CHAPTER 25

Critical Theory: A New Attitude towards Art and Society

1 The Original Concept of Critical Theory

We have seen that the concept of "theory" dates back to Greek philosophy and that it became synonymous with scientific, objective knowledge.[1] A theory does not change and it is independent of individual ideas and circumstances. This concept of theory was applied to the human and social sciences too, so that they have been considered ahistorical and non-subjective knowledge susceptible to empirical verification.

The Frankfurt School and its representatives proposed the opposite perspective. Theory is always a subjective, historical and often non-disinterested activity. We need a critical position; we have to ask the meaning of apparently self-evident truths and commonly accepted theories. And, when we ask, we always have to think of what we are asking, why we are asking, what is at stake in our asking.

Theory, according to the representatives of this critical theory, is not objective knowledge. The object of theory (or real knowledge) is not, like Plato said, in the eternal and immutable world of forms beyond the sky. On the contrary, it is possible that the very object of research has been created by the theory we want to demonstrate. For example, Plato's theory of forms was created to demonstrate the superiority of intellectual knowledge over the senses, the superiority of philosophy over poetry, but it created what it wanted to prove: the concept of form or idea as the object of intellectual knowledge. In Plato, the concept of form justified the task of the philosopher. In general, we can say that, from a critical point of view, neither the subject nor the object of the theory can be taken for granted and as if they were already "given" before they meet. We have to be suspicious and critical of them.

2 Critical Theory Today

Today the concept of "critical theory" has become a general label applied to almost every subject in the humanities and social sciences. At the beginning the critical theory of the School of Frankfurt represented a specific and

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radical attitude. It was criticism of what was normally taken for granted in order to dispel the delusions of ideology through self-awareness and promote a free society. The works of Marx and Freud were the basic texts. Today many other authors can be ascribed to the sources of critical theory. Philosophers like Nietzsche and Heidegger, but above all authors like Saussure, Shklovsky, Jakobson and the representatives of structuralism, Gramsci, Gadamer, and then the representatives of post-structuralism, above all Derrida and Foucault, and the postmodern theorists like Lyotard. It seems that almost every theorist from the last eighty years can be ascribed to the trend of critical theory. Actually, almost every philosopher or theorist of literature, aesthetics and art advanced a kind of criticism against the dominant culture, in order to dispel the delusion of given and unquestionable concepts and categories. Using a current expression, critical theory is a kind of "school of suspicion."

Critical theory is above all a self-critical attitude; this means it is not external to the theory it proposes and it is aware, and critical, of the conditions and context in which it is elaborated. This self-awareness is its most innovative trait. Critical theory often has a social commitment. It has an emancipatory character and it shows the possibility of a better society and provides guidelines for human action. Is our society based on profit and instrumental reason the best one? Why do we accept a system which does not serve our actual interests? Is it possible to have a more free and happy society? Even if it deals with language and with literature, with movies and with cultural products, critical theory shows that the entire culture and society are implied in them. It is not just a denunciation of culture, society and ideology, but an attempt to present the mechanisms on which culture, society and ideology are based. We have to remember that, in the philosophical tradition from Nietzsche to Heidegger and Derrida, truth is camouflaged not just because of ideology or the social order. The history of philosophy itself, or the tradition of metaphysics, or the very language we use must be objects of our criticism. At the same time, it is impossible to find a point of view outside of philosophy, metaphysics or language. We are always in the tradition we have to criticize.

In this chapter we will consider the origin of the critical theory, its characteristics and its main achievements, and we will understand the reason for its universal success and often misunderstood meaning.

3 The "School of Frankfurt" and the Critique of Instrumental Reason

In 1931, Max Horkheimer (1895–1973) became the director of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt. The program, under this new direction, was

interdisciplinary research into modern society in the wake of a revised and updated Marxian tradition. Philosophers like Horkheimer, Theodor Wiesgrung Adorno (1903–1969) and Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) worked together with psychologists like Eric Fromm (1900–1980), critics and thinkers like Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) and sociologists, economists, and scholars from different disciplines. Their interdisciplinary work emphasised the cultural aspect of social issues rather than the economic one and highlighted the interconnection between culture, economics, sociology, psychoanalysis, politics and power.

According to Horkheimer, critical theory designates a kind of social analysis which is not scientific in the traditional sense. Scientific rationality, actually, is at the origin of the instrumental reason which characterises the Western attitude and that explains the horrors of the World Wars. According to instrumental reason, rationality – which means efficiency and success – is the best way to achieve a goal. What is important is the efficiency with which a prescribed goal is achieved. From this perspective means are less important than ends and what is objective is more important than what is subjective. The objective has a cognitive content whereas the subjective is an empty representation, an illusion. This rational attitude is called "Enlightenment," and the historical Enlightenment in the eighteenth century is just a moment in the history of instrumental reason, which dates back to Plato and Parmenides and finds in modern science and technology its final form.

> For the Enlightenment, only what can be encompassed by unity has the status of an existent or an event; its ideal is the system from which everything and anything follows. [...] The mythologizing equation of Forms with numbers in Plato's last writings expresses the longing of all demythologizing: number became enlightenment's canon. [...] Bourgeois society is ruled by equivalence. It makes dissimilar things comparable by reducing them to abstract quantities. For the Enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry. Unity remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell. All gods and qualities must be destroyed.[2]

Abstract quantities are all that matters because real qualities cannot be reduced to a mathematical order, and in this way they are considered art or poetry, subjective accidents, matters of no importance. Modern bureaucracy and concentration camps share the same principle of instrumental reason: what matters is not the means (the human being) but the end: efficiency and

functionality to achieve a goal. Rationality, guided by the principle of instrumental reason, permeated Western philosophy, science, and technology. Actually, rationality and science could not prevent World War II and the genocide against the Jews. (Horkheimer and Adorno and other members of the Institute for Social Research escaped from Nazism in Europe to the US.) Actually, they were used to achieve an efficient extermination of human beings.

4 Criticism of Culture Industry

Today our society is permeated by the same instrumental reason (masked as a liberal attitude boosting rationality and progress) so that human beings are considered as things or, more exactly, as means to achieve a goal, and this goal is absolute power in a society in which profit is the only value. In order to get this power, mass media and art propose a simple and easy vision of reality, so that our critical faculties are dulled and atrophied. Critical theory is the struggle against instrumental reason and against principles which are given as self-evident and universally accepted but which actually express the attitude of the Enlightenment.

Culture industry products such as Hollywood movies, pop music, mass literature, and art in general are the result of an industrial process of commercialization which implies production, distribution and consumption of works. Works of art are created according to market strategies and become a part of our everyday life. In this way, in the fruition of the work of art, we do not experience anything new and different, we are not enriched by it, we do not encounter anything different from our society, which is the capitalist society of consumerism and profit. In the experience of the work of art we feel confirmed in our basic attitudes and beliefs. The culture industry does not simply offer models or life-styles consistent with the social system but it rather presents its products as exceptions and transgressions of the rules of our society. Take an action movie. Think of the hero who transgresses the accepted rules (for example, not to kill) in order to impose the order of our Western society (which appears to be the best and only one, with its reasonable rules and acceptable exceptions, for example, do not kill, unless you have to kill an enemy of our society). The oversimplification of super-heroes weakens our critical faculties and we accept as true what seems to be just entertainment. Actually, it is not entertainment but advertising, propaganda, and social control.

A system which exerts complete control on society is a totalitarian system. Why does a society prohibit some behaviours and, at the same time, present them as acceptable in the culture industry? Why does a society allow some

behaviours and present them as transgressions? They are presented as a form of tolerated transgression. This tolerance makes a repressive society seem to be very human, tolerant and, above all, free. Actually, this tolerance is a repressive tolerance. Society prescribes a prohibition and, at the same time, a transgression, and by means of the culture industry it presents a cultural background in which prohibition and transgression seem to be natural and self-evident. Actual life reflects a similar level of tolerance.

Our consumer society is rather free and liberal with regard to sexual behaviour. Is it real freedom originated by real tolerance? According to the theorists of the School of Frankfurt it is, again, a "repressive tolerance" where our real needs and actual opportunities for freedom are made to vanish.

> Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the trash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors' incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products.
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> Interested parties like to explain the culture industry in technological terms. [...] What is not mentioned is that the basis on which technology is gaining power over society is the power of those whose economic position in society is strongest. Technical rationality today is the rationality of domination.[3]

The culture industry presents art and culture subjected to the modern capitalistic system of profit and serves its totalitarian impulses. Movies and works of art in general are standardized products so that they present little innovation and a lot of repetition. The current trend in the cinema industry to make sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and remakes of lower quality instead of proposing original subjects is a commercial strategy. Profit, and not innovation or creativity, is the point. But, beyond profit, there is something else: social control. They exclude what is new, what is different, what can potentially disturb the system.

> What is new in the phase of mass culture compared to that of late liberalism is the exclusion of the new. The machine is rotating on the spot. While it already determines consumption, it rejects anything untried as a risk. In film, any manuscript which is not reassuringly based on a best-seller is viewed with mistrust. That is why there is incessant talk of ideas, novelty and surprises, of what is both totally familiar and has never existed before.[4]

For this reason, Horkheimer and Adorno call the culture industry a mass deception. "Industry is interested in human beings only as its customers and employees and has in fact reduced humanity as a whole, like each of its elements, to this exhaustive formula."[5] At the same time cinematic characters represent stereotypes with which people can identify and, in some way, find the meaning of their existence. But a complete identification is not allowed.

> The female starlet is supposed to symbolize the secretary, though in a way which makes her seem predestined, unlike the real secretary, to wear the flowing evening gown. Thus she apprises the female spectator not only of the possibility that she, too, might appear on the screen but still more insistently of the distance between them. [...] Where the culture industry still invites naïve identification, it immediately denies it.[6]

The culture industry creates contradictory feelings. The viewer of the movie fancies and enjoys what she could be and is not. She is an "absolutely replaceable" individual and, at the end, since she is not the actress, a "pure nothingness."[7] For this reason "films emphasize chance." Like in TV shows, success is a prize, a blind case, a random opportunity offered to anybody:

> By imposing an essential sameness on their characters, with the exception of the villain, to the point of excluding any faces which do not conform [...] the ideology does, it is true, make life initially easier for the spectators. They are assured that they do not need to be in any way other than they are and that they can succeed just as well without having to perform tasks of which they know themselves incapable.[8]

Using the conceptual tools offered by philosophy, psychoanalysis, and Marxism, Horkheimer and Adorno criticize the apparently simple logic of the culture industry and stress the fact that there is nodefinite, rational answer to a system which uses instrumental reason and that there is no consolatory truth but only a lot of contradictions which puzzle the traditional, rational critic of society. For example, the culture industry, on behalf of the consumer society, creates the starlet of the moment, a girl endowed with sexual appeal. As a sexy actress she can be the ideal girlfriend of adolescents, and as a pin-up she can delight an entire army, and "it is accepted and approved, but prostitution behind the lines is not permitted."[9] The critical approach means that we always have to see what is hidden behind an apparent self-evident and universally accepted theory, fact, or behaviour. In the example, the point is not if the representation of a sexy woman is morally good or bad, or why a woman

is represented in such a way. The point is: why is a woman arousing sexual interest represented and accepted as a model in the culture industry and, at the same time, why is she forbidden to be a prostitute in the actual society, where her sexual appeal would have a reason and a real purpose, where the desire she arouses could be actually satisfied? The social system itself is paradoxical and contradictory since contradiction and paradox are characteristics of instrumental reason, because the instrumental reason creates an irrational society despite all its rationalization.

