



## **A WORLD OF THE PAST, A WORD OF THE PAST A CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE OF NEW HISTORICISM**

**JOSHI HITESH BABUBHAI**

Assistant Professor  
Mahdi Mahila Commerce College.  
Affiliated To Maharaja Krishnkumarsinhji  
Bhavnagar University. Bhavnagar.  
(GJ) INDIA

### **ABSTRACT**

*This article draws attention to the keyword “New Historicism” through its evolution from its precursors of “Historicism.” The literary scene both in England and America at the turn of the century is a very complex one. Much that is traditional and old persists along with much else that is new, and as the century advances it becomes clear that the future lies with newer trends and approaches. For a correct appreciation of the New Criticism and New Critics, who increasingly dominate the critical scene, it is essential to form a clear idea of the chief trends, in American Criticism and the work of the leading American critics in the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> and the early of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. American literary scene in the opening decades of the century is one of great difficulty. A number of trends and movements, currents and cross currents are visible. Much that is old and traditional survives along with much that is new and experimental. The Romantics, the Realists, the Impressionists, the New Humanists. The Psychologists, The Marxists, continue to write deep into the New Century.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

As described, the new historicism theory evaluates literature through a comprehensive analysis of the social and cultural events that surround the event being described and so much more how these socio-cultural events help to build the event. In essence, new historicism aims at understanding intellectual history through literature and literature through the cultural context surrounding the historical event. A critical approach developed in the 1980s through the works of Michel Foucault and Stephen Greenblatt, similar to Marxism. Moving away from text-centered schools of criticism such as New Criticism, New Historicism reopened the

**JOSHI HITESH BABUBHAI**

1 Page



interpretation of literature to the social, political, and historical milieu that produced it. To a New Historicist, literature is not the record of a single mind, but the end product of a particular cultural moment. New Historicists look at literature alongside other cultural products of a particular historical period to illustrate how concepts, attitudes, and ideologies operated across a broader cultural spectrum that is not exclusively literary. In addition to analyzing the impact of historical context and ideology, New Historicists also acknowledge that their own criticism contains biases that derive from their historical position and ideology. Because it is impossible to escape one's own "historicity," the meaning of a text is fluid, not fixed. New Historicists attempt to situate artistic texts both as products of a historical context and as the means to understand cultural and intellectual history.

### **THE RISE OF NEW CRITICISM**

The most noteworthy critical development of second quarter of the century is the New Criticism. It is also known as the Formalistic or Ontological Criticism. The term *New Criticism* was first used by Joel E. Spingarn in an address at Columbia University on, *New Criticism*, and the address itself may be regarded as the manifesto of New Criticism. However, the term came into general use after John Crowe Ransom published his *THE NEW CRITICISM* in 1941, in which he studied four great contemporary critics and made a forceful plea for *Ontological Criticism*.

### **CAUSES FOR RISE OF NEW CRITICISM.**

Various factors contributed to the rise of New Criticism. First there was widespread dissatisfaction, both in England and America, against the contemporary literary situation. There were rapid scientific development and significant social changes, but literature and literary criticism were stagnant. Victorian prudery and the old fashioned concerns with moral and social values came to be regarded as obstacles in the way of literary and critical development. Writers desired earnestly a positive approach to literary problems. Allied to this desire was the revolt, in nearly all critical camps against academic overemphasis upon the background and environment of literature and concentration upon the author instead of the work. Dissatisfaction with the old, naturally led to thinking along new lines, and thus were sown the seeds of the New Criticism.

### **BASIC TENETS OF NEW CRITICISM.**

1. To the New Critics a poem, or a work of art, is the thing in itself, and the critic must concentrate all attention on it and illuminated it. The function of the critic is to



analyze, interpret and evaluate a work of art. A poem is distinct from the poet and his social milieu; it is a definite entity in itself and must be studied as such. The critic must devote himself to close textual study, unhampered by any extraneous concerns.

2. Moral and religious considerations, social, political and environmental conditions, the details of the poet's biography, are all irrelevant and are all obstacles in the way of a real understanding of a work of literature. The literary critic must rid himself of all such extrinsic bias and prejudice. He must approach the work with an open mind, ready to study it, "as it is in itself".

