THE CHALLENGES OF NEO-THEMATISM

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Abstract

I advance the concept of "neo-thematism" as a parallel to Michel Collot's "variation recurrence," but one which incorporates in its flexible exegesis the transversality of comparativism and the dynamics of literary hermeneutics. Themes are no longer investigated parochially, within the structure of the same national literature and based on the impressionistic flair of the critic, in the absence of an interpretative method, as in older versions of thematic criticism, but in accordance with a rigorous aesthetic programme, which borrows from the aforementioned methods of investigation both amplitude and coherence. In this respect, comparativism provides the syntagmatic axis, functioning horizontally, therefore broadly, whereas hermeneutics provides the paradigmatic axis, functioning vertically, therefore in depth.

Key Words: literary criticism, neo-thematism, structure, comparativism, hermeneutics.

Fashionable in European literary studies written in the positivist age and a few decades after, i.e., during a period spanning from the mid-19th century to the first stage of New Criticism (around 1960), thematic criticism[1] seems to have now undergone a certain prestige crisis, appearing as outdated or too rigid to meet contemporary literary challenges. In what follows, I shall try to point out that the old Roman adage, *nihil sub sole novum*, may prove its worth yet again in the context of literary studies, and that self-entitled innovative approaches, which attempt to free themselves from the labels of

[1] The concept of *theme* is derived from the Greek noun *thema* (*sentence*), with reference to the subject of a discourse. Its Latin correspondent would be *motivus*. For a relevant discussion of the genealogy of the term, starting from a brief, but eloquent critique formulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss in relation to Vladimir Propp's *Morphology of the Folk Tale*, see Armstrong 38-45. For additional details regarding poetics, see Preminger and Brogan 1281-1282. See also Ducrot and Schaeffer *passim*.

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the past, only manage to preserve those labels by scratching new lines on old texts, as in a palimpsest. The former are mere echoes of the latter.[2]

As the reputed Harvard professor Werner Sollors (who, due to his academic authority, was also the one who established the temporal interval in which the method emerged and flourished) was quick to point out, many recent literary approaches (i.e., framed after 1990) are, in fact, pure, unadulterated instances of thematic criticism, conveniently disguised as gender or postcolonial studies: "This would seem to suggest that much of the new work may also be making contributions to thematic criticism, as it is concerned with the literary 'treatment' of certain themes" (xii-xiii). Sollors even emphasizes a certain critical embarrassment of the aforementioned researchers, who, for various reasons, resent their affiliation with thematism: "And yet, while one could probably argue that, de facto, thematic criticism has grown enormously, few scholars now seem to be willing to approach methodological issues of thematic criticism, or look at their own works in the context of thematics" (Introduction xiii). Sollors also notes the ironic state of affairs in the literary studies of the 1990s (and I should perhaps add, with a hint of sarcasm, that not much has changed since): "What seems more characteristic of the present moment is the widespread, yet undeclared 'thematic' practice by practitioners who do not claim (or who openly disclaim) affinities with 'thematology'" (Introduction xiii). Sollors ventures to formulate a verdict, which I find hard to ignore:

> At this moment, then, thematics may be an approach to literature that dares not speak its name. [...] The critical traditions stemming from Women's Studies, Black Studies, Ethnic Studies, Cultural Studies, Ideological Criticism, and New Historicism [...] show more than faint traces of (largely undeclared) thematic approaches (Introduction xiv).

Most importantly, he observes that "[i]nterdisciplinary work that includes literature may, for obvious reasons, be particularly drawn to thematic approaches, as literary texts may be asked questions relating to historical, social, or cultural themes" (xiv). I shall return to this statement later on in my argument. Suffice it to say, for now, that I believe that thematic criticism may indeed be back in fashion, thus responding to Sollors's question, posed in the opening of his substantial 1995 article "Thematics Today": "The end of an anathema?" Yes, definitely.

[2] Because of obvious space constraints, this chapter is a very brief introduction to the subject. I shall try to expand it at a later date.

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One of the most important French theorists of thematic criticism, Michel Collot, places this approach in the genealogy of Gaston Bachelard,[3] whose arguments were resumed and extended by influential critics such as Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski or Jean-Pierre Richard. Collot offers the following synthetic definition of a theme, which represents

> an individual signified, implicit and concrete; it expresses the emotional relationship between a subject and the world of the senses; it manifests itself within texts through matched variation recurrence; it associates itself with other themes in order to structure the semantic and formal economy of a work (81).

One may also understand thematism in the light of the subtle suggestions made by Claude Bremond and Thomas Pavel, as an actualization of unexplored virtualities: "Thus understood, thematization is neither an inventory of pre-existing themes, nor their *ex nihilo* creation, but a methodical actualization of virtualities never before exploited" (217).

