

Society, History, and Literary View

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The paper deals with some of the transformations of historiography that took place in the last hundred years and focuses especially on literary and narrative forms and their role in historiography. After rejection of eventuating history and attempts to develop structural approaches in its analyses we witness today an existence of two contrasting trends. On one hand we can witness a renaissance of a narrative form in historiography; on the other we see an emergence of a self-narration, which is a consequence of ahistoric fractalization of contemporary perception of reality.

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The muse Clio inspires the writing of history, which from the very beginning of Western civilization has maintained a form akin to that of literary expression. For both fields (i.e., the literary and historiographic), this seems to evince relevant and even essential features of grasping reality and learning about the truth, regardless of whether the truth is fictional or eventuating/empirical. It is a form of narration. Let us leave aside for a moment the question of whether the form of narration is a constitutive or solely derivative form, as Paul Ricœur expressed himself in his monumental work *Temps et récit*, which today proves a peculiar question of its own (see Ricœur). In the last two decades, the question of historiographic narration and the notion or concept of the event in general (*histoire événementielle*) have become the object of criticism and serious analyses, which is most clearly shown in recent French historiography. From its first masters of history in the journal *Annales*, especially Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, to contemporary authors such as Le Goff, Duby and Le Roy Ladurie, this historiography has fundamentally changed the writing of history and established a new epistemological field of understanding its reality and truth (see Burke). One way or another, it seems that within this context we are constantly returning to the basic knot, which is the narrative eventness (viz. crisscross reference), as Paul Ricœur put it, between desire for reality in history and fiction; that is to say, fictionalized narration.

The “crisscross reference” contained in narrative form probably most distinctly manifested itself in the 19th century, when historiography played an important role in forming modern nations in Europe. In forming national identities, great relevance has been attributed to tradition and the related national past, which is why historiography and literature deserved the widest possible social, cultural, and scientific consensus. In addition, this historiography was still indistinguishable from literature, and this not only in the sense of historical genre, with which selected topics from the past that were relevant for a specific culture were presented in literary oeuvres, but also because it was a general fact that the historian was someone with a touch for the esthetic level and was a good writer. Analogously, it was also true, as it probably still is today, that a man of letters is also someone with a fine touch for history, being able to actually interpret historical tradition with the help of his narration, recreating it, setting the events and insights of human existence in a specific time, and thus acting as an irreplaceable source of cultural tradition relevant for both individual and collective identity.

By the end of the 19th century, this form of historiography experienced a certain crisis. Despite the fact that, from antiquity onwards, Western history has been written in various genre types – from annals and chronicles to memoirs, reports, monographs, and parables – the prevalent form was narration of important military or political events and deeds of great men. In trying to bring its narration closer to science, historiography resorted to stricter criteria and relied only on reliable archival sources and political history. Rankean historiography thereby narrowed its field of interest and helped strengthen the importance and role of the historical genre in pure literature. There were of course exceptions among historians that wrote a different kind of history in the second half of the 19th century, much closer to the polyphonic plurality of human culture and feeling. These included Jules Michelet and Jakob Burckhardt. This trail – which has long remained one of dissidence in view of the basic academic stance, but nonetheless of great importance for the form of narration, crisscross references, and complementarity with pure literature – leads to Johan Huizinga at the beginning of the 20th century. In his works *Homo ludens* and *The Autumn of the Middle Ages*, Huizinga raised theses varying considerably from those of traditional historiography. He rejected schematic divisions and political chronology. Instead, he brought to the fore society and culture, whose nature is primarily esthetic and ludic, or playful. The human world is first of all the world of imagination, faith, rituals of honor, love, and an immeasurable crossbreed of symbols and experienced images.

It is interesting that historiography of the archival type, which strives for exactness and scholarly relevance, was also critically rejected by the founder of positivism and sociology, Auguste Comte, who named these small exactitudes “childish, petty details” (Burke). Later development saw both historiography and literature take parallel and autonomous paths. History, which (as in the past) remained one of the most popular subjects of pure literature, was freeing itself from narrative form in its own field. Instead of narration, what came to the fore was the issue of approach. Various human activities thereby gained scholarly relevance: mass psychology, forms of belief, and ways of perceiving things that are not objectively material. These included dreams, fear, perception of time, beauty, religious feeling, and so on. Instead of schematic chronology, an in-depth form of the long-lasting surfaced, and also the claim that in every historical moment time moves in different modes of velocity. (It is here that I usually remember my grandmother, who would complain when paying us a visit, how time in the city passes more quickly than it does in her village!) This brings us closer to the two segments of greatest importance for the literary historical genre. The first is the form of time, created by the literary text, either as a diachronic event-narration and simultaneously its transcending through entering into the synchronal “now,” into both the momentary now of readers’ reception and the integrated historical moment of the moment or object described. The second one – and perhaps the greatest effort by an artisan or writer – is the reaching for the voice of a hero or more literary heroes. Within the context of the historical genre and writing about a certain historical situation from the distant past, this proves to be a very acute problem, demanding in terms of writing, and at the same time literarily extremely challenging, creative, and, I dare say, bearing long-term pertinence for the readership and collective identification. This is how the advantage of literature over history can be evinced. A literary text communicates a voice of a historical hero, who thereby becomes alive in our consciousness. It mentally creates spaces that causally connect events unknown to or unrecorded by history itself. Let us reflect for a moment on how many voices we know and what their importance is for the collective; that is, national identification. The voice of Črtomir and Bogomila can be heard, in the middle of the night if need be. Odysseus, Antigone, and Hamlet can also be heard in our language. Likewise Marcus Aurelius with the help of Alojz Rebula’s novel *V Sibilinem vetru* (In the Sibyl’s Wind), or Marguerite Yourcenar’s *Memories of Hadrian*. Can we also hear the voice of Primož Trubar?