### **LIMITATIONS OF NEW CRITICS.**

- 1 The New Critics are too much pre – occupied with textual analysis. Their excessive pre-occupation with words, images, paradox, irony etc, makes them forget that the poem is an organic whole. In their pre – occupation with the parts they ignore the beauty of the whole.
- 2 Their approach is dogmatic and narrow. According to them, it is through textual study and analyses alone that truth can be arrived at. However, there are a number of other approaches The Historical, The Sociological, The Psychological, etc, and each has its own value and significance. All possible ways should be tried to arrive at the full truth about a poem.
- 3 The New Critics are wrong in ignoring the study of the history of literary criticism. A historical study shows that various critical tools have been used effectively in different ages and countries, and their use may be world wide in the present also. Aristotelian literary philosophy and poetics may still be of use in evaluation and interpretation. A historical study is the only way of understanding the comparative merits of the rival's schools of criticism. The critic must, therefore, master the critical traditions and from among the rival critical techniques choose the one best suited to his purpose.

### **LITERARY HISTORICISM**

Literary Historicism is the field of study devoted to grasping the relationship which links a literary work to its social and historical context. The question arises; do social and historical determinants express or manifest themselves through literary works? Can a text, for example, a work of fantasy, be historically-informed even if it is not realistic?



## **OLD HISTORICISM**

History as written is an accurate view of what is really occurred. History serves as a background to literature. Historical textual background is secondarily important because the text mirrors the history of its time. By applying the historical context to the texts the critic believes that he or she can formulate a more accurate interpretation of texts than if s/he did not know such historical context.

## **ORIGIN OF NEW HISTORICISM**

The term 'new historicism' was coined by the American critic Stephen Greenblatt, whose book *Renaissance Self – Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is usually regarded as its beginning. However similar tendencies can be identified in work by various critics published during the 1970s, a good example being J.W. Lever's *The Tragedy of State: A Study of Jacobean Drama* (published by Methuen in 1971, and re – issued in 1987 with an introduction by Jonathan Dollimore). This brief and epoch making book challenged conservative critical views about Jacobean theatre, and linked the plays much more closely with political events of their era than previous critics had done.

## **DEFINITION OF NEW HISTORICISM**

A simple definition of the New Historicism is that it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non – literary texts, usually of the same historical period. That is to say, New Historicism refuses at least ostensibly to 'privilege' the literary text: instead of literary 'foreground' and a historical 'background' it envisages and practices a mode of study in which literary and nonliterary texts are given equal weight and constantly inform or interrogate each other. This 'equal weighting' is suggested in the definition of NEW HISTORICISM offered by the American critic in 'the textuality of history, the historicity of texts'. It involves, in Greenblatt's words 'an intensified willingness to read all of the textual traces of the past with the attention traditionally conferred only on literary texts'. So NEW HISTORICISM embodies a paradox; it is an approach to literature in which there is no privileging of the literary.

## **THE TEXT AND CO – TEXT**

Typically, a new historicism essay will place the literary text within the 'frame' of non – literary text. Thus, Greenblatt's main innovation, from the view point of literary study, was to juxtapose the plays of the Renaissance period with 'the horrifying colonialist policies pursued by all the major European powers of the era'. Hugh Grady, in *The Modernist Shakespeare*,



he draws attention to ‘the marginalization and dehumanizing of suppressed others, usually by starting an essay with an analysis of a contemporary historical document which overlaps in some way with the subject matter of the play. Greenblatt himself refers to the appropriated historical document as the ‘anecdote’ and the typical new historicist essay omits the customary academic preliminaries about previously published interpretations of the play in question, and begins with a powerful and dramatic anecdote, as signaled, for instance, by Louis Montrose, in the first sentence of the essay discussed later: ‘I would like to recount an Elizabethan dream – not Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* but one dreamt by Simon Forman on 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1597’. These dramatic openings often cite date and place and have all the force of the documentary, eyewitness account, strongly evoking the quality of lived experience rather than ‘history’. Since these historical documents are not subordinated as contexts, but are analyzed in their own right, we should perhaps call them ‘co –texts’ rather than ‘contexts’. The text and co – text used will be seen as expressions of the same historical ‘moment’, and interpreted accordingly. This process is well described by Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton in the introduction to their collection of essays *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama*:

*Where [earlier] criticism had mystified Shakespeare as an incarnation of spoken English, it [new historicism] found the plays embedded in other written texts such as penal, medical and colonial documents. Read within this archival continuum, what they represented was not harmony but the violence of the Puritan attack on carnival, the imposition of slavery, the rise of patriarchy the hounding of deviance and the crashing of prison gates during what Foucault called ‘the Age of Confinement, at the dawn of carceral society’.*

*(Wilson and Dutton, P. 8)*

This succinctly conveys the tone and ambitions of new historicism, and the phrase about reading literature; ‘within the archival continuum’ is a vivid encapsulation of the method.

#### **NEW AND OLD HISTORICISM: SOME DIFFERENCES.**

When we say that new historicism involves the parallel study of literary and nonliterary texts, the word ‘parallel’ encapsulates the essential difference between this and earlier approaches to literature which had made some use of historical data. These earlier approaches made a hierarchical separation between the literary text, which was the object of value, the jewel, as it were, and the historical ‘background’ which was merely the setting, and by definition of lesser worth.



