

## Basic Principles of New Historicism in the Light of Stephen Greenblatt's *Resonance and Wonder* and *Invisible Bullets*

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### Abstract:

*The aim of this paper is to present the basic principles of new historicism through analysing Stephen Greenblatt's two works: Resonance and Wonder and Invisible Bullets since new historicism is highly associated with Stephen Greenblatt. Social, political, and economic elements designate the literary works of a society. New Historicism will be explored in detail through considering the relationship between history and literature as literary works are regarded as historical texts according to this criticism; however, it will be concluded that fiction and history are storylike narratives.*

**Key words:** New Historicism, Authority, Subversion, Greenblatt, Resonance.

### Introduction

New Historicism is “a label usually applied to a body of critical work on the English Renaissance, most conveniently and persuasively represented by the writings of Stephen Greenblatt” (Hamilton 131). New Historicism is based on the analysis of cultural, historical, social, political, economic and

moral interaction of the periods in which the literary works were written; and it “tends to read literary texts as material products of specific historical conditions” (Brannigan 3). Stephen Greenblatt thinks that not obvious matters but less noticeable ones (marginals) should be handled, that is to say, besides what is known and apparent to anyone, what is alien (the other) should also be reviewed. Another important figure, concerning new historicism, is Michel Foucault. In the introduction part to new historicism in their book *Modern Literary Theory*, Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh mention that:

Probably the most pervasive influence on new historicist practice, however, is the work of Foucault. His writings have consistently shown how so-called objective historical accounts are always products of a will to power enacted through formations of knowledge within specific institutions. (253)

It can be deduced that ideologies which determine literature must be researched and re-judged by means of the social, political and economic side of that period; therefore, a literary work must be evaluated both as a cultural and literary work. Regarding the New Historicist concept, the aim is not to leave the past behind but, on the contrary, to criticize the past and reconsider the social assessments.

Stephen Jay Greenblatt was born in Boston in 1943. He graduated from Newton North High school, and was educated at Yale University. Greenblatt has mainly studied on Shakespeare, the Renaissance and the New Historicism. He has been the editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and also co-author of *Practicing New Historicism* (2000). He has also works on travelling in Laos and China, story-telling and miracles. He has written a lot of books, and articles on new historicism. He is respected as an expert on Renaissance and Shakespeare fields. One of his most popular work is *Will in the World*.

## **Greenblatt: “Resonance and Wonder” and “Invisible Bullets”**

“Resonance” is Greenblatt's term for the connections he seeks - the resonance of works of literature with other writings and events. But he pairs it, when describing his method, with another term: “wonder” -- the wonder he feels at the beauty of those works” (Stephen’s web). Greenblatt says that “by resonance I mean the power of the displayed object to reach out beyond its formal boundaries to larger world...”; the literary work or a painting or an object displayed in a museum can survive for many years, maybe forever, and by wonder Greenblatt refers to the “arresting sense of uniqueness, to evoke an exalted attention” (Greenblatt web).

The lexical meaning of the word is “the resonance of a sound is its quality of being deep and loud and continuing for a long time” (Longman online). When we think about the definition of the word, the importance of literary works of the past comes into mind. What is written many years ago can still go on being wondered, and still read or analysed from different points of view, that is to say, one cannot help “wonder”ing how successful and beautiful the works of great writers, poets and artists are.

In his article “Resonance and Wonder”, Greenblatt gives three definitions from *The American Heritage Dictionary* and defines those three definitions in his opinion. The first definition he explains is that “the belief that processes are at work in history that man can do little to alter” (55). Greenblatt suggests that new historicism belies its own name and believes that human being cannot “intervene in the processes at work in history, processes which are alienated from all of those who enact them” (55). Conflicts and rules of a culture affect the selves, and they also effect changes in the course of history now that they are conditioned by the gender, religion and race.

New historicism, to Greenblatt, inclines to “discover limits or constraints upon individual intervention”; and the isolated individual depends on collective and social energy. He purports that what seems progressive in one circumstance may become reactionary in another by mentioning that “political valencies may change” (56-7).

Another definition of new historicism which again belies its name is “the theory that the historian must avoid all value judgments in his study of past periods or former cultures” (Greenblatt 57). Greenblatt suggests that being neutral would be a political position, it would be “a decision to support the official policies” (58). For him, the Renaissance was linked to the present “both analogically and causally” because his response to the past depended on his response to the present; studying Renaissance culture, for Greenblatt, was to feel rooted and alienated in his own values (58). Greenblatt states that avoiding all value judgments would be “a misleading account of what it had actually done” (59).

Another work by Greenblatt is “*Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion, Henry IV and Henry V*”. As the title suggests, in the essay Greenblatt identifies the processes of subversion<sup>1</sup> and containment<sup>2</sup>. Louis Montrose refers the terms as “the capacity of the dominant order to generate subversion so as to use it to its own ends marks the very condition of power” (8).

Although the article revolves around Henry IV and Henry V, the point is applicable to almost all Shakespeare's plays.

