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Events, Facts, and Power: A Comparative Study of Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism

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Abstract

This essay compares Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism through the concepts of event and fact. It argues that their difference lies not only in method, but also in ontology and epistemology. Reception Aesthetics sees the event as realized in the interaction between text and reader, and understands facts as formed through the accumulation of reception and interpretive continuity. New Historicism, by contrast, treats the event as historically situated and materially embedded, and regards facts as discursive effects produced within networks of power, archive, and institution. By comparing these two paradigms, the essay shows that literary meaning is shaped by both reception and history, and that literary history is constructed through the tension between interpretive openness and historical constraint.

Keywords

Reception Aesthetics; New Historicism; event; fact.

1. Introduction

The question of how literary meaning and historical significance are constituted lies at the heart of modern literary theory. Among the most influential responses are Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism, two paradigms that, though both concerned with the relation between literature and history, rest on markedly different ontological and epistemological assumptions. Reception Aesthetics locates the constitutive force of literary meaning in the encounter between text and reader, emphasizing horizons of expectation, interpretive gaps, and the diachronic unfolding of reception. New Historicism, by contrast, situates literary meaning within historically specific discourses and material practices, where texts are shaped by power, institution, and circulation. A comparison between the two therefore makes visible not only differing interpretive methods, but also differing assumptions about where meaning happens and how historical significance is produced.

This divergence became particularly significant in the later twentieth century, when literary criticism increasingly turned from questions of formal structure to questions of interpretation, history, and cultural embeddedness. Reception Aesthetics, associated with Hans Robert Jauss, Wolfgang Iser, and Robert Holub, emerged in postwar Germany as an effort to overcome static models of textual meaning by foregrounding the active role of readers in literary history. Its account of literature as a process of reception provided a way to understand how texts survive, change, and acquire value across time. New Historicism, associated with Stephen Greenblatt, Louis Montrose, and Catherine Gallagher, emerged in the Anglo-American academy in the 1980s as a challenge to both formalism and conventional historicism. Rather than treating literature as autonomous, it emphasized the ways texts participate in the circulation of discourse and are embedded in concrete historical conditions.

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The difference between these paradigms is not simply a disagreement over method. It reflects two distinct ways of imagining the relation between literature and history. Reception Aesthetics assumes that literature remains historically alive through acts of reading, which continually reactivate and reshape textual meaning. New Historicism assumes that literature is inseparable from the discursive and institutional conditions of its production and circulation, and that meaning is therefore bound to historical structures rather than freely renewed by readers alone. In this sense, the contrast between the two is not merely theoretical but concerns the very grounds on which literary significance can be said to exist.

This essay approaches that contrast through two linked concepts, event and fact. The concept of event makes visible the ontological divide between the two frameworks, since it raises the question of whether meaning first comes into being through reception or through historical process. The concept of fact brings this divide into epistemological focus, since it asks how interpretation becomes stabilized, authorized, and recognized as knowledge. If Reception Aesthetics understands the event as something realized in reading and the fact as something sedimented through reception, New Historicism understands the event as historically situated and the fact as discursively produced within networks of power. By comparing these two concepts across the two paradigms, this essay argues that their deepest difference lies in the tension between reception as the ground of meaning and history as the ground of meaning. Such a comparison clarifies not only how literature is interpreted, but also how literary history itself is constructed.

2. The Ontological Difference in "Event"

The question of what constitutes an "event" in literary and historical understanding reveals a fundamental ontological divide when Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism are brought into sustained dialogue. The disagreement between the two theories is not merely a matter of interpretive emphasis but concerns the very mode of being of the event itself. Both seek to explain how meaning and historical significance arise, yet they place the constitutive force of the event in radically different locations. For Reception Aesthetics, the event comes into being in the encounter between text and reader, and its existence depends on acts of realization, completion, and renewal. For New Historicism, by contrast, the event belongs first to historically situated discourse and acquires meaning within networks of power, institution, and material circulation. Their divergences in agency, temporality, and materiality are therefore not isolated disagreements, but successive expressions of a deeper ontological question: whether literary meaning exists primarily as an event of reception or as an event of history.

