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TOWARD A REINTERPRETATION OF EUROPEAN LITERARY HISTORY*

In 1974–75 Jacques Voisine, Professor of Comparative Literature at l'Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, organized a seminar on the period 1760–1820. The four essays presented there were published in a booklet which became the first of a series of "cahiers" dealing with the same period. The idea is that these analytical volumes will prepare the way for a synthetic study of European prose in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This will probably be a relatively slow process, but its result may be a book more truly comparative than the volume on the poetry of the same sixty years published in Budapest, in 1982. The authors of the series, of which 7 volumes have come out so far have broken fresh ground in two respects: their research covers a far wider field than any earlier work on the period, and they are able to combine the historical with the theoretical view of the phenomena, thus realizing what Russian scholars from Veselovskij to the Formalists regarded as the aim of future scholarship. To mention but one example, Monique Nemer's study in the first volume ("1760–1820: De l'aphorisme didactique à l'aphorisme poétique"), an inquiry into the relation of public mentality and changes in the function and form of a genre, can be taken as a perfect model for those who wish to break down the barriers between historical poetics and Comparative Literature.

What are the basic principles underlying this extremely ambitious undertaking? Three of them are laid down with excep-

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tional clarity by Jacques Voisine and Daniel-Henri Pageaux, in the preface to the first "cahier".

1) The methodological starting point is different from the one taken by the Hungarian editors of the volume mentioned above. Each national literature is represented by an expert who supplies the authors of the essays with material. Thus, even at this preparatory stage, the work is done on two levels. Beyond all doubt, it will take several years to arrive at a synthesis with this method, but loss in time may be counterbalanced by a greater degree of originality in the final conclusions.

2) The second hypothesis is even more convincing. The idea of a wide gap between Enlightenment and Romanticism having been discarded, it is conceded by all the contributors that the period in question is marked by the coexistence of a number of literary trends.

3) The third assumption is probably more open to question. The members of the international research group working on the European prose of the last decades of the 18th and the first ones of the 19th century are dissatisfied with the conventional distinction drawn between the so-called "major" and "minor" literatures. And rightly so, because that opposition has been responsible for an unjustly narrow definition of European literature. Jacques Voisine, in particular, has been a champion of extending the field of observation, and we, East-European scholars, must be especially grateful for his great efforts to draw attention to our culture.

Still, historiography cannot do without selection, for the simple reason that the very notion of a historical fact is an evaluative notion, and the question of the theoretical basis of our selection can never be ignored. The leaders of the research do their best to answer that question towards the end of their preface: "Nous avons voulu tenir compte, et de la signification que les contemporains prêtaient aux œuvres lues, et de celle que nous leur donnons maintenant, ou du prestige que certains textes ont acquis après la mort de leurs auteurs" (I, 20).

Selection means evaluation, and the only possible key-term

for evaluation is given in that definition, yet we cannot help asking the question who the readers might be whose predisposition and belief system will determine the selection. The ambiguity of Riffaterre's concept of "archilecteur" shows that it is by no means easy to combine literary history with a reader-oriented approach. Our scholars, too, had to face the difficulties inherent in such a synthetic approach, as the article written by Hana Jechova and Jacques Voisine for volume 3 of the series clearly indicates: "S'agit-il du lecteur prétendu pour lequel l'auteur a écrit son œuvre? Faut-il prendre en considération avant tout le lecteur de l'époque – ou a-t-on le droit de penser à un lecteur des générations postérieures qui comprend souvent l'œuvre mieux que les contemporains de l'auteur?" (III, 115.) The fundamental question is well asked, and my only complaint is that probably more stress could have been laid on the dependence of historiography on hermeneutics.

And here we must return to the methodological principle of our scholars. Useful as the two-stage method seems to be, to draw upon second-hand information may have its dangers. The quotations may be exact and from reliable sources, but our own interpretation may slightly distort the facts.

A case in point is provided by Alain Michel's article "Le néo-latin de 1760 à 1820", in the first "cahier". When speaking of the status of Latin in Hungary, he quotes István Borzsák, a Classical scholar, who is absolutely right in saying that the national upheaval of the late 1760's and early 70's did not result in "la disparition totale de toute littérature latine" (I, 26). The trouble is that from this statement Professor Michel comes to the conclusion that in the Hungary of the second half of the 18th century Latin played "précisément ce rôle que le latin avait joué au temps de la Renaissance auprès du français ou de l'italien" (I, 25). Undoubtedly, there was a "décalage" between Hungarian and such Western literatures as English, French, German, Italian, or even Spanish, but the gap was not so wide: after the 15th century even in Hungary no major work of literature was written in Latin.