5 The Critical Theory at Work

Critical theory applies principles from economics, psychoanalysis, sociology, and philosophy in an unsystematic way in order to reveal the hidden mechanisms of oppression and control working in our present world and culture. From Horkheimer and Adorno's texts we can notice that authors do not propose a defined and systematic conceptual discourse. Rather, critical theory finds out the tricks and inconsistencies of a system which pretends to be rational, scientific, natural and inevitable. We have seen that critical theory does not share the scientific method and that it employs Marxian and Freudian concepts and strategies since they are not considered science and, in contrast, undermine the possibility of a univocal and unique social order.

The cultural critic, psychoanalyst and philosopher Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), a prominent representative of the School of Frankfurt, proposes a fusion of Marx and Freud that since then has characterized the approach of critical theory. In his influential book *Eros and Civilization* (1955) Marcuse affirms, in revolutionary terms, that civilization is not necessarily based on the repression of instincts. Western society uses repression as an instrument to provide social order and ensure a stable political power. Actually, civilization is moved and animated by instinctual forces. From this perspective it is possible to imagine a society in which satisfaction of instincts, pleasure and happiness are granted, chaos is avoided and civilization is preserved. This would not be the consumer society and the capitalistic system, which are both based on repression of instinctual forces and on the eternal delay of a promised pleasure.

Marcuse takes the concept of pleasure from Freud's psychoanalysis and applies it successfully to society. At the same time, he takes from Marx the revolutionary vocation that philosophy has to change the world starting from the economic and socials level.

As we have seen, in critical theory there is not a given set of rules and concepts but rather an attempt to see the problem from another point of view,

questioning what seems to be normal, accepted and self-evident. A non-scientific tradition, then, can provide concepts and new perspectives and possible solutions. In the case of Marcuse, repression of instincts and unsatisfied desire seem to be instruments of power. Now we can better understand their connection to art and the culture industry.

6 The Power of Art

Satisfaction of desire is not the goal of the culture industry or consumer society in general. The culture industry creates desire and relentlessly promises pleasure but it cannot satisfy the promise "because its product ceaselessly reduces the pleasure it promises as a commodity to that mere promise, it finally coincides with the advertisement it needs on account of its own inability to please."[10] The commodity delivered by the culture industry is desire and not satisfaction and, at the end, the culture industry is the advertising of a non-existent goal.

We can make an example. Mainstream movies which target a large audience (young people, adults, families…) present very standardized characters and situations. In such films the movie industry usually proposes actresses who are more and more young, beautiful, and sexually attractive. Their skimpy dress suggests nudity, but the naked body is never to be seen; their speech is often about sex, but sexual intercourse is never shown. It is strange, since a naked body is a rather normal occurrence in life whereas a hyper-sexualized and perfect body occurs less often, if ever.

According to Freud, the sexualization of all of life (experienced as the desire for sex and the refusal to indulge in it, as flirting, as phantasies, and so on) along with the impossibility of satisfying this sexual drive, is the condition of hysteria. A world characterized by a constant desire which cannot (and does not need to) be satisfied is a hysterical world. You cannot live happily in it. Now, if you are not happy, you can be better controlled because you desire. If you desire, you can be used. You desire what you do not have, so you buy. Conversely, if you are happy, if you can satisfy your desire, you cannot be easily controlled. What in our society is presented as an apparent liberal and free attitude is actually proposed in the form of desire: a beauty which normal women cannot achieve, but only desire; the sexualization of all of life, but as a play which aims to increase desire but does not lead to satisfaction.

In contrast, our consumer society proclaims that pleasure, full satisfaction of desire, and happiness exist like never before and that they are offered as available commodities ready for consumption.

The work of art created and distributed by the culture industry is easy, enjoyable; it does not present the contradictions of authentic life and it does not require our critical faculty. We can experience it without thinking. "For the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been pre-empted by the schematism of production."[11]

Actually, authentic art and non-industrial culture have in themselves a great disruptive and emancipatory power. Art, according to Adorno, should not offer any cheap consolation or vain hope but it should present the negativity of existence. A real, authentic work of art presents what is not assimilated, standardized, reduced to the order of things we know and accept. The novels and theatre of Samuel Beckett, the stories of Franz Kafka, and dodecaphonic music are examples of what art can be: something which is irreducible to the social and rational order of things. Something which is maybe difficult, unpleasant and uncanny, but art does not need to please and give satisfaction: in this case it would cheat you and be a commodity ready for consumption.

Art in general, according to the thinkers of critical theory, represents the other and the different, what is not our ordinary life. Art is another dimension with respect to everyday life and because of this, art opens a utopian dimension. In art, according to Marcuse, we sublimate our sexual instincts (Freud called them "libido"); that is to say, we delay their satisfaction, in order to achieve an intellectual or aesthetic work. This mechanism of sublimation is the origin of the great works of art of the past and gave art a function in society. According to these premises, art is an experience of the other and of the different. Now, in the era of the culture industry and mass production, art permeates everyday life more and more and it appears to be more and more its reproduction.

> The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry. [...] The more densely and completely its techniques duplicate empirical objects, the more easily it created the illusion that the world outside is a seamless extension of the one which has been revealed in the cinema. [...] Life is to be made indistinguishable from the [...] film.[12]

Today in industrial art we find the ordinary and not the extraordinary, despite cinematic special effects. In mass society art cannot negate reality, cannot offer a different, utopian perspective. Mass art simply affirms the existing order and the impossibility of resisting it. Sexual energy is no longer invested in creating and experiencing works of art, a process which Marcuse calls "desublimation." Without the possibility of sublimating his sexual energy in a work of art, the

human being lives in one dimension only, that of the present world. In this way desublimation is a repressive instrument in the hands of a consumer society based on profit and efficiency.

It seems that sexual freedom is a great achievement of our tolerant, contemporary society. In fact, this freedom has reduced the utopian space of art and the possibility of experiencing the other and the different, and of resisting the present. Actually, an apparent freedom and false tolerance cause further enslavement and subjection to the instrumental reason, to the present and to its rules of efficiency and profit. This is what Marcuse called a "repressive tolerance," which apparently grants freedom to people in order to control them. Art, when possible, seems to be the only real transgression and the only chance to change the order of things. Art, at any rate, is the only hope we have to be free.

7 Critical Theory and the Humanities

The school of Frankfurt left a great heritage to the study of the humanities and the social sciences. As we have seen at the beginning of this chapter, the label "critical theory" can be applied to many fields of research. In general, the study of literary theory and works owes a lot to the School of Frankfurt, and concepts like "instrumental reason," "cultural industry," repressive tolerance and emancipatory power of art are very useful.

Today we can understand critical theory in a broader sense, as the systematic criticism (or at least the awareness) of the principle of instrumental reason, in situations in which human beings are considered as means and not as ends in themselves. It considers elements from society, from political theory, from psychology, from art, literature, and pop culture. It warns that what seems to be true is often nothing but a kind of camouflage of something else. It warns that we should not believe in the explicit assertions of a social and cultural system. Literary theory, aesthetics, and especially the study of popular entertainment (movies, comics, video-clips, and so on) has often adopted the critical attitude.[13] In general, its strategies can be applied to many fields of research to great advantage. They can be useful in many situations in which a totalitarian system attains its goals by means of an apparent free and progressive theory. From post-colonial studies to feminism, from gay and lesbian studies to racial studies, and so on, the label of "critical theory" is used and, actually, means the emancipatory content of critical knowledge.

Notes

1 See Plato, Chapter 1.
2 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), pp. 4–5.
3 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 95.
4 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 106.
5 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 118.
6 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 116.
7 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 117.
8 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 117.
9 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 126.
10 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 131.
11 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 98.
12 Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 99.
13 See, for example, Slavoj Žižek, *Living in the End Times* (London, New York: Verso, 2010).

CHAPTER 26

Perspectives of Post-Structuralism

1 The Criticism of Sign and Structure: Attitude of Post-Structuralism

Both terms, Post-Structuralism and Deconstruction, refer to something which was before and which we have to overcome or disassemble. In both cases the previous situation (a contingent situation of method or a given situation of facts or ideas) is the starting point to go beyond. We have to keep in mind the meaning of these terms in order to understand our current condition and the general situation of the human sciences and, more specifically, of aesthetics and literary theory.

Post-Structuralism as a negative term in general means that the attitude of Structuralism was somehow inadequate or biased, and that we have to overcome it. The first case of an open and consistent criticism of Structuralism dates back to 1966, when, in a conference at Johns Hopkins University intended to present Structuralism to American scholars, Jacques Derrida (1930–2004) read a paper which called into question the structural method. In the late Sixties Structuralism was at the peak of its fortune. Structure was considered the constant and general feature of cultural phenomena. From linguistics to anthropology Structuralism was proposed as a scientific and anti-humanistic method.

In his paper "Structure, sign and play in the discourse of the human sciences" Derrida criticized Lévi-Strauss and the very concept of the sign, the core of linguistics. The sign is based on a difference in which something always refers to something different (the signifier refers to a signified). For example, the word "horse" (signifier) refers to the animal (signified). Such a signified is considered as an original, permanent, stable principle or origin (Greek: *arché*) which is different from the play of moveable signifiers. As Jonathan Culler writes: "Traditionally Western philosophy has distinguished 'reality' from 'appearance', *things* themselves from the *representations* of them, and *thought* from *signs* that express it. Signs and representations, in this view, are but a way to get to reality, truth, or ideas, and they should be as transparent as possible, should not affect or infect the thought or truth they represent."[1] According to Derrida, without the supplement of the sign, we cannot experience the immediate, present reality of things. "Signs produce the immediacy of the thing they defer." From this perspective the sign is no longer a tool, an instrument, or an intermediary to grasp the immediate reality of things.

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What we perceive as immediate is always the result of linguistic mediation. In this way Derrida states that "immediacy is derived. Everything begins with the intermediary."

Western philosophy is based on the assumption that there is a principle or origin (*arché*), or a final end (*telos*), which is different from the play of significations and which gives a meaning to it. This principle gives us the comfortable delusion that we can play (the play of signification) without being a part of the play itself. Structuralism is based on the same assumption of a permanent principle or a stable structure.

> The center is not the center. [...] The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which itself is beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught by the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset.[2]

In order to master this anxiety for being implicated in the game, we look for a stable meaning, a "full presence," an origin (*arché*, like the Platonic form), or an end (*telos*), which is beyond the game.

> On the basis of what we call the center [...] repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always *taken* from a history of meaning [*sens*] – that is, in a word, a history – whose origin may always be reawakened or whose end may always be anticipated in the form of presence. This is why one perhaps could say that the movement of any archaeology, like that of any eschatology, is an accomplice of this reduction of the structurality of structure and always attempts to conceive of structure on the basis of a full presence which is beyond play.[3]

Language cannot be considered as a stable system whose referent (object) is present, whose permanent or constant characteristics we can identify, and whose structures we can analyze. Language (or more generally the discourse of human sciences based on a linguistic model) is constantly changing and its rules are subject to variation. The idea of a stable and permanent center (a signified, a structure...) is rather a function, a continuous movement of "repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations." But behind these repetitions and transformations there is nothing given as a stable presence and as the origin or end of history. What happens is rather a process of substitutions,

the infinite play in which the signifier refers to a signified which is not a stable and permanent principle.

