Signs Taken For Wonders

Essays in the Sociology of Literary Forms

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Translated by Susan Fischer,
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Acknowledgements

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> Forme is power.
> (Hobbes, *Leviathan*)

Introductions always get written last, perhaps years after some of the work they are supposed to 'introduce'. Rereading one's own work, one immediately notices mistakes and gaps, the ideas that seem so obvious now but which then – God knows why – seemed impossible to grasp. One would like to discard everything and start afresh – or at least look forward, not back, and pursue what has not yet been done, without worrying about making presentable what has long since been left behind.

In short, immediately one starts writing an introduction, one wants to write the exact opposite of an introduction. I have tried to resist this impulse, then to subdue it, then to disguise it. But I might as well admit to feeling that this introduction has rather run away from me. I do not even know whether it is a good idea to read it before the other essays. Not that it has nothing to do with them: on the contrary it tackles precisely those theoretical problems that continually recur in the book. But there are two differences of some substance in the way it deals with them.

For one thing, this is my first attempt at a systematic and abstract discussion of issues that I have always approached in an occasional, intuitive and concrete way: in relation to a specific text or literary genre. And while I am convinced that empirical research is impossible without a guiding theoretical framework, I am by no means sure that I am personally cut out for this sort of work. I feel more at home examining, correcting or falsifying already existing theories in the light of concrete examples than when I have to put forward an alternative theory. Ideally, of course, the two operations ought to coincide: but in reality one

finds oneself 'specializing' in one or other of them, and I must say that the operation I find more congenial is the one found in the essays that follow, not the one attempted in this introduction. On the other hand, in the rather frenetic world of literary criticism, theoretical speculation enjoys the same symbolic status as cocaine: one *has to* try it. Readers will judge for themselves whether in my case it has been worthwhile or whether they have simply had dust thrown in their eyes.

The second difference is much simpler and much more important. Over the past few years I have changed my opinion on various questions. In a couple of cases, which I shall mention explicitly, I now think that I was wrong. Overall, though, I would say that I have mainly radicalized and generalized a number of intuitions scattered here and there in my earlier work. It may be that they have thereby gained in clarity and explanatory power, or it may be that they have lost what was good in their original formulation. I (predictably) lean towards the former view, but it is, as always, other people's judgements that count. I simply wanted to state at the outset that the discrepancies between one essay and the next, and between essays and introduction, derive at least in part from the fact that I am unable to consider my work as something complete; that no methodological or historiographic framework wholly convinces me; and that every change I have made has been prompted by the unfashionable and banal conviction that the main task of criticism is to provide the best possible explanation of the phenomena it discusses. That is all; now we can get on with the real problems.

1. Rhetoric and History

'Rhetoric is like a branch ... of the science dealing with behaviour, which it is right to call political.' Aristotle's words (*Rhetoric* 1356a) prefigure those researches of the last few decades aimed at demonstrating that rhetorical conventions exist in order to satisfy specifically *social* requirements. Thus Kenneth Burke in 1950: 'The *Rhetoric* must lead us through the Scramble,

the Wrangle of the Market Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take, the wavering line of pressure and counter-pressure, the logomachy, the onus of ownership, the Wars of Nerves, the War . . . . Its ideal culminations are more often beset by strife as the condition of their organized expression, or material embodiment. Their very universality becomes transformed into a partisan weapon. For one need not scrutinize the concept of "identification" very sharply to see, implied in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division. Rhetoric is concerned with the state of Babel after the Fall. Its contribution to a "sociology of knowledge" must often carry us far into the lugubrious regions of malice and lie.'[1] Thus also, to cite someone who is intellectually at the opposite pole from Burke, Giulio Preti in 1968: 'Rhetorical discourse is a discourse addressed to a *particular* (I prefer to call it a "determinate") audience . . . . In other words, rhetorical argument starts from presuppositions as well as from feelings, emotions, evaluations – in a word, "opinions" (*doxai*) – which it supposes to be present and at work in its audience.' And further on, commenting on some passages from the *Logique du Port-Royal*: 'Two things stand out in particular here: the first is the *emotional* character underlying these kinds of non-rational persuasion, an emotional character indicated a little crudely by terms like "amour propre", "interest", "utility", "passion", but which is nonetheless quite definite . . . . The second is the typically *social* character of these forms of sophism: they are linked to man's relations to other men within the nation, the social group or the institution. This social character is contrasted with the universality of rational conviction.'[2]

