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WHY LITERARY HISTORIOGRAPHY?

Why literary historiography? There are reasons for asking the question. Over the last one or two decades we have seen a shift from history to criticism. It is now criticism—often parading under the name of critical theory—that absorbs most of our attention. Maybe this shift of attention is not equally visible everywhere in the world. In North America it is probably more apparent than in Europe, and in Northern Europe more than in the South. In Italy and Spain recently still several comprehensive histories of the national literature have appeared, sometimes based on the cooperation of several authors. Think, for instance, of the voluminous *Historia y crítica de la literatura española*, coordinated by Francisco Rico. But in general, I believe it is true that at present in our discipline criticism is more prominent than historiography.

There is no exact synchronicity in the considerations which make us question literary historiography. But some people indeed feel that there is a crisis. In 1992 David Perkins, professor of English and American literature at Harvard University, published a book on the historiography of literature and gave it the timid title: *Is Literary History Possible?* The title certainly is an expression of doubt, or even crisis. Perkins explicitly responds to what he calls «a genuine crisis in literary historiography» (1992: 60).

If we dig a little deeper, we can see that there are indeed reasons for reconsidering the possibility of literary historiography. When, in the nineteenth century, the first histories of national literatures appeared, they were motivated by nationalist aspirations coinciding with a romantic world view. At a somewhat later stage they showed great confidence in positivist description and explanation. Hippolyte Taine is a well-known exponent of the belief in the possibility of positivist explanation, which implies a considerable degree of determinism. At present, however, determinism is no longer a guiding principle in the cultural sciences, and positivism has been superseded by other epistemologies. In addition, the romantic, nationalist perspective is completely out of date—at least in the more developed parts of the world. The foundations of the one-time flourishing business of literary history have disappeared. No wonder that people ask what we still have to build our historical constructions on.

It is a platitude to say that in the course of the twentieth century the intellectuals have lost the sense of a common perspective. But it is true. Recently, the Hungarian scholar Mihály Szegedy-Maszák, in a study of postmodernist narration, summed up the status quo as follows. The sense of a common perspective was challenged by Nietzsche who announced that God is dead. As Szegedy-Maszák writes, and now I quote: «Weltgeschichte is but theodicy disguised, enlightenment is the secularized form of salvation, so the loss of religious faith may imply a loss of belief in progress» (1997: 281). Szegedy-Maszák suggests that the loss of religious belief will entail the loss of all belief.

In Lyotard's terminology, metaphysics is just a metanarrative, a *métarécit*, and, as such, it has lost its validity. Following Lyotard, Gianni Vattimo (1992), too, has proclaimed the end of metaphysics. According to Lyotard (1979) our age is marked by the incredibility of any metanarrative: not only transcendental belief, but also progressive politics or scientific explanation lack a valid legitimation. We should not forget that the subtitle of Lyotard's highly influential essay is: «Rapport sur le savoir.»

Let us look more systematically at the reasons for the lack of confidence in the possibility of writing literary histories. I see three major reasons:

1. Positivist determinism has been subjected to criticism, notably in the humanities. The criticism can be traced back to Wilhelm Dilthey and it developed into a hermeneutics which stressed the uniqueness of the text and the genius of the writer. The uniqueness of the text and the writer's genius supposedly transcend attempts at historical explanation.

2. There is no longer a common *telos* such as was connected with a shared religious faith. As a result of philosophical scepticism and the continuing process of secularization, the metanarrative of a common aim has been lost. What history is there to tell if every individual is entitled to make up his or her own story?

3. The third reason is a paradoxical one, for it is based on the holistic assumption that, in spite of the impossibility of a teleology or common perspective, literature is part of a larger story than its own. The argument is that the specific nature of literary communication cannot be defined. That attitude gave rise to New Historicism, institutional history, cultural studies, postcolonialism, and identity politics. These varying approaches all absorb literary studies while denying a specific function to literature. They are all based on a metanarrative which remains unquestioned. Now the argument is not so much directed against historiography, but against the possibility of writing a *literary* history. In spite of Lyotard's much acclaimed argument, these recent metanarratives simply ignore his position.

