

## THE PROBLEM OF LITERATURE AT FOUCAULT AND IN CULTURAL STUDIES

*Abstract: The paper deals with the influence of Michel Foucault's theories and concepts about governmentality and power in cultural studies. In doing so, it focuses upon the changing status of literary discourse, as seen by Foucault, in relation to social, political, cultural discourses at large. Inspired by the artistic experience of the former French avant-garde or the contemporary nouveau roman, the French philosopher considered literature, in its purest form, a privileged discourse, which remains extraneous to other discourses of ideas and to modern systems of surveillance and control. On the other hand, cultural studies, although extensively making use of Foucauldian concepts, re-integrate literary texts within transactional circuits of culture and often take them as ground arguments for the analysis of social and political strategies. The study debates upon the varying arguments of the two perspectives on literature and the paradigm shift from (post)structuralism to culturalism determined to a great extent by the respective European and North-American literary and academic contexts.*

*Keywords: cultural studies, postcolonialism, French (post)structuralism, discourse, avant-garde literature*

Last decades' cultural studies witnessed a visible shift of the status of literature, in a seemingly contradictory fashion. On the one hand, the literary object was obviously displaced from its traditional borders (and its traditional aura, as well), through the ideological waves of multiculturalism or the growing influence of social studies in literary history. However, on the other hand, literature remained at the very centre of cultural studies' debates, as literary texts were, to a greater extent than other types of texts or archives, the ones to be subjected to various critical theory interpretations.

Many have, indeed, argued that the preeminence of social-political over aesthetic criteria had the effect of weakening the literary object, as it had long been shaped within the Western canon. Culturalist perspective dissolved the former disciplines of European tradition: literary theory and literary history. As structuralism faded off and aesthetic essentialism was dissolved by reader-response trends of criticism, literary theory as such seemed to have exhausted its grand narratives, consequently resorting to local, historical investigations, less concerned with the purity of method. Literary histories have, also, undergone altering changes. After being long overshadowed in the age of structuralism, literary histories have been reshaped (in project, at least) in relation to social sciences, such as geography, political economy, anthropology and sociology. However, these field alliances did more than enlarge the context of analysis; in fact, they deeply re-conceptualized the very object of analysis: many recent literary histories regard literature mostly as indicator of certain human communities. The decline of pure and purist metaliterary discourse – whose nostalgia still haunts Jonathan Culler or Antoine Compagnon – and the atomization of literary canon in the view of cultural and intellectual histories both reflected the relativization of literary value – a change of accent perhaps necessary for the French culture, undoubtedly explicable in the North-

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American context. Even if not properly denied, the idea of literary value was historicized and linked to local systems of representation, thus losing its essential meaning.

Nevertheless, one can argue that culturalist approaches still resort to literary-critical tools in deconstructing ideologies or social identities. Indeed, cultural studies programmatically denied the old autonomous object of literature; however, they operated through literary assumptions (which they extended to *non-literary* areas also), taking into account narrative, rhetorical, elocutionary or purely linguistic features of discourses they were deconstructing. Social identity as narration, repression or resistance as conflicting discourses, natural categories of culture shaped by a certain rhetoric of the public space – are all good examples in this respect. To a certain extent, one could assert that *literariness* migrated from the distinct perimeter of literature to the heterogeneous space of cultural objects, which were indistinctively regarded as "languages". Jonathan Culler was, therefore, right in pointing out "the literary dimensions of many of cultural studies' most potent concepts"<sup>2</sup>. Even postcolonialism – arguably one of the most politicized branches in the field – defined itself as "discourse analysis" and dwelled upon political suppression through literary-linguistic tools, often precariously assuming that power strategies are more obvious in literary than in sociological material.

Cultural studies' various disciplines and approaches greatly differ in their objectives, use of concepts or views upon culture; however, they all share certain textual skills and they all focus upon linguistic mechanisms of cultural discourses, which they inevitably invest with literary features. As a matter of fact, it is that implicit hypothesis, expanding textuality to the entire corpus of culture, which reunites, ideally, most of the theoretical paradigms that fueled cultural studies (structuralism, post-structuralism, postmodernism). And one could not help but see a paradox in the way in which this disciplinary trend that subordinated theory to (political) activism and believed in meliorism and social reform only assumed, at least for a while, a literary-like *modus operandi*. Indeed, such topic was debated in the States from the beginning of the 90s: Tony Bennet, for instance, criticized cultural studies' lack of empiricism and their tendency to concentrate on discursive mechanisms, instead of approaching concrete institutions which could account for social change. Accordingly, second-generation post-colonial analysts, such as A. Ahmad or H. Bhabha, discussed Edward Said's prestigious *Orientalism*, observing that "the decolonization debate was mostly confined to literary and literary-critical issues"<sup>3</sup>.