Obviously, we are thinking only in terms of greater or smaller emphasis when we suggest that occasionally the idea of a static East-West division of Europe, inherited from earlier generations and fought against by the editors of the present series, still has some influence on a few contributions, or at least that prejudice has not been quite overcome by some scholars; and so the difference between national cultures appears to be somewhat greater than it actually is between national cultures. Another example could be *The Voyage of Tarimenes* (1804), a late work by György Bessenyei, commented upon by André Karátson, a well-known specialist of Franco-Hungarian literary relations. His impression is that in this philosophical novel "la civilisation apparaît comme garante d'un ordre supérieur pour l'homme puisque celui-ci considère du côté de la Hongrie arriérée" (I, 72). An avid reader of Rousseau, Bessenyei was as sceptical about the advantages of civilization as the author of the first *Discours*. *Tarimenes* is a telling example of his lack of optimism: Kirakadesz, the "bon sauvage" comes to the conclusion that civilization is no more than appearance, and knowledge brings unhappiness.

Far less simple is the case of Roger Bauer's extremely valuable study of literatures in the Habsburg Empire of the late 18th century. This is the most interesting part of volume 2, for it gives us a comparative analysis of national cultures that have been examined only individually so far. The eminent Alsatian scholar's essay on Josephinism culminates in three important conclusions:

1) In the 18th century the Habsburg Empire was no more than «une simple réunion, de type féodal, de "couronnes" n'ayant en commun que la personne du souverain» (II, 71).
2) Joseph II tried to create a centralized state, but his attempt proved to be a complete failure in Hungary.
3) Josephinism was bound up with a new wave of Classicism.

The third of these observations is of crucial importance for historians of Hungarian literature, because it may lead them to solve problems that have been found perplexing by earlier

scholars. In particular, it can give at least a partial answer to the question why Ferenc Széchényi, former student of Sonnenfels, later became a friend of the German Romantics, having at least partly rejected his earlier views.

With this example in mind we may return to the second conclusion. Although it contains an important element of truth it might nonetheless quite easily lead to misunderstandings. The fact of the matter is that Hungarian public opinion was divided: most intellectuals supported Joseph II, while there was a strong opposition, especially among more conservative landowners. During the latter's reign most Hungarian writers did their utmost to support his policy, whereas after his successor's untimely death (1792), Francis I repressed Hungarian Josephinism. The leaders of the movement were either executed or imprisoned, and most of its supporters were forced to repudiate their earlier attachment to the ideals of the Enlightenment. The tremendous impact of Josephinism on Hungarian literature, the fact that froim the middle of the 18th century most Hungarian intellectual spent years in Vienna, the common stylistic features of architecture in Austria, Bohemia, Moravia, and Hungary, as well as several other social and cultural factors would suggest that Professor Bauer's first conclusion appears to be a little far-fetched. If differences were considerable, the gap was less wide between Western and Northern Hungary, territories which had never been conquered by the Turks and became parts of the Habsburg Empire in 1526, and Southern and Eastern Hungary, taken back either from the Turks or from the Prince of Transylvania at the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century. In short, the Habsburg Monarchy was on the way to becoming a cultural unit before Joseph II set about to create a centralized state according to the French model.

Two examples, drawn from the third "cahier", could also be cited to illustrate how second-hand information may lead to a slight misunderstanding or at least simplification of facts. Calvinist peasants are mentioned with reference to Hungary in the early 19th century (III, 37). The most important protestant

church of Hungary had been founded before the influence of Calvin could have reached Central Europe, along the lines laid down by Zwingli and Melanchthon. Later on, in the 17th century some of its prominent members did sympathize with Puritanism, but that influence never went deep; and so at no stage of its history could the Hungarian "reformed" church as a whole be labelled "Calvinist" in a theological or even in a loosely ideological sense. A similarly debatable point can be found in one article of the otherwise remarkably helpful terminological glossary, at the end of the volume. Undoubtedly, the term "national-populaire" is sometimes used by East-European literary historians. The definition is exact, only the reference to Hungarian culture is somewhat misleading, for in this country the term applies to a later period, a specific stylistic trend of the 1840's.