Greenblatt accounts for this seeming contradiction in Shakespeare by reference to certain ideological strategies, constituting a discourse of power, which are identified by Machiavelli and operative in Thomas Harriot's Brief and True

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<sup>1</sup> Secret activities that are intended damage or destroy the power or influence of a government or established system.

<sup>2</sup> The act of keeping something under control, stopping it becoming more powerful.

Report of the New Found Land of Virginia (1588). (McAlindon 412)

Niccolo di Bernardo dei Machiavelli was an Italian politician, diplomat, and philosopher – lived between 1469 and 1527 – the writer of *the Prince*, which is mentioned in Greenblatt's essay, and he was accused of being an atheist. The mentioned Thomas Harriot (1560-1621), however, was an English astronomer, mathematician and translator.

Stephen Greenblatt starts his most known essay "*Invisible Bullets*" by adverting to a police report of an Elizabethan spy on Christopher Marlowe, who declared that "Moses was but a juggler, and that one Heriots, being Sir Walter Raleigh's<sup>3</sup> man, can do more than he" (18).

Greenblatt proceeds his work, and refers to Thomas Harriot, "the author of first original book about the first English colony in America", as "the possessor throughout his career of a dangerous reputation for atheism" (18). While doing so, Greenblatt, interestingly enough, purports that "the historical evidence is unreliable; even in the absence of substantial social pressure, people lie quite readily about their most intimate beliefs" (19).

In the article, the writer lumps treason and atheism together (in the mentioned period), and that "atheism is one of the characteristic marks of otherness" is mentioned (19). Greenblatt identifies Thomas Harriot's the only work *A Brief and True Report of the New Land of Virginia* with Christopher Marlowe's remark and with William Shakespeare's Henry plays "that can be seen to confirm the Machiavellian hypothesis of the origin of princely power in force and fraud even as they draw their audience irresistibly toward the celebration of that power" (20). Thomas Harriot, in his work, writes how he achieved to convert the Indians into Christianity.

Machiavelli's remarks on religion, and its relation to power underlies the essay together with Harriot's remarks on Christianity in his own work, and Machiavelli's "*The Prince*" is mentioned: "the Discourses treat religion as if its primary function were not salvation but the achievement of civic discipline, and hence as if its primary justification were not truth but expediency" (Greenblatt 20).

Some other "monstrous opinions" in the minds of Renaissance authorities are like this: in Raleigh's School of Atheism, it is said that "both Moses and Our Savior, the Old and the New Testament, are jested at", and Marlowe's affirmation that "things esteemed to be done by divine power might have as well been done by observation of men" (Greenblatt 21).

Harriot is portrayed as a spy, and a missionary, and the process of proselytism is revealed; he was "sent by Raleigh to keep a record of the colony...Harriot took care to learn the North Carolina Algonkian dialect" (Greenblatt 21). Without Christianity, civilization for those natives would not be possible; in his work, Harriot indicates that:

Most things they saw with us, as mathematical instruments, sea compasses, the virtue of the loadstone in drawing iron, a perspective glass whereby was showed many strange sights, burning glasses, wildfire works, guns, books, writing and reading, spring clocks that seem to go of themselves, and many other things that we had, were so strange unto them, and so far exceeded their capacities to comprehend the reason, and means how they should be made and done, that they thought they were rather the works of gods then of men, or at the leastwise they had been given and taught us of the gods (Harriot 375-6). (qtd in Greenblatt's essay 22)

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<sup>3</sup> Sir Walter Raleigh was an English aristocrat, soldier and poet, who was assumed the title of "Sir" by Elizabeth I, and executed by James I with treason charge in 1618.

To Greenblatt, the important fact for Harriot is “the testing upon the bodies and minds of non-Europeans or, more generally, the non-civilised, of a hypothesis about the origin and nature of European culture and belief” (22).

Furthermore, it is mentioned that “the Indians must be persuaded that the Christian God is all powerful and committed to the survival of his chosen people” and it seems that Harriot lies by meaning that “he will wither the corn and destroy the lives of savages who displease him by disobeying or plotting against the English” (Greenblatt 23). It seems that they are there to colonize by using Christianity; ‘the invisible bullets’ are their lies: using books, materials that they have and even the solar eclipse.

As commented by Greenblatt, Thomas Harriot abuses power and lies to fulfil his duty, and as Greenblatt mentions “Harriot is in a position to disclose the power of human achievements –reading, writing, gunpowder, and the like – to appear the ignorant as divine and hence to promote belief and compel obedience” (23). Subversion seems to be produced and contained: “Harriot confirms...subversive hypothesis in his culture about the origin and function of religion by imposing his religion...upon others” (Greenblatt 23).

Greenblatt gives such examples by describing the power and dominance of Elizabethan England, and its control over the nation, and God’s overall control on all; then, “a second mode of subversion and its containment” is adverted: “the recording of alien voices...of alien interpretations”; in this case, that is the consequence of “the threatened extinction of the tribe” (25). Greenblatt turns back to Harriot’s work and quotes:

There was no town where we had any subtle device practiced against us but that within a few days after our departure from every such town, the people began to die very fast, and many in short space...The disease was so strange that they neither knew what it was, nor how to cure it... (378) (qtd Greenblatt 25).

