

“VERSIONS” OF LITERATURE AND THE GHOSTLY FUTURITY OF READING

GYÖRGY FOGARASI

Time and again the question returns: “whither literature, whither criticism?” Where are they going? What are the major directions of their development? Where will they be, what will they look like a year, a decade or a century from now? Will they still exist, and if so, what will be their major poetic, rhetorical, aesthetic, political, and moral features or tenets? Will all these categories – poetry, rhetoric, aesthetics, politics, morality – still partake of the same conceptual network, and have the same heuristic value, as they do today? One should perhaps be reluctant to produce straightforward answers to questions like these. It seems more profitable to ask whether literature itself may have something to say of these topics, of its own future, which is perhaps more elusive and unpredictable than a hasty forecast may suggest. In what follows I will try to spell out two paradigmatic “versions” of literature, two major modes of relating to the future, and see if the interrelation of these modes may help us conceive of a specifically “literary” futurity for both literature and criticism.

First of all, one could perhaps reformulate the relation of literature to its future as the relation of the literary text to its criticism, or even better, as the relation of any single text (literary, critical, or other) to its own reading (or misreading or even neglect). For reading is first and foremost an event that takes place in the future of a text, in its *avenir*, an occurrence that is about to come. In this perspective, criticism itself may appear as

the future of literature. And once this translation is made, we may transpose the question of futurity into the problematic of reading, and of literature's attitude to its own reading or readership. If the relation between literature and criticism can be reformulated in terms of the relation of a text to its reading, then the blurring of the borderline between the former two might as well be articulated in temporal terms as a confusion of literature's present with its future. Hence, I wish to speculate on the futurity of reading, and on literature's relation to (its possible confusion with) that incalculable moment.

After these preliminary remarks, let me outline the two "versions" of literature mentioned above. One of them would turn its back on its readers and would develop an indirect mode of addressing its audience, whereas the other would continually apply for their attention. These two gestures can be associated with two rhetorical figures, aversion and adversion, respectively.¹ In terms of poetic subgenres, for example, the romantic ode would clearly be an instance for the former rhetorical mode turning away from its current readers by addressing a fictional (deceased, absent, or mythological) person, or a personified entity, whereas the epitaph, with its direct appeal for public attention, would rather exemplify the adversive gesture of texts by its effort to catch and captivate the eyes of its readers. The opposition of these two "versions" of literature is all the more interesting since it often serves as a principle of articulation for literary history: modernism is frequently associated with an aversive mode which "turns away" from its market and tries to maintain the autonomy of literary discourse, while the notion of postmodernism is often coupled with the practice of metafiction, one which tries to break the fictional frame and (re)establish a direct contact with its readership.² The latter would then be an instance of blurring the temporal or spatial gap between literature and criticism, or present and future.

The poetry of the American poet (former poet laureate) Billy Collins might serve as a fitting example. In many of his poems Collins reflects on the way his poems are or could be read by current or future readers, and such metapoetic meditations are often

¹ On the question of apostrophe and address see Jonathan Culler, "Apostrophe," in *The Pursuit of Signs* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981), 135–54, and J. Douglas Kneale, "Romantic Aversions: Apostrophe Reconsidered," in *Rhetorical Traditions and British Romantic Literature*, ed. Don H. Bialostosky and Lawrence D. Needham (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 149–66.

² Patricia Waugh, one of the most prominent authors on metafiction, has in fact always been careful not to cast this literary phenomenon into reductive historical terms. See her *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (London and New York: Methuen, 1984), as well as her *Practicing Postmodernism Reading Modernism* (London: Edward Arnold, 1992).

accompanied by figures of address aimed directly at his current readers. One of these poems, "A Portrait of the Reader with a Bowl of Cereal" (a work opening, and thus occupying a strategic place in, his 1998 volume *Picnic, Lightning*) sets up a clear opposition between the conventional modernist and his own postmodern attitude toward readers.³ The text has an epigraph taken from Yeats which reads: "A poet ... never speaks directly as to someone at the breakfast table." So, when in the main body of the poem Collins starts speaking to his reader in an intimate, familial tone, by a nicely set breakfast table ("Every morning I sit across from you / at the same small table..."), he is mocking at the very indirectness Yeats claims for poetic discourse. In the quotation from Yeats, one may recognize the aestheticist notion that poetry is a "soliloquy overheard" (Mill), a mode of speech that resembles the song of a "nightingale" (Shelley) insofar as it is not intended for listeners and is concerned only with the inwardness of the poetic subject. From that perspective, the adversive logic of Collins' poetry seems to challenge the romantic or modernist preference for indirect communication, its implicit elitism and neglect of consumers' demand. Thus, one could easily conclude that postmodernism votes for the emancipation of popular culture and the free commerce of literary goods.

