

A DECONSTRUCTIVE STUDY OF *THE REGENERATION TRILOGY*, PAT BARKER

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El presente trabajo tiene como objetivo abordar un breve análisis de las teorías deconstructivistas de M.Foucault en la Trilogía *Regeneration* de la escritora inglesa Pat Barker. Dicho análisis pone de manifiesto la ruptura del discurso imperante a principios del siglo XX (apología a Dios, al Rey, a la Nación) y la sustitución por una percepción más crítica de dichos conceptos tradicionales. Asimismo se ofrece la exposición de una intrincada serie de redes de poder con los conceptos de Castigo, Locura, Sexualidad y Valores Sociales en el marco de ese paradigma.

1.- FOUCAULT'S CONCEPT OF HISTORY

Michel Foucault's deconstructive theories have to be understood within the framework of Postmodern historical fiction or *metafiction*¹, whose principal feature is to falsify the real events of history with the aim of disclosing the fictional construction of the past.

Foucault considers history as a literary construct derived from the imagination and the subjective interpretation of the historian or fiction writer. Historians cannot ignore the historical context and ideologies – which constitute their epistemology - of their time when they reconstruct the Past. History is made of empirical content (“raw data”) as well as ideologies applied by historians. According to Foucault :

(1) For W. Onmundsen (1993: 82), *Metafiction* is fiction about fiction; it involves games in which levels of narrative and the readers' perception of them are fused, and traditional realist conventions governing the separation of mimetic and diegetic elements are flaunted or thwarted.

“History is the record not of what actually happened, but of what historians tell us happened after they have organised the data according to their own version of social reality” (Munslow,1997:127).

Contrary to conventional historicism, where the historian “should clarify and familiarize his readers with the artefacts of past cultures and Epochs”(White,1978:250), Foucault proposes a deconstructive solution, i.e. to defamiliarize the concepts of Man, Society and Culture, which for a long time have been considered transparent.

“He rejects empirism’s will to truth. This vision of postmodern history (...) dismisses the reconstructionist belief (brute factualism, disinterested historians, continuity, etc. in a transparent narrative that permits the historical truth to emerge as if it existed beyond its description” (Munslow,1997:124).

Continuing with this idea of history, Foucault argues that it is impossible to gather the truth of the past objectively, as objectivity itself is a historical and cultural construct. The knowledge of the past comes through the medium of language reflected in historical narrative discourses. History is a medium where a disconnected range of discursive practices can take place - discourse and narrative can be considered synonymous at this point - . Historical narratives are formed by discourses, verbal and non-verbal, which constitute the *knowledge* at any given period of time. The attitude of historians towards the historical facts they are reconstructing is shaped in *tropes*² and other narrative strategies, thus this knowledge will never be objective. The resulting discourse reflects the knowledge at a certain epoch or *Episteme*.³

(2) Tropes are those figures of speech used in the narrative to create a new meaning in words different from the one which usually corresponds to them. This shift of meaning is based on a close association of the terms.

(3) For Foucault Episteme is something like a piece of history in which all separate discourses which constitute the basis of knowledge join to create “a coherent structure of thought founded on a set of shared assumptions about how such knowledge is obtained and deployed” (Munslow,1997:183). He distinguishes four Epistemes in History, since the XVI century until nowadays. Our current Episteme (“the Postmodern condition”) is characterized by the existence of knowledge materialised in power and situated in discourse – a literary construct fixed through the troping process -.

2.- DISCOURSE-POWER RELATIONS

At the core of Foucault's historical theory there is the innate relation between discourse and power, as throughout history discourse has determined the power wielded by institutions – including here politics, arts and science - at different historical periods. Discourse is inseparable from power, because discourse is the governing and ordering power of every social institution. Foucault shows that social and political power work through discourse.

“Discourse determines what is possible to say, what are the criteria of truth, who is allowed to speak with authority and where such speech can be spoken”. (Selden & Widdowson, 1993:129).

“Truthful” discourse considers what is rational and normal and it works by accepting several constraints representative of its particular episteme. These are, first of all, to exclude the abnormal in order to avoid being condemned to madness and silence; to think in terms of the author and discipline, and finally, to accept the formative power of the education system, which defines what may be rational or not.

