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## FACT AND FICTION IN LITERATURE AND IN LITERARY THEORY

Some decades ago my colleagues and students would have recommended me to rephrase my title and to read it in the following way: *The Fictional Nature of Literature, and the Facts of Literary Theory*. Theories have, they would have argued, to be confronted with experiential data or facts, whereas, in reading literature, we have learned to suspend or even refuse empirical testing of the represented worlds and to accept the fictional ones.

Actual philosophical thinking, however, has attacked severely the above mentioned common sense reaction. It is well-known to all of us that things are far more ambiguous and complicated. The most striking change which has occurred is the introduction of the notion of fiction into the domain of theoretical thinking. Nobody will be surprised that literary scholars are fascinated by that idea, if we remember that even physicists nowadays are interested in metaphor and that they discovered the influence of the movement of a wing of a butterfly in Brazil upon the climate in Amsterdam.

A clear distinction between fact and fiction in historical studies is refuted in the theoretical reflections on history, in particular by Hayden White's (1973) concept of plot-structure-selection in historical writing, by Alexander Demandt's (1986) proposal of imaginary history as a method of historical research, and by Michel Foucault's discursive determinism in social life. Another domain where the opposition fact vs. fiction exercises a considerable influence is that of the theory of linguistic representation/non-representation with the ensuing problem of stability/non-stability of meaning attribution, the most important theoretician in that area being Jacques Derrida.

Let me, in the first place, mention the fact-fiction relationship as it transpires from Hayden White's selective plot-structure. Nobody will object to the idea that some data can be considered facts, in literary history as well as in general history. The question is, however, «do they have any significance?» (Fokkema 1990: 31). In other words, the meaning of a fact remains empty unless a cognitive interest, an emotional impulse or an ideological commitment construct a system which makes that fact into an historical «event», and, at the same time, into a narrative. Hayden

White puts it as follows: «a specifically *historical* inquiry is born less of the necessity to establish *that* certain events occurred than of the desire to determine what certain events might *mean* for a given group, society, or culture's conception of its present task and future prospects» (White 1986: 487).

The model for the meaning construction envisaged by Hayden White is available in the repertoire of literary genres, such as tragedy, comedy, epic etc. In principle, the historian may select a «plot-structure» of his liking, although certain historical facts are more likely to be shaped as tragedy than as comedy. This remark relativizes in a sense the arbitrariness of the historical construction. On the whole, however, Linda Hutcheon is right, when she observes that a «shift from validation to signification, to the way systems of discourse make sense of the past» has taken place (Hutcheon 1988: 96).

Alexander Demandt, in his *Ungeschehene Geschichte* advocates a historical reflection in which the events and actions which did not occur, play an important role. Once, these not-realized events have been «real possibilities». This happened at a moment in time when the future was open to a number of alternative choices out of which one has been made.

Another theoretical impulse which weakens the strong rules of separating fact and fiction is, as I mentioned already, the discourse theory of Michel Foucault (1969). Discourse, in the philosophical framework of Foucault, produces its objects. It does not refer, but it is a practice that systematically creates its entities. Foucault's «archaeology» as a method of research is neither conceived of as a science (there are no causalities to be discovered or constructed), nor as a discipline of the humanities (there is no subject who attributes meaning to a text or a phenomenon). The archaeologist has to describe the discourse practice of an historical epoch.

It is not my intention here, however, to criticize the discourse theory of Foucault, nor the other theories I mentioned. My only aim is to point to the element of fictionality in theory which appears to exercise its influence at the very moment when the notion of facts or factual relations is replaced by mental or social creation. In his well-known book *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said relies heavily on Foucault when he tries to show to what degree the concept of the Orient is a discursive creation of the European cultural elite and as such has a long textual tradition. Said writes: «such texts can *create* not only knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe» (94).

In Derridean Deconstructivism the notion of factuality dissolves together with the notions of identity and stable meaning. The relative stability of meaning, achieved by convention and transmitted by socialization, is not accepted by Deconstructivists. The concept of identity based on agreement about points of orientation in time, space, and language has been sacrificed in favour of the idea of the primary autonomy of language. The absence of a transcendental signified has extended the field and the play of signifiers to infinity (Derrida 1967: 411). Presence and absence, the conceptual pillars of factuality, are denied («Le jeu est toujours jeu d'absence et

de présence, mais si l'on veut le penser radicalement, il faut le penser avant l'alternative de la présence et de l'absence», 426). The non-existence of a center of orientation is not any more felt as a loss («perte»), but, following Nietzsche, as a play «sans sécurité», as a possibility, an adventure in the search for traces («l'aventure séminale de la trace», 427).

