cultural system” (Montrose, 1998: 779).

In fact,

What represents the central contribution brought by the representatives of the current is the questioning, from a perspective that includes a series of developments of recent philosophical and literary reflection, of the interactive role that literature plays in history and society, shaping self-perception of a given community and reflecting, simultaneously, its underlying ideology. (Ștefănescu, 10/2007: 82).

2. Stephen Greenblatt and the Birth of New Historicism: *The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began*

The long-awaited non-fiction book by historians and philologists, for which Stephen Greenblatt received the Pulitzer Prize in 2012, *Clinamen. How the Renaissance Began (The Swerve: How the Renaissance Began, 2011)*, was published in Romanian language by the Humanitas Publishing House in 2014. In the spirit of this investigative method, Stephen Greenblatt goes side by side to complete the details of an essential moment in the history of culture. We go back to 1417, in the footsteps of a humanist, former apostolic secretary of a dethroned pope, who discovers among the lost manuscripts of antiquity, hidden in the monasteries' desks, *On the nature of things* by Lucretius.

The influence of this poem, which has disappeared for centuries, will be essential to the production of the cultural mutation we know today as the Renaissance. The appreciation also passed in the pages of the big dailies and weekly newspapers. Is it possible for a poem to change the world, asks the "Newsweek" columnist: "Stephen Greenblatt tells us how the ancient text that shook the foundations of Renaissance Europe and inspired shockingly modern ideas came to us." The new historicism is neither popularization nor schematization, it is the new breath that will allow us to keep a minimum relationship of the people we are with the ideas that were.

The historian is supposed to impose a pattern on what Greenblatt calls the "unpredictable movement of matter" (2014: 25). Greenblatt, however, argues that history is not a question of that flow of matter and energy which is the life of the universe, but, as says in the opening of *Shakespearean Negotiations*, of talking to the dead. This dialogue is the only object of history, and its content depends upon the artefacts sent down to later generations. At the same time, they are not the faithful mirror of the lived experience back then but just voices of the past, as

subjective or biased as ours. Greenblatt does not imagine this dialogue to be knowledge of the past, but a bridge cast through language to their language, which makes their world relevant and meaningful to us. Here is, for instance, the story of the miraculous survival of a famous text. How many other such texts have been irreversibly lost? The past is for us a reductive image of the whole picture, as the author states that of all the ancient masterpieces, this poem should certainly have disappeared, once and for all, along with the lost writings that inspired it. The fact that he did not disappear, that he came to the surface after many centuries and began to propagate his deeply subversive theses again, could be described by some as a miracle. But the author of the poem in question did not believe in miracles. He was convinced that nothing could violate the laws of nature. Instead, he advanced the principle of 'deviation' - the Latin word used mainly by Lucretius was *clinamen* - an unexpected, unpredictable movement of matter. The reappearance of this poem was itself such a deviation, an unforeseen deviation from the direct trajectory - in this case, to oblivion - which it was, it seems, together with the philosophy that inspired it (72).

The fragmentary nature of the heritage of the past is in no way disenabling its influence. The model embraced by New Historicism is that of cyclic history. Some heirloom of the past may catch the imagination of a later generation, its contagious spirit may conquer again the public sphere of a people's culture. The social semiosis which unifies an age epistemologically is revolving around this newly revived old attractor. The influence of the ancients in the Renaissance was not limited to the arts which, according to Greenblatt, enter into negotiations with all the other discourses and manifestations of a civilization:

In my opinion, and, of course, of many others, after Antiquity, the culture that adopted the Lucretian embrace of beauty and pleasure and promoted it as a legitimate and praiseworthy occupation was that of

the Renaissance. This inclination did not manifest itself only in the field of arts. She designed the clothes and etiquette of the courtiers; the language of the liturgy; modeling and decorating everyday objects. It also extended to Leonardo da Vinci's scientific and technological explorations, Galileo's lively dialogues on astronomy, Francis Bacon's ambitious research projects, and Richard Hooker's theology. In fact, it had become a reflex, so works that were apparently far removed from any aesthetic ambition – Machiavelli's analysis of political strategy, Walter Raleigh's description of Guyana, or Robert Burton's encyclopedic exposition of mental illness – were composed in such a way, so as to produce the most intense pleasure. But the Renaissance arts – painting, sculpture, music, architecture and literature – were the supreme manifestations of the inclination towards beauty (78).

Greenblatt's approach too is of this kind: events are set against the whole historical background in an attempt to find reasonable hypotheses about the behavior of social actors, trying to place themselves in the position of those who acted then in order to identify motives for acting the way they did. The historicist's view is thus a double one, meant to reach a balance between our understanding of the past historical praxis and theirs:

Wrapped in the traditional cloak of philosophers, called a tribune, and traveling through the city in a chariot, Hypatia was one of Alexandria's most visible public figures. In ancient times, women often led isolated lives, but this was not the case. Her self-confidence and naturalness, evidence of a cultured intellect, were also such - wrote a contemporary - that he often appeared in public in the company of magistrates. The fact that he always had access to the political class did not translate into a constant interference in political life. During the first attacks on cult images, she and her followers maintained a

reserved attitude, probably telling themselves that breaking a breathless statue still left intact what really mattered. But with the aggression against the Jews, it must have become clear that the flames of fanaticism would not soon be extinguished. Hypatia's support for Orestes when he refused to expel the city's Jewish population could explain the events that followed (89).

