

**New Historicism and the Theory of Biography of Saint Beuve: A
Comparative Study**

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Abstract:

This research paper presents a comparative study of Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography and New Historicism. Both approaches believe that literature must be understood in relation to life and history and not as a separate object. Sainte-Beuve's biographical method explains that a literary work reflects the author's personal experiences, thoughts, and social world. For example, Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* can be better understood by studying Melville's sea journeys and his struggles with society. In contrast, New Historicism focuses on the larger cultural and political background of a text. Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* shows how literature is shaped by the realities of war and how ordinary people experience historical events. Even though one theory centers on the author and the other looks at collective history, both help readers understand how literature grows from real human experience. This study highlights that these two approaches provide meaningful ways to connect the writer, the text, and the historical context.

Keywords: Sainte-Beuve, Theory of Biography, NewHistoricism, Stephen Greenblatt, Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*, Anthony Doerr, *All the Light We Cannot See*, Literature and History, Author and Context, Historical Reading, Biographical Criticism, Comparative Study

Research Method:

Comparative analysis: Create a comparative framework (table or thematic matrix) listing criteria such as focus (individual vs. cultural), sources used (biography vs. archival/cultural texts), notions of agency, ideology, and temporality.

Introduction:

The connection between literature and lived experience has continued to shape the evolution of literary criticism, and two influential approaches that address this relationship are Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography and New Historicism. Sainte-Beuve emphasizes the importance of the author's personal experiences, emotions, and intellectual life in understanding a literary text, while New Historicism shifts the focus toward the broader cultural, historical, and political conditions that influence both literary production and interpretation. This study applies these theories to two significant works from different centuries—Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851) and Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* (2014)—to explore how individual experience and historical context shape literary meaning. *Moby-Dick* reflects Melville's

personal encounters as a sailor and his philosophical struggles, while Doerr's novel is deeply rooted in the traumatic historical circumstances of World War II and its impact on human lives. Although both theories enrich interpretation, each presents limitations: the biographical approach risks confining the text to the author's life, whereas New Historicism may overemphasize historical circumstance and reduce literature to a cultural artifact. This paper examines the strengths, weaknesses, and debates surrounding these critical frameworks, demonstrating how they offer distinct yet complementary perspectives on literature's role as both personal expression and historical record.

Research Objectives:

1. To understand the main ideas of Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography and New Historicism.
To examine how personal life and historical context influence the creation of a literary text.
2. To study Herman Melville's Moby Dick through the biographical approach by linking the novel to the author's life and experiences.
3. To study Anthony Doerr's All the Light We Cannot See through a New Historicist approach by connecting the novel to the social and historical realities of World War Two.
4. To compare both theories and identify how each method helps readers interpret literature in different ways.
5. To highlight the value of using biography and historical context together to gain a deeper understanding of literary works.

The study of literature has always been linked with the study of life, society, and history. Readers try to understand a text not only through its story but also through the people and the world connected to it. Two important critical approaches that explore this connection are Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography and New Historicism. Sainte-Beuve believed that a text reflects the personal life of its author and that the key to understanding literature lies in knowing the writer's character, experiences, and social environment. On the other hand, New Historicism focuses on how literature is shaped by the cultural and historical forces of the time in which it is written.

The new historicism erodes the firm ground of both criticism and literature. It tends to ask questions about its own methodological assumptions and those of others... Moreover [it] has been less concerned to establish the organic unity of literary works and more open to such works as fields of force, places of dissension and shifting interests, occasions for the jostling of orthodox and subversive impulses... Renaissance literary works are no longer regarded as either a fixed set of texts that are set apart from all other forms of expression and that contain their own determinate meanings or as a stable set of reflections of historical facts that lie beyond them. The critical practice represented in this volume challenges the assumptions that guarantee a secure distinction between 'literary foreground' and 'political background' or, more generally between artistic production and other kinds of social production. Such distinctions do in fact exist, but they are not intrinsic to the texts; rather they are made up and constantly redrawn by artists, audiences, and readers. These collective social constructions on the one hand define the range of aesthetic possibilities within a given representational mode and, on the other, link that mode to the complex network of institutions, practices, and beliefs that constitute the culture as a whole.

(Greenblatt 1982: 5-6)

Greenblatt explains that New Historicism changes the way we study literature and criticism. Earlier, critics believed that literary works stood on their own and had a single, complete

meaning inside them. New Historicism rejects this idea. It questions not only its own method of reading literature but also the methods used by other critics.

