

The Limits of New Historicism: Marjorie Levinson's Interpretation of "Tintern Abbey"

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Abstract

Within the field of New Historicism studies of British Romantic poetry, Marjorie Levinson's interpretation of William Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey" holds a significant position. However, Levinson's analysis exhibits a notable flaw: her utilization of Gilpin's texts without adequately considering the ideological backdrop they carry. This oversight neglects the unique historical context of these materials, specifically the prevalent ideology of the "picturesque" and the related phenomenon of picturesque tourism in late 18th-century Britain. By delving into this omission, this paper aims to unveil the inherent paradoxes within the New Historicist methodology itself and further explores the "post-critique" strategies of New Historicism in literary analysis.

Keywords

Literary Criticism, New Historicism, Picturesque, Marjorie Levinson.

1. Introduction

The study of classic British Romantic literary works has yielded a rich and diverse body of research over the years. David Simpson delineates literary studies into two primary categories: appreciative criticism, characterized by an absence of deliberate adherence to any external theoretical paradigms or philosophical modes, lacking what is termed as "methodological self-consciousness"; and methodological criticism, where critics engage in literary critique or reading under the guidance of clear principles or norms (1-2). The nearly two-century-long history of British Romantic literature research exemplifies the evolution of these literary studies approaches. The surge of various theoretical paradigms in the 20th century provided multiple methodologies and perspectives for the study of British Romantic literature, such as New Criticism, Deconstructionist Criticism, Feminist Criticism, New Marxist and New Historicist Criticism, Post-colonial Criticism, and Ecocriticism, among others, unveiling the multifaceted and complex nature of British Romanticism in full.

New Historicism emerged in the 1980s, continuing the deconstructionist tradition of exploring the indeterminacy of literary texts while also focusing on linguistic issues within literary works. However, New Historicism's approach is not limited to the form and rhetorical aspects of literary language but extends to the interplay between literary form, rhetoric, and the underlying historical and political issues. Alan Liu, in 2009, clarified that "Romantic New Historicism" does not represent a unified school of thought with common theoretical assertions but rather subverts a series of theories including dialectics, cultural materialism, formalism, post-structuralism, intellectual history, text-historical research, and textual criticism (xiii-xiv). The most renowned New Historicist analysis of a British Romantic poet is Marjorie Levinson's interpretation of Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey."

The earliest comprehensive review of Levinson's work in China was conducted by Ding Hongwei in his 2002 publication, "Ideas and Tragedy: The Post-Revolutionary Transformation of Wordsworth," particularly in the second chapter, "Politics and History: Wordsworth's

Modern Critics.” This chapter focuses on the New Historicist analysis of Wordsworth by scholars such as Marjorie Levinson, Alan Liu, and Marilyn Butler, offering critiques of their work. Subsequent research has largely built upon Ding’s foundational work, with domestic scholars following his lead in evaluating Levinson but not surpassing his depth of critique. For instance, Zhang Zhiyi, in his 2007 paper “‘Tintern Abbey’: A Void of History and Nature”, mistakenly identified Levinson’s gender and concluded that Levinson had not escaped the influence of traditional historicist research, accusing her of erasing the poet’s intrinsic intentions and the unity of the poem’s expressive content. Yuan Xianjun, in his 2007 paper “The Meaning of Nature: Interpreting Wordsworth’s ‘Tintern Abbey’”, also briefly criticized Levinson, suggesting that Wordsworth’s view of nature encompassed personal, political, and social contexts, yet his construction of nature primarily originated from a poetic and aesthetic context.

Zhang Xuchun’s 2008 paper, “‘Tintern Abbey’ without Tintern Abbey: The New Historicist Paradigm in British Romanticism Studies,” placed Levinson’s work within a critical spectrum, clearly presenting the research on Wordsworth by Abrams, Aidan Day, Simpson, and Levinson, highlighting the achievements and limitations of the New Historicist paradigm. Zhang pointed out that New Historicism managed to avoid the mechanical and hollow correspondences between text and static social background typical of traditional socio-historical criticism and the narrow focus on semantic analysis characteristic of structuralism and deconstructionism (56). Zhang also noted the challenge New Historicism faces in delineating the boundaries between Enlightenment and conservatism, suggesting that the early radicalism and later conservatism of the Lake School poets fundamentally reflect a unique response to modernity, and that “Tintern Abbey” without Tintern Abbey represents an early critique and protest against bourgeois modernity from an aesthetic modernity standpoint (56).