> Henceforth, it was necessary to begin thinking that there was no center, that the center could not be thought in the form of a present-being, that the center had no natural site, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This was the moment when language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a center or origin, everything became discourse, [...] a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences.[4]

The play of signification is infinite. We have neither a point from which we can start nor an end which we can reach. "The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely."[5] We are always in the play of infinite signification without a final presence given once and for all. Every signifier differs from its signified but this signified itself is already a result of the "system of differences." A signifier cannot find a definite signified, a presence, but only an infinite system without beginning or end. There is not a privileged point of view outside of this system and a pure scientific and objective perspective is impossible. The result is that every thought (and in this way every concept, every idea, everything) is not exactly what we think it is.

> [...] as soon as one seeks to demonstrate in this way that there is no transcendental or privileged signified and that the domain or play of signification henceforth has no limit, one must reject even the concept and word "sign" itself – which is precisely what cannot be done. For the signification "sign" has always been understood and determined, in its meaning, as sign-of, a signifier referring to a signified, a signifier different from its signified. If one erases the radical difference between signifier and signified, it is the word "signifier" itself which must be abandoned as a metaphysical concept.[6]

In this situation what can we do? How can we tackle the domain of the human sciences? How can we deal with signs? We cannot have certainties, we cannot hope for the definite interpretation of a text (or of a human phenomenon).

Above all we have to remember that "language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique"[7] so that we have to work infinitely on language (since we are in language and nothing human happens outside of language). We

always have to find new interpretations and accept that things can appear different from what they were supposed or thought to be. We cannot get rid of our language, of our tradition, and of our traditional concepts, but we have to conserve "all these old concepts within the domain of empirical discovery while here and there denouncing their limits, treating them as tools which can still be used. No longer is any truth value attributed to them; there is a readiness to abandon them, if necessary, should other instruments appear more useful."[8] We do not need to change our concepts but we have to adopt a certain attitude by reading literary and philosophical texts in a different way, without the expectation to find in them a true and final meaning: "the passage beyond philosophy does not consist in turning the page of philosophy (which usually amounts to philosophizing badly), but in continuing to read philosophers *in a certain way.*"[9] Life is permeated with signs and we cannot reach a privileged position to interpret them, we are deeply embedded in this process of signification so that we have neither immediacy nor external reality. We are always submerged in the text and "*there is nothing outside of the text*" (there is no outside-text; French: *it n'y a pas de hors-texte*).[10] We can adopt a certain attitude; we can read texts in a certain way. We have to remember that when we read a text "repetitions, substitutions, transformations, and permutations are always *taken* from a history of meaning" but that there is no ultimate and original meaning outside the moveable system of signification of which we are a part. The very idea of an original is created by the copies and we have only to do with them.

2 Foucault: Archeology and Criticism of Knowledge

In later paragraphs we will consider in more detail the consequences of Derrida's philosophy on literature and interpretation. Now we give an example of the application of the post-structuralist attitude to human science.

Michel Foucault (1926–1984) was a French intellectual, historian, and philosopher. He came from Structuralism but the structural method left him unsatisfied. It is hard to explain his personal research methodology in general terms. According to Foucault, in doing historical research, we should avoid taking for granted assumptions and conventions and we should question our very thinking of history. Our idea of history and historical research should be questioned and should become the first object of our historical inquiry. The point is: why do we think according to certain concepts, terms, categories, and oppositions? A structural analysis can show the present situation but cannot explain the reason and origin of such concepts, terms, categories,

and oppositions. Henceforth, we need what Foucault called an "archeology" of knowledge. We have to distrust the accepted categories, the perceived objects of knowledge, and we should research their origin. What we see as an object of knowledge is mainly the result of conventions. Our analysis should aim to reveal the origin of the object of knowledge which is made not of tradition but rather of dispersion and discontinuity, of transformation, of resemblance and repetition, of recurrence.

> We must also question those divisions or groupings with which we have become so familiar. Can one accept, as such, the distinction between the major types of discourse, or that between such forms or genres as science, literature, philosophy, religion, history, fiction, etc., and which tend to create certain great historical individualities? We are not even sure of ourselves when we use these distinctions in our own world of discourse, let alone when we are analysing groups of statements which, when first formulated, were distributed, divided, and characterized in a quite different way.[11]

Categories are supposed to be neutral but, actually, they are the result of a social, political, cultural system which is taken for granted and not analyzed.

> 'Literature' and 'politics' are recent categories, which can be applied to medieval culture, or even classical culture, only by a retrospective hypothesis, and by an interplay of formal analogies or semantic resemblances; but neither literature, nor politics, nor philosophy and the sciences articulated the field of discourse, in the seventeenth or eighteenth century, as they did in the nineteenth century. In any case, these divisions [...] are facts of discourse that deserve to be analysed beside others [...].[12]

The categories we use for analysis are the first object we should analyze. The object of history is not what was done but rather the set of conditions which made possible or, better, create the historical object. History is not linear and historical events are caused by dispersed and anonymous causes.

The original cause of historical fact is not a subjective will, an idea, destiny, progress or Providence, but a *discursive practice*. A discursive practice is the system of rules which determines the production of statements in a given society and in a determined period. This rules decide what can be said and what cannot be said and, in general, what is possible to say. In order to speak of the author or a work, for example, it is necessary that the concepts of "author" and "work" exist and that the statement has a meaning. Rules are anonymous and

objective; they do not come from an individual or collective will or from a decision. Foucault uses the terms discursive practice and statement to describe the origin of rules, but we cannot identify them with everyday language:

> They are, in a sense, at the limit of discourse: they offer it objects of which it can speak, or rather (for this image of offering presupposes that objects are formed independently of discourse), they determine the group of relations that dis-course must establish in order to speak of this or that object, in order to deal with them, name them, analyse them, classify them, explain them, etc. These relations characterize not the language (*langue*) used by dis-course, nor the circumstances in which it is deployed, but discourse itself as a practice.[13]

Sometimes there is a coincidence between language and discourse, but in general discursive practice means the anonymous, impersonal and not subjective character of the system of rules, which works like an autonomous linguistic system.

In this way we can understand the discursive formation or a system of statements produced by an anonymous, discursive practice. A discursive formation appears as the result of tradition, or as the effect of an individual decision, or as the consequence of a choice made by a consciousness. For example, at a certain moment around the seventeenth century there was an increasing control of discipline in social institutions as prisons and schools. What happened in the society can be seen as the consequence of a tradition or of a linear development of history. A traditional historian could interpret it as a will to control, a desire for order, the consciousness of the need for good behaviour, the rise of authority and so on. Actually, it happened in very different places and institutions: in prisons, in schools, in hospitals and in factories… According to Foucault, there was a common discursive practice, that of "discipline," which can explain dispersed and different facts occurring in very different places and without an apparent linear causality. The emergence of a discursive formation is random, anonymous and does not need any subject, any will, any intention or consciousness to be explained. And above all they do not have any aim.

> The forces operating in history are not controlled by destiny or regulative mechanisms, but respond to haphazard conflicts. They do not manifest the successive forms of a primordial intention and their attraction is not that of a conclusion, for they always appear through the single randomness of events. […] The world such as we are acquainted with it is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate

> their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events.[14]

We want to find a meaning in history, but this psychological need is at odds with the historical facts. "We want historians to confirm our belief that the present rests upon profound intentions and immutable necessities. But the true historical sense confirms our existence among countless lost events, without a landmark or a point of reference."[15]

3 The Post-Structuralist Method

Now we consider the consequences we can draw from Foucault's theory. There is neither subjectivity nor individual intention which triggers, orders or drives social phenomena. There is not a permanent structure which we can know with scientific attitude and objective certainty. We are always part of a discursive formation in which (and by means of which) we can say something. We cannot choose to change our discursive formation but only revise it in an "archeological" attempt.

Knowledge in the human sciences is not an objective and definite kind of knowledge but rather a type of "archeology." We have to discover our objects of knowledge and experience that can be very different from what they were supposed to be. The object of the human sciences is ruled by chaos, randomness, and chance and not by a general or universal law, not even by a permanent structure.

Foucault gives a very clear example of this difficulty in researching a very common object. What is sex? It seems a very easy question. From a biological, social and historical point of view it seems to be clear what sex is. Today we can speak about sex with a freedom which was unthinkable in sexually-repressed Victorian society. Nevertheless, Foucault states, there is still a repression.

> If sex is repressed, that is, condemned to prohibition, nonexistence, and silence, then the mere fact that one is speaking about it has the appearance of a deliberate transgression. A person who holds forth in such language, places himself to a certain extent outside the reach of power; he upsets established law; he somehow anticipates the coming freedom. This explains the solemnity with which one speaks of sex nowadays.[16]

Is it that simple? Can we say that sex is a natural fact and that its (relatively) free practice today tells us a story of emancipation? Actually, sex, repression,

and freedom are interconnected elements of the same discursive practice. What we think of as "sex" did not exist before as such. Sex is an idea produced by different social practices, created by discourses. Psychologists, clergymen, medical doctors, writers, poets, and politicians all contributed to the definition of what we today call "sex." We find medical, psychological, moral, political elements put together and deeply intertwined with novels, poems, narratives, religious prescriptions, philosophical treatises and so on. The biological fact of sex is indistinguishable from social, cultural, medical, religious, and artistic facts since they are all grouped under the same category of "sex." This is an artificial creation which, paradoxically, serves to determine the identity of individuals. In our culture sexuality becomes the secret of human nature and its most signifying aspect (more signifying than the soul) so that we distinguish human beings according to their sex and sexual orientation. Foucault, in his analysis, considers sex as an effect of social, political, and cultural forces rather than as a cause. Sex is the result, not the (supposedly) given explanation. In this way we are encouraged to be suspicious of what is considered as identified and natural (male/female, heterosexual/homosexual…). Foucault says that "what is at issue, […] is the over-all 'discursive fact,' the way in which sex is 'put into the discourse.' Hence, too, my main concern will be to locate the forms of power, the channels it takes […]."[17] A discursive practice always concerns the system and, as a consequence, power. There is not an isolated activity like "poetry" which is not connected to the discursive practice and which can be properly understood independently.

Since there is not an objective and permanent system, knowledge is related to dispersed, random, different cases. The multiplicity and dispersion of the objects of knowledge are not the consequence of a weakness of critical theory. They are rather acknowledgement that theory has to follow and adapt to specific cases and to find adequate strategies according to each case or each field of research. There is not a general method, only that of distrusting the surface, the obvious appearance and the simplicity of the object of knowledge.

In the human sciences the object of knowledge can be a small and particular portion of cultural production and the social world. In each case we have to inquire into particular objects and facts developing specific strategies, analyzing case by case. And in each case we have to find connections, dispersions, repetitions, concealments. In each case we have to distrust what can be easily explained in terms of tradition, suggestion, fashion, individual will or collective decision, in order to understand what actually is hidden behind what appears normal and understandable. And in our quest for knowledge we have to give up any hope of completeness; we have to accept that our object of knowledge

is always the result of forces and events that we cannot fully investigate, and, possibly, we have to accept the final unknowability of our object.

Notes

1 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 9.
2 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), pp. 352.
3 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," pp. 352–353.
4 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," pp. 353–354.
5 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," p. 354.
6 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," pp. 354–355.
7 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," p. 358.
8 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," p. 359.
9 Jacques Derrida, "Structure, Sign and Play," p. 364.
10 Jacques, Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 158.
11 Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 16.
12 Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 17.
13 Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, p. 36.
14 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," in *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault, II*, edited by James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley and others (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 381.
15 Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," p. 381.
16 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), p. 6.
17 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 11.