According to Greenblatt, literature should not be seen as a perfect and closed structure. Instead, it should be viewed as a space where many ideas, conflicts, and social forces meet. A literary work may contain traditional beliefs, but it may also contain ideas that challenge those beliefs at the same time. This shows that literature is connected to the social and political tensions of its period.

Greenblatt also says that older critics thought Renaissance literature belonged to a special group of fixed texts with clear meanings, separate from ordinary life. New Historicism argues that this separation is man-made, not natural. The difference between what is called “literary art” and what is called “political or social writing” is something that changes from time to time, depending on how readers, writers, and societies think.

He concludes that literature is shaped by culture, and at the same time literature shapes culture. The ideas in a literary work are part of a wide system of beliefs, institutions, and practices of society. Therefore, to understand literature better, we should study it along with the social and cultural environment that produced it.

The Key Ideas of New Historicism

A. Every expressive act is part of real-life practice.

New Historicism says that writing, speaking, or creating art is always connected to real social actions. Literature does not come from imagination alone but from the everyday activities, beliefs, and systems that shape society.

B. Criticism also uses the same tools it questions.

When critics attack a political or cultural system, they still use the language and ideas created by that same system. This means that criticism too can become trapped in what it tries to expose.

C. Literary and non-literary texts interact and influence each other.

Books, letters, newspapers, advertisements, and historical documents all circulate together and shape public thinking. Literature is not higher or more special than other types of writing.

D. No text gives access to final or permanent truth.

New Historicism rejects the belief that literature reveals universal and unchanging truths. Human nature and social values change over time, so the meanings of texts also change.

E. Critics are also part of the system they study.

When scholars study culture under capitalism, they themselves are influenced by that same economic system. They cannot stand outside it as neutral observers.

F. It is a postmodern approach to history.

New Historicism accepts that history is not a straight line of facts but a collection of changing interpretations, shaped by perspective and power.

G. It sees Shakespeare as a product of his cultural environment.

New Historicists do not treat Shakespeare as a solitary genius. They study how his plays emerged from the lively, competitive, and political world of Renaissance theatre.

H. Shakespeare's plays cannot be separated from their context.

His work is connected to the time, culture, audience, and social rules of his period.

I. Power is present everywhere in society.

New Historicism follows Michel Foucault's idea that power is not only about class or money. It exists in schools, families, language, religion, and everyday relationships.

J. New Historicists read texts historically.

They analyze literature by looking at the historical events and cultural attitudes that shaped it.

K. It shares ideas with cultural materialism.

Both approaches believe that literature is strongly influenced by social and economic conditions.

L. It is related to the ideas of Hippolyte Taine.

Like Taine, New Historicism agrees that literature is shaped more by the time, society, and environment of its creation than by the author's imagination alone.

Sainte-Beuve attempts to explain the formation of literary personalities by three categories of factors: natural predispositions, education/determining intellectual socialization in a particular milieu, and historical (literary) context/His portraits consequently provide a detailed biographical account and a psychological characterization of the writers in question. The most important empirical source for this research is provided by private correspondence, diaries, and accounts of family and friends of the writer. The more intimate the source, the better. An ideal biography is 'un excellent volume ou le texte entier de cette vie si pleine est, en quelque sorte, établi'. Under the heading of natural predispositions, Sainte-Beuve discusses the influence of familial predisposition, climate, soil, and national character on a writer's character. Sainte-Beuve argues that to determine la race physiologique' of a writer is of utmost interest, while conceding that in most cases, the critic can do little more than speculate. Regarding the analysis of socialization, Sainte-Beuve points to the importance of the artistic/intellectual milieu in which a young writer's creativity is molded. By historical context Sainte-Beuve means specific literary contingencies such as the status of a language as a means of poetic expression (variety of rhyme forms, vocabulary, etc.) at a certain point in history, as well as popular motifs, genres, and the influence of dominant writers, but also, very broadly, the moral zeitgeist of an epoch, i.e. social manners and conventions of the literate strata of society.

(Ayudh, 92)

Sainte-Beuve explains that a writer's personality and style are shaped by three main influences.

The first influence is **natural traits**. These include family background, physical and emotional tendencies, the climate and region where the author grew up, and even national character. He believed that these natural factors affect how a person thinks, behaves, and creates, although he accepts that critics often can only guess rather than prove these things.