If we consider the theoretical development outlined so far, a considerable expansion of fictionality has taken place culminating in the extreme statement that all reality is nothing but fiction. What, in earlier times, has been a prerogative of writers, which they defended against the serious claims of factual reality with the help of concepts such as verisimilitude and its variants, has now become normal practice. The Dutch contemporary writer of fiction, Louis Ferron, feels happy about it: «The boundaries between imagination and reality have to be abolished, because there is nothing but imagination» (Roggeman 1983: 19). This statement is likely to fit perfectly well into the international poetics of postmodernism.

We should, however, be careful and not jump to a conclusion which would have the appeal of persuasiveness but, at the same time, would be erroneous. If the boundaries are crossed between fiction and non-fiction in theoretical thinking, the same, but in opposite direction, occurs in literature. That means that, dialectically, the theoretical self-awareness of fact and fiction as mental constructs plays a crucial role in contemporary poetics. Via self-awareness and reflection factuality enters into fiction.

There is no need anymore to prevent facts from entering into literature, since factuality undergoes an important transformation by accepting the shift from validation to signification and by further accepting the cognitive efforts in reality construction.

In postmodernist fiction, the factuality of the historical discourse is one of the areas which call for our attention. The fictional environment is well suited to give significance to historical events. This explains why history enters into postmodernist fiction even as documentary intertext. The signifying interplay of fact and imagination is at its best in this constellation.

I wish to support my argument by focusing on *The White Hotel* by D.M. Thomas (1981) and *Die letzte Welt* (1988) by Christoph Ransmayr. My interpretation of *The White Hotel* is guided by the question: Are the two main intertexts which are responsible for the semantic content of the novel of equal importance or do they stand in a hierarchic organization, notwithstanding the often uttered credo that in postmodernist literature «anything goes» and no selections are made. I offer you my answer to that question first and then will try to give an analytical account of it. The «Holocaust-discourse» in *The White Hotel*, the documentary intertext of the fifth chapter, which D. M. Thomas borrowed from Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar*, in my opinion, functions as a falsifier of Freudian theory, the other important cultural intertext in the novel, and therefore plays a dominant role.

In the fictional context of a highly poetic and metaphoric narrative, in which restrictions of logic, causality, chronology, and referentiality are often negated and

cultural conventions are regularly violated, the theoretical text of Freud and the historical text of *Babi Yar* are the competing «factual» elements. The report ascribed to Freud, provides us with the scientific explanation — within the framework of psychoanalysis — of the history of the disease of the young lady, the main character, a child of a Jewish-Roman Catholic intermarriage. The process of her growing up is highly conditioned by the death of her mother in a burning hotel and by the unexpected reservations of her father with respect to his daughter after the death of his wife. Her marriage resulted in a divorcé and she is neurotically afraid of becoming pregnant and bearing a child.

Although Freud's analysis is hampered by a lack of honesty and by avoidance on the part of his patient, he nevertheless is convinced to be very close to the truth. The truth of Freud runs as follows: his patient must have a strong feeling of guilt with respect to her mother because she has wanted her death. The reward, however, to be loved by her father, did not occur. Moreover, she has been seriously hurt by the talk of the sailors in Odessa, who made an end to the illusion she held about her mother. Her unhappy partnership is an evident consequence of this constellation.

Freud's analysis is supported by the images of the prose poem written by the patient: the hotel being a place of hospitality and destruction at the same time; sexual phantasies as the result of her relational problems; the strong attachment to her mother which is the source of her being afraid of having a child.

In the fourth section of the novel, which tells the story of Lisa Erdmann, corrections of earlier untruthful statements are made in a letter to Freud. These corrections are the first falsification of Freud's theory insofar that they deny the psychoanalytical explanation based exclusively on sexuality. The theory is considerably adjusted by non-sexual states of affairs: antisemitism at the shipyard in Odessa, antisemitism also on the part of the husband, the denial of her Jewish origin on the part of Lisa.

The adjustment of the Freudian theory is followed by the insertion of Anatoli Kuznetsov's *Babi Yar*, reporting the historical event of the German occupation of Kiev on September 29, 1941. After this occupation the so-called evacuation of the ghetto took place. The evacuation, in reality, was a mass execution of the Jews under the most inexpressible circumstances. This part of the novel contains the denial of fictionality and poetic imagination. This, however, is not the final word. The last chapter describes in an utopian way the life after the catastrophe in the promised land. At this moment and this place Lisa remarks, that she would be forced to say to Freud, if she ever would meet him again, that she now has even more doubts about the correctness of his analyses than she ever had.

This renewed falsification has shattered the Freudian theory beyond repair. All efforts to discover the truth by means of the psychoanalytical procedure are declared nonvalid in the face of the annihilation of any personality in *Babi Yar*. Reporting documentary truth is a commitment even for the postmodernist author. The pretext of *Babi Yar* leaves no room for counterfactuals and fictionalization. On the contrary,

the historical event which it reports, defictionalizes as it were the phantasies and transforms them into a counterpart of those who are victimized in reality.

