

## FROM RHETORIC TO DECONSTRUCTION

### Lecture Twenty-One: New Historicism

#### Literature (the novel) and history

A central concern of Marxist aesthetic theory: as literature has a cognitive function owing to its mimetic nature, it is instrumental in our understanding and interpretation of history; also, the political, economic and cultural conditions of the times in which it was created must be considered in interpretation. This is shared by other ideologically oriented theoretical schools, but Marxism differs from them in that it is not reductive.

The kinship of the novelist and the historiographer noted by Henry **James**: the novel is history and competes with life in the same way as history does when narrated by a historian: “The subject-matter of fiction is stored up likewise in documents and records, and if it will not give itself away [. . .], it must speak with assurance, with the tone of the historian” (“The Art of Fiction” [1884]). More recently, historian Hayden **White**: like the novelist, the historian obeys the laws of narrative when, in order to give it coherence, he transforms his material into a story (“The Historical Text as Literary Artifact” [1978]). Both the novel and (written) history = narrative discourse.

#### New Historicism

Principally an American movement; it is a reaction to (1) the formalism of the New Criticism as well as structuralism and poststructuralism/deconstruction; (2) to what might have checked formalism but did not: the “old historicism” of the postwar decades (conservative, complacently patriotic, in the spirit of the Cold War and McCarthyism), untenable after the social and political upheavals (the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Liberation, etc.) of the sixties.

#### Early phase

Definite contours taken in 1980s; ideologies underlying works of literature become the object of study. Ideology: the discursive practices (political, legal, religious, literary, scientific, etc.) of an age, reflecting the interests of the dominant class (basically, the Marxist definition, see Lecture Twenty); this, in NH, is supplemented with Louis Althusser’s view in which ideology is more generously perceived (it may be progressive, too), art itself is not seen as an ideology, but it alludes to an ideology which in turn alludes to history; art is born from this ideology but detaches itself from it. On such theoretical premises the critic can still afford not to adopt a hostile attitude to the work, even though there is an ideology (objectionable/un~) at work.

■ Compare: Captain Ahab in Melville’s *Moby-Dick* misleads his crew and the owners of the whaling ship about what he intends to do (kill the white whale, Moby Dick, to avenge himself)→ship and crew are destroyed; the narrative as critique of the analogous case of President James Polk drawing America into expansionist policies (Oregon, Texas, Cuba), leading to conflict and bringing the slavery question to a head—ideology both reflected and critiqued (James Duban, 1983); Consider analysis of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*: the pattern of subjection and resistance in the fate of Hester Prynne, reflecting the pattern of American history (Sacvan Bercovitch, 1988). Jane Tompkins’s reassessment of Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1985) celebrates the novel’s loving portrayal of the home, the kitchen as its tribute to mothers and grandmothers who do the “the world’s primary work.”

#### Consolidation and new departure

Chief architect of New Historicism: Renaissance scholar Stephen Greenblatt and like-minded scholars at University of California; their journal: *Representations*. Founding idea: understanding of literature depends not on abstract and universal aesthetic models, “but rather on an encounter with the singular, the specific, and the individual” (Gallagher-Greenblatt, *Practicing New Historicism* [2000]); these reflect what had shaped them: the ideologies (interests) of the age in which they happened to exist,

thus, along with other instances of the singular, the specific and the individual, they help us reconstruct the field of force (economic, political, spiritual and intellectual) that determined the character of an age.

- Greenblatt rejects John Dover Wilson's idea (1939) that *Richard II* is staunchly pro-Tudor; its seditious reading was obvious to contemporaries, Elizabeth I included—on the day before the unsuccessful Essex rising someone had paid 40 shillings to have it revived. The whole field of force that agitates the culture is to be considered (Introduction to *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* [1982]).

Finding fault with (1) even the best achievements of traditional Marxist scholarship and with (2) Michel Foucault. Both treated in a critical spirit, although NH draws on both.

(1) Marxism has a narrow economic focus, interprets complex phenomena in terms of a limited set of concepts (“mode of production,” “class conflict,” “ideology,” etc.), and ignores the private sphere of human experience: childhood, sexuality, family, etc.→one-sidedness even in the best Marxist historiography (e.g. E. P. Thompson).

- Food riots of the early nineteenth century: potato replaced grain as a staple nourishment for the poor. The issue was not merely the quality of the food, but also the impact of the change on culture. Grain as a staple was work-intensive (it had to be sown, harvested, ground, stored, baked, etc., thus it involved large segments of the working population in the “moral economy.” Potato was a much simpler affair: one had one's plot of land and was confined to it because the new staple could be made consumable without the services of people in other trades; this led to the social exclusion of the poor. Also: it was the poor man's staple, not that of the wealthy. The fear of exclusion has been ignored by historians in “the potato debate” that has concentrated exclusively on the body (the alleviation of hunger) and left out of account the larger issue of social displacement (*Practicing*. . .).

(2) Foucault's work on power offers a new dimension to the study of history.

- The professions: teachers, doctors, psychiatrists, educators become complicit with the “carceral” [prison-like] system through their specific discourses, by means of which power imposes itself on the subject (*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1975]). But power is not merely repressive as it induces pleasure, creates knowledge and produces discourse, so “[i]t needs to be considered as a productive network which rubs through the whole social body, much more than a negative instance whose function is repression” (“Truth and Power”).

- Discourse and power are intertwined. Study of sexuality not a study of repression as from the 18<sup>th</sup> c. on there is growing openness; forms of sexuality not spoken about before, begin to be noted with the aim of forbidding them; what matters is that they are talked about (teachers have to tell their pupils what they must not do), and “the great process of transforming sex into discourse,” along with the multiplication of discourses, takes place. The greater the variety of discourses (tied to different forms of sexuality), the more numerous the ways in which power intervenes in the lives of subjects (*The History of Sexuality* [1976-84]).

Yet Foucault's work does not produce that “counterhistory”: the stories of the losers, of forgotten or obscure lives, of unrealized possibilities—“the lived life” of the past. Of this better examples are offered by British Cultural Criticism—Raymond Williams's concept of culture as a whole way of life. Pulled out of the domain of the aesthetic and into the mere documentary for representation (Clifford Geertz versus Flaubert) in the search for counterhistory.

- Is literature itself a kind of counterhistory (“the lived life”)?