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A VIEW OF THE SELF IN AMERICAN LITERARY STUDIES

The article deals with the problem of the self in American literary studies. The beliefs about the self practiced in the New Criticism and Deconstruction are considered in the article. Special attention is drawn to the work "Disappearance of God" by J.H. Miller with its emphasis on the state of mind of a poet, symbolism, referential language.

Статья посвящена проблеме интерпретации индивидуального сознания в американской литературной критике. В статье рассматриваются представления об индивидууме школы «новой критики» и деконструктивизма. Особое внимание уделяется работе «Исчезновение Бога» Дж.Х. Миллера с ее вниманием к внутреннему миру поэта, понятиям символизма и референтного языка.

Key words: literary criticism, American literary studies, the self, new criticism, critical deconstruction, literary meaning, consciousness.

Ключевые слова: литературная критика, американская литературная критика, индивидуум, «новая критика», критическая деконструкция, литературное значение, сознание.

Modern Anglo-American literary critical theory has been historically influenced by philosophical empiricism, which defines the grounds of objective knowledge.

The suppositions of a scientific methodology, grounded in empiricism, especially beliefs about the self *challenged* have been accepted by critics.

This dynamic can be viewed both in the theory of the New Criticism and in the transition from structuralism to post-structuralism and deconstruction.

In American criticism deconstruction has been developed in the works of four critics, J. Hillis Miller, Paul de Man, Geoffrey Hartman and Harold Bloom.

They themselves did not acknowledge the theoretical unity of their work as a single body of criticism. Nevertheless, common themes, beliefs, and approaches may be revealed in their work.

We can't but mention that deconstruction in America is not French post-structuralism. American criticism develops traditions, begun by the New Critics, with significant modifications, including the use of some post-structuralist ideas.

As the author of "From the New Criticism to Deconstruction" Art Berman points out, "from the Anglo-American perspective, Derrida transforms language into the Kantian art object, poeticizing all language, the student of language becomes much like the reader of poetry" [1, p. 224].

American deconstruction, however, does not integrate the fundamental suppositions of structuralism and post-structuralism. That would involve the radical redefinition of the self, that Americans, who seek to liberate the self, find unappealing.

The American deconstructors ignore the post-structuralist focus on the analysis and interpretation of literary texts. They reopen the New Critical concept that the content of a poetical work is not subordinated to propositional truth. Language as an artwork can be treated as if it were detached from the world (authorial purpose or intention). So it can be treated as a formal structure provoking esthetic response. Meaning becomes a property of language, rather than of its employment.

This detachment from intentional use in post-structuralism calls forth the analysis of a number of English critics (Ch. Butler, G. Strickland, J. Culler, C. Belsey), E.D. Hirsch in America, who cannot separate reading or writing from communication, from socially determined interchange of information, "active practice" [4, p.169].

The American intellectual milieu has always displayed a basic empiricism in debate with religious, spiritual and esthetic countercurrents.

Americans usually recognize a "desire" that precedes self-consciousness and attribute this to "need" (for oxygen, food, love, etc.). Another form of desire (seeking, wanting, yearning) is posited, following self-consciousness, as an attribute of the healthy self, as if the self existed from the very beginning, at birth, but took some time to know itself.

In the post-structuralism of Derrida and Lacan, which, from the Anglo-American point of view, looks like an empiricist skepticism, desire precedes self and plays a part in constituting it. Adult desire, structured in language is continuous with original biological “need”.

This is Freud’s view, which in America has been tempered by ego-based psychology of various sorts that rejected the notion that adult need is no more than infant “id” in new guise and a concession to a selfhood present from the beginning.

Literary critics in America are customarily allied with a view of the self as a unified, coherent, ontologically fundamental entity, engaging its desire in a quest for meaning or fulfillment.

The deconstructive critics in America are more strongly influenced by this tradition, even when they challenge it, than by the fundamental post-structuralist epistemology, which leads to determinism. This accounts of their modifications of the theory of post-structuralism.