After the first volume, which serves as a kind of introduction, the *Cahiers d'Histoire Littéraire Comparée* follow a thematic arrangement. The second volume is of special interest for Hungarian scholars, for it has the title "Lumières et Romantisme à l'est de Vienne". Since almost the whole "cahier" is devoted to less well-known literatures, one may expect less accuracy here than in the other parts of the series. It is a proof of splendid organization and careful editing that even misprints are scarce. From our own literature we have found only two: the Franciscan Andrija Kačić Miošić (1704–60) could hardly have studied in Budapest, for that city did not exist before 1872, and the governor of Hungary under the minority of Ladislaus V (1446–52) was not Jan, but János Hunyadi. Such misspellings, however, are quite negligible, and cannot diminish the importance of the volume, which consists in bringing forth largely or entirely new material. Most scholars will find the chapter on Ukrainian literature of especially great interest, because it may convince them of the ambiguity inherent in the impact Napoleonic wars made upon European contries: while in Russia they produced chauvinism, for Ukraine they brought hopes for a national revival.

As we are reading a work in progress, we must take it for granted that the authors may feel it necessary to modify the

methodological principles laid down in the first volume. Hana Jechova, D.-H. Pageaux, and Jacques Voisine in their introduction to volume 2 admit that not only the opposition major vs. minor literatures is inadequate, but even the distinction between "littératures réceptrices et littératures émettrices" has proved to be useless. What is more, the very concept of literature varies from one country to another. Having accepted that the old distinctions lack validity, the question arises of what other principle can help us understand the fact that the same ideological or literary movement started earlier in some and later in other cultures. Different degrees of secularization is the new criterion given in the brief introduction to volume, and it can hardly be denied that here we have a sound historical concept. Less satisfactory, however, is the conclusion drawn from the right premise: the field of observation is more limited in this 3rd volume, because its subject is narrative fiction, and, in the late 18th century this genre was only able to develop in the most secularized of countries; "le roman au sens moderne ne connaissant pas encore son véritable développement en dehors de l'Angleterre, de la France et de l'Allemagne" (III, 10).

This hypothesis cannot be accepted for two reasons:
1) If the authors of the *Cahiers* stick to their historical principles, i.e. they write not only about narrative fiction regarded by some readers as of great aesthetic value, but also about novel-writing as a historical phenomenon, they cannot claim their statement to be true.
2) As they frequently refer to works written in Slavic languages and comment upon novels which by unanimous agreement are considered inferior works of art (e.g. *René* by Bajza), their practice is at variance with their principle, and it is not quite clear on what ground certain literatures are excluded.

Except for this methodological contradiction, the third volume of the series must be acclaimed as a complete success. The advantages of collective work are felt on almost every page. All the articles point towards the conclusion that the period in question is decisive in the history of the novel, because it

shows the writers' growing awareness of the dilemma of a subjective vs. objective approach the character. The contributions build up to an organic whole and are supplemented by a useful bibliography from which Bakhtin's is the only name I miss.

Three phases are distinguished in the evolution of prose narrative. To quote Louis Trenard: "On assiste à un graduel passage d'une littérature de fiction, longtemps considérée comme un parent pauvre, vers un romanesque toléré dans la mesure où il peut servir à l'instruction morale et civique se substituant aux catéchismes religieux, vers l'émancipation que connaîtra le roman au XIX^{e} siècle" (III, 15). From the analyses made by Monique Nemer, Maurice Colin, Hana Jechova, Jacques Voisine, Jacques Mounier, and Antonia Fónyi it becomes clear that German literature contributed most to this process, "le passage du 'héros' traditionnel, contaminé quelquefois avec le 'type' et évoluant vers de nouveaux 'types', au 'personnage', et même (. . .) à la personne", as Hana Jechova and Jacques Voisine put it (III, 93). In wholehearted agreement with the emphasis put on the supreme importance of such writers as Wieland, Jean Paul, Hoffmann, Kleist, or even Tieck and Arnim, my only remark is that the influence of Sterne on the transformation of German prose seems to be a shade underrated.

I must confess that I am somewhat less satisfied with the next three "cahiers". Beyond a doubt, the collection of essays on "La poésie en prose" is even more unified than its predecessor. This is indeed the best edited volume of the whole series. The bibliography is almost immaculate, and François Mouret's introductory summary of the theoretical debates on the relation of prose to verse is both cautious and illuminating. My reservations are due to the fact that the authors of the other three articles have limited the range of the works examined to a greater extent than advisable in a work that aims to be part of a comparative history of European literatures. What is more, in the introductory notice to the bibliography a reason is given for this kind of approach which is not quite acceptable: "Les théoriciens des littératures d'Europe centrale et orientale lisaient ces ouvra-

ges directement en français et en allemand, connaissaient ceux écrits en anglais par des traductions françaises ou allemandes, et ne faisaient guère que les reprendre en les adaptant aux réalités nationales" (IV, 145). I could argue that it was impossible to apply Western principles to a language which differed radically from Indo-European languages; and so the Hungarian scholar and poet János Földi, listed in the bibliography had to come to his own conclusions, but more important is the theoretical objection raised by Elinor Shaffer, whose critical remarks are published at the end of the volume. She detects in the sentence just quoted "a reflection of a too mechanical notion of 'dissemination' which would certainly not be accepted by current reception theory" (IV, 141).

