

Interdisciplinarity and Anti-disciplinarity in Literary Studies

Drd. Constantinescu Andreea Roxana
Universitatea "Dunărea de Jos", Galați

Résumé : *Cet exposé porte sur le rôle de l'interdisciplinarité dans les études littéraires. Des disciplines telles que l'histoire, la sociologie, l'anthropologie, l'histoire culturelle, les études politiques sont-elles utiles pour l'étude des textes littéraires? Dans quelle mesure l'interdisciplinarité et l'effacement des frontières entre les disciplines contribuent-ils à établir le sens du texte littéraire? Le but de cet exposé est de démontrer que la démarche interdisciplinaire avec sa foule de perspectives offre des méthodes et des paradigmes supplémentaires pour la compréhension des textes littéraires. L'utilisation des perspectives, des méthodes et des sources d'information multiples peut être un vrai défi, mais qui en vaut la peine dans notre tentative de décoder et déchiffrer le sens des textes littéraires.*

Mots clés : *Interdisciplinarité, études littéraires, études culturelles*

Literary criticism has long focused on aspects regarding solely the literary text and its aesthetic value. The literary text has long been separated from other forms of cultural representation, constituting the only material available to the critic. The critical canon prescribed a disciplinary divide between the literary and the non-literary forms of culture, as well as the supremacy of literature and the literary text. Non-literary texts, as well as methods of inquiry typical of other disciplines, have long been excluded from critical studies as irrelevant. It was with the development of cultural studies out of and alongside literary studies that the emphatic notification was made that the focus of interest was shifting from 'Literature' to all forms of cultural production and representation. The widely influential Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at Birmingham University was founded in 1964 by Richard Hoggart, author of *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), and later developed by Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall and others. In its earlier phases, mass-circulation newspapers, the BBC, television, film, advertising, working-class 'culture', sub-cultures, style, literacy and mass education, became the objects of attention – all those discourses, in other words, that 'Literature' had more or less explicitly defined itself against, and in all of which the notion of 'the text' had to be fundamentally rethought. 'More importantly perhaps, Cultural Studies – intellectually 'impure', fiercely political, and an irritant on the margins of the academy – was never quite a new discipline, but a mode of critique. Cultural Studies, in other words, has been less a discrete 'subject' and more a politicized way of thinking beyond the limitations of whatever field of enquiry it enters or recuperates.'¹ Indeed, it would be a mistake to see cultural studies as a new discipline, or even a discrete constellation of disciplines. Cultural studies is an interdisciplinary field where 'certain concerns and methods have converged; the usefulness of this convergence is that it has enabled us to understand phenomena and relationships that were not accessible through the existing disciplines.'²

Therefore it was the cultural studies movement that introduced the interdisciplinary approach to literature. Interdisciplinarity is the hallmark of cultural studies, which promoted the breaking down of disciplinary boundaries and the bringing together of different disciplinary perspectives. Cultural studies integrated literature in the broader concept of culture. Culture, in its turn, was considered in its relation to society, to which it was seen as inextricably linked. Culture is not viewed as high culture, or as 'possession' or a 'detachable part of a human being'³. What cultural studies brought new in literary studies was the introduction and use of information and methods belonging to such disciplines as psychology, philosophy, political studies, sociology, anthropology, history and art history in the study of literary texts.

There were a number movements in Western thought and culture which contributed to this conception of literature into culture and culture and/in society, prefiguring cultural studies. We will only mention a few, insisting on their significance in the development of the interdisciplinary approach to literary studies. All these movements involved a process of de-centring and of questioning the Enlightenment cultural paradigm. From this perspective, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche can be thought of as one of the precursors of cultural studies. Nietzsche's "romantic" agenda – the philosopher as madman, the cult of the Dionysian principle, the indictment of the Socratic-Platonic-Christian-Kantian line as the mainstream of Western metaphysics – brings about an epistemology rooted in an overall assault on rationality. Such concepts as embeddedness, situatedness, positioning, decentring are to be found in Nietzsche's philosophy – the 'death of God', the collapse of 'good', the dissolution of the 'one way'. The Nietzschean praise of subjective freedom represents a step to postmodern marginal alternatives to the core. Alternative beliefs are encouraged and promoted: Zarathustra instead of Christ, the body instead of the spirit/soul, myth instead of rationality.

