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THE SURVIVAL OF THE NOVEL: E. L. DOCTOROW'S
ESCAPE OUT OF THE POSTMODERN DEADEND

I

20th century literary theory has been marked by a continuously increasing radical rejection of the notion that literature is able to portrait or to represent reality. This is a decisive deviation from the more than 2000 years old tradition of western thought to believe in *mimesis* as a key term to explain the special contribution of art to the understanding of life and to point at the uniqueness of human existence. Aristotle, for example, in his Poetics claimed that *mimesis*, the faculty to imitate reality is the distinguishing human quality which enables us, other than all other life forms, to learn about the world around and beyond *us*. *Mimesis*, then, is the distinctive human ability to widen our horizon and to transcend the limits of a mere existence which would be simply aiming at maintaining biological functions intact. The fundamental initial notion of *mimesis* is that there is something outside ourselves, some covert Order of things which includes our very existence and the knowledge of which would be fundamental to understand who we are.¹ The basic assumption of course is that man is able to correlate self and not self and that the artistic representation of the non-self in itself is valid and that the sign used for depicting the non-self really is a reliable referent of the

¹ cp. Joseph C. Schöpp, Ausbruch aus der Mimesis. Der amerikanische Roman im Zeichen der Postmoderne, München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 1990, 19–45.

strange reality. A novel, then, would be an imaginative dialectic form mediating between self and world and creatively relying on the solidity and meaning of the linguistic sign referring to some external reality. In saying that art is 'creatively relying' on the dependability of the sign, however, also is to point at a problem which from the very beginning was inherent in the concept of mimesis.

Gerald F. Else, 1957, in his monumental commentary on Aristotle's *Poetics*, repeatedly stresses the double nature of mimesis, that is as imitation and as constructive technique. *Mimesis* thus also is "the making or construction of the poem",² thus a novel finally would be the draught of a world by itself, inherently, however, referring to and depicting the real world at large. Therefore, *mimesis* is not to be understood as a simple imitation and precise rendering of reality it is also a creative act of giving form and meaning to occurrences man experiences. Thus the literary artist is giving form and meaning to events he believes to be of significance. At the center of Aristotle's discussion of *mimesis* therefore, and it is important in our current theoretical debate about postmodern implications of linguistic and epistemological theory on literature's validity to remember that, stands the notion that mimetic representation means constructing a meaningful and believable plot, which is representing human action. Other than the never ending flux of life human action necessarily consists of a beginning a middle and an ending.³ On the abstract level Aristotle therefore argues that the plot line of a good story has to follow the requirements of the intended effect, it is important to find an effective beginning, a meaningful (morally or ethical) climactic middle, and a satisfying ending. This of course raises the question of moral standards as any human action involves or touches the lives of others. That is why formally a plot has to have a size proportional to the ethical problem or problems presented, and in logical terms it has to give a reasonable impression of plausibility as to the sequence of events.

² Gerald F. Else, Aristotle's *Poetics: The Argument*, Leiden: Brill, 1957, 9.

³ cp. Richard Kannicht, "Handlung als Grundbegriff der Aristotelischen Theorie des Dramas", *Poetica*, 8, (1976), 326-336, 331.

II

The problems an author has to face in order to construe a good plot are considerable. Questions arise such as: what events depict a valid ethical problem of the time? where do the ethical norms for the proposed solution come from? does the culturally transmitted idea of coherence and meaning of life stand up to one's own changing experience? how do individual decisions touch the lives of others? On all these counts 24th century linguistic and philosophical theory has become increasingly wary, mistrusting inclusive world views such as religious concepts or ideological convictions of any sort. More radical, even, was the increasing doubt in man's epistemological faculty of really being able to understand anything which was not of his own making.

Two distinctive phases of development can be discerned: Modernism and postmodernism. Modernism, at the beginning of the century, was concerned with epistemological problems as economic, political, and social changes disrupted traditional explanatory models of the world and authors such as Henry James, Joseph Conrad, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot, William Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway, and Gertrude Stein, to name but a few Anglo-American representatives of the movement, stressed the necessarily individual perception of anybody and begun discussing questions of literary techniques such as perspective, point of view, and stream of consciousness, as a reaction to epistemological problems arising out of pragmatism and psychoanalysis. James' "house of fiction"⁴, Eliot's "objective correlative"⁵, Faulkner's "art is to arrest motion"⁶, or Hemingway's "the real thing"⁷ prove that the belief in language's referential potential still is intact. Most intriguing is James' image of the "house of fiction", which in its totality refers to the theoretically

⁴ Richard P. Blackmur, ed., *The Art of the Novel, Critical Prefaces by Henry James*, New York, Scribner's, 1934, 46.

⁵ cp. T. S. Eliot, *The Sacred Woods*, New York, 1920.

⁶ cp. Jean Stein, „William Faulkner“, in: Malcolm Cowley, ed., *Writers at Work: The Paris Interviews*, New York, 1958, 67–82.

