

Discourse

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“DISCOURSE” has been a key concept in modern literary criticism. The New Critics, for example, would speak of the “discourse of the novel” as opposed to “poetic discourse” as a way of identifying and separating genre. And, of course, for the New Critics, this distinction implied a hierarchy: poetry was always superior to prose, despite T. S. Eliot’s description of the latter as “an unspeakably difficult art.” Even the New Critics who wrote fiction and poetry called themselves primarily “poet-critics.” Allen Tate, for example, thought of his fine novel, *The Fathers*, as a diversion, an experiment, and considered himself a poet.

To look, then, at the New Critics’ use of “discourse” might be a good beginning to an understanding of certain changes that have taken place recently in this key critical term. For the New Critics, “discourse” marked differences and established identities. For example, it helped them set the limits of certain kinds of language use; and the New Critics and their heirs (including, in this case, Northrop Frye) tried to discover whatever it was that made for the identity of one sort of language as opposed to another. These are the sorts of distinctions critics came to think of as “genre differences.” In other words, each “discourse,” in itself, from this point of view, has an identity to be discovered, defined, and understood; in addition, each discourse established the limits of a particular genre: Tate, for example, could approve moments of *Finnegans Wake* because they were “poetic”; but he could not praise the entire novel, precisely because it exceeded the limits of any genre—that is, it was neither this nor that, neither purely poetry nor purely prose. Joyce’s book, for Tate, was off the grid made up by the categories of discourse which, for him and many other modern critics, defined the identity of genre and marked the differences of one genre from another. Not incidentally, this categorization of “genre” was essentially ahistorical and resulted in the consideration of literature apart from the specifics of history and culture (many important contemporary critics have since tried to reverse this result; see,

e.g., Jameson 1981). Indeed, one might say that the New Criticism’s conservative political and cultural character appears most fully in its notion of genre: in opposition to what they saw as an unchanging “present” of capitalistic excess and the scientific dominance of culture, they counterposed the “memory” or “myth” of an equally unchanging agrarian or pastoral past. Only from this stable community of class relations, they believed, could there re-emerge the relatively fixed benevolent forms of tradition that capitalism destroyed (during the Civil War in the United States and globally in World War I) and that modern literature and criticism would fruitfully modify, replace, or restore.

Quite consciously, then, the New Critics (particularly the Southerners among them who passed through agrarian and regionalist moments in their development) linked these essentialist—and, thus, timeless—“genres” to specific modes of social existence, and they saw them as “expressive” of stable relations in a particular kind of rural or classical community. But paradoxically, they thought these genres still existed and that their recreation and use might help reestablish, in our world, the cultural values that had belonged to the societies that produced them. However, we should not forget that these idealistic and ahistorical notions developed in highly charged and specific political contexts (see Bové 1986). Another way to put this would be to say—with some contemporary poststructuralists like Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze—that the New Critics’ idea of genre masked a specific link to power and desire. It obscured the New Critics’ own historical needs and wants. It helped transform their real historical experiences of concrete political and cultural deprivation into a conservative expression of their mythic desire to recover a lost origin, a supposed premodern state of innocence best named by T. S. Eliot as “an undissociated sensibility.”

It is worth pointing out, then, that, in effect, the New Critics put to *use* this term “discourse.” Indeed, their case illustrates exactly how key terms are finally more important for their function, for their place within intellectual practices, than they are for what they may be said to “mean” in the abstract. In other words, we must try to see that while the New Critics were carrying on the post-Renaissance business of making distinctions and marking identities about such things as genre, their use of the term “discourse” powerfully shaped the field of literary critical understanding and contained an entire range of aesthetic, moral, and political value judgments which were often unacknowledged as such—although they were sometimes quite clearly understood.

To be more specific, we might say that “discourse,” used in this New Critical sense, is itself an example of how we might now delineate the functioning of “discourse” as a category within contemporary critical practice: it helped to constitute and organize an entire field of knowledge about language; it helped discipline the judgment, and thereby the response, of students and teachers; and, in so doing, it revealed its links to forms of power—such as teaching—that have effects upon the actions of others. And in the case of New Criticism, we can, if

we choose, easily trace this pattern, in which an intellectually specialized language of a professional discipline is constellated and made functional; we can see it extended both into a broader coherence with other discourses constituting other fields and into the processes which institutionalize discourses. When *their* "discourse" about language and criticism became institutionalized, it effectively produced the language of professional literary criticism and, accordingly, helped make up an academic discipline by giving it some of the characteristics of other intellectual fields already professionally organized. As a result, criticism joined in the general disciplinary project of producing and regulating the movement of knowledge, the forms of language, and the training of minds and bodies. Professionalized academic literary criticism came into being.