Rhetoric has a social, emotive, partisan character, in short, an *evaluative* character. To persuade is the opposite of to convince. The aim is not to ascertain an intersubjective truth but to enlist support for a *particular* system of values. In the seventeenth century – which witnessed the first great flowering of empirical science, and *at the same time* the collapse of all social 'organicity' in the fight to the death between opposing faiths and interest – the perception of this contrast was extremely acute. According to *La Logique du Port-Royal*: 'Si l'on examine avec soin ce qui attache ordinairement les hommes plûtot à une opinion qu'à une autre, on

trouvera que ce n'est pas la pénétration de la vérité & la force des raisons; mais quelque lien d'amour propre, d'interêt, ou de passion. C'est le poids qui emporte la balance, & qui nous détermine dans la plupart de nos doutes; c'est ce qui donne le plus grand branle à nos jugements, & qui nous y arrête le plus fortement. Nous jugeons des choses, non par ce qu'elles sont en elles-mêmes; mais par ce qu'elles sont à notre égard: & la vérité & l'utilité ne sont pour nous qu'une même chose.'[3]

So far we have discussed the social character of rhetorical conventions. But the argument applies also to literary conventions. Rhetoric is concerned with so many and such different activities (law, politics, ethics, advertising . . .) that it would be mistaken to restrict it just to literature, yet literary discourse is entirely contained within the rhetorical domain. As Preti puts it in a flawless passage: 'Epideictic discourse, which was the least valued in antiquity (precisely because it is the most . . . "rhetorical" in a derogatory sense) is nowadays however the one which takes on the greatest importance. It can even be said that in present-day philosophy of culture it is the only one with any interest, precisely because it does not have narrow practical ends, but a cultural, "paedeutic" aim. And above all because it provides the *genus* of literary discourse in prose. It bears on moral values, and in general on the values of a civilization. It aims at reinforcing or arousing attitudes (feelings) not just as regards a contingent (legal or political) decision, but as regards the great values that make up a civilization. Precisely because of its non-practical character, it is unlikely to degenerate from a discourse of persuasion to one of propaganda. It is above all the structures and rules of this kind of discourse which are the object of the new Rhetoric.'[4]

The evaluative and persuasive character of literary discourse emerges sharply in that area of the rhetorical tradition with which literary criticism is most familiar, namely 'figures', and particularly in the 'queen of poetry' – metaphor. Far from being 'aesthetic' ornaments of discourse, places where the strategy of persuasion is attenuated or disappears, figures show themselves to be unrivalled mechanisms for welding into an indivisible whole description and evaluation, 'judgements of fact' and 'judgements of value'. To quote once again *La Logique du Port-Royal*: 'Les expressions figurées signifient, outre la chose principale, le mouvement & la

passion de celui qui parle, & impriment ainsi l'une & l'autre idée dans l'esprit, au lieu que l'expression simple ne marque que la vérité toute nue.'[5]

'Passion', the 'emotions', 'feeling': these indicate that uncertain object that literary criticism can choose to ignore but which does not thereby disappear from its field of operation. As Pascal said, feeling 'acts in a flash, and is always ready to act'. He traced it back to 'habit', to that 'spontaneous' cultural reaction ('we are automatism as well as spirit . . . ') which tells us with ruthless clarity just how profoundly our psychical apparatus is determined by the socio-historical context.

Rhetoric, then, addresses itself to 'feeling' precisely because it is concerned with evoking and disciplining the most purely *social* parts of us. The most 'automatically' social, we should say, with Pascal in mind, but also recalling the theory of metaphor put forward by Max Black. Metaphor for Black appears as simply unthinkable outside a whole system of moral and cognitive commonplaces (rhetoric, as Aristotle had said, is the art of using commonplaces well) which are used and accepted without any longer being subjected to any control: 'Consider the statement "man is a wolf" . . . . The metaphorical sentence in question will not convey its intended meaning to a reader sufficiently ignorant about wolves. What is needed is not so much that the reader shall know the standard dictionary meaning of "wolf" – or be able to use that word in literal senses – as that he shall know what I will call the *system of associated commonplaces*. . . . From the expert's standpoint, the system of commonplaces may include half-truths or downright mistakes (as when a whale is classified as a fish); but the important thing for the metaphor's effectiveness is not that the commonplaces shall be true, but that they should be readily and freely evoked. (Because this is so, a metaphor that works in one society may seem preposterous in another).'[6]

