

HISTORY AND THEORY AS CONTRARY FORCES: THE AFRICAN AMERICAN CRITICAL DEBATE

JESÚS BENITO SÁNCHEZ

Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha

In recent years the field of literary theory has been seriously challenged by an urge to get back to history as a valid interpretive code. This article concentrates on the ongoing opposition, within the African American literary-critical field, between both discourses—the historical and the theoretical—as they struggle to achieve supremacy within an increasingly multidisciplinary academia. Finally, this article envisions how, from radically poststructuralist positions, theory attempts to vanquish and subsume history, transforming it into one more of the unstable signifiers through which meaning is created as well as withheld.

We are always embroiled with theory—even when the word itself is absent. It is an illusion to suppose that a non-theoretical subject position is possible.

Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Workings of the Spirit*

In the above epigraph, Houston A. Baker argues the inescapability of «theory» in a postmodern cultural environment. However, the primary role of «theory» in certain areas of the contemporary cultural debate is still problematic. After the advent, during the last two decades, of many different strategies of analysis in which the objectivity and decidability of signification has been called into question, «theory» is being seriously challenged by more essentialist discourses, such as history.¹ Centering

1. In the last few years, special attention has been dedicated to the interaction and opposition between «theory» and «history.» In *White Mythologies*, one of the basic studies on

on the African American literary-critical field, this article will focus on the current struggle between the proponents of a radically historical view of «theory,» and the advocates of a drastic theoretical revision of history.

In the modern cultural world, «theory,» with its aloofness and difficulty, is starting to be condemned among historians as well as critics of literature for a variety of reasons. Historians accuse «theory» of a clear tendency to deny the objectivity of history; they also denounce the growing concern with the form of historical narrative as a fundamental component of history writing, and the excessive preoccupation with the tropological nature of historical discourse. On the other hand, quite a few literary critics put the blame on «theory» for challenging the traditional foundations and values of the study of literature, and for breaking the integrity and organic unity of the work. These critics also accuse «theory» of disseminating meaning and blurring the frontier between literature and other uses of language.

Within the general field of literary criticism, certain humanistic scholars disclaim the poststructuralist readiness to champion the primacy of signs and texts and the consequent death of authors, subjects, and all extratextual reality. They also reject the postmodernist tendency to raise technique over substance, analysis over narrative and critic over author. From the humanistic perspective, the greatest sin committed by «theory» has been that of calling into question the transcendental signified, while doubting even the very existence of a discernible, stable meaning that can be extracted from a text. Summing up the poststructuralist challenge of received notions such as those of presence, meaning and stability of the sign, Terry Eagleton affirms:

Nothing is fully present in signs: it is an illusion for me to believe that I can ever be fully present to you in what I say or write, because to use signs at all entails that my meaning is always somehow dispersed, divided and never quite at one with itself. Not only my meaning indeed, but *me*: since language is something I am made out of, rather than merely a convenient tool I use, the whole idea that I am a stable, unified entity must also be a fiction. (124)

The way out of this bleak vision of instability and absence has been a retreat into the realm of history, until recently a traditional universe of continuity, integrity and presence. As Lynn Hunt indicates, «History's relationship to theory of any sort has always been rather problematic» (95). However, with the advent of poststructuralism, the very existence of a stable concept of history, untroubled by the attacks of the postmodern cultural debate, is hardly imaginable. In an attempt to

this opposition, Robert Young indicates: «... one of the most vigorous debates has concerned the relation of 'theory' to 'history.' Very often these categories are presented as somehow opposed, even as mutually exclusive, or as if they operated within hierarchical realms so that the one was in a position to vanquish and subsume the other» (vi).

resist the dissolution of meaning, certain historians and literary critics are struggling to secure a unified, integral vision of history. Elizabeth Fox Genovese, one of the leading critics in the African American literary field clings partially to that historical perspective:

History also consists, in a very old-fashioned sense, in a body of knowledge—in the sum of reliable information about the past that historians have discovered and assembled. And beyond that knowledge, history must be recognized as what did happen in the past—of the social relations and, yes, ‘events,’ of which our records offer only imperfect clues. (125)

Given this privileged status of historical knowledge, secured by the presence in the background of a domain of events immune to the flow of signifiers, history was traditionally adopted by literary critics to provide the facts that could control interpretation, and do away with dissemination and undecidability. The events depicted in history were taken as if they had a «facticity and objectivity, a presence in the world» (Patterson 251) that could be used to define the parameters of possible significance and interpretation of a literary text. Thus, from the old historicists to more modern humanists, literary critics have turned to history in search of a fixed referent that could be used to close off readings of particular literary texts.

In their effort to maintain that primary role applied to literature as the valid repository of black history, some African American critics have rejected modern theoretical methods, especially poststructuralism, feeling that their emphasis on the constructedness of meaning, and their reading of the linguistic sign as a mark of absence and «difference» is a dangerous ground in the African Americans’ search for their true history. While a whole generation of younger scholars in the field of African American literature, like H. L. Gates, R. Stepto, H. Baker and H. Spillers, are making an important effort to master and apply the critical methods of poststructuralist schools, others tend to avoid the fragmentation and epistemological crisis which these Euramerican schools entail; instead, they are turning to history as an interpretive code, aware that history can reflect the unified black difference as it evolves continuous and integral from the moment the black man set foot on American soil. In this sense, «theory» appears in opposition to history: «theory» being, in the latest poststructuralist undertakings, a representative of an epistemological fragmentation and discontinuity, while history is thought to reflect the continuous black essence and experience in diachronic evolution.

In *Workings of the Spirit* (1991), meditating on these two tendencies in African American literary studies, Houston A. Baker termed «Black Power» the radically theoretical trend, while the name «Black Studies» was used to designate the essentially historical orientation among black scholars (13). The Black Power trend is mainly, though not exclusively, followed by black male critics, like Henry Louis Gates and

Houston A. Baker himself, who had moved to radically nonhistorical, theoretical strategies of analysis by the mid-seventies. The Black Studies tendency, on the other hand, is mainly defended by black female critics, who also by the mid-seventies had begun to apply historical modes of analysis.

Thus, within the African American critical field, a group of critics are counteracting the rise of «theory» by turning to an internally coherent and consistent vision of history which «can serve as a stable point of reference, beyond contingency, to which literary interpretation can securely refer» (Greenblatt 5). These black critics profit from the outstanding work of previous social historians like John Blassingame, Nathan Huggins, Lawrence Levine, Eugene Genovese or Winthrop Jordan to oppose the furiously theoretical offensive of poststructuralism. In the work of the literary critics who follow this historical line, the subtext contained in African American works of literature, their history, is considered as their true essence and not just as a mere accident.

Represented by black critics like Joyce A. Joyce and R. Baxter Miller, the Black Studies school assumes that «theory» is alien to African American discourse. In the opinion of its proponents, black discourse is properly humanistic, moral; it is basically understandable and explainable «via assumptions of a traditional humanism and methods of standard disciplines such as social history, philosophy and group psychology» (Baker 5). From the perspective of these critics, literature and the black writer play a primary role in the African American community as purveyors of harmony and unity. In the words of Joyce A. Joyce, «The black writer has always used language as a means of communication to bind people together . . . » (343). The base for that communion of African Americans has always been their past experience as slaves in American soil. That historical past allowed them to feel as one people, and to surmount their original differences in Africa. It was also that historical past which the first slaves tried to record in their narratives, and in their poetry, and which contemporary writers are still writing into their fiction. That historical past also contains the black essence which the critic must search for and record in his reading of black literature.

