

## The End of History? New Historicism?

### Time and space

These are hard times for contemplating history. Historical issues have turned into a bone of contention that everybody wants to have a bite at. When positivist thinkers try to have their share, history gets lost in a vast ocean of meticulous, yet chaotic, “facts” of little significance when treated in isolation from one another. The discussion loses focus in the intentions of heroes, outstanding individuals, and key players in memorable events studied by academics. It breaks and freezes in the immanent, synchronic systems constructed by structuralists. Currently, it dissolves in abstract paradigms advocated by the successors of Michel Foucault. Narrativism and narratology in turn rip history off the *actual happening* and turn it into a *story about old times*. History becomes a narration and a plot, much like literary fiction.

In this sense, changing and modifying history suddenly became effortless. Unlike Marx, narratologists decided that in order to rebuild the world it is enough to *retell it*. This way, desired reforms and modifications became only a matter of vivid imagination and efficient narratological techniques. Thus, in keeping with this theory, all “men of words” can quite easily build their very own brave new worlds, which will make their brothers and sisters happy. All you need is a publisher and willing readers.

Therefore, these are truly blissful times for both the enthusiasts and fierce enemies of history and historicism. History no longer requires hard work. Nobody is obliged to participate in it. There is no moral code commanding us to die for the cause. Actually, we should not be even bothered with history, since we can either create or annihilate it with one stroke of the pen. We can also watch it on TV from the kingdoms of our armchairs. In the meantime, we can take a nap, because real history has turned into a *perpetuum mobile*. History makes and drives itself. It used to make us lose sleep, while now it lulls us to sleep.

The breaking news is that the ends of history never ended and the real end is now. The intellectual climate of the final end of the history (the end of all ends) was aptly, both satirically and sarcastically, captured in a sketch “The End of Temporality” by Frederic Jameson. I quote at length, for it introduces an interesting notion.

"After the end of history, what?<sup>1</sup> No further beginnings being foreseen, it can only be the end of something else. But modernism already ended some time ago and with it, presumably, time itself, as it was widely rumoured that space was supposed to replace time in the general ontological scheme of things. At the very least, time had become a nonperson and people stopped writing about it. The novelists and poets gave it up under the entirely plausible assumption that it had been largely covered by Proust, Mann, Virginia Woolf, and T. S. Eliot and offered few further chances of literary advancement. The philosophers also dropped it on the grounds that although Bergson remained a dead letter, Heidegger was still publishing a posthumous volume a year on the topic. And as for the mountain of secondary literature in both disciplines, to scale it once again seemed a rather old-fashioned thing to do with your life. *Was aber war die Zeit?...?*<sup>2</sup> (695–96).

"In any case, neither phenomenology nor Thomas Mann offered promising starting points for anything calculated to fire the imagination. What clearly did so, however, was the spatial alternative. Statistics on the volume of books on space are as alarming as the birthdate of your hereditary enemy<sup>3</sup>. The rise of the intellectual stock of architecture accompanied the decline of *belles lettres* like a lengthening shadow; the opening of any new signature building attracted more visitors and media attention than the newly published translation of the latest unknown Nobel Prize winner" (697).

In his sketch, Jameson quite rightly (but not entirely accurately, as we will see later) concluded that modernism was obsessed with the *secret of time*, while it was passionate about the *category of space* and problems with spatial development in terms of ecology, urban planning, and architecture, as well as imagery and tonal aspects. The difficulty stemmed from the fact that both dimensions – time and space – are now in conflict. They have become mutually disproportionate and untranslatable. For time has appropriated only internal reality, including what Jameson called "subjectivity and logic, the private and the epistemological, self-consciousness and desire", while space seized matter – "exteriority, includes cities and globalization, but also other people and nature" (697).

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<sup>1</sup> See for the history and analysis of the concept, Perry Anderson, "The Ends of History", *A Zone of Engagement*, pp. 279–375.

<sup>2</sup> Here, Frederic Jameson quotes *The Magic Mountain* by Tomas Mann: "What is time? A secret – insubstantial and omnipotent. A prerequisite of the external world, a motion intermingled and fused with bodies existing and moving in space. But would there be no time, if there were no motion? No motion, if there were no time? What a question! Is time a function of space? Or vice versa? Or are the two identical? An even bigger question! Time is active, by nature it is much like a verb, it both 'ripens' and 'brings forth.' And what does it bring forth? Change! Now is not then, here is not there – for in both cases motion lies in between. But since we measure time in a circular motion closed on itself, we could just as easily say that its motion and change are rest and stagnation – for the then is constantly repeated in the now, the there in the here. ... Hans Castorp turned these sorts of questions over and over in his own mind". (qtd. in Jameson 695–96)

<sup>3</sup> There are thousands of volumes of this type of literature.

## The postmodern curse

We could say that the postmodern present, with its preference for space, has boldly rejected the traditional perception and importance of a close kinship between the two categories, seen as co-dependent and intertwined. Immanuel Kant did identify them as a *priori* forms of mind, organizing a common perception and experience of reality. Mikhail Bakhtin introduced the now widely used term of the artistic chronotope (literally, time-space). He openly stated that it is impossible to deal with one dimension in the absence of the other, and that clear-cut divisions of time and space in literature are an unjustified abstraction. He argued that each space described by the language communicates a temporal tone and each time indication communicates a spatial one.

“In the literary artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterizes the artistic chronotope” (84).