Knowledge is apprehended in this way by means of discourse although it takes place within a real world of power struggle:

“In politics, arts and science power is gained through discourse: discourse is *a violence that we do things* (...), there are absolutely no *true* discourses, only more or less powerful ones”. (Selden & Widdowson, 1993:161).

Foucault defines *power* as “a general system of dominations exerted by one group over another, a system whose effects pervade the entire social body”.⁴ Power is not considered a property, but it is rather a strategy whose effects can be attributed to dispositions and stratagems; it is rather exercised than possessed. Whatever the way power is revealed, it always involves *new knowledge*. The relations of power-knowledge are not always the same, there are continual shifts (“paradigmatic shifts”) which make knowledge and, as they are encoded in discourses, they change depending on the episteme of its time.⁵

(4) Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*. Penguin, p.92

(5) Power representing the true knowledge changes from one period to another; a theory cannot be recognised as truthful if it does not coincide with the power consensus of the institution of the day.

All individuals take part in networks of power, sometimes as subject (dominator), sometimes as subjected (dominated). They are part of the discourse and the knowledge they create. The power rests on the discourses which are common or agreeable to a particular community and at any given time. i.e. they agree to their own episteme.

The relations that form power are manifold and include all sorts of discourses. Power is exerted through discourses like persuasion, education, social security, etc. . However it is also necessary to point out to the power of the discourse in “intellectual, moral, psychiatrist and legal constraints”, which are rooted in social institutions which produce oppression. The discourses in question are related to the concepts of *Sexuality, Discipline and Punish and Madness and Civilisation.*

3.- FOUCAULT'S THEORIES AS REFLECTED IN *THE REGENERATION TRILOGY*

Reaching this point in our discussion we would like to apply Foucault's ideas of power and discourse to an analysis of Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy* (*Regeneration, The Eye in the Door* and *The Ghost Road*). We will explore the different power-discourse networks which are linked to such concepts as Punishment, Madness, Sex, Social Class and Gender.

First of all the novel itself by being set during a historical period like the First World War creates a discourse, which includes all concepts and values attached to a specific moment and society like the British at the beginning of the twentieth century. These values were based on a traditional faith of people in God, King and Country; nationalist feelings enhanced, among other things, by the power of the British Empire abroad. However all these nationalist emotions were undermined by the massacre of British soldiers in the battle of the Somme in 1915.

In the *Trilogy* most of the patients treated by Rivers took part in that battle.⁶

As R. Paul points out “The battle of the Somme was to be a turning point (...). Not only was it the worst defeat of the war in terms of human losses, it also gave a final crashing blow to any remaining feelings of support among civilians at home for the ultimate aims of their military leaders”.⁷

(6) The *Trilogy* ends with an episode of war just a few days before the war ended, the 11th of November, 1918.

(7) Ron Paul. *Unruly Nations*, Akademiförlaget. 1996, p. 54

This battle was a paradigmatic shift which caused the belief in values mentioned before to be seriously undermined. In the work of Pat Barker the perspective of the story is given by the “sufferers” of the war, such as soldiers and other people who were somehow involved in the war: women working in arms factories, Protestants imprisoned as a result of riots against the war policies of the Government (e.g. Beattie Roper is convicted for attempted murder of a political leader).

Applying Foucault’s theories of power, we find that the novels deconstruct the political and social discourse, which established knowledge and power, represented by the prevailing values in the First World War.

3.1.- POWER-PUNISHMENT/DISCIPLINE RELATION

According to Foucault modern nations function as “disciplinarian” in the sense that they exert power, pervading contemporary societies and governing “even the minute details of everyday life”.

A metaphorical way of exerting that power is found in the punishment represented by prisons. Prison is used as an “apparatus” for repression. Perhaps the punishment carried out nowadays (“within our episteme”) is less terrible than in past times, however it does not prevent it from being so repressive. The procedure by which punishment is exercised is based on a model of “perpetual surveillance”, so-called *Panopticism*:

“Prison is concerned with whatever is visible; it is a system of light before being a figure of stone defined as *Panopticism*: by a usual assemblage and a luminous environment in which the warder can see all the detainees but the detainees being able to see either him or one another”.⁸

This system operates similarly in our society: certain institutions exert a permanently vigilating discipline, the only difference with respect to the “stone –prison” being that this power works in an invisible manner.

