EWA IGNACZAK
Wrocław

MEANING AND ITS CONTEXT.
POSTSTRUCTURALIST BACKGROUND
OF NEW HISTORICISM

J. Hillis Miller's Presidential Address of 1986, in which he defined the emergence of New Historicism, a new orientation in literary studies as a "turn away from theory in the sense of an orientation toward history, culture, society, politics, institutions, class and gender conditions, the social context, the material base"[1], seems quite arbitrary given vast theoretical background of this new formation. However large the polemical field in which New Historicism is engagend, there are no doubt two basic orientations towards which it needs to relate: on the one hand poststructuralist theories of history (Hayden White, Dominick LaCapra), and the later Foucault's analyses of power-determined discourse, and Yale deconstruction on the other, addressed directly by Hillis Miller in his opening speech.

This theoretical area does not cover the whole background out of which New Historicism grows: Marxism (L. Althusser's critique of ideology and the concept of decentred historical totality), R. Williams's dynamic model of culture conceived as a 'whole way of life', or C. Geertz's interpretive anthropology with the concept of reading 'thick descriptions' of studied cultures (interpretation of alien cultures in terms of its members so as to present specimens of 'local knowledge'), to name but the most important.

Thus situated and often defined as both a reaction to poststructuralist literary criticism and, conversely, its continuation, New Historicism is bound to face polemics on all sides of the theoretical field. Not infrequently, meta-criticism of new historicists writings defines their

---

[1] J. Hillis Miller, "Presidential Address 1986. The Triumph of Theory, the Resistance to Reading, and the Question of the Material Base", PMLA 102, 1987, p. 283.

theoretical engagements as new pragmatic "arguments 'against theory'"[2] in the sense of - programmatically - never fully theorised critical activity. As Stephen Greenblatt, the author of the label itself (1982) and one of its major proponents, suggests it is "a practice rather than a doctrine"[3]. Difficulties in articulating a coherent theoretical system on which to found a literary critical practice is certainly one of the weak points of the movement which has so far produced a body of the criticism on a whole variety of themes.

New Historicism does not limit its interests to a conventionally historical subject matters: the early modern (the Renaissance), the American Renaissance or Victorian Studies. To use Louis A. Montrose's words, history is not "what's over and done with"[4], it is what we live in. This liberal view dangerously enlarges the area of New Historicist ambitions, so as to cover the precent time as well, or perhaps more modestly, but more specifically - at least to problematise the concept of history and context, which means in practice an invasion into virtually any literary text or even beyond literature, that is into any text of culture.

Formulation of the New Historicist theoretical agenda is no easy task and writers defining themselves as New Historicists have been quite reluctant to present a systematic theory underlying their critical practice. Spelling varieties of the movement's name allude to no established discursive tradition, to its not fully demarcated boundaries, and to absence of writings aimed at self-definition. One of the most ciculated programmatic pronouncements of the New Historicism is included in the introductory part to H. A. Veeser's collection of the New Historicist theoretical essays. While emphasising the overwhelming heterogeneity of the orientation, Veeser manages to scan major assumptions from the body of criticism of divergent thematic areas: the Renaissance, nineteenth-century American and British realist fiction, recent Cultural Studies, nineteenth-century women's fiction, amongst other issues. Veeser's "key assumptions" make it clear that the text viewed in New Historicist perspective becomes virtually a broadly conceived intertext of culture:

---

[2] J. Litvak, "New Historicism, Deconstruction, and Fiction", Texas Studies in Literature and Language, vol. 30, No 1, 1988, p. 121.

[3] S. Greenblatt, "Towards a Poetics of Culture", in: H. Aram Veeser, *The New Historicism*, Routledge, New York-London, 1989, p. 1.

[4] L. A. Montrose, "The Poetics and Politics of Culture", in: Veeser, op. cit., p. 25.