Reception Aesthetics views the event as emerging from the dynamic encounter between text and reader. Jauss explicitly argues that "in the triangle of author, work, and public the last is no passive part, no chain of mere reactions, but rather itself an energy formative of history" (19). The work's historical life, therefore, is "unthinkable without the active participation of its addressees" (19). In this account, the literary event is constituted not simply by the act of writing but by the continuing reception of the text across generations, a process that confers both historical significance and aesthetic value. Iser develops this perspective through his concept of the "virtual dimension" of the text. He notes: "The literary text activates our own faculties. The product of this creative activity is what we might call the virtual dimension of the text: it is the coming together of text and imagination" (284). For Iser, the text exists only in the interaction between the given words on the page and the imaginative participation of the reader. When textual continuities are disrupted, "the opportunity is given to us to bring into play our own faculty for establishing connections—for filling in the gaps left by the text itself" (285). Such gaps, or "blanks," are not flaws but invitations for active completion, ensuring that the literary event is always a subjective, repeatable realization rather than a fixed entity. Holub

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captures this transformation as the shift from the "text-as-artifact" to the "event-of-reception" (15), underscoring that meaning is produced in acts of reading and continually reactivated over time.

New Historicism, by contrast, situates the genesis of the literary event in material history and the circulation of discourse. Greenblatt emphasizes that "it is rather the story's full situation—the genre it is thought to embody, the circumstances of its performance, the imaginings of its audience—that governs its shifting meanings" (3). The resonance of Queen Elizabeth's famous declaration, "I am Richard II, know ye not that?" (3), illustrates this view. Her statement was not merely personal interpretation but a politically charged intervention within a volatile historical moment, demonstrating how the play's meaning was inseparable from contemporary political crises. Moreover, the omission of the deposition scene from the first three quartos of *Richard II*, which only appeared after Elizabeth's death, reveals how censorship actively shaped the event of the play's reception. As Greenblatt observes, the performance itself moved in "a more volatile zone … of the streets" (3), where the boundaries between art and political action blurred. Here, the event is not a readerly realization but a historically situated act embedded in networks of authority, censorship, and performance.

At the level of agency, the two frameworks differ first over who serves as the primary bearer of the event. Reception Aesthetics grants substantial creative power to the reader. Iser describes reading as "a sort of kaleidoscope of perspectives, preintentions, recollections. Every sentence contains a preview of the next, and this in turn changes the 'preview'" (284). In this dynamic process, the reader reconstructs coherence and transforms textual indeterminacy into meaning. Jauss likewise maintains that the understanding of the first audience is "sustained and enriched in a chain of receptions from generation to generation; in this way the historical significance of a work will be decided and its aesthetic value made evident" (20). In this view, the event is not bound to its initial appearance but remains open to renewal by successive readers. New Historicism, however, shifts agency from the individual reader to discourse itself. Power, as Foucault observes, "comes from everywhere" (Wilson 603), and for New Historicist critics, indeterminacy signals not creative freedom but ideological struggle. Greenblatt's notion of "subversion and containment" shows how interpretive activity is always already constrained by the cultural and political frameworks in which it occurs. As Montrose observes, the authority of texts derives less from private acts of reading than from "the circulation of social energy" within networks of power (20). Thus, while Reception Aesthetics foregrounds the generative activity of readers, New Historicism stresses that agency ultimately resides in discourse itself, a difference that underscores their fundamentally opposed conceptions of how the event comes into being.

This divergence in agency further determines the temporality of the event. If readers actively constitute the event, then the event is inherently repeatable: each act of reception renews the text, allowing it to "strike ever new resonances […] and free the text from the material of the words" (Jauss 21). Reception Aesthetics thus envisions a work's history as a diachronic chain of receptions, each actualizing the virtual dimension in new contexts. New Historicism, by contrast, anchors the event in irreducible historical specificity. Tyson asserts, "there is no such thing as a presentation of facts, there is only interpretation" (616). From this standpoint, the event cannot be abstracted into an ideal form that recurs across time; it is singular, material, and inseparable from the networks of power that produced it. Gallagher reinforces this view by stressing that New Historicism "locates the meaning of silence not in readerly completion but in the historical force of what has been suppressed" (44). Thus, Reception Aesthetics frames temporality as repeatable renewal, whereas New Historicism insists on the uniqueness of historical moments. The difference is not simply chronological but ontological: one understands the event as something repeatedly realized, the other as something historically situated and therefore unrepeatable in the same sense.

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A further point of divergence lies in their treatment of materiality. For Reception Aesthetics, the material text is only a starting point for the reader's imaginative engagement. As Jauss suggests, literature "frees the text from the material of the words and brings it to a contemporary existence" (21). The emphasis is on the immaterial dimension of experience, which transcends the physical text. New Historicism, however, insists on the irreducibility of the material record. Archival evidence—such as quartos, payment documents, censorship edicts, and eyewitness accounts—becomes indispensable for establishing what the event was and how it functioned. Hawthorn underscores this difference by noting that Reception Theory grants the work "a repeatable historicity rooted in subjective experience," whereas New Historicism grounds historicity in the contingent survival of material traces (78). In this sense, Reception Aesthetics subordinates materiality to reception, while New Historicism regards materiality as the very precondition for historical knowledge, a divergence that exemplifies their contrasting epistemologies.