CHAPTER 27

The Practice of Deconstruction

1 Derrida and Deconstructionism: The Difference

Hans-Georg Gadamer wrote that there is no work of art, only interpretation and that "the being, of which we can speak, is language."[1] Jacques Derrida took to the extreme consequences the criticism against anything (a given meaning, a being in itself, a permanent substance) below or behind the interpreted world and the language. His criticism extends to the questioning of presence and immediacy, since what we perceive as present and immediate is the result of a linguistic mediation. His starting point[2] is linguistics and he proposes a criticism of structuralism.[3]

The notion of or term "difference" is at the core of Derrida's system (or unsystematic method) called "deconstruction." As we have seen, Derrida starts with the basic concept of Saussure's linguistics, the sign. He says that the sign differs, or is different, from the object it signifies. But the French term "différence" means "to be different," or "to differ" and "to defer," or "to delay." The linguistic sign is different from the object it signifies and it "delays" the real meeting with the object it signifies. In this process of difference the presence of the object is permanently delayed. We think to meet the object but we meet its substitute, the sign. Derrida calls this particular condition "*différance*," a French neologism which sounds like "*différence*" but which is written differently. The process of *différance* is the key term of any signification. Granted that we are in a world of signs, we cannot reach any ultimate, final and permanent signified. As we have seen in the previous chapter, traditional philosophy considered the signified as an original, permanent, and stable principle or origin (Greek: *arché*) which was different from the play of moveable signifiers. Now, we have to accept that we are deeply embedded in the play of signifiers and there is no position outside of it. Derrida expressed this condition with the statement: "there is no outside-text." In other words, we are in the text we have to understand and there is not any original and true meaning behind it. *Différance* is a process involving signification which operates in space and time, whose origin we can never reach. There is not any substance or aim which is at the end of this process. The object we suppose as a presence at its origin (a referent, a real thing outside of the language) is always "different" and "delayed" by the *différance*. We can speak of a permanent process in which we never reach the real presence of things but always something we think of as a presence.

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And, actually, the idea of "presence" is a leitmotif of Western metaphysics which Derrida criticizes. The very idea of an ultimate substance, or aim, or truth at the end of the process of *différance* is based on the assumption of presence. The concept of something which is being in itself (like a thing) and something else which is not being in itself (like a sign) affirms the priority of presence and the ontologically accessory status of the sign. But reality can be very different from what it was supposed to be.

Western tradition is based on the opposition between substance and appearance, things and their representations or signs. According to common sense, our world is woven with signs but (according to metaphysics) what matters are things or thoughts, which are the immediate manifestation of the presence of things. As we already noted, "signs and representations should be as transparent as possible, should not affect or infect the thought or truth they represent." On its turn, speech appears to be the immediate manifestation of the presence of thought. In contrast, writing seems to be derivative; writing is a graphic representation of speech, a sign of a sign, a representation further removed from immediate presence and truth. Now, Derrida turns this hierarchy between speech and writing upside down.

2 The Primacy of Writing

Our world is affected by signs; it is a text and there is no outside-of-the text. In our world any "immediacy is derived" through the process of *différance*. The very notion of presence is the result of a system of signs or "supplements." A "supplement" is something which supplies and completes something else, which we believed immediate and complete in itself. Actually, considered from a non-metaphysical perspective, this supplement is not inessential, but it constitutes the very essence, the very *presence* of the thing we perceive as present and immediate. As a matter of fact, our experience of reality is never immediate but always mediated and "supplemented" by signs and previous significations. Derrida writes that "it is impossible to separate the signifier from the signified."[4] There is no starting point, no substance or truth, no sheer presence or objective data from which we can start.

> Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of originary perception. Immediacy is derived. That all begins through the intermediary is what is indeed "inconceivable [to reason]."[5]

As a consequence of that, writing is not the last derivative effect of an original presence. Writing is the starting point of our reality, interwoven with signs and significations which give us the delusory certitude of an immediate presence. The very neologism "*différance*" calls attention to the written word (in speech we cannot tell it apart from the usual French "*différence*") and assigns to writing the task of performing the process of *différance* concealed by speech, concerned with presence. Actually, the delusion of presence is the result of the supplement or the sign. As we have seen, there is no outside-of-text and there is nothing but the text. Now, in the text, beyond and behind the real life of existences "of flesh and bone," beyond and behind writers and characters,

> there has never been anything but writing; there have never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the "real" supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, *in the text,* that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like "real mother" name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.[6]

Language, and writing in the first place, before speech, opens and articulates our world by making disappear the natural presence, something which has never existed except as a delusion created by the chain of supplements, by the infinite process of *différance.*

3 Derrida's Deconstruction and Literary Criticism

Deconstruction has become a method and a kind of reading strategy. Applications and results may vary considerably from case to case and from critic to critic, but the general attitude is that we should avoid looking for a cause-effect connection between phenomena which are apparently related. What is obvious and consistent is worth deeper consideration. The method of deconstruction suggests the reversal of the usual and traditional order of things based on accepted oppositions (signifier/signified, writing/speech, cause/consequence, and so on) and then the deconstruction or dismantlement of the system on which these oppositions are based. Every object of knowledge (a text as well as a concept) hides in itself the conditions of its own deconstruction, since the origin of every object is different from what it seems to be according to

the history of causes and effects, tradition, or common sense. The practice of deconstruction considers texts (their ideas, authors, facts, rhetorical forms…) in their complexity and reciprocal interdependence and does not restrain from a free and personal choice of details, paradoxical interpretations and non-conventional strategies of reading, at odds with historical interpretation, conventional criticism and common sense. It is possible to find examples of deconstruction, but it is impossible to give a general method to follow.

> If it seems to us in principle impossible to separate, through interpretation or commentary, the signified from the signifier, and thus to destroy writing by the writing that is yet reading […] When we speak of the writer and of the encompassing power of the language to which he is subject, we are not only thinking of the writer in literature. The philosopher, the chronicler, the theoretician in general, and at the limit everyone writing, is thus taken by surprise. But, in each case, the person writing is inscribed in a determined textual system.[7]

In this work of "destroying writing" by means of our interpretative writing which is a reading, we cannot dwell outside of the text and we are always in play. There is not any higher authority (as an author or an external meaning) which can help us to decide the true interpretation. The result is that we cannot often decide the true and definite meaning of texts or concepts. In contrast, sometimes we have to accept that a text or a concept remains indecipherable and that our criticism can only state that something is neither this nor that and that a definite answer is out of the question. Our understanding is more the practice of deconstruction in itself than an ultimate truth.

Deconstruction means to read texts and authors "*in a certain way*," as Derrida puts it: we should distrust appearance, clear and evident cause-affect connections, common sense, and consider that reality can be very different from what it seems to be. From the point of view of interpretation, we have to be aware that a text cannot find a definite interpretation and does not have a unique meaning. Even a single interpretation is subject to constant variations and adjustments, since the practice of deconstruction does not stop at any result and it is rather conceivable as a permanent movement.

Then, we have to accept that there is no difference between work and interpretation. Since there is no "outside of the text," a work and its interpretation share the same value and ontological status. The extreme consequence of this fact is that a piece of criticism and a piece of narrative are similar works and, in the end, we have to consider them at the same level in the hierarchy of texts. Romantic poets and philosophers have already stated this fact[8] and decadent

writers stressed the essential equivalence of creative and critical works[9] but they did it for poetic reasons and in an unsystematic way. Derrida offers a philosophical and critical approach to a question which will be extremely influential on literary theory.

4 Yale Critics: Bloom, De Man and the Practice of Deconstruction

Derrida's deconstructionism has had a great impact on aesthetics, criticism, and literary theory. Nevertheless, it is impossible to remain true to Derrida, since deconstruction has not (and cannot have) a definite methodology.[10] At Yale University some critics freely applied deconstructionist strategies to the close reading of literary texts. Texts of poetry and criticism (considered at the same level) have been read with original and interesting results. Harold Bloom (1930) affirms that there are no texts in themselves, only relationships between texts and that their interaction is meaningful. Bloom calls this relationship "influence," and poets and critics always experience the influence of the works of their predecessors. The history of poetical and critical texts is the history of their influence. A strong poet or a strong critic revises, re-interprets, and re-writes the work of his predecessors, in order to overcome the *anxiety of influence*. A strong poet attempts to occupy the ground or the poetic realm of his great precursor. He creatively *misreads* his predecessor and creates his own poetic realm and his own original work. His misreading is a wilful act which requires force and courage. In contrast, Bloom says, a weak poet imitates his precursor and remains in his shadow because he cannot find the force or courage to misread his work.

> I propose, not another new poetics, but a wholly different practical criticism. Let us give up the failing enterprise of seeking to "understand" any single poem as an entity in itself. Let us pursue instead the quest of learning to read any poem as its poet's deliberate misinterpretation, *as a poet*, of a precursor poem or of poetry in general. Know each poem by its *clinamen* and you will know that poem in a way that will nor purchase knowledge by the loss of the poem's power.[11]

Bloom's approach to the poetic text is personal and original. His terminology is creative and his imagery is free, corroborating the idea that between poetry and criticism there is no difference. He writes "a theory of poetry which presents itself as a severe poem"[12] and uses terms such as *clinamen* which are extraneous to the critical tradition. *Clinamen* is from Lucretius's poem *The Nature of*

Things and "it means the swerve of the atom so as to make change possible in the universe."[13] In Bloom's theory it refers to "poetic misreading or misprision." According to Bloom, the history of texts is the history of their misreading or misprision, a process which certainly owes to Derrida's notion of *différance* and which makes of intertextuality a main concept of aesthetics and criticism and a key concept of poetic creation, too. Intertextuality means that a text can never be considered alone but all texts are made of other pre-existing texts which are in reciprocal interaction. Misreading is neither imitation nor tradition, but a more active and less controlled principle. It means also that a work cannot be considered as an isolated text and every literary work re-calls, refers to and calls into question other works.

We have seen the first definite appearance of the concept of intertextuality in early Romantic poetology and the concept of "transcendental poetry."[14] Then we have considered its presence in Roman Jacobson and in structuralism.[15] Now the principle of misreading proposed by Bloom anticipates the concept of "intertextuality" of Julia Kristeva (1941). We cannot find an intrinsic meaning of a text, since a text does not exist as an isolated item but is rather a mosaic of quotations from or references to other texts; a text is always in dialogue with other texts. In this way meanings in general are the result of a negotiation between already established meanings.

Another influential critic who was active at Yale University is Paul De Man (1919–1983). He moves between criticism and poetry, challenging the limits of both. He states that in language there is a permanent conflict between its literal or referential meaning (what it says concerning the world) and its figural meaning (represented by its rhetorical use). All language is figural in its essence so that it resists interpretation and introduces an element of essential ambiguity. On the one hand, we have a literal meaning and on the other hand a figural meaning and it is impossible to decide, by means of grammatical devices, which of the two (maybe contradictory) meanings prevails. We cannot decide the true and definite meaning and when we are looking for the literal meaning we do not see the figural one and we are blind to the text. This paradoxical experience of *blindness* and *insight* (the title of De Man's famous book) is the consequence of the ambivalent nature of language. Blindness and insight are two contradictory conditions which are always present when we read a text. This essential ambiguity of language means that we cannot find any final interpretation or any definite meaning of a work. A final meaning is nothing but a rhetorical figure itself, an allegory of our reading.

