

Rethinking Literary Historiography: Narrative and Literary Event

Literary historiography is facing a crisis. This is something it has long been aware of.

The *krisis* of literary historiography means that it stands in judgment itself, that it sets out itself for distinction: self-judgment and self-distinction. In their endeavours to separate their projects from traditional literary historiography, literary historians have, especially over the last two decades, intensively studied historiography in general – or, rather, its theory, which began to flourish in the second half of the 20th century. Indeed, at times they have paid more attention to the theory of historiography than to their own discipline.

First and quite simply: literary history and literary historiography are not the same thing, although “literary history” is often pronounced to be the activity or work of literary historians. Literary history is, strictly speaking, the history of literature. In order to tell the difference between literary history and literary historiography, one needs to distinguish between history and historiography, to which literary historiography itself looks in its self-distinction. In traditional historiography, the difference does exist, but is at the same time obscured.

History is traditionally defined as *res gestae*, and historiography as *historia rerum gestarum*. History, then, is the “accomplished things,” deeds, events in the human sphere – what happened. Historiography, by contrast, is *historia*, an inquiry into and report on these deeds or events. The Greek word *historía*, which was used by the “father of history” himself, Herodotus, to describe his activity, actually means “inquiry” or “investigation” as well as “report” or

“narrative” (and it preserved this semantic ambiguity on being adopted by the Latins).

The influential 19th century German historian, Leopold von Ranke, defined the task of historiography as reporting on *wie es eigentlich gewesen* (cf. von Ranke 1970: 75).¹ This is the crucial word: *eigentlich*. It obscures the difference between history and historiography. In Ranke’s programmatic formula, *eigentlich* means more than the commonplace “properly speaking.” A historian must report on what “actually” or “really” happened, or, better yet, on what is “proper” (*eigen*) to history itself – on its own story. In a mass of events, he must search for the story and find it. Find a well-knit, rounded-off story – *eigentlich*, with no interventions or additions.

Assuming that he has succeeded, the history is the story of history itself, told through the historian. The historian’s narrative is a transparent medium for the story of history: it *is* the story.

Now is that true?

The overlap of the historian’s narrative with the story of history, culminating in the 19th century with the equation of the two in historiographical methodology, has aroused explicit suspicion in meta-historiographical reflections roughly since the 1950s. Is not a transparent, pure transmission of a discovered story of history through a historiographical narrative an illusion, the self-deception of a historian’s naive mind, a mere fiction?

The dividing line between traditional and contemporary historiography is marked precisely by their respective attitudes to history as story. What has become tangible for the radical modern (and postmodern) hermeneutics of suspicion in the field of historiography is something else: from a multitude of events, which have no story structure by themselves, the historian’s narrative selects and connects a handful, imposing a story pattern on them only by setting them in a

¹ Originally in the introduction to his first important work entitled *Geschichte der romanischen und germanischen Völker von 1494 bis 1514* (1824).

plot. The ostensible story of history itself is nothing but an invention, a narrative construction.

To continue talking about the *story of history* is thus erroneous and outdated. According to Hayden White, it is only the *emplotment*, the narrative configuration of events into a whole with a beginning, middle and conclusion, that gives rise to the *plot*, which is, in contrast to the ostensible story of history itself, a work of narrative. In a historiographical narrative, the found – that is, the events – is always read in the key of the invented. White distinguishes between four types of emplotment in historical narrative, and since these imitate, in his view, some of the typical emplotments of literature or (literary) fiction, they are subsumed under the concepts of the tragic, comic, novelistic, and ironic – concepts largely referring to literary genres. To explain the construction strategy of the emplotments, moreover, these terms are supplemented by tropes from rhetoric – metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony (cf. White 1987: 1–42).

It is hardly surprising, then, that the narrative came under fire from meta-historiographical criticism as early as the 1940s. Aware of the constructibility and fictionality of narrative, and striving for scientificity, the historians who had gathered around the journal *Annales* turned away from historiography's traditional focus on actions and their agents. They sought to banish the event from historiography in practice as well. Their postmodern successors found in the narrative a "metaphysical" structure and recognised in the historiographical narrative a form of the *grand récit*, the "great narrative," which is always dictated by the existing (or emerging) centres of social and political power. In the field of literary historiography, the shadow of suspicion fell, for example, on the national literary histories of the 19th century, which emerged in the German, Italian, and Central European countries as exponents of the national movements struggling for the foundation of national states. In our own time, the most telling example of an anti-narrative orientation, which turns against such inherent "metaphysical" principles of the narrative as continuity, teleology and wholeness, adopting instead an encyclopedic manner of presenting the materials, is represented by Hollier's new French literary history (cf. Hollier 1989).

But still: are the “stories written by life,” as the phrase goes, nothing but an empty metaphor?