Despite the comprehensive and critical analysis provided by Ding Hong and Zhang Xuchun, this paper identifies a critical flaw in Levinson’s discussion: her treatment of Gilpin’s segments similarly obscures the underlying ideology, misreading it as “real history” while neglecting the historical context of the material itself. This study aims to deconstruct Levinson’s New Historicist analysis using the methodology of New Historicism itself, to reveal its inherent contradictions and limitations. Through this reflexive critique, the study not only seeks to deconstruct Levinson’s analysis but also to deeply reflect on and scrutinize the New Historicist method itself. Through this critical self-reflection, the paper explores the limits of New Historicism’s application in literary studies and the challenges and possibilities it faces as an interpretive strategy.

2. Marjorie Levinson’s Critique of “Tintern Abbey”

The New Marxist critique of Wordsworth originated with Jerome McGann, who in “The Romantic Ideology: A Critical Investigation,” argued that the task of New Marxist-New Historicist critics is to unveil the internal mechanisms through which literature and art produce ideological constructs, especially how Romantic literature gives rise to Romantic ideology. McGann posits that this ideology is primarily centered around the Ideal of Harmony or “Unity of Being,” which many scholars have adopted, perceiving British Romanticism as an occurrence solely within the realms of mind and spirit, disconnected from external political and societal realities (1). Specifically, Romantic literary production embodies a “Romantic ideology” through a displacement strategy, abstracting and conceptualizing specific social and historical issues into an idealized and conceptualized world where the genuine social issues engaged by Romantic poetry are placed into various idealized, conceptualized realms.

Further, McGann suggests that Romanticism’s yearning for harmony and unity, and its contemplation of natural principles and world soul, are not purely artistic concerns but rather reflect the spirit of the age, indicative of the historical-cultural crisis of the Romantic era in

Europe. He argues, this anxiety over regaining totality is a manifestation of the “epistemological crisis” underlying the political and social turmoil of the era (41). McGann inspiring a host of New Marxist-New Historicist scholars, including Levinson, Simpson, and Alan Liu.

Levinson’s work, “Wordsworth’s Great Period Poems: Four Essays,” is among the most successful applications of this approach. Her reading of Wordsworth is akin to Said’s postcolonial critique “contrapuntal reading,” juxtaposing the contradictions and conflicts within Wordsworth’s poetic texts against the political and social issues of his era. Thus, Levinson’s method transcends simplistic historical background-literary foreground descriptions to reveal the complex entanglement between the social, historical, political issues of the Romantic period and Wordsworth’s creative psyche, along with the textual and linguistic meanings of his works.

Levinson argues that the seemingly clear Romantic “ideality” or themes in Wordsworth’s poetry, such as nature’s nurturing and sustenance of the soul, are in fact closely linked to specific historical events that troubled him. However, Wordsworth consistently attempts to erase or circumvent these historical elements in his texts, leading to numerous contradictions or ambiguities. Levinson advocates for a “historical imagination” to question Wordsworth, exploring how supposed “harmonies” erase, suppress, and conceal “social and political echoes” (1-2).

“Tintern Abbey”, known as “Lines Written a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey” is a poem by Wordsworth about his nostalgic return to the Wye Valley and his feelings of nature, creativity, and the human soul. It is fraught with unresolved issues, notably its title’s misalignment with its content, as the poem lacks any description of the abandoned abbey itself. Levinson points out that Wordsworth’s experience of Tintern Abbey was determined by multifaceted factors, clarifying which aids in understanding these contradictions (18).

