NOTES ON THE CREATION OF LITERARY HISTORIES AND THE DIVERSITY OF THE SEMIOSPHERE

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Introduction

I am a Professor of English Literature, mostly working on Shakespeare, theoretical issues and hermeneutics, and therefore I am speaking at this Conference as a non-specialist of Slavic Studies. In fact, I have read Lotman’s works only in translation (in Italian and in English: Lotman 1972, 1985, 1990, 1993; Lotman-Uspenskij 1973, 1987), but I wish to witness his influence in my own field, both in Italy, since the seventies, and in what I believe could be fruitful connections between Lotman’s Semiotic Theory of Culture and recent findings in various disciplines, such as Cultural Materialism and Cultural Studies, in Britain and North America.

I will start with a personal, but certainly not intentionally autobiographical reference: in 1993 I was asked by Manchester University Press to contribute to a study of Shakespeare’s dramatic settings, with specific reference to his Italian backgrounds, and I did so in terms which closely and consciously referred to Lotman’s “semiotic theory of culture” (Locatelli 1993). Starting from Lotman’s considerations on the concept of “semiosphere” and “semiotic space”, and using his idea of “renaming” and “stereotypic labelling”, I focussed on Shakespeare’s elaboration of the fictional world of Verona, Mantua and Venice in terms of a wider general process of cultural exchange between Italy and England, a process that evolved from an early attitude of “Imitating the Italians” (Dasenbrock 1991) to a later phase, of “vituperating” the Italians. Shakespeare’s descriptive, and at the same time suggestively prescriptive, creation of foreign dramatic settings seemed to me to record and obey a cultural transition in the English appropriation of Italian culture. Shakespeare’s fictional world is certainly less biased than the picture offered by the Jacobean dramatists, who emphasized the lurid element of the supposedly “Machiavellian” courts, but it is also more critical of Italian culture than the picture offered by the early English Humanists who had studied in Italy.
I will not, of course, uselessly repeat here what I have already said on that occasion, but I would now say that one of the reasons that led me to choose Lotman as a primary theoretical influence for the treatment of my Shakespearean discourse was not only the belief that his contribution confirmed my particular thesis, but also that I saw this as an opportunity of informing English colleagues in the field of English Studies of Lotman’s vital presence on the Italian academic scene.

Lotman has actually been familiar in Italy for more than twenty years. His work “on the poetic text” was one of the earliest “canonic” books within the emerging discipline of semiotics. In the late sixties and early seventies, semiotics was gaining intellectual support in Italy and in continental Europe, but it was also widely misunderstood, and violently attacked, often incompetently, especially by the idealistic followers of Croce on one side, and on the other by a portion of the marxist school, which was radically opposed to structuralism and which often did not discriminate between structuralism and semiotics.

The general trend of critical theory was obviously miniaturized within each discipline, but in different contexts Lotman’s name was one of the most often quoted. In the field of English Studies in Italy Marcello Pagnini and Alessandro Serpieri were drawing attention to the Tartu School, in as early as 1972.

Pagnini’s work on The Pragmatics of Literature (Pagnini 1987), which was also translated into English (and published in the U.S.) and his Semiosi: teoria ed ermeneutica del testo letterario (Pagnini 1988) have exerted a significant influence especially on the modes of interpretation of English Literature in semiotic terms. These works opened the way to new approaches, combining attention for the forms of expression in literary texts, together with a focus on the historical dimensions of texts (as opposed to an a-historical, idealistic approach). Pagnini’s work has concentrated on such vital questions as: “authorship”, “reading and reception”, “referentiality” and “context” in literature.

