Foucault’s Concept of History and New Historicism: Points of Convergence

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Abstract
This paper attempts to explore the impact of Michael Foucault’s theoretical understanding of history on New Historicism, a literary school that developed in North America in the later part of the twentieth century. While Foucault is known throughout academia for his extraordinarily wide range of interests, this paper aims only to focus on his radical perspective on history and to show how that perspective is linked in vital way to the development of new historicist strategies, highly innovative in themselves, that seriously challenge, if not redefine, the traditional humanist interpretation of literature. Attempt therefore has been made in this paper to examine how Foucault’s ‘epistemic break’ and ‘archeological’ model of history as a ‘discontinuity’ remain as important points of reference for the new historicist interpretation of textuality, authorship, theatre and culture at large. While discussing new historicism, this paper largely draws upon the opinions of Greenblatt and Montrose, two pioneering theorists of this school.

Index terms—foucault, episteme, archeology, Greenblatt, Montrose, new historicism, historical discontinuity, discourse, pluralism.

1 Introduction
Foucault’s theoretical impact on new historicism as a key cultural movement of the twentieth century is undeniable. His understanding of history as asymmetric and discontinuous relationship between different stages of civilization with no unifying human consciousness anchoring the so-called ‘progress’ of this history has been a source of tremendous interest for thinkers with predisposition to seek radically alternative interpretations of the past. While Foucault’s antihumanist position vis-a-vis history works to deplete the role of subjectivity in history, that position also removes any prospect of considering history as a grand narrative. The significance of this position lies in disengaging history from the monolithicity of any particular interpretation and opening it up to the plurality of interpretation. Inspired by Foucault’s view of history as a non-linear epistemic or discursive formation, New Historicism seeks to locate the significance of any event of the past within the historic moment of its formation with focus on the wide and disparate cultural elements that bear on the formation of the said historic moment. The radicalness of this particular approach also extends to considering the spatio-temporal position of the interpreter as integrally bound with the task of interpretation of history, leaving no scope for doubting the fact that the objectivity of historical interpretation is a myth (Richter 1205). This paper attempts to examine Foucault’s critical concepts such as discursive formation and episteme, and explore how far these concepts work substantively as theoretical underpinning for the protocols of the literary and cultural school like New Historicism.
2 Foucault’s Concept of History

Any discussion on how Foucault envisioned history is contingent upon critical perspectives entailed by his reliance on terms such as ‘episteme’ and ‘epistemic break’. His unique way of studying history, a counterintuitive approach in appraising the sequence and events of the past has been of tremendous influence on the nature of critical thinking across various disciplines of knowledge. While the tradition of intellectual practices espouses a continuity in the transmission of knowledge from period to another, Foucault critically arrives at conclusion to the contrary. The strength of his claim is based on positioning history in relation to episteme—a concept that, for Foucault, denotes “the sum total of the discursive structures which come about as a result of the interaction of the range of discourses circulating and authorized at that particular time” (Mills 57). For Foucault, discourse exists, at the fundamental level, as an unit for structuring thoughts; and when discourses of a particular period are grouped together, there emerges a particular way of thinking about a subject and a tendency "to map out certain procedures and supports for thinking” (57). "Every period", as Didier Eribon, describes, "is characterised by an underground configuration that delineates its culture, a grid of knowledge making possible every scientific discourse, every production of statements...” (Eribon 1991: 158).

Foucault holds that the passage of history is not charted in smoothness but in a motion that is uneven and uncertain. History is a "series of lurches” and it is characterised by disjunction and discontinuity known as ‘epistemic break’. The radical nature of Foucault’s thinking is best understood by the fact that he is not after any Weltanshauung behind his theory; instead he is a trail-blazer when it comes to investigating conflicts and tension that undergird the seemingly tranquil surfaces of social construction: I have defined the play of rules, of transformations, of thresholds, of remanences. I have collated different discourses and described their clusters and relations (Foucault 1991a: 55).

