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Strategies for literary and artistic studies in a world dominated by complexity

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The present article discusses briefly, along the lines proposed by the organizers of the conference dedicated to 'Contemporary Strategies of Literary and Cultural Histories', the possible changes of paradigm in literary criticism and theory under the assumption of a complexity dominated world. Its conclusion is that a new way of "metaphoric thinking" based on "multivalued concepts", among them amnesia and anamnesis mentioned by the organizers, represents one of the most adequate ways to establish a new paradigm for the technological age of tomorrow.

Keywords: *literary criticism, theory, anamnesis, metaphor and metaphoric thinking, complexity*

When Gaëtan Picon revisited in 1976 his panorama of the post WWII French literature, he entitled it - paraphrasing Dumas - 'La literature vingt ans après'. In the best classical tradition, he considered that from time to time past things must be revisited in order to re-position them in accord with present history and contemporary critical trends: 'Written in 1948 and previously revised in 1957' he wrote in the new preface, '*Panorama de la nouvelle literature française*' needed still further revisions if it was not to disappoint the reader of 1976, for over the past decade things have changed even more dramatically'[2]. Picon obviously felt 'twenty years later' that literary trends as well as *the art of reading* changed significantly; he had therefore introduced revisions but he did not want to make drastic modifications to the point that the work would turn into a completely different book. Was such a thing possible? Didn't the author sense the impact of the events, such as 'the 1968 moment' on the evolution of the literary trends?

In his *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century*, Mark William Roche reviewed the dominant contemporary models/paradigms in literary studies: the

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[2] The translation belongs to Arthur Goldhammer, ap. *Literary Debate: Text and Context*, Eds. Denis Hollier and Jeffrey Mehlman (New York: The New Press, 1999), p. 373.

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historical criticism, the re-surfacing formalism with roots in the Russia of the turn of the twentieth century and more recently, during the postmodern years, the deconstructionism[3]. All these can be considered in fact as representative of various manifestations of literary criticism, within a paradigm based on hermeneutic principles which - from Dilthey to Gadamer - evolved into some sort of a generalized 'New Criticism' which showed various degrees of interference with Marxist and Aesthetic philosophies. In parallel, a rapid development of novel technologies as well as that of adjacent branches of applied sciences resulted in a radical change in the characteristics of the realm in which literature, literary criticism and its theoretical efforts developed: a shift toward *a new paradigm dominated by complexity* became more and more prevalent and as this process picked up speed toward the turn of the twentieth century.

'The Formalists started out by seeing the literary work as more or less an arbitrary assemblage of 'devices' and only later came to see these devices as interrelated elements … within a total textual system' Terry Eagleton wrote recently in the revised version of his previously published *Literary Theory*[4]. That view of the 'literary work' as a mere construct 'focusing on the way of talking rather than on the reality of what is talked about' leads in turn to the conclusion that 'literature is a kind of self-referential language, a language which talks about itself'[5]. While Eagleton understood very well *Formalism*, he worked hard to transcend it through a Marxist analysis, re-enforced by ideas borrowed from Adorno and the Frankfurt School. But in *The Task of the Critic* published in 2009, he observed that form was 'always saturated in historical content', a fact pointed out as well by Roland Barthes who claimed that if you pushed form all the way, you will emerge in the domain of the historical[6]. That was one way through which the time-dimension, that is *historicity*, became central in literary history. In a different context, Reinhart Koselleck remarked that 'theory transforms our work into historical research'[7]; did he mean by that something different from Barthes or Eagleton? Theory *observes* events or phenomena through the use of adequate intellectual tools of interpretation: while studying the phenomenon of the modern consciousness, as it developed in Germany and in

[3] Mark William Roche in his *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).
[4] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), p. 3.
[5] *Ibidem*, p. 7.
[6] See Terry Eagleton and Matthew Beaumont, *The Task of the Critic: Terry Eagleton in Dialogue* (London: Verso, 2009), p. 295 et passim.
[7] Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 6.

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France, Koselleck remarked that 'time is no longer the medium in which all histories take place' 'History no longer occurs *in*, but *through*, time', he wrote. Thus, in Germany *Neue Zeit* became during the 19th century *Neuzeit*, an equivalent of the Baudelaire's *modernité*. The critic concluded that 'this lexical consolidation … offers the most basic discursive evidence for a conceptual transformation of the concept modernity – from mere chronology to a fully self-evident condition of temporal experience'[8]. The same approach to theory enabled Koselleck to address the issue of culture studies - within the German context of *Bildung* - to which the topics we intend to discuss here belong to a large extent[9].