Together with a number of notable researchers, I believe that the great scholarly advantage of any thematic approach is the dialectic investigation of constants and variations (Sollors, Introduction xix), by pointing out the specific differences brought forth by one theme in contrast to another.[4] This play of polarities clearly escapes dogmatism, for the tone of thematic researchers is almost never apodictic. This, no doubt, stems from the fact that it is hard to find a clear-cut distinction between, say, the concepts of "theme" and "motif," which, though synonymous from an etymological perspective, are, nevertheless, distinct in literary practice. To shed some light upon the matter, Cesare Segre does not refrain from borrowing a useful demarcation made by scholars of musical studies:

> It is, in my opinion, beneficial to accept the musicologists' definitions [...] according to which themes are elements that span an entire text or a considerable part thereof, while motifs—of which there may be many—are more localized elements (25).[5]

Additionally, one must take into account the speed of intellectual change, generated by the complex realities of our contemporary world.

[3] Bachelard's works influenced various interdisciplinary methods of approaching a literary text. For more details concerning the conjunction between thematic criticism and various other fields of study, see *infra*.

[4] For keen observations on the essence of themes, see Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan.

[5] Further observations may be made on the relationship between, for instance, motif and mode. For additional details, see Wolpers 65-67.

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Thematic approaches are constantly being reviewed and updated by critics who have undergone the experience of other exegetic techniques or entirely different critical disciplines, currently in use. One can no longer speak of the revolute thematic criticism of one hundred years ago, but of a supple and mobile type of criticism, which records the progress of other critical methods and does not refrain from making full use of them. As early as 1980, the Polish-born American theorist Naomi Schor was essentially right when she defended the reformed status of the older version of thematic criticism, by deftly pointing out that the "new thematic criticism is not, however, a nostalgic practice, a 'retro' criticism, a regression to the styles (or readings) of the 1950s. [...] Neothematism is a thematism passed through the filter of structuralist criticism" (qtd. in Sollors, "'Theme' as a Theme" 18). The fact that one turns over and over again to the problematic of themes and motifs when approaching literary works does say a lot about the relevance of these elements within the intricate fabric of exegesis. In this sense, I wish to draw attention to Menachem Brinker's contention, according to which one continually makes use of thematic principles because one wishes to label and classify works of literature which would otherwise escape a rational and therefore convincing mapping. In his own words, the theme becomes "the principle (or locus) of a principle grouping of texts" (22). He adds that "[t]heme's most common function for critics is the aid it affords in the description and interpretation of a work or a group of works" (22). Thus, after having incorporated structuralism, one may speak, in the case of neo-thematism, of a polyphonic critical structure, able to place the investigated themes and motifs in the context of a significant intercultural equation, thanks to the rigour of two methods of literary research, themselves permanently updated: comparativism and hermeneutics.

Concretely, the meaning I attribute to the concept of "neo-thematic criticism" parallels Collot's "variation recurrence," but also incorporates in its flexible exegesis the transversality of comparativism and the dynamics of literary hermeneutics. Themes are no longer investigated parochially, within the structure of the same national literature and based on the impressionistic flair of the critic, in the absence of an interpretative method, as in older versions of thematic criticism, but in accordance with a rigorous aesthetic programme, which borrows from the aforementioned methods of investigation both amplitude and coherence. In this respect, comparativism provides the syntagmatic axis, functioning horizontally, therefore broadly, whereas hermeneutics provides the paradigmatic axis, functioning vertically, therefore in depth. *Toutes proportions gardées*, neo-thematic criticism constitutes the expression of a certain sense of moderation in literary studies.

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By acknowledging the fact that they cannot fashion themselves as defenders of an exact science, of a *Literaturwissenschaft*, as the classicist Oskar Froehde and his Berlin followers liked to believe, but being dissatisfied with the purely subjective status of the impressionist critic, neo-thematic critics are willing to adopt a relativistic perspective and, thereby, contribute to the dynamization of literary study, which requires adaptability if it is to survive in today's context.

Thus, neo-thematic criticism must also meet the challenges posed by the integration, ideally, I should add, without a concurrent loss of identity, of literary discourse within the larger sphere of cultural discourses, together with ethics, politics and even ecology (of course, other equally relevant fields of study may be brought to attention). Far from being menaced by these, neo-thematic criticism should benefit from the ever-growing intellectual competition. Among the three factors[6] which have contributed to the ascent of the reformed version of thematism in the last decades, Theodore Ziolkowski mentions "the conspicuous advance of interdisciplinary approaches to literature, many of which—literature and law, literature and philosophy, literature and religion—by definition focus on theme and substance rather than form" (10). Literary theorists have recently realized that literature is, almost inevitably, an ideological vehicle, that, *volens nolens*, the literary discourse manipulates the reader, determining her to respond promptly to almost imperceptible suggestions found in the text, and that very few, if any, authors may safely defend the autonomy of the aesthetic beyond the narrow field of lyrical composition. That is why the various themes, approached from the perspectives afforded both by comparativism and hermeneutics, should be correlated with contemporary ethical (gender equality, as advocated by gender studies; acceptance of non-heterosexual options, as advocated by queer studies), political (rejection of nationalism, as advocated by cosmopolitan philosophy) and ecological desiderata (the examination of any literary work from the perspective of protection and respect for natural life, as advocated by eco-criticism). Before passing the difficult test of immediacy, neo-thematism must pass the equally difficult exam of adaptability.

[6] The other two factors enumerated by Ziolkowski are "the increasing use of postfigurative techniques to lend form and meaning to the literary work" (6) and the "recent theoretical developments" (manifesting themselves after 1980) (9).

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