

POST-THEORY AND BEYOND

Pós-teoria e além

LUIZ FERNANDO VALENTE 

Department of Portuguese and Brazilian Studies. Department of Comparative Literature.
Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, USA
E-mail: Luiz_Valente@brown.edu

ABSTRACT

This article surveys and assesses the eclectic trends in literary theory and criticism in the post-theory age with a focus on three rubrics: the cultural turn, the historic turn, and the affective turn. It concludes with a consideration of the current debate about symptomatic reading versus surface reading.

KEYWORDS: cultural; historic; affective; symptomatic; surface.

RESUMO

Esse artigo faz um levantamento do eclético panorama da teoria e da crítica literárias na era da pós-teoria, avaliando-o a partir de três rubricas: a virada cultural, a virada histórica, e a virada afetiva. Conclui com uma reflexão sobre o debate atual entre leitura sintomática e leitura de superfície.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: cultural; histórico; afetivo; sintomático; superfície.

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INTRODUCTION: THEORY AND POST THEORY

A headline in the October 13, 1993 edition of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, a requisite publication for anyone concerned with the professional debates in the North American academy, announced the “beginning of the Age of Post-Theory” (WINKLER, 1993, n/p) after a thirty-year dominance of what had become known as high theory. In the article that followed, “theory” is defined as an amalgamation of “the post-structuralist proposition about the slipperiness of language and the instability of meaning that began to be imported from France in the 1960’s” and “any of the ‘isms’ and schools of thought that have shaped literary interpretation in the last 30 years.

Marxism, feminism, psychoanalysis, the critical theory of Germany's Frankfurt school", in sum, "a way of doing criticism that at times seems to merge into philosophy" (WINKLER, 1993, n/p). After listing several recent publications since the mid-1980s that called theory into question, highlighted by the landmark volume *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism* (1985), edited by the renowned University of Chicago scholar W. T. Mitchell, and quoting several prominent scholars whom she had interviewed, including Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Stimson, Judith Butler, and Jonathan Culler, the author concludes that although it was still impossible to ascertain precisely in which direction literary studies were veering, it appeared certain that they were moving away from the linguistic turn that had informed the age of high theory towards a more eclectic period. This new eclecticism displayed, rather, a turn towards history (including an increasing emphasis on post-colonialism), gender, ethnicity, and "culture" broadly conceived.

Developments in the following decades would confirm that post-theory, as suggested in the article, did not imply an iconoclastic rejection of theory, whose lessons about the need for a healthy skepticism as well as a rigorous questioning of accepted critical vocabulary and traditional modes of analysis had left a lasting imprint in the human sciences, and therefore could not be easily dismissed. In this respect, I concur with Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski in the introduction to their edited volume *Critique and Postcritique* (2017):

As a result, critique has encouraged a recurring preoccupation with second-order or meta-analysis and a seeming inexhaustible relay of skepticism and disclosure: hermeneutic insight emerges only to become the object of further suspicion, lest it fall prey to the stable, authentic, or authoritative knowledge that critique seeks to challenge. Demanding a hypervigilance on the part of the critic, critique thus requires stringent self-critique and continued attempts to second-guess or "problematize" one's own assumptions. (ANKER; FELSKI, 2017, p. 8)

In the case of post-theory the prefix "post" signified much less a shift of paradigm along a diachronic continuum than a recognition that theorizing for theory's sake, which many regarded as one of the faults of the age of theory, had become less appealing and was now perceived as insufficient. Thus post-theory paved the way for renewed opportunities in the field of theory and criticism, which incorporated many of the accomplishments of the age of theory while self-consciously rejecting what came to be perceived as its excesses. Indeed, as Homi Bhabha proposes in his critique of "the current and controversial shiftiness of the prefix 'post': *postmodernism, postcolonialism, postfeminism*, the 'beyond' is neither a new horizon, nor a leaving behind of the past" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 1) but an "insurgent act" that "renews the past, refiguring it as a contingent 'in-between' space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (BHABHA, 1994, p. 7).

Reviewing the field of theory and criticism in the United States during the more than twenty-five years since the publication of the *Chronicle* article, it is possible to identify three broadly defined rubrics or "turns," on which this essay will focus before concluding with an assessment of the current debate over "symptomatic" versus "surface" reading: the cultural turn, the historic turn, and the affective turn. It goes without saying that these important discussions have informed and renewed the practice of comparative literature over the past few decades.