Indeed they are not. According to Paul Ricoeur, “to imitate or represent action is to pre-understand what human acting is: its semantics, symbolism, temporality” (Ricoeur 1983: 125). The narrative is a *mise en intrigue* (Ricoeur’s equivalent for White’s *emplotment*), literally a “setting-in-plot,” a configuration of actions which already mean something. Each plot, each *histoire racontée* or “narrated story” has its “prehistory” (Ricoeur 1983: 142), formed by the primary semantics of the actions, and each is an explication of this prehistory, that is, a developing, unfolding of the story which is folded in an action not yet narrated but rich in meaning.

Actions, events are being narrated even before they are fully elaborated in a historiographical or literary narrative. The chief source for Herodotus’ writings on the Greco-Persian Wars was, after all, nothing but hearsay. *Autopsía* as the main methodological principle of his historiography stems from a desire to see the events with his own eyes, but it presupposes both hearsay, which connects events uncritically, and a distancing from it. It is a critical observation of what has been transmitted by a rudimentary oral narrative.

Similarly, the tragic *mýthos* defined by Aristotle as *synthesis* or *sýstasis tôn pragmatón*, “the combination of the things done” (Aristoteles 1965: 11), presupposes an ancient myth, a narrative or story about gods and humans, which has been orally transmitted by bards from times immemorial. A tragic myth, which may be understood more broadly as a literary narrative in general, emerges precisely with an emplotment of the original aoidic narrative.

Emplotment, either historiographical or literary, is thus an elaboration, a formation of the prior narrative, an explication of a story which is already conceived but still implicit (however, a literary narrative is freer than a historiographical one in that it is not bound to textual or oral testimony, this freedom being a fundamental feature of its fictionality). The narrative is older than historiography or literature. It races ahead of them.

Narrative ability – *pace* Heidegger – may in fact belong among the fundamental existentials which essentially distinguish man from the other living beings and things. In a whirlwind of retrospections

and prospections, a narrative already somehow touches upon events without necessarily linking them into a linear or causal sequence. It is the source of the primary division of human temporality. The temporalisation proper to the narrative is older than any attempt at a conceptual comprehension of time. Homer's narrative, for example, lacks the concept of time (cf. Fränkel 1955: 1–2), but with the aid of retrospections and prospections it skillfully distinguishes between the time of narration and the time narrated, thus spreading out a rich temporality.

In short, we have always narrated. We cannot do otherwise. In our narrative, the “arrow of time” is always turning. And this narrative is story-making narrative.

But what are the implications of all this for the relation between the narrative and the event? As the narrative of historiography is founded on the event, the narrative of literary historiography is founded on the literary event.

Now what does the literarity of the event consist in?

To begin quite simply again: its literarity consists in its being bound to the letter. As far as I know, the event itself has been best described by an anonymous author known in the history of literary criticism as Pseudo-Longinus (or Longinus for short), although he was explicitly describing something else.

Longinus' treatise *On the Sublime* is, next to Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Art of Poetry*, one of the three most important ancient treatises on literature. In fact, Longinus' goal was not to write a theory of the sublime but to educate the reader to judge what was valuable in literature. From a theoretical viewpoint, his definition of the sublime is rather meagre. At the beginning he says that the sublime is “a certain excellence and prominence [*akrôtes kai exochê tis*] of words” in the greatest poets and prose writers (‘Longinus’ 1964: 1).² In Chapter Seven, however, it is the master of literary

² The English translations in this paper, however, are not taken from Russell's English text but based on the Greek original.

experience who finds his voice, describing the action of the sublime as follows: “For the truly sublime in fact somehow uplifts our soul [*hypò talethoûs hýpsous epaíretai te hemôn he psychê*], and the soul, experiencing a wonderful exaltation, is filled with joy and pride [*charâs kai megalauchías*], as if she had brought forth [*gennésasa*] herself what she had heard” (‘Longinus’ 1964: 7–8).

To translate more literally: the soul is uplifted by the sublime (the verb *epaíro* is used here in the medial or passive voice). Thus she suffers the action of the sublime wording, but in this suffering she is carried upward rather than humiliated. And while carried up by the wording, she is also filled with pride: both pride and joy at the extraordinary birth. For the soul is like a pregnant woman, proudly glad of the fruit which she is carrying. She is “now herself giving birth to what has made her pregnant”. The wording she has heard while reading – the ancients always read aloud, listening to themselves reading – finally becomes like her own issue. In the process of this genesis, of this bringing forth, what comes from the writer emerges as something coming from the reader as well. But Longinus’ simile of giving birth suggests no hermeneutic usurpation or appropriation of the meaning that would reside in the *mens auctoris* as the author’s “possession.”