The political climate post-French Revolution influenced Wordsworth’s psychology. Following the French Revolution, the political landscape in Britain underwent dramatic changes, with sympathy for radicalism beginning to wane. Such ideologies were increasingly regarded as threats to social order. Consequently, Wordsworth and Coleridge became viewed as enemies. Aidan Day notes that in 1797, In 1797, when Wordsworth and Coleridge were in Somerset, the government deployed spies to monitor these two individuals, as they were suspected of being spies for France (135). Therefore, Wordsworth’s journey to Germany after writing “Tintern Abbey” partially served as an escape from domestic political persecution, with the poem acting as a farewell piece.

Furthermore, the contemporary state of Tintern Abbey could not provide Wordsworth with a serene and soul-purifying retreat due to the pervasive impact of modern industrial and commercial activities in the area. Marjorie Levinson draws from a variety of historical sources from the 18th and 19th centuries to illustrate this point, with one of the most emblematic being William Gilpin’s “Observations on the River Wye”:

Among other things in this scene of desolation, the poverty and wretchedness of the inhabitants were remarkable. They occupy little huts, raised among the ruins of the monastery; and seem to have no employment, but begging. ...The country about Tintern-abbey hath been described as a solitary, tranquil scene: but it's immediate environs only are meant. Within half a mile of it are carried on great iron works; which introduce noise and bustle into these regions of tranquillity. ...Hitherto the river had been clear, and splendid; reflecting the several objects on it's banks. But it's waters now became ouzy, and discoloured. Sludgy shores too appeared, on each side; and other symptoms, which discovered the influence of a tide (50-53).

This desolate and dilapidated landscape failed to offer Wordsworth a sanctuary for his soul. Levinson contends that the authentic visage of Tintern Abbey and the town itself thwarted Wordsworth’s genius-like “imaginative alchemy”: the historical and current state of Tintern

Abbey was so discomfiting and at odds with aesthetic imagination that it necessitated a non-historical, non-realist privatization and internalization (35). Therefore, Levinson posits that the primary poetic act of "Tintern Abbey," rooted in its writing background and motivation, is the suppression of the social, achieved through a mechanism of "selective blindness" (24). Ultimately, the specific Tintern Abbey gradually becomes internalized as the "Tintern Abbey of the mind" (48).

Levinson concludes that her exploration of social-historical echoes is not intended to dilute or negate Wordsworth's creative psyche or his poetic philosophy. On the contrary, the excavation and discovery of these new meanings connect Wordsworth's "existential angst" with his own real historical experiences and the contemporary state of his era and society (2). By uncovering the true historical conditions that allowed Wordsworth's great works to emerge, Levinson aims to refresh our appreciation for the profound strength inherent in his poetry (3).

3. Another Critique of Levinson: The Aesthetics of the Picturesque

Levinson's reference to 18th and 19th-century materials to depict the industrial surroundings of Tintern Abbey, deliberately overlooked by Wordsworth, is crucial in her critique. Among these materials, Gilpin's "Observations on the River Wye" is particularly notable. This work, Gilpin's inaugural notebook, titled "Observations on the River Wye and several parts of South Wales, Yale Center for British Art, Rare Books and Manuscripts," transcends mere travel observations. It is an extension of his aesthetic ideology, aimed at expounding his "principles of picturesque beauty," primarily grounded in his landscape painting knowledge. Hence, this book transcends personal musings, possessing public significance. Gilpin intended it as a travel guide for the British populace, complete with illustrations, thereby positioning it as a seminal text in the discourse of picturesque aesthetics and its influence on public engagement with landscape appreciation.

This period marks the flourishing of "picturesque" in Britain. The grand tour, popular among the British elite in the 17th and 18th centuries, fueled a fervor for acquiring European landscape paintings, significantly shaping British artistic tastes and cultural notions (Xiao 107). Dutch and Italian landscape paintings of the 17th century, while differing in style, shared a common approach: incorporating realistically depicted elements or details within an overall composition that followed certain idealized constructs (Mitchell 70). These landscape paintings, brought back by collectors from the grand tour, entered Britain, influencing British artists to adopt their compositional methods and styles.