The obvious difficulty for comparative scholars lies in the impossibility of having a first-hand knowledge of several literatures. I am fully aware that ours is an almost impossible task, but this may not mean that we should assert the non-existence of phenomena we are not familiar with. The material analyzed in "cahiers" 4–6 is strictly limited, the Hungarian reaction to the American War of Independence and the French Revolution which from 1789 to 1848 was the most influental factor in Hungarian culture and literature is underrated, the chronology is uneven (Auber's *La muette de Portici* is included, but not a single work by Mozart or Beethoven is mentioned), the remark that "quelques journaux en latin ou en allemand, parurent en Hongrie, ils étaient aussi insignifiants que les viennois" (V–VI, 65) is questionable, the Hungarian Liberalism of the post-Napoleonic era is not given its due, Sir John Bowring is appreciated both as a journalist and as a traveller, but his close association with that movement is not taken into consideration, and the analysis of literary utopia is based on two literatures, with an argument given in the preface that can hardly be sustained: "si l'article qui lui est consacré ne puise guère que dans les littératures anglaise et française, c'est simplement parce que le 'genre' – si l'on le définit avec in minimum de rigueur – n'est pratiquement pas représenté ailleurs" (V–VI, 11).

But let us return first to the essays on poetic prose. It lies beyond discussion that volume 4 is full of important observations. Jürgen Wertheimer convincingly argues that translation contributed remarkably to the discovery of prose as a new form of poetic expression; and so the doctrine of inner form became established, and a kind of anti-poetry was created. Even the conclusion is revealing that "ces indécisions sur la limite entre vers et prose ébranlent la binarité héritée du système traditionnel et ouvrent un nouvel espace dans lequel la génération littéraire suivante pourra fonder le poème en prose" (IV, 65). What the reader will miss is a hypothetical definition of verse. With no such clear-cut notion in view, it is not quite understandable why Smart's *Jubilate Agno* is called "une prose extrêmement irrégulière, libre jusqu'à la bizarrerie" (IV, 55), whereas this work has an intricate kabbalistic structure, and has been analyzed by others as a piece of verse with a system derivative from the Hebraic. Nor are we given sufficiently clear criteria for what poetry is meant to be; and so it is not always evident on what ground certain parts in a prose work are labelled poetic.

Similarly theoretical questions may be asked in connection with Monique Nemer's article on "le genre mêlé". In this case, however, our remarks would be superfluous, for the most important observations have been made by the scholars whose remarks upon the articles are printed at the end of the volume: Elinor Shaffer has pointed out that the subject of the mixed genre should not be identified with that of the "Gesamtkunstwerk", for the simple reason that the latter involves nonverbal sign systems; and Alain Montandon convincingly argues that the Romantic cult of the mixed genre resulted not only in the integration but also in the disintegration of literary genres.

Speaking about the exclusion of too much material, we have already referred in passing to volumes 5–6, on "La prose dans l'ère des révolutions et des guerres". To avoid misunderstanding, it must be admitted that within its limits the summary of the influence of the American and French Revolutions on the press

and on foreign travellers is almost perfect, and either some experts or other kinds of secondary sources are responsible for the gaps. A case in point is Charles d'Eszláry's article on Hungarian Jacobinism, published in French in 1960, and referred to on page 89, which is unreliable. By now there are a number of Western publications on the subject, among them *Enlightenment and National Revival*, a book by Margaret C. Ives (Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1979), which contains a useful selection of documents in English translation, and George Barany's monograph of Széchenyi *(Stephen Széchenyi and the Awakening of Hungarian Nationalism*, 1791–1841. Princeton, New Jersey, 1968). The lack of a good expert on Hungarian culture is also felt in the chapter about travellers. The diaries of two important writers: Ferenc Kazinczy, who was imprisoned as a Jacobin in Austria, and Sándor Kisfaludy, who was taken prisoner of war by the French revolutionary army, could have been interesting topics for the author of the remarkable essay on the ways travellers contributed to the European reaction to the French Revolution.