Placed in direct comparison, the divergence is not simply one of emphasis but of ontological definition. Reception Aesthetics understands the event as a process of realization that remains virtual, repeatable, and dependent on the reader's imaginative participation. New Historicism, by contrast, understands the event as a historically organized occurrence that is material, singular, and embedded in discourse. The former emphasizes how the event is realized in reading; the latter emphasizes how the event is produced and constrained in history. Their disagreement over agency, temporality, and materiality therefore prepares the transition to the next problem. Once the event is defined differently, the question of fact can no longer be approached in the same way. A different ontology of the event necessarily entails a different mechanism by which facts are generated, recognized, and authorized.

3. Divergent Mechanisms of Fact-Generation

This chapter turns to the mode of formation of the fact. The divergent ontologies of the event in Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism fundamentally shape how each framework conceptualizes fact-generation, that is, the processes by which literary-historical meaning, significance, and "truth" are produced. The central difference does not lie in the simple opposition between interpretation and truth, since both theories reject the naïve notion of facts as self-evident data. Rather, the difference lies in the mechanism through which interpretation acquires factual status. Reception Aesthetics treats facts as interpretive results sedimented across acts of reading and validated by diachronic aesthetic coherence. New Historicism treats facts as discursive effects produced, selected, and authorized within institutional and ideological networks. What counts as a fact, therefore, is not a neutral datum but the outcome of distinct epistemological procedures grounded in different assumptions about subjectivity, history, and power.

Reception Aesthetics situates fact-generation within the interpretive activity of readers across time. Jauss defines the horizon of expectations as follows:

The analysis of the literary experience of the reader … describes the reception and the influence of a work within the objectifiable system of expectations that arises for each work in the historical moment of its appearance, from a pre-understanding of the genre, from the form and themes of already familiar works, and from the opposition between poetic and practical language. (22)

Meaning emerges when readers negotiate the tension between existing expectations and the challenges posed by a new work. When familiar norms are unsettled or new experiences raised into awareness, interpretation becomes an active process of reconfiguration. Over time, this ongoing negotiation creates a chain of receptions that both preserves and transforms a work's significance. In this view, facts are not fixed features of the text but historical traces of reception.

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Holub reinforces this by explaining that "the way in which a literary work meets, surpasses, or refutes the expectations of its first audience obviously provides a criterion for the determination of its aesthetic value" (58–60). For Iser, such processes are sustained by the "virtuality" of the text, which "can never be precisely pinpointed, but must always remain virtual, as it is not to be identified either with the reality of the text or with the individual disposition of the reader" (298). Facts are therefore generated in the interplay between text and reader, validated not by external authority but by experiential coherence and the aesthetic resonance that accumulates over time. As Schmidt has argued, Reception Aesthetics thus redefines fact as a "historical sedimentation of interpretive acts," reminding us that facts in literary history emerge only through the lived continuity of reading practices (41). In short, facticity is here tied to the capacity of texts to mobilize successive audiences, transforming reception into the true ground of historical knowledge.

New Historicism, however, conceptualizes fact-generation as the contested outcome of discourse and power. Greenblatt describes facts as arising from "the circulation of social energy" within "fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests" (6). From this perspective, a fact is not a transparent truth but a discursive effect, validated by its role in material and institutional networks. Tyson underscores this position: "there is no such thing as a presentation of facts, there is only interpretation" (616). What counts as fact is inseparable from power's ability to define legitimate knowledge, whether through censorship, documentation, or performance. Archival traces—such as payment records or suppressed scenes—thus become crucial evidence of how discourse polices meaning. Montrose stresses that literary texts must be read as "cultural practices through which power circulates," not as autonomous creations (20). Similarly, Dollimore and Sinfield's *Political Shakespeare* exemplifies how canonical drama is mined for its "ideological fault lines," treating plays less as timeless works of art than as active sites of political struggle. In sum, fact-generation here is a function of power relations, secured not by aesthetic coherence but by institutional validation and documentary survival.