The three reasons which I mentioned partly overlap, partly contradict each other. This accounts for part of the confusion. They represent different discourses, which all are half true or even less than that. A difficulty in criticizing the three arguments which affected the theory and practice of literary historiography is that a straightforward denial is impossible. Let me explain.

ad 1. Indeed, positivist determinism has rightly been criticized. In cultural matters, determinism does not apply. It cannot be true, for instance, that if the material conditions of climate, race and moment are favorable, great literature will automatically follow. It is also not true that the appreciation of literature is restricted by the conditions under which it originated. Even in Marxism it was accepted that great

literature produced in feudal times could give pleasure to people in the industrial age. Art of an archaic society could radiate «eternal charm.» In the original German text Marx used the famous words: «ewiger Reiz» (cf. Fokkema and Ibsch 1995: 87).

The objections to positivist determinism have led to another extreme position, which is the view that the origin and quality of literary works cannot be explained at all. According to this view the literary text is unique and cannot be grasped in rational terms. But this view is not attractive either.

The so-called uniqueness of a literary text is a dubious concept. Or, as Claudio Guillén wrote in *The Challenge of Comparative Literature*, the English translation of *Entre lo uno y lo diverso*, «not everything is individuality on the enchanted island that is a literary work» (1993: 15). Of course, all texts are unique in the sense that they are the product of a specific historical moment and, as we know from Borges' story «Pierre Menard,» the production of a particular text cannot be repeated under different historical conditions. In that sense all historical events, including the production and reception of texts, are unique.

However, when we are talking about *unique* historical events, we are forced to do that in *general* terms which, on other moments, will also be used to refer to other *unique* events. The use of the word «unique» itself is revealing in this context, since it paradoxically refers to numerous events.

I suggest that we should characterize historical events not as totally unique, but should indicate in which respect they may be considered unique and in which aspects they can be described in general terms and compared to other phenomena. The unique event can be understood as a specific historic materialization out of a set of potential events which, according to our rational analysis, might have occurred under the conditions of the moment. Uniqueness can be defined as that which we have not yet succeeded to explain.

In practice, when discussing a so-called unique event we are immediately pushed into the position of describing it in general terms, as it is the general aspects of an event which enable us to judge, for instance, the desirability of repetition or non-repetition. The death penalty pronounced over Salman Rushdie is a unique event, but it is practically always discussed in general terms: it is considered extraordinary cruel, it is believed to be a denial of widely accepted functions of fictionality, it is uncommon because of its international repercussions, it is a symptom of the clash of cultures, it has aroused the concern of writers and intellectuals all over the world, it has increased interest in Islam, and it has led to the death of at least a dozen people. None of these observations refers to a unique aspect or event. Similarly, there is a contradiction between the notion that literary texts are considered unique and the many ways in which we can analyse them, in fact separating unique from more general aspects. We call a text unique but our observations on that text are not unique at all.

Exclusive emphasis on uniqueness brings discussion to a halt very soon. A uniqueness which makes us speechless is of no use in the scholarly debate. There is very little we can learn from the unique aspects of an event, or a text.

My conclusion is that we are confronted with two extremes: on the one hand, the legacy of positivist determinism which requires from us that we discover laws which we cannot find, and on the other, a celebration of uniqueness which makes us speechless. I would propose neither to look for laws, nor to remain spell-bound by

unique experiences. Instead, we should choose a third way, and look for general aspects and regularities in all those literary events which for historical reasons can be called unique.

ad 2. The second obstacle to a flourishing literary historiography which I mentioned is the loss of a common telos, the loss of faith. However, from a secularized point of view, faith is no more than a convention. According to this secularized view, religious belief is a construction designed by human beings and agreed upon among a specific community. If religious faith has been lost, it does not follow that it is impossible to think of another or similar common goal. Of course, I cannot deal adequately with this topic in a short paper. I am referring to the question of whether it is possible to have an ethics and an aesthetics without a transcendental belief. Again, I see no reason why we have to choose between two extremes: the religious dogma on the one hand, and the complete isolation of individuals, each wrestling with his or her own fragmented destiny, on the other. A third way may be possible, and, in choosing that third way, I may come close to the recent position of Gianni Vattimo: the third way is based on the assumption that groups of people may invent or join goals which they find valuable. On the basis of mutual agreement or convention (as David Lewis would say) people may pursue these goals which provide parameters for writing histories, including literary histories.

