NEW HISTORICISM

According to author and critic Kristi Siegel, New Criticism’s formalist, exclusionary approach to analyzing literature spawned the reactionary theory of New Historicism, which offered a theoretical approach skeptical of the inherent subjectivity of historical narratives. New Historicism emerged in the late 1970’s and early 80’s, differentiating itself from traditional biographical historicism, in which “literature was seen as a (mimetic) reflection of the historical world in which it was produced. Further, history was viewed as stable, linear, and recoverable—a narrative of fact.” Additional evidence of New Historicism’s differentiation from other critical theories is the integration and consideration of “cultural, social, political, and anthropological discourses at work in any given age.” This inclusive approach to other disciplines also closely links and intertwines New Historicism with Cultural Materialism and Cultural Studies.

Key Figures

Stephen Greenblatt, Michel Foucault, Alan Liu, Catherine Gallagher, Louis A. Montrose, and Clifford Geertz

Key Works

---. “Towards a Poetics of Culture” (1989)

Key Terms

Thick description – Developed by Clifford Geertz in The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays (1983), it’s “the close analysis, or ‘reading,’ of a particular social production or event so as to recover the meanings it has for the people involved in it, as well as to discover, within the overall cultural system, the network of conventions, codes, and modes of thinking with which the particular item is implicated, and which invest the item with those meanings” (qtd. in Abrams 191).
Discourse - [from Julian Wolfreys's *Introducing Literary Theories: A Guide and Glossary*] - "defined by Michel Foucault as language practice: that is, language as it is used by various constituencies (the law, medicine, the church, for example) for purposes to do with power relationships between people."

Episteme - [from Wolfreys] – “Michael Foucault employs the idea of episteme to indicate a particular group of knowledges and discourses which operate in concert as the dominant discourses in any given historical period. He also identifies epistemic breaks, radical shifts in the varieties and deployments of knowledge for ideological purposes, which take place from period to period.”

Power – [from Wolfreys] – “For Foucault, power implies knowledge, even while knowledge is, concomitantly, constitutive of power: knowledge gives one power, but one has the power in given circumstances to constitute bodies of knowledge, discourses and so on as valid or invalid, truthful or untruthful. Power serves in making the world both knowable and controllable. Yet, in the nature of power, as Foucault suggests in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, is essentially proscriptive, concerned more with imposing limits on its subjects.”

Representations - Neither historical nor literary texts are "closer to the 'truth' of history. History is not some unmediated reality out there, some stable background that the literary text reflects or refers to" (Rivkin and Ryan 506). "Any text [...] is conceived as a discourse which, although it may seem to present, or reflect, and external reality, in fact consists of what are called representations—that is, verbal formations which are the 'ideological products' or cultural constructs of the historical conditions specific to an era" (Abrams 191).

Self-positioning – As stated by Lois Tyson in *Critical Theory Today: A User-Friendly Guide* (1999), "new historicism's claim that historical analysis is unavoidably subjective is not an attempt to legitimize a self-indulgent, 'anything goes' attitude toward the writing of history. Rather, the inevitability of personal bias makes it imperative that new historicists be aware of and as forthright as possible about their own psychological and ideological positions relative to the material they analyze so that their readers can have some idea of the human 'lens' through which they are viewing the historical issues at hand" (289).

"At a certain point, subversion and containment were almost the catch phrases of New Historicism" (Rivkin and Ryan 506).

**ON NEW HISTORICISM**

“Influenced at once by Foucauldian and Marxist theories of history, the New Historian focuses on issues of power—with a particular interest in the ways in which power is maintained by unofficial means” (Rivkin and Ryan 506).

“Because traditional historicism assumes that works are explained by their immediate historical contexts, these researchers are arguing that the work is a sort of artifact frozen in historical time” (Rapaport 34).

“History is not some unmediated reality out there, some stable background that the literary text reflects or refers to; it is not a context” (Rivkin and Ryan 506).

“To see the discourses circulating in a particular era, one needs to see not only their literary manifestation but also their presence in other kinds of cultural representations” (Rivkin and Ryan 506).

“Understanding 'history' as discursively produced allows one to consider the source of a given discourse, its genealogy, to use a term important to Foucault, and along with its source the perspective it might serve (Rivkin and Ryan 507).
“Thus historicism was the methodology that foregrounded the political the most and manifested the most capacity for judgment about politics, but it was in its practice—especially in the 1990s and after—the least politically judgmental” (Birns 287).

In her essay “Marxism and the New Historicism,” Catherine Gallagher discusses the accusations that new historicism is a “crude version of Marxism,” stating that “the insistence on finding a single, unequivocal political meaning for this critical practice, indeed in some cases on reducing it to a politics or a relation to power, is puzzling and certainly runs counter to what seem to me to be new historicism’s most valuable insights” (Veeser 37)

“Only on the basis of an adequate history of the New Historicism, I suggest, can an adequate theory of the method be articulated. This is because only an awareness of shared cultural contexts will provide the missing medium in which to see the commonality of the New Historicism and those criticisms it has so far sought to distinguish itself from [...] it is simply not the case that the New Historicism is essentially different from formalism. It is more true to say that it is an ultimate formalism so “powerful” that it colonizes the very world as its “text” (Alan Liu).

Contributions and Connections of New Historicism

In his introduction to *The New Historicism*, H. Aram Veeser claims that the newly coined New Historicism “has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people’s practical lives—matters best left, prevailing wisdom went, to experts who could be trusted to preserve order and stability in ‘our’ global and intellectual domains” (ix).

Veeser also outlines five key assumptions in his introduction that connect both practitioners and critics:

1. that every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;
2. that every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;
3. that literary and non-literary "texts" circulate inseparably;
4. that no discourse, imaginative or archival, gives access to unchanging truths nor expresses inalterable human nature;
5. [...] that a critical method and a language adequate to describe culture under capitalism participate in the economy they describe. (xi)

Questions to Consider

1. In class we’ve discussed the ways in which several critical theories, including feminism, post-colonialism, and race theory, seem to come automatically to us in today’s academy. Is New Historicism any different in this regard?

2. Stephen Greenblatt “claimed that the ‘proper goal’ of his critical practice was ‘a poetics of culture’” rather than new historicism, although the practical applications regardless of terminology were the same (qtd. in Brannigan 84). What possible differences, if any, do you see in the terms?
3. In The History of Sexuality Vol I, Foucault discusses sexuality as a conduit of power. His "repressive hypothesis" posits that 18th century bourgeoisie power/control over the language and discourse of sex (as strictly relating to a husband and wife) created desire, or a lack (psychoanalytic basis), and thus societal discourse became saturated with the subject. This idea worked it's way into New Historicism because Foucault's claim conceived that "all attempts at opposition to power cannot help but be 'complicitous' with it" (qtd. in Abrams 196) (See also Veeser #5 above). In what way(s) does this idea correlate to Greenblatt's discussion of Harsnett's Declaration and Shakespeare's King Lear?

4. Throughout the semester we've been applying the various theories to Mansfield Park. What issues that we've discussed might fall under the category of a New Historicist reading? In what ways would applying this lens increase our understanding of the text and/or Austen's world?

5. In February, soprano Julianne Baird gave a lecture and musical performance based on her research of Jane Austen's music collection. In what ways could such material culture items contribute to a New Historicist reading of Austen? How would the results of such analyses contribute to the field at large?

Bibliography