But a reader might ask: How can we arrive at such a far-flung set of conclusions? He or she might argue, for example, that Tate simply inherits the apparently self-evident distinction between "poetry" and "prose." It is part of "his discourse" as a man of letters, a literary critic, and poet-novelist; this traditional opposition makes possible, for example, Tate's quite remarkable discussions of Faulkner and Eliot. In other words, such a reader might say, this opposition is merely an accepted critical "tool" that allows Tate to produce essays and that makes possible the debate that surrounds them. Perhaps we would best respond to this respectable line of thought by saying that it is the very utility of the discourse that must be seen as functional and regulative. It hierarchizes not only poetry and prose but, implicitly, identity and difference, authority and subservience, taste and vulgarity, and continuity and discontinuity as well—that is, we might say, it shares in the operation of the generalized discourse of our society that constitutes its most basic categories of understanding and thought.

We might continue to answer this question by saying that *of course* this kind of "genre discourse" speaks through Tate and, indeed, from our point of view the very fact allows us to say that *in these terms* he too is a "function," that in doing his work, he helps maintain and extend the very hierarchies and disciplines we have already mentioned. The final poststructuralist attempt to convince such a questioner that these conclusions are legitimate (even if not fully demonstrated here) would be a quite simple argument: above all, what is noticeable about the way "discourse" functions in the New Criticism is that it draws attention away from itself, from its disciplinary operations and effects—with their promises of reward and assistance—and focuses the attention of the New Critics' apprentices on the need "to get the job done," to understand the "meaning" of texts and produce "new readings" of them. Like all successful discursive categories, in other words, the New Criticism became, for a time, transparent, naturalized, and self-evident. Its effects within the field of knowledge established by the discourse to which it belongs were not noticed or examined by those operating within, that is producing knowledge defined by, that field.

The work of Michel Foucault has given a special prominence to the concept of "discourse" in contemporary intellectual and political analysis. He used the term throughout most of his significant writing, but with *L'ordre du discours*, his inaugural lecture at the College de France (1970), and his methodological book *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, the idea gained a new rigor and a new significance that, one might say, has effectively changed the way in which we think of language and its relation to social institutions, systems of power, and the role of intellectuals in our society.

It must be said that in light of the new tenor given to "discourse," we can no longer easily ask such questions as, What is discourse? or, What does discourse mean? In other words, an essay like the present one not only does not but *cannot* provide definitions, nor can it answer what come down to essentializing questions about the "meaning" or "identity" of some "concept" named "discourse." To attempt to do so would be to contradict the logic of the structure of thought in which the term "discourse" now has a newly powerful critical function.

Of course, the reader of a book like this one may wonder why these questions about meaning cannot be answered and perhaps cannot even be asked. Do I not overstate my case? Do I not really mean that poststructuralists don't speak clearly and so cannot answer such commonsensical questions? To such remarks as these, I must reply that the original statement was correct: these essentialist, defining questions quite precisely *cannot* be asked of "discourse." But why not? Because to ask them and to force an answer would be, in advance, hopelessly to prejudice the case against understanding the function of "discourse" either in its poststructuralist context or in its existence as an institutionalized system for the production of knowledge in regulated language. To be more precise, poststructuralists hold that these essentializing questions emerge from the very interpretive models of thought which the new focus on "discourse" as a material practice aims to examine and trace.