The balance between textualism and pragmatism, between the analysis of representations and institutional policies is indeed defining for cultural studies, although the right proportion is still difficult to set. There are many factors accounting for the dominance of one or the other term, including the theoretical base – Derrida or Foucault, Gramsci or Rorty respectively - and the particularities of local cultural markets (and, accordingly, the status of the literary institution, which differs in Europe and in the States). In addition to this, the balance textualism-pragmatism is complicated by the fact that cultural studies remained a set of academic disciplines and advanced mostly in academic status, in spite of their initial counter-cultural impetus and in spite of the fact that they sometimes provided grounds for the minorities' juridic claims.

Of course, the enlarged notion of text, seen as covering the whole field of culture, is of typically European origin. However, the above mentioned examples prove that the question of disparity between purely discursive analysis and practical agenda within cultural studies was also raised in the North-American context. So the more interesting as the American culture did by no means overrate literature or perpetuate a traditional literary instruction, as was the case in Europe (and, particularly, in France). As a matter of fact, excepting the singular experience of the *New Criticism* and perhaps the Yale School, North-American humanities put forward an anti-canonical rhetoric, assumed democratic pedagogical views and indulged in the idea of "anti-intellectualism" (in Richard Hofstadter's terms), while literary research as

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<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Culler. *The Literary in Theory: The Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007, 18.

<sup>3</sup> Aijaz Ahmad. *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*. London: Verso, 1994, 208.

such got soon into the orbit of multiculturalism. Last but not least, in the States, mass-media and the entertainment industry supplied, as cultural signifiers, certain functions of literature in a much more categorical manner than in Europe.

Little, if anything of this cultural context would have anticipated the valorization of literature brought about by cultural studies. Within this field, literature acquired indeed a new value – anthropological, even if not purely aesthetic – and often provided the ground discourse for the study of social-political domination. Undoubtedly, the import of French theory was one of the factors that triggered off the ascendance of literary arguments. From the end of the 70s, Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Julia Kristeva's studies about the hegemonic symbolical orders fit right into the views and stakes of North-American academic neoliberalism. Such authors were quickly absorbed into the emerging cultural studies, mostly due to their interest in the construction of cultural identities, later due to their particular relevance for feminism and *queer studies*. The French theorists supplied cultural studies with analytic tools and key-concepts, yet they could not provide empirical solutions also. They became part of the cultural studies' language, not necessarily of their objectives as well – as a recent historian of the domain points out<sup>4</sup>. As a matter of fact, the French intellectual front of May '68 specifically targeted the order of philosophical, literary, theoretical at large Western discourse, and only in subsidiary or in a metaphorical manner the social or the political order. After all, beyond the seductive rhetoric of contestation, "the structures did not descend into the street". By and large, profound Nietzschean traces of thought along with the persistence of the Saussurean myth of language impersonality rendered the French theory, at whole, extremely skeptical to the possibility of self-determination and the efficiency of human agency. The often-claimed and largely-slammed "anti-humanism" (insistently tagged to Foucault, in particular) was seemingly far and away from the voluntarist, meliorist ethos of Anglo-American cultural studies.

This incongruity did not, however, stop concepts from migrating across the ocean, even if they changed their significance and analytic finality in the process. Foucault himself, although arguably the most nihilistic in what concerns the possibility of human liberty, becomes "the most cited philosopher in cultural studies"<sup>5</sup> and an essential inspiring factor in postcolonialism<sup>6</sup>. E. Said, A. Ahmad, H. Bhabha, G. Spivak, R. Young largely borrow his theories about the power that produces its submissive subjects. In a Foucault-like manner, these authors describe the repression exerted in Occident's client states as a colonization of the imaginary. But the analysis of power is more ideologically oriented in postcolonialism than with Foucault. As a consequence of that, most of the above-mentioned authors work with Foucauldian conceptual tools, but they frequently criticize the French philosopher for having neglected the question of resistance or the possibility of counter-hegemonic cultural production. Postcolonialism specifically focuses on such matters as the latter. Anyway, in doing so, it takes into account mostly literary texts, although Foucault himself is "far from ever having implied that literature would be the most efficient vehicle for the analysis of political or economic configurations of a certain epoch"<sup>7</sup>.