Another important step towards what we call today cultural studies was made by the Frankfurt School. The 'Frankfurt School' is the name used to refer to the philosophers, social theorists, literary scholars, economists and psychoanalysts who developed the ideas of the 'Institute for Social Research', which was founded in Frankfurt in 1923. The members of the group sought to establish what they termed 'Critical Theory', combining Kantian critical philosophy with Marxist critique of ideology: from Kant's 'pure reason' to 'a critique of historical reason', from nature to culture, from science to history. Their theories were not intended just as objective descriptions of social phenomena, but were also meant to contribute to changing those phenomena. This is the central idea which informs Critical Theory's approaches to modern culture. Georg Simmel's interpretation of culture in terms of the Marxist notions of the 'base' and the 'superstructure'; Max Weber's concept of the disenchantment or demagicization of the world; Georg Lukacs's idea that the singified social relations integrate to efface the individual into the anonymous, objective, impersonal community; Walter Benjamin's idea of commodification (reproduction displaces the unique work by launching instead a plurality of copies, mere commodities); Theodor Adorno's cultural critique dealing with alienation in the modern world; Max Horkheimer's and Theodor Adorno's idea that the scientific heritage of modern civilization (mechanized history, mechanistic society, pragmatized thought) is a complex Enlightenment product – all these point to a critique of the Enlightenment paradigm which equally prefigures the New Historicist and the Cultural Studies movements. 'Critical Theory's approaches to literature belong within the broader Marxist tradition, but they are not straightforwardly susceptible to the kind of criticism directed at that tradition by some forms of literary theory. Deconstruction, for example, suspects approaches which seek grounding for interpretation in a "master code", of the kind it sees as being employed by Marxist criticism, which locates the interpretation of texts in the historical context of the struggle between differing social classes. Such suspicion has sometimes proved to be justified in relation to the more dogmatic types of Marxism, which seek evidence of the direct effect of the economic "base" on literature as part of the cultural and social "superstructure". The new interest in the work of the Frankfurt School has in part come about because of the re-examination of the role of historical context in literary studies characteristic of New Historicism and Cultural Materialism. These help to highlight the concern that deconstructive literary readings might begin to result in a mere repeated demonstration of how texts do not permit definitive interpretations. This concern has now led to a greater concentration on the idea that texts are also forms of social action which have effects in historical contexts.'

Marxist theories, in general had a tremendous influence on cultural studies. But the Marxism which informs the cultural studies approach is a critical Marxism in the sense that it has contested the reductionist implications of earlier Marxist approaches to the study of culture. Traditional Marxism had devalued the importance of the idea of culture; culture was a part of the 'superstructure' of society, and thus simply a product of the economic and industrial base. The Marxist approaches that have informed the development of the cultural studies perspective have insisted in the relative autonomy of culture, i.e. on the fact that it is not simply dependent on economic relationships and cannot, accordingly, be reduced to or viewed as a mere reflection of these, and that it actively influences and has consequences for economic and political relationships rather than simply being passively influenced by them.⁵ Ideology, in earlier Marxist formulations, had been seen as a kind of veil over the eyes of the working class, the filter that screened out or disguised their 'real' relations to the world around them. The function of ideology was to construct a false consciousness of the self and of one's relation to history. Althusser's work marks a conclusive break with this way of conceptualizing the term. Drawing in particular on Althusser's argument that key ideological apparatuses (the law, the family, the education system) are as significant as economic conditions, cultural studies insisted that culture is neither simply dependent nor simply independent of economic relationships. Rather, there are many determining forces – economic, political and cultural – competing and conflicting with each other in order to make up the complex unity of society.