I tried, through these few brief introductory remarks, to create a *frame* for our present discussion: since the organizers of the conference 'Contemporary Strategies of Literary and Cultural Histories' pointed out that one of their main interests is to evaluate the possibility to 'redefine some of the theoretical instruments employed by the cultural and literary histories', it will be only natural to choose a few of the often used research 'tools', such as perhaps rhetoric, deconstruction or canonic definitions and (re)consider them carefully in view of new developments in their respective fields. One of the first questions will be in this case that of how or rather, 'based on what kind of criteria should one make such a selection?'; once the question posed, whatever the answer will be, the next query will be related to the nature of the relationship between the chosen tools/concepts and the assumed 'new developments'. Sometimes new developments in a field will change the meaning and the position of a given investigative tool in the domain under consideration: the story of the 'canon' in the postmodern literary theory is one of the many possible examples one can give to illustrate this point. Moreover, the criteria for the selection of the 'tools' might also be of a contentious nature: a *historicist* approach might not be appropriate in a post-formalist realm for instance while deconstruction will be rejected by theorists working in the wake of Karl-Otto Appeal or Vittorio Hösle's ideas. Above and beyond such arguments, in any endeavor related to literature and literary and more generally, culture (not cultural!) studies, one can easily drift away and find oneself in disagreement with *any* method and methodology which establishes hierarchies and values judgements.

Another difficulty we might encounter consists in the fact that many of the concepts used in literary criticism and theory exhibit different *time-constants* in their evolution. Take for instance such concepts as modernity, realism, avant-

[8] I follow here the analysis of Edward S. Cutler in his *Recovering the New* (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 2003). In this context, see in particular the Introduction, pp. 1-21.

[9] I do not mean here 'Cultural Studies', in the sense given to the concept in the contemporary American University.

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garde, etc.; all undergo frequent changes, sometimes mutations even. Others dissipate or disappear in time only to re-surface under a completely changed guise: what would Romanticism or Symbolism mean today? What would be an 'American tragedy' after Dreiser and more generally, is tragedy still possible after King Lear? It seems that all these imply that a theory is indeed badly needed but then, we remember again Reinhart Koselleck who stated that 'theory transforms our work into historical research' (to which he added also with satisfaction that 'this presupposition has so far proved its worth'[10]). And this observation seems to take us from the realm of literature and/or literary theory to that of … history!

Are all the quarries mentioned above equivalent in some way or they belong to independent domains of research? All in all, this is a quite radical interrogation which contains in itself both an acceptance and a rejection: it seems *prima facie* that a literary theory, if at all possible (or desirable) is destined to become in the hands of critics, academic researchers and/or proponents of literary paradigms, a two-edged sword. If we try to apply it, we may discover soon that it will lead nowhere, being marred by inner contradictions and/or lack of self-consistency. On the other hand, if we give it up, we shall continue to err hopelessly within a labyrinth. Perhaps the only consolation (I do not dare say *light* at the end of the tunnel!) can be found in the recognition of the *complex* nature of the problems at hand, as I alluded above. In the limited space-time at my disposal here I shall be only able to hint and relate very briefly to the question of *what could complexity mean in the context of literary endeavors*, from writing to criticism and theory. In 'hard' sciences, we have a fairly good idea of what complexity is supposed to mean; but are there other meanings, other possible interpretations of complexity and other ways of thinking about it we could adopt for our literary studies? And if the answer turns out to be 'yes', would they lead to *coherent* and *self-consistent* results when extrapolated to domains far removed from those of natural sciences (such as physics or biology, for instance)? Would different definitions and other modalities of understanding complexity enable a more successful method and/or methodology in areas such as humanities in general? It seems that the most important thing at this point of the discussion would be to establish a distinction between 'ontological' and 'epistemic' complexity characteristic of the humanistic endeavors. The question is therefore, simply stated, one about *thinking (in) complexity*; regardless of how one would define it, we might assume that *complexity* will always be generated

[10] Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 6.