Therefore, postmodernism has resumed the attitude of abstract division or even juxtaposition of the two categories. In some sense, it has renounced and degraded time in order to make more room for ever-expanding space (for example, space travel). It keeps blurring time dynamics and differences to emphasize the rich and diverse means of shaping and adapting space. Using similarities, contrasts, and variations of spatial forms, it has mimicked cubist or surreal paintings, as well as silenced and concealed the changeable, erratic, and surprising flow of time. It has stripped time of its vital, potent, and independent voice.

To what extent will these efforts prove successful? Only, paradoxically, time can tell. Anyhow, we ought to keep in mind Bakhtin’s suggestion that artistic time-space should not be confused and mixed up with urban or ecological space, which, by the way, were the first targets of the postmodernists. Even Jameson did not escape this blending of notions. It is then crucial to understand that each space applies to a different reality, is filled with different matter and functions, in a different way. Each makes different, inherent connections with time.

Therefore, we can literally stroll in ecological space and untiringly tramp urban space. Yet, only as readers can we metaphorically step into artistic time-space. It creates a property of the textual space shaped by signs and meanings, rather than concrete and pavements. So we should treat it as an anthropological, sociological, and cultural means of manifesting the awareness of time and space, and, even more so, a means of expressing their complicated interrelations in language and artistic discourse. This property is susceptible to discourse and in turn affects it. However, this issue calls for a separate study.

It is true, then, that in its historical development, artistic time-space undergoes various modulations and transitions. Sometimes, time and space unite and are inextricably connected in a literary chronotope (for instance, in the realist, travel, and historical novel); at other times they split and go their separate ways. It makes one wonder what is the source of this hypersensitivity to time (sometimes even a hypersensitivity bordering on obsession, as in Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*), to historical development in time, and to history as it happens. It is also intriguing to consider what factors have triggered postmodern *time amnesia* and the acute sense of *spatium*, accompanied by a dulled perception of the flow of time and the signs of the times.

This issue has a broader historical and cultural significance. Fascination with space and spatial relations coincides with paralysis or loss of the ability to *read* and interpret the signs of the times, which is even more visible in the case of a dulled perception of the flow of time. These deficiencies manifest themselves in ignoring the continuity of the flow of time, in "shredding" time, reversing its course, neutralising the relations before and after, and turning them into a synchronous alternation, reversing the order of events, breaking the rule of *post hoc non est propter hoc*, reversing cause-and-effect relations, eliminating temporal marks and levels, mixing up distant ages and formations, and transferring the past into the present and the present into the past.

In other words, suspending temporal relations has become a characteristic feature of *postmodern culture*. Actually, temporal relations have not entirely disappeared from postmodern discourses (Jameson somehow overemphasises, probably for rhetorical purposes, the contrast between modernist "temporality" and postmodern "spatiality"), but they have considerably suppressed awareness and perception of *real* historical time. What has gained the upper hand, is the *fictional* – capricious, fragmented, partial, ragged, random, and alienated – experience of time. It has dominated various modern discursive forms, including the literary and the main historical discourses. Notably, the universality and omnipresence of those *vestigial* or *substitute* temporal forms has by no means eliminated the real, prolonged historical time. However, they have impeded and complicated its perception, understanding, and assessment. They have disturbed a social sense of direction in the real, event-based historical time.

Apparently, the reduction of temporality has paved the way for the "permanent now", bringing temporal relations down to the *current now*, which, from the outsider's point of view, undergoes invisible yet constant fluctuations. For instance, there is a tendency to analyze selected aspects of the past with reference to the present and to ignore the then conditions, relations, means, and resources. This is driven, strictly speaking, by interest and the needs of social and cultural forces, which currently wield the power

to shape public opinion and mass imagination. In this way, some forms of the past are being idealized and others demonized.

Both idealization and demonization transfer the past into the *current now*, even though they focus on strictly different elements of the past. They both accord it a specific (positive or negative, respectively) *added value*, which is symbolically and pragmatically significant in the present. Such enhancements undoubtedly contribute to the process of the *mythologization of history*. Its images come off their original base and function independently for the purposes of completely different times.

In such circumstances, Wilhelm Dilthey's directive to judge a historical period *according to its own standards*, however different from the current ones, becomes null and void. However, should we consider it binding, the past would have to be judged according to the then prevailing conditions in terms of demography, civilization, natural environment, political system, local and global surroundings, experience, and the available, yet obviously limited, time horizon. Unfortunately, the selfish present seldom musters such magnanimity.

There is evidence (also in Poland) suggesting that in post-revolutionary, triumphant, and dogmatic periods dealing with the defeated past, the said principles sink into oblivion. What usually wins is the hateful desire for revenge. The spiteful inspectors-inquisitors transfer their own, current awareness and their own feelings onto the period of time examined and on modern times in general. They criticize the past for being *not like now*, as if any past was able to foresee the future, look at itself through the eyes of subsequent ages, and adjust to their standards without any objections. This idyllic state of affairs might possibly prevent many conflicts, but it is highly unrealistic.

A cheeky question arises, as to whether historical time would be then really historic, and would a given age be truly itself? Triumphantly superimposing our own present on the past, are we entitled to demand pharaohs to be democratic, slave owners to despise slavery, inquisitors and inspectors to be open-minded, and nineteenth- and twentieth-century revolutionaries to worship capital and exploitation? Would it make sense to interpret history by calling the nineteenth-century colonial powers benevolently to give up their colonies and withhold colonial oppression, and the Catholic church to acknowledge all the Jews and heretics sent to the stake as martyrs and saints?

In the reception of artistic literature, such phenomena have bent the historical consciousness instilled in texts to suit the current consciousness of their readers. The former has been incapacitated, then digested and absorbed by the latter. The stark, but not necessarily intentional, presentism – the rule of the current – has become a common postmodern interpretation of past literature and art. Thus interpreted, they have lost

the right to their own voice and their own stand. They have also lost all historical independence, save the formal one granted by the very act of being dated. This kind of reception has placed past works of art and relations in the matrix of present time. A critic or researcher of the past has been turned into Jehovah, the scary God of the past with a quick punishing hand.