Since ideologies are observable in material form only in the practices, behaviours, institutions, and texts in society, the need to examine these material forms seemed to be extremely pressing. There is now a rich literature of inquiry into the material, social, and historical conditions of ideological formations. These range from histories of the media to the history of discourse identified with Michel Foucault, history of the notions of discipline, or of Western sexuality, that see such concepts as entirely culturally produced. 'Since literary texts 'belong' to ideology, they too can be the object of such scientific analysis. A scientific criticism would seek to explain the literary work in terms of the ideological structure of which it is part, yet which it transforms in its art: it would search out the principle which both ties the work to ideology and distances it from it.'⁶ The literary text is studied from an ideological perspective: ideology and political philosophy are thus intertwined with literary studies.

The literary text and its ideological content and implication is also placed within a historical context, and thus history, art history, the history of ideas, the history of mentalities also become part of literary studies. History itself is decentered. As a discipline, it comes to merge with other disciplines (literature, sociology, anthropology, political studies). Its main interests and its focus also undergo a major change, shifting from the central to the marginal. An important cultural movement which prefigured and influenced cultural studies was the 'Ecole des Annales', with its emphasis on the marginal and its new approach to history. The Ecole des Annales movement brings about a dramatic change of attitude, interest, and focus in approaching history. If traditional history (political history) focuses on the centre, on traumatic changes (wars, revolutions etc.), on great personalities, on outstanding moments, on the exceptional, the 'nouvelle histoire économique et sociale' is interested in the margin, in slow transformations, in average people, in everyday life and context, in the common. Traditional history is event-oriented, whereas the 'nouvelle histoire' is conception/value-oriented. Traditional history is a history of elites, while the 'nouvelle histoire' is a history of all the people. The 'nouvelle histoire' is a complex interdisciplinary subject, with new ties with traditional and other sciences: ethno-history, economic and social history (Lucien Febvre and Marc Bloch), history of religions (Georges Dumezil), history of human behaviour and cultural institutions (Michel

Foucault), statistics, demographic studies, anthropology, geography, cartography, sociology. For the representatives of this movement, material culture is an inexhaustible source of historical knowledge. It deals with clothing, housing, objects, food, furniture, and customs. The *Ecole des Annales* movement also comes up with a new concept of 'text': any cultural object is a text to be read by the new historian *and* in a given context, in large measure created by mentalities even more than by events or ordinary happenings. As far as the French *Ecole des Annales* are concerned, discourse, rather than the fixed text has come to be their main focus, with the shaping of reality in texts as the principal conceptual ingredient; representation and the construction of reality occupy the seats in the first row of these studies. Everything is a cultural construct. Commonplace lives of common people, economic trends, commercial practices, forms of popular entertainment and popular 'mentality' betray Bakhtinian, as well as New Historicist approaches. The dissemination of ideas and representations owing to "modern" practices (printing, the market place, the transmission of commodities) underpin a sociology of texts in its own right. Society itself becomes a text, a huge text asking for sophisticated hermeneutic tools to decipher.

The *Ecole des Annales* anticipated New Historicism, which, in its turn, had a great impact on cultural studies. 'All critics', Paul Hamilton argues, 'are historicist up to a point. The pastness of the texts that we interpret demands accommodations of critical approach to negotiate historical differences.'⁷ Therefore, it is not only the text that we should analyze, but also its context, and co-texts. And this is probably the most significant aspect of the New Historicism, that it represents a 'move away from the contextless, intensive concentration on particular texts equally characteristic of the New Criticism, classical structuralism, and deconstruction'⁸. As Prof. M. Irimia states, 'The time is over now when the text reigned supreme in its arcane complication. We are past accepting assumptions of the kind works of art can be securely isolated from all other texts...'⁹