The practice of giving ‘equal weighting’ to literary and nonliterary material is the first and major difference between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ historicism. As representative of the ‘old’ historicism we could cite E.M.W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World picture* (1943) and *Shakespeare’s History Plays* (1944), books against which new historicism frequently defines itself. These books described the set of conservative mental attitudes (to society, to the deity, to the created universe, etc.) which Tillyard saw as typifying the Elizabethan outlook and reflected in Shakespeare’s plays. The ‘traditional’ approach to Shakespeare (through to the 1970s) was characterized by the combination of this historical framework, with the practice of ‘close reading’, and the analysis of ‘patterns of imagery’.

A second important difference between old and new historicism is encapsulated in the word ‘archival’ in the phrase ‘the archival continuum’ quoted earlier, for that word indicates that new historicism is indeed a *historicist* rather than a *historical movement*. That is, it is interested in history as represented and recorded in written documents, in history – as – text. Historical events as such, it would argue, are irrecoverably lost. This emphasis bears the influence of the long – familiar view in literary studies that the actual thoughts, or feelings, or intentions of a writer can never be recovered or reconstructed, so that the real living individual is now entirely superseded by the literary text which has come down to us. As it were, the word of the past replaces the world of the past. Since, for the new historicist, the events and attitudes of the past now exist solely as writing, it makes sense to subject that writing to the kind of close analysis formerly reserved for literary texts.

Incorporated into this preference for the textual record of the past is the influence of deconstruction. New Historicism accepts Derrida’s view that there is nothing outside the text in the special sense that everything about the past is only available to us in textualised form: it is ‘thrice – processed’, first through the ideology, or outlook, or discursive practices of its own time, then through those of ours, and finally through the distorting web of language itself. Whatever is represented in a text is thereby remade. New historicist essays always themselves constitute another remaking, another permutation of the past, as the play or poem under discussion is juxtaposed with a chosen document, so that a new entity is formed. In this sense the objection that the documents selected may not really be ‘relevant’ to the play is disarmed, for the aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re – situating it.

#### **NEW HISTORICISM AND MICHEL FOUCAULT.**

New historicism is resolutely anti – establishment, always implicitly on the side of liberal ideas of personal freedom and accepting and celebrating all forms of difference and ‘deviance’. At the same time, though it seems simultaneously to despair of the survival of



these in the face of the power of the repressive state, which it constantly reveals as able to penetrate and taint the most intimate areas of personal life. This notion of the state as all powerful and all – seeing stems from the post – structuralist cultural historian Michel Foucault whose pervasive image of the state is that of ‘panoptic’ (meaning ‘all – seeing’) surveillance. The Panopticon was a design for a circular prison conceived by the 18<sup>th</sup> century utilitarian Jeremy Bentham: the design consisted of tiered ranks of cells which could all be surveyed by a single warder positioned at the center of the circle. The panoptic state, (*What is the panoptic mechanism according to Foucault?*)

*The Panopticon was a metaphor that allowed Foucault to explore the relationship between 1.) Systems of social control and people in a disciplinary situation and, 2.) The power-knowledge concept. In his view, power and knowledge comes from observing others. The panoptic state, however, maintains its surveillance not by physical force and intimidation, but by the power of its ‘discursive practices’ (to use Foucault’s terminology – ‘discursive is the adjective derived from the noun ‘discourse’) – which circulates its ideology throughout the body politic.*

Discourse is not just a way of speaking or writing, but the whole ‘mental set’ and ideology which encloses the thinking of all members of a given society. It is not singular and monolithic - there is always a multiplicity of discourses – so that the operation of power structures is as significant a factor in the family as in layers of government. Hence contesting them may involve, for example the struggle to change sexual politics just as much as party politics. Thus the personal sphere becomes a possible sphere of political action in ways which might well interest a feminist critic. Here, then, we might see grounds for political optimism. On the other hand when political power operates in and suffuses so many spheres, the possibility of fundamental change and transformation may come to seem very remote.

On the whole, new historicism seems to emphasize the extent of this kind of ‘thought control’, with the implication that ‘deviant’ thinking may become literally ‘unthinkable’, so that the state is seen as a monolithic structure and change becomes almost impossible. Foucault’s work looks at the institutions which enable this power to be maintained, such as state punishment, prisons, the medical profession and legislation about sexuality. Foucault makes a less rigid distinction than is found in Althusser between ‘repressive structures’ and ‘ideological structures’.

It should be added that new historicism, in spite of its foregrounding of the word ‘historicism’, really represents a significant extension of the empire of literary studies, for it contains intensive ‘close reading’, in the literary critical manner, of non – literary texts.