"1. ... every expressive act is embedded in a network of material practices;

2. ... every act of unmasking, critique, and opposition uses the tools it condemns and risks falling prey to the practice it exposes;

3. ... literary and non-literary 'texts' circulate inseparably"[5],

The conclusion arises that text, or rather discourse (after Foucault), leaves the formalist void of poststructuralist rhetorical analysis and enters a social contex, as determinant of meaning. The problem of context so widely conceived is bound to open a vast problematic area. Unlike formalist theories (New Criticism and deconstruction) which seem to lock the text in a circle of autonomous linguistic, rhetorical or grammatical play, New Historicism enlarges the meaning-determinant context onto the ideology and culture, and as such brings promise of a new critical, and possibly political, engagement.

Before we proceed to elaborate this fragment of the New Historicist agenda, it is worth considering its troubled and forcefully debated relation to deconstruction, an orientation that is chronologically antecedent and often treated as a synecdoche for poststructuralism itself. The relation between New Historicism and deconstruction is at best problematic. The point the author of the present paper is trying to make is that New Historicism, in some of its most interesting analyses, "this media hype mounted against deconstruction", in fact shows a number of qualities which seem to put these two orientations in a peculiar alliance.

Launched as a reaction to aridity of deconstructive analyses of text, always bound to end up in an undecidability, infinite regression of meaning, and aporetic closures, New Historicism undertakes to account for social dimension of meaning production. It seems a common meta--critical practice to contrast the two orientations, sometimes in a fashion of a conflict between American followers of Derrida centered in Yale, and the Foucault's legacy, scholars concentrated around *Representations* journal at Berkeley. As early as 1978, in an illuminating essay "The Problem of Textuality: Two Exemplary Positions", and later revised into "Criticism Between Culture and System", Edward Said discusses philosophical background of this problem, in a summary form of Derrida–Foucault debate, notably neither a literary critic. Ever since this comprehensive and non-partisan paper has circulated as a synopsis of the problem. "Criticism Between Culture and System" subsumes the two

---

[5] Veeser, op. cit., p.*xi*.

(Foucault's and Derrida's) positions in a neat formula: "Derrida's criticism moves us *into* the text, Foucault's *in* and *out*"[6]. The Foucault-Derrida debate is of importance to the New Historicist practice in so far as the value of Foucault's heritage for New Historicism is a fact acknowledged by its advocates, whereas any criticism (historicism included) which aspires to be *new* needs to relate to deconstruction, and hence to Derridean textual theories. The debate is symptomatic of a conflict between two approaches to textuality, two poststructualist contributions into a theory of meaning and its context.

Put crudely, the complex controversy ultimately comes down to difference in approach to textuality: power-regulated discourse against Derrida's formalist reading of the text, as detached from the social intertext. This sort of simplification is bound to overlook the whole lot of subtle theoretical ramifications.

Derrida's procedure enacted upon Foucault's "History of Madness", the starting point of a confrontation between the two philosophers, revolves around charges of Foucault's complicity with the rigours of reason which locks madness in its disciplinary enclosure, practised traditionally in Western culture ever since Descartes. Foucault's redefinition of rationality, performed yet from a position of rational discourse is viewed by Derrida as an inadvertent reinforcement of just another violent hierarchy, in which reason and rational subject are given priority. This move is symptomatic of a larger problematic, which in fact means choice of different central issues, history and historicity, or historical specificity as responsible for production and preservation of meaning.

In Derrida clearly history is a background issue. Derridean history and historicity are made possible throught différance (deferral and internal difference), history is seen as a possibility of language, and historicity as an effect of writing or the play of différance. Derrida's history remains thus locked outside specificity of time analysed, remaining beyond the scope of regular hermeneutic investigation. "[H]istoricity itself is tied to the possibility of writing; ...Before being the object of a history – of an historical science – writing opens the field of history – of historical becoming"[7]. From such a perspective history becomes a

---

[6] E. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1983, p. 183.

[7] J. Derrida, *On Grammatology*, Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1984, p. 27.

function of différance, not only temporal deferral but also internal non--identity.

By this gesture Hegelian historicism, a concept of History as Idea, teleology, or continuity lose validity. Foucault as a historian leaves no doubt about his vision of history, and Derrida, while never having developed a theory of history or a historical methodology, as early as "Structure, Sign, and Play" of 1966, speaks of history as:

"a concept which has always been in complicity with a teleological and eschatological metaphysics, in other words, paradoxically, in complicity with that philosophy of presence to which it was believed history could be opposed. The thematic of historicity ...has always been required by the determination of Being as presence ...History has always been conceived as the movement of a resumption of history, as a detour between two presences"[8].