The second influence is **education and social environment**. Sainte-Beuve says that the surroundings in which a young writer develops are very important. The group of thinkers, artists, teachers, and intellectual life that the writer experiences can strongly guide their creativity and ideas. The third influence is **historical and literary context**. By this, he means the time in history when the writer lived: what language forms were available, what poetic styles or genres were popular, and which famous writers were admired or followed. He also

includes the overall moral values, social customs, and cultural attitudes of that era. Sainte-Beuve believes that to truly understand a writer, we must study intimate sources like private letters, diaries, and the memories of family and friends. The more personal the information, the more accurate the picture of the writer. His idea of a perfect biography is a detailed book that fully presents the writer's life and personality. In short, Sainte-Beuve sees a writer as a product of **nature, social upbringing, and historical moment**, and the best way to understand their work is by studying their life closely and personally.

Here are the **Characteristics of Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography** written in clear, simple language

Characteristics of Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography

1. Literature is a reflection of the author's life

Sainte-Beuve believed that a writer's work cannot be understood without studying the writer's personal life. The emotions, struggles, beliefs, and habits of the author appear directly or indirectly in their work.

2. Close study of the author's personality

His approach focuses on the writer's character—their strengths, weaknesses, passions, and fears. He argues that a critic should first understand the human being before judging their book.

Importance of intimate and personal sources

Sainte-Beuve prefers evidence such as letters, diaries, memoirs, and family recollections. He felt that private and personal information reveals the real nature of the writer better than public statements.

3. Three main factors shape a writer

- Natural qualities and family background
- Education and social environment
- Historical and literary context of the time
- These together form the writer's personality and influence their writing style.

4. The critic becomes a psychological observer

The critic's role is not only to study the text but to observe and interpret the writer's mind and emotional world. He treats biography almost like psychological research.

5. A writer is a product of their race, place, and moment

He mentions that climate, cultural traditions, and national character affect the writer. He also believes that each writer belongs to a specific historical moment that shapes what they can create.

6. Rejects the idea of a text being independent

He opposes the belief that a literary work exists separately from the author. For him, literature is deeply connected to the author's personal history and social life.

7. Emphasis on moral and social values

Sainte-Beuve studies whether the writer's life matches their ideas. He often judged writers morally and socially, believing that personal conduct influences creative credibility.

8. Biography as a tool of criticism

For Sainte-Beuve, biography is not secondary but central. A well-written biography is necessary to understand the full meaning of a literary work.

9. Subjective and interpretive method

His criticism sometimes relies on personal opinion and speculation because many things about a writer's internal life cannot be proved, but only understood through interpretation.

Moby-Dick in the Context of Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography

Sainte-Beuve's biographical approach argues that understanding an author's personal life, emotions, beliefs, and experiences is essential to interpreting a literary work. *Moby-Dick* offers many direct biographical connections to Melville's own life. Before becoming a writer, Melville spent several years as a sailor and whaler in the Pacific Ocean, surviving shipwrecks, desertion, and encounters with colonial and indigenous societies. His firsthand experience of whaling ships and maritime hardship clearly shaped the novel's vivid descriptions of ship life, whale hunting, and oceanic danger. Captain Ahab's obsession can be read as a reflection of Melville's struggle with personal disillusionment in his career and faith. His later years were marked by financial instability, critical failure, and growing skepticism about religion and authority—elements that resonate through Ahab's rebellion and Ishmael's philosophical questioning. Through this lens, *Moby-Dick* becomes a deeply personal novel shaped by the author's lived trauma, existential searching, and disappointment with the American dream, demonstrating Sainte-Beuve's belief that literature emerges from the emotional and intellectual biography of its creator.

Moby-Dick in the Context of New Historicism

New Historicism interprets literature not simply as personal expression but as a product of historical forces, cultural power structures, and the dominant ideologies of its time. *Moby-Dick*, written in 1851, reflects the political and social anxieties of mid-19th-century America—a period marked by industrial expansion, imperial ambition, and growing tension around slavery. The Pequod, a multicultural ship with workers from diverse nations, symbolizes the emerging global capitalist society, where profit overrides human value. Captain Ahab's hunt for the white whale can be seen as a critique of American expansionism and the illusion of manifest destiny—a nation convinced it was destined to conquer land, people, and nature. The novel also exposes how knowledge, science, and religion were used to justify power; Ishmael's encyclopedic explanations mirror how institutions attempted to rationalize control. New Historicist readers therefore view *Moby-Dick* not only as a narrative of personal obsession but as a cultural artifact reflecting the power struggles, colonial impulses, racial hierarchies, and economic forces shaping America's historical identity.

