

Ain Shams University

Faculty of Al-Asun

Department of English

**Poetics of History in Tom Paulin's *Walking A***  
***Line: A Study in Text and Context***

**MA Thesis**

**Submitted by**

**Hend Hamed Mahmoud Ezzeldin**

**Under the Supervision of:**

**Prof. Mohammed Shebl El Komy**

Prof of English Literature

President of Misr International University (MIU)

**Dr. Mohammed Bahnasy**

Lecturer in English Poetry

Faculty of Al-Asun, Ain Shams University

2008

# ***CONTENTS***

---

<b>No.</b>	<b>Page</b>
<b>Abstract</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6-11</b>
<b>Chapter One:</b> The Historical and the Anti-Historical: A Theoretical Overview	<b>13-53</b>
<b>Chapter Two:</b> History: Dialectics At a Stand Still	<b>55-146</b>
<b>Chapter Three:</b> Art: An Odyssey into a Burdened Self 205	<b>148 -</b>
<b>Conclusion</b> 210	<b>207 -</b>
<b>Bibliography</b> 231	<b>212 -</b>

# **ABSTRACT**

The concept of history plays an important role in human thought. Knowing about the past raises the possibility of learning from it and hence helps one understand the present in a new light. In a direct conflict with this concept is the notion of art and creativity. Through art, one creates a different realm wherein he breathes the air of freedom of which he is deprived in the external world. The self is the victim in such a strife as it strains to find a compromise between those two entities in order to be able to adapt with outer circumstances. History creates a frozen life that never brings about change, but keeps the self stagnant and incapable of developing or improving. On the contrary, art provides the self with possible means of fleeing from the intense reality in order to penetrate into a world of dreams that grants the self temporary comfort, yet provides it with no solid solutions.

Through analysing and digging deep into the poetry of Tom Paulin in his fifth books of poems Walking a Line (1994), this thesis attempts to explore the poet's self in relation to both history and art as two conflicting entities and to investigate the poet's stance in association with these two notions. The thesis employs the theories of Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on history and art respectively in an attempt to understand Paulin's views concerning the two concepts in a better light. Being always a witness to wars and troubles in Northern Ireland, Tom Paulin the poet and the human saw in history an incarnation of all injustice and destruction and made an attempt to go beyond history and enter stealthily into the world of art and creativity. Nonetheless, in art, Paulin found himself standing at the labyrinth of life; not knowing whether to believe in reality whatever it is or dispense with it as a whole and resort to art for a solace. His only advice is to learn from the past and see art as a way of escaping from history and attaining a temporary comfort.



# **INTRODUCTION**

One's life is made up of a blend between certain ideas, notions, concepts and ideologies. History and art are both all-encompassing concepts that are fundamental to one's survival. History, on the one hand, is that entity that one's life revolves around; one's family is history, reality is history, war is history; everything is history. The most remarkable feature that characterizes this history is its fixed nature; i.e. one's inability and powerlessness to control its workings. Yet, no one denies that history is blatant in every action and every thought brought about from all individuals even if those thoughts express a kind of frustration and despair resulting from one's incapability in controlling his / her life as it should be controlled. Art and creativity, on the other hand, produce all the hopes and aspirations of those frustrated individuals in such a peaceful and artistic manner that makes one vent his soul (whether privately or publicly). Such a means of resisting one's frozen life does not bring about any change or modification in the course of history, nevertheless, it brings about a transformation in the individuals' minds and hearts, the thing that makes them able to bear the burdens of the external world in a forceful manner. In an attempt to highlight this conflict between history and art and to investigate the results of such a conflict on the self, the thesis will examine the poetry of the Irish Tom Paulin and try to locate it in both a historical context and an ahistorical one that dispenses with the temporal and the spatial features of history. Through the application of the theories of Walter Benjamin on history and those of Theodor Adorno on art, the researcher will attempt to trace Paulin's philosophy concerning these two notions and highlight how he proposes his ideas in his poetry from both a thematic (through the philosophies of Benjamin and Adorno) viewpoint and a structural (through applying the interdisciplinary approach proposed by Professor Mohammed Shebl El Komy) perspective.

This thesis falls into an introduction, three chapters and a conclusion.