3. Romanian Contributions. On the Symbolism of Shakespearean Bodies: Elements of Cultural History in *Despre corp și ipostazele sale în teatrul shakespearian* by Dana-Andreea Percec

Professor Dana-Andreea Percec's book starts from a premise that has gained more and more academic authority in recent decades, with the development of fields such as (the new) historicism. Literary studies have become increasingly receptive to an interdisciplinary approach to texts, including data from various areas of the social sciences. One of the most profitable associations remains that between literary criticism and history, in the form of the new historicism. The movement emphasizes the importance of the role played by the historical context in the interpretation of artistic creations. Thus, the past becomes open, hermeneutically, like a text, the writings having meaning only in relation to other writings, their value depending on the value given to them, directly indirectly, by the discourses of the time. In other words, in the author's opinion, the meaning given to a text by the initial readers remains unchanged. The difference is that today's critical readers are more aware of the political and cultural conventions of the past than the ancient public, because the latter assumed these models as part of the collective imagination.

The new historicism, in the formulations of Professor Stephen Greenblatt, for example, proposes a complex reading grid from the perspective of the multiple interpretations that were formulated in the time that

elapsed between the first reception and the analysis proposed today. In conclusion, art, like historical events, cannot be separated from the moment it was created. The traditional evaluation of the literary canon no longer works as such from the perspective of cultural studies, which read elitist genres along with anonymous journals, marginal manifestos, obscure treatises, forgotten pamphlets. The correlation is validated, according to Greenblatt, by the fact that all these creations belong to the same historical moment, i.e. they were occasioned by the same non-literary circumstances.

Thus, Dana-Andreea Percec concludes that the same piece can be at the top of an elitist evaluation, through the authority conferred on it by the one who wrote it, or it can slip into a sub-cultural niche, if it is read through the prism of an ideology marginal. Shakespeare's plays were discussed in the specific historical, political and cultural context of the time in which they were written, with frequent references to other important writers and philosophers contemporary to him, juxtaposing the important events that shaped early modern England as a new power on the European geopolitical map.

Shakespearean critique placed in the area of body studies proposed and consecrated, in the 2000s, a series of 'bodies', from the theatrical and discursive, to the silent or illegible, from the explosive body, to the carnival or grotesque, or even to the geographical body, to give just a few examples, says the author. Moreover, continues Dana-Andreea Percec, it is obvious, therefore, that if the object of study is not "body-organism", this list can continue, the body as a filtered experience can withstand an infinity of epithets, as well as experiences lived in the most varied historical and social contexts. In the author's selection, Elizabethan bodies, as presented through Shakespearean characters, are linked to what Catherine Belsey called the construction and assertion of meanings in the age of early modernity.

As elements of cultural history, Shakespearean bodies are also identified in non-fictional texts, such as medical,

philosophical, political, geographical images of the time, as specific products of the English and European Weltanschauung of early modernity. Again, the author states, paraphrasing Catherine Belsey, when she interpreted family values in Shakespearean plays, that she started in this approach without starting from the premise that the songs necessarily reflect the world that produced them, but having the belief that they explore the meanings of the age in a way that could have been transparent to the original audience. The mission assumed by Dana-Andreea Percec, was to interpret, from the present, the political and sociological meanings of the past. To this end, the literary text was designed against the broader background of literature written by the Bard's English contemporaries, whose work can successfully complete the historical puzzle initiated by Shakespearean plays.

A frequent approach to Shakespearean plays is the one that highlights the context of the staging, an area conducive to the discussion about the actor's body and the embodied experience of theater and film people, which adapts the Shakespearean text, on the one hand, and the audience that follows the actors' play and selects themes, motives, language elements, characters, identifying with them in their own cultural, historical and political context, on the other hand. From this perspective, Andreea Percec's book aims to analyze Shakespearean plays through the complex phenomenon of appropriating the Shakespearean message (appropriation), i.e. how an era, a nation, a community or an artist relates to the Shakespearean text and context to generate new meanings. An important role is given by the author of the dynamics of contact between mainstream and sub-cultures, between local/ national and global identity, as well as between international and local/ regional culture.

A constant concern of the author was to watch Shakespeare's plays speak of the original way in which Queen Elizabeth I treated royalty. She carefully studied how she promoted her image as a female monarch at a

time when female royalty, as well as femininity in general, were seen as passive hypostases. Relevant from this perspective is the manner in which Elizabeth inserted the symbolism of the two bodies of the king in the propaganda of the time, the signaling of these elements being a subtle one in Shakespeare's plays. If Elizabeth's royalty was not a passive one, says the author, but a particularly active one, so was another area of the Virgin Queen's preoccupations, namely, literary creation.

If, according to traditional evaluation criteria, elitist literature is the one that contains a stable corpus of works, which is the result of an individual authorial intention and has international validity, the great Elizabethan pieces are part of the canon just like the work left behind by Elisabeth Tudor, in the form of poems, letters and speeches. The author's conclusion is that Shakespeare's plays – written to be played, improvised, incomplete, with many variations, and many other possible co-authors, dependent on external, social, political, and ideological factors – are today seen as fluid cultural products, rather than as a fixed corpus of poetic creation, as argued in traditional literary criticism. Following the example of Shakespearean plays, Elizabeth's work can be the result of collective work, can respond to specific historical and personal contexts, even if preserved in various versions, more or less authentic. It remains in the vision of Dana-Andreea Percec open to new discoveries and interpretations.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of our research was that of bringing in arguments supportive of a theorized and conceptualized approach to literature in the context of a growing distrust of theory and of talks about a crisis in the humanities. We were also pleased to draw attention to valuable Romanian contributions to the research and discourse on this subject.

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