The traditional notion of history which Derrida sets out to deconstruct depends on two kinds of presence, an origin and an end. In his view the origin of history lies in language, and consequently in its essential deficiency and inadequacy. This purely linguistic or textual nature of historicity accounts for why the Derrida-Foucault debate has been often misinterpreted as a conflict between textuality and historicity, and not one between different approaches to textuality.

History and historicity in Foucault, especially in his later phase, make it clear that his attention is concentrated on various aspects of history, conceived in *The Order of Things* as a discursive practice which cannot be simply equated with or contrasted to textuality. Even if Foucauldian analyses do reiterate binary hierarchies typical of Western philosophical tradition (such as the history of otherness contained in *The History of Madness*, which in Derrida's view instantiates the discourse of prioritised reason, despite declared intention to let otherness speak for itself), what is given fresh attention is specific circumstances responsible for a particular mode of thinking. History itself is revealed to be a mode of thinking, a historical phenomenon, a perspective. Although anti--Hegelian and anti-positivist like Derrida's, this approach brings about specific consequences for analysis of text, now relocated to its original background. Text – discourse – a social practice, regains its social dimension, one not analysable in purely formal or textual terms.

---

[8] J. Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1978, p. 291.

For Derrida and other Yale deconstructionists (de Man, Hartman, Hillis Miller, H. Bloom) the text's value is just that which is there in it for the reader. The actual grounding of the text, ideology, material practices, historical moment, psychology of the writer or the reader, have no special explanatory value as compared to the text, but themselves amount to but another instance of textuality. Such a position begs questions, of political nature too, such as one Said asks in his essay: "If everything in a text is always open equally to suspicion and to affirmation, then the differences between one class interest and another, between oppressor and oppressed, one discourse and another, one ideology and another, are virtual in ...the finally reconciling element of textuality"[9].

Deconstructionist vocabulary defines large-scale interests of its practitioners who – through various and individually preferred ways – seem always to arrive at a single conclusion of the immanent semantic inadequacy, non-referentiality, randomness, and indecision of the text. What kind of text undergoes a deconstructive treatment does not matter much, since no particular discourse can make particular truth claims, owing to the fact of universally deficient linguistic mediation involved in signification.

Derrida's and de Man's writing, while certainly distinctively idiomatic, both instantiate criticism which defies totalization, and which is bent upon questioning its own premises, undoing structures of authority, questioning possibility of truth and explanation, criticism without a be- ginning and end, whose only foundation seems to be lack of any found- ation at all. Theirs is a criticism that revolves around immanently fictive character of linguistic meaning. The entire body of Derrida's writting as well as de Man's *Blindness and Insight* (1971) and *Allegories of Read- ing* (1978) ironically undermine the traditional distinction between the discourse of literature and non-literature, literature and history (or his- toriography), literature and philosophy, theory and narration, simultane- ously ironizing their own premises.

Ironically too, in this apparently quite totalitarian deconstructive gesture, subject (theme), context and text dissolve into a field of un- limited linguistic play.

As a new theoretical and critical project New Historicism needs thus to take into account this type of thinking about nature of linguistic

---

[9] Said, op. cit., p. 214.

meaning (Derrida and poststructuralism) and the history of thinking about meaning (Foucault's archaeology of ideas).

These distinct critical modes share attention paid to what text conceals, the rules and plays of textuality, however differently approached. This point remains central to Said's synopsis of Derrida--Foucault debate which seems to him as it were a cross-purpose dialogue. Derrida's interests are concentrated on deconstruction of the Western metaphysics of presence, a mistaken but pervasive belief that linguistic meaning has an ultimate foundation which would stop the endless linguistic play, a tendency to believe that something rather than noting makes sense. With all its exquisite subtlety, Foucault aims to account for why this type of thinking has managed to build a canon, and determine the extra-epistemic factors that perpetuated such state of affairs.