The members of the "Centre de Recherches d'Histoire Littéraire Comparée de l'Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle" themselves may have felt that in volumes 3–6 greater intensity has been achieved only at the cost of narrower limits, because in the 7th "cahier" they return to their earlier practice. Although I can see the great advantages of the more theoretical approach to a limited corpus, in view of the synthetic aims of the research I rejoice to concur in the principle set down in the preface to the volume on "La pensée théorique et critique dans la prose européenne": "synthèse n'est pas juxtaposition. Le comparatisme ne saurait non plus s'accomoder d'une hiérarchie qui classerait les littératures selon le degré de diffusion de leur langue" (VII, 11). That principle is admirably observed by Gy. M. Vajda in his essay on Gy. A. Szerdahelyi's *Aesthetica* (1778), as well as by the authors of all the other articles. There are hardly any debatable points. One exception is the reference made to the first Hungarian critical review, which was not *Élet és Literatura* (1826–27), but *Erdélyi Múzeum* (1814–18), and to Kölcsey, who

published his important critical essays not in the 1820's, but in 1817, in *Tudományos Gyűjtemény*, the second and by far the most important such periodical. As to Bajza's novel *René*, its short analysis is entirely convincing, except for the adjective "slovaque", for in my view that book was written in a language halfway between Czech and Slovakian, much before Slovakian language in a literary sense was created.

Although this volume may be somewhat less integrated as a whole, it represents a happy combination of theory and comparison. Louis Trenard's essay ("De la manière d'écrire l'histoire"), for instance, first outlines a development from "rhétorique" to "érudition", then shows how Voltaire succeeded in combining the two traditions, and finally comes to the crucial admission that the cosmopolitism of the mid-18th century was superficial, and thereby necessitated a new differentiation in nationalistic Romanticism. In other words, the universalism of some historians of the Enlightenment in the long run turned out to be an illusion, or even a sort of provincialism: "Pour Voltaire, la nature (. . .) signifie notre patriarcat. La civilisation française lui paraît universelle" (VII, 23).

While earlier scholars often seemed to be torn between theory and history, the contributors to the *Cahiers* are able to open up a way for the synthesis of these seemingly irreconcilable orientations. D.-H. Pageaux looks upon the newspaper as "un miroir de l'idéologie dominante" in the age of the Enlightenment (VII, 46), but his analysis is based on concepts drawn from communication theory: "émetteur, message, récepteur et modèle de communication". In the same way, Jacques Voisine's summary of changes in the history of criticism points toward theoretical conclusions: the shifts from poetics to aesthetics and from psychology to sociology can testify as to the vital influence that a growing awareness of history exerted on critical thinking. Theory appears to be an indispensable condition of writing literary history in the two essays on narrative fiction, by Monique Nemer and Hana Jechova, suggesting the interdependence of mimesis and didaxis, and arguing that the period 1760–1820 was

crucial in the history of the novel, because it started to undermine those two principles.

And now I have come to the final chapter of the last volume, "Les principles de la traduction du 'canzoniere'". On the face of it, this is but a modest, though sound and detailed analysis. In fact, it rounds off a series of theory-oriented historical studies. By tracing the history of gradual shifts of emphasis from translation to imitation and from imitation back to translation, François Mouret reminds us that the very concept of translation is not so much an interlingual as an intertextual phenomenon, and translatability depends on textual traditions. With this conclusion in mind we shall end up in the largely unexplored territory of a comparative history of translation, which might bring us closer to a history of European literatures. The fact that the title of one of the two volumes which are in preparation is "Le rôle des traductions dans les littératures nationales des Lumières au Romantisme" proves that our scholars are aware of that possibility.

To summarize: the *Cahiers d'Histoire Littéraire Comparée* could be of great use to all literary scholars seeking international understanding for at least two reasons:

1) As a collective work the series has set an example for those who think that European literature is more than a juxtaposition of national literatures.

2) It urges us to inquire a little more closely into the nature of concepts we comparatists have worked with. Above all, it might help us clarify the basis of selecting the facts we incorporate into our narrative of literary history. If until now we have thought of European literature as an objectively determinable line, in the future we must either discard this idea or find a new justification for it. In either case we must accept not only the truism that the observer is also part of the observed, but should realize that it may be a metaphysical question (no irony intended!) whether the imaginative reconstruction of our traditions, our creative thinking our way through an enormous body of information can result in establishing an order we call European literary his-

tory. To put it simply, our discipline is in need of more self-reflexiveness. That is the final conclusion one may draw from having read these seven volumes. Whatever may be done by others toward a revision of our image of European literature, future scholars will look back with gratitude and respect to the pioneering work done by the scholars gathered round l'Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, and will follow the broad lines of the course they have charted.