Greenblatt comes to the conclusion that Harriot supports “the idea that God is protecting his chosen people by killing off untrustworthy Indians”, and that “English power in the first Virginia colony depends upon the registering and even the production of such materials” (27). In relation to that, John Brannigan states that “power can only define itself in relation to subversion, to what is alien or other, and at the heart of power is therefore the production and subsequent containment of subversion” (64).

Greenblatt, though, reads the report as an account of a “test” of Machiavellian theories of power of the queen and of God are contingent upon tricks and deliberate misunderstandings of phenomena. He systematizes this test into three phases: testing, recording, and explaining. (Lechler web)

Shakespeare thought about the effects of English culture and the Queen together with its enemies and friends, and out the strategies of the kingdom and its power in his works. His plays, to Greenblatt, are “concerned with the production and containment of subversion and disorder” (29). In the play 1 Henry IV, the authority is problematical. It is revealed that Hal – the future Henry V –, the oldest son of Henry IV, and a friend of Sir John Fastaff – a fat, old knight who is always drunk – “is a juggler” to Greenblatt because he is “a conniving hypocrite, and that the power he both serves and comes to embody is glorified usurpation and theft” yet his prince and power is celebrated (30).

At the end of the first tavern scene in Part 1 Henry IV, Hal asserts that “by how much better than my word I am, by so much shall I falsify men’s hopes” (I.ii.210-11) (qtd Greenblatt 30). There, to falsify is deceiving men, and betraying them; “as in the act of *explaining* that we have examined in Harriot” (G 30).

Greenblatt, then, exemplifies the scenes in which Hal and tapster Francis talk; Hal’s reduction while talking – like the word “Anon” – shows his linguistic poverty. To Greenblatt,

such scenes resemble the recording part of Harriot's text, "a mode that culminates for Harriot a glossary, the beginnings of an Algorician-English dictionary" that one is actually "designed to facilitate further acts of recording and hence to consolidate English power in Virginia" and this concept is exemplified in the play with Hal's glossary of tavern-slang: "I am so good proficient in one quarter of an hour that I can drink with any tinker in his own language during my life" (II.iv.15-20) (qtd Greenblatt 32).

With regard to Shakespeare's theatre, it is believed that the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre was a social event, and thus it is the expression of social practices and assessments" (Greenblatt 32-3). Thus by rereading Shakespeare's 1 Henry IV, 2 Henry V, and Henry V, Greenblatt deduces that Prince Hal creates his power and "betrayal, and violence put Hal on the throne, through the theft of Richard II's throne by Hal's father Bolingbroke; through Hal's betrayal of his friends Bardolph and Pistol and his most adoring friend Falstaff" (Lechler web).

In these plays "political interests are involved", and the alien voices of the repressed and subversive are *recorded* with the tapster Francis, the characters of Falstaff and Bardolph, and the "diverse peoples represented in the play by Welshman Fluellen, the Irishman Macmorris, and the Scotsman Jamy" and Greenblatt adds that "Hal symbolically tames the last wild areas in the British Isles" (Greenblatt 36, 42). In the essay, although Greenblatt exemplifies recording, and explaining, he does not provide examples of testing clearly.

A complex new world is surveyed like Harriot in the first part of Henry IV, and in the second part "we are like the Indians" who are forced to "pay homage to a system of beliefs", and the concluding play Henry V "we have all along been both coloniser and colonised, king and subject" (Greenblatt 42). As mentioned at the beginning, the marginalised groups are of concern for new historicists.

The relationship of power and performance with the Elizabethan audience is explained by Greenblatt, and Queen Eliabeth is:

A ruler without a standing army, without a highly developed bureaucracy, without an extensive police force, a ruler whose power is constituted in theatrical celebrations of royal glory and theatrical violence visited upon the enemies of that glory...As in a theatre, the audience must be powerfully engaged by this visible presence while at the same time held at a certain distance from it. (44)

### **Conclusion:**

To sum up, together with the stories of Machiavelli, and Thomas Harriot with his work, and Shakespeare's plays, Greenblatt comes to the conclusion that "there is subversion, no end of subversion, only not for us" (45). Greenblatt's "epochal analysis allows him to establish that there is an absolute and impenetrable barrier between us and the past, and that our reading of the past is necessarily conditioned by the power relations in which we live and think" (Brannigan 66). Fiction and history are storylike narratives as Hayden White purports:

We may seek to give our live a meaning of some specific kind by telling now one and now another kind of story about them. But this is a work of construction rather than of discovery – and so it is with groups, nations and whole classes of people who wish to regard themselves as parts of organic entities capable of living storylike lives. Neither the reality nor the meaning of history is out there in the form of a story awaiting only a historian to discern its outline and identify the plot that comprises its meaning (487).

In other words, new historicists regard historiography as connected to power relations; therefore, producing stories of the past is beside the point (Oppermann 32). History and fiction are, in a way, like the fictionalised representations of the past.

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