Indeterminacy marks the crucial fault line between Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism. For Reception Aesthetics, gaps are not deficiencies but productive invitations: "It is the virtuality of the work that gives rise to its dynamic nature, and this in turn is the precondition for the effects that the work calls forth" (Iser 280). Each blank opens a space for readers to co-create meaning, ensuring that significance is grounded in subjective yet repeatable acts of interpretation. New Historicism, by contrast, reads indeterminacy as fissure rather than invitation. The absence of the deposition scene in *Richard II* is not a license for imaginative freedom but a trace of censorship, whose facticity derives from its material status as evidence of political intervention. As Catherine Gallagher observes, New Historicist practice "locates the meaning of silence not in readerly completion but in the historical force of what has been suppressed" (44). Patterson further emphasizes that indeterminacy is "not a neutral space of play, but a battleground where competing discourses leave their scars" (212). Thus, while both frameworks engage with indeterminacy, what ultimately distinguishes them is the criterion by which they authorize knowledge: aesthetic coherence across receptions versus documentary validation within networks of power.

While indeterminacy reveals where fact-generation begins to diverge, validation reveals by what standard a fact is recognized as legitimate. Reception Aesthetics validates facts aesthetically and diachronically: the greater a text's capacity to reshape horizons of expectation and sustain a chain of interpretations, the more secure its historical importance. New Historicism validates facts politically and materially: legitimacy depends on archival grounding and explanatory power in revealing ideological struggle. In short, Reception Aesthetics appeals to experiential coherence, while New Historicism appeals to documentary evidence and discursive efficacy. The contrast shows that the standards by which knowledge is confirmed

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differ radically, with one framework privileging hermeneutic vitality and the other privileging historical documentation.

The methodological commitments of the two frameworks further reinforce this contrast. Reception Aesthetics builds its account of facts primarily from interpretive traces: reviews, criticism, and subsequent readings that document how audiences responded. Literary history thus becomes a history of interpretations, as Holub notes, where "aesthetic value is decided and made evident" through the chain of receptions (60). New Historicism, by contrast, relies on archival excavation: anecdotes, performance records, and state documents that reveal how texts circulated within fields of power. Gallagher highlights that New Historicism proceeds by "thick description" (44), weaving together disparate fragments of evidence to demonstrate the circulation of social energy. Montrose likewise emphasizes the "poetics and politics of culture," where every text is read as an intervention within broader ideological struggles. Dollimore and Sinfield's *Political Shakespeare* epitomizes this method by showing how canonical drama can be reinterpreted as a record of political conflict rather than timeless art. As Hohendahl argues, such practices mark a decisive epistemological shift, since "facts are no longer conceived as transparent givens, but as effects of discursive strategies" (173). Thus, the methodological divergence underscores the incompatibility of the two approaches: one constructs literary history through aesthetic reception, while the other reconstructs it through archival fragments embedded in power.

Thus, the mechanisms of fact-generation reveal not merely a difference in emphasis but a deeper epistemological division. For Reception Aesthetics, facts emerge from the hermeneutic interplay of text and reader and gain stability through the historical continuity of reception. For New Historicism, facts are power-laden constructs that become legible through the material circulation of discourse, archival survival, and institutional authorization. Both reject the transparency of facts, yet they ground facticity in different places: one in the sedimentation of aesthetic experience, the other in the operations of historical power. In this sense, the structure of the essay becomes clear. The first chapter has asked how the event exists; the second has asked how the fact is recognized. The answer in both cases returns to the same theoretical divide: whether literary meaning is best understood as emerging from reception or from history.

4. Conclusion

This study has examined Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism through the dual prisms of the event and the fact, clarifying how each framework envisions the constitution of literary meaning. Reception Aesthetics foregrounds the reader's role in shaping meaning through horizons of expectation, interpretive gaps, and the diachronic renewal of reception. New Historicism, by contrast, anchors meaning in the singularity of historical discourse, where censorship, power, and material traces determine what counts as an event or a fact. What emerges is not the supremacy of one model over the other, but the recognition of a constitutive tension between interpretive freedom and historical constraint. Literary meaning cannot be reduced either to the subjective agency of readers or to the objective authority of history; rather, it arises in the interplay of both forces.

The significance of this inquiry lies in showing how these paradigms, though divergent, can be placed in productive dialogue. Theoretically, it underscores the importance of holding together aesthetic openness and material embeddedness in any account of literature's meaning. Methodologically, it suggests that criticism may advance by integrating these perspectives, treating them less as competing doctrines than as complementary lenses. In this sense, the dialogue between Reception Aesthetics and New Historicism remains generative, reminding us

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that literature is at once a site of imaginative agency and a terrain of historical and political negotiation.

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