

## THE NEW HISTORICISM IN CONTEMPORARY LITERARY STUDIES

**Пинчукова Татьяна Петровна**

старший преподаватель кафедры романо-германской филологии  
Могилевского государственного университета имени А.А. Кулешова  
(г. Могилев, Беларусь)

*В статье рассматривается реализация концепции нового историзма в современной художественной литературе.*

**Ключевые слова:** новый историзм, литературное произведение, культурный контекст, исторический контекст, дискурс.

*The article discusses the realization of the new historicism concept in the contemporary literature.*

**Keywords:** new historicism, literary work, cultural context, historical context, discourse.

The 1980s of the late twentieth-century criticism might be characterized “as marking the return to History” by Joseph Litvak [2, p. 8]. The slogan of new historicism is “always historicize” and this is the imperative for all dialectical thought [2, p. 109]. The practice of new historicism concerns itself with extraliterary matters, including letters, diaries, films, paintings, medical treatises, etc. It looks for an opposing tension in a text, then for an opposing tension related in history. New historicists seek “surprising coincidences”, highlighting unsuspected lending and borrowing of metaphor, details of ceremony, dance, dress, or popular culture.

Like cultural studies, the new historicism is difficult to define. H. Aram Veeseer notes, “It brackets together literature, ethnography, anthropology, art history, and other disciplines and sciences in such a way that its politics, its novelty, its historicity, and its relationship to other prevailing ideologies all remain open questions” [3, p. 102]. New historicism is a form of literary theory

which aims to understand intellectual history through literature, and literature through its cultural context.

Stephen Greenblatt, a Renaissance Shakespeare scholar, played a major role in the rise of new historicism. The school, to which he belonged, developed largely in Shakespeare and English Renaissance Theatre studies. The focus of their studies has been on understanding Shakespeare less as a genius than as a clue to the conjunction of the world of English Renaissance theatre and the complex social politics of the time. The focus of new historical analysis is to bring to the foreground the historical context and give it greater emphasis than before.

The movement is based on four main assumptions: 1) Literature is historical, which means that a literary work has a social and cultural context shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it is through the culture and society that produced it. 2) Literature must be assimilated to history, which presupposes a particular vision of history. 3) Like works of literature, man himself is a social construct, the composition of social and political forces that transcends history. Renaissance man belongs just to the Renaissance. There is no any connection between him and us; history is a series of “ruptures” between ages and men. 4) As a result, the historian/critic is trapped in his own “historicity”. No one can rise above his own social formation, his own ideological upbringing in order to understand the past. A modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries experienced it. So, the best a modern historicist approach to literature can accomplish is to use the text as a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology.

A brief example of a new historicist reading of a well-known text was given by Susan Bruce in her article “The Flying Island and Female Anatomy”. The author offers a reading of book three of *Gulliver's Travels*, “A Voyage to Laputa” that makes some new sense of that mysterious book. Swift named the flying island “Laputa”, which in Spanish means “the whore”. Bruce describes the trend toward the education of midwives and the medical profession's desire to stamp them out. Examining books published for literate midwives during the period allows Bruce to describe the hostility not only to midwives, but to women in general.

She presents Gulliver's observations on women, particularly his descriptions of the female body, such as his descriptions of the queen of Brobdingnag at table. The implication is that under the male gaze, the magnification of the female body leads not to enhanced appreciation but to horror and disgust. But Bruce connects Gulliver's anxious fascination for what is in the body to the anxieties of his age involving the rise of science.

Bruce describes the floating island of Laputa as a gigantic trope of the female body. Laputa has at its centre a giant lodestone on which the movement of the island depends. Yet, as Bruce goes on to observe, the attempted control over the female body that drives Laputa becomes its undoing, for the more the men of the island try to restrict their women from traveling below to Balnibarbi, the more male impotence threatens Laputian society. One recalls that Gulliver notes the men's ineffectuality from the descriptions of the "Flappers" that must slap them out of their scientific reveries in order to make them speak. The women have "Abundance of Vivacity; they condemn their Husbands, and are exceedingly fond of Strangers..." Bruce connects the "doomed attempt of various types of science to control the woman's body" [1, p. 72] to the debate about language in book three (such as the "Engine for Improving Speculative Knowledge" that produces only broken sentences) and the demand of the women and the commoners to be allowed "to speak with their Tongues, after the Manner of their Forefathers".

Thus in "A Voyage to Laputa" the attempt to bring the female body under control clashes with the realization that such control would have to include control over the discourse produced by that body. The female body, Swift implies, cannot be so managed because no one has discovered a way of controlling female discourse.

Bruce's approach makes clear the potential of the new historicism. Literary texts can be approached as effects of cultural change, as participation in a cultural conversation. That kind of criticism would be able to make significant strides toward understanding language in history, its historical development.

### **Literature**

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