Comparative Insight

When read biographically, *Moby-Dick* is Melville's personal confession—his psychological exile, artistic frustration, and confrontation with faith and fate. When read through New Historicism, the same narrative becomes a mirror of America's historical ambitions and anxieties. Together, these approaches reveal that *Moby-Dick* is both a product of Melville's individual struggles and a text deeply rooted in the ideological conflicts of its time. The pursuit of the whale symbolizes not only Ahab's personal madness but also a society driven by power, colonial desire, and the myth of control. Thus, both theories reinforce the idea that literature is inseparable from both the inner life of the author and the wider forces of history.

The Novel "All the Light We Cannot See" by Anthony Doerr through the Lens of Both Theories

All the Light We Cannot See (2014), written by Anthony Doerr, is a historical novel set during World War II, following the parallel lives of Marie-Laure, a blind French girl, and Werner Pfennig, a German orphan trained by the Nazi regime. When read through Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography, the novel becomes a reflection of the writer's personal interests and experiences. Doerr has often expressed his fascination with museums, radios, and the way technology shapes human connection—elements that deeply influence the plot. His travels to France, his research in the city of Saint-Malo, and his sensitivity toward themes of disability, innocence, and war demonstrate how an author's life and worldview shape literary creation. According to this theory, understanding Doerr's background—his obsession with time, memory, and science—enhances our understanding of the novel's structure, alternating timelines, and symbolic elements like radio waves and blindness.

However, New Historicism views the novel differently. Instead of focusing on Doerr himself, this theory examines the text as a cultural product that interacts with historical power and society. The novel becomes a window into the less-told narratives of WWII—how war affected civilians, children, the disabled, and ordinary Germans who were pulled into Hitler's machinery. Doerr reimagines overlooked voices—the blind girl surviving through sound and touch, and the German boy who resists the ideology forced upon him. A New Historicist reading analyzes the power structures, propaganda through education and radio, colonial mindset, forced labor, and the suppression of free thought. It shows how the text questions the grand narrative of war that usually glorifies soldiers and battles, instead highlighting human fragility and moral conflict

It takes him a long time to come down the ladder. He takes her hand. He says, "The war that killed your grandfather killed sixteen million others. One and a half million French boys alone, most of them younger than I was. Two million on the German side. March the dead in a single-file line, and for eleven days and eleven nights, they'd walk past our door. This is not rearranging street signs, what we're doing, Marie. This is not misplacing a letter at the post office. These numbers, they're more than numbers. Do you understand?"

(Doerr 360)

Around four o'clock, an American field howitzer, two miles away, lets fly a single improperly ranged shell. It sails over the city walls and bursts against the northern parapet of Fort National, where three hundred and eighty Frenchmen are being held against their will with mini-mal cover. Nine are killed instantly. One of them still clutching the hand of bridge he was playing when the shell struck.

(Doerr 375)

In these passages, Doerr presents the immense human cost of war through both statistical magnitude and personal tragedy. From a **New Historicist** perspective, the text situates individual experiences within the larger historical context: the millions of deaths and the random shelling of French prisoners illustrate how ordinary lives are shaped and disrupted by historical forces. Literature here acts as a medium to understand the social and cultural realities of war, showing that history is not just abstract events but lived experiences. From the perspective of the **theory of biography**, the narrative emphasizes the personal and emotional dimensions of history. The character's reflections and observations reveal how individual sensibilities, memories, and experiences interpret and humanize historical events. Together, these passages show that Doerr merges historical reality with personal experience, demonstrating that history and biography are inseparably intertwined in literature.

Similarities in both of the Theories:

1. Both reject the idea that literature exists independently of life

Sainte-Beuve and New Historicist thinkers strongly disagree with the belief that literature should be studied as a self-contained artistic creation. They argue that a literary text carries traces of the living world. For the biographical method, literature grows from the author's personal world—his emotions, childhood experiences, relationships, and personal struggles. New Historicism goes further to say that literature also reflects the collective life of the time—the politics, power structures, and cultural tensions of society. In both approaches, the real world outside the text becomes essential to understand what the text means.