Still, the same thing also happens, during the 80s, outside the field of postcolonialism: researches concerning the beginnings of the British novel<sup>8</sup> approach the insidious manner in which pre-modern fiction sets social conventions and thus is intimately linked to political systems of surveillance and

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<sup>4</sup> See Chris Barker. *The Sage Dictionary of Cultural Studies*. London: Sage, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Chris Barker. *Making Sense of Cultural Studies: Central Problems and Critical Debates*. London: Sage, 2002, 18.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Nichols. "Postcolonial Studies and the Discourse of Foucault: Survey of a Field of Problematization". *Foucault Studies*, 9 (Sept. 2010): 111.

<sup>7</sup> Robert Nichols. "Postcolonial Studies and the Discourse of Foucault". Ed. cit., 126.

<sup>8</sup> See Lennard Davies. *Factual Fictions: The Origin of the English Novel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983, Nancy Armstrong. *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1987, Michael McKeon. *The Origins of the English Novel (1600-1740)*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, John Bender. *Imagining the Penitentiary Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth Century England*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1989, J. Paul Hunter. *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth Century English Fiction*. New York: Norton, 1990.

control. Here is the example of a *New-Historicist* approach which invests literature with typically Foucauldian suspicions about the modern disciplinary state, even though such suspicions did not concern, in Foucault's case, literature itself, but specifically the philosophical, medical, legal discourse etc. In such occurrences, the conceptual apparatus of French origin functions indeed as "simulacrum or supplement for the ideological reaction postcolonialism or *New Historicism* want to provoke"<sup>9</sup>, making amends to the humanist studies' tendency to assume canonical writing has only beneficent cultural influence.

The political investment of literature comes as a consequence of the enlarged concept of culture - from an aesthetic to an anthropological sense - a shift of meaning that occurred during the 60s and the 70s; Foucault was "one of the principal agents of this conceptual change"<sup>10</sup>, once he used a *society-wide* notion of culture. This made the French philosopher an obvious and necessary reference for the social history, the philosophy of science or *les histoires des mentalités* developed from the 70s; however, it did not fully explain why the author of *The Order of Things* became so influential within (culturalist) literary studies as well. Actual literary theorists, on the other hand, such as G. Genette or R. Barthes, were less influential in the area, although their own theories would have been more fitting: they argued that literature should no longer be regarded as "monumental", but analyzed in line with other cultural contents, subsumed to a general theory of signification. Nevertheless, it is Foucault who mostly inspires *New-Historicist* and postcolonial analysis, but also the literary history, reshaped from a largely cultural perspective, in the 90s<sup>11</sup>. Yet, Foucault's key-concepts - "discipline", "power", "control", "normalization" - to which cultural studies' ethics and politics promptly react and rush to apply to literary texts, were not at all meant by the French philosopher in relation to literature.

In fact, Foucault regards the literary discourse in rather enigmatic terms, always placing it at the margins of his theories about modern power and the disciplinary state. The literary reference is, nonetheless, ubiquitous in his work until the middle of the 70s; it includes criticism proper (the book about Raymond Roussel), occasional essays (such as „Langage et Littérature” from 1964), frequent reflections spread along works like *The Order of Things* or *History of Madness*, articles on literary topics published in the journals *Tel Quel* and *Critique* (between 1963-1966). In each and every instance, the philosopher tries to present literature as a *counter-discourse*.

In his view, literature emerges as a distinct "discursive formation" at the very moment when texts transgress the limits prescribed by the *episteme*: Sade's writings and Gothic novels

attempt to move beyond language - either by producing intense sensation (terror) or, in Sade's case, by exhausting the possibilities of language (...); language begins to pass itself as the manifestation of sheer desire (...), unreadable, untranslatable because tied to the sensation it can never reach<sup>12</sup>.

Starting from the 19th century, as Foucault argues, literature becomes "progressively more differentiated from the discourse of ideas and encloses itself within a radical intransitivity (...), in opposition to all other forms of discourse"<sup>13</sup>. So even if deeply tied to a certain culture through multiple layers of

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<sup>9</sup> William Beatty Warner. "Social Power and the Eighteenth Century Novel: Foucault and Transparent Literary History". *Eigtheenth Century Fiction* 3, 3 (1991): 189, <http://digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/ecf/vol3/iss3/4>.