Seen in this light, the more a rhetorical formulation is turned into a commonplace (or rather – but it is the same thing – the more it has become 'implicit', unnoticeable to us) the more persuasive it will be: 'To us it seems that the value of "dead" metaphors in argument is above all prominent because of the great force of persuasion they possess when, with the aid of one technique or

another, they are put back into action. This force results from the fact that they draw their effects from an analogic material which is easily admitted because it is not only known, but integrated, by means of language, into the cultural tradition.'[7] 'Someone who uses a form from the rhetorical system does not have to think, or be consciously aware at that moment, that he is using that form, just as someone driving a car does not have to think, or be consciously aware at that moment, how many cylinders the engine has or how it works . . . the knowledge of rhetorical forms by the listener can in fact jeopardize the effect the speaker hopes to arouse with those forms, in that the effect is subjected to the listener's control.'[8]

Rhetorical figures, and the larger combinations which organize long narratives, are thus of a piece with the deep, buried, invisible presuppositions of every world view. This is why one duly turns to them every time one has to put into focus a particularly complex experience (one can practically speak about time only in metaphors) or to express a judgement that possesses particular importance (almost all emotional language – from 'honey' to 'scum' and beyond – is a long chain of metaphors). I said just now that rhetorical forms are 'of a piece' with the deepest presuppositions of every *Weltanschauung*. The examples just adduced invite us to go further, to suggest that they are the *most widespread* form, and in certain cases the *only* form, in which those presuppositions continue to manifest themselves. Their lasting and undetected effectiveness points to the wide field of study of the *unconscious* culture, the implicit knowledge, of every civilization. It has indeed become difficult to imagine an adequate social history of 'consensus' that does not understand the techniques of persuasion. Reciprocally, literary criticism – as a sociology of rhetorical forms – would have everything to gain from contact with the history of mentalities outlined by the *Annales* school: 'Inertia, a fundamental historical force, . . . is more a fact of minds than one of matter, since the latter is often quicker to act than the former. Men make use of the machines they invent while retaining the mentality of prior technical stages. Drivers of motor-cars have a horse-rider's vocabulary, nineteenth-century factory workers have the mentality of their peasant fathers and grandfathers. Mentality is what changes most slowly. The history of mentalities is the history of

slowness in history.'[9] Yet it would of course be wrong to say that literature is limited to 'bringing back to life' the rhetorico-ideological forms already deposited in tradition. Literature is traversed by continuous, at times traumatic, innovation: 'daring' figures, works that on their appearance were rejected as 'incomprehensible' or 'absurd' are the most visible evidence of this second side of the question. Yet this does not in the least 'prove' – as is often believed, for the most varied reasons – that 'real' literature is by its nature anti-conventional, and that its interpretation will therefore impel us 'beyond' rhetorical analysis.

Let us begin with the second point. Rhetorical theory is by no means unable to account for the evolutionary character or even the ruptures of literary history. Harald Weinrich's analysis of metaphor in text-linguistic terms aims precisely at explaining the culturally innovative function that it can, if necessary, come to exercise. Indeed when Weinrich notes that metaphor is a 'contradictory predication', he shows that the relation between 'topic' and 'comment', or subject and predicate, established by metaphorical combination is never, orginally, a 'peaceful' one but always implies a 'risky' transition between the two terms.[10] The predication proposed by metaphor – in its interweaving of description and evaluation – can just as well be repulsed. The inert, counter-determinant context can prove too rigid and thus make the predication seem incomprehensible. Literary history, after all, abounds in rhetorical experiments that seem relegated for ever to the limbo of absurdity. But it also abounds – and this is the point – in experiments that seemed absurd and yet now appear not only entirely acceptable but actually indispensable – experiments that have become established as 'commonplaces'. 'Créer un poncif': was not this Baudelaire's – *Baudelaire's* – ideal? When faced with a text that violates the conventions of its time, therefore, critical analysis cannot remain content with the half-truth that tells us how it did so. It cannot look, as it usually does, only at the *past*, at the dislodged convention or the deconstructed *Weltanschauung*. The *future* of a text – the conventions and the world views it will help to form and consolidate – is just as much a part of its history and its contribution to history. This consideration is taken for granted in other kinds of historical studies. Only literary criticism – prey to