Against the instability of the sign championed by modern «theory,» the proponents of historical modes of analysis struggle to secure the continuity, presence and fixity of history. Considering the literary works of African American women writers, Missy Dehn Kubitschek assumes a somewhat ontological essentialism based on the concept of a continuous historical experience shared by all women. This shared experience materializes in a literary continuum in which the American female identity can be traced: «This book [*Claiming the Heritage*] proposes a continuity in the works of African-American women fictionists: coming to terms with the history of slavery and oppression as the fundamental necessity for the construction of a tenable black female identity» (5). A few pages later, Kubitschek proclaims the fixed and material nature of her sense of history: «Explorations of history may seem the antithesis of science fiction, with its limitless scope for imagining futures. The past, after all, has

certain fixed events and forms» (24). Thus, the critic inhabits a whole literary world placed within a fixed and stable «past,» a continuous diachronic background which settles all questions of meaning and analysis.

However, this radical opposition to «theory» in favor of a history envisioned as continuous and present can entail unfortunate drawbacks in the light of the poststructuralist challenge to logocentrism and presence. The Black Studies' struggle to achieve a monologic and essentialist view of African American history runs the risk of remaining constrained within the hegemonic historical discourse instituted by white American culture. Instead of being a subversive move against the dissemination and undecidability of meaning, the historical mode of analysis conceals a «theoretical silence» that readily enables a «gesture of co-optive self-empowerment by the theoretically powerful» (Baker 18). Besides, struggles to achieve a homogenous notion of the historical past have traditionally been motivated «by patriotic nationalism and by a desire to silence dissident voices in the name of cultural unity» (Patterson 251). So, by using the same rules against which he is supposedly fighting, the black critic runs the risk of subverting his own subject position.

The Foucaultian attack on monologic history, which is considered as a discourse of containment, has given a whole new perspective to literary studies. Foucault questions the notion of history as a repository of continuity or homogeneity; the new history envisioned in Foucaultian «theory» emerges discontinuous, fragmented; it abandons the privileged realm of events and limits itself within the universe of pure textuality: «a field made up of the totality of effective statements (whether spoken or written) in their dispersion as events and in the occurrence that is proper to them» (qtd. in Lentricchia 193). In this view, which has been adopted by several poststructuralist schools of «theory,» history ceases to be considered as a teleological process;² instead, it appears as «the reversal of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who had once used it, a feeble domination that poisons itself as it grows lax, the entry of a masked 'other'» (Foucault 154-55). Thus, the new conception of history serves to unmask the traditional monological view and to open the historical discourse to marginal voices. Therefore, poststructuralist «theory» appears as instrumental in disclaiming a previous interpretive *mastery*, which championed concepts like God, Self, History, the Bible as its supreme codes.

This decentering of history renders historical discourse inappropriate as a literary-interpretive code. If history itself is discontinuous and subjective, it no longer serves to secure a correct interpretation of a literary text; instead, the historical

2. In the words of Michel Foucault: «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 singular randomness of events» (155-56).

narrative appears as the product of interpretive practices rather similar to the literary interpretations it was previously used to control; history no longer inhabits an objective universe without «theory.» It is precisely «theory» that can be used to problematize the fallacious distinction between subjective literature and objective history: both belong in the realm of textuality. In this sense, Henry Louis Gates affirms: «we can never lose sight of the fact that a text is not a fixed ‘thing’ but a rhetorical structure which functions in response to a complex set of rules. It can never be related satisfactorily to a reality outside itself merely in a one-to-one relationship» (Gates, «Criticism in the Jungle» 5).

Following Paul de Man in «The Resistance to Theory,» after the historical and supposedly objective dimension has finally been found inadequate, the critic must fall into the realm of «theory» if he is to grasp the whole range of meanings inscribed in literary texts:

Literary theory can be said to come into being when the approach to literary texts is no longer based on non-linguistic, that is to say historical and aesthetic, considerations or, to put it somewhat less crudely, when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and of reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment. (158)

Since, according to Hayden White, literary and historical discourses are similarly produced through the use of rhetorical, tropological and interpretive practices (81), then any extratextual referent is rendered unavailing as an interpretive code. Once situated in this realm of signs and texts, it is only «theory» that can help discover different levels of discourse, what Baker calls «*metalevels* of explanation» (38), inscribed within history as well as literature.