However, New Historicism is seen by some critics as a deviation from the critical canon: 'The so-called New Historicism' provides a curious fusion of academicism and radicalism'.¹⁰ It is also perceived as a threat to both history and literature, i.e. to disciplinarity. 'Yet historical interpretation of literature fairly easily loses sight of literary interests; if it goes far enough, the interpreter may assume that the idea of poetry or drama as art can be abandoned, since what counts are cultural traces, of whatever kind, and the ideological impressions they appear to bear. In which case 'history' becomes a force to be resisted by readers who like literature, and who may also like history, but have never thought they were one and the same thing.'¹¹

There is however more to New Historicism than the mere parallel study of literary and non-literary texts. The texts are interpreted from a Marxist ideological standpoint. New historicists' analyses of power, like Foucault's, tend to examine how power maintains itself, rather than show how it is altered. Therefore, the new historicist analysis is synchronic, paying attention to the organization of things within a single moment. The key terms coined by the New Historicists (appropriation, circulation, exchange, negotiation) are widely used in Cultural Studies. Also, Cultural Studies take over New Historicism's preoccupation with what Louis Montrose called 'the textuality of history, the historicity of texts'¹². By adopting Foucault's notion of discourse, new historicists insist that 'history' itself is textual. We do not have direct access to a history that exists outside of texts. Foucault's insistence that power does not involve ownership but circulates impersonally through different discourses of 'truth' has resulted in one of new historicism's most characteristic methods: parallel readings of literary and non-literary texts, i.e. a shift from canonical to alternative texts, from authoritative to subversive voices.

New Historicism was very much influenced by Michel Foucault's thinking. Reluctant to methodological and disciplinary commitments, Foucault also used alternative

texts to illustrate his theories. Foucault can be seen either as a philosophical historian, progressively developing a series of historical methods: an archaeology of discourse (in *Madness and Civilisation*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*), a genealogy of power relations (in *Discipline and Punish*, *The History of Sexuality I*), and a problematization of ethics (in *The Use of Pleasure*, *The Care of the Self*), or as a historicist philosopher, offering theories of knowledge, power, and the self.

Foucault's work has been classified by Gary Gutting¹³ into histories, theories, and myths. Foucault's histories can be further classified into histories of ideas, histories of concepts, histories of the present, and histories of experience. The histories of ideas are analyses of the intellectual subconscious of scientific disciplines defining knowledge for a given intellectual era. The histories of concepts concern those concepts which pervade all disciplines of a given period and create an episteme. The histories of the present presuppose using an understanding of the past in order to understand what is intolerable in the present. The histories of experience, recognizing a central role for the subject, refer to the way in which certain phenomena are experienced (for example, the early modern, classical, and modern experience of madness, or the experience of order). Foucault's theories (for instance, his theory of power) were not conceived as permanent truths or universal structures, they were meant to respond to the demands of a specific historical or cultural project. Foucault's approach to each topic is driven by the specific historical subject matter than by prior methodological commitments: 'Archaeology and genealogy are primarily retrospective (and usually idealized) descriptions of Foucault's complex efforts to come to terms with his historical material'¹⁴

Despite his reluctance to methodological commitments and his willingness to employ whatever methods seemed required by his specific subject matter, we can classify Foucault's methods into archaeologies and genealogies. The archaeology writes a history of thought centered not on the individual object but on the linguistic structures defining the fields in which individual subjects operate, on the conceptual structures which lie beneath and outside the consciousness of individual subjects.. The genealogy, as a particular version of history of the present, undermines grand narratives of inevitable progress by tracing the origins of practices and institutions from a series of contingent petty causes. Foucault's first works (*The History of Madness*, *The Birth of the Clinic*, *The Order of Things*, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*) were archaeologies of madness, clinical medicine, and the human sciences. Archaeologies do not study the 'arche' or the origin, but the 'archive'. The archive is the set of discourses that conditions what counts as knowledge in a particular period. Thomas Flynn defines the archive as 'discourse not only as events having occurred, but as 'things', with their own economies, scarcities, and (later in Foucault's thought) strategies that continue to function, transformed through history and providing the possibility of appearing for other discourses'¹⁵. Genealogy moves beyond archaeology in its explicit focus on power and bodies. Genealogy's major concern is the imposition of power upon bodies. Power, however, in Foucault's philosophy, does not exist, there are only relations of domination and control.