Let me now continue from Longinus’ suggestion, bearing in mind the literary event. When the soul is giving birth, it is not appropriating the meaning; rather, it is captured by the wording. Such a wording, coming over us captor-like through the writer, evokes the thrilling sense that we have somehow thought the same without being able to express it. Indeed, we recognise something that we have touched, in our heart of hearts, with the apex of our soul, as the writer must have touched it with his – something most intimate which is closest to us yet immensely far away, something that seems thoroughly homely yet entirely strange. We might say: something that seems *unheimlich*.

Unheimlich as the concept of a particular ambivalence of feeling was introduced into the discussion of literature by Freud. *Das Unheimliche* is the – initially hidden – homely or familiar which reveals itself in its ghastliness (this is not fully conveyed by the translation “uncanny” without an explanation). Or, translated into the analytic

terminology of psychic life: it is a return of the repressed, the traumatic childhood event which fights its way from the unconscious into consciousness as a psychological disorder (cf. Freud 1988: 335–376).

In the case of a wording, the “uncanniness” of the most intimate is different. The wording becomes (like) the reader’s own, because it reminds him of the innermost in himself. It awakens an “anamnesis of that touched upon with the soul”, which has no visible paradigm in the background: the recognition of what the reader is somehow acquainted with already – but “as the familiarly unfamiliar” which is left unknown.

Thus the literary event is nothing to do with language. It is a meeting of writing and reading or listening. It occurs at the wording, which is the linguistic correlative of the “creative” act: a spark of suffering on the apex of the soul.

The literary event on which literary historiography as the narration of the story of literature is founded is by itself ahistorical and transhistorical. It is ahistorical because it takes place in the timelessness of the ecstatic exaltation of the soul, and transhistorical because it occurs in all ages, in Longinus’, ours, and those in between, at the wording of any time. In order to occur, it needs reading in addition to writing, but it is not dependent on any historical reception. There are two paths opening up from it: one leading to literary creativity, to a new superb wording, and the other leading to a responsibly answering response to it.³

One of the creative forms of this response is literary historiography. This, in contrast to literature, makes use of a conceptual language. Without a responsible response, however, its concepts and categories are merely empty accusations (the Greek verb *kategoréo* means “indicate,” “display,” “declare,” while its primary sense is “accuse”). Unless it stems from the literary event and fosters a responsible response to the wording which gives rise to the event, it

³ Cf. the *responding responsibility* referred to in Steiner 1989, 8.

wanders hopelessly, no matter how systematic it is, how coherently it assigns works of literature to its ordering categories, or how much support these win before the tribunal of the discipline itself, in meta-literary historiographical criticism. If, however, it does stem from the event, it can maintain the good old tradition of philology as love of words, taking in everything – to its advantage.

In his important text *The Newest Russian Poetry* (1921), focusing on the literarity of literature, Roman Jakobson wittily remarks: “Up till now, however, historians of literature have mostly behaved like the police who, when they want to arrest someone, take in everyone and everything found in the apartment and even chance passers-by. Historians of literature have in the same way felt the need to take in everything – everyday life, psychology, politics, philosophy. Instead of a science of literature we have fetched up with a conglomeration of cottage industries” (Jakobson 1978: 57).

Of course Jakobson is right. A chaotic mixing of disciplines is fatal. But this holds true only if literary historiography does not know what is sending it on its way. If, by contrast, a narrative of literary historiography follows the wording responsibly, it does not close on the text but opens on the other side into a (non-linguistic) context. This narrative may also speak of the writer’s life which is the first among the subjects of literary historiography “incriminated” by Jakobson. It can take in everything as it draws closer to the unique experience behind the non-conceptual word of literature.

References

- Aristoteles, 1965. *De arte poetica liber*. R. Kassel (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fränkel, H. 1955. Die Zeitauffassung in der frühgriechischen Literatur. – H. Fränkel, *Wege und Formen frühgriechischen Denkens. Literarische und philosophiegeschichtliche Studien*. F. Tietze (ed.). Munich: C. H. Beck’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1–22.
- Freud, S. 1988. The “Uncanny.” – *The Pelican Freud Library*, vol. 14: *Art and Literature*, A. Dickson (ed.). London: Penguin Books, 335–376.
- Hollier, D. (ed.) 1989. *A New History of French Literature*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press.

- Jakobson, R. 1978. Najnovija ruska poezija. – R. Jakobson, *Ogledi iz poetike*, M. Komnenić and L. Kojen (eds.). Beograd: Nolit, 49–57.
- ‘Longinus’, 1964. *On the Sublime*, Greek-English edition, D. A. Russel (ed.). Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Ranke, L. von. 1970. Preface to the History of the Latin and Teutonic Nations. – F. R. Stern (ed.), *The Varieties of History. From Voltaire to the Present*. London: Macmillan, 55–62.
- Ricoeur, P. 1983. *Temps et récit*, vol. 1: *L'intrigue et le récit historique*. Paris: Éditions du Seuil.
- Steiner, G. 1989. *Real Presences*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- White, H. 1987. *Metahistory. The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.