Yet, without a doubt, these questions that I label illegitimate are absolutely "commonsensical" and "normal" within our disciplines' systems of knowledge and inquiry; but poststructuralists would argue that their very "normalcy" gives them a troubling power to shape thought and to hinder the posing of other questions. Indeed, poststructuralists would, I am sure, follow Gramsci in saying that it is their very place within the realm of "common sense" that should be questioned so that their effects—their "values" or "ideologies," if you prefer—can be brought into focus (Gramsci 1971, 323f.). Put yet another way, we can say that these questions imply a norm of judgment: meaning and essence are better and more important than a discussion of "how things work" or "where they come from." That is, within the normal procedures of our disciplines and

the knowledge-producing system they make up, these "commonsensical" questions are more important than genealogical and functional questions. Such questions are "self-evident" because they are part of a particular network of powerful intellectual and disciplinary expectations. They are asked in all innocence, but their "anonymous" effect is directed and power-laden: to make a theory which "chooses" not to answer them appear to be naive, obfuscating, needlessly difficult, or simply wrong and confused. By obliging all to answer the "same" questions, the "discourse" of "truth" and "definition," of "understanding" and "meaning," to which these questions belong homogenizes critical practice and declares "invalid" whatever does not and *cannot* operate on its political and intellectual terrain. In other words, in this little exemplum, we can see something of what the new sense of "discourse" allows us to describe: the "self-evident" and "commonsensical" are what have the privilege of unnoticed power, and this power produces instruments of control. This matter of control is rather difficult; it does not mean, as it might in certain Freudian or Marxist theories, control by repression or by exclusion. It means, rather, control by the power of positive production: that is, a kind of power that generates certain kinds of questions, placed within systems that legitimate, support, and answer those questions; a kind of power that, in the process, includes within its systems all those it produces as agents capable of acting within them. For example, it produces psychiatrists who let people talk—"confess," as Foucault puts it (Foucault 1978, 58–67)—and so come to constitute themselves as a certain kind of subject who believes sexuality alone defines his or her identity. Indeed, from Foucault's point of view, all intellectuals, all teachers and students within the disciplines, are to some extent incorporated within these systems of control based upon the mode of knowledge and truth production that defines much of our social world. There is, in other words, no place for any of us to stand outside of it.

We should, then, ask another set of questions: How does discourse function? Where is it to be found? How does it get produced and regulated? What are its social effects? How does it exist—as, say, a set of isolated events hierarchically related or as a seemingly enduring flow of linguistic and institutional transformations? In effect, then, to understand the new sense of "discourse," one must try to position it, to see it in its own terms, to describe its place within a network of other analytic and theoretical concepts which are "weapons" for grappling with contemporary society and its history. For example, Foucault gives us a strong sense of discourse as an enduring flow by tracing the genealogy of "discipline" as a series of events existing as transformations of one another (see Foucault 1977a).

"Discourse" provides a privileged entry into the poststructuralist mode of analysis precisely because it is the organized and regulated, as well as the regulating and constituting, functions of language that it studies: its aim is to describe the surface linkages between power, knowledge, institutions, intellectuals, the

control of populations, and the modern state as these intersect in the functions of systems of thought.

There is a broad political purpose to this project that develops out of a radical skepticism about "truth" and the correspondence of fact and concept. It is worth pointing out, however, that this skepticism is not nostalgic; that is, it does not regret the passing idealistic philosophies or empirical scientific certainties. On the contrary, it celebrates, if you will, the increasing impossibility of defending "truth" in any metaphysical way and welcomes the political possibilities for self-determination inherent in a recognition that "truth" is made by humans as the result of very specific material practices. A general source for this kind of thinking is in the writings of Giambattista Vico, who insisted upon seeing history and society as human productions. For poststructuralists, however, who are not historicists, a more important and immediate source for the development of this project is the philosophy and history of science developed in France, most notably by Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem—two important influences on Foucault (another is Georges Dumézil's study of ritual, while a fourth would be Kojève's, Koyré's, and Jean Hyppolite's critiques of Hegel [see Foucault 1976, 235–37]).