Foucault's theory of power as a force that circulates impersonally through discourse and is exercised in all realms of cultural practice is taken over by the new historicists. By discourse, Foucault means the systems of meaning created within institutions and disciplines devoted to the production of normative truths about humans – for example, criminology, medicine, psychology, and education. By creating 'the individual' as an object of knowledge that can be defined in opposition to forms of deviant behaviour and identity (madness, criminality, sexual perversity etc.), discourse controls the individual. Power is thus exercised through discourse, and discourse is present in all cultural practices.

All the movements and theories mentioned above promoted the idea of interdisciplinarity and contributed to the emergence and development of the interdisciplinary approach to the literary text. In this approach, the literary text is compared with non-literary texts, with different forms of cultural production, with different cultural objects and practices, which complement its meaning and significance, integrating it in a broader social, economic, and political context. The methods used belong not only to literary criticism, but also to history, sociology, anthropology, political studies, etc.

There are, however, opponents to this approach, who argue that interdisciplinarity is a threat to literary studies. Their main fear is that literary studies as such will dissolve and eventually disappear in this mix of disciplines and that literature will be completely absorbed by the concept of 'culture': 'Ironically in the light of this it seemed that Cultural Studies might take the place of 'English' in British higher education institutions and that literature would be subsumed, as one element among many, within a broader conspectus of 'cultural history'¹⁶. Many of the constituent elements and theoretical/methodological praxes of Cultural Studies have implanted themselves in other academic fields, such as Women's Studies, Third World Studies, Film, Media and Communication Studies. But they have also embedded themselves within 'English', which discipline has been transformed in terms of content and intellectual orientation: 'canonic' texts have been resituated in their 'period'; different categories of 'writing' have been introduced alongside them without a hierarchy of 'value'. Literature has been historicized and politicized. 'Any notions of 'disinterestedness', 'scientific' objectivity and 'ideological innocence' have been scuppered by the political analysis of Cultural Studies, as they have, too, by those of the latter's principal theoretical drives: Marxism, feminism and postcolonialism. In other words, the construct 'Literature', and the studying of what it comprised, has been denaturalized both as object and practice.'¹⁷

A defender of the dominant culture of the canonical tradition, Harold Bloom is one of the greatest adversaries of interdisciplinarity. In his *Western Canon*, he defines the canon and makes up a comprehensive list of canonical books, which he classifies into four ages: the theocratic, the aristocratic, the democratic, and the chaotic. The opening of the canonical list, i.e. the study of non-literary texts and of other cultural practices, is for him a fatal acceptance of mediocrities on the same level with the classics: 'Originality becomes a literary equivalent of such terms as individual enterprise, self-reliance, and competition, which do not gladden the hearts of Feminists, Afrocentrists, Marxists, Foucault-inspired New Historicists, or Deconstructors – all of those whom I have described as members of the School of Resentment.'¹⁸. A strong believer in the categories of traditional aesthetics, Bloom is adamant against interdisciplinarity, by which he means replacing literature with sociology and propaganda, or turning literature into non-literature.

Despite the reluctance manifested by a number of critics and the bitter criticisms formulated against it, the interdisciplinary approach proves useful and enriching in the study of literature. Terry Eagleton insists on the value of interdisciplinarity when he nominates Raymond Williams as the most important critic of post-war Britain. The most important quality of Williams's work, Eagleton argues, is precisely its interdisciplinary character: 'The transgression of borders has been a recurrent metaphor in his writing, which has ranged across theatre and linguistics, literature and politics, education and popular culture, film, ecology, and political nationalism.'¹⁹. Williams, therefore, cannot be considered a literary critic in the contemporary meaning of the term; nor can he be applied other conventional labels, such as, for example, sociologist, political theorist, social philosopher, cultural commentator; 'aside from the somewhat uninformative title of 'cultural studies', there is as yet no precise name for the area Williams inhabits.'²⁰