According to Foucault, history, progress and subjectivity are matters of metaphysics and thus have no relevance whatsoever with the material understanding of history. Those who believe in the continuity of history categorically assume in the human subjectivity as a unifying agency imposing value and interpretation from a certain perspective on the interpretation of history (Hamilton 127). Key to his concept of history is the idea of conflict and resistance as defining the formation of a discourse. Since discursive grouping within episteme are characterized by discontinuities and similarities, there is a tendency to look at human subjectivity and historical objects for that matter from the point of views of both unification and dispersal (Hamilton 128).

Contradictory positions are therefore crucial to Foucauldian history. Completely opposed to the myths of truth of history as some object historian reaches back in past to discover, Foucault balances history "in relations of power, not relations of meaning” (qtd Hamilton 131). Foucault’s fundamental assumption that knowledge and power work in nexus (Abera), historian’s attempt to gloss over an event of the past is itself an expression of power; However it is also important to note that historian’s interpretative task of the past can be understood in the broader context of the power relations within which he/she inhabits. The hermeneutical project of the historian therefore attains a new dimension; attempts to reach to past, the conviction to demystify it, to connect to details, great and small, of a period that Foucault terms as ‘archive’ are prompted by questions of power or what Foucault terms as struggle:

"History has no meaning though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to the smallest detail -but this is in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics” (Foucault 1980: 115) Foucault’s passionate concern with details, his investigation into the discursive rules within a given episteme that generate identities and create conditions in which subjectivity acquires an state of selfconsciousness led him to approach history from archaeological and perspectives (Rabinow 17). The term ‘Archeology’ for Foucault has a very special meaning. It designates "internal rules, structures, interrelationships, continuities, discontinuities, rules of transmission, the condition of their emergence, development and decline” (Hawthorn 18). When one views together the four works that constitute Foucault’s archaeological period, namely, The History of Madness, The Birth of the Clinic, The Order of Things, and The Archaeology of Knowledge, it becomes quite obvious that Foucault is more concerned with the ‘how’ factor in history than the ‘why’, thus taking a decided position against phenomenology and Marxism who are too subjective and reductionist respectively. Foucault considered Archaeology an essential "because it supported a historiography that did not rest on the primacy of the consciousness of individual subjects;
it allowed the historian of thought to operate at an unconscious level that displaced the primacy of the subject
found in both phenomenology and in traditional historiography.” (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

The move from phenomenology to archaeology is move towards decentering human subjectivity towards
underlying rules that works within discursive formations of epistemes to produce the subjectivity in question. In
the four books mentioned, Foucault conducted thoroughgoing search of diverse elements of a bounded space of a
particular period. "Suspicious of claims to universal truths”(Rabinow 4), Foucault launched himself to discover
the practices of Western culture to the point that "these practices became coherent reflective techniques with
definite goals... (4). These definite goals, as he explored in the archaeological phase of his works, is to operate on
a knowledge-power continuum that sets in place scientific and sociological propositions to interpret details through
"divisive practices” and "scientific classification”. Unlike "long durée” (Rabinow 17) historian who
works with a long-range events and distinct political events, Foucault concerned himself with men.

In Discipline and Punish (1979a) and the three volumes of History of Sexuality, especially volume one,
Foucault engaged even more rigorously with the specificities of history, predominantly human body, and launched
investigation into how human body in the post-Renaissance society came under increasing surveillance and and
went through stages of normalization and spatial distribution (Rabinow 1984 20). Cateogorically Foucault was
pursuing at this point a more focused understanding of history, a kind that used ‘disciplinary technology’ to
turn population into ‘bio-power’. Known as Genealogy, this approach is ‘micro-physical’ and subtly maneuvered on
human body and minute local details.