This is a reason for the elevation of criticism to a status like poetry itself. At the same time they accept from post-structuralism the belief that, since language can never accord with reality, which therefore is never directly “present”, truth is unobtainable. This quandary is intensified by an inability to relinquish the traditional “self”, as Lacan and Derrida do.

Deconstruction can be seen in the light of a personal quest. The post-structuralist philosophical speculations of Derrida are set off to the side by the American critics, and are used to justify the critical methodology, which make use of some assumptions of the New Criticism. The absence of truth for Miller and de Man is used only to extract textual inconsistency and contradiction through close reading in a skeptical mode.

The theoretically infinite openness of language, the “freeplay”, which Derrida bases upon *différance*, is used by Miller and de Man to support indeterminacy in critical interpretation and by Hartman to support a criticism based on freedom, on unconstrained creative pleasure and self-revelation.

Derridian “freeplay” is, however, not freedom. It is a mechanical term, first used of machinery. For American critics the structuralist constitution of the self by language becomes the self creating itself, self-creativity being a product of self. The quests of Miller, de Man, Hartman, and Bloom appear throughout their critical work. Miller seeks to know the presence of an-other, poet or deity; Hartman attempts to confirm the artistic and philosophical vision of the critic as seer; de Man strives for mastery in the face of morality and time; Bloom wrestles with angels and devils (the great poets) to acquire the mystic visions.

In “The Disappearance of God” (1963) J. Miller espouses a “phenomenological” critical practice with which he investigates a theme common to certain nineteenth-century authors. In the following years this theme generates a critical

technique of his own, becomes Miller's version of deconstruction. The disappearance of God becomes the disappearance of unequivocal textual meaning.

Miller reviews the historic background and biographies of the authors. The content of the authors becomes his own existential position, through the translation of spiritual alienation into textual indeterminacy.

Miller's early mentor, Georges Poulet pointed out that the critic treats the entire work of a single author as "so many manifestations of the same personality" [2, p. 7]. The critic attempts to interact with the personality of the author. He reconstructs the personality through the texts themselves, tries to "reproduce his experience, to "duplicate" his "awakening", to provide "a comprehensive description of the author's "total experience" [2, p. 267].

To Miller literary works "embody states of mind"; and the critic is to put himself within the life of another person "to relive that life from the inside" [3, p. 4] For the authors whom Miller examines, God, though still believed in, is absent; there is no longer evidence of "the divine power of as immediately present" [3, p. 2].

The former "old harmony", in which language mirrored, vanishes. Modern literature "is part of the history of the splitting apart of this communion" [3, p.3]. God is hidden somewhere behind "the silence of infinite space" [3, p. 6].

This circumstance is caused, in part, by the development of modern philosophy of Descartes and Locke [1, p. 230], following whom "each man is locked in the prison of his own consciousness" [1, p.12], and, as a consequence, there is "a moving of once objective worlds of myth and romance into the subjective consciousness of man" [1, p. 12] in modern literature.

Every theme raised by Miller in his "Disappearance of God" – the disappearance of immediacy, the opening up of a vast "space", language reaching for the inaccessible, man locked in a psychic prison, poetic symbol replacing directly referential language, belief as arbitrary can be easily connected with the post-structuralist methodology.

The suppositions of American deconstruction are also present here.

Miller says of De Quincey that "desiring immediacy, he is doomed to the mediate" [3, p. 32]. De Quincey searched for an unobtainable harmony and unison [3, p. 39], his essays lack logical progression, they have persistent discontinuities, and De Quincey, through his style, tries "filling up all those chasms", "tries to balance" polar opposites" [3, p. 45].

Miller grounds his critical deconstruction on the history of Romanticism and its aftermath in England. The influence of Derrida will confirm Miller's understanding of the human predicament by validating a critical methodology. The absence of God becomes the impossibility of ascertaining certainty in textual analysis, the perpetual withdrawal of truth from language.

There is also a political aspect to preserving the autonomous, creative, free entity of self in American literary criticism. Like the Romantic poets, literary critics seek their wisdom in their own speculations. The preservation by literary critics of the notion of the self derived from Romanticism and an imported existentialist phenomenology also demonstrates its politically important role in American literary studies.

Literature

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