Canguilhem's influence was particularly important. His work showed that the history of systems of thought, of disciplines, and of sciences was not merely the chronology of concepts, ideas, and individual discoveries. He did at least two things that helped make possible certain characteristic poststructuralist efforts to rethink the functions of knowledge and truth in modern and postmodern societies. In a sense, he de-personalized science; that is, he showed that it did not have to be understood in terms of individual genius, even of individuals finding solutions and posing problems; he outlined the history of science as the workings of a number of material practices that make up a society. He traced how some of these practices and sciences extended—like "vectors," as it were—throughout a culture, and he showed how they opened new spaces for new forms of knowledge production. By so doing, Canguilhem also showed that science(s) "cohere"; this is a difficult notion. By saying that different sciences and systems of thought "cohere," he claimed that they share what Edward W. Said has called "adjacency" (Said 1975, 351–52), or what Wittgenstein and Chomsky let us call loosely "family resemblances." The order of business for the historian and philosopher of science, then, was to become a historian and philosopher of entire "systems of thought." This approach created unique problems as well as opportunities. Most important, it obliged Canguilhem and others after him to consider how, within the "systems of thought" they constituted, various "sciences" might be institutionally and even conceptually discontinuous; how they might be practiced, as it were, at disparate points within a culture and yet, given their "adjacencies," make up a coherent system of thought spread across a range of institutions and discourses whose family resemblances can be traced by

the genealogist interested in their multiple origins, transformations, and their value for the present. (A similar problem for the literary critic might involve tracing the adjacencies between the rise of the realistic novel and, say, such pertinent discourses as anthropology or psychology.)

These three lines of inquiry intersect in poststructuralism and, joined with a certain understanding of Nietzsche (see Deleuze 1983; Foucault 1977b), make possible a skeptical and relativistic, or perspectival, view of the authority of scientific disciplines and, indeed, of all humanistic discourses. In effect, for poststructuralism, all "truths" are relative to the frame of reference which contains them; more radically, "truths" are a function of these frames; and even more radically, these discourses "constitute" the truths they claim to discover and transmit. In its thinking about discourse, then, poststructuralism offers us a kind of nominalism: all that exists are discrete historical events, and the propositions or concepts which claim to tell the truth about them have no reality beyond that acquired by being consistent within the logic of the system that makes them possible. This would seem to be a radical perspectivism, except as poststructuralism develops this idea, it has no psychologistic element; no given perspective depends upon the viewpoint of any actually existing person or even group of persons. The function of discourse and the realities it constructs are fundamentally anonymous. This does not mean that no individuals hold these perspectives nor that no individuals effect them. It means, rather, that their effective realities depend upon no particular subject in history. In opposition to certain kinds of Marxism, for example, this understanding of discourse does not make discourse the product of a particular class or set of class conflicts and conjunctions. There is no natural or necessary identity to the dispersed coherence of discourse; nonetheless, in their randomness the events form a coherence.

But how can this skepticism have a politics? A poststructuralist response would go something like this: Discourses produce knowledge about humans and their society. But since the "truths" of these discourses are relative to the disciplinary structures, the logical framework in which they are institutionalized, they can have no claim upon us except that derived from the authority and legitimacy, the power, granted to or acquired by the institutionalized discourses in question. This large fact turns us to an analysis of the history of discourses, or, more precisely, to their genealogies.

"Genealogy" complements the critical dimension of poststructuralism's radical skepticism. It aims to grasp the formative power of discourses and disciplines. This involves a double analysis, but one in which the two parts are not really separate. First, genealogy tracks down the ways in which discourses constitute "objects" and "classes of objects" which are available for study. Second, and more important, genealogy traces the way in which discourses constitute these objects as subjects of statements which can themselves be judged as "true" or "false" according to the logic, syntax, and semantics of the empowered dis-

course. Not unless a statement is about an "object" and can be judged in its truthfulness does it enter into a discourse; but once it does, it furthers the dispersal of that discourse and enlarges the realm of objects and statements which produce knowledge that can be judged legitimate or illegitimate. There is a relationship of constitutive reciprocity, then, between the "objects" and "statements" within any discourse. Neither can be studied without seeing it in its relation to the other.