The fact that literary texts are seen as embedded in a context, studied in that

context, and investigated with methods of inquiry borrowed from other disciplines does not deprive them of their aesthetic value. 'To reconnect the texts with society, with the culture and the individuals that produced and consumed them, involved a fundamental reorientation. One was required to think about how culture was structured as a whole before one could examine its processes or its constitutive parts.'²¹ Without denying the aesthetic value of the literary text, interdisciplinarity provides new methods of inquiry and sources of information which can only lead to a deeper insight into the meaning and significance of the literary text, reconnected with the culture and the society which it is a part of.

References:

1. Widdowson, P., *Literature*, Routledge, London and New York, 1999, p 74-75
2. Turner, G., *British Cultural Studies. An Introduction*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996, p. 11
3. Bauman, *Culture as Praxis*, London, Sage Publications, 2000, p. 5
4. Bowie, A., 'Adorno and the Frankfurt School', in Patricia Waugh (ed.). *Literary Theory and Criticism*, Oxford, New York:, 2006, p. 189-190
5. in Turner, G., *op. cit.*, p. 24-25
6. Eagleton, T., *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Routledge, London and New York, 2006, p. 18
7. Hamilton, P., 'Reconstructing Historicism', in Patricia Waugh (ed.) *Literary Theory and Criticism*, New York, Oxford, 2006, p. 386
8. Bergonzi, B., *Exploding English. Criticism, Theory, Culture*, London, Clarendon Press, 1990, p. 177
9. Irimia, M., *Postmodern Revaluations*, București, Editura Universității din București. 1999, p. 55
10. Bergonzi, B., *op. cit.*, p. 174
11. Bergonzi, B., *op. cit.*, p. 177
12. Montrose, L., 'The Politics and Poetics of Culture', in Veesser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989, p. 23
13. in Gutting, G., 'Introduction. Michel Foucault: A User's Manual', in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 6-20
14. Gutting, G., *op. cit.*, p. 6
15. Flynn, T., 'Foucault's Mapping of History', in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 30
16. Widdowson, P., *op. cit.*, p. 75
17. *Ibid.*, p. 76
18. Bloom, H., 1995, *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1995, p. 47
19. Eagleton, T., *The Function of Criticism*, London and New York, Verso, 2000, p. 108
20. *Ibid.*
21. Turner, G., *op. cit.*, p. 12

Bibliography

- Bauman, Z., *Culture as Praxis*, London, Sage Publications, 2000
- Bergonzi, B., *Exploding English. Criticism, Theory, Culture*, London, Clarendon Press, 1990
- Bowie, A., 'Adorno and the Frankfurt School', in Patricia Waugh (ed.). *Literary Theory and Criticism*, New York, Oxford, 2006
- Bloom, H., *The Western Canon: The Books and School of the Ages*, New York, Riverhead Books, 1995
- Eagleton, T., *The Function of Criticism*, London and New York, Verso, 2000
- Eagleton, T., *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006
- Foucault, M., *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, London and New York, Routledge, 2005
- Flynn, T., 'Foucault's Mapping of History', in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge University Press, 2007
- Greenblatt, S., *Shakespearean Negotiations. The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England*, Oxford University Press, 1990
- Gutting, G., 'Introduction. Michel Foucault: A User's Manual', in Gary Gutting (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Foucault*, Cambridge University Press, 2007
- Hamilton, P., 'Reconstructing Historicism', in Patricia Waugh (ed.) *Literary Theory and Criticism*, New

York, Oxford, 2006

Irimia, M., *Postmodern Revaluations*, București, Editura Universității din București, 1999

Montrose, L., 'The Politics and Poetics of Culture', in Veenser (ed.), *The New Historicism*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1989

Turner, G., *British Cultural Studies. An Introduction*, London and New York, Routledge, 1996

Widdowson, P., *Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999