⁷ Ernest Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon*, New York: Scribner's, 1932, 2.

still relevant possibility of representing life as a whole but which nevertheless is unattainable in practice as each author stands at his individual window and looks down on the procession of life revealing itself to him in the perspective offered by the particular window. But what he sees still transcends his subjectivity and the subject - object relation still is valid. Literary art, therefore, is believed to produce epistemological insights and to enhance understanding.

This is exactly where postmodernists disagree. Depending on Ferdinand de Saussure, who early in the century (1916) in his *Cours de linguistique générale* developed a theory of language in which he states the discontinuity of language and reality⁸. Language, he claims, is mere form and not substance, it is a system of signs representing not a name and the named thing or object but signifies only an idea and an accompanying sound⁹. Under the influence of the French philosophers of language such as Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan postmodernism in the 1960's and 1970's assumes that reality in itself has no meaningful ontological status but acquires meaning only in so far as human experience assigns specific conceptual ideas of meaning to it. Therefore there is no reality our system of linguistic signs portrays there is only a fake-reality our seemingly referential system of linguistic signs arbitrarily construes¹⁰. Raymond Federman even announces that "life is fiction" and consequently proclaims:

In the fiction of the future all distinctions between the real and the imaginary, between the conscious and the subconscious, between the past and the present, between truth and untruth will be abolished. All forms of duplicity will disappear. And above all, all forms of duality will be negated—especially duality: that double-headed monster, which for centuries now, has subjected us to a system of values, an

⁸ cp. Ferdinand de Saussure, *Grundfragen der allgemeinen Sprachwissenschaft*, ed., Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2nd ed., 1967.

⁹ cp. Joseph C. Schöpp, op.cit., 38–39

¹⁰ cp. Ulrich Horstmann, "Parakritik und Dekonstruktion. Der amerikanische Post-Strukturalismus", in: *Arbeiten aus Anglistik und Amerikanistik* Bd.8 (1983), Heft 2, 145–158.

ethical and aesthetical system based on the principles of good and bad, true and false, beautiful and ugly¹¹.

Writing fiction becomes something radically different from what we knew it to be. Freed of the mimetic obligation to represent reality and to adhere to the rules of plausibility writing becomes a creative process spinning out contents of imagination without the obligation to adhere to such things as facts, which, according to theory do not exist anyway in any kind of meaningful contexts. This is where the provocative notion comes from that the novel is dead. The end of fiction is marked by terms such as “surfiction”, metafiction”, “non-fiction fiction”. Ever since Ronald Sukenick provocatively announced in a title of one of his books “The Death of the Novel and Other Stories” (1969) this catch-phrase has been repeated by authors and scholars alike. William H. Gass noted in 1972 “..the novelist, if he is any good, will keep us imprisoned in his language - there is literally nothing beyond”¹².

Literature thus itself becomes a piece of reality to be experienced by the reader and estimated for the immediate pleasure it gives but it cannot have any inherent meaning, ethical or otherwise.

The dividing line between fictional texts and non-fictional accounts begins to blur and even literary criticism emerges as imaginary writing on the pretext of a literary text, but in itself it is ontologically of the same kind as literature itself. Maybe that is one reason for the enormous output of literary criticism in the last decades. If you are no longer obliged to reasonably discuss matters and to show aesthetic or ethical values inherent in literature than the production of rambling and theoretically vaguely interesting texts becomes a lot easier.

¹¹ Raymond Federman, „Surfiction—Four Propositions in Form of an Introduction”, in: Federman, Raymond, ed., *Surfiction: Now ...and Tomorrow*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1975, 23–31, 8.

¹² William H. Gass, *Fiction and the Figures of Life*, New York, 1972, 8.

III

In 1977 Edgar Laurence Doctorow published an essay with the title "False Documents"¹³. In this article he tried to approach the problem of a literary text from a more practical perspective, laying aside linguistic and philosophical considerations, and looking at the functions texts of any kind have in modern society. As an author of fictional texts trying to relate human experience he notes that modern industrial society relies heavily on texts which linguistically communicate discoveries of science and run "on empirical thinking and precise calculations." Language is seen as a property of facts themselves - their persuasive property. We are taught that facts are to be distinguished from feeling and that feeling is what we are permitted for our rest and relaxation when the facts get us down. This is the bias of scientific method and empiricism by which the world reveals itself and gives itself over to our control insofar as we recognize the primacy of fact-reality¹⁴.

Literature, he observes, in comparison for example to the middle ages, has dramatically lost its impact and political importance being confined to the realm of leisure and relaxation. In former times literature had something to communicate, to pass on values and to give advice. "if the story was good the counsel was valuable and therefore the story was true" (219). Doctorow obviously does not care for the philosophical and linguistic theories which caused Federman and others to enthusiastically reject notions of value, of true and false, of right and wrong; he is solely interested in the function any given text has within the communicative context of society¹⁵. Thus true and untrue lose their ethical meaning and are reduced to 'it works which equals true, and it does not work which equals untrue'. It is surprising how Doctorow thus can evade any ideological or religious fixation

¹³ Edgar Laurence Doctorow, „False Documents“, *American Review* 27 (November 1977), 215–32.