THE CULTURAL TURN

The Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was founded in 1964, under the directorship of Richard Hoggart, as part of the Department of English at the University of Birmingham (UK). It became an independent unit in 1972 under the visionary stewardship of Stuart Hall, who had been the first editor of the influential *New Left Review*, a key publication venue for British Marxists. The creation of the Centre should be viewed as the natural development of the British culturalist tradition in the human sciences, which goes back to Matthew Arnold and especially to F. R. Leavis. Though his approach to literature, unlike the work done at the Centre, was elitist and reactionary (he subscribed to a theory of cultural decline, resulting from industrialization and mass production), Leavis already argued unequivocally that literary culture and non-literary culture were unavoidably connected: he identified as one of the characteristics of a thriving society the fact that there is “behind the literature, a social culture and an art of living” (LEAVIS, 1962, p. 15). Even while accepting this premise, the new left culturalists were, however, carving their own path as they spun off several brilliant papers on popular culture and mass media in the 1970s. It is generally accepted that the forerunners of the new culturalism were Raymond Williams (*Culture and Society: 1780-1950*, pub. 1958) and E. P. Thompson (*The Making of the English Working Class*, pub. 1963), whose works provided the foundation for the new movement. Williams, in particular, had an enormous influence on Hoggart’s thinking, by proposing that “a culture is not only a body of intellectual and imaginative work; it is also and essentially a whole way of life” (WILLIAMS, 1958, p. 325).

Moving away from traditional belletristic concerns, the British proponents of cultural studies were committed to a scholarly practice that viewed “culture as a whole way of life and struggle accessible through detailed concrete (empirical) descriptions that captured the unities or homologies of commonplace cultural forms and material life” (LEITCH, 1994, p. 180). By the end of the 1970s several other programs in cultural studies had been established in Great Britain, mainly at the so-called polytechnics, located in places like Cardiff, Lancaster, Nottingham, Southampton and Sussex, though, significantly, not at the older and more traditional, elite institutions like Cambridge and Oxford, where, supposedly, the term ‘culture’ retained its association with ‘high culture.’ Distinctly interdisciplinary and anti-Establishment, the movement was heavily influenced by Marxist thought and methods. In the United States, however, where the tradition of close reading, dating back to new criticism, was still in vogue despite the advent of theory and deconstruction, it was not until the mid-1980s that cultural studies took hold and began to flourish.

As was the case across the Atlantic, North American cultural studies tended to draw literary critics and other intellectuals on the left, many of whom subscribed to the interdisciplinary practices that had become increasingly more prevalent in the American academy since the 1970s, and called into question the traditional ways of organizing research and teaching in American higher education. Cultural studies grew very quickly and attracted a lot of attention, as can be garnered from the programs of the annual conventions of such scholarly associations as the Modern Language Association of America and the American Comparative Literature Association. A host of new, influential journals were founded in quick succession, including *Cultural Critique*, *Differences*, *Representations* and *Social Text*. It became a thriving field.

In the United States the links between cultural studies and literary studies were perhaps stronger and would be longer lasting than in Great Britain, where much of the focus was on popular culture and mass media. Interestingly one of its founding texts was authored by none other than the British literary critic Terry Eagleton, who argued in the final chapter of his influential *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (1983) that what we call “literature” was nothing but

a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michel Foucault has called ‘discursive practices’, and that if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes rather obscurely labelled ‘literature’ (EAGLETON, 1983, p. 205).

Eagleton’s expansive definition of literature provided the theoretical grounding for the budding field of cultural studies:

I am countering the theories set out in this book not with a *literary* theory but with a different kind of discourse – whether one calls it of ‘culture,’ ‘signifying practices’ or whatever is not of first importance – which would include the objects (‘literature’) with which these other theories deal, but which would transform them by setting them in a wider context. (EAGLETON, 1983, p. 205)

Similarly engaged with an expansive view of literature was Robert Scholes, the founder of Brown University’s program in Semiotics in the 1970s (under the aegis of the English Department), which would eventually evolve into the pioneering Department of Modern Culture and Media, with its own faculty and doctoral program. Scholes, who had been known for his classic studies of Anglo-American metafiction, narratology and structuralism, proposed in 1985 that “we must stop ‘teaching literature’ and start ‘studying texts’ and that the ‘exclusivity of literature as a category must be discarded’ (SCHOLES, 1985, p. 16), thus echoing Eagleton’s argument two years earlier:

All kinds of texts, visual as well as verbal, polemical as well as seductive, must be taken as the occasions for further textuality. And textual studies must be pushed beyond the discrete boundaries of the page and the book into the institutional practices and social structures. (SCHOLES, 1985, p. 16-17).

The field of cultural studies proved to be very dynamic even if it never reached the status of a self-standing discipline, an apparent failure that may, paradoxically, be responsible for much of its vitality and success. As Andrew Edgar has suggested, cultural studies’ “miscellany of approaches facilitated the asking of new questions, and thus to a reconceptualization of exactly what was entailed by the term ‘culture’” (EDGAR, 2002, p. 101). In fact, cultural studies became an umbrella for the introduction of new emphases and the development of new combinations in the study of texts, both literary and non-literary. There is no question that the increase in multidisciplinary work in the humanities and the humanistic social sciences since the 1980s owes a lot to cultural studies. The field quickly asserted itself as an important vehicle for the discussion of issues of gender, sexual orientation, race and ethnicity even as in the United States issues of social class did not have the centrality that they possessed in the British context. Under the influence of cultural studies multiculturalism became a central concept, as the boundaries between academic scholarship on culture and more pragmatic political activism were at times blurred. Film studies also benefited from its association with cultural studies by moving the discussion of cinema away from technical, formal and ideological concerns to cultural concerns. In fact, many literary scholars with no formal expertise in cinema began to incorporate the study of film

into their courses and, in some cases, to write about film. The eclecticism that was identified at the beginning of this essay as one of the major traits of the post-theory age was epitomized by the direction that cultural studies took not only in the United States but also in other countries.