... a genealogy should be seen as a kind of attempt to emancipate historical knowledges from that subjection,
to render them, that is, capable of opposition and of struggles against the coercion of a theoretical, unitary, formal
and scientific discourse. It is based on reactivation of local knowledges -of minor knowledges, as Deleuze might
call them - in opposition to the scientific hierarchisation of knowledges and the effect intrinsic to their power:
this, then, is the project of these disordered and fragmentary genealogies. ??1980a, 85) Dissociation of historical
knowledge from linear and hierarchical narratives and realigning it to the local, peripheral, contingent is a
genealogical approach. Although, the word genealogy deals in a sense with the idea of origin, Foucault sticks to
the Nietzschean sense of it, as he considered history as an untrammeled samlessness with no originary or fixed
center. While archaeological notion helped Foucault to excavate the underlying grid of discursive practices that
produced certain kind of interpretation in a particular episteme, genealogy explains for Foucault that history
evolved along with the evolution of the society itself along the capitalist principles of the domestication and
containment of human body. That is why, centralization of the human body is crucial to the genealogical
approach; but in doing so, this approach also inventories a rich and diverse assortment of signs, symbols, rituals
and practices that are intimately associated with the concept of human. Rather than histories of mentalities or
ideas, genealogies are "histories of the body”. They examine the historical practices through which the body
becomes an object of techniques and deployments of power.

By historicizing the body, Foucault explains that the rationality of the modern penal institutions is markedly
different than those that are aimed solely at retribution through pain. He effectively reveals the double role of the
present system: it aims at both punishing and correcting, and therefore it mixes juridical and scientific practices.
Foucault suggests that this shift resulted in the emergence of new, insidious forms of domination and violence.
The critical impact of Discipline and Punish and in the History of Sexuality thus lies in its ability to reveal the
processes of subject formation that operate in modern penal institutions.

However, the true significance of Foucault’s archaeological and genealogical approach to history consists in
the fact that Foucault, in trying to understand the process of ‘Subjection’ of human body, delved deeper into
practices, dislines and genres of an episteme and discovered that nothing in the culture (taken in broader
sense) exists without interest. The interests lie exactly in the manipulation of the human body; and disciplinary
knowledge, in their multiple forms, empowered that process of manipulation. According to Foucault, power,
therefore, is nonhierarchal. Boundaries of disciplines break into one another and the implication is that any
piece of knowledge of any discursive field or discipline, by complex grids and networks, is connected with another
piece of another field.

Power is not only polyvalent (Hancock), it is also ubiquitous; and the very fact of it’s ubiquity is instantiated
by the deployment of power and the simultaneous resistance to it:
Power comes from below: that is there is no binary and allencompassing, opposition between rulers and ruled
at the root of power relations... ??Foucault, 1978: 94) The dissolution of the binaries and the acknowledgement
of the fact that any given site in the power spectrum is fraught with the plurality of contest illuminate on the
nature of a Foucauldian historian. He not only interprets the past with full knowledge that anything he studies
is enmeshed in a dense web of power and political rationality (Rabinow 18), but he also that his instigation to
the task of interpretation is motivated by certain interests specific to his time, that he also belongs, like the
subject he studies, to the ‘spatialization of reason’(Cambridge Companion 44). Since this kind of history runs
counter "to totalize or synthesize in the Sartrean and Hegelian senses”, this counter-history, so to speak, frees a
historian to move away from time to space, from phenomenological consciousness to webs of influences, revealing
in the process that historian and historical object are both trapped in a loop of relativity (Cambridge Companion
42). Foucault’s archeology and genealogy are "both counter-history and social critique. It is counter-history
because it assumes a contrapuntal relationship to traditional history, whose conclusions it more rearranges than
denies...” (Cambridge Companion 43). It is summed up in the following comment: Steering consciously away
from phenomenology and structuralism and then from reductionist ideas of Marxism, Foucault set in motion a
counter-history that not only avoided giving primacy to the ideas of ‘the individual’ and of ‘subjectivity’, but
also allowed the contingency of time, power and disciplines to bear on any interpretation of any event at any
given point of history (Foucault Primer).

3 III. The Relevance of Michael Foucault

for New Historicism

Foucault’s archival interest in history, especially in the way truth and power compliment one another at the
formative level of knowledge allowed him to read into any text of history affiliations of that text with governing
principles and structures that lead to the formation of that text in question. It is this interest that makes Foucault
an important reference point in elucidation of key tenets of new historicism. A particular text, for Foucault, is
deeply embedded within countless other texts, all bound up in a network of inter-disciplinary exchanges. It is
because of this reason what is important is not what any text, in particular, says, rather the imprints or effects
of power that the text bears. The enunciative form of that power relations within a text is known as discourse
that designate ways of constituting knowledge, together with the social practices, forms of subjectivity and power
relations which inhere in such knowledges and relations between them (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). The relation of
knowledge with social practices is similar to the relation of texts with contexts. For Foucault and for the new
historicism, this relation is predicted on the important idea that ‘truth’ of any discipline, or any text for that
matter, is not specific to that discipline or text alone. The geneology of that ‘truth’ has to be traced to the power
that it serves and is strengthened in return. Foucault is quite unambiguous about this point:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn’t outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a
myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn’t the reward of free spirits, the child of
protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is only by
virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of
truth, its “general politics” of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true;
the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which
each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those
who are charged with saving what counts as true. (Reader 72-73).