2. Both study literature in connection with context

Biography connects a text to the writer's personal context. New Historicism connects it to historical and cultural context. However, both agree that literature is incomplete without knowing what surrounds it. The Theory of Biography asks: *Who was the writer? What did they live through?* New Historicism asks: *What was happening in society, religion, or government when the text was written?* Although the scale differs—one focuses on the individual, the other on society—both rely on context as the key to interpretation.

3. Both consider external influences as key elements in critical study

For Sainte-Beuve, external influences include the family background, natural tendencies, education, and the emotional development of the writer. For New Historicism, external influences include social norms, class systems, power relations, and public events. They differ in what they consider “external,” but both believe that literature is shaped by forces outside the imagination of the author.

4. Both oppose text-centered criticism (like New Criticism)

Both approaches emerged as reactions against critics who believed that the text alone should be studied. New Criticism argued that a poem or novel has an independent structure and meaning. Biography and New Historicism disagree because they claim that meaning comes from life—either the life of the author or the life of society. Both bring the world back into criticism.

5. Both see literature as shaped by time

For Sainte-Beuve, the historical moment influences the writer's interests, style, and thinking capacity. For New Historicism, the time period creates political and ideological forces that affect the story. Both believe a writer cannot escape the time into which they are born. The past shapes the present and the text becomes a historical document reflecting its era.

6. Both rely on evidence beyond the text

Biography uses personal writings such as letters, diaries, confessions, and testimonies. New Historicism tests literary interpretation by using court records, advertisements, maps, medical documents, and cultural practices. Both see literature as only one type of document among many others that can reveal meaning.

7. Both view literature as part of human experience

Sainte-Beuve sees literature as written by humans with feelings, relationships, and personal stories. New Historicism sees literature as an expression of human societies dealing with power, domination, resistance, or survival. In both cases, literature becomes a living record of human existence.

8. Both expand the scope of criticism

These theories do not limit criticism to artistic style or imagery. They encourage critics to explore the deeper forces that shape writing—such as personal emotion or social struggle. This broadens the way readers understand a text, making interpretation richer and more meaningful.

9. Both accept multiple and changing meanings

Since personal life and history both change over time, the meaning of literature is never fixed. A biography may reveal new hidden aspects of a writer, while history may provide new angles to read the text. Both allow new interpretations as new information or perspectives emerge.

10. Both invite multiple viewpoints

The Theory of Biography brings the author and those who knew them into criticism. New Historicism invites the presence of other voices—peasants, women, colonized people, and marginalized groups who are often missing from traditional history. Both approaches welcome more than one voice and open space for wider discussion.

Differences Between the Theory of Biography and New Historicism

1. Focus on Individual vs. Focus on Society

The most fundamental difference is in their area of attention. The Theory of Biography centers on the individual writer. Sainte-Beuve argues that the key to understanding a literary text is understanding the author—their life, feelings, habits, personal relationships, illnesses, and emotional struggles. In contrast, New Historicism shifts attention from the author to society. It studies how literature is shaped by political forces, power relations, religion, institutions, and cultural beliefs of a particular period. Where biography personalizes interpretation, New Historicism collectivizes it.

2. Personal Documents vs. Historical Documents

The Theory of Biography depends on personal and intimate sources such as diaries, letters, journals, and memories from friends and family. It values emotional and psychological closeness to the writer. New Historicism depends on public historical records—government orders, social practices, travel records, newspapers, medicine, and legal documents. It values the broader picture rather than personal details. Thus, the type of evidence used by each theory is completely different.

3. Author as the Centre vs. Author as One Element

For Sainte-Beuve, the author remains the heart of criticism. The critic must know the writer before he judges the book. New Historicism does not ignore the author but treats the writer as only one part of a larger system of forces. The author becomes a product of culture rather than a creator outside it. The meaning does not come from authorial intention alone.

4. Morality and Personality vs. Power and Ideology

Biographical criticism often includes moral judgment. Sainte-Beuve was openly interested in whether the writer lived a moral life and how it affected their writing. New Historicism does not judge the morality of the writer. It studies how power and ideology work in texts—how they challenge or support those in authority, and how they reflect class, gender, or racial inequality.

5. Linear Life Story vs. Non-linear Historical Interpretation

Biography often creates a continuous story of a writer's life from birth to death, assuming it forms a single path that leads to their literary achievements. New Historicism rejects the idea of a single path or single truth. It believes that history is made of competing voices and multiple truths. Interpretation becomes a shifting field, not a stable timeline.