For example (and this is a privileged example in poststructuralism), how did the human subject come to be that about which entire sets of psychological statements can be uttered that, in turn, as propositions, can be judged true or false? In effect what this kind of questioning supposes is that both the object of disciplinary study, in this case the subject as psyche, and the discipline which forms authenticated statements about the object are functions of discourses "about" the subject they constitute: for only within these discourses and the practices that grow from and depend upon them does the "psyche" exist as an object of a certain kind of knowledge ("a certain kind" is a necessary part of this formulation in light of Foucault's work in the second and third volumes of his history of sexuality; he showed there that sex can be and has been the "object" of many different kinds of knowledge and practice—see Foucault 1985, 1986). Genealogy tries to get hold of this power that crosses discourses and to show that it is, among other things, the power that makes possible and legitimate certain kinds of questions and statements. It is, in other words, the power to produce statements which alone can be judged "true" or "false" within the knowledge/power system that produces "truth" and its criteria within a culture. It is, in effect, recognizing that "truth" is produced in just this way as the "effect," so to speak, of systems-in-place to which are reserved the authorities of judgment—it is by recognizing this effect of power that genealogy does its work. Indeed, genealogy lets us confront how power constructs truth-producing systems in which propositions, concepts, and representations generally assign value and meaning to the objects of the various disciplines that treat them. Value, we might say, circulates along the paths or vectors these disciplines sketch. Within literary studies, for example, we might say that this power shapes the language that lets us speak about such creations of the discipline as "the author," while not easily letting us see the workings by which "the author" has come to be constituted by and for us when we "discourse" about literature and writing (Foucault 1977b).

But how, then, is "discourse" key to more than a politics of abstract language games? The answer lies in the materiality of discourse. That is, "discourse" makes possible disciplines and institutions which, in turn, sustain and distribute those discourses. Foucault has shown how this works in the case of prisons and medical clinics. In other words, these discourses are linked to social institutions which "have power" in the very ordinary sense we mean when we use that phrase: such institutions can control bodies and actions. But there is more to

them than "having power" in the sense of being able to dominate others. And this is more slippery and strange as an idea, but it is central to grasping the utility of discourse for political intellectual analysis.

Discourses and their related disciplines and institutions are functions of power: they distribute the effects of power. They are power's relays throughout the modern social system. One of Foucault's late meditations usefully gets at this idea:

In effect, what defines a relationship of power is that it is a mode of action which does not act directly and immediately on others. Instead it acts upon their actions: an action upon an action, on existing actions or on those which may arise in the present or the future. . . . A power relationship can only be articulated on the basis of two elements which are each indispensable if it is really to be a power relationship: that "the other" (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognized and maintained to the very end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results, and possible inventions may open up. (Foucault 1983, 220)

Power must not be thought of as negative, as repression, domination, or inhibition. On the contrary, it must always be seen as "a making possible," as an opening up of fields in which certain kinds of action and production are brought about. As power disperses itself, it opens up specific fields of possibility; it constitutes entire domains of action, knowledge, and social being by shaping the institutions and disciplines in which, for the most part, we largely make ourselves. In these domains we become the individuals, the subjects, that they make us. This phrasing, of course, makes things sound more deterministic than they are in fact, for there *is* no subject there to be determined in advance: the subject comes to be whatever or whoever he or she is only *within* this set of discursive and nondiscursive fields. What Foucault means when he says that power acts upon actions is precisely that it regulates our forming of ourselves. "Individuation," then, is the space in which we are most regulated by the ruling disciplines of language, sexuality, economics, culture, and psychology.

"Discourse" is one of the most empowered ways in modern and postmodern societies for the forming and shaping of humans as "subjects." In a now-famous play on words, we might say that "power" through its discursive and institutional relays "subjects" us: that is, it makes us into "subjects," and it "subjects" us to the rule of the dominant disciplines which are empowered in our society and which regulate its possibilities for human freedom—that is, it "subjugates" us. (The French have a set of words that gives them some punning insights into this whole matter: the poststructuralists have made much of the word "assujettir," which means to subject and to subjugate.) Indeed, we must even hypothe-

size that power affects the forms which our resistance to power can take. In other words, according to this notion there is no essential self somewhere else within power; consequently, resistance to any particular form of power—resistance to any discursive "truth"—depends upon power and not some abstract category of freedom or the self.

How does this happen? Recall that "true statements" are always relative to the authority of empowered discourses; recall, in addition, that what is constituted as "real" are only those objects of which statements can be judged true or false. As humans, we are the "subject" of these discourses and their crossings; if we are professional critics, literary criticism would be prominent among them. But before we had received our professional training, we would already have been the subject of other disciplines which criticism might enforce or, in part, subvert. Surely sexuality, law, and the psyche, embedded in fundamental institutions and discourses, would be the earliest means to "subject" us all within this culture. We would become, then, in very large measure, the objects who are the subjects of these (our own) discourses: readers and writers, subjects assessed by statistics, bodies available to punishment regulated by the helping services, psyches to be normalized, bodies to be "engendered," and so forth. A genealogical study of "discourse" would be a study of how these things have come about; even more, it would be a history of how the present has come about in part by virtue of the increasing ability of the power which forms such disciplines to arrange social and individual life.