The points made by Foucault is emphatic enough for the new historicists to construe that the significance of
a particular text resides in a broader sense in the diffuseness of culture. As observed by Edward Said (1978),
Foucault held that a text inhabits a regime of power; and that the manipulative function of the discourse of
a text, along with the non-availability of any single author controlling that discourse, opens up ways in which
. . . textuality is to present the text stripped of its esoteric or hermetic elements and to do this by making
the text assume its affiliation with institutions, offices, agencies, classes, academies, corporations, groups, guilds,
ideologically defined parties and professions. Foucault’s descriptions of a text, or discourse, attempt by the detail
and subtlety of the description to resonemanticize, and forcibly to redefine and reidentify, the particular interests
that all texts serve” (Critical Inquiry 701).

The revisionist spirit of new historicism hinges on the incorporation of the spatio-temporal factors of the
historian into the interpretation of any event of the past. This is where again, Foucault’s understanding of
historical narratives as discourses become highly useful, since discourse represents "a form of power that circulates
in the social field and can attach to strategies of domination as well as those of resistance...if relations of power
are dispersed and fragmented throughout the social field, so must resistance to power be” (Diamond and Quinby,
1988, p. 185). Interpretation is a task that should, therefore, proceed along an ever changing line of tactics
and strategies. The new historicist emphasis on the transcending of disciplinary barriers when it comes to the
interpretation of the past invokes Foucault’s model of history as war. Dissatisfied with semiotic deflation of
history as mere play of contrast and with the dialectic logic that presupposes a mechanical continuity of history,
Foucault provides a new historicist interpreter an extraordinary freedom to fix frames of reference to conduct
historical research:

Here I believe one’s point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to
that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a
language: relations of power; not relations of meaning. History has no “meaning,” though this is not to say that
it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible to analysis down to the
smallest detail—but this in accordance with the intelligibility-of struggles, of strategies and tactics (Reader 56).

The preoccupation of the new historicists with the details of culture is well-established. As it is amply
demonstrated in the works of the likes of Greenblatt, the simplest of events of Renaissance dramatic theatre
might have resonance with elements of culture that has seemingly nothing to do with literature in particular and
art in general. The fact that the dialogue of a particular Shakespearean character can be interpreted, against
critical grain, in the light of strange happenings in the colony or that a whole scene in a play can be omitted to
ingratiate with a powerful fold of the royal society define the limits of a critical perspectives that not only take a
Volume XXI Issue XV Version I A text is an object-event that copies itself, fragments itself, repeats itself, simu-
lates itself, doubles itself and finally disappears without its author ever being able to claim that he is its master.

... I would like for a book not to give itself the sort of status that would make of it a text which pedagogues
and critics would then be able to reduce; rather I would want a text to have the casual bearing, as it were, in
order to present itself only as discourse; that it be at the same time battle and arms, strategy and shock, struggle
and trophy (or wound), conjuncture and vestiges, irregular encounter and repeatable performance.” (Foucault,
Histoire de la folie, p. 8).

In the following, the points of convergence between Foucauldian history and new historicism with leading
figures of this critical school will be explored.