Poetic language is a continuous attempt to tell something which is not in the order of the "real" or referential world, named by referential language. Dealing with terms such as nostalgia and desire in Romantic poetry De Man writes:

> One hesitates to use terms such as nostalgia or desire to designate this kind of consciousness, for all nostalgia or desire is desire of something or for someone; here, the consciousness does not result from the absence of something, but consists of the presence of a nothingness. Poetic language names this void with ever-renewed understanding, and [...] it never tires of naming it again. This persistent naming is what we call literature.[16]

In the same way, fiction creates the illusion of reality. But this illusion does not need to be demystifies.

> The work of fiction invents fictional subjects to create the illusion of the reality of others. But the fiction is not a myth, for it knows and names itself as fiction. It is not a demystification, it is demystified from the start. When modern critics think they are demystifying literature, they are in fact being demystified by it; but since this necessarily occurs in the form of a crisis, they are blind to what takes place within themselves.[17]

The literal and referential attempt of criticism, which tries to demystify the meaning of literature (for example by referring the poem to an author's life or to the historical period or literary tradition, and so on) cannot grasp the real meaning of the literary text. This literal and referential perspective is blind as far as the figural dimension is concerned. This contradiction of meanings is the specific trait of literary experience.

Notes

1 See Chapter 24.
2 See Chapter 26.
3 See David Novitz, "Postmodernism. Barthes and Derrida," in Berys Gaut, Dominic McIver Lopes (editors), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 155–165.
4 Jacques, Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 159.
5 Jacques, Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* p. 157.
6 Jacques, Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* p. 159.
7 Jacques, Derrida, *Of Grammatology,* pp. 159–160.
8 See Chapter 14.
9 See Chapter 18.

10 See Wallace Martin, "Introduction" and Wlad Godzich, "The Domestication of Derrida" in Jonathan Arac, Wlad Godzich, Wallace Martin (editors), *The Yale Critics: Deconstruction in America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).
11 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence. A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 43.
12 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 13.
13 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*, p. 14.
14 See Chapter 14.
15 See Chapters 20 and 22.
16 Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight. Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 18.
17 Paul De Man, *Blindness and Insight*, p. 18.

CHAPTER 28

Contemporary Schools and Traditions in Literary and Critical Theory

1 Theory, Literary Works, and Critical Theory

From the perspective opened by Post-Structuralism it is even hard to decide what is today the definite object of critical theory and literary criticism. The very concept of "theory" no longer has the traditional, Platonic meaning[1] and the scientific status of knowledge concerning a specific object of a definite field. According to Jonathan Culler, we can say that today theory means a "miscellaneous" genre "which has come to designate works that succeed in challenging and reorienting thinking in fields other than those to which they apparently belong. [...] Works regarded as theory have effects beyond their original field."[2] We have already stated this interaction between different fields of knowledge, especially in the Romantic period and then in the last century. In linguistics, critical theory, structuralism, deconstruction, and postmodern, theory has become an open set of works about philosophy, sociology, linguistics, poetics, culture, and so on, even if the specific object of the study is a literary work. Sometimes, like in the case of Bloom or Derrida, it happens that it is even difficult to draw a precise line between creative and critical works.

For instance, we have seen that critical theory in its original form[3] was a kind of political criticism (a "school of suspicion") with an explicit social commitment, which has found in the field of literary criticism a great opportunity for development and a fruitful application. Conversely, we have stated that the strategies elaborated and offered by linguistics and literary criticism are useful and can be applied in order to understand and explain social facts.[4] We do not study literary theory only to understand an author or a literary work. "As a critique of common sense and exploration of alternative conceptions, theory involves a questioning of the most basic premises of assumptions of literary study, the unsettling of anything that may have been taken for granted. What is meaning? What is an author? What is it to read? What is the 'I' or the subject who writes, reads, or acts? How do texts relate to the circumstances in which they are produced?"[5] In this way, today literary theory gives a clue about something which is beyond the text, tackles complex problems, for example how the human world is organized and structured and how it can be understood, what is the meaning of "understanding," what is at stake in our understanding

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of the world and which dangers we face in our attempt to understand it, why literary works always bring with them a theoretical meaning, and so on.

> Derrida's interpretation shows the extent to which literary works themselves [...] are theoretical: they offer explicit speculative arguments about writing, desire, and substitution and supplementation, and they guide thinking about these topics in ways that they leave implicit. Foucault, on the other hand, proposes to show us not how insightful or wise texts are, but how far the discourses of doctors, scientists, novelists, and others create the things they claim only to analyse. Derrida shows how theoretical the literary works are, Foucault how creatively productive the discourses of knowledge are.[6]

To understand reality as a structure, or as a discursive practice without a permanent structure, requires a literary attitude. The human world is a system of signs and the possibilities and strategies for understanding it are mediated by the criticism which is articulated as literary criticism.

Derrida and Foucault, among many others, proposed a new strategy of reading texts and culture in order to deconstruct what is taken for granted and what seems to be obvious.[7] The object of our inquiry can be a literary text or a cultural aspect of our world. Or, in many cases, it can be a literary work which exposes a cultural content, or a literary work whose structure and linguistic organization make understandable something which is beyond the accepted and conventional world.

The post-structural attitude prescribes that we have to distrust what can be easily explained in terms of tradition, fashion, individual will or collective decision, and we have to find what is hidden behind what seems normal and socially accepted.[8] Sometimes we have to acknowledge that the issue we are considering is rather the effect of forces, powers, and traditions that we cannot fully investigate. Nevertheless, it is important to read works "in a certain way," to consider what is behind the surface of the given object of social and literary experience.

This post-structural line of thinking, this attitude of distrust towards given categories and this questioning of traditions, culture, power and even our own questioning, has been adopted in many fields of research and by different schools and movements of literary theory. Post-Colonial Studies, Queer Theory, Minority Discourse, and Gender Studies can take advantage of Foucault's strategies and, more generally, of the post-structural attitude. The result is that human sciences have been fragmented into a great number of critical practices, each of them inquiring into a specific portion of culture and society and

following particular strategies and methods. In other words, in the human sciences we cannot find a unique method and general strategy with a universal validity. At the same time, the line which separates words and things, literary works and facts, discourses and social reality becomes very thin and often disappears. It exposes the theory to a danger: to which degree does the theory influence or invent its own object? The danger that the theory we elaborate or adopt determines or even creates the issue or the problem of research is a real one, and we have to take it into account. One of the tasks of critical theory in its broader meaning[9] is to explain the emergence of its objects of knowledge. In the literary work something more than imitation or presentation of a supposed "real world" is at stake. In contrast, the "real world" outside of literature seems to be more and more permeated or, better, constituted by our discursive practices, by our narratives, by our literary works.

In contemporary literary theory there are several schools, traditions, or movements which adopt a critical attitude to their fields of research. We remember some of these schools as examples of the contemporary debate and perspectives.

2 Feminist Theory and Criticism

Simone De Beauvoir (1908–1986) has written that woman is made not born. How is the feminine identity created? Femininity itself is a gender identity for woman changing from one historical period to another and from one country to another. Nevertheless, it is a set of rules which prescribe how women have to act, think, behave, feel… It appears that femininity is defined as something different from masculinity which seems to be the "normal" condition. The systemic nature may explain the concept of woman as other from man but it does not explain its pervasiveness, durability and force in society. What is the origin of this system of rules and why is it so long-lasting and ubiquitous? Is it the patriarchal tradition and the power held by men which has created this gender inequality? Are women victims or accomplices of their own condition? Is there a biological reason for this inequality? We can suppose that in the prehistoric and ancient world the biological condition determined the physical inferiority of women. Today technology and modern life create a new environment so that biology cannot be called on to justify a woman's supposed inferiority. The question is important and our very culture is at stake. Johan Jacob Bachofen (1815–1887) proposed that at the beginning of our civilization societies were ruled by a matriarchal system in which power was held by women. This assumption subverts the traditions and accepted institutions

of our society, like property and family, and even a symbolic order (symbols of earth and water instead of the traditional symbols of heaven of classical mythology). A male-ruled society is characterized by conquest (of new fields, new land and more power), whereas a feminine-oriented society is oriented toward conservation; the former is based on limits, the latter does not know any limits, like the unlimited life of nature. Can we imagine, today, a society which is not based on our patriarchal values and traditions?

Feminist theory and criticism, one century after Bachofen, consider with a new self-awareness issues concerning gender, inequality of the sexes, and the condition of women in literary works and in the present society.[10] It combines the study of woman writers with the analysis of women in literature and in other forms of art. Biological, cultural, social, historical, political, and religious questions can be discussed from very different perspectives and with different results. It can propose strategies to bring equality between the sexes and create literary worlds in which inequality of the sexes does not exist. Science fiction (for example Ursula Le Guin) can be a very interesting and challenging field to propose and discuss such a perspective.

How does sexual difference determine a literary work? How is inequality of the sexes represented in it? Why are woman writers marginalized or excluded from literary history? What are the possibilities of a subaltern culture like the feminine one to be represented in a male-dominated culture? Is it a different perspective possible? And then, the questioning of the opposition man/woman poses further issues: What are the creative and existential possibilities offered by a work of art not conditioned by a male-determined culture?

Feminist theory is a very large and articulated intellectual movement. Its aim is the definition of woman's identity and the specificity of woman's writing as a specific experience. It calls into question the patriarchal tradition. At the same time, it can be a questioning of the opposition male/female as the basis of culture and identity. Among the main authors we can remember are Luce Irigaray (1932), Julia Kristeva (1941) and Judith Butler (1956).

3 Gender Theory

Is gender determined by nature or is it the result of social influence and a cultural construct? Gender describes the set of characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity and femininity and ascribed by culture to men and women. Conversely, "sex" can be considered as the sum of physical and biological characteristics which make up a man and a woman. Now, from a post-structural perspective even our understanding of biology, nature and sex

is determined by our language and culture. In other words, a biological sex is a cultural construct.

Gender identity has not only to do with behavior and psychology, but with culture and society. Its characteristics are rather created by culture and society than determined by nature, as biological determinism claimed.

Gender is not given by the body alone but it is rather the identity one develops as a consequence of social and cultural pressure. How is gender created? What is its effect on literary production? From a very fluid perspective, we can choose one gender or another; but we cannot choose no gender. Our experience of reality (and of literary creation) is determined by the gender to which we belong. If gender is the result of a continuous process of linguistic and cultural production, how does this process work in artistic and literary creation? For example, the active hero of a narrative is conventionally a man and the passive object is a woman. More than the effect of a natural gender difference, the narrative contributes to the creation of a linguistic and cultural difference which does not exist in nature. Among the authors we can remember are Adrienne Rich (1929), Donna Haraway (1944) and, again, Judith Butler.

4 Gay, Lesbian and Queer Theory and Criticism

Heterosexuality has been traditionally considered as the natural, normal and accepted sexual attitude. Other attitudes appear to be non-normal, different, marginal, perverse or deviant. What is normal and what is different from the norm? Queer theory studies sexual identity in its cultural and social history. Why is sexual orientation so important in the social structure? Though sexuality is rather a continuum of possible, individual sexual attitudes, it is segmented in determined social and cultural categories, which are fixed and separate (straight, gay, lesbian, bisexual…), so that it becomes a reason for social inclusion and exclusion. Sexuality seems to be a cultural construct rather than a natural condition so that biological determinism alone (without considering culture) cannot explain the variety of sexual orientations and the history of and reason for different labels and attitudes. In this way queer, lesbian and gay theory questions culture, as well as society and literature, not only sexual issues. Queer theory tackles, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the presence of homosexual love and, more generally, the importance of the difference, the relationship between subaltern and dominant culture, the discourses which produce some behaviours as normal and others as deviant, and the creation of a social order. It is committed to a tolerant and less restrictive society where gender and sexuality can be lived in a creative and productive way and not as problems.