The study of "discourse," then, leads inevitably to a study of institutions, disciplines, and intellectuals: poststructuralists like Foucault would argue that the research areas opened up by this concept of "discourse" are inherently restricted to matters of the local; other thinkers, especially those who might try to align some of these poststructuralist notions with certain forms of recent Marxist thinking—much of it derived from Gramsci—would argue that such study cannot stop at the local level but must be expanded to outline the relationship of these discursive institutions to the largest forms of power—civil society and the state (see Smart 1983, 119–20). In both cases, though, there seems to be a common concern: to understand how these material discursive realities act upon the actions of others, that is, of all of us, no matter where and how differently placed we are in the grid of identity and privilege these realities constitute.

Foucault argues that power is deeply rooted in social relations but that this fact should not be taken fatalistically:

For to say that there cannot be a society without power relations is not to say either that those which are established are necessary, or, in any case, that power constitutes a fatality at the heart of societies, such that it cannot be undermined. Instead I would say that the analysis, elaboration, and bringing into question of power relations and the "agonism" between power relations and intran-

sitivity of freedom is a permanent political task inherent in all social relations. (Foucault 1983, 223)

"Genealogy" provides unique access to these relations and struggles: unlike Marxism and whiggism, two major forms of historical explanation which it opposes, genealogy separates itself within the "will to truth" by trying to unmask discourses' associations with power and materialities; also, it is not reductive, that is, it alone allows for a full description of the complexly determined discursive practices it studies; and, finally, it describes and criticizes these practices with an eye to revealing their "subjugating" effects in the present—it means always to resist disciplining and speaking for others in their own struggles. (I should also mention the relation of genealogy to certain forms of philosophical pragmatism that are, in their own ways, prepared to admit a complicity between truth and power, but this issue is too complex to explore briefly—for some sense of the matter, see Rorty 1982, 136–37, 203–8; and Rorty 1986, 48.)

"Genealogy" aims not to trace causal influences among events, nor to follow the evolution of the "Spirit of History"; it does not adhere to strict historical laws, nor does it believe in the power of subjects, great or small, to act "originally," that is, to "change history." Rather it describes events as transformations of other events which, from the vantage point of the present and its needs, seem to be related by a family resemblance. It shows how these transformations have no causal or historical necessity; they are not "natural." It shows how the adjacency of events, that is, their simultaneity within ostensibly different fields, can transform entire domains of knowledge production: the rise of statistics and the development of discipline within massed armies helped transform punishment from torture to imprisonment with its rationale of rehabilitation. It also shows that this new penal discipline makes the body's punishment the space wherein the modern soul, the psyche, comes into being and is made available to the "helping" (that is, the disciplining) professions of social work, teaching, and medicine.

In the process of this description and criticism, genealogy also engages in intellectual struggle with the major forms of explanatory discourse in modernity, with what are sometimes totalizing oppositional discourses—such as psychoanalysis and Marxism—which, from the point of view of poststructuralism, are inescapably caught up in the same disciplining formations as penology, medicine, and law. This is not to say that genealogical work is simply "anti-Marxist" or "anti-Freudian"; rather, it is interested in describing how these grand oppositional discourses have become authoritative and productive within the larger field of humanistic discourse which defines modernity—and in trying to pose other questions. Foucault would have it, for example, that everyone is a Marxist: how can one not be? What this means, of course, is not just that the fundamental Marxist analysis of class domination and struggle, as well as other basic Marxist