New historicists are skeptical of the possibility of reserving veneration for the authorship of literary texts, since,
unlike traditional literary critics, they challenge the idea that any particular author can be singularly instrumental
to the composition of literary texts. They place the traditional understanding of history in a critical perspective,
because our veneration of the great authors is bound up with their ancientness. Like Michael Foucault, new
historicists are stimulated to hold the idea that a genius working in a mysteriously inspired manner to beget
literary texts is a myth, a case of misconception of texts come into being. According to Stephen Greenblatt,
there is no 'total artist' nor 'totalizing society'two 'monolithic' entities that are traditionally believed to be in
antagonism with one another (?Negotiations 2). He understands that an author or writer works through a gradual
and incremental process leading to codification of signs:

There may be a moment in which a solitary individual puts words on a page, but it is by no means clear
that this moment is the heart of the mystery and that everything else is to be stripped away and discarded.
Moreover, the moment of inscription, on closer analysis, is itself a social moment. This is particularly clear
with Shakespeare, who does not conceal his indebtedness to literary sources, but it is also true for less obviously
collaborative authors, all of whom depend upon collective genres, narrative patterns, and linguistic conventions
(?Negotiations 5).

There is no pure creation nor there is an artist who simply relies on himself out the compass of culture, because
when one investigates the process "one begins to glimpse something that seems at first far less spectacular: a
subtle, elusive set of exchanges, a network of trades and trade-offs, a jostling of competing representations, a
negotiation between joint-stock companies. Gradually, these complex, ceaseless borrowings and lendings have
come to seem to me more important, more poignant even." (?Negotiations 7). In Renaissance Self-Fashioning ,
Greenblatt identifies the trends among literary historians to consider history in unmediated linearity, as the
anthropological components of culture and the formative role social codes and customs in the moment of the
inscription of literary text are not factored in their criticism (?Self-Fashioning P3-4). This opinion of Greenblatt is
clearly in line with Foucault who argued that there is nothing called 'author' but 'author-function'. This function
sets out a discursive space and the concomitant constraints that filter the process of literary codification. The
author's name in reality only serves to anchor a certain discourse under which texts written by "so-and-so"
are assembled (Reader 107). Discursive understanding runs counter to the historical understanding of literary
texts. while the latter attribute originary points to those texts, the former crystalizes how coherence among
Shakespearean texts for example is artificial (Mills 74). New historicist Louis A Montrose invokes Althusserian
brand of Marxism to declare that the "freely self-creating and world-creating Individual of so-called bourgeois
humanism is-at least, in theory-now defunct" (New Historicism 21), emphasizing that subjectivity in literature
is a doubleedged word referring to a process of contestation by which agency is asserted as well as subdued. The
point made by him is expressively cogent and clear:

... subjectivity is socially constituted and constrained; the processes by which ideologies are produced
and sustained, and by which they may be conte-sted; the patterns of consonance and connadiction among the
values and interests of a given individual, as these are actualized in the shilling conjunctures of various subject
positions—as, for example, intellectual worker, academic professional, and gendered domestic, social, political
and economic agent. (19) New historicists acknowledge the fact that historical interpretation of any event of
the past is a problematic task. While traditional historians go by a generalized, hierarchical, and piecemeal
therefore, process of reckoning with the salient features of the past events, new historicists (even though, they
are mainly concerned with the historicity of literary texts) are committed to situate an event at the intriguing
nodal points of dynamic exchanges within a culture. Referring to the Renaissance theatre and the plays of
Shakespeare, Greenblatt observes that "Despite the wooden walls and the official regulations, the boundaries
between the theater and the world were not fixed, nor did they constitute a logically coherent set; rather they were
a sustained collective improvisation" (?Negotiations 14). The 'transgression of boundaries' that Greenblatt talks
about is indicative of the fact that there is no single route to the interpretation of a play (16). While disciplinary
walls are removed, historical events, even if it is a Shakespearean play, are seen altogether in a new light, in a
complex network of crisscrossing power relations. The grid of power relations establishes numerous historical
versions of an event, as it is acknowledged that reciprocal exchanges within different discourses and disciplines
cancel out any possibility of valorisation of any particular version of history. Identifying this exchanges within a
culture as 'mobility', Greenblatt remarks that ideological institutions like church, family, school all simultaneously
participate in exercising power in a manner that makes a singular interpretation of any historical event impossible
(?Self-Fashioning 2). While his observations are in relation to the Renaissance plays of Shakespeare, they are not
far from Foucault's archaeological and genealogical view of history, of how the ubiquity of power gains access
to human bodies through the construction of disciplines and their relevant discourses (Reader 66). Traditional
history is not concerned with the 'micro-physics' of power nor with goings-on and trade-offs in "the fine meshes of
the web of power"(58), relying therefore on the fictional continuity of the narrative. Sensing that a monopolical
interpretation of literary history is quite antiquated in present day, he lays his opinion of what needs to be done
in Towards a Poetics of Culture:

We need to develop terms to describe the ways in which material—here official documents, private papers,
newspaper clipplings, and so forth—is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic
property. I would, I think, be a mistake to regard this process as unidirectional from social discourse to aesthetic
discourse—but only because the aesthetic discourse in this case is so entirely bound up with capitalist venture but
because the social discourse is already charged with aesthetic energies (11).

Diversity of historical interpretation and the acknowledgment of the embeddedness of any event of past in
multiple contexts define the ambivalent limits of new historicism. The very first line with which Greenblatt opens
up the first chapter of his famous book Shakespearean Negotiations (1988) says it all. "I began with the desire
to speak with the dead" (1). He concludes the chapter with the following realization: . . . I had dreamed of
speaking with the dead, and even now I do not abandon this dream. But the mistake was to imagine that I
would hear a single voice, the voice of the other. If I wanted to hear one, I had to hear the many voices of the
dead. And if I wanted to hear the voice of the other, I had to hear my own voice. The speech of the dead, like
my own speech, is not private property.

The realization that there is no access to any single authentic voice of the past pluralize the task of historical
interpretation. This applies not only to literary text but to any event of the past. Since textuality is the challenge
that a historian must confront in order to approach the task of interpretation, there is no bypassing the fact
that the signifying practices of language is multi-directional. A historian can never fully circumvent the slippery
domain of language to arrogate to himself the totality of historical interpretation. The best he can do is to
place an event in the multiplicity of other events and observe the interlinking. Only then he can approximate
the meaning in its plurality. Explaining how a literary text is embedded within multiple signifying practices
which he terms as 'cultural poetics' Greenblatt says-Social actions are themselves always embedded in systems
of public signification, always grasped, even by their makers, in acts of interpretation, while the words that
constitute the works of literature that we discuss here are by their very nature the manifest assurance of a similar
embeddedness. Language, like other sign systems, is a collective construction; our interpretive task must be to
grasp more sensitively the consequences of this fact by investigating both the social presence to the world of
the literary text and the social presence of the world in the literary text. The literary text remains the central
object of my attention. I should add that if cultural poetics is conscious of its status as interpretation, this
consciousness must extend to an acceptance of the impossibility of fully reconstructing and reentering the culture
of the sixteenth century, of leaving behind one's own situation. (?Self Fashioning 5).

However, a more direct interpretation of Foucauldian and new historicist version of history as archaeological,
heterogeneous and processual comes from Montrose. If there is one thing certain about history is its uncertainty.
. . . the histories we reconstruct are the textual constructs of critics who are, ourselves, historical subjects.
If scholarship actively constructs and delimits its object of study, and if the scholar is historically positioned
vis-à-vis that object, it follows that the quest of an older historical criticism to recover meanings that are in
any final or absolute sense authentic, correct, and complete is illusory. Thus, the practice of a new historical
criticism invites rhetorical strategies by which to foreground the constitutive acts of textuality that traditional
modes of literary history efficaciously misconstrue. It also necessitates efforts to historicize the present as well as
the past, and to historicize the dialectic between them—those reciprocal historical pressures by which the past has
shaped the present and the present reshapes the past. In brief, to speak today of an historical criticism must be
to recognize that not only the poet but also the critic exists in history; that the texts of each are inscriptions of
history; and that our comprehension, representation, interpretation of the texts of the past always proceeds by
a mixture of estrangement and appropriation, as a reciprocal conditioning of the Renaissance text and our text
of Renaissance (New Historicism 24).

Montrose reminds us of Foucault's view of history as war, strategies and shifting positions. As it is true for
Foucault, new historicists challenge the aporias and limits of formal history and transform them into an space
emancipated from restrictions and taboos.