Given demonstrably constructed character of all norms of culture, it becomes interesting how it happenedd that these particular habits of mind typical of rationalism – the master discourse of Western culture – have become so pervasive. Culture and history, along with specialised discourses of disciplines and institutions of various periods in history, reappear as valid for critical consideration, also for the analysis of a literary text.

In Foucault's perspective the invisible of the text is revealed through text's silent participation in a network of power, whose textual nature only serves to obscure operation of this very power, regulative of production and distribution of knowledge. Foucault's criticism of culture (investigated through epistemes, epochs or other totalities) and Derrida's deconstructionist method, are both aimed at "antireferentiality and de-definition", to use Said's formula.

Derridean deconstruction of text and Foucauldian analysis of descourse are both a "double writing" procedure; Derrida's consisting in detection of an undecidable, in order then to re-write the text so that it can reveal its self-contradiction or confusion, to point at instances of hierarchy, of privileged parts of binary oppositions, while Foucault's archaeology – in representing a specimen of discourse, an archive, an enunciation, so as to reveal the repressed, unsaid elements in it. Derrida's aim is a demonstration of ways metaphysics of presence pervades all types of writting/text/meaning so as to show how – at a closer analysis and rewritten – it ends up deconstructing itself, while Foucault's – analysis of subject formation through the operation of power in discourse. His interest is concentrated on factors which contributed

to circulation of these concepts, on what enabled creation of ideologies, on what accounts for relative coherence of systems built upon them, ultimately, on what the relation between these concepts and agencies that have perpetuated them and made them virtually invisible for subjects. The question of agency involved in transmission of ideas in time brings the question of history into focus. In a non-Derridean manner, Foucault undertakes to deconstruct the history of subject-formation through dis- course as an instrument of power. His project means re-semanticisation of discourse, accomplished through placing analysed material in a con- text which deprives the text of its hermetic nature, so as to reveal institutional interests which the text serves.

As in a debate over Descartes' separation of folly from dreaming, Foucault will concentrate on extra-textual forces of the time the text, as an instance of two contemporary discourses (a meditation and a logical demonstration), on the social dimension and professional authority at work, whereas Derrida will treat the text as a indeterminate play of textual traces of meaning organised in the form of a violent hierarchy. Foucault opposes – as Said says – deconstructive "placing it [text] *en abime* in a wholly textual ether". While never negating the linguistic nature of signification, Faucault chooses to describe the text's meaning in terms of its effect upon subject, its power to regulate human conduct and create subjectivity.

Foucault's preoccupation whit discourse, his archaeology of ideas defines rules of exclusion, incorporation, defferentiation, legitimation and rejection, ways of defining what is and what is not classifiable as a fact, what is accepted as the sane or insane, who given the authority to speak, operative in a given period, principles which define acceptability and legibility of text, at the same time rendering it a natural part of an overall text of contemporary culture. Once again context and history, discontinuous between periods, always radically different from previous epistemes, become relevant as determinants of meaning. Rules of discourse, in Foucault's view, are made invisible directly through processes of rarefaction and disguise so as to impose upon the text an aspect of naturalness and assertiveness enabling control over subjects under the guise of rationality, truth, fundamental human values.

Discourse, ruled externally by power relations obtaining at a given historical moment and internally by the peculiar order of its syntax that hides its qualities of a free play, perpetuates itself through its apparent objectivity. Internal syntax of discourse are functions of the distinction

between the signified and the signifier, an arbitrary relation between an order of words and an order of things. Foucault's procedure consists in a study of texts of a period so as to distinguish a discursive mode or epistemic coherence they display, regardless of their authors' biography. His treatment of discourse is deconstructive in the poststructuralist sense that an "order of things" and an "order of words" are separated by an unbridgeable gap, just as other deconstructors and structuralists before them would have it. His archaeology of knowledge repeatedly discredits myths of full identity – a mythical state of time before speech/writing emerged. Identity and non-identity are conditions of logic, grammar and social praxis, all of which governed by hierarchy – a result of "that Fall of man into language"[10].