Documents are seldom offered entire: instead of extract is made which is then subjected to intensive scrutiny. (Contextualization of the document is usually minimal, partly as a writerly ploy to increase its impact.) Further, little attention is paid to previous writing about the same text, as if the advent of new historicism has wiped the academic slate clean. Hence, this is a true 'words on the page' approach in which context is dispensed with and the material then studied like the decontextualized, isolated poems which I. A. Richards offered for criticism in the 1920s. Thus, a single historical text is sometimes the sole witness, for, say, a claimed change in attitude towards some aspect of sexuality. The interpretative weight thus placed upon a single document is often very great. So we should not expect to find the methods of new historicism greatly valued or admired by historians. It is, on the contrary, a way of 'doing' history which has a strong appeal for non-historians.

### **Advantages and Disadvantages Of New Historicism.**

However, the appeal of new historicism is undoubtedly great, for a variety of reasons. Firstly, although it is founded upon post- if\ structuralist thinking, it is written in a far more accessible way, for) the most part avoiding post-structuralism's characteristically dense style and vocabulary. It presents its data and draws its conclusions, and if it is sometimes easy to challenge the way the data is interpreted, this is partly because (as in the case of Freud's theories) the empirical foundation on which the interpretation rests is made openly available for scrutiny. Secondly, the material itself is often fascinating and is wholly distinctive in the context of literary studies. These essays look and feel different from those produced by any other critical approach and immediately give the literary student the feeling that new territory is being entered. Particularly, the 'uncluttered 'pared-down' feel of the essays, which results from not citing previous discussions of the literary work, gives them a stark and dramatic air. Thirdly, the political edge of new historicist writing is always sharp, but at the same time it avoids the problems frequently encountered in 'straight' Marxist criticism: it seems less overtly polemical and more willing to allow the historical evidence its own voice.

### **WHAT NEW HISTORICISTS DO?**

- 1 They juxtapose literary & non – literary texts, reading former in the light of the latter.
- 2 They try thereby to 'defamiliarise' the canonical literary text, detaching it from the accumulated weight of previous literary scholarship and seeing it as if new.
- 3 They focus attention (within both text and co – text) on issues of state power and how it is maintained, on particular structures and their perpetuation, and on the process of colonization, with its accompanying 'mind-set'.





- 4 They make use, in doing so, of aspects of the post-structuralist outlook, especially Derrida's notion that every facet of reality is textualised, and Foucault's idea of social structures as determined by dominant 'discursive practices'.

### **NEW HISTORICISM: an example**

As an example of new historicism in practice let us take a closer, at an essay, not by Greenblatt, but by Louis Montrose. His essay *A Midsummer Night's Dream and the Shaping Fantasies of Elizabethan Culture: Gender, Power, and Form* appeared originally in the American journal *Representations*, the 'house magazine' of the historicism, and is reprinted in Wilson and Dutton. Montrose's IA definition of new historicism is that it centers upon the text of the text and the textuality of history, and the essay might be seen as an embodiment of that pronouncement. His overall thesis is that the play 'creates the culture by which it is created, the fantasies by which it is shaped'. Thus, the cult of Virgin Queen is both fostered by literature like Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* and a whole range of court masks and rants, and at the time generates such literature: life and literature stimulate upon each other. Elizabeth can project herself as the Queen virginity has mystical and magical potency because such images art given currency in court masques, in comedies, and in epic poetry. Conversely, the figure of Elizabeth stimulates n and promotion of such work and imagery. Hence, in history- is textualised and texts are historicized.

A simple modern parallel would be the way images of masculinity and femininity in film pervade our lives and offer us ways of representing ourselves: they give us 'role models' which we can become trapped inside, so that real life mimics the filmic representation of life. Montrose's essay also represents the eclecticism of new historicism, for it draws upon psychoanalysis, especially Freudian dream, already mentioned, in which Forman describes an erotic encounter with the Queen, then an elderly woman: the dream turns on the pun of 'wait upon' the Queen and 'weight upon her'. Her dress is trailing in the mud and he offers to solve, the problem by causing her belly to lift ('I mean to wait upon you not under you'). In the dream Forman has just saved the Queen from being pestered by a weaver, a tall man with a reddish beard', and Montrose interprets this as an Oedipal triangle. He links this to the Queen's projection of herself as mother of the nation, but also as a virgin who is openly flirtatious and provocative Montrose quotes the French ambassador's accounts of her extremely revealing style of dress ('She kept the front of her dress open, and one could see the whole of her bosom'). He then relates all this to the tensions generated by the peculiar situation that a highly patriarchal society in which all power was vested in men was nevertheless ruled by a woman who therefore had absolute powers of life over all her subjects, men and women, and the power to advance or end the careers of her male courtiers. In Shakespeare's play, there are sever4.1 instances of a queen who is 'mastered', and thereby



feminized — Hippolyta, the Amazonian queen, has been defeated by Theseus, whom she must now submit to and marry: Titania, queen of the fairies, has defied her husband Oberon in her attachment to the changeling boy and hence is humiliated by him in having Puck administer the magic-potion which makes her fall in love with the first being she sees on waking. Throughout the play, there is much about the rights of fathers over daughters and husbands over wives, and the precondition of male desire is female subjection. The 'happy' ending depends upon the reinforcement of patriarchy:

*The festive conclusion of A Midsummer Night's Dream, its celebration of romantic and generative heterosexual union, depends upon the success of a process whereby the female pride and power manifested in misanthropic warriors, possessive mothers, unruly wives, and willful daughters are brought under the control of husbands and lords.*

Hence, it is suggested, the play might be seen as implicitly treasons, since:

When a virgin ruler is ostensibly the virgin mother of her subjects, then the themes of male procreative power, autogeny, and mastery of women acquire a seditious resonance. In royal pageantry; the queen is always the cynosure; her virginity is the source of magical potency. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, however, such magical powers are invested in the king.

Hence, 'Shakespeare's comedy symbolically neutralizes the royal power to which it ostensibly pays homage'. In practice, patriarchy is maintained in spite of the presence of a woman at the pinnacle of power, by constantly insisting on Elizabeth's difference from other women. This is a familiar strategy even today, for having a female leader did not lead the Tory Party to revise its ideas about the role of women in society and on the contrary, under the rule of the 'iron lady' (an interesting locution in this context) reactionary ideas were reinforced and strengthened. Thus, 'Elizabeth's rule was not intended to undermine the male hegemony of her culture. Indeed, the emphasis upon her difference from other women may have helped to reinforce it'. If the pageants and the encomiums constantly proclaimed her simultaneously 'Maiden, Matron and Mother' then she becomes, not a real woman, but a religious mystery. Throughout the essay, then, the account of the play entwines it with male attempts to come to terms with the simultaneous existence of a female monarch and a rigorous patriarchal structure. For male courtiers, there might seem to be a certain 'unmanning' involved in being chaste servants of the Virgin Queen, while those who sought advancement from her seemed like children seeking the favours of the nation's mother. (Montrose describes an extravagant and protracted entertainment in which Raleigh and Greville acted out this metaphor.) All this demonstrates what is meant in practice by insisting upon the historicity of the text and the textuality of history.



## CULTURAL MATERIALISM

The British critic Graham Holderness describes cultural materialism as 'a politicized form of historiography'. We can explain this as meaning the study of historical material (which includes literary texts) within a politicized framework, this framework including the present which those literary texts have in some way helped to shape. The term 'cultural materialism' was made current in 1985 when it was used by Jonathan Dollimore and Alan Sinfield (the best-known of the cultural materialists) as the subtitle of their edited collection of essays *Political Shakespeare*. They define the term in a foreword as designating a critical method which has four characteristics: it combines an attention to:

1. Historical context,
2. Theoretical method,
3. Political commitment, and
4. Textual analysis.

To comment briefly on each of these: firstly, the emphasis on historical context 'undermines the transcendent significance traditionally accorded to the literary text'. Here the word 'transcendent' roughly means 'timeless'. The position taken, of course, needs to face the obvious objection that if we are today still studying and reading Shakespeare then his plays have indeed proved themselves 'time-less' in the simple sense that they are clearly not limited by the historical circumstances in which they were produced. But this is a matter of degree: the aim of this aspect of cultural materialism is to allow the literary text to 'recover its histories' which previous kinds of study have often ignored. The kind of history recovered would involve relating the plays to such phenomena as 'enclosures and the oppression of the rural poor, state power and resistance to it witchcraft, the challenge and containment of the carnivalesque Secondly, the emphasis on theoretical method signifies a break with liberal humanism and absorbing the lessons of structuralism, post-structuralism, and other approaches which have become prominent since the 1970s. Thirdly, the emphasis on political commitment signifies the influence of Marxist and feminist perspectives and break from the conservative-Christian framework which hitherto dominated Shakespeare criticism. Finally, the stress on *textual analysis* 'locates the critique of traditional approaches where it cannot be ignored'. In other words, there is a commitment not just to making theory of an abstract kind, but practicing it on mainly canonical texts, which continue to be the focus of massive amounts of academic and professional attention, and which are prominent national and cultural icons.