Literature is of great interest in queer studies. The point is not the declared, alleged or latent sexuality of the author. Many texts written by heterosexual authors show queer elements. Lesbian and homosexual elements express the anxiety of the text concerning sexuality and gender. The repression and sublimation of homosexual orientation makes that the sexual content is transformed in another, less disturbing issue. Among the authors of queer studies we can remember is Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1950–2009).

5 New Historicism

Stephen Greenblatt (1943) inaugurated New Historicism as a movement in literary and cultural criticism with *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and *The Power of Forms in the English Renaissance* (1982). According to New Historicism literary texts are agents of history, that is to say, they shape history. Like politics and religion, for example, literature is a practice which shapes the world. In this way a literary work is not a reflection or a product of a social reality but rather one of its practices. We can say that a literary work tells us something about the world outside of the text and the historical period to which it belongs. And practices are sometimes contradictory and antagonistic. From this perspective the interpretation of literary works helps us to understand history and the world in which they have been written.

According to New Historicism, ideas, concepts, stories and all the elements of a literary text have their origin in the time of its creation. We always have to connect the literary text to its historical context and, in this way, we can use the text as a means to interpret and understand the context and historical period in which it was created.

New Historicism reintroduces the historical dimension in the study of literature after the anti-historicism of structuralism, post-structuralism and deconstruction. It does not claim that history is a neutral and stable background to the literary text. It rather affirms that literary and non-literary texts are inseparable and determine each other, and that history is part of both, since it is part of facts as well as of texts.

6 Postcolonial Studies and Criticism

The label of Postcolonial can be applied to a large number of interdisciplinary studies in the fields of literature, anthropology and history, concerning the effect of colonization on culture. The interest of postcolonialism is devoted

to the study of society and culture of the former European colonies. Both the cultures of the colonizers and the colonized are implied since they have had a reciprocal effect on each other. From the historical point of view, it considers nations after their decolonization and has been thriving above all in the field of literary studies.

Colonialism is a matter of the past but in many countries and cultures the colonizer's culture (along with economic interests, institutions, power relations, traditions, ideas ...) is still present. What is the relationship between colonial tradition and indigenous identity?

Identity is actually a main issue in postcolonial studies. The way a culture creates its identity is not always linear. One is the image one has of oneself. Another is the image that others have of one. In the case of colonialism these two images are not in harmony. How do these images interact? What are the effects of subaltern and dominant cultures on each other? Literary works not only reflect but also contribute to the creation of these images and identity. But national and cultural identity cannot simply be defined by means of general traits or tradition. Are there some particular characteristics which are essential to a culture? The essentialist perspective has been questioned by post-structuralism so that it is impossible to find essential qualities to define a culture.

We can say that identity is not defined once and for all. What is Asian? It is misleading and impossible to give a general definition of Asia. At the same time, we can suppose a strategic essentialism which has no ontological or epistemological validity (which cannot explain anything real about the being nor the knowledge of the object) but which can be of help in defining a common ground for action. Asia is different from Europe and, despite the lack of essence of Asia and Europe, we have to deal with this difference and identify some "Asiatic" and "European" features.

In Postcolonial studies difference is considered unavoidable and privileged over sameness. We have to make the best out of it and, more important than that, we have to understand its strength and its ambivalence. Difference can give rise to contrasting and even contradictory feelings and impulses and it can have complex and opposite meanings. For example, during the colonial period "hybrid" was a negative concept. Today it has another meaning and it shows the unavoidable interdependence between the colonizer and the colonized. There is not a pure national or cultural identity. Hybridity opens a new space between the subaltern subject and the idealized other and, in this way, the subaltern subject produces its actual identity.

Literary works have pivotal importance in creating identity. They do not only reflect it but, more likely, shape it. Control over the representation of the "other" and the "different" is an exercise of power. For example, "Orientalism"

has been a common label for a complex and multiform patchwork of cultures from China to Japan, from India to the Middle East. These countries differ in terms of geographic characteristics, history, traditions, religions, languages and much more. In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Western orientalists created the object of their inquiry (often using second-hand material) and conjured up this image of an Orient which does not exist. The Orient turns out to be an exotic, irrational, deviant, sensuous, lazy and backward land. Actually, as Edward Said (1935–2003) points out in his book *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient* (1978), this place is nothing but a discursive production which reflects the difference of military, political and economic power between West and East. The mystified image of this Orient has had effects on political and practical decisions.

Among the more notable authors of Postcolonial studies are Frantz Fanon (1925–1961), Homi Bhabha (1949) and Gayatri Spivak (1942).

7 Cultural Materialism

Raymond Williams (1921–1988) was an influential Marxist literary critic. His work gave birth to the practice of Cultural Studies and it has had a great influence on contemporary criticism. The label "cultural materialism," used to describe his method, has been applied to different critical approaches in a Marxist political and intellectual perspective. The two terms "culture" and "material" suggest that cultural practices are determined by material processes and, at the same time, that culture can be considered as a material practice and not just as the result of material conditions.

Classical Marxism understands culture as the expression of the economic base which determines artistic, literary and cultural production. This determinism was already corrected by Antonio Gramsci[11] who introduced the concept of hegemony. Gramsci stressed the social context in which a subaltern group can gain power over the dominant class only by creating its own cultural hegemony. This hegemony has always to be considered in the social-political context, that is to say, we always have to understand if a work endorses or rejects the dominant hegemony.

From this perspective culture is a very broad and all-encompassing concept. According to Williams, culture is "a whole way of life" and concerns any expression and cultural production. It is not only high culture (poetry, philosophy) and literary texts but also popular culture (movies, comics, advertising, pop music and virtually anything which can be considered as a cultural production). This is the broad field of research of Cultural Studies.

Williams used the term Cultural Materialism for his critical work which connects the literary criticism of texts to the material facts of history. In general, the perspective of Cultural Materialism stresses the relationship of the text to the "real" and "external" world of history. Presenting the relationship between history and text, it questions the relationship of the work to economic and dominant ideology. Cultural forms cannot be considered as isolated texts but are always a part of the historical and material process which created them.

Today cultural materialism is a field of literary and cultural criticism which considers the material circumstances in which culture is produced and proposed. It focuses on the relationship between texts and dominant culture and points out how texts are determined by the dominant culture and, at the same time, how they can oppose it. According to the writings of Foucault, the dominant concepts and ideas of an epoch are shaped by discursive formations or cultural practices. One can be the dominant cultural practice, others can be the opposite or emerging ones, often in contrast with each other.

Notes

1 See Chapter 1.
2 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory. A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 3.
3 See Chapter 26.
4 See Chapter 20.
5 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory*, pp. 4–5.
6 Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory*, p. 13.
7 See Chapter 26.
8 See Chapter 27.
9 See Chapter 25.
10 See, for example, Sarah Worth, "Feminist Aesthetics," in Berys Gaut, Dominic McIver Lopes (editors), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics* (London, New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 437–446; Rita Felsky, "Why Feminism Doesn't Need an Aesthetic (And Why It Can't Ignore Aesthetics)," in Joseph Tanke, Colin McQuillan (editors), *The Bloomsbury Anthology of Aesthetics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 571–580.
11 See Chapter 21.

CHAPTER 29

Postmodern and the New Character of the Literary Work

1 A General Definition of Postmodern

'Postmodern' is a very comprehensive and generic label for a philosophical and cultural epoch which covers the period from modernity to the present day. What is modern? With a great deal of approximation, we can call "modern" what is characterized by the idea of progress, of emancipation, of newness. The avant-garde and its wish to get rid of the past is modern. Faith in the progress of science and technology is modern. The ideas of Enlightenment are modern, as well as the assumption that we are following a line of development from a past condition (ignorance, darkness, slavery) to a new and different status (knowledge, freedom, self-awareness, progress, and so on). In this very broad meaning, the modern condition stretches from the beginning of the Christian era to the beginning of the twentieth century or later. Actually, Positivism (and its faith in the power of science and progress) and Marxism (with its main tenet that philosophy should change the world and set men free) are very significant examples of modern thought, as is the assumption of avant-garde artists that we need (and can have) a completely new form of art. In contrast, the assumption that these conditions and perspectives are irremediably past represents a postmodern attitude.

We can adopt the term "postmodernity" to designate the present historical period and use the term "postmodernism" when we speak of art and architecture, stressing its aesthetic meaning. The form "postmodern" conveys a more philosophical meaning and hints at the epistemological rupture between the modern past and postmodern conditions. These three meanings are usually mixed together so that, in current use, they are more or less synonymous.[1] Actually, the artistic and aesthetic meaning was the first one in the cultural debate. Postmodernism in architecture was a playful and free style, based on bizarre quotations from past monuments, showing a general distrust of functionalism and rationalism. The use of brilliant, saturated and pastel colours like pink and green, the insertion of classical elements such as columns and Greek capitals in a modern structure, the contamination between pop culture (comics, advertising and cinema) and high culture may show a postmodern intention of the artist. The general assumption is that the idea of the future as

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a regulative principle and as the aim of our artistic creation no longer exists. Progress, development, history and the possibility of changing reality are questioned principles which cannot distinguish the past from the future[2] and cannot give meaning to an artistic creation. The past seems rather to be a deposit or, better, a kind of supermarket where the artist can choose and take elements at whim. Free references to the past, quotations from other works, self-reflection of the work by means of which it presents its artificial nature, extreme (and aware) intertextuality, and suspension of rationality are the general hallmarks of a postmodern work of art.

On these general premises, postmodern literary works show an eclectic approach, a large use of irony, pastiche, and parody, references to other literary works rather than to reality, and the general assumption that the literary work should appear as a fictive, created work (and not a delusive imitation of the real world). There is not a specific postmodern literary genre but rather the use (and inner transformation and fusion) of codified genres. It happens above all with the genres of popular culture: science-fiction, noir, detective, neo-gothic, and horror stories can be considered and appreciated as high-level examples of postmodern novels.

A useful definition of postmodern literature could be "magic realism." This term was used in the figurative arts to designate an artistic trend. Painters present smoothly painted and sharply defined still figures, with a strong realistic result. The realism of the representation is so accurate that it sometimes achieves a surrealistic effect, so that reality slips into dream and fantasy. From the German *Neue Sachlichkeit* to the American artist Edward Hopper the label "magic realism" means that a hyper-realistic representation of the world proves to be a surrealistic view of its deepest and most secret aspects. In literature the term has been applied to the work of the Argentinian writer and poet Jorge Luis Borges (1899–1988), author of *Fictions* (1944), to the Colombian writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927–2014), author of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967), and to the Italian Italo Calvino (1923–1985), who wrote *If on Winter's Night a Traveller* (1981) and *The Invisible Cities* (1972). In the cinema, the label has been used for the Italian director Federico Fellini (1920–1993) and movies like *The Sweet Life* (1960) and *8 ½* (1963).

2 The End of Grand Narratives

In his book *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge* (1979) the French philosopher Jean François Lyotard (1924–1998) gave to the term "postmodern" a place in the cultural and social debate. According to Lyotard, postmodern

is the end of the grand narratives which marked modernity. An example of a grand narrative is the Christian idea of the creation and the salvation of human beings through the conversion of souls to the Christian narrative. Another example is the Enlightenment as the progressive emancipation of reason and freedom. Capitalism proposed the grand narrative of the unlimited enrichment of all humanity through the progress of science and technology. Marxism, on the other hand, offered the narrative of progress towards a righteous society without classes. Since these narratives are about other narratives and gave them a frame and a general meaning, Lyotard also calls them "metanarratives." Postmodern is the end of these narratives which marked modernity so that there is no longer a general frame, aim, route, or tale giving a general meaning and direction to human thoughts and actions. Freedom, salvation, and progress are no longer unambiguous words.

> Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives. This incredulity is undoubtedly a product of progress in the sciences: but that progress in turn presupposes it. To the obsolescence of the metanarrative apparatus of legitimation corresponds, most notably, the crisis of metaphysical philosophy and of the university institution which in the past relied on it. The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal. It is being dispersed in clouds of narrative language elements – narrative, but also denotative, prescriptive, descriptive, and so on.[3]

These grand narratives legitimated our practices of knowledge and action. They gave a consistency and order to our intellectual and social life. They created the very idea of the future and of a necessary project to be accomplished by our work and existence.

> These narratives are not myths in the sense that fables would be (not even the Christian narrative). Of course, like myths, they have the goal of legitimating social and political institutions and practices, laws, ethics, ways of thinking. Unlike myths, however, they look for legitimacy, not in an original founding act, but in a future to be accomplished, that is, in an Idea to be realized. This Idea (of freedom, "enlightenment," socialism, etc.) has legitimating value because it is universal. It guides every human reality. It gives modernity its characteristic mode: *the project* [...].[4]

Modernity has been characterized by hope in the future and the idea of the project. This project is the realization of universality. Now this idea of a universal

project and the very idea of the future have been "liquidated" or destroyed by the postmodern condition. Capitalism based on science and technology considers success as the only criterion but is "incapable of saying what success is, or why it is good, just, or true." We are unable to find a general frame to explain it. In the postmodern condition the legitimation of science, philosophy, ethics and knowledge in general is no longer given by metanarratives.[5]

3 The New Legitimation of Knowledge

According to Lyotard, in our post-industrial society and postmodern culture, that is to say in our contemporary world, "the legitimation of knowledge is formulated in different terms." Since in the postmodern era the grand narrative has lost its credibility, we cannot find legitimation through unique and general systems (as idealism, positivism or structuralism). Actually, in the postmodern condition we have rather to do with "little narratives" incommensurable with one another. We do not necessarily need to establish stable language combinations, "and the properties of the ones we do establish are not necessarily communicable."[6]

> If this "delegitimation" is pursued in the slightest and if its scope is widened [...] the road is then open for an important current of postmodernity: science plays its own game; it is incapable of legitimating the other language games. The game of prescription, for example, escapes it. But above all it is incapable of legitimating itself, as speculation assumed it could.
>
> The social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games. The social bond is linguistic, but is not woven with a single thread. It is a fabric formed by the intersection of at least two (and in reality an indeterminate number) of language games, obeying different rules.[7]

Lyotard takes from the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein the image of the town and the term "language games." A variety of incommensurable language games takes the place of a unique and totalitarian metanarrative as legitimation of knowledge. The social bond is linguistic, but there are different languages expressing the heterogeneity of interests, methods, specificities and particularities of the speakers. A "little narrative" can be about machine language and another one about genetic code, a third one can be about a popular genre of fiction and another one determined by its local or ethnic origin. These linguistic games present the heterogeneity of the linguistic bond in postmodern society.

> We may form a pessimistic impression of this splintering: nobody speaks all of those languages, they have no universal metalanguage, the project of the system-subject is a failure, the goal of emancipation has nothing to do with science [...]. Speculative or humanistic philosophy is forced to relinquish its legitimation duties, which explains why philosophy is facing a crisis wherever it persists in arrogating such functions and is reduced to the study of systems of logic or the history of ideas where it has been realistic enough to surrender them.[8]

Now we can better understand some general features of the postmodern condition and of postmodernism. In our contemporary society we can find a multiplicity of different languages; the present seems to be a collage of fragments from the past or from different (local and ethnic) traditions; styles from different periods and diverse cultural traditions can be freely mixed; the future no longer has a regulative function and a precise shape and it is not the aim of any project. The myth of progress, of a rational developing of history, of emancipation, and of the rational control of nature as a quantitative-mathematic knowable object are dismissed. Postmodernism can be seen as a general crisis of rationalism and scientific attitude in which other and different experiences of truth are possible.

4 Umberto Eco: Open Work and Postmodernism

Now we propose an example which shows how literary theory and creativity can be conceived in the contemporary literary work. The Italian philosopher and writer Umberto Eco (1932–2016) offers a very deep and interesting reflection on the work of art in postmodern culture. Dealing with modern aesthetics and contemporary poetry, he outlines the poetics of the "open work" (*The Open Work*, 1968). A work of art is open since it stimulates an infinite number of interpretations. A poem, for example, is not a text with a defined meaning, valid once and for all, but it is rather a dynamic and living whole which has to be integrated by the reader. Since the poem is somehow incomplete and requires the presence and action of the interpreter, it is always in movement and never defined. In this way, the poet is not separated from the reader and the act of interpretation is a creative activity.

> We have, therefore, seen that (1) "open" works, insofar as they are *in movement,* are characterized by the invitation to *make the work* together with the author and that (2) on a wider level (as a *subgenus in* the *species* "work

> in movement") there exist works which, though organically completed, are "open" to a continuous generation of internal relations which the addressee must uncover and select in his act of perceiving the totality of incoming stimuli.[9]

The result is that a work of art is always open to an unlimited number of possible interpretations. This is the essence of the work of art and not its limit.

> *Every* work of art, even though it is produced by following an explicit or implicit poetics of necessity, is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal *performance.*[10]

A work of art is open but, at the same time, it has a form which cannot be disregarded. A dictionary contains words but it is not a poem, it does not have a permanent structure. A poem, by contrast, is an open and dynamic work of art susceptible to a range of integrations allowed by its open, incomplete but precise and defined structure. The "structural vitality" is the first basic property of the work of art, which supports its second basic property, the openness. For the relevance of the form as the basis of any possible interpretation, we can remember Gadamer's concept of "transformation into structure" as character of the work.[11] This principle of openness can be applied to all works of art throughout the ages but "now is the period when aesthetics has paid especial attention to the whole notion of 'openness'."[12] In the postmodern condition we must accept that we have interpretations rather than works of art and the fact that we have specific languages which are not intercommunicating and which work on different levels and according to different, specific logics.

Which is the specificity of poetic language? Eco considers facts from information theory and psychology and then states that

> Art, in all its forms, has also evolved in a similar fashion, within a "tradition" that may seem immutable but which, in fact, has never ceased to introduce new forms and new dogmas through innumerable revolutions. Every real artist constantly violates the laws of the system within which he works, in order to create new formal possibilities and stimulate aesthetic desire [...].[13]

The "aesthetic desire" for new forms can be understood as a psychological effect but, again, what is the specific content or information or meaning of

the poetic language? Is it different from ordinary language? They use the same words and apparently refer to the same real world.

> What we most value in a [poetic] message is not "information" but its aesthetic equivalent: its "poetic meaning," its "quotient of imagination," the "full resonance of the poetic word" – all those levels of signification that we distinguish from common meaning. [...] All deviation from the most banal linguistic order entails a new kind of organization, *which can be considered as disorder in relation to the previous organization, and as order in relation to the parameters of the new discourse.* But whereas classical art violated the conventional order of language *within well-defined limits,* contemporary art constantly challenges the initial order by means of an extremely "improbable" form of organization.[14]

Classical art and contemporary art work in different ways and with different effects. The obscurity and difficulty of contemporary art is not its limit, but rather its opportunity to convey more information.

> Whereas classical art introduced original elements within a linguistic system whose basic laws it substantially respected, contemporary art often manifests its originality by imposing *a new linguistic system with* its own inner laws. [...] The contemporary poet proposes a system which is no longer that of the language in which he expresses himself, yet that system is not a nonexistent language; he introduces forms of organized disorder into a system to increase its capacity to convey information.[15]

The contemporary poet is in a new situation and has a new task. In the past the classical poet operated a partial rupture of the order of the linguistic code and introduced a new code which conveyed a "rather ordinary message" that could be understood "in only one way." The contemporary poet proposes "as much poetic meaning as possible out of the very ambiguity of the message." He "produces emotional tension by suggesting various gestures and emotions from which the reader can choose the ones that, by stimulating his own mental associations, best enable him to participate in the emotional situation evoked by the poem."[16] In this way the condition of contemporary poetry is shown in its continuity with the past, and the possibilities of the contemporary poet are defined in their specific and new characteristics.

Years later, Eco wrote his first novel *The Name of the Rose* (1980), considered (by critics and by the author himself) as an example of a postmodern novel. Actually, it appears to be a detective story set in the Middle Ages, with a

conventional plot and traditional writing. Is it at odds with the poetics of the open work and with modern literary aesthetics?

Eco wrote a *Postscript to The Name of the Rose* (1983) in which he tells his experience as a writer (from the point of view of a philosopher and a literary theorist) and suggests that his novel is fully consistent with a postmodern poetics. The writer plays with a popular genre, he proposes something that the reader already knows. "I rediscovered what writers have always known (and have told us again and again): books always speak of other books, and every story tells a story that has already been told."[17] A book is not related to the real world but to other books; the plot can be a quotation of other plots. Eco considers postmodernism as an "ideal category" or better as a "way of operating."[18] "The postmodern reply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it cannot really be destroyed, because its destruction leads to silence, must be revisited: but with irony, not innocently."[19] In other words, the reader must be aware of its new postmodern condition, otherwise he will miss the meaning (or at the least some of the meanings) of the work.

A postmodern narrative is always, in a certain way, a kind of metanarrative, since it tells us something about something that has already been told in another narrative. Literature rediscovers its meta-poetic and self-reflective nature, which we traced from the Romantic period[20] to the linguistic turn of criticism.[21] The future (with new and fresh possibilities) is exhausted so that we rethink of the past, but we are aware that it is already past (we know it and we are no longer innocent) and we make as if it were new. Postmodern is the age of lost innocence in which the reader knows that the writer knows that he knows. For this reason, the postmodern work of art is characterized by such irony and metalinguistic play. Irony can work at different levels. Irony can sometimes not be understood as such and it is its constitutive feature and a normal consequence of its essence. In this case a postmodern novel can be enjoyed as a traditional and popular piece of escapist literature. "The ideal postmodernist novel will somehow rise above the quarrel between realism and irrealism, formalism and 'contentism', pure and committed literature, coterie fiction and junk fiction."[22]

Nevertheless, a novel is always a "cosmological matter"; it creates a new world and this new world motivates infinite interpretations. A work is always the infinite interpretation it arouses, and the point of view of the author is like the point of view of any other critic or reader. "A narrator should not supply interpretations of his work; otherwise he would have not written a novel, which is a machine for generating interpretations."[23] Criticism cannot exhaust the possibilities of creativity, even when critic and writer are the same person. At any rate, the cognitive element is a constitutive part of the aesthetic

experience, and a critical self-awareness and reflection on the mechanisms of the work are constitutive elements of the literary experience, for the writer/critic as well as (to a certain degree) the reader.

5 Italo Calvino: Postmodernism and Literature

The postmodern attitude towards narratives encourages a multiplicity of languages, the use of irony, the literary device of metanarratives, and the interchangeable roles of criticism and creativity. Creativity is based on a constant criticism and on a critical attitude; in its turn literary criticism considers the literary work as a living whole whose rules cannot be formalized once and for all. More and more often a writer has to be a critic and he has to reflect on the process of writing with an analytic mind whereas a critic has to think of the process of creation, adopt a creative language, and write a kind of narrative.