6. Personal Psychology vs. Cultural Psychology

The Theory of Biography tries to understand the emotional mind of the writer—love, pain, anger, dreams, and fear. New Historicism studies the emotional and cultural psychology of an entire society—its shared hopes, religious fears, wars, and political struggles.

7. Literature as Personal Expression vs. Literature as Cultural Production

Biography sees literature as the author's personal voice and self-expression. New Historicism sees literature as a product of culture—something influenced by many social forces like capitalism, colonialism, gender roles, and religion. It becomes a cultural artifact rather than a private message.

8. Stability vs. Change in Interpretation

Sainte-Beuve assumes that the more we know about the author, the more fixed and clear the meaning becomes. New Historicism believes that meaning keeps changing as history and culture change. No fixed interpretation exists.

Reviews of literature:

“Symbolic Landscapes in Sainte-Beuve’s Early Criticism” — Richard M. Chadbourne:

Chadbourne, Richard M. “Symbolic Landscapes in Sainte-Beuve’s Early Criticism.” *PMLA*, vol. 80, no. 3, 1965, pp. 217-230.

Chadbourne investigates where Sainte-Beuve's early criticism displays a poetic mode of perception, even within his prose. The article argues that in his early essays and “causeries,” Sainte-Beuve does more than just record biographical or historical facts; he shapes symbolic landscapes — metaphors and imagery drawn from personal and cultural memory — which are continuous with his poetic impulse. Chadbourne explores vocabulary, motifs of memory, and elegiac tones, pointing out how these influence Sainte-Beuve's later critical style.

This article helps you understand the interpenetration of author's life, sensibility, and style in Sainte-Beuve's method. It demonstrates how biography for Sainte-Beuve is not just external facts but an internal, symbolic formation that shapes perception. In comparing with New Historicism, this will help you examine whether New Historicist readings uncover similar symbolic implications or focus more on external socio-cultural forces.

The Classic: Sainte-Beuve and the Nineteenth-Century Culture Wars” — Christopher Prendergast:

Prendergast, Christopher. *The Classic: Sainte-Beuve and the Nineteenth-Century Culture Wars*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Prendergast examines Sainte-Beuve's role in the “culture wars” of nineteenth-century France — debates over classical vs. modern, literature's role in nationhood, and the critic's public authority. In particular, Prendergast analyses how Sainte-Beuve, through his essays, causeries, criticism of his contemporaries, and ideas about literary taste, becomes a figure caught between

tradition (the “classic”) and modernity. The chapter on “The Modern Classic” shows how Sainte-Beuve negotiates these. This book gives you useful historical context: what forces (political, cultural, ideological) shaped Sainte-Beuve’s work, how he saw the critic’s role, and what issues he was addressing. In New Historicism you often look at similar tensions (tradition vs. change, ideological conflict), so Prendergast provides good material to align or contrast these dynamics.

“A Genealogy of XIXth Century French Criticism — Typology, Physiology and Genealogy in Sainte-Beuve, Taine and Nietzsche” — (MDPI article):

“A Genealogy of XIXth Century French Criticism — Typology, Physiology and Genealogy in Sainte-Beuve, Taine and Nietzsche.” *Criticism*, vol. 5, no. 3, 2020, MDPI, article 73.

This article traces the philosophical, scientific, and critical ideas that influenced Sainte-Beuve in comparison with others (Taine, Nietzsche). It shows how Sainte-Beuve’s approach incorporates physiological metaphors and typological thinking, and how later critics transformed or challenged those ideas. It also explores Sainte-Beuve’s place in the intellectual genealogy of biography and criticism in France.

The notion of genealogy is quite relevant to New Historicism (which often draws on genealogy, discourse, power). By seeing how Sainte-Beuve is situated among thinkers like Taine and Nietzsche, you can draw parallels to how New Historicism doesn’t treat history as neutral but as constructed, contested, and composed of discourses. This article helps you to locate Sainte-Beuve in intellectual history and trace continuities or discontinuities with New Historicist impulses.