Although the powerful discourse of white American culture traditionally denied depth and complexity to African American literature—black literature was unanimously considered a simple imitation of the white canon—modern critics are claiming the essential intricacy and double-voicedness of the black text. From his earliest steps on American soil, the African American individual felt the need to deal with *metalevels* of cultural inscription, as is clearly visible in such cultural forms as the spirituals, the blues, and the signifying. In Baker’s words, «the African-American negotiations of *metalevels*, in combination with his or her propensity for autobiography as a form of African survival, has always enabled him or her to control a variety of levels of discourse in the United States» (42). These complex levels of textuality and signification written into black texts are not accessible to easy humanistic or pure historical readings.

Placing themselves within the poststructuralist debate, modern critics in the field of African American literature are struggling to redefine «theory» from within the black vernacular; they propose a «negotiation of academic *metalevels*,» that is, an effort to «extrapolate from ‘theory’ what is actionally and autobiographically necessary

and useful» (45) to African American cultural study. These radically theoretical critics are establishing an enriching dialogue with Euramerican «theory» in order to achieve a vernacular interpretive strategy with which «to disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature» (Gates, «Canon-Formation» 27). Thus, while some critics of black literature remain anchored to a humanistic delightfulness and monosyllabic clarity, the Black Power critics are turning «theory» to their own profit. In 1987, looking towards the future, Henry Louis Gates forcefully expressed the task before the black critic who wilfully accepts the challenge of the poststructuralist debate:

This is the challenge of the critic of black literature in the 1980s: not to shy away from literary theory; rather, to translate it into the black idiom, *renaming* principles of criticism where appropriate, but especially *naming* indigenous black principles of criticism and applying these to explicate our own texts («What's Love» 352).

WORKS CITED

- BAKER, HOUSTON A. Jr. *Workings of the Spirit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991.
- DE MAN, PAUL. «The Resistance to Theory.» Ed. K.M. Newton. *Twentieth-Century Literary Theory*. London: Macmillan, 1988. 158-64.
- EAGLETON, TERRY. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*. Minneapolis, 1983.
- FOUCAULT, MICHEL. *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1977.
- GATES, HENRY L., Jr., «Canon-Formation, Literary History, and the Afro-American Tradition: From the Seen to the Told.» Eds. Houston A. Baker, Jr. and Patricia Redmond. *Afro-American Literary Study in the 1990s*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989. 14-39.
- GATES, HENRY L., Jr., «Criticism in the Jungle.» *Black Literature and Literary Theory*. New York: Methuen, 1984. 1-24.
- GATES, HENRY L., Jr., «'What's Love Got To Do with It?': Critical Theory, Integrity, and the Black Idiom.» *New Literary History*, 18 (1987): 345-62
- GENOVESE, ELIZABETH F. «Literary Criticism and the Politics of the New Historicism.» Ed. Aram Veesser. *The New Historicism*. New York: Routledge, 1989. 213-24.
- GREENBLATT, STEPHEN. *The Forms of Power and the Power of Form in the Renaissance*. Norman: U. of Oklahoma P., 1982.
- HUNT, LYNN. «History Beyond Social Theory.» Ed. David Carroll. *The States of Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990. 95-111.
- JOYCE, JOYCE A. «The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism.» *New Literary History*, 18 (1987): 335-44.

- KUBITSCHKEK, MISSY D. *Claiming the Heritage: Afro-American Women Novelists and History*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991
- LENTRICCHIA, FRANK. *After the New Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.
- PATTERSON, LEE. «Literary History.» Ed. Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin. *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990. 250-62.
- WHITE, HAYDEN. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978.
- YOUNG, ROBERT. *White Mythologies*. London: Routledge, 1990.