And yet, despite the excitement that it was generating, cultural studies began to show signs of exhaustion as early as the end of the 1990s. I remember attending a session at the 1996 MLA convention in Washington, D.C. that asked rather anxiously where cultural studies was going and sounded a nervous alarm about its upcoming demise. Among many literature scholars a major complaint was that as broadly conceived cultural concerns became dominant, less attention was being paid to literary texts themselves, which were often turned into mere pretexts for vague generalizations about social and political issues, lacking the specificity demanded by the social sciences. Furthermore, many of us shook our heads as we watched cultural studies begin to slide into a branch of the study of pop culture even though it never completely abandoned its original ties to literary studies.

Many of the high hopes for cultural studies did not materialize. Professing a belief in the transformative role of cultural studies, the Brazilian Comparative Literature Association had prematurely declared in the late 1990s a supposedly inextricable and long lasting connection between comparative literature and cultural studies, which went unrealized and was eventually abandoned. In the United States many had believed that cultural studies was going to transform the humanities. As cultural critic Michael Bérubé stated in a 2009 article,

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, we heard (and I believed) that cultural studies would fan out across the disciplines of the humanities and social sciences, inducing them to become at once more self-critical and more open to public engagement. Some people even suggested, in either hope or fear, that cultural studies would become the name for the humanities and social sciences in toto (BÉRUBÉ, 2009, n/p).

Known for his active involvement with professional and institutional issues on a national scale, and a respected practitioner of cultural studies himself, Bérubé has lamented the rather limited impact that cultural studies has had in the American university: “The bad news is that the place where cultural studies has arguably had the greatest impact is in English departments. And though people in English departments habitually forget this, English departments are just a tiny part of the university” (BÉRUBÉ, 2009, n/p). And yet Bérubé continues to voice at least a feeble hope that some of the promise of cultural studies might come to function as an antidote for the neoliberalism that has ruled the political and economic landscape:

But I still have hope that the history of cultural studies might matter top the university – and to the world beyond it. My hopes aren’t quite as ambitious as they were 20 years ago. I no longer expect cultural studies to transform the disciplines. But I do think cultural studies can do a better job of complicating the political-economy model in media theory, a better job of complicating our accounts of neoliberalism, and a better job of convincing people inside and outside the university that cultural studies’ understanding of hegemony is a form of understanding with great explanatory power – that is to say, a form of understanding that actually works. (BÉRUBÉ, 2009, n/p).

What I am calling the cultural turn has not been exhausted, however, by the rise and fall of cultural studies. More recently new subfields have evolved, which owe much to cultural studies’ reliance on interdisciplinarity, even though they do not operate strictly within the confines of cultural studies. Two examples are disability studies and ecocriticism.

Emerging in the 1980s, the first disability studies program was established at Syracuse University in 1994, and the field has continued to grow. Calling into question “the view of disability as an individual deficit or defect that can be remedied solely through medical intervention or rehabilitation by ‘experts’ and other service providers” and regarding disability as primarily a social construct, the Society for Disability Studies defines its parameters as follows:

Using interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches, Disability Studies sits at the intersection of many overlapping disciplines in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Programs in Disability Studies should encourage a curriculum that allows students, activists, teachers, artists, practitioners, and researchers to engage the subject matter from various disciplinary perspectives. (SOCIETY FOR DISABILITY STUDIES, n/d).

Straddling the humanities and the social sciences, disability studies has been linked to the budding subfield of medical humanities, which “use methods, concepts and content from one or more of the humanities disciplines to investigate illness, pain, disability, suffering, healing, therapeutic relationships, and other aspects of medicine and health care practice” (SHAPIRO, 2009, p. 192). The medical humanities have paid special attention to literature, attracting scholars based in English and Comparative Literature departments, and encouraging their collaboration with medical practitioners.

William Rueckert has generally been credited with coining the term *ecocriticism* in a 1978 article significantly entitled “Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism.” (RUECKERT, 1996, p. 105-123). The title of the article should not surprise, given the admittedly close ties between ecocriticism and literary criticism. In fact, Derek Gladwin defines ecocriticism as intertwined with the study of literary texts:

Ecocriticism is a broad way for literary and cultural scholars to investigate the global ecological crisis through the intersection of literature, culture, and the physical environment. Ecocriticism originated as an idea called “literary ecology” and was later coined as an “-ism.” Ecocriticism expanded as a widely used literary and cultural theory by the early 1990s. [...] Ecocriticism is often used as a catchall term for any aspect of the humanities (e.g., media, film, philosophy, history) addressing ecological issues, but it primarily functions as a literary and cultural theory. (GLADWIN, 2017)

The popularity of ecocriticism has increased exponentially as the global environmental crisis has exploded. Undergraduate (and sometimes graduate) courses have been developed at many colleges and universities, while sessions on ecocriticism have become plentiful and are generally well attended at conferences of professional associations in the various national literatures and comparative literature. Although the influence of ecocriticism has been seminal in the introduction of important new themes and concerns to the field of literary studies, much like disability studies it has failed, nonetheless, to develop a specific methodology, and therefore remains a diffuse conglomeration of scholarly and political interests.