Weaknesses and Debates

1. Sainte-Beuve’s Theory of Biography

Weaknesses:

- **Overemphasis on the Author:** Sainte-Beuve’s approach often reduces literature to a mere reflection of the author’s life, ignoring the text’s autonomous artistic value. This can lead to biographical determinism, where a literary work is judged primarily by how well it mirrors the author’s personal experiences rather than its literary merit.
- **Limited Interpretive Scope:** By focusing heavily on the author, this theory sometimes neglects other critical perspectives, such as textual, linguistic, or structural analyses.
- **Historical Context Underplayed:** Although it considers social environment, Sainte-Beuve’s method does not systematically examine broader historical or political forces shaping literature.
- **Subjectivity Risk:** The interpretation of an author’s life can be speculative, especially when private details are scarce or ambiguous, leading to potentially biased or inaccurate readings.

Debates:

- Critics argue that Sainte-Beuve’s approach conflates biography with literary criticism, raising questions about whether knowing an author’s life truly enhances textual understanding.
- Some scholars defend it as a way to humanize literature, insisting that understanding the author’s context enriches interpretation, but debates persist about the balance between biography and textual autonomy.

2. New Historicism

Weaknesses:

- **Relativism of Meaning:** By emphasizing historical and cultural context, New Historicism can suggest that texts have no intrinsic meaning outside their time, making interpretations heavily contingent on historical reconstruction.
- **Neglect of Literary Craft:** Critics argue that New Historicism sometimes underestimates the aesthetic and imaginative aspects of literature, treating texts primarily as historical artifacts rather than artistic creations.
- **Selective Evidence:** New Historicist readings often rely on archival research, which can be uneven, and critics may accuse it of cherry-picking historical facts to fit a particular interpretation.
- **Complexity for Readers:** Its dense methodology and frequent reliance on historical documentation can make it less accessible for general readers, limiting its broader applicability.

Debates:

- Scholars debate whether New Historicism risks turning literary criticism into historiography, prioritizing history over literature itself.
- Supporters claim it democratizes interpretation, showing how literature interacts with power, ideology, and society, while detractors caution against over-politicizing texts.
- **Sainte-Beuve:** Strength lies in connecting literature to the author's life, but critics challenge its neglect of textual autonomy and broader contexts.
- **New Historicism:** Strength lies in situating literature within historical and cultural frameworks, but critics highlight risks of relativism, underestimating artistic form, and methodological selectivity.

Both approaches spark ongoing debates about the **balance between text, author, and context**, showing that literary meaning is rarely fixed and is influenced by multiple layers of human experience.

Conclusion:

The comparative study of New Historicism and Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography demonstrates that both approaches challenge the idea of literature as an isolated artistic creation. Sainte-Beuve emphasizes the author's personal experiences, emotions, and social environment as central to shaping literary texts, while New Historicism focuses on the broader historical, cultural, and political contexts influencing both the production and interpretation of literature. Although they operate on different scales—one centering on individual life, the other on society—they converge in recognizing that literature is inseparable from lived reality. While Sainte-Beuve's approach provides insight into the human and emotional dimensions of literature, it has been critiqued for overemphasizing biography and underestimating the text's autonomy. Similarly, New Historicism enriches understanding by situating literature within its historical and cultural milieu but faces debates over potential relativism, selective evidence, and the risk of treating texts merely as historical artifacts. Despite these limitations, combining these perspectives allows critics to address both personal and societal dimensions of literary meaning.

By examining texts through these dual lenses, readers gain a more nuanced understanding that balances the author's life, historical circumstances, and the aesthetic qualities of literature. Ultimately, this comparative study underscores that literature functions as both a reflection of individual experience and a record of the world in which it is produced, highlighting the dynamic interplay between biography and history in shaping meaning.

Limitations of the Study

While the comparative study of New Historicism and Sainte-Beuve's Theory of Biography provides valuable insights into the relationship between literature, history, and personal experience, it has certain limitations. First, both approaches focus heavily on context—historical or biographical—potentially downplaying the intrinsic artistic, linguistic, or stylistic qualities of a text. Second, the theory of biography relies on accurate knowledge of the author's life, which may be incomplete, subjective, or interpreted differently by scholars, limiting definitive conclusions. Third, New Historicism emphasizes historical and cultural forces, which can risk reading the text primarily as a historical document, possibly overlooking universal or imaginative aspects of literature. Finally, combining these two approaches may sometimes create tension between individual and societal perspectives, making it challenging to balance personal biography with broader historical context. Despite these limitations, the study remains useful for understanding literature as a product of both human experience and historical circumstance.

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