### **The modern paradox**

So far, nothing answers another fundamental question. That is: what forces or civilizational processes have caused culture to forget historical reality, to stop learning and feeling it in terms of “great historical time”, and have consequently stimulated the postmodern turn towards the one-dimensional, synchronous spatial imagination? The issue is crucial to understanding processes that result in dismissing the issues of historical time in literature.

The key to this phenomenon seems to lie in the history of modernism, which, if we were to agree with Jameson, was more perceptive to the flow of the historical time and its transformations. But the modernist perception would also have to be explained somehow. Recently, some specialists have pointed out that the European celebration of the modernist victories in the middle of the nineteenth century was premature and overblown. Even at the beginning of the twentieth century, some parts of the continent were not free of feudal remains and reluctantly underwent industrialization and urbanization. Isles of modernism spread their joyful, ecstatic momentum over the rest of the continent. The general atmosphere, however, was hardly festive and joyful.

Indeed, there were enclaves of advanced modernization (England, Germany, France, the United States), fuelled by modern technology and industrial manufacture, as well as a ripe bourgeois culture, but they could not replace the whole, which lagged behind. The actual situation of Europe was characterised by the multitude of forms of civilization with diverse histories and distinct – often contrasting – levels of modernity. It is impossible to forget that in the partitioned Poland, nineteenth-century patriarchal and feudal relations were maintained long into modernity, and the native nobility defended themselves heroically against reforms violating their hereditary privileges. A similar state of affairs was widespread in almost the entire Russian Empire and in many other regions and countries. Anachronistic structures coexisted and mixed with the bourgeois-industrial and working-class versions of modernity.

Therefore, modernism emerged in a climate marked by great disproportions. Different regions represented different historical periods at the same time. At the forefront, there was the Romanov empire, seconded by the multinational Habsburg empire,

and far behind there were the Balkans, slowly emerging from Turkish backwardness, and the hardly developed Iberian Peninsula. In Poland, we might similarly juxtapose the modernist (and for the most part, imported) manifestos by Stanisław Przybyszewski written at the end of the nineteenth century, with the anachronistic social and economic relations still in full bloom in the historical region of Galicia. We might say that the “modern” awareness of Polish writers of that time was ahead of local realities, especially in the overpopulated and underdeveloped countryside. *The Wedding (Wesele)* by Wyspiański proves that contemporary writers were aware of differences and contrasts, often bordering on the comical and grotesque.

It was crucial to the perception of time that modernists were likely to participate in two or more historically diverse, civilizational, social, and cultural circles. The contrasts they observed and experienced influenced temporal categories, which, in turn, affected their sense of history as it happened, its tensions and discords. The synchronous freeze-frame and shifts in synchrony itself captured the surprises, collapses, and discords, as well as the uneven pace of history. To participate in it meant really to feel historical time, to be immersed in it, and to articulate it.

### **Anachronistic modernism, modernist anachronism**

Let us use the example of Cyprian Kamil Norwid, the most modern among Polish Romantics, who wrote at length about his attitude towards time and history. The future researcher in the philosophy of history – with some of the greatest achievements in this field to be found in nineteenth-century Polish literature – was born in a humble village in the Mazovia region of Poland. From 1830 to 1840, he went to school in the then provincial and marginal city of Warsaw. The most powerful social group was the nobility, which carelessly and patriotically nurtured the patriarch-feudal order, just “as of old”. The scarce intelligentsia had little say in the public life of the annexed territory, and even less power.

It is worth stressing that Norwid knew Europe quite well and spent many years in Paris – one of the most developed metropolises of that time. In his travels, he took a close look at some of the most modern cities, such as London and New York. The contrast with the rustic Mazovia must have been glaring. In the poet’s consciousness and mentality, entirely different worlds, ages, and spaces coexisted and blended together.

Coming from the poor Mazovia, then still deep in the anachronistic eighteenth century, the writer had a chance to experience cultures representing a much more advanced stage of material development, living at a different pace, and in accordance with modern standards. He could compare structures divided by a huge gap in terms of ways

of life and political systems. He inhabited dramatically different spaces, from the rural to the heavily urbanized. He had an opportunity to weigh up the primitive, patriarch relations depicted satirically in his short stories, like *Łaskawy opiekun, czyli Bartłomiej Alfonsem*, *Dwie powieści*, and *Archeologia*, against the urban buoyancy, industrial dynamics, and colonial expansion of the most powerful empires.

Comparing the provincial estates of the Polish nobility with the modern metropolises, Paris, London, and New York, shaped his innately intense sensitivity of a country-born poet and an emigrant, and made him particularly perceptive to time and history. Sensitivity permeated his experiences, consciousness, and writing. It manifested itself in numerous reflections on running out of time, catching up with time, “slowing down” and “speeding up” time, fighting time, losing touch with time, and existing in a desperate time vacuum.

Being a “Romantic modernist”, Norwid recognized the flow of time in the sequence of dates, events, and ages, but also, paradoxically, in the synchronous and often grotesque coupling of various time structures and historical forms. He carefully observed their coexistence, which was seldom neutral or peaceful. They formed systems, anticipating, initial, premature, overdue, outdated, hybrid, anachronistic etc. In his works, we can see how insightful he was in spotting discords and clashes. He pointed out the miserable situation of individuals and entire generations, who had no choice but to look for consolation in existent – usually uneven and ragged – temporal units and define themselves in reference to them. He sounded an alarm in *Promethidion*:

“Between the *past* and the *future* opens a desperate vacuum... the vacuum-born generation – no bridge between the *past* and the *future* ... what should it become?... an angel gliding past – a phantom soaring by – an effeminate *nothing*... a martyr... Hamlet...” (466).