Gilpin, as one of the earliest proponents of the picturesque, published the popular "An Essay on Prints" in 1768, where he defined the picturesque as "a term expressive of that peculiar kind of beauty, which is agreeable in a picture" (xii), laying the groundwork for his principles of picturesque beauty. He observed that practical elements, such as manicured garden grounds and Palladian architecture, which are symmetrical and elegant, may be delightful in reality but become rigid and dull when depicted in a painting. Conversely, less conventionally attractive elements, like the rough bark of an old tree or the irregular slopes of hills, may not be inherently beautiful but acquire a captivating quality within the context of a painting (Xiao 107). This distinction underscores the picturesque as an aesthetic that transcends utility and functionality, celebrating the pure, idealized form of beauty. During the late 1760s and 1770s, Gilpin extensively traveled during the summer holidays, applying his principles to the landscapes he encountered and documenting his reflections and spontaneous sketches in notebooks. Led by artists like Gilpin, Britain experienced a surge in picturesque tourism in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, driven by Gilpin's travelling guidebooks.

John Ruskin critically examined and reflected upon the picturesque aesthetic from a moral standpoint, prompted by an incident during his travels in Bologna, Italy, in 1845. He witnessed

a skinny beggar child sleeping motionlessly by the roadside. The child's ragged, arm-baring attire and his peaceful lying posture, with folds of the torn clothing accentuating his emaciated chest, inadvertently formed a picturesque composition. Driven by an artist's instinct, Ruskin opened his sketchbook and approached the child's mother with money, not out of compassion, but to hire her to keep flies away, ensuring they wouldn't disturb his art-making. Reflecting on this in a letter home, he was shocked by his own insensitivity and indifference (Xiao 118). This event highlighted how the hardships of life were merely viewed as aesthetic objects pleasing to the eye, suggesting that proponents of the picturesque focused solely on its expression of eternal and universal formal beauty, neglecting any social significance beyond form.

Ruskin believed that behind picturesque scenes often lay human misfortune and suffering; thus, artists should seek to understand and empathize with the pains of humanity. From this perspective, Ruskin bifurcated the category of the picturesque into two: one, the "noble picturesque," which correctly employs formal features, and the other, the "lower picturesque," which misuses these features (Xiao 118). Through this distinction, Ruskin aimed to elevate the moral responsibility of artists, advocating for a picturesque aesthetic that acknowledges and engages with the underlying realities of human conditions rather than merely exploiting them for their formal beauty.

Gilpin's depiction of the River Wye could be seen as an example of the "lower picturesque." Throughout his narrative, Gilpin does not aim to objectively and truthfully reproduce the original scene, nor does he empathize with the subjects of his descriptions. Instead, his focus lies more on seeking compositions that align with the aesthetic of picturesque beauty. Taking his initial description of Tintern Abbey as an example, Gilpin mentions arriving at "the noble ruin of Tintern Abbey," described as "the most beautiful and picturesque view on the river" (46). He surveys the surroundings of Tintern Abbey: "The woods, and glades intermixed; the winding of the river; the variety of the ground; the splendid ruin, contrasted with the objects of nature; and the elegant line formed by the summits of the hills" (46-47). Subsequently, within this "very enchanting piece of scenery," Gilpin points out a discordant element, the abbey-church, which "has been an elegant Gothic pile" but "does not make that appearance as a distant object, which we expected" (47). He believes that although "the parts are beautiful", the whole is "ill-shaped" (47). Gilpin then suggests more appropriate viewing points, emphasizing that it "exhibits, on a nearer view, a very enchanting piece of ruin," particularly "when the whole together cannot be seen, but the eye settles on some of its nobler parts" (49-50).

Gilpin's observational and descriptive approach resembles the use of a Claude glass among picturesque tourism enthusiasts. The Claude glass offers a transformed view of the scenery, rendering the landscape in the field of vision more condensed, compact, and varied than in reality. The black glass filters light, simplifying shadows and tones, softening and unifying the colors of the scene, hence producing a modified, harmonious, and pleasing picturesque effect (Xiao 111). For tourists, it presents seemingly ordinary British countryside landscapes in an idealized form.