The two words in the term 'cultural materialism' are further defined: 'culture' will include all forms of culture ('forms like tele-vision and popular music and fiction'). That is, this approach does not limit itself to 'high' cultural forms like the Shakespeare play. 'Materialism' signifies the opposite of 'idealism': an 'idealist' belief would be that high culture represents the free and independent play of the talented individual mind; the contrary 'materialist' belief is that culture cannot 'transcend the material forces and relations of production. Culture is not simply a reflection of the economic and political system, but nor can it be independent of it'. These comments on materialism represent the standard beliefs of Marxist criticism, and they do perhaps point to the difficulty of making a useful distinction between a 'straight' Marxist criticism and cultural materialism. However, it is added that the relevant history is not just that of four hundred years ago, but that of the times (including our own) in which Shakespeare is produced and reproduced. Thus, in cultural materialism there is an emphasis on the functioning of the institutions through which Shakespeare is now brought to us the Royal Shakespeare Company, the film industry, the publishers who produce textbooks for school and college, and the National Curriculum, which lays down the requirement that specific Shakespeare plays be studied by all school pupils. Cultural materialism takes a good deal of its outlook (and its name) from the British left-wing critic Raymond Williams. Instead of Foucault's notion of 'discourse' Williams invented the term 'structures of feeling': these are concerned with 'meanings and values as they are lived and felt'. Structures of feeling are often antagonistic both to explicit systems of values and beliefs, and to the dominant ideologies within a society. They are characteristically found in literature, and they oppose the status quo (as the values in Dickens, the Bronte's, etc., represent 'human structures of feeling which are at variance commercial and materialist values). The result is that cultural materialism is much more optimistic about the possibility of change and is willing at times to see literature as a source of oppositional values. Cultural materialism particularly involves using the past to 'read' the present, revealing the politics of our own society by what we choose to emphasize or suppress of the past. A great deal of the British work has been about under mining what it sees as the fetishistic role of Shakespeare as a conservative icon within British culture. This form of cultural materialism can be conveniently sampled in three 'New Accents' books: *The Shakespeare Myth*, Graham Holderness: *Alternative Shakespeare's*, ed. John Drakakis, and *That Shakespearean Rag*, Terence Hawkes. (This quaint title is derived from an allusion by T S. Eliot in *The Waste Land*.) A correspondence in response to a review of the first of these ran for over a year in the *London Review of Books*, under the heading 'Bardolatry'.

How is cultural materialism different from new historicism?

Cultural materialism is often linked in discussion with new historicism, its American counterpart. Though the two movements belong to the same family, there is an ongoing family quarrel between them. Political Shakespeare includes new historicist essays, and the



introduction explains some of the differences between the two movements. Firstly, in a neat distinction Dollimore and Sinfield quote Marx to the effect that 'men and women make their own history but not in conditions of their own choosing cultural materialists, they say, tend to concentrate on the interventions whereby men and women make their own history, whereas new historicists tend to focus on the less than ideal circumstances in which they do so, that is, on the 'power of social and ideological structures' which restrain them. The result is a contrast between political optimism and political pessimism. Secondly, cultural materialists see new historicists as cutting themselves off from effective political positions by their acceptance of a particular version of post-structuralism, with its radical skepticism about the possibility of attaining secure knowledge. The rise of post-structuralism problematizes knowledge, language, truth, etc., and this perspective is absorbed into new historicism and becomes an important part of it. The new historicist defense against this charge would be that being aware of the inbuilt uncertainty of all knowledge doesn't mean that we give up trying to establish truths, it simply means that we do so conscious of the dangers and limitations involved, thus giving their own intellectual enquiries a special authority. This is rather like sailing into dangerous waters knowingly, with all sensible precautions taken, rather than blithely unaware of the dangers and with all lights blazing. Thus, when new historicists claim (in Peter Widdowson's words) that Foucault gives them entry into 'a non-truth-oriented form of historicist study of texts' this doesn't mean that they do not believe that what they say is true, but rather that they know the risks and dangers involved in claiming to establish truths.

A third important difference between new historicism and cultural materialism is that where the former's co-texts are documents contemporary with Shakespeare, the latter's may be programme notes for a current Royal Shakespeare Company production, quotations of Shakespeare by a Gulf War pilot, or pronouncements on education by a government minister. To put this another way: the new historicist situates the literary text in the political situation of its own day, while the cultural materialist situates it within that of ours. This is really to restate the difference in political emphasis between the two approaches. Indeed, it could be said that all three of the differences just described have this political difference as their common denominator. Of course, the differences between these two approaches are partly the result of their different intellectual frameworks. New historicism was much influenced by Foucault, who sees 'discursive practices' as frequently a reinforcement of dominant ideology. Cultural materialism, on the other hand, owes much to Raymond Williams, who sees 'structures of feeling' as containing the seeds from which grows resistance to the dominant ideology. A sceptic about both approaches suggested that it must be hard for the new historicists to explain how the English Civil War ever got started (since they seem to envisage a pervasive state power which would make resistance virtually impossible) while for the cultural materialists it must be difficult to explain how it ever ended (since their 'structures of feeling' constantly throw up new ideas which would seem to make stasis



impossible). In practice, however, the frequently evoked political difference between the two approaches is surely less uniform and predictable than such stark dichotomies would imply.