Various temporal forms, which Norwid was not necessarily aware and in control of, penetrated and shaped his own personality and mind-set, and were deeply instilled in his writing. Despite his efforts, they were by no means homogenous nor had a common source. They originated from different historical, civilizational and artistic time-spaces, which were often distant and uneven. They tended to create complicated and ambiguous connections with one another and Norwid sometimes failed to find a harmonious synthesis.

Norwid’s paradox (whose reception as a writer varies from the embarrassingly outdated to exceptionally modern) was undoubtedly and justly rooted in the fact that he actually lived in diachronically and synchronically different cultural and artistic circles. He embodied those circles and, consequently, also history. They manifested themselves in his world view and his art. They responded to the call of his age by giving birth



to many innovative works, while others are an unbearable and incomprehensible cacophony to contemporary readers. In a way, it is only natural that Norwid had to pay the price for his intentional double existence in time: the contemporary one, justified by the declared desire to “modernize” himself, and the historical one, stemming from an ambition to adopt as much of past achievements as possible and to be in control of the future, understood as the continuation of the “toil of history”.

Norwid’s example shows that sensitivity to time and history itself comes from *historical* and civilizational *reality*, and it is permanently fixed there. Analogically, the post-modern fascination with space and a weakened historical sense is to a large extent the effect of triumphs of globalization, post-industrial urbanization, and cyber-electronic development, which emphasises technological competence, uniform consumption, navigation in cyberspace, and the info-media network. The vast modernized, urban, and suburban districts, as well as local and global green politics, have pushed into the background archaic rural reserves, which testify to the past and to stages of agricultural civilization. Media, gradually reaching as far as cosmic space, have reinforced the said sense of *homogeneity* and uniformity of the contemporary space. They are also spread and reinforced by other factors, last but not least of them being international corporations and banks, as well as the pervasive standardization of norms, services, and products.

Those processes have weakened the former individual (existential) and social (cultural) role of temporality and historicism, which used to successfully legitimize mass reforms and revolutions, meaning to “fix” history or even determine its desired and only rightful shape (romantic utopias). They have reduced perception and sensation of civilizational changes and tensions, and the accompanying temporal dynamics. Spatial distinctions (local vs. global) have blurred or altogether replaced the perception of distance and temporal differences (old vs. new)<sup>4</sup>. The process of reducing differences and covering up irregularities has intensified.

Some doubts remain. Does that mean that postmodernist heralds are right and history has finally come to an end? That it stands stock-still, stiff, and motionless? And will stay this way until the biblical end of times? Maybe, on the contrary, it is merely that the scales of collective interests and perceptions have temporarily turned in favour of spatial issues, rather than of time and history? Now, it is this issue that requires our attention.

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<sup>4</sup> “This is the sense in which the dialectics of the local and the global has seemed to displace traditional oppositions between the public and the private (in the era of the ‘death of the subject’) those most ancient and classical ones of all, between the particular and the universal, if not indeed between the subject and the object itself” (Jameson 702).

## New Historicism? New heresy?

New Historicism, a theoretical movement developed in the 1980s and 1990s, gave new hope of a renaissance of profound studies in history and historicism being applied to literary studies. More importantly, it was to be free from the positivist meticulous attention to facts and “mirror-like” mimetic principles, as well as biased political, national, or religious interpretations. Whether this New Historicism really was (is) new, seems questionable. It provokes objections to the emphasised word “new”, which seems to reflect the compulsion to seek recognition and advertising in the ideological hubbub, rather than indicate a genuine innovation. Yet, such an attitude does not do justice nor tells the whole truth about New Historicism.

For within the truth lies what caused a stir among historians and literary experts. The controversies were reported by Hayden White, himself a historian and expert in comparative studies, an advocate of focusing on literature and fiction in historiography, author of the influential *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. In his comment on New Historicism, he states that “In the process of elaborating the theory, methods, techniques, and aims of this project, however, New Historicists have, inadvertently or by design, *run afoul* of some reigning orthodoxies in both literary and historical studies. (293)”<sup>5</sup> The very act of “running afoul” indicated that New Historicists’ propositions have gone beyond the established views on literature and history, and are alarmingly little short of heresy.

In fact, they have considerably modified the understanding of the placing and role of history in literature and the other way round. They have questioned the supremacy of synchrony in literary thought, interpretations, and studies. To balance that, they have stressed the productive and causative character of the historical process, as well as the significance of historical knowledge and awareness. This applies not only to the evaluation of the past and research methods, but also to the importance of history in understanding and managing the present. It means, in particular, regarding the present as yet another *stage in history*, and consequently, set in the current course of events: as stemming from it, determined by it, bearing its mark and some features, as changeable and transient.

On the one hand, such an approach has *demystified* synchrony. It rejects the established practice of writing the history into synchrony and treating it as an ingredient, an aspect of the function of synchrony. It opposes (directly or indirectly) identifying history with its axiological and instrumental understanding, and opposes turning it into a fictional narration or tradition. In short, it contests the more or less liberal

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<sup>5</sup> The preferred focus on cultural system coincided with studies of genetic relations between its elements. New Criticism condemned such relations as a “generic fallacy”.

and commonly practiced *modernizing* of history, which has led to transforming historical knowledge into a flexible, fluid, and erratic discourse and to agnosticism.