concepts, are uncontestable but also that we are all inscribed within the larger realm of discourse of subjectivity and struggle of which Marxism is, for certain intellectuals, a privileged part. Nevertheless, the centrality of discourse to poststructuralism requires understanding something more about its relation to Marxism, especially in France. In France, poststructuralism's questioning of Marxism has much to do with the student revolt of May 1968 and the so-called new politics that grew out of it. This questioning also grows out of a concern for socialism's weaknesses, of that kind now broadly (if wrongly) associated with Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost*. Intellectually, this concern has found its best voice in certain dissidents' objections to what one of their number calls "actually existing socialism" (Bahro 1978). It implies a conflict with Marxism's dialectical materialism and the principles of elite political leadership contained within it; for example, Foucault's experience of the events in Paris in 1968 led to his criticism of established forms of political leadership and representative institutions (see Foucault 1977b, 205–6). Just as genealogy can produce a critique of how liberal disciplines create the subjugated subjects differentiated, as such, within the regulated space of discourse, so Marxism—from this point of view—with its understanding of the proletariat as the subject of history, appears as a relay of power which acts upon the actions of the class it "constitutes" and the individuals disciplined by its institutions.

Foucault grew increasingly interested in what the rise of the modern disciplines had to do with modern state power—with what he called "governability"—and how it displaced sovereignty as the hegemonic figure of power and authority. A genealogical analysis of the discourses and practices that made for this transformation does not suggest that dialectics stands outside it. For example, a study of governability in an era of constitutive and regulative disciplines shows that actions always follow upon actions acting upon agents at a distance: liberal and Marxist discourses, by contrast always think of the actors as metaphysically constitutive subjects (for an example of how complex this notion can be, see Georg Lukács's discussion of "putative class consciousness" [Lukács 1971, 46–222]).

Politically, then, politics and democracy are the issues in poststructuralism's attempt to theorize power, action, agency, and resistance. In disciplinary societies, self-determination is nearly impossible, and political opposition must take the form of resistance to the systems of knowledge and their institutions that regulate the population into "individualities" who, as such, make themselves available for more discipline, to be actors acted upon. In this understanding of governability, truth produced by these knowledge systems blocks the possibility of sapping power; it speaks for—or, as we say in Western republics, it "represents"—others. But for poststructuralism, it is not self-evident, for example, that notions of oppositional leadership, such as Gramsci's conception of the "organic intellectual" (Gramsci 1973, 208–9), will be significant alternatives to the reg-

ulating ideal of "speaking for." Having emerged out of the events of 1968, post-structuralism remains politically suspicious of all rhetorics of leadership and all representational institutions. It gives priority to the politics of local struggles against defining forms of power and for marginalized identities; and it speaks for the difficulty (not the impossibility!) human beings face in trying to make their own "subjectivities" within the given sets of power relations.

The genealogical analysis of discourse, then, sets out with an eye on the present to criticize and trace the systems of power which have come to constitute human being in our world. It does this to stand in opposition to them and to provide the results of its work to whomever would like to use them in their struggles against the forms of power they are trying to resist.

3

The contemporary use of "discourse" turns literary critics away from questions of meaning; it also turns us from questions of "method" to the description of function. It suggests that a new set of questions should replace the interpretive ones that have come to constitute criticism and the normal practice of teachers and scholars. We might ask such things as, How does language work to produce knowledge? How is language organized in disciplines? Which institutions perform and which regulative principles direct this organization? With these questions and the turn from a discourse of "meaning," from hermeneutics, or from interpretive criticism as the grand humanistic practice, we turn to the question of the subject. We turn especially to the question of how the subject is produced within social discourses and institutions and how, also, the subject becomes the "subject-function." Within literary critical studies, this requires that we consider the function of the "author" in critical discourse and in the larger formation of the subject and the discourses of subjectivity within the modern and postmodern worlds.

Now with the question of the author, we come to an area heatedly debated and much misunderstood in recent criticism. Barthes, Derrida, and Foucault have variously proposed an apparently scandalous idea: the author is "dead"; language speaks, not the poet; the author is irrelevant. For the humanistic critic raised in the tradition of *belles lettres* or of American common sense or profitably invested in the defense of "traditional values," this sort of notion is either nonsensical, or, rather neurotically, taken to be a "threat to civilization," or not taken seriously, or, perhaps most commonly, simply dismissed as just too hard to understand.

One must try to clear up some of the confusion by recalling Foucault's assertion that no one is interested in denying the existence of the writer as a cause in the production of literature or any other form of written discourse. However, what Foucault and others interested in the material effect of writing intend to argue is that there are different ways to organize our considerations of writing—

that, indeed, we need first of all to describe and criticize the already institutionalized ways in which writing is conceptualized if we are to picture the principles which regulate the organization and which enable not only what we can *say* about writing but writing (and discourse) itself. In other words, when viewed as an element in a historical system of institutionalized discourse, the traditional idea of the "author," and the privileged value accorded to it in literary scholarship and criticism, is one of the two or three key concepts by means of which the critical disciplines organize their knowledge around questions of subjectivity and discipline both their practitioners and those they "teach."

