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## HISTORY AND THE POWER OF METAPHOR

My title will be found to connote far more than this paper itself will be capable of covering; let both the title and the content simply express a set of attitudes concerning the relationship of «history» and «theory» with respect, more particularly, to the study of literature.

Literary theory has been functioning as the legitimating and validating mental activity alongside our discourse, the keystone, as it were, of reflection upon literary studies; but it can justify itself in this role only as long as it does not lose sight of its own historicity. The moment it begins to construct a monument in which to enshrine its own legitimacy, that is, precisely at the pinnacle of success, it may begin to fail in its critical function. No theoretical statement — all the more if it cannot be sustained at a higher level of generality — should be admitted to be absolutely self-justifying.

The great impetus of literary theory in the past few decades has come from its ability to unseat even the most sacred icons, to make absolutes relative, to generate *theorizing* rather than *theory*. Classically, *theoria* did imply the dominance of reason, secure in its integration with cosmic harmony, whereas we have become accustomed to severely question any integrative, *a priori* thinking as the price to pay for epistemological correctness. My intention here is not to comment upon this tendency, but simply to call for consistency in its application, lest new, self-justifying affirmations crystallize from the very safeguards which were created to forestall them. Let us take as an illustration the polysystem theory, in many ways an ideal candidate for helping us to situate the study of literary history within and among cultures, and to understand its functioning there. In fulfilling this task, the polysystem theory has analyzed the processes of institutionalization and canonization of texts, as well as the obverse of these processes, so as to gradually establish a cogent, and increasingly complex, set of relationships that undoubtedly demonstrate recurrences in the conditioning and transformation of texts. My question concerns the risk of institutionalization of the deinstitutionalizing discourse itself, as it erects the observed patterns into «laws». The antidote may merge with the poison! At the outset, the polysystem theory proposes to account for semiotic phenomena, i.e. «sign-governed human patterns of communication»<sup>1</sup>, as systems rather than «conglomerates of disparate elements».

Relations replace collections of data, and the discipline gains laws which express «the diversity and complexity of phenomena»<sup>2</sup> rather than to merely register and classify them. Furthermore, the concept of system is enriching in that it captures, in addition to traditionally treated phenomena, non-traditional ones. As when fishermen drag a net through the sea, the system captures everything; seemingly, there is no better guarantee of factuality!

Further, the idea of system has the advantage of superseding the mechanistic collection of data, and works well with the static and synchronic as well as the diachronic, dynamic approach. Because homogeneity is then necessarily lost, the system becomes a polysystem, and is by definition open. «In order», says Even-Zohar, «for a system to function, uniformity need not be postulated. Once the historical nature of a system is recognized (a great merit from the point of view of constructing models closer to the «real world»), the transformation of historical objects into a series of uncorrelated a-historical occurrences is prevented»<sup>3</sup>. But soon the tone becomes more and more peremptory, as the inclusion of non-standard as well as standard elements evolves from being a mere consequence of the idea of polysystem to being a dogma directed against «élitism», deemed incompatible with literary history. «[...] As scholars committed to the discovery of the mechanisms of literature, there seems to be no way for us to avoid recognizing that any prevalent value judgements of any period are themselves an integral part of these mechanisms. No field of study, whether mildly or rigorously «scientific», can select its objects according to the norms of taste»<sup>4</sup>. Here the author, even as he utters a statement about what conditions all studies, fails to apply this utterance to his own studies, élitism versus its obverse also being value judgements.

This example is seemingly at a distance from the osmosis between fact and fiction which is the object of our discussion, but only seemingly: history, and especially literary history, is a privileged locus for studying the convergences and divergences of fact and fiction, and according to the polysystem theory — which is by no means alone in this respect — the historical discourse like any other mode of discourse is subject to the «laws» of canonization which will affect not only standards of historical factuality within a culture, but the shaping of the historical narrative, as well as the metaphorisation of selected aspects of history. Systematicity is tempting, precisely because it seems to offer itself as a means of controlling any excesses of the historical imagination; but the essay on the polysystem to which I refer affirms the polysystem to be more real than the individual phenomena upon which it works. Thus it fails to heed its own emphasis on the relative status of utterances; and this observation justifies the preference I expressed at the outset for «theorisation» as opposed to theory, lest dogma return through the back door; and finally, in the matter of «fact» and «fiction» in history, it provides an example of the manner in which the pressing of phenomena into patterns can yield an illusory hyperfactuality not unlike fiction...