On the other hand, New Historicists have internalized, as it were, a negative dimension of studying and perceiving history – which means that research findings are susceptible to the placement, ties, and methods of the particular historian or literary expert – and would in advance point to the illusion of academic objectivity. They assume that each critical, theoretical, historical-critical or historiographic subject study bears the mark of its author, reflects the sociological environment, and has the hallmarks of its times. In this sense, the said phenomena do not mirror historical reality, but rather the circumstances of their creation.

They have stipulated that a description of a historical event meets *the same* historical conditions as the event itself. It is, thus, *sui generis*, also a historical event but in a different existential dimension, different practical order, and changed circumstances. Therefore, the measure of cognitive objectivity does not lie in creating an illusion of *distance* and complete *neutrality* (making the impression of unfolding the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth). On the contrary, it means revealing one's stand in the present, social background, political views, inclinations, and reservations. A historian, just as was already stressed by Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists, is always somehow tied to ("framed"), and involved in, the surrounding reality. By referring to a particular subject, he or she is also affected by it and absorbs some of its nature.

New Historicists insist that *personal attitude* towards the subject be included in the study. Otherwise, one falls into a trap of false consciousness and hypocrisy. Literary historians, communist hunters, and inspectors absorb some features of the stigmatized phenomenon, and no matter how highly they think of themselves – of their virtues and the advantages of the political system whose interests they represent – with the force of historical dialectics, they are turned into inquisitors and neo-communists. They are under the protection of the governing political system and power, which they support; they enjoy the comforts of impunity, crave acclaim and popularity among others like them. Meanwhile, what they practice is exactly the same as what they condemn, only in a different (yet not necessarily benign) form and in different circumstances. By disciplining guardians of the old regime, they reveal the corrupting functions of their own system and thus demonstrate their membership, which, after all, is not entirely selfless.

New Historicists have incorporated such controversial and ambiguous situations in their methodology. For instance, they proclaim that language and principles of describing culture in capitalism *participate* in some way in the system they refer to, notwithstanding the attitude of a critic or a historian towards the system. For a historical

study, regardless of its real (or fictional, in literature) subject, cannot touch the “truth” which is constant, external or superior to history. Neither can a study reflect a “timeless” human nature. It does not transgress history but rather becomes an inherent part of it, one of its links, for better and for worse.

Following the example of “neutral” academics, instead of dreading political issues, New Historicists often analyse situations in which literary phenomena express (or quite the opposite, conceal) political content, and they assume a strictly political nature in cultural and social circulation. They also deal with reverse cases, where politics hides behind the mask of literature. At the same time, they demystify the apparent “selflessness” of historians and historical knowledge, including their own works.

Understandably, such a critical and exposing attitude to history and one’s own kind is constantly under siege. It was easier to come to terms with creating historical myths, ideological stereotypes, as well as racial, gender, religious and national prejudices, rather than accept criticism, which has deprived scholars of illusions that elevate – if only in their own eyes – their profession and pursuits.

## **Context**

New Historicists, regarded, according to Hayden White, by orthodox thinkers as heretics, have also substantially changed the relationship between literature and history. They have restored history to its *central position* in understanding and interpreting literature. Viewing literature from the angle of history and studying it in close connection to history, they have modified the canonical perspective on interpreting literature (according to popular and influential immanent schools, i.e. Russian Formalism, New Criticism, and structuralism, and partly by phenomenologists, post-structuralists, deconstructionists, and postmodernists). Moreover, they have redefined the critical focus, the established understanding of literature, the theory of the literary work, and, most importantly, the subject of literary studies.

They have given priority to *historical context*. It was the context that compelled the creation of a text, infiltrated it, determined its properties, publication, significance, functions, and reception. Shifts and changes in historical context not only modified its social and cultural status quo, relationship with other works, the position, rank, and function of a given text, but also affected the *configuration* of its properties and connotations. In this way, New Historicism has rejected the substantial, distinguishing, and reifying idea of a text. It has opposed identifying the text with subjective concretisation. On a methodological level, it has replaced immanence with historical *contextualism*.

Context enables one to equip literature with hallmarks of historical *idiom*, and at the same time (because of constant shifts, replacement of elements, and new borders) to immerse and place it within a historical process. Context demands that one keep track of fluctuations and shifts in that process. Thus, it reduces the role and rank of *synchrony*, which was dominant in the twentieth century.

By preferring studies on relationship between text and historical context, New Historicists believe that the text itself – in the mode of immanent analysis – is historically illegible and incomprehensible. Only after placing it in reference to *other* literary or non-literary texts (religious, political, social, scientific, official, colloquial) and establishing its *interactions* with them, can we establish its historical meaning. That, in turn, has enabled us to shed the illusion that an individual, subjective reading could be fully reliable and final. This principle applies both to the context of *creating* and publishing texts, as well as to their *reception* in other, subsequent epochs.

Contextualism has inspired a profound redefinition of literature. New Historicists have challenged the assumption that literary critics and specialists were dealing with exclusive “language works of art” set in a homogenous, autonomous literary progression impenetrable to other discourses, and dependent only, if at all (according to the formalist saying that “literature can be only born out of literature”), on similar works. Therefore, they have questioned exploring a literary work as a self-contained, individually organized linguistic entity, detached from other writings and culture. They also disagree with identifying its exemplary, “proper” reception with aesthetic concretisation (as understood by Roman Ingarden). Thus, they have by and large revisited the *paradigm of form and aesthetic function*, substantiated theoretically at the end of the eighteenth century by Kant in his *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, then established by the nineteenth-century modernist aesthetics, and in the twentieth century recognized as a basic canon by various, essentially *ahistorical* or *pseudohistorical* immanent trends (formalism, Ingarden’s phenomenology, New Criticism, structuralism, linguistic poetics, and many derivative programs).