The concept of history and anti-humanism are relatively short-lasting phenomena. The Classical age still clings to the notion of timeless and unchanging character of language, which is seen as a transparent vehicle of representation of things, only to be superseded by a new paradigm of thinking appearing early in the 19th century. The linguistic mode of mediation of reality becomes a currency, and the problem of time enters in. This concept of knowledge and man himself start to be seen as non-universal, finite, and constructed. The category of temporal succession gains priority over previous principles of resemblance and contiguity. This is a period of great philosophies of history, Hegel and Marx, as well as historical syntheses of Ranke or Michelet. "Life, labour and language", distinctive features of human kind, are approached from the perspective of history and studied in the hope for discovery of fundamental regularities. Contrary to expectations, science appears to give proofs of infinite difference instead of identity. Consequently, rationality loses its unquestioned status.

Given such a vision of history and linguistic character of historical knowledge, it becomes extremely complicated to say what historical criticism of any text, literary text included, is competent to do. This is a question undertaken by New Historicism, at least its poststructuralist variety, the one which discards the old historicist notion of history along with the old-fashioned hope for a transparent reading of it. When literature becomes just one of discourses (in no way privileged over others) and history (context) loses its transparency, when both as linguistic constructs are referentially unreliable, what becomes of

---

[10] H. White, *The Content of the Form*, The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 1992, p. 117.

historical criticism of literature? An answer to this question must involve both a new method and a new choice of themes. At its most effective, New Historicism should be able to combine deconstructive insights (even if without foregrounding them) with an analysis of historical texts and contexts.

This problem and its consequences for criticism of the literary discourse are given exemplary treatment by Joseph Litvak in his "Back to the Future: A Review Article on the New Historicism, deconstruction, and Nineteenth-Century Fiction". Litvak attends to poststructuralist insights deployed by the most theory-conscious New Historicists concerning history as an "already-textualized repertoire of manipulations and concealments, whereby discovery of a trans-historical or anti--historical undecidability may be postponed"[11]. What then differentiates their project from similarly oriented deconstructive rhetorical analysis, intent upon revelation of a deferred undecidability. The New Historicist new history seems to tell its local stories, or Greenblatt's "episodes", in order to postpone a moment of inevitable aporia. It engages reader's attention with telling-constructing stories of past portraying institutional interests, power relations, instances of containment and subversion before arriving at disclosures of conceptual impurity (différance as difference-within). The effect amounts to deconstruction of a larger narrative context, a fragment of past reality constructed in the discourse of literature and discourses of other disciplines (ideology, politics, medicine, law, psychoanalysis). What seems to distinguish New Historicism from deconstruction is the questions it tries to answer: Where do the impure, imperfect, internally-different texts come from, and what is their genealogy? Accepting immanent textual undecidability – also of the text of history – New Historicist critical discourse keeps readers busy with text which in the last instance is bound to reveal an indeterminacy, paradox, self-contradiction. Unlike deconstruction, New Historicism is engagend in motivating the arbitrary signifier in terms of historical context that generated the studied episode, developing plots that illustrate the impurity and internal contradiction of relevent intertext, before this routine poststructuralist discovery of an aporia is accomplished. In this fashion Catherine Gallagher's *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832--1867*, presents an analysis of social discourse which emerged during the "Condition of England" debate, contained in several contemporary

---

[11] Litvak, op. cit., p. 126.

industrial novels, so as to highlight affinities between oppositions that obtain in the discourse of emergent industrial society (free will/ /determinism, family/society, facts/values) and the novelistic discourse at the time. Thus Dickens's *Hard Times* is "'about' the failure of metaphor ...not just a general principle of rhetoric but the ideology based upon the specific, paternalist metaphor or society as family"[12]. At the most general level Gallagher deconstructs the basic dichotomy between the literary and the non-literary, which remain in a state of mutual dependence on each other. Her analysis of a Victorian concept of culture and representation also bears traces of deconstructive treatment, in so far as she analyses it as a paradox which at once disparaged and "elevate[d]... [representation] onto a plane above the world represented"[13]. Another paradigm-case of New Historicist discourse is Mark Seltzer's *Henry James and the Art of Power*, a Foucauldian study of selected novels by James, studies of theme of power, failed attempts at artistic escape from power-structures of its day, and co-optation as the ultimate result of these oppositional endeavours. Novel as a specimen of literary discourse, becomes an instrument of modern "art of power", of the aestheticisation of power, testifying to a political genealogy of polarity between the literary and the non-literary, which Seltzer ultimately deconstructs by conceptual means analogous to Gallagher's.