ad 3. When Lyotard announced the end of all metanarratives, he was paradoxically offering one last metanarrative. The paradoxical nature of his position was wryly noticed by Fredric Jameson, by Noël Carroll, by Linda Hutcheon, by Vattimo and others. Jameson writes about the «unforeseeable return of narrative as the narrative of the end of narratives» (1991: xii). I am not impressed by the ironic commentary on the paradox, for there is another, more important reason why the idea of the end of all metanarratives must be rejected. It appears that people cannot live without metanarratives, without constructions that justify their actions. Also after Lyotard had condemned the search for metanarratives, new metanarratives have been invented in literary studies, such as postcolonialism and identity politics. Apparently, as soon as a metanarrative is discarded, a new one is launched. It seems to be inherent to the human mind to design connective structures between different fields of interests and experiences. Such constructions do not need to be like dogmatic beliefs or firm convictions, they also can be like schemas or hypotheses: «weak» constructions that keep away from doctrines as well as from extreme subjectivism, weak constructions which are to be abandoned as soon as we can find less weak ones. There is not only no general taboo on these legitimating constructions, but also there is no reason to deny such legitimation to literary communication while granting it to postcolonialism or identity politics. There are good reasons for defending the specificity of literary communication. Towards the end of this paper I will suggest a metanarrative of literary communication, or, as I rather should say, I will offer an explanation of why literary communication still exists, which amounts to a kind of justification of literary practice.

A recurrent concept in my argument is that of the notion of convention. Convention is a concept situated in the semantic space between dogmatic conviction and scattered subjectivisms. As David Lewis has explained, a convention relies on silent or explicit agreement about the solution of a coordination problem. A standard example is that, in traffic in continental Europe, we have decided to keep the right-

hand side of the road. In England, one follows a different convention. In principle, any convention can be replaced by another one, if only the people concerned agree to do so. Lewis sees a broad area between biological necessity and logical inevitability where human beings are free to coordinate their action by way of conventions.

An example from literary studies is the appreciation of rhyme in poetry. There are cultures in which meter is more important as a distinctive feature of poetry than rhyme, and also in the history of European literature at times the convention of rhyme has been replaced by that of rhymeless verse.

One of the major conventions in literary communication is the aesthetic convention. The aesthetic convention has been defined by Siegfried Schmidt in the early 1980s and, in a slightly different wording, also on later occasions (for instance, Schmidt 1989: 430-31). It is easier to explain what the aesthetic convention is *not* than to say what it is. In my understanding, the aesthetic convention relies on shared knowledge among particular populations that, if texts are intended to be read as literature or for other reasons elicit a literary response, the text processing is *not* to be geared towards a testing of factual correctness or towards immediate practical application, but rather towards the cognitive and emotive assimilation of general beliefs or models of behavior.

Schmidt sees the emergence of the aesthetic convention and its social recognition in the eighteenth century, the age of Baumgarten, Mendelssohn and Kant. It is also the age of the birth of professional literary criticism, which found an outlet in a wider range of journals.

However, the aesthetic convention is no more than a convention. There is no inescapable obligation to consider literature an art.

It also would be naive to believe that the aesthetic convention, if it is embraced, will be the only convention that guides the writing and reading of literature; it certainly occurs side by side with other conventions. Reading literature as an art does not necessarily exclude reading it as documentary reportage, or a political tract, or an expression of the self at the same time. Although in certain cases the aesthetic or literary way of reading is overruled by these other interests, the aesthetic convention is a major convention which over the last two hundred years has made people in Europe look at literature — texts which successfully have been subjected to a literary way of reading — as a separate category, with a history of its own. The aesthetic convention has appeared to be a vital one. And as Montserrat Iglesias Santos has argued with reference to S.J.Schmidt's definition of the aesthetic convention and other macro-conventions, the study of conventions is a promising road to go; it is, as she calls it, «una de las líneas principales a seguir en el futuro» (1994: 325).