What cultural materialist critics do?

1. They read the literary text (very often a Renaissance play) in such a way as to enable us to 'recover its histories', that is, the context of exploitation from which it emerged.

2. At the same time, they foreground those elements in the work's present transmission and contextualizing which caused those histories to be lost in the first place (for example, the 'heritage' industry's packaging of Shakespeare in terms of history-as-pageant, national bard, cultural icon, and so on).

3. They use a combination of Marxist and feminist approaches to the text, especially in order to do the first of these (above), and in order to fracture the previous dominance of conservative social, political, and religious assumptions in Shakespeare criticism in particular.

4. They use the technique of close textual analysis, but often employ structuralist and post – structuralist techniques, especially to mark a break with the inherited tradition of close textual analysis within the framework of conservative cultural and social assumptions. 5. At the same time, they work mainly within traditional notions of the canon, on the grounds that writing about more obscure texts hardly ever constitutes an effective political intervention (for instance, in debates about the school curriculum or national identity).

Cultural materialism: an example

An example of an informal variant of this approach is Terence Hawkes's essay 'Telmah'. This is the fourth piece in the book, each one being centered on the work of one of the major Shakespearean critics of the early part of the century, within an overall strategy of looking at how Shakespeare is mediated and processed to us. In this chapter the critic is John Dover Wilson, best known for his 1930s book *What Happens in Hamlet?* The opening section considers aspects of Hamlet, emphasizing cyclical and symmetrical elements of the play, such as how the beginning echoes the end, how the same situation occurs several times in it (like the several father-son parallels) and considering how indefinite the start and end of any performance are, since the play is already culturally situated in some way in people's minds before they see it. A repeated motif of looking backwards in the play (to a past which was better than the present) leads Hawkes to imagine a 'reversed' Hamlet which shadows the actual play, the 'Telmah' of his title. The second section is entitled 'To the Sunderland Station', alluding to the title of a well-known history of the Russian Revolution called *To The*



*Finland Station*. An account is given of John Dover Wilson on the train to Sunderland in 1917, sent by the government to sort out labour problems in a munitions factory, and reading W.W. Greg's article on *Hamlet* which argues that the king's failure to react openly to the dumb show indicates that he is a figure of some complexity, not just a story book villain. If he is this then he begins to claim some of our attention, and distract us from the exclusive focus on Hamlet himself which had been the traditional way- of responding to the play, at least from the time of the Roman-tics. Wilson's excited outrage at this notion is related to a fanatical desire for order manifested in his published writings about Russia which see it as a picturesque 'organic' feudal state, which, in turn, looks like a version of the England which his social class regards with nostalgia and fears might be lost. Dover Wilson's rushing to the defense of Hamlet, the threatened cultural icon, in his reply to Greg, and later in his Hamlet book, are seen as symptomatic of this too. Shortly after the First World War Wilson was a member of the Newbolt Committee which reported on the teaching of English, and saw it as providing a form of social cohesion which might save the country from the fate which overtook Russia. Hawkes also quotes a letter from Neville Chamberlain praising *What Happens in Hamlet?* and thus creates a pattern of appeasing and containing difference. Hence, a way of interpreting the play is placed among several co-texts from twentieth-century life, and thus the play itself is culturally transformed. Hawkes's final reading of the end of the play involves inserting an extra stage direction, and his model for a criticism of this kind is that of the jazz musician who doesn't transmit a received text, but transforms what he performs. That might be taken as the characteristic feature of this variant of cultural materialist criticism. It is difficult to know how to 'place' writing of this kind. It is lively and interesting, personal and engaged in tone, and most of the formalities of academic writing are dispensed with. Openings are dramatic, transitions abrupt: suspense is maintained by holding back key details about identity or situation till the moment of maxi-mum impact. The structure is a series of seemingly unrelated incidents or situations which turn out to be intimately intertwined. All these features are novelistic, and there is clearly a sense in which this 'creative writing' which would not accept any absolute distinction between literature and criticism. As in new historicism, literature and history are intertwined, but the perspective and the historicizing are much more those of our own day than would be the case with new historicism itself.