In an earlier poem, however, entitled "Dear Reader" and published in the 1995 volume *The Art of Drowning*, the scheme is hardly that simple.⁴ There Collins ponders on the long literary tradition of intimacy and invokes a distinguished list of "early" and "high" modernist authors just to emphasize the importance of address in both poems and novels, and more importantly, in both the past and the present.

Baudelaire considers you his brother,
and Fielding calls out to you every few paragraphs
as if to make sure you have not closed the book,
and now I am summoning you up again,
attentive ghost, dark silent figure standing
in the doorway of these words.

Pope welcomes you into the glow of his study,
takes down a leather-bound Ovid to show you.
Tennyson lifts the latch to a moated garden,
and with Yeats you lean against a broken pear tree,

³ Billy Collins, *Picnic, Lightning* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 3-4.

⁴ Billy Collins, *The Art of Drowning* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1995), 3.

the day hooded by low clouds.

[ll. 1–11]

The presence of Yeats himself in this list should not mislead us. He is included not so much for a direct prosaic mode (which he does not have), he is mentioned instead for the suggestive and engaging style of his works. But the historical pattern indicated above, so convincing at first look, seems no longer tenable. The adversive vein of Fielding, Pope or Baudelaire shows that the relation between address and apostrophe (adversive and aversive speech, or fiction and metafiction, if you will) is not something that one may treat by simply giving it a temporal or historical dimension. Collins is unequivocal about the long heritage of his own discourse. Nevertheless, what is interesting about the above list, which includes 18th century figures as well as postromantic poets from the 19th and 20th centuries, is the total elision of the romantic period.

On the one hand, this seems highly logical, for if romanticism signifies the emergence of what Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy have called the “literary absolute” (the autonomy of art and the disregard for the reading public as it appears in the romantics’ preference for the ode),⁵ then it clearly has no place in a line which enlists representatives of a more pragmatic and reader-oriented mode of speech. But on the other hand, the inclusion of the romantics would seem equally legitimate and desirable, for it is there that metafiction is at times considered as the prime feature of the work of art. We only need to recall the romantic notion of irony as it has been conceptualized by the major critic of the Jena romantics, Friedrich Schlegel, and we can see at once how the concept of romantic poetry is founded on the very mode that becomes foregrounded in “postmodern” literature. In his fragments Schlegel defines irony as a “constant self-parody” (*stete Selbstparodie*) or a “permanent parabasis” (*permanente Parekbase*) which implies the continual breaking of the fictional frame and the endless self-reflexivity of the poetic form.⁶ The term parabasis refers to the moment when the

⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Literary Absolute: The Theory of Literature in German Romanticism*, trans. Philip Barnard and Cheryl Lester (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1988).

⁶ Friedrich Schlegel, “Lyceums-Fragmente” (Fragment 108), in *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I. (1796-1801)*, ed. Hans Eichner, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (München, Paderborn and Wien: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 2:160; Friedrich Schlegel, “Zur Philosophie” (Fragment 668), in *Philosophische Lehrjahre (1796-1806)*, ed. Ernst Behler, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (München, Paderborn and Wien: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 18:85.

speaker of the work calls out to the reader and comments on his own discourse. In the German romantic tradition, Tieck's plays or Hoffmann's narratives are the most spectacular cases of such self-parody, but Byron's *Don Juan* or Pushkin's *Eugene Onegin* could just as well provide numerous examples. In his dissertation, Walter Benjamin called this phenomenon the "ironization of form" (*Ironisierung der Form*) as opposed to the "ironization of the subject matter" (*Ironisierung des Stoffes*), because here it is no longer the content which is ironized (as in parody) but the very frame of literary discourse.⁷ All this has a lot to do with the notion that literature can only be criticized by literature itself, since if the ironic nature of the literary work implies a self-critical attitude, then any further criticism of that work will merely repeat on a higher level what the work itself has been doing all the way long. In that sense, criticism is just the continuation of poetry, it does not begin the ironic act but merely raises it to a higher power. If the self-critical motion of literature is disruptive with regard to the literary work of art which stays essentially fragmentary and can never really be accomplished, then the same logic is at work on the higher level of art as such (the Work), which is always underway and remains deferred into futurity like the fulfilment of an impossible promise. And this interpenetration of poetry and criticism can be seen to coincide with the intermingling of the present and the future, or of the text and its reader, if we keep in mind that the ultimate form of ironic reflection is the parabasis, the figure of transgressing the fictional frame and addressing the reader.