It is worth to consider consequences of theoretical awareness of the constructed nature of context, which – however provisional, unreliable, relative – in certain ways still resembles the old-fashioned pictures of epochs *reconstructed* by the positivists historians and genetic literary historians. Is this new history substantially different from a naive empirical, realist construction of Tillyard's Elizabethan England, a model old-historicist performance? Is the New Historicist plausible narrative representation of traces of past reality, performed in empirical terms, even if without a vision of a unified, hierarchical whole, any different from reconstructions performed in faith in objective knowledge of the past.

Philosophical consequences of the post-structuralist representation of past, textual access to this non-present reality, is an issue whose multiple ramifications go far beyond the scope of the present paper. In an apt allusion to the title of a California-based journal of New

---

[12] Litvak, op. cit., p. 129.

[13] C. Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832-1867*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1985, p. 243.

Historicists "Representations", Howard Felperin - analysing the "uses of the canon" - points to the fact that "[t]he very term 'representation' at once recuperates and sublates this older historicist and naively realist objective of 'making present again' a past culture conceived not only as chronologically but *ontologically* prior to any construction of it. In so doing, it partly rehabilitates a residually referential aspiration, if not to 'commune', at least to correspond with the past"[14]. Felperin's structures point to another fragment of the polemical field in which New Historicism is located, to a dialogue with the older varieties of historicism, and perhaps to those New Historicist productions, which - while keen on labelling themselves *new* - in fact remain under influence of the positivist idea of history and genetic criticism, an issue which itself deserves critical attention.

---

[14] H. Felperin, *The Uses of the Canon*, Clarendon Press, London, 1990, p. 150.

ZNACZENIE I JEGO KONTEKST.
POSTSTRUKTURALISTYCZNE TŁO NOWEGO HISTORYCYZMU

(Streszczenie)

Nowy Historycyzm, jako jedna z nowych orientacji w badaniach literackich, stanowi próbę zastosowania post-strukturalistycznych teorii znaczenia w analizie literatury. Z jednej strony orientacja ta określa się wobec wciąż jeszcze żywej odmiany historycyzmu pozytywistycznego, z drugiej zaś pozostaje w pełnym kontrowersji dialogu z dekonstrukcjonizmem (zwłaszcza jego Derridiańską odmianą, zwaną szkołą z Yale), uznawanym za reprezentacyjny kierunek post-strukturalizmu.

Historia, rzeczywistość, literatura – to w ujęciu dekonstrukcyjnym – tekst. Analiza owego tekstu (czy owych tekstów) musi więc sprowadzać się do jego/ich relacji wewnętrznych, jako jedynych, formalnych wyznaczników sensu. Kontekst społeczno-historyczny nie posiada mocy wyjaśniającej, gdyż granica pomiędzy dyskursem literatury a dyskursem kultury danej epoki jest złudzeniem.

Foucault w swoich analizach dyskursów koncentruje się na tym, jakie czynniki sprawiły, że dane typy dyskursu osiągnęły pozycję dominującą i zdołały ją utrwalić (np. dyskurs racjonalizmu, jako główny dyskurs filozofii zachodniej). Kontekst w jego ujęciu – historia, społeczeństwo, wszechobecne stosunki władzy – determinują preferowane sposoby formułowania myśli.

Debata Derrida-Foucault, szeroko komentowana w kontekście pojawienia się Nowego Historycyzmu i koncepcji post-historii, może więc zostać potraktowana jako spór wokół roli kontekstu wobec znaczenia. Wiodące przykłady analiz tekstów literackich (C. Gallagher, M. Seltzer) stanowią udaną próbę wykorzystania koncepcji dekonstrukcyjnych i analiz ideologii epoki („ideologia państwa jako paternalistyczna metafora społeczeństwa", czy „powieść jako estetyczny instrument władzy").