<sup>10</sup> Willem Frijhoff. "Foucault reformed by Certeau: Historical Strategies of Discipline and Everyday Tactics of Appropriation". *Cultural History after Foucault*, ed. John Neubauer, New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1999, 92.

<sup>11</sup> A filiation that David Perkins traces, in *Is Literary History Possible?*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, 170.

<sup>12</sup> Michel Foucault. "Limbaajul la infinit", translated by Bogdan Ghiu. *Theatrum philosophicum: Studii, eseuri, interviuri 1963-1984*. Casa Cărtii de Știință: Cluj, 2000, 20 [our transl.].

<sup>13</sup> Michel Foucault. *Cuvintele și lucrurile: o arheologie a științelor umane*, translated by Bogdan Ghiu and Mircea Vasilescu. București: Univers, 1996, 154 [our transl.].

signification (one of which is the "function of author"), literature keeps for itself a core irreducible to the web of social signs, being the only discourse which is conscious of its convention: "[literature] resists and outlives the stereotypical discourses around it – philosophies, sciences, psychologies"<sup>14</sup>.

It's true that the famous essay on authorship seemed to mark the tombstone of the literary institution, on asserting that the "function of author" derives from the same *episteme* of modernity that produced the subjected subject of the human sciences. But, as with Barthes, historicizing the concept of author did not alter the ontology of writing, on the contrary: once erased this last hook of the text in the cultural environment (namely, "the author"), the notion of writing emerged purified and timeless. As a matter of fact, with the sole exception of the essay on authorship, Foucault hesitates to regard literature as an institution. Perhaps because he believes too much in its epistemological potency. During the 60s, a young Foucault still searches for grounds to oppose and escape pervasive power and thinks, for a while, to have found them in the uncontrollable space of art. Literature leaves place for experiment, hazard, mobility. Like madness and crime, it "tends to place outside the law and takes upon itself the burden of scandal, transgression and revolt"<sup>15</sup>. Literature (namely, the avant-garde writing) appears as a form of heretical ethics, as it represents the only self-conscious discourse, thus "replacing traditional ethics in the modern world"<sup>16</sup>.

In some kind of apotheosis, Foucault deals, in one of the last chapters of *History of Madness*, with Romanticism, Modernism and Surrealism; he finds in their art the energies of anarchic creativity that madness was depleted of once medically normalized, the tragic sense that was lost once with the secularization of the Western culture. Literature, on the other hand, bears the traces of "a very archaic and threatening truth about man", of a "view upon Western culture, starting from which all denials become possible, even total denial taking us back to raw savagery"<sup>17</sup>.

Of course, in the 60s' France, it is not only Foucault who tends to read artistic texts in such mystical-metaphorical terms. After all, also Cl. Lévi-Strauss and J. Lacan often refer to literature: it is not, however, a proper object of study for them, it rather provides them with an attitude, a theoretical strategy, a style. According to them, literature fulfils a "political role" in evidencing the fact that "no language, not even the scientific one, is innocent", in "actively representing the linguistic nature of all human artifacts"<sup>18</sup>. Because, even if all objects of culture are mere languages, their constructedness remains hidden, "naturalized", whereas literature deliberately shows its convention and comes out as pure language. Literature became thus a sort of blind spot of theory, a strategical angle whence the deconstruction of other cultural languages could begin.

Anyway, it is worth noticing that French theorists in general, and Foucault in particular, derive this transgressive mythology of writing directly from the Modernist experience of local artistic works, in the line from Mallarmé to the *nouveau roman* and, especially, from the program of the precedent or contemporary avant-garde. The author of *The Order of Things* is definitely close kin to the themes debated around the Parisian journal *Tel Quel*. Here emerges in the 60s a strong front of support for the *nouveau roman*. This "canonical battle" echoes multiple theoretical layers and also builds for itself, in retrospection, an anti-canon, which reclaims forgotten predecessors of the contemporary avant-garde, like Lautréamont, R. Roussel, A. Artaud, or unclassable authors, like G. Bataille, M. Blanchot, P. Klossowski,

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<sup>14</sup> Michel Foucault. "Langage et Littérature". Conference at the Saint-Louis University, Bruxelles, 18/19 March 1964, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/96149557/05-Foucault-Langage-et-litterature> [our transl.].