THE HISTORIC TURN

The publication in 1996 of *The Historic Turn in the Human Sciences* (Terrence McDonald, ed.), bringing together the papers presented at a conference organized by the Program for the Comparative Study of Social Transformations at the University of Michigan, confirms two trends that began in

earnest in the 1980s and exploded in American academic circles in the 1990s: an increasing self-consciousness about historical writing, complemented by a greater attention to historical issues in literary theory and criticism, which had generally been relegated to the background, if treated at all, during the heyday of new criticism, structuralism and deconstruction. Indeed, since the publication of Hayden White's groundbreaking *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), historians had demonstrated an increasing self-reflexivity about the question of historical representation, as reflected in White's influential and at times polemical essays, compiled in volumes such as *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (1978) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), in the provocative work by the prolific intellectual historian Dominick LaCapra, and in the landmark volume *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (1988) by historian Peter Novick, among others. White's and LaCapra's essays became standard fare in literary theory courses, while the two authors were frequent guests of departments of English and Comparative Literature despite having been trained as historians. As McDonald indicates in the introduction to his edited volume,

One of the most distinctive aspects of the current intellectual epoch is a turn toward "history" that is in progress across the humanities and social sciences in America today. The signs of a significant transformation of the intellectual agendas of the human sciences are apparent in the appearance of, among other things, the "new historicism" in literary and legal theory, a revived interest in "history in philosophy," a historically oriented "new institutionalism" and other historical approaches in political science and economics, "ethnohistory" in anthropology, "historical sociology" in sociology, and even a more self-consciously reflexive and historicist methodological discussion in history itself. (McDONALD, 1996, p. 1)

This "historic turn," resulting in a porosity between history and related fields in the human sciences, has had momentous implications:

Today the leakage of history out of its professional disciplinary container has allowed the development of new models for its practice at the same time as its old and new practitioners have subjected it to theoretical challenges from critical social theory, literary criticism, and newer interdisciplinary projects like feminist studies and cultural studies. This does not mean that history is impossible, but it does mean that the term now has multiple meanings and that it has been appropriated for many different reasons by the different disciplines. (McDONALD, 1996, p. 2)

One could say without much exaggeration that in the American academy history was everywhere. In the field of literary studies it was also reflected in a renewed interest in literary history, an important topic in itself, which, due to space limitations, will not be treated in this article. Rather, our discussion of the "historic turn" will concentrate on two developments that had a major impact on literary theory and criticism, and, by extension, on comparative literature: new historicism and postcolonial studies.

Articulating Raymond Williams' cultural materialism with Michel Foucault's work on knowledge and power, new historicism was originally developed by English Renaissance scholars, such as Stephen Greenblatt, Catherine Gallagher, Louis Montrose and others as a rigorous method that aimed to demonstrate "the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history" (GREENBLATT, 1990, p. 164). Unlike new critics or structuralists, new historicists categorically rejected the autonomy of literary texts, which they regarded, rather, as the inevitable result of a "negotiation between a creator

or class of creators, equipped with a complex, communally shared repertoire of conventions, and the institutions and practices of society” (GREENBLATT, 1990, p. 158-159). Their version of the return to history called into question the simplistic formula according to which literary texts “reflected” a more or less stable historical “context.” As suggested by LaCapra, who is not considered a new historicist despite espousing positions that reveal many affinities with new historicism, “the notion of relating – or seeing the interactive relation between – texts and contexts in terms of a variable conjunction of symptomatic, critical, and possibly transformative tendencies is a formula for a project that cannot be reduced to formulas” (LaCAPRA, 1987, p. 7). Catherine Gallagher has been even more explicit about the complex relationship between texts and contexts, while also acknowledging the new historicist practice of juxtaposing, in a non-hierarchical manner, literary and non-literary objects:

Although there has been a certain amount of controversy over just what the new historicism is, what constitutes its essence and what its accidents, most of its adherents and opponents would probably agree that it entails reading literary and nonliterary texts as constituents of historical discourses that are both inside and outside of texts, and that its practitioners generally posit no fixed hierarchy of cause and effect as they trace the connections among texts, discourses, power and, and the constitution of subjectivity. (GALLAGHER, 1989, p. 37)

Far from a monolithic movement, the variety of positions taken by its practitioners has been, indeed, one of the more striking features of new historicism, with differences of opinion deepening and enriching theoretical discussions. One example is the debate over the questions of *entrapment* and *dissidence*. Stephen Greenblatt tends to see apparently subversive moments in texts, such as Shakespeare’s history plays, as ultimately complicit with dominant discourse, which Alan Sinfield criticizes as a form of *entrapment*. Instead, Sinfield prefers to focus on the potential of what he names *dissidence*, as opposed to subversion, which he dismisses as less effective:

‘Dissidence’ I take to imply refusal of an aspect of the dominant, without prejudging the outcome. This may sound like a weaker claim [than ‘subversion’], but I believe it is actually stronger insofar as it posits a field necessarily open to continuing contest, in which at some conjunctures the dominant will lose ground while at others the subordinate will scarcely maintain its position. (SINFIELD, 1992, p. 49)

New historicism did not remain circumscribed to Renaissance studies. Its wider influence was reflected in the volume *The New Historicism* (1989), edited by H. Aram Veeser, compiling papers by scholars whose work focused on various periods and even different languages. A good example is the seminal essay “The Nation as Imagined Community” by Jean Franco, a renowned scholar of Hispanic-American Literature, in which the author dialogues with Benedict Anderson’s well-known formulation and engages in a polemic with the celebrated Marxist critic Fredric Jameson over the question of allegory in Third-World literary texts.

Farther reaching has been the appeal of postcolonial studies. Its antecedents can be traced back to the founders of colonialist discourse in the 1950s and 1960s – writers like Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Albert Memmi, Chinua Achebe, and others, who called into question the appropriation of “history” by European imperial powers. During the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s the field expanded enormously, playing a major role in significant debates in the fields of literary theory and criticism, and touching on diverse subfields, ranging from subaltern studies to feminism. There is no question, moreover, that postcolonial studies was instrumental in creating spaces for the study of non-canonical literatures and

authors, therefore helping to expand the field of the national literatures and to renew the theory and practice of comparative literature. Functioning as an umbrella for various literary, historical, sociological and political concerns, it continues to resist a precise definition, as the following description in the *Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory & Criticism* undoubtedly attests:

The designation “postcolonial” has been used to describe writing and reading practices grounded in colonial experience occurring outside Europe but as a consequence of European expansion and exploitation of “other” worlds. Postcolonial literature is constituted in counterdiscursive practices. Postcolonial Writing is also related to other concepts that have included internal colonialization, such as the repression of minority groups: Chicanos in the United States, *Gastarbeiter* in Germany, Beurs in France, and so on. It is similarly related to women voicing concern and frustration over colonialization by men, or a “double” colonialization when women of color are concerned. [...] PCS is not a discipline but a distinctive problematic that can be described as an abstract combination of all the problems inherent in emerging fields as minority discourse, Latin American studies, African studies, Caribbean studies, Third World studies (as the comparative umbrella term), *Gastarbeiterliteratur*, Chicano studies, and so on, all of which participated in the significant and overdue recognition that “minority” cultures are actually “majority” cultures and that hegemonized Western (Euro-American) studies have been overprivileged for political reasons. (GUGELBERGER, 1994, p. 582)

Regardless of its imprecise contours, which to a certain extent confirms its reach and vitality even while exposing its notorious lack of a precise focus, postcolonial studies is an eminently historical enterprise though it conceives of history not as an object to be unpacked but as activity existing in a dynamic exchange with the present:

The colonial past is not simply a reservoir of ‘raw’ political experiences and practices to be theorised from the detached and enlightened perspective of the present. It is also the scene of intense discursive and conceptual activity, characterised by a profusion of thought and writing about the cultural and political identities of colonised subjects. Thus, in its therapeutic retrieval of the colonial past, postcolonialism needs to define itself as an area of study which is willing not only to make, but also to gain, theoretical sense out of the past. (GANDHI, 1998, p. 5)

Even more so than new historicism, postcolonial studies accommodates scholars with a wide range of interests, temperaments and intellectual affiliations. Let us just consider some of its leading figures in the United States. Impressively scholarly and urbane, with interests ranging from literature to politics to classical music, Edward Said was a wealthy Palestinian trained at elite private institutions in the United States (Northfield Mount Hermon School, Princeton and Harvard), spent his whole career at Columbia, and remained unapologetically committed throughout his life to the relevance of radical humanism and what he termed “democratic criticism.” The translator of *Of Grammatology*, which first made Jacques Derrida’s work widely available to the English-speaking public, Gayatri Spivak is a Bengali woman (though the holder of a doctorate in Comparative Literature from Cornell) who has not hesitated to criticize Foucault, an author favored by Said, and has remained unabashedly faithful to Derrida even as she has embraced a “strategically essentialism” at odds with many of the tenets of deconstruction. Interested in the “hybridity” generated by the ambivalent “mimicry” between colonizer and colonized, Homi Bhabha relies on a rather eclectic (hybrid?) appropriation of ideas from a variety of fellow thinkers to construct a powerful, influential and at times rather uneasy theoretical synthesis. It was not unusual for Said and Bhabha to be at odds with each other while on the same panel, as I

witnessed at the 1998 MLA convention in San Francisco. What unites these three major figures in postcolonial studies are their incisive critiques of First World cultural dominance though not much else.

Postcolonial studies has remained enormously influential in the American academy, as attested by courses, journal articles, and books. Scholars such as Spivak, Bhabha, Leila Gandhi and others attract large crowds to their invited talks and presentations at professional conferences. Their courses are generally packed with students from various departments in the humanities and social sciences. Postcolonial critics, including the late Said, are among the authors most frequently quoted in scholarly publications in literature and the human sciences. Indeed, it is a rare dissertation in literary studies, whether in English, Comparative Literature, or the various foreign literatures, that does not pay at least lip service to the diversity of ideas and questions raised by postcolonial studies in its various forms and iterations.