There is one concept in Lotman’s “Theory of Culture” that proves extremely fruitful in Serpieri’s analysis of Shakespearean drama: the distinction between the “semantic or symbolic” model of the world, versus the “syntagmatic model” (Lotman 1972: 44-6). In fact, Serpieri has provided a complex reading of King Lear (Serpieri 1992), maintaining that the shift from a semantic to a syntagmatic
Before I move on to the “creation of literary histories”, let me briefly mention some of the concepts and modes of Lotman’s theory which, in my opinion, have had, and continue to have, a relevant significance. First of all, I have to stress his making sense of formal structures in art by relating them to historical and social phenomena (in a sophisticated, rather than purely deterministic way); then I will recall his view of semiotics as a cognitive endeavour, rather than as a merely “technical” enterprise. His originality in the analysis of poetry, and his complex definition of culture are, of course, of primary importance as well. Lotman has dealt with widely different facets of culture, ranging from film to history, and from language to social behaviour. He has looked at these phenomena in a comprehensive, but not rigidly systematic fashion.

The Creation of “Literary Histories”

Let me now approach the specific topic suggested in the title of my paper: “The creation of Literary Histories”. Literary histories have been traditionally dealt with within the realm of the teaching of Literature, at least in Europe, where there has always been, and still is, a strong belief in the idea that specific links have to be found and explained between certain linguistic artistic or literary phenomena and a particular moment in history. The need to describe such phenomena, has normally led to the elaboration of broad categories, such as “Enlightment”, “Romanticism”, “Modernism”, “Post-Modernism”, etc. These “umbrella concepts” functioned as abstract models of specific epistemic situations, which, however were not always linear in a chronological sense, and were far from being homogeneous even in a synchronic perspective. For example, the fact that the noun “sympathy” or the adjective “sentimental” were widely used in England, in 18th Century philosophy and literature, in poems, novels, but also in newspaper articles and private letters, is clear evidence of this discontinuity. Traditional scholarship (with the benefit of hindsight) has faced the challenge of heterogeneity by calling such discrepancies “pre-Romantic” elements within the Enlightenment, a period prevalently described in terms of “esprit philosophique”, or polemically, by the English Romantics as “an age lacking in feeling and vision”. Incidentally, two small words,
like “sympathy” and “sentimental” are sufficient to reverse the Romantics’ view of the Literature of the Enlightenment.

As I said, Lotman has taught us that semiotics is a cognitive science, because semiotic systems not only explain the world, but also construct it. Language is the primary modelling system (specificity of culture is first of all determined by difference in languages), but myth, religion, art, literature, social rules, and law are secondary systems to be taken into account. The culture of any specific period (the Middle Ages, the Renaissance or the Enlightenment) is a secondary modelling system as well, and we should bear this in mind when creating Literary Histories.

The relationship of codes and messages in a certain age should not, of course, be interpreted in “metaphysical” terms, but, as Lotman brilliantly and repeatedly points out, as a “normal” incessant activity within the semiosphere. Signifying systems are in fact in a perpetual state of change. Moreover Lotman reminds us that any culture is far from being homogeneous and also that within each culture there is a continuous renewal of codes:

(…) different languages circulate for different periods: fashion in clothes changes at a speed which cannot be compared with the rate of change of the literary language, and Romanticism in dance is not synchronized with Romanticism in architecture. So while some parts of the semiosphere are still enjoying the poetics of Romanticism, others may have moved far on into post-Romanticism. So even our artificial model will not give us a homologous picture across a strictly synchronic section. This is why when we try to give a synthetic picture of Romanticism to include all forms of art (and perhaps also other areas of culture), chronology has to be sacrificed. What we have said is true also of the Baroque, of classicism, and of many other «isms». (126) (emphasis mine).1

The sentence: “even our artificial model will not give us a homologous picture across a strictly synchronic section” seems particularly relevant to me because it is indicative of the distance Lotman has established from the earliest systematic aspirations of structuralism. In the study of culture, homology and even chronology must be sacrificed on behalf of the specificity of the “facts” that are being observed. Our artificial model of any synchronic section when we create a “History of Philosophy”, or a

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1 All quotations and page numbers refer to Lotman 1990.
“History of Literature”, and a “History of Art”, must then look at the synchronic with a sort of diachronic lens.