In order to decide where the main facts of literary history are to be found, we are in need of a theory of what literature is about and in what respect it changes over time. A theory is not a doctrine and not completely subjective either. It can be replaced by another theory if there are good arguments to do so. But we need theories if we wish to discover relevant facts. Indeed, without a theory or theories which help us to distinguish facts and to tell us why they are significant, it is very difficult to reach clarity in our historical research or in the scholarly debate.

The present state of the art in literary historiography can be discussed in terms of, at least, three theories of literature.

a) The cognitive or referential theory of literature: it conceives of literature as

primarily expressing knowledge about social reality. Or, in Jakobson's terminology, the cognitive or referential theory of literature focuses on the referential function of texts. If society changes and people become aware of those changes, the strategies and devices of literature will change as well. The reflection of social change in literature is not restricted to semantic contents but also affects literary form. This view can be found in Marxist criticism (think of Lukács and Lucien Goldmann), but, as Karl Eibl (1976) has argued, it can also be connected with Karl Popper's notion of problem solving.

b) The aesthetic theory of literature: this theory conceives of literature as primarily being written and read according to the aesthetic convention. Literature does not present a direct reflection of social reality, but expresses a possibly biased yet encompassing, holistic view which addresses itself to both the cognitive and emotive faculties of readers. Rather than documentary truth, literature conveys general beliefs and provides models of behavior. It is the formal and contextual aspects of texts —aspects which can be recognized as semiotically significant— which detract from the readers' inclination to discover factual truth and immediate applicability. The emphatic attention to formal aspects was described by Jakobson as the poetic function of texts.

c) The anthropological and sociological theory of literature: it holds that literature is primarily an expression of the self and as such contributes to the constitution of an identity. If we seek again a parallel with Jakobson's terminology, now the focus is on the emotive or expressive function of texts. Literary change occurs because writers and readers wish to distinguish themselves from the traditional conventions. The anthropological argument for such changes is that human beings in principle are inclined to emphasize the arbitrary nature of all conventions and therefore wish to introduce new ones, just showing their power over the traditional conventions and the people who uphold them. Resistance to the prevailing conventions contributes to the formation of an identity. The constitution of an identity is not necessarily a private affair. One may operate as a group and demonstrate one's competence to bring about change. This reasoning comes close to Bourdieu's in *La Distinction* (1979). Now, the motivation is not to acquire traditional cultural capital but to create new cultural assets. It is well known, for instance, that, at the instigation of Robbe-Grillet, the writers of the *nouveau roman* formed a group which in their struggle for recognition quite intentionally enhanced their own identity. Such a motivation can be explained by the anthropological and sociological factors pertinent to generational conflict.

We can be sure that the aesthetic theory of literature —the conception of literature as an art— is important, but it is difficult to say important to what extent. The aesthetic convention is widely spread among educated readers in both Oriental cultures and in the West, but there are also readers who focus primarily on the referential or cognitive meaning of literature, or on the identificational function of literature. How to proceed from here?

Scientific research can establish to what extent particular groups of readers —that is, readers with a certain degree of literary competence— read texts in a literary way. Such research was done, for instance, by Petra Hoffstaedter (1986) and Rolf Zwaan (1993). But that kind of research cannot tell us how texts considered literary *should* be read. This research tells us something about the past, it cannot provide us with directives for the future.

By way of a thought experiment, we must seriously consider the possibility that we would no longer subscribe to the aesthetic convention. What would happen if we would relegate the aesthetic or literary way of reading to the past? The aesthetic convention came to full development in Europe in the eighteenth century; perhaps it should be abandoned by the end of the twentieth century. Literary studies then can be subsumed under cultural studies, or postcolonial studies, or identity politics. As a result, there would be no longer room for innocence, for private worlds, for individual pleasure. Didn't Linda Hutcheon say that «every representation always has its politics» (1989: 168)?