For all its appeal, postcolonial studies has been subjected to somewhat harsh criticism in some circles. One of its most ferocious opponents has been the Indian scholar Aijaz Ahmad, who has repeatedly faulted postcolonial critics for succumbing to a poststructuralist textualism that relegates activism to the background, while also ignoring the specificities of history and class, a criticism that at least in the case of Said sounds quite unfair. For Ahmad postcolonial critics speak from an unacknowledged position of privilege, which paradoxically demonstrates complicity with the oppression inflicted by capitalism:

The fundamental effect of constructing this globalised transhistoricity of colonialism is one of evacuating the very meaning of the word and dispersing that meaning so wide that we can no longer speak of determinate histories of determinate structures such as that of the postcolonial state, the role of this state in reformulating the compact between the imperialist and the national capitals, the new but nationally differentiated labour regimes, legislations, cultural complexes, etc. Instead, we have a globalised *condition of postcoloniality* that can be *described* by the '*postcolonial critic*' but never fixed as a determinate structure of power against which determinate forms of struggle may be possible outside the domains of discourse and pedagogy. (AHMAD, 1996, p. 283)

Serious reservations have also been voiced by intellectuals associated with the movement of “decoloniality,” such as Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano and Argentine literary scholar Walter D.Mignolo, whose project is to recalibrate postcolonial theory and problematize the history of power from the viewpoint of the Latin American experience. Quijano has insisted on the persistence of the “coloniality of power,” which did not end with colonialism (QUIJANO, 2000), whereas Mignolo has argued for the “epistemic de-linking” from the colonial matrix of power “from bottom up”:

The grammar of de-coloniality (e.g., de-colonization of knowledge and of being – and consequently of political theory and political economy) begins at the moment that languages and subjectivities that have denied the possibility of participating in the production, distribution, and organization of knowledge. [...] That is, the practice of liberation and de-colonization is initiated with the recognition, in the first place, that the colonialization of knowledge and being consisted of using imperial knowledge to repress colonized subjectivities and the process moves from there to build structures of knowledge that emerge from the experience of humiliation and marginalization that have been and continue to be enacted by the implementation of the colonial matrix of power. (MIGNOLO, 2007, p. 492)

THE AFFECTIVE TURN

Not to be ignored among critical trends in the post-theory age is the turn to affect, which has impacted various fields, ranging from literary and cultural studies to anthropology and sociology. The role of feelings and emotions in human perception and understanding has occupied philosophers as different as David Hume, Friedrich Nietzsche and, in the contemporary period, the prolific Martha Nussbaum, who has argued for the link between emotions and judgments of value: “Emotions, I shall argue, involve judgments about important things, judgments in which, appraising an external object as salient for our own well-being, we acknowledge our own neediness and incompleteness before parts of the world that we do not fully control” (NUSSBAUM, 2001, p. 19). Nussbaum ardently rejects the opposition between emotions and reason: “Emotions are not just the fuel that powers the psychological mechanism of a reasoning creature, they are parts, highly complex and messy parts, of this creature’s reasoning itself” (NUSSBAUM, 2002, p. 3). Her influential work has had special currency among literary scholars, possibly because Nussbaum often relies on literary examples to construct her arguments.

Several critics and theorists had begun to turn to affect in the 1970s and 1980s. A forerunner was Susan Sontag, who, as early as the mid-1960s, had reproached critics for an excessive focus on a rational, distant, unemotional and supposedly objective interpretation that privileged content and took “the sensory experience of the work of art for granted” (SONTAG, 1965, p. 13). This critique led to her much quoted proclamation that “in place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art” (SONTAG, 1965, p. 14). Relying on phenomenology, particularly the work of Roman Ingarden and Hans-George Gadamer, Wolfgang Iser, who, together with Hans Robert Jauss, his colleague at the University of Konstanz, changed the course of German literary criticism through their renewed focus on the response to (Iser) and reception of (Jauss) texts by readers, developed a theory of reading in his early books *The Implied Reader* (1974) and the *Act of Reading* (1978) that stressed the interpretive role played by affect and emotions.

Another champion of the affective approach was Arnold L. Weinstein, who argued persuasively in *Vision and Response in Modern Fiction* (1974), while discussing Georges Bernanos’ *Monsieur Ouine* and William Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury* and *Absalom, Absalom!*, that “the premise behind each novel is that authentic perception, the real drama of consciousness, is a matter of impulses, sensations, fragments of thought and feeling; it is a sensuous, emotive continuum that resists the artificial clarity and cohesiveness of any story” (WEINSTEIN, 1974, p. 91-92). Together with Iser’s theories, Weinstein’s turn to emotions and affect had a lasting influence on several of his former comparative literature students at Brown University, including on my own doctoral dissertation,¹ whose main tenets can be found in condensed form in the article “‘Marriages of Speaking and Hearing’: Mediation and Response in *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Grande sertão: veredas*”. In the tradition of affective criticism, the article concludes with a plea for the inextricable links between emotions and the moral dimension of life:

The authors’ inventive narrative technique, calling into question the primacy of objectivity and logic, and requiring an active involvement by the reader, are aesthetic choices with a moral dimension. Designed to create partnerships between the reader and the text, these “happy marriage[s] of speaking

¹ See “The Reader in the Work: Fabulation and Affective Response in João Guimarães Rosa and William Faulkner”, PhD dissertation, Brown University, 1983.

and hearing” constantly remind us of the ties that bind us in the *travessia* (“crossing”) of our ephemeral experience. (VALENTE, 1995/1996, p. 163)

Finally, in the introduction to her 1980 anthology of critical essays on reader-response criticism, Jane P. Tompkins categorically dismisses William Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley’s view of affective response as a supposed “fallacy,” one of the pillars of new critics’ theory and practice, while asserting its very opposite, that is, the centrality of affect in interpretation:

Reader-response critics would argue that a poem cannot be understood apart from its results. Its “effects,” psychological and otherwise, are essential to any accurate description of its meaning, since that meaning has no effective existence outside of its realization in the mind of a reader. (TOMPKINS, 1980, p. ix)

The turn to affect has also been prevalent among several feminist critics, as evidenced in Donna Haraway’s connection between love and knowledge and in Sarah Ahmed’s “economies of touch,” as well as in the pioneering work of the late queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who exposed the limitations of the so-called linguistic turn in dealing with the complexity of emotional life and the social construction of subjectivity.

Lately Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, a disaffected former student of Jauss, who spent most of his career at Stanford, has contended that an obsession with the logical reconstruction of meaning has prevented criticism from appreciating how cultural and literary events impact our senses and our bodies. In his recent work, Gumbrecht has developed the concept of *Stimmung*, a German term often associated with music, which the critic has used to indicate how literary works, rather than merely representing the material world mimetically, are capable of capturing and transmitting the spirit of an era, thus evoking in the reader’s own present a more immediate connection with the past experience of subjects at other times. Gumbrecht’s recent work aims to demonstrate that reading is not a purely rational or intellectual enterprise, but a matter of experiencing certain moods or atmospheres.

CONCLUSION: SYMPTOMATIC VS SURFACE READING

One of the most hotly contested debates over the last couple of decades has been whether literary texts should be read for what they repress or hide, or for what they manifest, that is, between what has been termed “symptomatic reading” and “surface reading.” Much of the discussion has revolved around the work of the Fredric Jameson, the foremost Marxist critic in the United States, who, in his 1981 classic, *The Political Unconscious*, had polemically defined interpretation as a “‘strong’ rewriting in distinction from the weak rewriting of ethical codes” so that it “would make sense to seek a latent meaning behind a manifest one, or to rewrite the surface categories of a text in the stronger language of a more fundamental interpretive code” (JAMESON, 1981, p. 60). For Jameson, “only weak, descriptive, empirical, ideologically complicit readers attend to the surface of the text” (BEST; MARCUS, 2009, p. 5). Under the primary influence of Marxism and psychoanalysis, symptomatic readers aim to probe deeper meanings beyond the surface of the text:

When symptomatic readers focus on elements present in the text, they construe them as symbolic of something latent or concealed; for example, a queer symptomatic reading might interpret the closet, or ghosts, as surface signs of the deep truth of a homosexuality that cannot be overtly depicted. Symptomatic readings often locate outright absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts, and then ask what those absences

mean, what forces create them, and how they signify the questions that motivate the text, but that the text itself cannot articulate. (BEST; MARCUS, 2009, p. 3)

This mode of reading, dominant in the heyday of the “Age of Theory,” has been called into question by critics and theorists who “emphasize the need to adopt a more generous posture toward the text” (ANKER; FELSKI, p. 16), that is, whose project is to move criticism back to a closer appreciation of the intrinsic aesthetic quality of literary texts while also embracing an affective relationship with them. For example, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick evolved from an approach to literary texts that contained “symptomatic” elements to a categorical rejection of symptomatic reading as “paranoid reading” (SEDGWICK, 2003, p. 123-151). She chided symptomatic readers for their excessive dependence on what Paul Ricoeur had termed a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” whose “masters” were Freud, Marx and Nietzsche (RICOEUR, 1970, p. 33). Instead, Sedgwick unapologetically argued for a “reparative” reading, based on object relation theorist Melanie Klein and affect theorist Silvan Tomkins.²

The special fall 2009 issue of the journal *Representations* provides a comprehensive introduction to the debates involving symptomatic versus surface reading. Its contributors were asked to “articulate what alternatives to symptomatic reading currently shape[d] their work and how those alternatives might pose new ways of reading” (BEST; MARCUS, 2009, p. 3). The majority of the essays evolved from papers originally delivered in a 2008 conference, jointly sponsored by Columbia University and New York University. It had, significantly, focused on Jameson’s work, which codified symptomatic reading in U.S. literary theory and criticism. The most thorough explanation of the aims of renewed surface reading methodologies in the post-theory age comes towards the end of the introduction to this special issue, in which its editors, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus contend that surface reading is rooted in progressive humanistic practices:

Surface reading, which strives to describe texts accurately, might easily be dismissed as politically quietist, too willing to accept things as they are. We want to reclaim from this tradition the ascent on immersion in texts (without paranoia or suspicion about their merit or value), for we understand that attentiveness to the artwork is itself a kind of freedom. [...] To some ears this might sound like a desire to be free from having a political agenda that determines in advance how we interpret texts, and in some respects it is exactly that. We think, however, that a true openness to all the potentials made available by texts is also prerequisite to an attentiveness that does not reduce them to instrumental means to an end and is the best way to say anything accurate and true about them. (BEST; MARCUS, 2009, p. 16)

This is music to my ears, having long suffered through interminable sessions at professional conferences, in which I witnessed literary texts being pushed to the background or completely ignored as speakers behaved like would-be sociologists, psychoanalysts or anthropologists, trying to raise questions with which, more often than not, they were not professionally equipped to deal. I welcome the long overdue return to a closer appreciation of literary texts. By that I do not mean aestheticism, for I believe that literature unavoidably opens the readers’ minds up to moral, ethical and historical

2 Ellen Rooney, a feminist theorist whose work has been influenced by Louis Althusser, has rejected the recent “disavowal of symptomatic reading,” by arguing, instead, that the latter is a “problem of form”: “In contrast, I will argue that symptomatic reading invites us to read to the letter, intimately and yet aloud, in the contentious, invigorating, and unpredictable company of other readings. Symptomatic reading cannot be reduced to either philosophical critique or a hermeneutics of suspicion, not least because of its irreducible engagement with form, its dependence on a text from which it nonetheless ineluctably distinguishes itself” (ROONEY, 2017, p. 127).

questions of essential import. This feature is not hidden in the depths of the literary text but is built into its form. In his brilliant *On Moral Fiction* John Gardner rejected a merely instrumental approach to the arts, among which literature is to be included, arguing eloquently and persuasively that they reconnect us with what is fundamental to our humanness, a view to which I subscribe:

Art is essentially serious and beneficial, a game played against chaos and death, against entropy. [...] Art builds temporary walls against life's leveling force, the ruin of what is splendidly unnatural in us, consciousness, the state in which not all atoms are equal. [...] Art rediscovers, generation by generation, what is necessary to humanness. Criticism restates and clarifies, reenforces the wall. [...] The moment the artistic or critical mind loses sight of the whole, focusing all attention on, say, the flexibility of the trowel, the project begins to fail, the wall begins to crack with undue rapidity [...] and the builder becomes panicky ferocious, increasingly inefficient. (GARDNER, 1977, p. 6-7)

Literature cannot be relegated to a mere tool (“the trowel”) because its social, political and moral reach is inextricable from the aesthetic pleasure and intellectual fulfillment that it engenders. In other words and put more bluntly, literature - together with literary theory and criticism - matters.

Since this article has been written for a distinguished Brazilian journal, I would like to conclude with a few considerations about some specifics of Brazilian literary life, which, in the international spirit behind comparative literature, should be applicable to other lands. Brazil has a vibrant publishing market and boasts numerous fine writers, both young and not so young. It seems that nary a week goes by without my receiving an announcement of a new book or an invitation for a book signing. Brazil has unquestionably become a country of writers, but is it also a country of critical, effective readers? The number of bookstores that have shut down, particularly since the beginning of the novel coronavirus pandemic, is discouraging. According to recent statistics, the book market in Brazil has shrunk by nearly 50% this year alone.³ Of course, it is impossible to predict the short and long prospects for this market given the economic uncertainties of the present time. These are important material concerns, which are likely to continue to trouble us for a while. Within the scope of this article, however, the key question, in Brazil and elsewhere, for anyone who believes, as I do, that by reaffirming our membership in the planetary⁴ human community, literature may serve as an antidote for the dystopic sense of chaos and hopelessness that we are currently experiencing, should ultimately be not *how much* we publish nor even *what* we read but *why* and *how* we read in these distressful years of the early twenty-first century.

3 The site G1 estimates, on the basis of recent research by the National Union of Book Publishers, that the Brazilian publishing market has retracted by 48% due to the closing of bookstores, especially since the beginning of the COVID19 pandemic, dropping from R\$125.4 million in April 2019 to R\$ 65.7 million in April 2020. See <<https://g1.globo.com/pop-arte/noticia/2020/05/06/mercado-de-livros-tem-queda-de-48percent-no-faturamento-em-abril-apos-fechamento-de-livrarias-por-cao-da-pandemia-do-coronavirus.ghtml>>.

4 I acknowledge my affinity with Gayatri Spivak's concept of planetarity as differentiated from globalization: “To be human is to be intended toward the other. [...] If we imagine ourselves as planetary subjects rather than global agents, planetary creatures rather than global entities, alterity remains underived from us; it is not our dialectical negation, it contains us as much as it flings us away. And thus to think of it is already to transgress. [...] We must persistently educate ourselves into this particular mindset” (SPIVAK, 2003, p. 73).

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