According to New Historicists, the self-contained “literary work”, meant for exclusive aesthetic consumption, had been reduced to a common *text*, which has functioned in various ways and in various forms in the life of the epoch. A similar re-evaluation of artistic literature was probably affected by literature, mass culture, and the process of blurring differences between high and low literary and cultural circulation. Another factor was market pressure, favouring popularity and commercial success (sales) rather than artistic quality. All in all, New Historicists have regarded literary texts – including masterpieces, such as Shakespeare’s plays, analysed by the American New Historicist Stephen Greenblatt – as surrounded by texts representing different genres and functions,

interacting, cooperating, and mixing with them. They have studied their long-term *circulation* in a particular cultural and social space.

It was the cultural and social circulation – rather than “solid”, unchangeable qualities of the text itself and lasting aesthetic value – that determines its literary status and distinguishes it from other genres. New Historicists treat the circulation also as entailing the involvement of broad social groups in production, distribution, selection, rating, and consumption of texts, and consequently – according to Foucault’s thesis that knowledge is power – in the social distribution of power. They analyze the way texts consolidated cultural activity, which by the way determines their production and distribution. They have revealed the mask and tools of power instilled in texts, that is forms of establishing social systems and their power relations. They have adopted Foucault’s – one of the initiators of New Historicism<sup>6</sup> – methodological suggestion that “power relations are ceaselessly at work in every society in disguised forms, very often disguising themselves as theory of knowledge, but always having as its object the subjugation of those who are made ‘objects of knowledge’ or ‘objects of theoretical understanding.’ (Diaz 16)”

The notion of the context, which, actually, had already been known and used, has been being modified in New Historicist writings. In times dominated by a genetic approach, a work of literature was confronted with the socio-cultural context of disproportionate quality, encompassing the author, his or her biography, experiences, family relations, professional and social background, living conditions, social relations, institutions, and interpersonal relations. However, in the New Historicist approach, especially among American practitioners (best illustrated in Greenblatt’s works), the categories of text and context have often (but not always) undergone *unification*.

For in the given variation of Neo Historicism, particular elements of a heterogeneous context boil down to a uniform *textual* dimension. This way, texts become virtually uniform and ubiquitous, because each link of the real historical contest has undergone a potential *textualization*. This has justified the platitude of studying the “historicity of a text” and the “textualization of history” (Greenblatt). In effect, it has brought about accusations of textual and cultural reductionism, as well as of turning historicism into historical hermeneutics. It has also caused a cognitively futile uniformization of texts: reducing them, in accordance with the increasingly more widespread postmodernist fashion, to one dimension.

Therefore, the category of text explains each and every element of the historical and literary complex: not only literature, which is necessary and understandable, but also

<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault’s input in shaping New Historical thought – including criticism of the history of ideas and narratology – is analysed by Thomas Flynn in *Foucault and the Historians: Sartre, Foucault, and Historical Reason. A Post-Structuralist Mapping of History*, pp. 3–82.

its social and cultural environment, as well as the historical process as such. The structural metaphysics of a text (particularly potent in the Tartu School, directed by Yuri Lotman) have undoubtedly obscured historicism. The rest was covered by postmodernism. A history-focused profile of New Historicism has come under pressure from the two tendencies and has imperceptibly changed into a traditional *philological* profile.

However, comparing and contrasting various texts have resulted in levelling qualitative and functional differences between their types. Such a solution – in short, the eradication of qualitative and functional hierarchy, especially a kind of degradation of aesthetic discourses, and their reduction to functional ones – could not go unnoticed by supporters of the autonomy of literature, literariness, and the aesthetic function, who have severely criticized such solutions. They have demanded a respect for principal, constructional, ontological, and functional differences between artistic texts and other text types: colloquial, official, journalistic, and academic. Otherwise, the formalist-phenomenological, structural and post-structural composition would collapse and lose its *raison d'être*.

Another New Historicist heresy is that it distinguishes between *text* and *context* – however, not consistently – while structuralists and post-structuralists seemed to assume (if not in theory, then in practice) that there was no “outside” the text, and if there was, it was not significant. Such was the view of Foucault, the guru of post-structuralism, as well as of Jacques Derrida. Hence the conclusion that we cannot speak of relations between texts and independent socio-cultural contexts. For it would contradict the thesis on the immanent nature of language and self-referential nature of the text, and this bears resemblance to the unacceptable “referential illusion”, which made scholars’ blood run cold. New Historicism, although indebted in this respect to post structuralism, has come into conflict with it. In the age of leftist radicalism, it risks being disgraced by charges of *partiality*.

To sum up, according to New Historicists, literary texts are always embedded in the social and cultural context of the times when they are created and when they function, including contexts of reception at that time. Paradoxically, artistic literature suppresses and erases those *idiomatic, contextual associations* and aspires to existing beyond time, and, quoting Horace, to be “more durable than brass”, on a quest for eternity and immortality. From this angle, history seems a real content of literature, though removed from the surface, often concealed and repressed, pushed into a deep collective cultural subconscious. By restoring the animated, active historical context, New Historicism has got rid of the repression of history. It has revealed literature’s true nature and real existence, often enough not as independent, elevated, innocent and pure as the aesthetic and immanence-focused movements would like to present them.

## Capital and coordinates of historicism

Despite drawing from various, often incongruous inspirations and sources, New Historicism is predominantly a research practice. It has established a mode of interdisciplinary studies typical for the second half of the twentieth century, one which supports literary and historical knowledge with elements of anthropology, sociology, economics, political studies, art history, and culture studies. Being in opposition to ahistorical (or pseudo-historical, like Formalism and Structuralism) immanent and aesthetic movements, it is meant to rebuild, activate and update historicism. It has defined and modernized it in connection to the latest trends in humanist studies.