I disagree with that statement, however much I admire her work in other respects. Any representation can be used for political purposes, but there is no inherent political quality in just any form of representation. It is wrong to say that «every representation always has its politics.» It is wrong in two ways: logically and empirically. Let me explain: it is logically wrong to assume that texts or representations *have* their politics because only living human beings can have possessions and can participate in politics; texts cannot. It is empirically wrong, because there are many texts with a private character that accordingly have elicited a private response. If one would argue that all privacy is political—a view which Linda Hutcheon ostensibly maintains—one has abolished the idea of privacy. At the same time one has stretched the notion of the political to an extent that it has become meaningless.

I personally disagree with the attempts to ignore the aesthetic convention and, as a consequence, to abolish the study of literature as an art. Perhaps one is not impressed by my personal conviction. Therefore I say, let us turn again to literary history. Let us see what in the past the intentions of the writers have been and what the effects of literature among the readers were. Let us examine by what formal means and contextual conditions these effects were triggered. Let us study the emergence of the aesthetic convention and its diffusion.

Let us also study the *social* function of the aesthetic convention, for the aesthetic convention has had an enormous social impact. The aesthetic convention, which tells us to read a text in a way that does not primarily ask for factual correctness or immediate applicability and yet contributes significance to that text, invests literary communication with a particular function that distinguishes it from other types of communication. A literary way of reading decontextualizes texts to a considerable degree. This decontextualization allows for symbolic and metaphorical transpositions and gives rise to a situation where, in an off-guarded way, readers may accept a story or a view which they never would take the trouble to absorb if the message were a straightly informative one. It is this hybrid nature of texts considered literary—high literature rather than popular literature, new interpretations of those texts rather than canonized ones—that makes them more likely to dismantle ideological fixities than expository texts can do. Witness the sensitivity of totalitarian regimes to literature, witness Boris Pasternak and Salman Rushdie. It is this *social* function of literature which may explain the persistence of literary communication in a society flooded with texts of all kinds. This social legitimation of literary communication is my preferred metanarrative about the function of literature.

It is by means of specific formal qualities and contextual factors that a text may induce a reader to focus not only on the semantic contents. Genre distinctions, too, function as formal qualities. The recognition of a specific genre warns the reader

that the text should be read in accordance with the conventions of that genre. The recognition of a genre activates knowledge of that genre in the reader.

This congress is partly devoted to the investigation of genres. This is a timely thing. The study of genres has been much neglected in recent years. The approach of literature through a study of its genres will show important historical changes. Every period, every literary current, seems to have a preference for particular genres. In symbolism it is poetry, in international modernism —the modernism of Joyce, Proust, Mann and Svevo— it is the novel, often characterized by long essay-like interventions, and in postmodernism we see a recurrence to marginalized but popular subgenres, such as the detective, the western, the fairy tale, the historical novel, the regional novel or *Heimat Roman*, and science fiction. This revival of popular subgenres surfaced in a recent collective study of *International Postmodernism*, edited by Hans Bertens and myself, and published in the series *A Comparative History of Literatures in European Languages* of the International Comparative Literature Association.

What does the postmodernist interest in popular narrative forms mean? In my view, the restoration of quasi-naïve narration is a departure from the over-intellectual considerations of the modernists. It is motivated by an attempt to surprise, possibly shock, and certainly entertain the reader. In short, there is definitely an aesthetic motivation in texts such as Barthelme's rewriting of *Snow White* (1967), or Paul Auster's *City of Glass* (1985), or Günter Grass's *Der Butt* (1977; translated into English as *The Flounder*, 1983), or Juan Goytisolo's *Reivindicación del conde don Julián* (1970, *The Reclamation* by Count Don Julián).

Through their specific literary forms, these texts convey things which hardly can be put forward in more directly written expository texts, or, if expressed in expository texts, would find no audience. That is why, I believe, attention to formal aspects, to genres, and to the prevalence of the aesthetic convention is important in literary historiography. Literary historiography has only just begun to pay systematic attention to these phenomena.

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