**Chapter One** which is entitled "The Historical and the Anti-Historical: A

Theoretical Overview” sets the theoretical framework of the thesis. The chapter is divided into two sections. The first section tackles history and is built on Walter Benjamin’s philosophy of history that he discusses in his Theses On the Concept of History. He introduces his philosophy which he refers to as ‘the interruptive view of history’ and compares it with the old view of historicism. For Benjamin, the keystone of his philosophy lies in the notion of the past which he sees as the most important concept in history and the concept that allows for the existence of both the present and the future. Benjamin, then, introduces the idea of the replications in history and rejects the Enlightenment idea of progress that believes in the progress towards perfection. On the contrary, Benjamin sees progress as leading to humanity’s downfall and destruction. Besides, this section highlights Benjamin’s view that the word civilization is always synonymous with the word barbarism. He explains that there is no powerful country that had not met its downfall and no oppressed citizens who refrained from revolution and rebellion. Finally, Benjamin asks all people to seek the future in the past by stressing that people should make of history a technique of awakening, not of lamentation.

Section two of **Chapter One** deals with Theodor Adorno’s views on art in his Aesthetic Theory. In this section, both the nature of art and its functions are put under the spot light. Adorno maintains that art does not uproot itself from the society that gives it its birth, but it looks at the external world through different eyes in order to create a different world, detached from the empiricism of the outer one. In its creation of such a different world, art enjoys an autonomous entity that makes it cut from the external world. However, Adorno then explains that if art produces a different, contradictory world to that of the external reality, then it is not uprooted from reality in the true sense of the world. By appearing to be the opposite of the real world, art reveals more about this external world as it reveals about itself. Furthermore, as regarding the



function of art, Adorno states that art does not have a social function because it is actually characterized by its detachment from the outer reality. Art rejects reality and taking a distance away from this reality is innate in art's nature and could be regarded as one of its functions. Additionally, and from a psychoanalytic viewpoint, art functions as a mediator between the self (unconscious) and reality; it moderates the wished-for desires that have not found a place in the external world. Art is this place where the self finds the freedom it is deprived of and sees potential hopes in a better life even if this life does not exist in the first place. Finally, Adorno maintains that the power of art lies in its ability to carry the individuals into illusory spaces wherein they can attain all their aspired-for dreams.

**Chapter Two** which is entitled “History: A Dialectics at a Stand Still” aims to investigate Tom Paulin’s poetry from a historical context. In an attempt to highlight Paulin’s philosophy of history and how it was influenced by his Ulster upbringing, Walter Benjamin’s theory in his On the Concept of History (1939) is applied to selected poems in the volume in an attempt to highlight Paulin’s views on history. Paulin is very much influenced by Ireland’s history and the Troubles to the extent that he sees the history of the universe as a replication of the history of Ireland. The **chapter** demonstrates Paulin’s talent as a poet who uses language playfully in order to convey his messages to the readers. In these poems, Paulin tackles all the burdens that haunt his soul such as the language problem, hopelessness in a better future, historical unawareness and lack of communication between the state and its citizens. All these ideas are illustrated in an artistic manner that renders Paulin’s poetry that of serious thematic concerns and talented creative structures.

As for **Chapter Three**, it traces the metamorphosis from reality to

illusion both inside the poet's mind and the readers' selves. The **chapter** applies selected parts from Theodor Adorno's aesthetic theory to eclectic poems in the volume. These poems are different in both form and content to the poems discussed in the previous chapter. Whereas chapter two deals with reality with its depressions and frustrations, **chapter three** deals with the illusory and deceptive life created as a knock-on effect to the dissatisfaction faced by all individuals thanks to history and its fatal workings. The poems celebrate the transcendental nature of art and creativity and bear great emphasis on the key character of the volume, Paul Klee, whose ghost haunts the whole set of verse from beginning to end. History and reality are set at the background of these poems but they do not constitute a great importance or interest to the mind and heart of the poet. The poet is only interested in the world he creates within dispensing with the world without in order to live peacefully even if temporary. Time and space have no place in these poems wherein a timeless zone is always created in an attempt to flee reality and history. The question that this chapter attempts to find an answer for is: Will art and literature help improve our external world?

In examining this conflict between history and art in Tom Paulin's Walking a Line, the researcher follows the interdisciplinary critical approach proposed by Professor Mohammed Shebl El Komy in his book Modern Schools of Criticism: A Philosophical Approach. As presented by professor El-Komy and explained by professor Mohamed Inani (in the introduction), a critical approach of poetry should go through descriptive, interpretive and hermeneutic stages. While the descriptive stage adheres to the meaning of the text away from the writer's intentions, the interpretive stage investigates the historical, psychological or social references which have not been proclaimed within the text. In the hermeneutic stage, the critic transcends the text into broad universal dimensions.