New Historicism is driven both by polemical momentum and constructive enthusiasm. It openly criticises both ahistorical and pseudo-historical movements and concepts which were historically accurate but outdated, barren, tendentious, and unable to grasp and explain progressing civilizational, social, and cultural changes. It looks for theoretical points of reference, methods, and conceptual apparatus, which could keep up with modernized historical knowledge, latest trends in human sciences, and, particularly, civilizational, social, political, and cultural changes.

It has become clear that *knowledge of history* is itself a *product* of history. It is transformed by civilizational and social changes, while historiographical patterns and explanations used in the past give way to harsh realities of modern times. For new times have brought new components and factors, which *had not existed* in the past. The world history scene was essentially different, with new actors, newly discovered forces, movements, and problems. Globalization has done away with Eurocentrism; the collapse of colonialism has put an end to the geographical establishment and hierarchy of civilizations; the development of communication technology *has reduced time and material space*; nuclear and solar energy have revised the concept of energy; ecology has modified the notion of nature; social and political movements have gained an unprecedented dynamics; genetic engineering and medicine have revolutionized our notion of life; world wars have ridiculed the idea of hell; space travel has annulled the idea of heaven; and consumption has made traditional and religious visions of happiness and paradise naïve and empty.

Also the hierarchy of literary and cultural forms, values and functions, has been overturned or reshuffled under the rule of technological and digital civilization. Research methods have changed<sup>7</sup>. It is the *pace of historical change* that has increased most of all.

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<sup>7</sup> An interesting reaction to the discussed changes can be illustrated by the works of Jerome McGann, the author of the acclaimed and influential work *The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation*, often associated with New Historicism and material culture. See: *Radiant Textuality. Literature after the World Wide Web*.



Synchronic, immanent, or close-reading models embodying an alternative to history – once exciting and innovative – have become inadequate and inefficient in explaining the new reality. They had been kept alive mainly for the guilty pleasure of the aging generation of scholars, who had once worked so hard to construct and promote them. The thought of locking them away in the museum of past ideas, makes one tremble – somewhat understandably – for fear of “profanation of literature”, the “fall of science and culture”, and “the end of history”. In fact, “ends of history” are its inherent parts and stimuli for progress.

Literary New Historicism refers to various methodologies interested in any way in history and offering legitimate theoretical and methodological suggestions<sup>8</sup>. The school calls itself open, receptive, and flexible. These features contradict the established approach to literature, which locates literary studies within boundaries of “disciplines” and “subjects”, and adheres to old guidelines and maxims, such as the autonomy of the literary work, the self-referential nature of its language, literariness, detachment from other discourses, supremacy of form and the aesthetic (poetic) function. As was to be expected, the negation of those ideas and canons – especially coming from New Historicism and the sociology of literature – has met with disapproval and criticism from the orthodox wing of literary studies, because it has revealed its historical roots, position, and construction hidden in abstract, universal aspirations, and the literary theory regime.

However, criticism (or the response to criticism) has in fact substantiated the innovative and useful elements of the New Historicist proposals. In the course of ahistorical re-evaluation or pseudo-historical literary studies, New Historicism draws from a rich source of philosophical, epistemological, historical, sociological, and cultural ideas. It takes advantage of the existing – and still potent – supply of the past, and is inspired by the latest trends, though at times it fails to use them well.

This way, the new old Historicism has renewed and revived some inspiring notions of historical and cultural materialism associated with Karl Marx and his western twentieth-century successors. It refers to ideas developed in Germany by the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin’s in particular. New Historicism has reintroduced, in accordance with new theoretical standards, the sociology of literature, promoted in the second half of the twentieth century in Britain by an influential *cultural materialism*. It has updated and moderated theories by Louis Althusser, Raymond Williams, and Terry Eagleton. It has even adapted to modern standards some of the early concepts of Hippolyte Taine, in which he stressed the importance of the author’s environment and literary links.

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<sup>8</sup> A comprehensive review of early trends can be found in the already mentioned *The New Historicism*, ed. H.A. Veesper.

It has seized and exercised the historical relativism and epistemological scepticism of Nietzsche and uses his historical ontology to criticise traces of platonic metaphysics in literary studies and theories of history.

The New Historicist area of interest includes ideas promoted by Fernand Braudel and the *Annales* School, some ideas of Mikhail Bakhtin, but most or all suggestions and solutions tried in theory and in practise by Foucault in the 1960s and 1970s. The French post-structuralist has made a substantial contribution to defining the scope of New Historicism, shaping its conceptual apparatus, and establishing its discourse. One of the New Historicist points of reference is also comparatist-historical narratology, practiced by Hayden White, which transfers tools used in literary studies to the field of description and analysis of historiographical sources.

The revival of New Historicism initiated by French (Foucault) and English (mainly New Left) scholars, attracted many American scholars. Some, like Greenblatt, went as far as to claim to have founded it. The truth is that the emergence of New Historicism in the USA coincided with Foucault's visiting Berkeley University in 1983. It was Foucault, who in his research into the *episteme* of a particular historical period, effortlessly crossed discourse boundaries and determined their common cores. His works resembled the *pouvoir-savoir* idea, which was also of interest to New Historicism. It defined knowledge and power as forms of social energy spreading over cultural institutions and fields of cultural activity.