In *The Eye in the Door* (second book of the *Trilogy*) we have illustrations of this power-punishment relation. Primarily, the imprisonment of Beattie Roper and “her being watched” through the key hole of the

(8) Giles Deleuze. “A New Cartographer (Discipline and Punish)”, Foucault, 1998, vol. IV, p.289

door represents this eternal, unexpected surveillance:

“He was finding the eye in the door difficult to cope with. Facing it was intolerable, because you could never be sure if there were a human eye at the centre of the painted eye(...) He had the irritating impression of somebody perpetually trying to attract his attention. It tired him, and if it tired him after less than one hour, what must have done to Beattie?”⁹

This is supposed to be the way of invigilating convicted persons in British prisons, because Beattie also mentions that her son, who had become a conscientious objector and refused to put on a military uniform, had been constantly observed: “it wasn’t the cold that bothered him, it was being watched all the time”(The Eye in the Door, p.36).

However the symbol of constant surveillance and punishment is also reflected in other situations throughout the story, rather than just in the prison system itself. Thus after visiting Beattie, Prior starts having blackouts. The eye in the door that he saw in the prison brings him memories from the past when on one occasion he had the eye ball of one of his men held in the palm of his hand. In those blackouts he feels as if there were an eye (a *panopticon*) on one side of his head observing his other half and he is unable to control it.

A final remark regarding the power-punishment or discipline relation is found in the Soldier’s Declaration (a military discourse) where the treatment given to British soldiers in the War is denounced: “the war has changed from one of defence to conquest and the end of the suffering of the troops is wanted”(Hynes, 1995:1).

The State is so repressive that they do not consider the terrible consequences that the war is having on the future of the country. It is also repressive that Sassoon, a brave healthy officer is forced to pretend to be shell-shocked to prevent his own court-martial.

3.2.- POWER-MADNESS RELATION

In this second network (power-madness) Foucault claims that madness and disease are not simple, empirical facts but they are always conceived in relation to the social norms and specific forms of discourse current at particular historical moments.

Madness and with it the existence of institutions to deal with mad-

(9) Pat Barker. *The Eye in the Door*. London: Viking, 1993, p.40

ness (e.g. psychiatry) is another way of repression. After recovering, patients are obliged to be re-inserted in the social system they live in. According to A. de la Concha (1999) "Las nuevas disposiciones legales y las formas de tratamiento médico constituyen una estigmatización moral de la degeneración inducida por la proletarización y una reinterpretación de la curación mental como rehabilitación social".

In the novels of *The Regeneration Trilogy* we have this power relation reflected through the function of psychiatry at the mental Hospital of Clai-glockhart. Soldiers are affected by "shell-shock".¹⁰ Shell-shock was a new problem in military medicine that was unprepared either to understand or to treat it. Soldiers showed symptoms attached to hysteria (paralysis, deafness, mutism, nightmares, insomnia...). Hysteria had traditionally been considered a "female malady", a mental illness common in women.

To many doctors, shell-shock cases were considered as signs of cowardice and malingering in men who did not want to go back to the war. But it was especially attached to an image of unmanliness. That is the reason why psychiatrists like Yevelland applied outrageous therapeutical methods like electric-shocks. As E. Showalter (1985) points out: "Male hysteria elicited angry responses because men were not supposed to show weakness"¹¹

"Yevelland put the pad electrode on the lumbar spines and began attacking the long pharyngeal electrode(...) 'Remember, you must behave as becomes the hero I expect you to be(...), a man who has been through so many battles should have a better control of himself'.¹²

On the other hand the therapy applied by Rivers in cases of shell-shocked patients consists of making them to confront the inhumanities of the war they have experienced, and to find ways of dealing with it. "Agricultural and athletic occupations were encouraged for those who liked them, and there were excellent facilities for gardening, tennis, bowls, cricket., etc.)" (Showalter,1985:179).Among some patients (e.g. Owen and Graves) writing poetry was encouraged. In short, the aim was to provide patients with less stressful environment so that they could face their fears.