There is no doubt, in postmodern literature, that the past existed; but, to quote Linda Hutcheon, «its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality» (16). Comparable to D. M. Thomas, Christoph Ransmayr in his novel *Die letzte Welt* creates a textual framework which also enables «Holocaust-discourse» to penetrate into a fictional world. This world is related to a highly canonized work of European culture, namely the mythological poem of Ovid. The most prominent intertexts in this novel are *The Metamorphoses*, a fictional text, and *Tristia: Epistolae ex Ponto*, an historical autobiographic text by the same author.

The geographic center of the novel is Tomi, located at the Black Sea and called «the iron city». It is characterized in opposition to Rome. Tomi, where Ovid has been deported, is described as a center of horrifying diseases, crimes, and of the most grotesque and frightening natural phenomena. There are no boundaries between dream and reality; it is a world-in-between, where the laws of logic are no longer valid (human beings change into stones). If incidentally there is a glimpse of beauty, as is the case with the girl Echo, this beauty is afflicted by a severe dermatitis. The inhabitants of Tomi are totally insensitive, dull, indifferent, and rough. No event is able to awaken emotions of compassion. «Man is a wolf». This dead metaphor is filled with new symbolic meaning in the context of *Die letzte Welt*. The Latin «Nec formas servat easdem», the Leitmotiv of the Ovidian metamorphoses, is interpreted by Ransmayr only in one direction: the changes occur from human to unhuman, from «man» to «wolf», from bad to worse.

Postmodern anachronisms which interfere with the Ovidian period are expressed mainly in two ways. First, by the introduction of cinematographic presentations and by the technical jargon of the twentieth century, and, second, by a protagonist who is called Thies, the German. Thies (a free translation of Dis) is responsible for the integration of the «Holocaust-discourse» into the world of Roman antiquity. He has been one of the oppressors during the Second World War, in his function as a warder in a concentration camp. At a certain moment he deserts and arrives in the iron city of Tomi, where he is burier and where the remembrance of the systematic extinction of the Jews causes nightmares to him. It is said of Thies that he has an «unprotected heart» ever since. When the story of Thies is told, a documentary intertext is inserted, one of the fragments of the Auschwitz trials in which the agonies in the chambers of gas are reported (p. 261).

The document fits into the narration in an inconspicuous way; only those readers who are familiar with either the experience or the historical report of Auschwitz (possibly via *Die Ermittlung* by Peter Weiss) are able to identify the scene. Those readers, at the same time, will not any longer read *Die letzte Welt* as a future apocalyptic threat, as is proposed by many critics, but above all as an inescapable recollection of one of the most inexpressible forms of inhumanity in the

recent past. My reading is supported by a number of dispersed anticipations on which I cannot elaborate in this paper.

The mention of reading experiences which differ according to different historical experiences of the readers, brings me to another relationship of fact and fiction in literature and in literary theory. After having dealt with the introduction of «fiction» into history by means of interpretive textual transformations of the historical facts, and after having proposed a reading of two postmodern novels in which history is inserted in the fictional text, I want to concentrate a moment on reading experiences in the empirical study of literature.

The German and Dutch branches of empirical literary studies are theoretically indebted much to S. J. Schmidt's concept of literary system and his characterization of this system by means of the esthetic and the polyvalence conventions (Schmidt 1982). The esthetic convention is defined in opposition to the fact convention. In the latter the distinction of true and false as well as the established model of reality are the prevailing frames of reference, whereas in following the esthetic convention other frames of reference are activated.

The remarkable change of perspective in Schmidt's concept is the shift from textual properties to the agreement between human beings: not literary works but authors and readers are the constituents of the literary system. Not the structure of the literary text, but the capability and willingness of human beings to agree upon a rule of conduct (a convention) is the decisive factor of what is called literariness.

This has, of course, considerable consequences for the fact and fiction relationship. If it is not the scholar who demonstrates which elements in a text are factual and which are fictional ones, and if it is not the philosopher who proclaims that all reality is fiction, but the reader who does or does not accept to abandon the true/false judgment, then neither facts nor fictions are available for the empirical scholar, but only *hypotheses*. Empirical research should provide material for hypotheses about the various conditions responsible for either respect or disregard of the separability of the fact convention and the esthetic convention. It should also provide material for hypotheses about the possible effects of the recognition of historical facts inserted in postmodern literature with respect to moral judgment.

I admit, that my personal recognition of «Holocaust discourse» in *The White Hotel* and *Die letzte Welt* had a strong legitimating effect as to my judgment of the moral strength of both novels. But I admit at the same time, that this is not a necessary effect. Research has to be done to provide valid «factual» knowledge about the fact/fiction-relationship in literary communication. This knowledge I call «factual» in a non-positivistic sense. That means that I recognize that my «facts» are theory-laden and in no way neutral. My theoretical frame of reference generates the hypotheses and the facts involved in it.

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