¹⁴ *op. cit.*, 216.

¹⁵ for the following discussion I am indebted to the excellent dissertation of Robert von Morgen, *Die Romane E.L. Doctorows im Kontext des postmodernism*, Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1993.

and still salvage meaning on a very pragmatic level. This is rather close to the position the philosopher Richard Rorty takes in discussing objective truth. "Objective truth", he says, "is no more and no less than the best idea we currently have to explain what is going on."¹⁶

That, of course, means that reality is nothing more than a concept society at any given moment agrees upon. Thus the notion of what reality really is constantly is changing. Therefore Doctorow refers to scientific language which communicates results of research as being of "the power of the regime" while literary and imaginative language to him appears as being "the power of freedom". Ever since the age of enlightenment, Doctorow observes, rationalism and empiricism dominate western civilization and rate scientific language as more important than imaginative literature. Thus it is no wonder that authors beginning with Cervantes and Defoe found it necessary to disguise the fictitious character of their tales by claiming they were simply editing manuscripts they had found or been given by a friend who in these accounts relates his adventures in the real world. They were producing "False Documents", the author hid behind a narrator in order to pass on the collective wisdom of mankind in a language that seemed to be committed to facts. This defensive attitude, imitating the scientific language in order to express imaginative and fictitious contexts is nothing but the beginning of the realistic mode of narration but its credibility is ensured only by the manner of presentation. 'Literary facts', in contrast to non-fictitious communication become believable because of the manner in which they are presented, making the text dominantly a self-referential entity and to a lesser degree an expression of the epistemological convictions of the age. And it is here where both, literary and non-literary texts, meet on a common ground because they agreed on convictions of an age determine what facts we perceive and incorporate into the mesh of our cultural identity. Doctorow gives a memorable example

...the regime of facts is not God but man-made, and, as such infinitely violable. For instance, it used to be proposed as a biological fact that women were emotionally less stable and intellectually less capable than men. What we proclaim as the

¹⁶ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1980, 385.

discovered factual world can be challenged as the questionable world we ourselves have painted - the museum of our values, dogmas, assumptions, that prescribes for us not only what we may like and dislike, believe and disbelieve, but also what we may be permitted to see and not to see. (217)

Established facts, then, are nothing but scientific and philosophical assumptions guiding and at the same time limiting our perception of the world. Doctorow concludes therefore: "Facts are the images of history, just as images are the data of fiction". (229) Of course the old Aristotelian distinction between historiography, relating events that happened, and literature, telling about events that could happen, here looms in the background. Literary and nonliterary texts operate similarly in that they have to rely on the persuasive character of the linguistic form they are construed in. The reality beyond in both cases has no meaning, it simply exists. Meaning is generated solely by the structure of the text itself. Referring to weather reports on television, Doctorow shows how 'facts' are presented to acquire the intended meaning:

Weather reports are constructed...with exact attention to conflict (high pressure areas clashing with lows), suspense (the climax of tomorrow's weather prediction coming after the commercial), and other basic elements of narrative . [...] I am thus led to the proposition that there is no more fiction or nonfiction as we commonly understand the distinction: there is only narrative. (230/231)

Even if all texts are nothing but narrative generating meaning out of their structure alone, there still is a valid difference in their political functions. Nonfiction, in Western culture, pretends to explain reality according to natural laws, scientific experiments persuasively prove the validity of 'facts', thus giving assurance to the assumption that there is a meaningful universe out there. "The power of the regime", as Doctorow calls fact-oriented text structures, may use its persuasive potential to secure political influence, to blunt people's intellectual and emotional faculties, and eventually even to establish totalitarian regimes. Literature, "the power of freedom" on the other hand, can use its subversive capabilities to point out such dangers and to prevent society from falling prey to dexterous linguistic manipulators.

This, of course, is possible only if one overcomes the postmodern ethical and moral relativity and introduces, as Doctorow tries to do, an intersubjective ethical consensus which is based not on an outside reality but on a cultural agreement as to moral norms. Aristotle's term of *mimesis* now takes on a new or rather renewed significance. Aristotle never understood *mimesis* as an imitation of reality as such but as an imitation of meaningful human action which takes place within a meaningless world. And in that sense literature again becomes possible and important as it can show good examples of how ethical and moral convictions may serve to secure and extend meaningful and fulfilling human lives. And that means that the Aristotelian *mimesis* is far from obsolete. Imitating human action in a strange world in a structured, persuasive, and logically convincing way may yet be more necessary than ever before. Thank God that every generation so far has come to this conclusion, because human creativity is the only guarantee that we will continue to lead meaningful lives.

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