superstitions specific to itself, as we shall see shortly – has claimed exemption. There is no good reason for this, not only with respect to historiography, but also in the light of rhetorical theory itself. Because rhetoric – remember Kenneth Burke's words – is the daughter of division and strife. By the mere fact of its existence, it bears witness to a society divided, in conflict. It is an entity that continually transforms itself, historical in its essence. Rhetorical 'daring' testifies to a will that wants to overturn the power relations of the symbolic order. 'Commonplaces' and semantic inertia, for their part, are the potential *result* of that daring no less than its opposite. This is the sense of a memorable passage by Erwin Panofsky: 'art is not, as a point of view which excessively accentuates its opposition to the theory of imitation would like one to believe, a subjective expression of feeling or an existential occupation of certain individuals, *but rather an objectifying and realizing conflict, aiming at meaningful results, between a forming power and a material to be overcome.*'[11] Even the tone of this sentence makes it clear that, for Panofsky, there would be nothing wrong in seeing the history of art as an articulation of the history of social conflicts and violence: as a *history of conflicts in the sphere of aesthetic forms.*[12] It is no longer a question, then, of contrasting rhetorical (or ideological) 'consent' with aesthetic 'dissent', but of recognizing that there are different *moments* in the development of every system of consent, and above all different *ways* of furthering it. As I try to explain in the essays on Joyce, Eliot and Balzac – and in the fourth section of this introduction – in particular social contexts even 'open', 'non-organic', or 'obscure' aesthetic forms can function as instruments of consent.

Knowledge of the socio-historical context of a literary work or genre is not therefore an 'extra' to be kept in the margins of rhetorical analysis. In general, whether one is aware of it or not, such knowledge furnishes the starting point for interpretation itself, providing it with those initial hypothesis without which rhetorical mechanisms would be hard to understand, or would tell us very little indeed. Thus, when around ten years ago every work was implacably led back to the Nature/Culture opposition, the procedure soon wore thin, not so much because of its historical indeterminacy, but because that indeterminacy (largely encouraged by

Lévi-Strauss himself) permitted as a rule analyses that were at best elementary, and otherwise simply wrong.

Yet, although rhetorical analysis refines and extends the territory of the social sciences and the latter, for their part, provide it with that historical framework outside of which the very existence of rhetorical conventions would be meaningless, it should not therefore be thought that the connection between the two conceptual apparatuses, and the set of phenomena they refer to, is linear and predictable. True isomorphisms never occur, and from this categorial discrepancy stems the set of problems that characterizes literary history.

2. Literary Historiography – and Beyond

Literary texts are *historical* products organized according to *rhetorical* criteria. The main problem of a literary criticism that aims to be in all respects a *historical discipline* is to do justice to both aspects of its objects: to work out a system of concepts which are both historiographic and rhetorical. These would enable one to perform a dual operation: to slice into segments the diachronic continuum constituted by the whole set of literary texts (the strictly historical task), but to slice it according to formal criteria pertaining to *that* continuum and not others (the strictly rhetorical task).

To a large extent, such a theoretical apparatus already exists It is centred on the concept of 'literary genre'. I do not think it is accidental that, in the twentieth century, the best results of historical-sociological criticism are to be found in works aimed at defining the internal laws and historical range of a specific genre: from the novel in Lukács to the baroque drama in Benjamin, from French classical tragedy in Goldmann to (in a kindred field) the twelve-note system in Adorno. Yet there is no doubt that the concept of literary genre has not yet acquired the prominence it deserves, or that it could lead to a very different structuring of literary history from the one familiar to us. I would like here to outline some of the prospects that might open up if it were to be used systematically. But first I shall suggest why criticism has put up such widespread resistance to these developments.

Let us take the case of the young Lukács. In the period when he was working on his *Modern Drama*, Lukács, under the influence of Simmel's sociology of forms, had come to formulate the problem we are concerned with in terms that still remain valid today. As he wrote in the 1911 foreword to that work: 'The fundamental problem of this book is therefore: does a modern drama exist, and what style does it have? This question, however, like every stylistic question, is in the first place a sociological one . . . . The greatest errors of sociological analysis in relation to art are: in artistic creations it seeks and examines only contents, tracing a straight line between these and given economic relations. But in literature what is truly social is form . . . . Form is social reality, it participates vivaciously in the life of the spirit. It therefore does not operate only as a factor acting upon life and moulding experiences, but also as a factor which is in its turn moulded by life.'[13] Similar concepts are expressed in the first and longer draft of the foreword, the 1910 lecture 'Observations on the Theory of Literary History': 'The synthesis of literary history is the unification into a new organic unity of sociology and aesthetics . . . . Form is sociological not only as a mediating element, as a principle which connects author and receiver, making literature a social fact, but also in its relationship with the material to be formed . . . . Form in a work is that which organizes into a closed whole the life given to it as subject matter, that which determines its times, rhythms and fluctuations, its densities and fluidities, its hardnesses and softnesses; that which accentuates those sensations perceived as important and distances the less important things; that which allocates things to the foreground or the background, and arranges them in order . . . Every form is an evaluation of life, a judgement on life, and it draws this strength and power from the fact that in its deepest foundations form is always an ideology . . . . The world view is the formal postulate of every form.'[14]