In this sense, the traditional study of literary history has often been carried out starting from an epistemic bias, that is an idea of “evolution” which was uncritically borrowed from the biological sciences. However:

The evolution of culture is quite different from biological evolution, the word «evolution» can be quite misleading. Biological evolution involves species dying out and natural selection. (…) In the history of art, however, works which come down to us from remote cultural periods continue to play a part in cultural development as living factors. A work of art may «die» and come alive again; once thought to be out of date, it may become modern and even prophetic for what it tells of the future. (127).

Knowing that Bulgakov, as Lotman says, read Gogol and Cervantes as contemporaries, we have to abandon the traditional approach to the problem of the history of literature and we have to introduce major changes in the questions we ask when approaching literary texts of different epochs. Intertextuality itself would acquire new connotations. In fact, we would have to conclude that, only in this sense, “Shakespeare is our contemporary”, as Jan Kott’s book suggests in its fortunate title (Kott 1964). As Lotman brilliantly says:

> everything contained in the actual memory of culture is directly or indirectly part of that culture’s synchrony. (127) *(emphasis mine)*.

This consideration is illuminating in highlighting a mistake of the traditional literary historian who tried to determine the “state of literature” at any one time on the basis of:

> the list of works written in that year, instead of the works being read in that year – which would produce a very different picture. And it is hard to say which of the lists is more typical of the state of culture at any one time. (127).

Another trap into which the literary historian may fall, and to which I have already alluded with the example of “sympathy” and “sentimental” in 18th Century English literature, is that of choosing

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a normative view of any given period in literary history (on the basis of the prevalent outlook of either one or more authors of that age, or on the basis of the literary historian’s own period) and then forcing all other texts into the pattern, declaring that any anomalous text is either “irrelevant” or even “meaningless”. For example, some people (many among the “general public” or the “average reader”) think of the Middle Ages as the “Dark Ages”, an age of ignorance and superstition, and fail to acknowledge the sophistication of medieval philosophy, its elaborate interpretative methods, and its intense academic life. The picture of the “Dark Ages” has been shown to be a defensive construction of the Humanists, who were engaged in displacing the “Schoolmen’s” philosophy (mostly theoretical) with their own (more pragmatic), and yet such an image has held for hundreds of years and is still accepted by some.

It is certainly reassuring to be able to situate any text within a convenient taxonomy, but it may be dangerous. In fact, from time to time, we have to revise our convenient cultural schemes, or if we are not ready to do so we have to admit to the discovery of a few “unknown” writers or poets:

There are the writers who in their time were classified as «non existent» and who were ignored by scholarship as long as its point of view coincided with a normative view of the «period». But points of view change and «unknowns» suddenly occur. (129).

The tendency to re-define familiar models is gaining support from many scholars in the Anglo-Saxon world today, especially from those, like ethnic minorities, women and other socially marginalized groups, that have not been present in the prevailing descriptions of past ages. A fairly recent work, entitled: Rewriting the Renaissance (Ferguson, et alia 1986) may be taken as emblematic of the new trend. Its aims are illustrated in the “Series Editor’s Foreword” as:

(…) an ambitious, energetic fruitful effort to resee the Renaissance and to see it wholly. This attempt involves both dispelling old illusions, no matter how glamorous they might be, and spelling out new perceptions, no matter how sacrilegious they might seem (…). As the editors of this volume tell us, such work foregrounds «phenomena» that we have ignored, distorted or marginalized.
The Diversity of the Semiosphere

If we are wondering why “old illusions”, or widely accepted taxonomies of certain periods in our cultural history are so highly valued, and so persistent, Lotman suggests that they are the outcome of a common (perhaps inevitable?) cultural mechanism, which he defines in these terms:

The highest form and final act of a semiotic system’s structural organization is when it describes itself. This is the stage when grammars are written, customs and laws codified. (...) The stage of self description is a necessary response to the threat of too much diversity within the semiosphere. The system might lose its unity and definition, and disintegrate. (128).