In the descriptive stage of critical analysis, the researcher will analyse the poems from an objective and panoramic viewpoint; describing the poetic experience itself without any deletion or modification to any of its parts. Description, as Professor El Komy sees it, should be free of any prior viewpoints. It, also, should include all the aspects of the poetic experience without neglecting or altering any of its phases. The critic does not have the right to neglect any ordinary experience in favour of more complicated ones because no matter how ordinary the experience may seem, it is still real and necessary for explicating the poetic experience as a whole. Through logical deduction, the elementary particles of the described experience are reconstructed to identify the poetic vision from which the poet has set off to express his subject matter.

The interpretive stage of critical analysis, further, is made up of two intersecting layers; the ontological and the axiological levels. The ontological layer of the interpretive stage of critical analysis, deals with drawing the relationship between literature and the non-literary through the social approach (which associates literature to the society), the Marxist approach, and many others. These approaches could be referred to as cultural approaches which relate literature to the age in which it was produced. As for the axiological level, this tackles myths, legends, songs or folktales included in the poems. It, also, deals with the religious, philosophical and artistic values that the writer sees in each and every phenomenon that he brings forth in his literary production.

Finally, the hermeneutic stage of critical analysis links the human limited world (microcosm) to the vast universe (macrocosm). The researcher analyses the poems from the angle he finds apt, not according to any specific approach. The reader is given the gift of analysing the work of art, not having to look at

the author of the text or the context that influenced its production. The hermeneutic stage is also based on the conviction that that no literary text has a fixed meaning.

The **Conclusion** crystallizes this conflict between art and history and highlights that there is no winning or defeated party. Nevertheless, art and poetry have the capability of making all individuals satisfied internally and maybe this will help them, consequently, to adapt with the outer circumstances in which they have no hand in. Despite the fact that apparently history and art may seem two conflicting entities, the truth is that they are but complementary. No entity can exist without the other, yet, the major difference might lie in their natures. Where history is stagnant and cannot be manipulated by any means, art and literature may provide an impetus for freedom and free will practised only in one's microcosm.

**CHAPTER ONE**

**The Historical and**

**the Anti-Historical: A**

**Theoretical Overview**

*“For the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture, the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential.” (Nietzsche 8)*

Throughout history, man finds himself surrounded by many difficulties. Different ages bring about different mentalities and different abilities just to face history and its workings. Reading history books is sometimes regarded as being boring and tedious. This is due to the fact that history is always repeated. Whatever that took place back during the sixteenth century, for instance, is taking place now in the twenty – first century. Examples are sundry; they include historical events such as wars, struggles, abolition of powerful states, plagues and many more examples. Thus, reading about one’s ancestors is of extreme significance because one should learn from the past in order to be able to react to the present circumstances. History is fixed and hence, one should take privilege of such an advantage, but people are never aware.

During the course of history, many artists came to be known, again starting from Homer until contemporary men- of – letters. These people started to appear on the scene because of the workings of history to which they stood still unable to take any action. Artists became the only solace for people who could no longer react to anything they see or feel. Art was created for the health of the society, otherwise, people would have killed themselves because of what they go through during their lifetimes and to which they can do nothing about. One’s life is, therefore, made up of two opposing, yet, complementary entities, that of history and that of art.

## **History and Art:**

Ever since the early ages, history and art have been in a constant struggle that renders both entities opposing ones. The clash between the two concepts lies, mostly, in their functional and ideological differences. Philosophers of history, on the one hand, maintain that history is of extreme importance to one's life as people want to know why they are and where they come from and hence, they turn to history in order to find answers for these questions. People resort to learn about "stories and accounts of historical figures, of nations and civilizations, and even histories of the world" (Sweet 1) in an attempt to understand the world around them. On the other hand, philosophers of art view art and creation as contributing "valuably to human self-realization and fulfilment" (Davies Art, vii). Therefore, both notions seem to be opposing and contradicting.

The word history, on the one hand, comes from the Greek word 'historia' which means "inquiry(knowledge acquired by investigation); the study of the human past" ('History' Wikipedia). History has been defined by different scholars in different connotations. According to the earliest definition of Aristotle, "history is an account of the unchanging past" (Pathak 4). E.H. Carr (a British historian, journalist and international relations theorist), in addition, says that "history in an unending dialogue between the past and the present" (Pathak 4). The philosopher Thomas Carlyle, further, maintains that history "is nothing but the bibliography of great men" (Pathak 5) while John William Miller (American philosopher) explains that "the course of life is like a sea; men come and go, tides rise and fall, and that is all of history" (Pathak 5). Other critics and philosophers such as the American poet Walt Whitman, for instance, views history as "a self reading", Henry Adams as "thermodynamics" and Ezra Pound as "a process of translation" (Allen 353).