But we still have to go one step further, as the Schlegelian notion of irony is not that simple. When he says that the parabasis becomes permanent he might not simply mean that romantic texts reflect on themselves with extreme frequency, as most readers of Schlegel (with Benjamin, Peter Szondi, Winfried Menninghaus, Moon-gyoo Choi among them) would have it. He might mean something fundamentally different. The permanence of the breaking of form is in fact not to be understood as a "constant self-parody", it is rather something which lies beyond any reflection and any dialectic.⁸ One should heed Schlegel's distinction in his essay "On Incomprehensibility" ("Über die

⁷ Walter Benjamin, "Der Begriff der Kunstkritik in der deutschen Romantik," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann and Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1991), 1:82–87.

⁸ Paul de Man, "The Concept of Irony," in *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. Andrzej Warminski (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 181.

Unverständlichkeit”) between the two divergent senses of the phrase “irony of irony”.⁹ He says that whereas in general usage the expression refers to the uncensored and endless use of reflexive devices, he himself prefers to use it in a wholly different meaning. He emphasizes the author’s loss of control over his own text and over the workings of irony, which is also the author’s victimization by the non-coincidence of his intended meaning with the interpretation given by the reader. So, rather than being synonymous with self-reflexivity (and thus a reassertion of authorial control), the permanence of parabasis implies the undecidability of authorial intention, that is, the impossibility ever to locate the moment of reflection in a text. In this sense, the parabasis (and with it, irony) is no longer a trope that we could pinpoint in the work, it becomes invisible like a virus or secret agent, potentially disrupting its semantic coherence at every point.

Something like this may be happening in the English romantic tradition, where the simultaneous cultivation of both ode and epitaph sets up a scheme very similar to the one we have seen just before. The “epitaphic mode” of Wordsworthian poetry,¹⁰ its ghostly voice coming from beyond the grave and its recurrent appeal for the attention of the passer-by (who appears as an “attentive ghost” akin to Collins’ reader), is an indication of the text’s omnipresent effort to navigate its way, its reading, and thus to predict and control its future history. At first glimpse, this gesture would seem as a symmetrical opposite of the logic of the ode as it can be witnessed in the works of Shelley or Keats. But the apparent contrast of the two genres or rhetorical modes is perhaps nothing more than the result of a defensive polarization of something more elusive and the false opposition of arbitrarily demarcated and idealized poles. For what if the gesture of turning *to* the reader was merely a version of turning *away* from him or her? What if any adversive move had an apostrophic logic? What if address and apostrophe, or direct and indirect communication, were related precisely the way fiction is related to reference? In that case, moments of metafiction in a novel could be read as apostrophic appeals to a fictional reader who does not necessarily coincide with the actual reader reading the text. Any single moment of address would simultaneously turn away from the reader (on the level of fiction) and turn toward him or her (as soon as it

⁹ Friedrich Schlegel, “Über die Unverständlichkeit,” in *Charakteristiken und Kritiken I. (1796-1801)*, ed. Hans Eichner, in *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, ed. Ernst Behler (München, Paderborn and Wien: Verlag Ferdinand Schöningh, 1967), 2:369.

¹⁰ Frances Ferguson, *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), 155–72.

is referentialized). And since the futurity of reading works both ways at the same time, the text and its future (that is, literature and criticism) will neither perfectly miss, nor perfectly meet, each other. Such ghostly encounters are usually associated with “literature,” but if this spectrality pertains to the futurity of reading in general (to each and every “attentive ghost” watching us as we speak or write), then there is little chance that we can keep it within the borders of poetry and the walls of the literary canon. It will evade our grasp and will intermingle the two versions of speech in every domain, confronting us with a half-present, half-absent (that is, ghostly) ever emergent “literary” futurity.

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