## WORK CITED

1. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory*. Manchester University Press, 2017.
2. Bose, Brinda. "Saga of Soldier and sailor." *Review of Flood of Fire*. *Biblio: a Review of Books* 20.5 and 6 (May-Jun2015) 19.
3. Chase, Cynthia, ed. *Romanticism* (Longman Critical Readers, 1993).



4. Contains three examples of new historicist approaches to the period, namely, the chapters by Karen Swann on Coleridge's *Christabel*, by Marjorie Levinson on Keats, and by Jerome Christensen on Byron's *Sardanapalus*.
5. Dollimore, Jonathan and Sinfield, Alan, eds, *Political Shakespeare: New Essays in Cultural Materialism* (Manchester University Press, 2nd edn, 1994).
6. The introduction gives a useful account of new historicism and explains how it differs from cultural materialism. The book reprints Greenblatt's essay 'Invisible Bullets'.
7. Drakakis, John, ed. *Alternative Shakespeare's* (revised edn, Routledge, 2002). The term 'cultural materialism' is not used of these essays, but they are generally representative of this approach; they seek 'to accelerate the break with established canons of Shakespeare criticism', exemplifying 'explorations of the ways in which historically specific readings are generated'.
8. Gallagher, Catherine and Greenblatt, Stephen, *Practicing the New Historicism* (University of Chicago Press, 2000).
9. 'In lucid and jargon-free prose, Catherine Gallagher and Stephen Greenblatt focus on five central aspects of new historicism: recurrent use of anecdotes, preoccupation with the nature of representations, fascination with the history of the body, sharp focus on neglected details, and skeptical analysis of ideology.' (Publisher's blurb.)
10. Grady, Hugh, *The Modernist Shakespeare* (Oxford University Press, new edn, 1994).
11. Pages 225-35 are on the new historicism. An excellent book, always sharp and readable. Chapter four on Tillyard (the 'old historicism') is very useful. Chapter five discusses the application of contemporary critical trends to Shakespeare.
12. Greenblatt, Stephen, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (California University Press, 1991).
13. The essay 'Fiction and Friction', on cross-dressing in Shakespearean comedies, is a good starting-point on new historicism. The essay 'Invisible Bullets' is the best-known piece in the book.
14. Hawkes, Terence, *That Shakespearean Rag* (Methuen, 1986). Examples of cultural materialism in practice. The whole book is a lively read which makes some startling juxtapositions of Shakespeare and the circumstances in which we encounter him.
15. Holderness, Graham, *The Shakespeare Myth* (Manchester University Press, 1988)
16. Ghosh, Amitav. *Flood of Fire*. Penguin books, 2015.
17. *River of Smoke*. Penguin books, 2011.
18. *Sea of Poppies*. Penguin books, 2008.
19. Greenblatt, S. "The Forms of Power and the Power of Forms in the Renaissance," *Genre* 15: (3-6) Routledge, 1982.
20. Jan R. Veenstra. "The New Historicism of Stephen Greenblatt: On Poetics of Culture and the





21. Interpretation of Shakespeare” History and Theory, Vol. 34, No. 3 (Oct., 1995), pp. 174-198.
22. Judd, Denis. Empire: The British Imperial Experience from 1765 to the Present. Harper Collins, 1996.
23. Montrose A. Louis. “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture” The New Historicism. Ed H. Abraham Veesser. Routledge, 1989.
24. Newton, Judith Lower. “History as Usual? Feminism and the “New Historicism”” The New Historicism. Ed by H. Aram Veesar. Routledge, 1989.
25. Tyson, Lois. Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide. Routledge, 2006.
26. White, Hayden. Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in the Nineteenth-Century. John Hopkins, 1973.
27. Studies of the 'culturally-produced and historically-determined Shakespeare myth', along with 'interviews with prominent mediators of Shakespeare in education, theatre, the press, and television'.
28. Levinson, Marjorie, ed. *Rethinking Historicism: Critical Readings in Romantic History* (Blackwell, 1989).
29. New historicism applied to Romanticism.
30. Sinfield, Alan, *Shakespeare, Authority, Sexuality: Unfinished Business in Cultural Materialism* (Routledge, 'Accents on Shakespeare' series, 2006).
31. See especially chapters 1 and 11 ('Unfinished Business: Problems in Cultural Materialism' and 'Unfinished Business IF) in this exciting book by one of the pioneers of cultural materialism.
32. Veesser, H. Aram, ed. *The New Historicism* (Routledge, 1989). A useful and valuable source.
33. Weser, H. Aram, *The New Historicism Reader* (Routledge, 1994).
34. Covers a range of British and American literature, not just the Renaissance. Wilson, Richard and Dutton, Richard, eds, *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* (Longman, 1992).
35. A useful collection of key articles, well introduced