In a broader sense, the convergence of ideas of Foucault and the new historicists, especially Greenblatt and
Montrose can be explored in the concept of episteme as defined by Foucault. The dynamic exchange between
diverse elements of a culture (New historicists call it 'cultural poetics'), negotiations betwen Volume XXI Issue
XV Version I 14 ( ) different discourses and disciplines that discard the metaphysical notion of authorship and
genius behind so-called creativity and originality in history depend for their theoretical validity on episteme.
In the Preface to The Order of Things, Foucault considers episteme as "the mute ground" (xviii), or the
"configuration" that "defines systems of simultaneity as well as series of mutations necessary and sufficient
to circumscribe the threshold of a new positivity" (xxv). Beneath a typical Foucauldian language dense with
poetic and philosophical registers, what he is hinting at is a kind of domain that he characterises as "graduated,
or discontinuous and piecemeal, linked to space or constituted anew by the driving force of time" (xxii). Since
this domain is discontinuous and is specific to an epoch or period of time, it is hard to see it operating in
the naked eye. Yet this domain or 'order' as Foucault calls it, informs disciplines of culture and science in
their mutual exclusiveness and explains any phenomena in those disciplines that are mistaken for 'stroke of
genius'. While episteme supplies secret linkage between different disciplines, however apparently different they
are, he understands very well that episteme itself changes resulting altogether in qualitative changes. Since
each epoch has its own episteme, we have recourse only to histories in place of one polished version of official
history. The following quotation sums it up all: . . . it is rather an inquiry whose aim is to rediscover on
what basis knowledge and theory became possible; within what space of order knowledge was constituted; on
the basis of what historical a priori, and in the element of what positivity, ideas could appear, sciences be
established, experience be reflected in philosophies, rationalities be formed, only, perhaps, to dissolve and vanish
soon afterwards. I am not concerned, therefore, to describe the progress of knowledge towards an objectivity in
which today’s science can finally be recognized; what I am attempting to bring to light is the epistemological field,
the episteme in which knowledge, envisaged apart from all criteria having reference to its rational value or to its
objective forms, grounds its positivity and thereby manifests a history which is not that of its growing perfection,
but rather that of its conditions of possibility; (The Order of Things) However care must be taken here for not
reading into ‘episteme’ a parallel for an immutable structure; rather, it can be explained as something close to the
unconscious ‘constructionism’ of a particular epoch, always susceptible to change and reconstruction (The Atlas
between epistemes inhibits our customary notions of ‘progress’ and ‘genius’ and, compel our attention to the
grids connecting discrete and heterogeneous elements within culture and science in order to explain formations
in diverse disciplines. This view of Foucault is found to have significant impact on the new historicists and their
attitude to literature and art in general:

That is, art does not simply exist in all cultures; it is made up along with other products, practices, discourses
of a given culture. (In practice, “made up” means inherited, transmitted, altered, modified, reproduced far more
than it invented: as a rule, there is very little pure invention in Now the demarcation is rarely, if ever, absolute
or complete nor can we account for it by a single theoretical formulation. we can think up various metaphors to
describe the process. (?Negotiations 14).

In 1969, Michael Foucault held a chair in College de France, that he referred to as ‘the history of systems
of thought’ (Wiki). This was truly in keeping with his passion. He lifelong invested his intellectual energy in
observing and investigating how systems of thoughts of different periods of time worked to produce knowledges
that are immensely diverse in origin. He had enormous scholarly interests in many areas of knowledge, but it
is true that he wrote very little on literature in particular. That is why, the interventions made by the new
historicists in the study of literature are found useful; they have adopted Foucault’s critical lens on history as
 discontinuity and adapted them in understanding literature on a non-homogenous, nonhierarchical scale. With the
adoption of Foucault’s critical thoughts to literature, new historicists opened up possibilities in which literature
could be conceived and re-conceived in line with the radical socio-political trends of the later part of the twentieth
century. As the authorial function of a literary text was seen less as creator than as a facilitator of that text,
as the interpretation of a literary text was seen to depend less on aesthetic space than on the components that
made up a culture, there was a fundamental understanding among the new historicists, their many disagreement
on many issues notwithstanding, that variants of temporality, geography and the conflict of interests explain why
interpretation of literature is always-already pluralistic (my italic). Clearly, Foucault stands as an inspirational
figure for literature to transition from humanistic school to the wider horizon of new historicism.