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through thought processes. In an article entitled 'Theories of complexity, complexities of theory: Habermas, Luhman and the study of social systems'[11], Nicholas Rescher, who had been involved in his long career in almost all the domains of philosophy, expressed the idea under discussion in the following way: 'As an item's complexity increases, so do the cognitive requisites for its adequate comprehension, although, of course, cognitive ineptitude and mismanagement can manage to complicate even simple issues'[12]. The critics and the researchers must be concerned with this issue, but what about the writer? Should he be worried about such questions? Perhaps he should not, as he is mainly a *generator of complexity* rather that an *agent* moved by it. On the other hand, the critic and certainly the theorist must ponder about the nature of complexity and its implications, from as a general vantage point as possible. It is obvious that any serious approach of these issues will have to use different concepts and/or epistemological 'tools' from those used in theories based on old, reductionist thinking patterns. These tools might turn out to be in themselves more complex and thus transfer their own complexity to the object under study; one should be aware though, that the new tools which emerge in the process of thinking through/in complexity might sometimes lead to blind alleys due to what Rescher called 'the cognitive opacity of the real'. Another difficulty might stem from a quite different source: if complexity and its corollaries are assumed in humanities in an axiomatic way, they risk to be rejected immediately by the postmodern theory (and any of its many recent reformulations), as representing another 'totalizing' scheme. Michel Foucault followers could be good candidates for such a radical rejection; however, merely stating that reality is 'heterogeneous' and knowledge 'perspective dependent', as Foucault did in all his books, from *The Order of Things* to *The Archeology of Knowledge* and beyond, is not equivalent with a *de facto* denial of complexity in both the ontological and the epistemological realms?

At this point of the argumentation, I shall narrow the focus of the discussion in order to reach a few conclusions of interest to the topic of this conference. In essence, we want to find ways to re-consider working theoretical tools and concepts used in the study of literary and cultural matters which, as we have seen, are permeated by complexity. Our discussion takes place in a system which is obviously time-dependent, multi-faceted, a domain in which a large number of sub-systems interact in various ways. The functional concepts we

[11] W. Rasch, in *German Studies Review*, 14, 65:83, 1991.
[12] *Complexity, A Philosophical Overview* (New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 1998), p.1.

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must use in such a space have to incorporate all these qualities: the first corollary of this desideratum will therefore be that the concepts used must be *multi-valued*, that is, defined in such a way that they might change their meaning, depending on the context. Such an intellectual construct can be built only on an enlarged version of a *'structuring' metaphor*: its extended field does introduce some vagueness but at the same time, it offers the potential of a 'collapse' of the concept into one of a multiplicity of meanings. In hard sciences, physicists have managed to define such concepts and successfully work with them: for instance, a *wave-function* which describes the possible whereabouts of a sub-atomic particle - such as an electron in an atom - has multiple possible values; when the position of an electron is determined through an experiment, this *multi-valued wave-function* 'collapses' and takes the unique value which describes the position of the particle *as determined through the experiment*. I discussed elsewhere in more detail how such a thing can work in a realm other than that of natural sciences[13]; here, I shall resume and repeat only that such *multi-valued constructs can be built through the assumption of a metaphoric definition of the concept*. That is why a discussion concerning the relationship between complexity and metaphor is essential for a new paradigm. We may say … metaphorically (!), that thinking in complexity is in fact some sort of a *metaphoric thinking*, a statement which in turn, raises the question 'is complexity just a metaphor?' In his book entitled *Metaphor and Knowledge*, Ken Baake pondered already on this question in a brief section dedicated to complexity and came to the conclusion that 'while the term "complexity" is too abstract to be a true metaphor, its foundational referent, is clearly metaphoric'[14]. Here Baake relies on Gell-Mann's explanation concerning the etymology of the word *complexity* as originating with the Indo-European *plec*, which means *tangled*. 'In *plectics* we try to understand the relation between simple and the complex'[15]. If complexity means *folding together* simple things in such a way that we obtain something which is more than their sum total, then indeed, in some sense complexity is a metaphor. Associating complexity with the metaphor leads to a situation in which by the mere characterization of something as being 'complex', we hint at an 'added value', a new quality. In addition, I would claim that *literary complexity* is directly linked to our ability to think metaphorically: the two notions proposed by the organizers of this conference as potential new tools, *amnesia* and *anamnesis* have certainly the potential of multi-valued concepts.

[13]Michael Finkenthal, *Complexity, Multidisciplinarity, and Beyond*, New York: Peter Lang, 2008.
[14] Ken Baake, *Metaphor and Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), p. 204.
[15] John Horgan, *The End of Science* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1996), p. 213.

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Moreover, they can be used equally by authors and critics within this new, *complexity driven paradigm*. But there is still another connection which results from our analysis: while *amnesia* might, under certain conditions be the equivalent of forgetfulness in the old *analogic* world, dominated by time understood either in the Einsteinian or in the Bergsonian way[16], *anamnesis* is closer to the *digital* world in which we seem to live today and will certainly live tomorrow. This new reality is dominated by information, streaming, managing, transferring and using of which requires a constant use of re-visiting, remembering, re-arranging data which regardless of its content, exists at the very moment of use, in a relatively remote past. We are thus at all times, practitioners of *anamnesis* in the process of creating and interpreting the metaphors of our new brave digital world.

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[16]The first, the time of the physicists is based on a discrete notion of time whereas that of the humanists, is more often referred to as to a continuous *durée*.

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