The Foucauldian notion of discourse requires that we skeptically ask the question How did the category of 'the author' become so central to critical thinking about literature? This means "central" not only in theory but in practice: in the way single-figure studies dominate criticism; in the organization of texts in "complete editions"; in biographies; and, above all, in the idea of style, of a marked writing characteristically the "expression" of a person's "mind" or "psyche" whose essential identity scrawls across a page and declares its imaginative "ownership" of these self-revealing and self-constituting lines. (Even critics, after all, aspire to their own "style.") Carrying out this genealogy is beyond the scope of this essay. The attempt to do so, however, would, in itself, move critical analysis into a different realm and—if carried out in a nonreductive manner, one which did not simplify the complexities of discourse, one which did not newly reify certain "genealogical" categories—would exemplify a valuable new direction for literary criticism. In the process, it suggests the privileged place "lit crit" has held in the construction of modern subjectivity—though it is by now a rapidly retreating privilege.⁴ It also suggests to some, however, that literary criticism might assume a powerful oppositional political position within our society or that it might be of assistance to some people in their own forms of struggle elsewhere in the system. Were this possible, it would be very important. Since ours is a society which increasingly tries to ensure its political order through discursive systems that discipline our language and culture, any successful resistance to that order would seem to require strong weapons aimed to weaken that discipline. Hence the value of the poststructuralist idea that genealogical, discursive analysis can be politically valuable to others struggling against the established forms of power wherever they might be.

In other words, literary criticism, presumably always specially sensitive to the functions of language, and newly sensitive to its relationship to power on the site of institutionalized disciplines, can turn its tools to the critical examination of how, in relation to the state and its largest institutions, power operates in discourse and how discourse disciplines a population. How, in particular, discourse helps to maintain a population as a set of actors always available for discipline, to act to ends announced by agents themselves responding to (or even resisting) the distributed effects of power in this society.

In sum, then, discourse can turn literary studies into a full criticism, one which is skeptical, critical, oppositional, and—when appropriate—sustentative. It can help us to avoid reduction, either of the historical context of an event or of the rhetorically complex display of power within a textualized discourse or institutionalized discipline.

Of course, it is, in itself, no panacea of critical opposition; it is no talisman—although many newer critics chant its terms as if they were a magical charm. It, too, can become a new disciplinary technique—some would argue it already has—within our regulated society, one that enables the production of new texts, new discourses, whose “contents” may be different and whose politics may be oppositional but whose effects on given power relations may be either minimal or unpredictable and undesired. Criticism must always watchfully resist the promotional powers of the disciplined discourse in which it is placed. It can exploit the possibilities of that discourse to produce what Foucault calls a “counter-memory,” but it needs to be careful not to assume the right of speaking for others in forming that memory. Above all, it needs to avoid becoming what R. P. Blackmur would have called a “new orthodoxy.”

In his turn away from the very New Criticism that he had helped to establish, Blackmur explained that he was motivated by a commitment to criticism, to a process and position that Edward W. Said sums up as “critical negation” (see Bové 1986, 275–99), and that I am calling here “skepticism.” When the tools of opposition, useful to a point and in a specific local struggle against a particular form of power, lose their negative edge—when their critical effect makes no difference and they simply permit the creation of new texts, new documents recording the successful placement of the previously “oppositional” within the considerably unchanged institutional structures of the discipline—at that point criticism must turn skeptical again and genealogically recall how the heretical became orthodox (perhaps the most powerful example of just this move is Blackmur’s critique of Kenneth Burke [see Blackmur 1955]). This is a difficult chore of critical renewal: a perpetual measure of criticism’s task in our society, one that must transcend both professional enticements and critical egoism. As Foucault says of Hegel’s (that is, of philosophy’s) encounters with his twentieth-century readers: it commits us to a task of “continuous recommencement, given over to the forms and paradoxes of repetition” (Foucault 1976, 236).

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