4 IV.

5 Limitations of the Study and Possibility

We attempted, in this study, to explore the extent of impact of Foucault’s ideas of history on the leading figures
of new historicist school. What motivated us in attempting the task is the fact that Foucault and new historicists
like Stephen Greenblatt and Louis Montrose dominate the syllabus of cultural studies of English departments
of our country. Our perception of the close interactive relationship between Foucault and new historicists at
the theoretical level is the starting point of this study. However, it is admittedly true that because of resource-
constraints and other limitations, we could not extend the application of Foucault’s ideas to other members,
apart from Greenblatt and Montrose, of the new historicist school, although we are aware that many members
within this school have had issues with the label ‘new historicism itself’. Another area of the limitations of this
study is that it does not have anything to say about cultural materialism, another cultural movement flourishing
on the other side of the Atlantic. It is our firm belief that the trend to read Foucault’s ideas in the wider cultural
context will pave the way to explore literary and cultural movements developing in different continents of the
world. History, origin and continuity are issues that have proved relevant to all cultures since time immemorial.
Foucault’s ideas, therefore, will be relevant among people all over the world in the days to come.

6 Conclusion

The theoretical convergence between Foucault’s concept of history and new historicism is undeniable. Foucault
rejects the extraordinary reliance of traditional history on anthropomorphism and the predictable linearity of the
narratives of the past. Since narratives are composed out of selective episodes, Foucault’s critical interest lies
precisely in those details of the past that are not usually represented in official and institutionally sponsored
narratives. Approaching history, instead, from archaeological and later, from genealogical points of views,
Foucault observes that technologies and systems of power are at work in all disciplines of society especially where
production of knowledge is concerned, and that distinction between discourses of knowledge is practically spurious
since knowledge in a given epoch (Foucault calls it episteme) is trans-disciplinary, interrelated, intertwined.
Raymond Williams (1973) wrote that “we cannot separate literature and art from other kinds of social practice,
in such a way as to make them subject to quite special and distinct laws” (“Marxist Cultural Theory”). Although
Williams is not strictly a new historicist in the way Greenblatt and Montrose are, his words shed light on some
important assumptions shared both by Foucault and new historicists. Congruent with Foucault’s idea of ‘new
history’, new historicism represents a critical outlook that favours a ‘turn to history’ and places literature in
history (Veeser). While such outlook doesn’t place any premium on the idea of originality and authorship in
literature, they investigate all the possible sites of power-relations and struggles that have the potential to generate
highly nuanced texts as that of Shakespeare, for example. What new historicists refers to as ‘cultural poetics’ is
a kind of all embracing inclusiveness of disciplines where discourses of state, church, family, school, theatre and
polity all merge into and shape one another. Unsurprisingly therefore, cultural poetics as a conceptual model
has a resounding resemblance with Foucault’s episteme. And as Foucault defines history as a series of epistemic
lurches, new historicists locates a paradigmatic shift in literature from medieval period to that of Renaissance
and show how identity, self-fashioning and material appropriation gradually became staple themes in literary
representation (Greenblatt). It is quite evident that points of convergence between Foucault’s idea of history
and new historicism are quite substantial and these points have proved more useful to diverse trends of critical
thinking that it is superficially understood. As one critic says-Foucault’s legacy to new historicism is to have
imbued new historicist critics with a fascination for the structures and technologies of power relationships at every
level of human society, from the feats and methods of colonisation to the roles and functions of entertainment
rituals. Foucault has been a major influence on critics like Greenblatt, Montrose and Gallagher, both in terms
of his initial support for their work and as a lasting influence on their methods and theoretical assumptions.
This legacy has produced some excellent and fruitful analyses of the social and cultural fabric of Western society.


[_(2005) Michel Foucault, Routledge: London and (New York)]


[O’farrell Clare (1)] Michel Foucault: The unconscious of history and culture, The SAGE Handbook of Historical Theory, O’farrell Clare. 2013.


[______ (1)] Renaissance Self-Fashioning, __________. 1980. Chicago & London: Chicago Press. The University of