In so doing the polysystem theory is only one of countless attempts to endow history with scientificity. They may be extraordinarily fruitful as working hypotheses

and methods; yet their treatment of «fact» may be as transforming as that of the more metaphorically-based theories of history I wish to mention.

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Whether we are speaking of Northrop Frye or Hayden White or Paul Ricoeur, any reference to the metaphorization of history, as well as in general reflection on the interrelatedness of fact and fiction in history, should not be presented as somehow opposing or excluding historical research and organization of data, that is and should be scientific. The discussion is about the kind of narrative statements that we can truthfully and legitimately make about the past. A logician of history such as Ankersmit states quite conclusively that 1. there are no reliable translation rules enabling us to «project» the past onto the narrative level of its historical representation; and that modern socio-scientific research into the past is an aid for historiography but cannot be substituted for it. While historical research is a scientific pursuit, the narrative writing of history is separate from it and has different goals. 2. The historian's *narratio* offers us his interpretation of the past which becomes embodied in a narrative structure. «[...] As soon as we realize that historical uniqueness should always be associated with narrative things, and not with things in historical reality»<sup>5</sup>, the criticism is obviated according to which reliable historical knowledge cannot result from inferring a unique historical phenomenon from a unique historical context and vice-versa, since general knowledge of «what these historical phenomena or the historical context in which they are embedded»<sup>6</sup> is required as to what they are related to. What is unique, says Ankersmit, is not what is explained but what explains. «What is unique in a *narration* is not the aspects of the subject-matter under discussion, but the way these aspects are integrated or colligated into one narrative structure»<sup>7</sup>. This is the basis of what Ankersmit presents as his plea in favour of historicist assumptions. 3. Finally, there is a similarity between narration and metaphorical statements, that of point of view upon reality; «[...] historical knowledge is not knowledge in the proper sense of the word» but rather an arrangement of knowledge. «What makes historical knowledge philosophically such an interesting phenomenon lies in the fact that it is always concerned with the question of *what* we should or should not say on reality and not with *how* we should speak about reality»<sup>8</sup>, that being the domain of science.

This is at the same time a sobering and a liberating analysis because it bears out the epistemological limits of historical truth claims and rebalances the concepts of objectivity and subjectivity. The richest historical account would perhaps be the one on which the greatest number of points of view have been expressed<sup>9</sup>. Thus, rather than to be simply a particular way of envisaging or writing history, metaphorisation may prove to be one of its most stable constants because the historical imagination of the individual historian is vindicated by a range of theoretical and philosophical opinions whose wide consensus targets the fertile frontiers of subjectivity and objectivity in history.

It is further corroborated by Paul Ricoeur's concept of a metaphorical truth at the crossroads between redescription and fiction, linked to the tension which arises around the referential relationship of a metaphorical statement to reality<sup>10</sup>: «In service to the poetic function, metaphor is that strategy of discourse by which language divests itself of its function of direct description in order to reach the mythic level where its function of discovery is set free»<sup>11</sup>. This statement is made in the context of a discussion on poetic discourse but it also has implications for the historical discourse because such concepts as the reduction of distance between «invention and discovery»<sup>12</sup> and indeed between subjective and objective approaches to truth apply there also and are amply demonstrated in such works as *Histoire et vérité* and *The Reality of the historical Past*. The many insights brought by Ricoeur to the discussion of objectivity and subjectivity in history are difficult to summarize but they include the selectiveness among events and imposition of rational framework that are not devoid of resemblance with the construction of scientific hypotheses; the overhauling of the concept of causation based less on series of events than on holistic patterns; the historian's ability to both recognize the distance of the past and endow a section of the past for the reader, by dint of historical imagination, with «une conscience d'éloignement, de profondeur temporelle»; and the overcoming of that distance, which includes the impossibility of reentering the mentalities of human beings of past eras, by contemplating with sympathy the world that was theirs and constructing an image of it that will be part of ours. Here the historian departs from the scientist and yet I do not think I am stretching Ricoeur's theory of history if I say that it is precisely in this aspect of historical activity that the historian is most specifically an historian and by adapting methodology to purpose fulfils a scientific mandate.

Ricoeur also recalls, when it comes to transferring into text the historian's vision of the past, the relevance of Frye's concept of the rhetorical analogy between literature and reality, *mythos* and *mimésis*, the poetic and the hypothetical<sup>13</sup>. After discussing the role of metaphor in speculative discourse, Ricoeur concludes: «What is given to thought in this way by the 'tensional' truth of poetry is the most primordial, most hidden dialectic — the dialectic that reigns between the experience of belonging as a whole and the power of distanciation that opens up the space of speculative thought»<sup>14</sup>.