(10)"Shell-shock" became a term in medicine to refer to "anxiety neurosis", "war strains" detected in patients who had taken part in armed conflicts.

(11)Elaine Showalter. *The Female Malady*. University of Chicago Press, 1985, p.176

(12)Pat Barker. *Regeneration*. London: Penguin, 1992,pp. .229-230 (First book of the *Regeneration Trilogy*)

However this therapeutic method does not stop it being another way of repression: by confronting their fears they suffer from insomnia, double-personality (in the case of Prior), hallucinations or nightmares and screams.

“His misconceptions had resulted in a marked reluctance to reveal his dreams . Yet his dreams could hardly be ignored, if only because they were currently keeping the whole of one floor of the hospital awake”. (*Regeneration*, p.31).

Furthermore the treatment of shell-shock patients has the ironic result that they will be sent back to the front to continue killing themselves. In this respect Psychiatry works like Punishment: British soldiers have the right, and are condemned to fight in the name of God, the King and the Country.

It is curious to observe that Rivers himself is a victim of his own therapy approach: by dealing with the suffering of shell-shocked officers, he draws on his own suppressed emotions of love and nurturance.

There is for example a scene in *The Eye in the Door* where there is a shift in power (“paradigmatic shift”) between Rivers (the doctor , the *subject* in power) and Prior (the patient, the *subjected*). Thus Prior makes Rivers overcome his own fears.

“After so many hours of probing, manipulating, speculating, teasing, Prior had finally and almost casually succeeded. He couldn’t ignore this; it had to be dealt with (...).Rivers stood up and indicated to Prior they should exchange seats(...)
‘I’m going to show you how boring this job is. When I was five...’”(*The Eye in the Door*, p.136)

3.3.- POWER- SEXUALITY RELATION

Foucault is considered a pioneer in having identified sex as a social construction, whose largest element of meaning is related to cultural connotations. Accordingly, the social convention has created a discourse around the concept of Sex because it is unnatural. The basis of sexuality is found in confession, as this seems to be one of the most effective ways of “giving out”, “releasing” sexual repression.

Confession was used by the Catholic church as a way of looking for the traces of sin in the revealed details of sexual experiences. The same method seems to have been used by psychiatrists when treating their

patients. Rivers applies a similar therapeutic method (as explained before); not only does he look for the causes of his officer-patients in their war experiences, but also in their childhood and sex lives.

As Sex is considered something repressive its confession creates a powerful link between the confessor (in our case "patient") and preacher (in our case "psychoanalyst"). However this relation must not always be regarded as something oppressive and negative: there is no need for the existence of a dominator or oppressor and a victim. Most sexual relations in our society are harmonious.

This also applies to *The Regeneration Trilogy* where both positive and negative sex relations can be found. First of all, homosexuality, being influenced by Victorian morals, was socially condemned in Britain at the turn of the century. As mentioned above, the behaviour of shell-shocked soldiers was regarded as unmanly. In the *Eye in the Door* we have examples connected with the publishing of the articles "The First 47,000" and later "The Cult of the Clitoris", where it was implied that many high-status military officers were homosexual and therefore open to blackmail by Germans. Charles Manning, being one of these 47,000, tries to hide his sexual inclination. Only when he is with men of a lower class like Prior, is he able to disclose his real desire for men:

"He (Prior) took off his tie, tunic and shirt and threw them over the back of a chair(...). He had transformed himself into the kind of working class boy Manning would think it was all right to fuck. A sort of seminal spittoon". (*The Eye in the Door*, p.11)

Homosexuality is also manifested in the fact that many men enrolled in the armed forces because the atmosphere of the war was intensely "homoerotic". According to E. Showalter (1985:174) the motives impelling men to enlist might well have included the homosexual desire to be in close relation with masses of men. All kind of sexual links in the war environment were possible. Especially representative was the sublimated passion of officers for young soldiers. In *The Ghost Road* (third book of the *Trilogy*) we have cases of this, exemplified in the relation of the officer Prior and the soldiers he had under his charge:

"And I thought about the rows of bare bodies lining up for the baths and I thought it isn't just me (...) Whenever a man with a fuckable arse horves into view you can be quite certain something perfectly dreadful's going to happen". (*The Ghost Road*, p. 176)

Throughout the book sexual scenes, involving Prior, are brutal and almost crude, either when he is with women (Sarah, the prostitutes) or with men (Mannings, French boy in the war). Later in the book it is discovered that he was sexually abused by the priest Father Mackenzie. This must be the reason why he becomes so attached to Rivers in the sense that he sees in him a kind of surrogate father (his own father did not show affection for him). By disclosing the secret of his sexual abuse, he makes Rivers do the same: Rivers was also abused.

“Something happened to me on the top floor that was so terrible that I simply had to forget it (...) I suppressed not just one memory, but the capacity to remember things visually at all” (*The Eye in the Door*, p.137).

Similarly to the madness/power relation, the link of patient (confessor)/doctor (preacher) is broken, and with it the discourse of sex-power. The patient (Prior) has access to his doctor's personal fears. At the same time, the relation Rivers-Prior seems to be positive and harmonious, the same that can be established between a father and a son, a teacher and a pupil, etc.

3.4.- SOCIAL CLASS, EDUCATION, GENDER – POWER RELATION

As R. Paul states “The prolonged military conflict was also beginning to have a profound effect on all parts of British society”(1996:54).

The war had somehow blurred the boundaries among social classes (although the differences were always kept). Young soldiers from a lower class background became officers overnight, however they always knew where their place was. This is also the case of Billy Prior in *The Regeneration Trilogy*, whose family in the North of England is very modest.

In his first sexual encounter with Mannings, Prior is aware of the class distinction that exists between them: he feels resentment, envy and hatred for his class. However even if it only is for a few moments, he feels that he can change the power roles.

“(...)Then suddenly he realised that Manning needed to be hurt. (...) It was a dangerous game. Prior was able of pure sadism and knew it, and the wounded knee was only an inch or so away from his hand”(*The Eye in The Door*, p.14)

Another aspect in this break-up of working class relations is shown by the fact that both lower and upper-class soldiers and officers were equally affected by the symptoms of shell-shock (hysteria, neurasthenics, etc...), although in different symptomatic ways.

With the war the situation of women also changed drastically, as they started working in arm factories and the sort during wartime. However they did have to wait until the end of the war in 1918, before obtaining the franchise. their working outside the house liberated them from the kind of life that their female ancestors had had for centuries, a life as a housewife, keeping up the house and children.

In *The Trilogy* Sarah and her mother are examples of this new generation of women, who were also sexually liberated: the previous Victorian morality would not have allowed girls –regardless of social class- to sleep around like Sarah and her friends did.

However there are still women of the older generation, like Prior's mother, who still comply utterly to the role of a lower class woman in Britain, serving all her rich families and having a life of hardship, living with an alcoholic and unfaithful husband.

4.- CONCLUSION

M. Foucault's deconstructive theories consider history and the past as a construct made according to the dominant discourse of institutions at every specific time, and by means of tropes, so that the truth is not only not achieved objectively but it is also impossible to retrieve it straight away.

Foucault's concept of power and discourse can be fruitfully used to explore some of the underlying issues in Pat Barker's *Regeneration Trilogy*. Our claim is that it was at this point in time that the old discourse about God, King and Nationhood broke down and was replaced by a more critical perception of such traditional concepts. Many sub-discourses take place producing a paradigmatic change of previous relations. These shifts suppose a dismantling of the discourses represented by prevailing concepts in the First World War. The metaphoric or trope illustrating this paradigmatic shift in Barker's text is the psychological breakdown of the participant themselves, the soldiers at the front. As Ron Paul states:

“Works like *Regeneration Trilogy*, by Pat Barker provides a new view of warfare, complementing the images presented in a male discourse of this terrible and tragic period in human history”.
(Paul, 1996:57)

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