



Practicing New Historicism

Catherine Gallagher , Stephen Greenblatt

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For almost twenty years, new historicism has been a highly controversial and influential force in literary and cultural studies. In *Practicing the New Historicism*, two of its most distinguished practitioners reflect on its surprisingly disparate sources and far-reaching effects.

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. Arguing that new historicism has always been more a passionately engaged practice of questioning and analysis than an abstract theory, Gallagher and Greenblatt demonstrate this practice in a series of characteristically dazzling readings of works ranging from paintings by Joos van Gent and Paolo Uccello to *Hamlet* and *Great Expectations*.

By juxtaposing analyses of Renaissance and nineteenth-century topics, the authors uncover a number of unexpected contrasts and connections between the two periods. Are aspects of the dispute over the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist detectable in British political economists' hostility to the potato? How does Pip's isolation in *Great Expectations* shed light on Hamlet's doubt?

Offering not only an insider's view of new historicism, but also a lively dialogue between a Renaissance scholar and a Victorianist, *Practicing the New Historicism* is an illuminating and unpredictable performance by two of America's most respected literary scholars.

"Gallagher and Greenblatt offer a brilliant introduction to new historicism. In their hands, difficult ideas become coherent and accessible."—*Choice*

"A tour de force of new literary criticism. . . . Gallagher and Greenblatt's virtuoso readings of paintings, potatoes (yes, spuds), religious ritual, and novels—all 'texts'—as well as essays on criticism and the significance of anecdotes, are likely to take their place as model examples of the qualities of the new critical school that they lead. . . . A zesty work for those already initiated into the incestuous world of contemporary literary criticism—and for those who might like to see what all the fuss is about."—*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

Practicing New Historicism Details

Date : Published September 1st 2001 by University of Chicago Press (first published June 15th 2000)

ISBN : 9780226279350

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Format : Paperback 260 pages

Genre : Criticism, Literary Criticism, Philosophy, Theory, Nonfiction, History

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Mathieu says

Rather succinct, accessible & seemingly exhaustive, it is a very interesting introduction to the field that I would recommend to anybody interested in Literary Criticism, even if, like me, you didn't agree with all the founding principles of their doctrine, which are well described, at length, in the introduction and the first chapter. The main precepts are, if I understood correctly :

-Literary works are not to be treated as autonomous objects but constitute a network subjected to social, cultural and political forces. Basically, the Western Canon wasn't created ex nihilo , writers are a product of their sociocultural environment and work under a set of assumptions that are inherent to the spirit of the times, the 'zeitgeist'.

Difficult to completely refute that, I'd say. This also debunks the idea of 'isolated genius'

-Do away with the dichotomy Literature vs. Non-fiction. Porosity between the two realms, historical can be extracted from literature and non-fiction can have literary value.

I feel this is only partially true but the approach certainly yields interesting results.

-A consequence of that is that 'sub-literary texts' or uninspired non-literary texts are put side by side with 'the great works of literature'.

This, I think, is pure suspension of belief.

Any effort to challenge the Canon and dig out long-lost literary works is commendable obviously. They seek to dig out minor works that have been hitherto ignored or denigrated and claim they are interesting in and of themselves.

-They have a fascination for the oddity, the anecdote, the singular. In a way, their work is largely microanalysis insofar as they argue they can derive significant information from detail, into a larger whole. "Confidence that in any random fragment plucked from the course of a life at any time the totality of its fate is contained and can be portrayed" (Auerbach, who is not a New Historicist by any means but whom the NH took inspiration from).

After the initial introductory chapters, they give detailed examples of their studies and I must say it was really interesting and removed most of my skepticism.

Notably, the chapter 'The Potato in the Materialistic Imagination' is worth a read independently of the rest of the book, I highly recommend it. Very informative, very clear in explaining, for instance, the 19th century English contempt for the Irish 'potato-eaters', how body and potato are intertwined in the view of the time, opposition to the Host of the Eucharist and so on and so forth. I didn't know much of the background and it was most engrossing.

Dina says

I enjoyed this most of all for its approachability; Thank goodness finally a "theory" I can actually read! A lot of the principles explored in this book are what I typically feel I practice when I am reading and interpreting text, and it was nice to find something I could be in tune with. All in all though (and I am going to use an analogy I used in class), New Historicism, like the country in which the authors were born and raised, is young, and has a little growing up to do yet.

Scott says

The introduction and first two chapters are stunningly good.
