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

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

Yasif Ahmad Faysal [α] & Md. Mijanur Rahman [σ]

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I. 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 anti-humanist 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.

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II. 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 of 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:

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> 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).

Like Thomus Khun's Copernican Revolution, elements of chances, accidents and relativity bulk large in Foucault's concept of a radical break, a hiatus that separates one episteme from other. From the conceptual point of view, Foucault's 'epistemic break' can be seen as in itself as having a radical break from those structures of critical thoughts that hold on to knowledge as a process of a linear historical accumulation. For Foucault, there is consequently a sense of wonder of how elements in different epochs, that cannot be simply explained away, work to bring about completely a qualitative change at the paradigmatic level:

> how can it be that there are at certain moments and in certain orders of knowledge these sudden take-offs, these hastenings of evolution, these transformations which do not correspond to the calm and continuist image that is ordinarily accepted. (Foucault 1979: 31).

Foucault, at the fundamental level of his thinking, was at odds with those thinkers who do not factor in the elements of strangeness between different periods in the generalized view of history.

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 self-consciousness 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 Philosohy).

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 continum that sets in place scientific and sociological propositions to interpret details through "divisive practices" and "scientific classification"(Rabinow 8). Unlike "long duree" (Rabinow 17) historian who works with a long-range events and distinct political events, Foucault concerned himself with men.

> "in their relations, their links, their imbrication with those things which are wealth, resources, means of subsistence, the territory with its specific qualities, climate, irrigation, fertility, etc.(Rabinow 16).

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In *Discipline and Punish* (1979a) and the three volumes of *History of Sexuality*, especially volume one, Foucault engaged even more rigorously with the specifities 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 nuanced 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 untrammelled sramlessness 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 appraoch; but in doing so, this approach also inteventories 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, displines 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 non-hierarchical. 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 all-encompassing. 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:

> 'a system of ordered procedures for the production, regulation, distribution, circulation, and operation of e´nonce´s', whilst genealogy sees truth as 'linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extends it' (Eribon III, 160).

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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*).

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-availablity 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 resemanticize, 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

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integrative view of culture but also hold open-ended views about textuality and authorship. The relevance of Foucault here for the new historicists can not be ignored:

> 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 lafolie, 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' not '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-Fasioning* 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 Althussarian 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 double-edged 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 acrualized in the shihing 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 criss-crossing power relations. The grid of power relations establishes numerous historical versions of an event, as

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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-Fasioning* 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 monological 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 clip-pings, and so forth-is transferred from one discursive sphere to another and becomes aesthetic property. h would, I think, be a mistake to regard this process as uni-directional-from social discourse to aesthetic discoune-not only becaUH: the aesthetic discourse in rhis case is so entirdy bound up with capitalist venrure but becausr the social discourse is already charged with aesthetic energies(11).

Diversity of historical interpretation and the acknowledgement of the embeddedness of any event of past in multiple contexts define the arduous 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 tcxrual constructs of critics who arc, ourselves, historical subjects. If scholarship actively con-structs and delimirs its object of study, and if the scholar is historically positioned vis-3-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 efface or misrecog-nize. It also necessitates effons 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 Renais-sance 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 between

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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 'constructionosm' of a particular epoch, always susceptible to change and reconstruction (The Atlas Society's 1999 online "CyberSeminar" entitled "The Continental Origins of Postmodernism"). The radical break 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, non-hierarchical scale. With the adaption 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.

IV. 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,

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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.

V. 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 these 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 sheds 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. (Brannigan 1998 52)

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