Importantly, Gilpin does not adopt a sympathetic or empathetic attitude towards the scenes of desolation and misery he describes. Beyond the "remarkable poverty and wretchedness" (50) Levinson cites, Gilpin further details the dilapidated state of the library:

One poor woman we followed, who had engaged to shew us the monk's library. She could scarce crawl; shuffling along her palsied limbs, and meager, contracted body, by the help of two sticks. She led us, through an old gate, into a place overspread with nettles, and briars.....We did not expect to be interested: but we found we were. I never saw so loathsome a human dwelling. It was a cavity, loftily vaulted, between two ruined walls; which streamed with various-coloured stains of unwholesome dews. The floor was earth; yielding, through moisture, to the tread. Not the merest utensil, or furniture of any kind appeared, but a wretched bedstead, spread with a few rags, and drawn into the middle of the cell, to prevent it's receiving the damp, which trickled

down the walls. At one end was an aperture; which served just to let in light enough to discover the wretchedness within (50).

In the face of such distressing scenes, Gilpin's mere exclamation, "we were rather surprised, that the wretched inhabitant was still alive," followed by a swift return to the exploration of Tintern Abbey's landscape (51), evokes the critique proposed by John Ruskin, showcasing an attitude that focuses solely on aesthetic value while neglecting social significance. Indeed, "slumming," or the trend of touring urban slums, emerged as a societal phenomenon under the guise of picturesque ideology, with the middle class organizing tours of city slums as a fashionable venture. Guided by Gilpin's theories, the hidden, narrow alleys, crowded dwellings, broken windows, sewage-ridden streets, and the emaciated urban poor of the Victorian era were transformed into aesthetically appealing objects with a rough texture and diverse forms, eagerly sought after by tourists (Zheng 58). Furthermore, many artists and writers catered to travelers' curiosity and aesthetic imagination, deliberately romanticizing slums into warm, nostalgic homesteads.

Hence, the landscapes surrounding Tintern Abbey as depicted by Gilpin cannot be regarded as "real history" for reference, but rather as aesthetic objects shaped by the ideology of picturesque aesthetics, specifically designed to appeal to the middle-class aesthetic sensibility. This is precisely what Levinson failed to examine. If Wordsworth's work is veiled by the "Romantic ideology," causing certain historical realities to be silenced, then Gilpin's work suffers from the same deficiency, being shaped by an aesthetic that captures the landscape's beauty while overlooking the deeper, often more troubling social realities beneath.

4. Limits of New Historicism

Zhang Xuchun has delineated the trajectory of 20th-century British Romanticism literary criticism as a series of negations and exclusions among various schools of thought across three main dimensions: linguistic and formal, internal consciousness, and socio-historical (364). The establishment of one critical stance often begins with the negation of another, leading to what Paul de Man described as the complementary nature of insight and blindness. Critics seem destined to grapple with the inconsistency between their intentions and their articulations, where preconceived "critical stances" are often overturned by actual "critical outcomes." Thus, "to write critically about critics," reflecting on the "paradoxical effectiveness of a blinded vision," becomes necessary (103-106). Building on this, Zhang highlights the flaws in the New Historicist critique exemplified by Levinson, specifically its focus solely on the socio-historical dimension while neglecting linguistic-formal aspects and internal consciousness. This approach results in a selective filtering, ignoring, or suppression of the essence of literary works. In his 1990 Clare Hall, Cambridge lecture on "Interpretation and Overinterpretation," Umberto Eco used Hartman's reading of Wordsworth as an example to introduce the concept of over-interpretation. Eco likened this interpretation to interpretative gambling, pre-determining the poem's theme and then exhaustively mining the text for every possible "semantic isotopy" to support it. When semantic isotopes become too generic, they lead to over-interpretation (Collini 62-63).