<sup>15</sup> Michel Foucault. "Viața oamenilor infami", translated by Bogdan Ghiu. *Theatrum philosophicum*, ed. cit., 164 [our transl.].

<sup>16</sup> Simon During. *Foucault and Literature: Towards a Genealogy of Writing*. London & New York: Routledge, 2005, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Michel Foucault. "Cercul antropologic". *Istoria nebulniei în epoca clasică*, translated by Mircea Vasilescu. București: Humanitas, 1996, 488 [our transl.].

<sup>18</sup> Roland Barthes. "Science versus littérature". *Times Literary Supplement*. 3.422 (Sept. 28, 1967): 898.

previously situated only at the margins of the French literary scene. The Foucauldian view of literature bears deep traces of such debates.

Let us not forget, however, that anti-realism, intransitivity, even the principle of automatism lingering behind the claimed "death of the author" are not intrinsic features of literature, but historical types, specific to the literary forms of the French moment. One could easily grasp the metonymy effect here, as Foucault tends to extrapolate specific principles of the avant-garde to the generic notion of literature. When, for example, he writes about the "nameless murmur of language" in relation to Gothic novels, to Sade or to Hölderlin, the French philosopher obviously regards literature indistinctively through the lenses of High Modernism. Just like the rest of the *Tel Quel* group, Foucault shares with the Frankfurt School a certain elitist view of literature. Indeed, one can see that, even if slamming the traditional and academic institution of literature, which they considered "monumental" (in Barthes' terms), French theorists could not stop from monumentalizing the avant-garde, the *nouveau roman*, the poetic modernism, which they all inscribed in a theoretical effigy.

But such implicit elitism no longer resounded to the "populist ethos"<sup>19</sup> that defines cultural studies. After all, this set of disciplines emerged in Britain in reaction to Leavis' Conservatorism, was institutionalized in the States on the tide of multiculturalism and was largely inspired by Gramsci's praise of popular culture. Although Foucault was highly influential in cultural studies, his exalted view of literary modernism and avant-garde was lost. Most French (post)structuralist theory resorted to categories of transgression and negativity in order to describe literature and rejoiced at the idea that literary texts were irreducible to cultural signs; on the contrary, cultural studies (of Anglo-American descent) reversed this ratio and read literature directly from the surface of cultural signs. Moreover, as postcolonialism proves, Foucauldian concepts about power are applied on the very object the French philosopher tried to set outside the order of discourse: literature. No longer opaque to the circulation of social signs, literature becomes transparent for the strategies of cultural power. Although making large use of Foucauldian terms, *New Historicism* has a different framework: it locates the literary fact within a "cultural poetics", analyzes the technologies that produce written works, the circuits that integrate them, the writing's relation to pleasure, desire, power, its cultural, social, legal use etc. Such transactional categories of analysis replace the non-mimetic categories through which French (post)structuralism regarded literature. Since he tied literary "realism" to the production of the "docile society", Foucault strongly believed – during the 60s, at least – in the principle of intransitivity, through which literature could remain unaltered by discursive circuits of modernity and could resist commentary or cultural explanation.

Yet, such high valorization of literary negativity, as a recoil angle opposing the constraining epistemic orders, is no longer present in the second part of the philosopher's work. Actually, towards the middle of the 70s, it becomes obvious that Foucault now distrusts the political role and the epistemological force of writing. The shift of thought is undoubtedly due to the afterthought of May '68 and to consequent debates about the agents of social change. In a 1977 essay, Foucault claims that the *nouveau roman* was stuck in the myth of "the great writer" and was "the swan-song" of an *écriture* that resorted to "exasperated theoretization" in order to hide the fact that "it had lost its focal power" and the fact that it could only give rise to "mediocre work"<sup>20</sup>. On the contrary, Foucault went on, since "university and education have become extremely sensitive to politics", the intellectual could no longer deal with "universal terms", but was meant to put his knowledge in service of "local" scientific truths and specific political battles.

His opinions were confirmed, to a certain extent, by the already emerging cultural studies. However, in opposition to them, Foucault, having given up the major stakes of literature, had no interest

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<sup>19</sup> Chris Barker. *Making Sense of Cultural Studies*. ed. cit., 185.

<sup>20</sup> Michel Foucault. "Genealogia puterii și funcția intelectualului în societatea actuală". *Theatrum philosophicum*. ed. cit., 433-36 [our transl.].

in resorting to it in order to analyse the local strategies of power.

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