If in the centre of the semiosphere the description of texts generates the norms, then on the periphery the norms, actively invading «incorrect» practice, will generate «correct» texts in accord with them. (129) (emphasis mine).

So while on the metalevel the picture is one of semiotic unity, on the level of semiotic reality which is described by the metalevel, all kinds of other tendencies flourish. (130).

These considerations call to mind the work of Raymond Williams (Williams 1965, 1976), the “Father of Cultural Studies” in England, whose observations have been crucial in the shaping of a new way of defining “culture”. From its Arnoldian connotations of “superior knowledge”, “high art” and “refinement” (of an élite), the term “culture” has come to mean both a general human development and any particular way of life (for example, in the expressions “American Culture”, “Japanese Culture”, etc.). By emphasizing this broad anthropological meaning Williams has also put forward the idea of “residual” and “emergent” cultures, in opposition to a presumably homogeneous “dominant” culture. Lotman’s picture of a “nuclear” versus “peripheral” activity within the semiosphere seems very close to William’s propositions. What I find extremely interesting in Lotman’s argument is that his description of the semiosphere abolishes the rigid distinction between a “central-hegemonic” versus a “marginal-subordinate” culture. By providing a spatial metaphor of “centre/periphery” it gives a sophisticated account of both the synchronicity and change of different and even opposite cultural codes and phenomena.

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Identifying contradictions in texts, in cultural phenomena and in social behaviour, is perhaps the only way of demonstrating the diversity of culture at any given moment. This critical practice seems to me to focus on what Lotman would call the “periphery” of the semiosphere, and/or the many “boundaries” within the semiosphere where dialogue is extremely intense. While British Cultural Materialism looks at these boundaries mostly in terms of “ideological fissures” within the texts (Dollimore 1984; Sinfield 1992), Lotman’s semiotic observations invite a meta-ideological reading of cultural phenomena (focussing on cultural codes, and their possible hierarchical order, rather than remaining at the level of the message). There is obviously a necessary reciprocity and a complementarity between the ideological reading and the epistemic reading of texts. Integration of the two levels of reading would account for both what is said (or not said) and the shaping force informing such discourse. Texts mirror contradictions, and it is the interpreter’s duty to point out such contradictions and aporias at different levels.

The discoursive nature of cultural phenomena is perhaps, as I have said, the central epistemic aspect of Lotman’s theories. No wonder then that this belief should also be expressed in his observations on history (Lotman 1990: 217-274). I regret not being able to deal with it at length, in this paper, but let me just say that many of Lotman’s statements on history seem to find a counterpart in the emerging view, among American critics, of the fictional nature of history itself, and the untenability of a rigid distinction between history and literature. Louis Montrose (Montrose 1986a, b), Howard Felperin (Felperin 1990), and Stephen Greenblatt’s (Greenblatt 1980, 1988) studies of the 16th and 17th Centuries are significant, among others, in this respect.

Conclusions

If Lotman’s contribution proves to be decisive, not only for those who can enjoy his works in the Slavic original, but for critics of different linguistic backgrounds and critical persuasions, this is due to the fact that Lotman’s theories have undoubtedly corroborated in many the belief in a fundamental principle of contemporary hermeneutics: i.e. the awareness that the structures of the text (any kind of text) must be related to the epistemic frame of

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the age (itself a plurivocal text). This is an attitude and a procedure we should cherish in interpretation. Placing texts in both a linguistic and a historical perspective may be a sobering experience (certain constraints would have to be accepted in interpretation, as well as certain degrees of freedom); but this is a healthy approach, if we wish to avoid the risk of carrying deconstruction and suspicion as far as the end of hermeneutics itself.

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