In the first decades of the 20th century pure literature, the entire art world, and historiography subverted the narrative form in the desire to

embrace and create deeper structures that latently but fundamentally determine or even direct individual and collective human existence. We need not repeat here the familiar adventures and formative approaches we are all familiar with; the names alone suffice: Proust, Joyce, and Kafka and, in fine art, Picasso, Malevich, and Kandinsky. The ambition of psychoanalysis, and also that of the structural linguistics of Saussure and Jakobson, was to grasp latent and unconscious structures as the fundamental matrix of both anthropological reality and our forms of creativity and communication (with an interjection that old Freud nevertheless could not avoid the seemingly “original” event, the *Urszene*, which was supposed to condition all subsequent behavior). Durkheimian sociology also tended to make evident the in-depth structures of society and thereby rejected eventuating history. It is these very theoretical and artistic forms, which represent the core of the 20th century, that were supposed to decentralize the topos of the subject and create a polyphony of discourses, in which narration as the prevailing discourse – be it a fictional world or a social truth – is always arbitrary. Michel Foucault never grew tired of warning about the implicit relatedness of narration with the concepts of power (cf. Foucault’s *L’Archéologie du savoir* and *Scritti letterari*).

Recently, however, we are witnessing a peculiar turning-point, which can also be understood as a reflection on the trodden path. On the one hand, pure literature is still looking back into the past to capture it in its form, and recreate it in and talk through its segments about human beings, and their experience, truth, and possible worlds. On the other hand, historians are markedly turning to “symbolic capital,” as Bourdieu put it (see his *Le sens pratique*), and to cultural anthropology, symbolic reality, and outlining historical and social habits, which are spatial and temporal in nature. What is most interesting – after exhausted structural approaches, after leaving behind linguistic ambitions, after exhausted psychoanalysis, which has turned into a repetitive rhetoric, at times even ridiculous, and after the great disappointment with economic determinisms of historic materialism, relentlessly formed by Marxism – is that one part of historiography is stepping back to narration. Historical narration, or even historical biography, certainly has a form and intention different from the one it had a hundred years ago. What is stepping into the foreground today is not a dull chronology, but rather an attempt to delineate the aforementioned habitats, to seek evidence of the mentality of reality, the polyphony of times and identities. The revival of narration brings back good old eventness, be it as personal existence or the reality of a collective, civilization, or even universe. To put it in a nutshell, if it is all still about discovery or the esthetic re-experience of reality and truth, we are still (at least to a certain

degree) inclined to understand it as the form of narration and story. “Je suis ce que je me raconte” says Paul Ricœur. “I am that which I narrate and am narrated by.” One of the basic aspects characteristic of both literature and the writing of history is the act of repetition. Narrative repetition or reconstruction of certain events and facts, integrated into a holistic linear temporal and spatial dimension, is in truth a creative act, because it is only through this very act that conscious cognition is brought about, providing meaning to things both real and fictitious. One genuine example of this form is provided by the *Odyssey*, especially in two places: on the island of Scheria, where Odysseus retrospectively reconstructs his adventures after the fall of Troy and his voyage to the island, whereby he becomes conscious of the entire meaning of his adventures, and in Eumaeus’ cottage, when, after returning to Ithaca, he talks more or less truthfully with his shepherd about past events. The invisible island of the Phaiakians, or wonderland, and the shepherd’s cottage are the birthplace of Western narrativity (see Citati).

Today, however, we are facing two opposing tendencies. On the one hand, we are witnessing the actualization of the “fractalization” of reality, which is the consequence of postmodernism and textual and general deconstruction, as well as virtual globalization. Instead of synthetic integration, the contemporary man, who is becoming a true *homo fractalis*, is experiencing a dispersion of the elements of reality, as adequately expressed by contemporary art.

The second aspect of contemporaneity is the abolition of the historical perspective, since it is becoming increasingly irrelevant and even fictitious. This is accompanied by a deterritorialization or exclusion of the subject and discourse from the physical space, which is only possible due to the abolition of distance, both spatial and temporal. Today we are talking about the notion of *uchronia*; that is, exclusion from successive or historical chronology. The abolition of distinctions can also be detected at various levels of entities, such as cultural, national, regional, sexual, and so on. The immediate consequence is a certain slip of symbolic language into signaletics, which loses the differentiating and representative moment, as well as the rich ambivalence of meanings and the semantic openness of the symbol. The virtual world of signs, or signaletics, is not representative, is not differentiating; rather, it abolishes the otherness and the ambivalence of meaning. It is an image without its negative. Namely, signaletics has to be subjected to quantification logics, dictated by the form of numbers and calculation, which erases all ambivalence in meaning. As a consequence, everything is drowned in the visual signaletic moment of the “now,” in the dehistoricized present moment; with or without physical presence. The

beautiful and traditional Art of Memory is becoming the craftsmanship of communication and consumption, although without the possibility of deeper reflection and esthetic pleasure, as enabled by static experience.

On the other hand, contemporary transformations of intimacy, as analyzed by Anthony Giddens, evince a reflexive project of the self, which is accompanied by emotional self-narration (see Giddens). “Blogs” are the last embodiment of the traditional form of narration. Contemporary man decidedly aims at a construction of the self-identity story. Within its framework, man develops an instrumental attitude towards the world, while woman and girl evince the eroticization of their own bodies in the desire to be loved. The fractal reality is accompanied by episodic encounters, and the final aim is the confluent love of two autonomous persons.

Translated by Janko M. Lozar

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