The case of historical discourse is more problematic with respect to linguistic approximation of reality, because of the constraints imposed by past objects; but it also serves to challenge as well as to expand «the dynamism of metaphorical utterance». What Ricoeur calls the nomological model in historiography carries its own semiotic constraints not unlike those of fictionality, and demanding «logicisation» and «dechronologisation». «(L'explication nomologique) ne peut se substituer à la compréhension narrative, mais (peut) seulement être interpolée en vertu de l'adage: expliquer plus, c'est comprendre mieux. Et si l'explication nomologique ne pouvait se substituer à la compréhension narrative, c'est parce qu'elle emprunte à celle-ci les traits qui préservent le caractère irréductiblement historique de l'histoire»<sup>15</sup>. More-

over, «dechronologisation» is simply the obverse of logicisation, and both together manifest the non-temporal character of the deep structures of narrative. Narrative therefore tends to impose itself upon historical discourse but at the risk of deemphasizing the uniqueness of single historical events. What attracts Ricoeur in the symbolizing quality of the historical narrative is the creation of new meaning for the reader. Time remains the ultimate referent but the imagination grasps the metaphorical truth and in this process the past of mankind stands in a renewed relationship to its present and future. In summary, historical narrative is an allegory of temporality which reinstalls meaning into time.

Literature and history, furthermore, share the referentiality of time which in the eyes of Hayden White promises a more exciting revelation than could be expected from the fictionality-factuality opposition. «Ricoeur's insistence that history and literature share a common «ultimate referent» represents a considerable advancement over previous discussions of the relations between history and literature based on the supposed opposition of «factual» to «fictional» discourse. Just by virtue of its narrative form, historical discourse resembles such literary fictions as epics, novels, short stories, and so on, and Barthes and the *Annalistes* are justified in stressing those resemblances. But instead of regarding this as a sign of narrative history's weakness, Ricoeur interprets it as a strength»<sup>16</sup>.

In a wide sense, metaphorisation might be considered as a major mechanism at work in the historians' own perception of the past, in their speculations as they compare, regroup and articulate single phenomena into more general vistas, and in their historiographical practice. Metaphorisation is also an historiographical weapon used, consciously or unconsciously, to mold historical events into ideological examples. One of my favourite examples of this is the XVIIIth century reception of the work of John Amos Comenius. Today he is studied mostly as one of the ancestors of progressive education, as the initiator of illustrated books for children, as an early champion of universal education, as a reformer of school systems in a range of European countries, as the author of numerous philosophical and pedagogical works emphasizing intellectual discovery from the earliest moments of childhood. But at least two Enlightenment authors, Bayle and Diderot, treat Comenius with contempt and anger in their respective dictionaries because of the mystical basis of his world view, perceived by them as fanatical. In both their accounts, the biography of Comenius is foreshortened in the years he devoted to pedagogical reform, and abundantly lengthened in the last period of his life, during which both authors accuse him of shamelessly exploiting his Dutch patrons. It is easy to conclude from this that, almost independently of, and even despite of entire bodies of texts in literary as well as intellectual history, authors can become symbols of tendencies, and thus targets and, as required, saints or martyrs.

We could similarly consider historical phenomena which have assumed either universal or local meaning beyond the original occurrence that constitutes them. They are *both* fact and fiction. Students of French history know that the «prise de la

Bastille» on July 14, 1789, is such an event: far from being filled with victims of the arbitrary power of the «lettres de cachet», the fortress was sparsely populated with petty criminals some of whom were held there at the request of their families. For a Czech, the battle of the White Mountain of 1621 represents the defeat of Bohemia at the hands of the Habsburgs, followed by what the Czech historical consciousness perceives (and continually replenishes with meaning) as three hundred years of tyranny although the Austro-Hungarian régime was in fact far from brutal.

Dates can have such meaning: the terse expression 'sixty-eight' immediately brings to mind the multiplicity of events which in 1968 shattered several countries in quite differing ways, though they all had in common the involvement of University students, the questioning of the structures of academe and those of the human sciences. It is not impossible — and by way of such phenomena as Tel Quel it is quite likely — that the intensification of literary theory studies is a distant product of those events.

Certainly the naming of periods of history or literary history often has the particular quality of isolating a fact or cluster of facts and tying them to a set of meanings which may or may not have been present in the minds of the actual actors. The expression «The Holocaust» has assumed a universal and catalytic quality which first of all has been pulling together powerfully the separate episodes, times, places and variants of Nazi terror; but has also begun to connote other instances of genocide.