American scholars have readily combined their interest in historical interpretation of literature with popular postmodernism, deconstructionism, feminist, and postcolonial criticism, and social and cultural anthropology. They have drawn inspiration from the *cultural turn* in literary studies, which shifts the focus from methodological linguistic patterns onto language and signs.

At no stage of its development has New Historicism been a unified or homogeneous doctrine. It embraces an open and changeable corpus of *diverse* ideas with the sole common denominator of a revival of historical thought and a desire to expose a *historical palimpsest* embedded in literature. Various more or less crystallized tendencies have emerged on these foundations. Some experts highlight the issues of ideology and power; others look to English cultural materialism and stress the importance of *cultural system* and the *circulation* of texts within that system. In both cases, they have traversed intellectual borders, which were a troublesome modernist legacy, especially when they took the form of synchrony, immanence, and aesthetics. Though difficult to endure, this legacy did not deserve to be thrown onto history's rubbish heap. New Historicists have never managed to solve or eliminate this dilemma once and for all.

## Towards the poetics of culture?

In one of its American versions, revisited historicism was called a *poetics of culture*, because of Stephen Greenblatt, an aspiring leader of the said school, who introduced his proposition in 1987 (Veenster 174–198). However, when put in a wider context, the new name seems a misunderstanding. History and historicism are neither “poetics” nor “culture”, not to mention “cultural poetics”. Both poetics and culture, understood as sets of signs and texts, constitute *components* of history but *by no means exhaust* its corpus, *nor determine* its course. Signs and texts, as such, do not win wars, produce nuclear power, or travel into space. They cannot be fed to the hungry, used to sew clothes or to build houses.

Questions applied to historical research in the nineteenth century – “How do people build their material life?” and “What discourses (in other words: ideology) do they attach to it?” – have not lost their essential, critical importance or validity. Fortunately, they are used by many (not all) adherents of cultural materialism and New Historicism. By giving up on asking them, historians and literary historians surrender to hypes or fall victim to random, obscure ideologies. Analogically, turning history and historicism into a poetics of culture seems a heartless sidestep, rather than a meaningful answer to the question as to what factors determine actual historical processes and what method should be used in historical studies in general, and in literature in particular. This change has basically justified the already mentioned claims against an involuntary shift towards a traditional philological hermeneutics under the cover of historicism, which was suddenly riding high in the 1980s and attracted more attention than ever. Still, it is better to practice hermeneutics as hermeneutics, and not as historical *hide and seek*.

By opposing ahistorical and pseudo-historical doctrines, contesting the absolutization of synchrony, the principle of immanence, aesthetic interpretation, and modernizing hermeneutics, New Historicism has achieved a significant *revaluation* of ideas shaping literary and historical thought. To be precise, it has also questioned models which had long existed in historical studies and interpretation. For instance, it has revoked the Hegelian uniform and one-sided vision of a universal historical process, rightly accusing it of philosophical apriority and political Eurocentrism. It criticises the idea of an undisturbed continuity of development, evolution theory, and the use of the category of progress. Although supporters of the said movement surely appreciate the role of environment and social context in literary studies, they reject the Marxist theory of class conflict as the driving force of history. Besides, they have also revised, more or less successfully, other principles of historical materialism. For example they have undermined the conventional distinction between the base and the superstructure, as well as the one-sided,

mechanical thesis stating that social existence (economy) determines consciousness (culture). New Historicists seem to attribute such determining role to authorities and political relations.

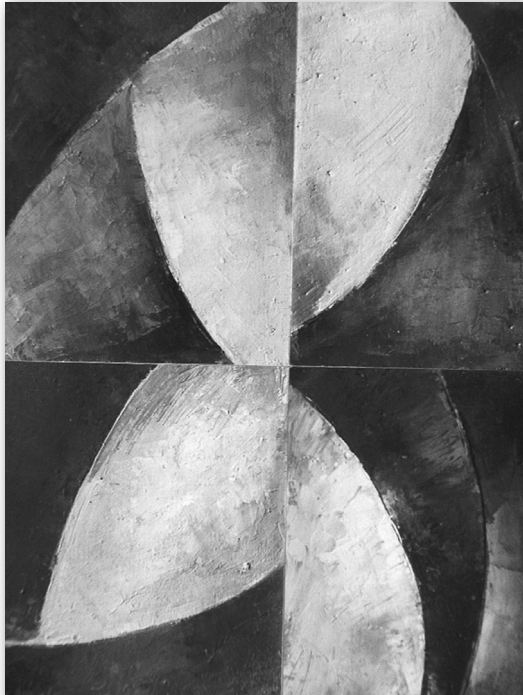
On the other hand, by rejecting a uniformity, universality, and one-sidedness of history, New Historicists do not support the theory advocating the existence of literary, artistic, and cultural orders that are autonomous and impenetrable to a historical, heterogeneous context. These orders, Formalists suggested, were driven by replacing automatization with deformation, and dissolving the established convention. On the contrary, New Historicists have stressed co-dependence, interaction, coordination, interweaving, and exchange of qualities between various discourses. However, they also pay attention to instances of conflict, opposition, and exclusion. On the basis of historicism, it is possible, though only fragmentarily, to analyse discourses of history by means of rhetorical figures, as was practiced (somewhat clumsily) by Hayden White. But applying this method to historical process has become an empty and naïve gesture, if not evidence of helplessness.

New Historicists deserve credit for accepting the challenge of revealing actual history, identifying its driving forces and the phenomena it affects. Whether they have succeeded is an open question. It is so because historical thought can grasp itself, but is not able to grasp the entire course of happening, which in itself is something *different*, something infinitely *more* than the thought and discourses embedded in it.

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Roussanka Alexandrova-Nowakowska, *Symmetry 6*