

Two Faces of an Old Argument: Historicism vs. Formalism in American Criticism

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Abstract

How can the debate of the 1940s and 1950s between Old Historicism and New Criticism and the current debate between the New Historicism and Deconstruction be reconciled? The similarities and dissimilarities between the opposing theories of Old Historicism and New Historicism, New Criticism and Deconstruction only serve to complicate this issue. The major differences are as follows: one side holds that text can be seen as an utterance of unique cultural context, while the other side holds that the value of these texts can only be seen as the complete realization of an aesthetic entity that links to an age-old trans-cultural tradition. This kind of antagonism can be seen in the Renaissance debate between “classical” and “native”, and in the “battle of the books” between ancients and moderns which took place in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This antagonism can most importantly be seen within America, in attempts to control literature and in the debate over European tradition (especially English) and local origins. These two opposing tendencies were characterized in Phillip Rahv’s article by the terms “Paleface” and “Redskin”. Although many outstanding authors possess these characteristics simultaneously, we can still use this idea of opposition in our reading of the majority of American literature and literary criticism. This is the natural outcome of the debate between Old Historicism and New Criticism and perhaps the debate between the New Historicism and Deconstruction is eventually not that dissimilar. New Historicism and

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Deconstruction both have post-structuralist characteristics which emphasizes language. The new version of this debate between determinism and spontaneity is the newest iteration of the debate between repression and resistance in our cultural texts.