One of the reasons that in English at least the expression «Early Modern» has begun to replace the combination of Middle Ages and Renaissance is that both these are rife with ideologically loaded preconceptions not the least of which is the relationship between the two chronological components themselves, and the continuity between them, the discontinuity — that is the advent of the Renaissance — being in a number of cases the self-proclaimed message of a small, humanistic, Court-oriented élite very knowledgeably institutionalizing itself.

These examples are but elementary illustrations of the universal relatedness of fact and fiction which has been noted since Classical Antiquity. Why is it important at this particular time to probe those forever uncertain frontiers? In a recent lecture A. Kibédi-Varga asserted that «nous vivons une époque pan-rhétorique où tout est rhétorisable», a time in which many basic legitimating meta-narratives are in crisis, and the truth claims of entire disciplines appear to have become negotiable or at least interpretable; and where it is therefore particularly important to trace the limits of that interpretability. Narration becomes argumentative, and argumentation in its turn requires narration.

Literary history, and more generally speaking history, are in this perspective brought into the orbit of fictionality as forms of discourse. We have become rather used to a division of labour in which literary history in some of its more positivistic, «fact»-oriented forms, has been allocated the residual role of representing that in the past which can no longer enter into dialogue with our present and has therefore lost

its necessity while the science of discourse has the ability to do so because it deals with the past as discourse. But once we have regained understanding of literary history as discourse of a time and place (which also includes considering the positivistic histories of national literatures as discourses of certain times and places, useful to analyze as such as a matter of historical understanding of a now well circumscribed phenomenon) then we are also free to continue the historical discourse upon literature in full knowledge of what in its narrativity is argumentative relatively to our own time and need for representation, and of its being a certain kind of *construction* (rather than the elusive shadow of *reconstruction*).

Hayden White adds an important dimension to the discussion about history itself by his analysis of what constitutes the need for narrativity itself with his distinction between narrating and narrativizing. The latter is developed as a response to the perceived need for endowing the past with the markers of fictionality (I would say that it is almost as if the historical reality the historian seeks to approximate is also a possible world). «(...) The very distinction between real and imaginary events that is basic to modern discussions of both history and fiction presupposes a notion of reality in which the «true» is identified with the «real» only insofar as it can be shown to possess the character of narrativity.»<sup>17</sup>

Historical narrativity, according to Hayden White, is increasingly marked by authority, the social system and its laws, as it advances from annals to chronicles to historiography; thus narrativity embodied in the historical discourse is value-laden, and «narrativizing discourse serves the purpose of moralizing judgements»<sup>18</sup>. Here, Hayden White is not speaking of a history which attempts to let the past tell its own story, but one where events of the past are made to «display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that can only be imaginary»<sup>19</sup>, and whose narrativity is imposed upon it by a contemporary scheme of values, not one stemming from the historical past.

This is precisely why such historians as Braudel do not favour narrative forms of historiography and why we have a number of schools of history preferring documentary and even quantitative methods to the exigencies and deceptions of narrativity. It should also be remembered that the structuralists and post-structuralists viewed narrative as a conduit of ideology, and this includes the thought that the form of the narrative is an instrument of power.

In the «history of history», this marks a serious divergence in terms of theoretical stances as well as practices. My introductory remarks suggested openness to a typology of approaches, provided of course that they are not mutually exclusive. White's theory of the historical narrative uses imagination as a positive element in bringing historiography to life; this does not exclude, and in the spirit of Ricoeur I would say it includes and is complementary with, close attention to precise knowledge of the materials of history, which place constraints upon the imagination. But the resulting historical text, according to Hayden White, yields as different an image of the past as the poem does of ordinary reality: «Precisely insofar as the historical

narrative endows sets of real events with the kinds of meaning found otherwise only in myth and literature, we are justified in regarding it as a product of *allegoresis*. Therefore, rather than regard every historical narrative as mythic or ideological in nature, we should regard it as allegorical, that is, as saying one thing and meaning another.»<sup>20</sup>. Now that is going far indeed when you consider that saying one thing and meaning another is Riffaterre's definition of poetry itself! But what White is also saying is that history is not myth nor is it literature; what it has in common with them however is that the story it tells generates possibilities of meaning for the reader beyond the facts woven into the narrative. New meaning is produced; the reality of the real events of the past is not thereby challenged, but reutilized. One of the most important consequences of this for literary and interdisciplinary studies is the thought that histories are not «about events but also about the possible sets of relationships that those events can be demonstrated to figure. These sets of relationships are not however immanent in the events themselves ... Here they are present as the modes of relationship conceptualized in the myth, fable and folklore, scientific knowledge, religion, and literary art, and the historian's own culture.»<sup>21</sup>. Ultimately, according to Hayden White, the role of the historical discourse, co-equal in this respect with other creations of the human mind but specific in its singularity and temporality, is thus a highly symbolical one.