Now we take another case in which literary theory and creation are closely intertwined in the postmodern work. The Italian writer and literary critic Italo Calvino (1923–1985) often reflects on and writes about the very process of writing, like in the preface of his trilogy *Our Ancestors* (1960). The genre of these three novels is romance, phantasy, or maybe they could be defined as moral allegories. Calvino tells us that, in writing these novels, his first concern was the choice of an anomalous genre. He was expected to write realistic novels according to the historical period and to his own previous artistic production. This is what we can read in the preface to the English translation of *Our Ancestors*:

> After my first novel, [...] I had made efforts to write the realistic-novel-reflecting-the-problems-of-Italian-society, and had not managed to do so. (At the time I was called a 'politically committed writer'.) And then, in 1951, [...] I began doing what came most naturally to me – that is, following the memory of the thing I have loved best since boyhood. Instead of making myself write the book I *ought* to write, the novel that was expected of me, I conjured up the book I myself would have liked to read, the sort by an unknown writer, from another age and another country, discovered in an attic.[24]

The choice of a fantastic genre is not the rejection of the problems of the real world. The genre is not followed as a prescriptive category but is used in a free and creative way. Calvino, in a postmodern mood, plays with popular, classical, fantasy, and historical genres in order to obtain a certain effect of

estrangement. He uses a popular form of narrative to convey high, existential issues. We notice that the political commitment shifts from the content (the realistic description of a given social and political situation) to the form. The novel itself is politically committed since it reflects (even despite the author's intentions) the existential condition of contemporary human beings.

The last novel of the trilogy is *The Nonexistent Knight* (1959). The faithful, pious, brave, and excellent knight Agilulfo is perfect, but he does not exist. His armour is empty. Nevertheless, he will prove his qualities during its adventures.

> What the three stories have in common is the fact that they had a very simple, very obvious image or situation as their point of departure: [...] an empty suit of armour that persuades itself it is a man and carries on through its own willpower. The tale is born from the image, not from any thesis which I want to demonstrate, and the image is developed in a story according to its own internal logic. The story takes on meanings that are always a little uncertain, without insisting on an unequivocal, compulsory interpretation.[25]

The story is always its interpretation but, at the same time, this interpretation is up to the reader. The author is not concerned with it.

> The reader must interpret the stories as he will, or else not interpret them at all and read them simply for enjoyment – which would fully satisfy me as a writer. So I agree to the books being read as an existential or as structural works [...] but above all I am glad when I see that no single key will turn all their locks.[26]

What is the meaning of this story? The author himself does not know. It develops from the internal logic of the story. The story itself cannot have a definite meaning but it elicits many possible interpretations. From a postmodern perspective a literary work always offers the possibility of various interpretations. They are not strictly codified in a hierarchy (like in the case of Dante, for example, where we also find different meanings or senses coexisting in the same text,[27] but they depend on the reader, on the different levels of the work, and on its codes (fairy tale, science-fiction novel, historical novel...). Sometimes the codes are not strictly defined (what is today a science-fiction novel? And what was it fifty years ago?) and the ambiguity becomes a constitutive character of the interpretation as well as a constitutive aspect of the literary work.

In the note to the original Italian edition of *Our Ancestors* the author offers a very interesting answer concerning the creative process. He writes that, when

he starts writing, first of all he has just an image in his mind. Then he develops this image into a story and "I convince myself that this image has a meaning. [...] In the process of writing every part fits to the whole."[28]

The critic's interpretation of a text is often considered as an external action which supplies answers to a given text. The writer's point of view may be different from the critic's. Actually, in Calvino's case, who is a writer and a critic at once, the narrative itself produces its own meaning, almost without (or even despite) the author's intentions. The writer needs a text to find a meaning to his images. He has to rely on the specific mechanisms of writing in order to think or say something. Writing is not a neutral act but it is an existential action, with existential consequences. The story, with its beginning and its end, gives an answer and a form to a question that is still formless and without a given structure. About the first novel of the trilogy, *The Cloven Viscount* (1952), in which the main character is split in two by a cannonball, Calvino writes:

> critics could be wrong and say that I was interested in the problem of good and evil. No, I was not interested in that, I did not think at all of good and evil. Like a painter can use an obvious contrast of colours to bring out a form, in the same way I used an evident narrative contrast to show up what I was interested in: the division.
>
> Divided, mutilated, incomplete, enemy to himself – contemporary man is all of this: Marx called it "alienated," Freud "repressed," a state of ancient harmony has been lost, and he aspires to a new kind of completeness. This was the ideological-moral kernel I consciously wished to give to the story.[29]

The author works on the story and he does not impose any content, idea or interpretation. This is the reader's task. Once the "ideological-moral kernel" is decided,

> rather than working on it in order to deepen it on the philosophical level, I took care to give the narrative a skeleton working like a good connected mechanism, then flesh and blood of free associations of lyrical fancy.[30]

The author is concerned with forms, images, and ideas and with the contrast between these elements. If we say that Calvino is not concerned with higher philosophical contents and meanings, it would seem to belittle the author's intentions and aims. Rather we have to think that the meaning of the work is the result of its narrative strategies; it is not (or not primarily) the intention of the author. Now, as we have read, the author has some conscious and

personal ideas, an "ideological-moral kernel." But the work is an opportunity to elaborate ideas or, as Umberto Eco put it, a kind of "machine for generating interpretations."[31]

Thanks to the narrative mechanism, a generic and vague idea (the division of the human soul) becomes a more precise and involving issue and gains social, philosophical, and historical implications and meanings, along with its narrative substance. Ideas like "division," or "alienation," or "repression" in themselves are always rather ordinary. But, even if the idea of human division is ordinary, the narrative makes it universal and involving, offering an opportunity for different possible interpretations.

> My aim was to fight against all human divisions, was to wish the full human being against the "dull wholeness." Maybe was it because, borne in an epoch of division, the story expressed, despite itself, the divided consciousness? Or because true human integration is not a mirage of undetermined wholeness or availability or universality but it is the obstinate study of what you are, of your voluntary choice, of your self-construction, of your competence, of your style, of your personal code of internal rules and effective renunciations to be followed up to the end?[32]

We notice that such "self-construction," such "style," such a "personal code" are an existential attitude and, at the same time, they are the result of a literary device; they are experienced in the literary work. Here we are speaking of the effect of the narrative, of the literary work, which urges, creates, generates ideas and offers solutions to human issues. The narrative, suggests Calvino, works by itself and develops and gives meaning to ideas. Only the act of writing completes the creation of meaning.

The reflection on literary strategies becomes a reflection on human problems and on the ways and possibilities to think of them and, eventually, to solve them. Calvino's reflection on writing is useful to understand the postmodern connection between writing practice and criticism, between the autonomy of the work and interpretation, between style and morality. Writing practice has a specific originality even in the critical and existential domain.

Today, in our postmodern condition, we can see the necessary historical development which connects (and in some cases and periods opposes) knowledge, beauty and art. We can better understand the reason we have considered authors and periods in the book. From Plato and the ancient culture to the new idea of the artist and of the human being in the Renaissance, from the new romantic perspectives of freedom and artistic creation to the concept of art as a form of the absolute spirit, artistic creation prove a pivotal relevance

in human achievements. After the romantic period, Nietzsche's questioning of truth and truthfulness of art, Heidegger's stress on the work of art as an event of truth, and the application of the linguistic system to interpret and explain the human world, give to art a special relevance. "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."[33] The specific form of art which deals with the language, literature, becomes the pivotal activity in creating and understanding the world. The interpretation of our world as a written text (in which, as Derrida states, we are embedded since ever) is a way to understand and to demystify the mechanisms of language (and of power) which control our society and our life. Writing becomes an existential issue, related to our understanding of the world and to our project of living.

Writing is always an existential question. In his book *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (written in 1985 and published posthumously in 1988) Calvino writes about Milan Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*:

> For Kundera the weight of living consists chiefly in constriction, in the dense net of public and private constrictions that enfolds us more and more closely. His novel shows us how everything we choose and value in life for its lightness soon reveals its true, unbearable weight. Perhaps only the liveliness and mobility of the intelligence escapes this sentence – the very qualities with which this novel is written, and which belong to the world quite different from the one we live in.[34]

Liveliness and mobility of intelligence are spiritual qualities which we can find completely deployed only in the literary work. In general, the work of art is the place where we can realize the intellectual and spiritual qualities we need in life, where the formless gets a form and chaos a meaning. The literary work offers such qualities to us not as a given content but as a living whole which is indistinguishable from life itself:

> A work of literature is one of these minimal portions in which the existent crystallizes into a form, acquires a meaning – not fixed, not definitive, not hardened into a mineral immobility, but alive as an organism.[35]

The specificity and fictionality of the work of art is not a limit, but it is its characteristic and, at the same time, it means its continuity with life and human concerns. A work closed in its mineral immobility would not be of interest to anyone. In this way writing is an existential issue. It is not just literature. It concerns our life, destiny, and existence. Why should we confide our existential secret to literature? Why should we trust literature? Because literature is our

world, created by us and in a human dimension. At the same time literature is the place in which our transitory world becomes eternal, receives a form, an order and a clarity that it does not have in ordinary life. The literary work is the place in which our interiority meets the exteriority of the world and attests what is human and meets what is not human.

Notes

1 See Ian Buchanan, *The Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 375.
2 See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 154–156.
3 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. G. Bennington, B. Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), p. xxiv.
4 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Explained*, trans. J. Pefanis, M. Thomas (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 12.
5 On the interaction of cognitive, ethic and aesthetic experience in the postmodern society, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodern Ethics* (Oxford and Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1993).
6 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. xiv.
7 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 40.
8 Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, p. 41.
9 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, trans. A. Cancogni (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 21.
10 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 21.
11 See Chapter 24.
12 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 22.
13 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 79.
14 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 59.
15 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 60.
16 Umberto Eco, *The Open Work*, p. 61.
17 Umberto Eco, "Postscript," in *The Name of the Rose*, trans. W. Weaver (London: Vintage Books, 2004), p. 568.
18 Umberto Eco, "Postscript," p. 570.
19 Umberto Eco, "Postscript," p. 570.
20 See Chapter 14.
21 See Chapter 20.
22 Umberto Eco, "Postscript," p. 572.
23 Umberto Eco, "Postscript," p. 560.

24 Italo Calvino, "Preface," in *Our Ancestors*, trans. A. Colquhoun, I. Quigly (London: Vintage Books, 1980).
25 Italo Calvino, "Preface."
26 Italo Calvino, "Preface."
27 See Chapter 5.
28 Italo Calvino, "Prefazione" in *Romanzi e racconti, vol. 1*, ed. M. Barenghi, B. Falcetto (Milan: Mondadori, 1991), p. 1210. Page numbers refer to the Italian edition, since the English translation has a shorter and different preface.
29 Italo Calvino, "Prefazione" in *Romanzi e racconti,* vol. I, p. 1211.
30 Italo Calvino, "Prefazione" in *Romanzi e racconti,* vol. I, p. 1211.
31 Umberto Eco, "Postscript," p. 560.
32 Italo Calvino, "Prefazione" in *Romanzi e racconti,* vol. I, p. 1213.
33 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. D. F. Pears, D. F. McGuinnes (London: Routledge & Kegan, 1961), § 5.6.
34 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 7.
35 Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, pp. 69–70.

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