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CULTURAL INFLUENCES ON AMERICAN LITERARY CRITICISM

The article deals with understanding the traditions in American literary criticism. The role of cultural environment in the development of literary theory is stressed.

Keywords: literary criticism, freedom of will, humanism, alienation, technology, determinism.

Статья посвящена пониманию традиций в американской литературной критике. Особое внимание уделяется роли культурной среды в развитии литературной теории.

Ключевые слова: литературная критика, свобода воли, гуманизм, отчуждение, технологии, детерминизм.

Criticism is important for literature, as it helps to shape the readers' perception in the complex of ideas underlying contemporary literature and criticism. Understanding the tradition in American literary criticism requires some knowledge of the cultural environment in the country in a definite period of time.

This question emerges when American critics examine the development of structuralism and post-structuralism in the country. They argue that French theoretical truths were imported into the United States and used in the procedure of literary criticism. But Americans did not simply follow European practices, but used them for purposes of their own.

At the heart of the matter is the concept of "self", that concerns freedom of will and determinism. Beliefs, concerning the self, form the basis of the theory of language, creativity and interpretation in American literary studies. There was the attempt in the society to unite a system of humanistic values with a scientific technology. "The ambivalent response to a technology that seems to promise the material wealth needed for the opportunity to be fully human, but at the possible price of humanity itself, has existed in one form or another throughout the history of the United States" [2, p. 62].

In the USA, much contemporary writing on the modern technological society combines a pessimistic analysis with optimistic hope. It is widely acknowledged that technology develops faster than a coherent system of values, beliefs, and ideals that would allow society to deal with them. Though enormous op-

portunities have been created by technology in the USA, the conflict between material and spiritual still exists.

At present, pessimists are in the minority. In "The Machine in the Garden" Leo Marx focuses upon the "pastoral idea of America". It was first found in the writings of Shakespeare and other humanists, who thought about "the unspoiled terrain of the New World as a possible setting for a pastoral utopia" [6, p. 73].

Machines soon came into the American life and were greeted at first with enthusiasm. Its purpose was defined "as the pursuit of rural happiness while devoting itself to productivity, wealth, and power" [6, p. 226]. This contradiction was pointed out by some serious American writers who wanted their readers to understand that "the aspirations once represented by the symbol of an ideal landscape have not, and probably cannot, be embodied in the traditional institutions" [6, p. 226]. Leo Marx insists that technological innovation brought a new era, separating people from their past, "from the rest of human history", it is the "suddenness and finality of change that American writers persistently address" [5, p. 122].

But the whole issue can be viewed from a broader perspective and it can explain the importation of structuralism and post- structuralism into American literary criticism. A new form of economy led workers and human actors to a status of alienation, when they became alien to their work and to their products. The concept of alienation is associated with the views on the bureaucratic tendencies of modern society. After the industrial revolution technology and science have replaced the power of religion; values, traditions and emotions are being displaced in favour of formal and impersonal bureaucratic practices that lead to the "disenchantment of the world" [8]. Music and visual arts have become codified according to mathematical principles. The magical beliefs spread by religion are marginalized by an instrumental scientific worldview.

One of the most important questions here is the concept of the "self" and its "freedom". The concept of freedom is what Americans cannot do without. They can take any system of thought and explain it to include freedom. In the reception of structuralism in the USA, concepts of "self", of what the human being basically is, how mind is constituted were put in the foreground. The constitution of mind is the basic concern of the modern linguistics, structuralism and post- structuralism. Here the Americans demonstrate the need to preserve the idea of the free, unified self.

The French existentialists followed the French structuralists. Existentialism encompasses the thought of many writers-philosophers, theologians, novelists. The direction is often considered a variation of phenomenology. In "The Order of Things" Michel Foucault points out that the concept of "Man" arises when the order of the world can no longer be attributed to God. Man had to understand himself through himself, and he became at once the subject and the object of the study.

The concept of freedom and responsibility unites the works of existentialists. In the works of Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, Camus we find a “self” who is aware of the compulsion to choose and to act. The mood, tone and the idea of freedom that can be found in existentialism influenced literary thought and theory in the United States.

Anguish, according to existentialism, arises in the face of an experience that creates dilemmas, incongruities, uncertainties that no knowledge can resolve. It requires human action. Poetry transmits this insight into a poetic form. This approach demonstrates a comparability between existentialism and the New Criticism. The psychological resolution that I. A. Richards attributed to the poem, reflects a basic human need, the need for psychic balance in the midst of a world of discrepancy.

Irony, in Brooks, can specifically serve the function of organizing the chaos by balancing the contradictions inherent to human condition. “The transition from Richards to Brooks, says Frank Lentricchia, is the elevation of irony from its place in the private psyche of the poet to the key to the human experience at large” [3, p. 146]. The poem embodies the conceptual dilemmas of life’s purpose and human nature, to which literary form brings a satisfactory esthetic organization.

The promotion of free will, personal choice and self-definition made existentialism acceptable in the US. Its audience consisted of young people who were seeking to make sense of life in modern technological times, to find values that science was not able to yield. Some social critics looked to a native American humanism, to a vision of America “the way it was meant to be”. To literary criticism, existentialism offered freedom and a concept of the self, thought to be threatened by the domination of science and technology.

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