In the case of Northrop Frye, history per se seldom plays such a role. He differentiates between verbal narratives in the metaphorical phase of language, when the gods serve as metaphors; in the metonymic phase, when narrative forms are conceptual; and the descriptive phase, where «the sequence in the narrative is suggested by the sequential features of whatever is being described.»<sup>22</sup>. Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* mostly exemplifies the third phase, by relating the fortunes of the later Roman Empire, yet also carries within itself (and its very title) a narrative principle which is Gibbon's *mythos*.

Frye's commitment is indeed to the narrative principle which shapes history and gives it intelligibility. I happen to have some recent information about his unpublished papers which illustrate this: in his private notebooks he had drafted, but obviously he never published, a history of English literature of the XVIIth and XVIIIth centuries. Yet his sense of historicity is unquestionable; his schemes unfold in time, but it is the time of the literary works responding to one another and, metaphorically, to their surrounding cultures.

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I do not know of a perfect model of renewed literary history that would either secretly carry as a hypogram some particular metaphor, or would openly acknowledge its need for one. It is, at any rate, incumbent upon us to widen our concept of what actually constitutes a work of literary history (for example, Northrop Frye's *The Great Code and Words with Power* should qualify, not because of the unpublished historical project of his youth which I mentioned, nor because of his prestige as a

thinker but because a wider range of formats and programs for envisioning the historical development of literature is needed.

Inclusiveness with regard to types of texts would also be a criterion; here the studies inspired by the polysystem theory are relevant, with their emphasis on heterogeneity, and contacts between cultures. Perhaps also, although I think that a one-year span is no more scientific a basis than any other chronological span — Marc Angenot has written a thick book about the year 1889 — works that are based on the theory of the social discourse would qualify as works of literary history. Certainly a maximum of openness towards the spectrum of genres would prevail, as would intercultural dialogue and the phenomenon of emergence. But emergence is not fundamentally or necessarily geographical: it is transgressiveness that has been the motor of much re-writing of history so that it may become open to «other» voices.

But what perhaps needs to be revised altogether is the expected globalizing format; the analysis of a micro-example might bring as much light to bear upon a period than would a work neatly divided in genres, themes etc... Works such as Greenblatt's *Renaissance Self-fashioning* and Cadava's collective compendium *Who comes after the subject?* fill a crucial need in engaging the reader to strive to complete the picture for those times and places they do not specifically discuss. They are profoundly historical in that they problematize in time and thus problematize time; they do not cover neatly mapped out areas of the past, nationally or internationally. But perhaps, in the global village, such container-like divisions of time are also a thing of the past. Paradoxically, in the face of globalization, I would envision a greater place for the individual subject as the responsible locus of the historical discourse, rooted in our present history.

On a theoretical or philosophical plane, we might say that the balance of subjectivity and objectivity has shifted considerably as a result of the reappraisal of the nature and function of the fictional; so that the hermeneutic status of the historical narrative is also one of its great social assets.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Itamar Even-Zohar, «Polysystem Theory», *Polysystem Studies, Poetics today*, Vol. 11, no. 1, Spring 1990, p. 9.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.
- <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.
- <sup>5</sup> F.R. Ankersmith, *Narrative logic: A semantic analysis of the Historian's Language*, The Hague, Nijhoff, 1983, p. 249.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> In this connection let us remember Douwe Fokkema's emphasis on the criterion of consensus among interpretations, which in the human sciences has been added to correspondence and coherence as criteria for validation of truths. (cf. «Questions épistémologiques»,

- Théorie littéraire: problèmes et perspectives*, eds. Marc Angenot, Jean Bessière, Douwe Fokkema, Eva Kushner, Paris, Presses universitaires de France, 1989, pp. 330-31.
- <sup>10</sup> Cf. *The Rule of Metaphor, Multidisciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language*, Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1977, p. 247.
- <sup>11</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 246.
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 245-6.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 313.
- <sup>15</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit*, vol. II, Paris, Editions du Seuil, 1983, p. 54.
- <sup>16</sup> Hayden White, *The Content of Form. Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*, Baltimore and London, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987, p. 175.
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 45.
- <sup>21</sup> Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse*, Baltimore and London, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 94.
- <sup>22</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, New York and London, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982, pp. 31-2.