Levinson's interpretation of "Tintern Abbey" thus falls into the category of over-interpretation. Her emphasis on ideological or political factors is one aspect, but more critically, she follows a path of interpretative gambling. If Levinson criticizes Wordsworth for employing "selective blindness" to suppress specific historical realities, then Levinson herself is also guilty of a prejudiced selective blindness. In her support for her interpretation of "Tintern Abbey," she overlooks the historical-political context behind Gilpin's "Observations on the River Wye," reducing it to a "real historical experience." This significantly undermines her foundational argument: rather than uncovering the historical echoes behind literature, what she considers

as “real history” is, in fact, a discourse imbued with ideology. As Ding states, there is no such thing as a “stubbornly non-compliant” real event that is not obsequious (in Levinson’s terms) to human imagination (86).

At this juncture, we can discern the inherent contradictions within New Historicism: on one hand, the theory sharply and precisely emphasizes the political nature embedded in texts; on the other hand, when the historical-political context is no longer merely a backdrop for literary works, reducing literature to a vessel for historical-political narratives, literature seems to lose its intrinsic value. Therefore, to outright dismiss New Historicism solely because of the latter seems unjust, as the loss of literary value is just one negative consequence among the brilliant achievements it brings. Consequently, in the practice of critical theory, there is an urgent need to find a balance, a way to reveal both the political and historical attributes of literary works without diminishing their literary essence.

Rita Felski, in “The Limits of Critique,” outlines an alternative model termed “post-critical reading”:

Rather than looking behind the text—for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives—we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. This is not idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition—long overdue—of the text’s status as coactor: as something that makes a difference, that helps make things happen (47).

The power of literature to “make (it) possible” refers to literature’s capacity to assimilate reality. Literature does not need to evade real events; rather, it often requires them to validate, strengthen, and expand its poetic force. Felski suggests that literary studies can wield a unique double-edged weapon: critique of literature versus literature as critique. Viewing reading as resistance rather than affirmation appears superficial and insufficiently nuanced: rather than exposing the flaws of the text, it reflects that the practice of reading lacks finesse because the critique is already inherent within literary works. Thus, everything is inverted: we no longer need to direct critique at the text because literature itself brings critique. Literature can now be praised because it achieves estrangement and demystification, exposing the ordinariness of the ordinary, highlighting the pure contingency and constructedness of meaning. In short, we do not need to doubt the text because it has already performed the work of doubting for us.

5. Conclusion

The integration of aesthetic contemplation with historical investigation has perennially posed a challenge in literary criticism. Comprehensive and profound critiques by Ding Hongwei and Zhang Xuchun have questioned the efficacy of New Historicism in capturing the essence of literary works. This paper takes an alternative path, examining Levinson’s discourse from a New Historicist perspective to unveil its inherent contradictions and limitations. The reduction of literature to mere discourse is an inevitable outcome of New Historicism’s approach, yet it also suggests a possibility for balance.

It must be acknowledged that the New Historicist research paradigm is stimulating. It avoids the mechanical and hollow correspondence between text and static social background characteristic of traditional socio-historical criticism, while also eschewing the narrow focus on semantic analysis prevalent in structuralism and deconstructionism. However, it raises a persistent question in New Historicism: where does literature distinguish itself from other discourses?

New Historicism posits that literary studies aim to understand how works become products of their era, which helps us to discern our works and our times. The evasion of contemporary social realities in literature results in many conflicts and contradictions becoming implicit content, covered by too many other elements, thus necessitating additional effort in reading not

just the text at hand but uncovering another implicit text. In this process, the historical interest of the interpreter inevitably becomes the true or ultimate interest.

Yet, New Historicists have failed to fully appreciate the natural transition between grand social-historical events and the minutiae of a poet's life, often overlooking the author's intellectual and spiritual authority. When they examine the poet's alleged political obfuscation of social-historical realities, it feels as though they are forcing the poet back into a discourse or mode of thought they have transcended, or into the clamorous reality of quantification.

Therefore, a different mode of reading is required, one that sees literature itself as a source of critique. Literature has the capacity to digest reality, not only validating, strengthening, and expanding its poetic force but also necessitating real events. Through this approach, literature can not only demonstrate its aesthetic value but also provide profound criticism and reflection on social-historical realities.

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