This line of research is very clear, and far richer than a couple of quotations can hope to suggest. One almost wonders what form sociological criticism might have taken had Lukács pursued his project. But, of course, things turned out differently. Already in 1910, in disconcerting synchrony with the arguments just quoted, Lukács elaborated a diametrically opposed concept of aesthetic form – a

'tragic' concept, based on the collapse of all connections between form and life, forms and history: '[Here] a fundamental question arises for aesthetics: is not what we have been accustomed to call form, and which we place a priori in front of the meanings of life and of what is being formed, the petrifaction of existence? . . . Every perfect work, precisely because of its perfection, places itself outside all communities and will not tolerate being inserted into some series of causes determining it from without. The essence of artistic creation, of formation, is just such an isolating principle: to cut every bond which tied it to living, concrete, moving life in order to give itself a new life, closed in on itself, not connected to anything and comparable to nothing. In every artistic creation there exists a kind of *Inselhaftigkeit*, as Simmel calls it, as a result of which it is reluctant to be a part of any continuous development.'[15]

As is well known, between *Soul and Forms* and *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács radicalized this second version of his concept of form. In the famous dialogue on *Tristram Shandy* the speaker who exalts formal order frightens the girl he loves and drives her into his rival's arms. By the same token, in *Theory of the Novel* the *historicity* which is consubstantial with the novel means that the formal accomplishment of a novel is always and only 'problematic': a 'yearning' for form rather than its attainment. Between Life and Form, history and forms, the young Lukács digs an ever-deepening trench. Life is 'movement', form 'closure'. Life is 'concreteness' and 'multiplicity', form 'abstraction' and 'simplification'. Form is, in a summarizing metaphor, petrified and petrifying: life is fluid, ductile, 'alive'.

However, the twentieth-century social sciences have erased this image of life for good. If one looks through the eyes of linguistics, history of the *longue durée*, anthropology and psychoanalysis, *even* life appears 'petrified'. What is unacceptable in Lukács's dichotomy is not so much the description of form as the characteristics attributed to historical existence. If, in Lukác's work between 1910 and 1920, the concept of form takes on increasingly metaphysical connotations, this happens, paradoxically, less for reasons internal to the concept of form itself than because of the image Lukács's philosophical background had imprinted on the

opposing concept. Form coagulates into a cruel a priori – extreme, tragic, opposed to life – *because* Lukács wants to conserve 'life' in a state of fluid and 'open' indeterminacy. What Lukác's is aiming to avoid is a concept which is, however, essential to the analysis of culture: the concept of *convention*.[16] It is a crucial concept because it indicates when a form has taken definitive social root, entering into daily life, innervating and organizing it in ways increasingly undetected and regular – and hence more effective. But it is at the same time a concept which enforces a harsh disillusionment, because it strips historical existence of its openness to change, and aesthetic form of its pristine purity.

I believe that literary criticism has kept for too long to the terms of Lukács's dilemma: to save the warmth of life and the purity of form. This is why history and rhetoric have become totally unrelated subjects. This is why the concept of literary genre has remained confined to a sort of theoretical limbo: recognized and accepted, but little and reluctantly used. To talk about literary genres means without any doubt to emphasize the contribution made by literature to the 'petrifaction of existence' and also to the 'wearing out of form'. It means re-routing the tasks of literary historiography and the image of literature itself, enclosing them both in the idea of consent, stability, repetition, bad taste even. It means, in other words, turning the ultimate paradise – the paradise of 'beauty' – into a social institution like the others.

We can now return to the role of the concept of genre in slicing up and reordering the continuum of literary history. Something immediately strikes us. A history of literature built round this concept will be both 'slower' and more 'discontinuous' than the one we are familiar with. Slower, because the idea of literary *genre* itself requires emphasis on what a set of works have in *common*. It presupposes that literary production takes place in obedience to a prevailing system of laws and that the task of criticism is precisely to show the extent of their coercive, regulating power. The idea of genre introduces into literary history the dimension which the *Annales* school has called *longue durée*, and supports the hypothesis that 'art is without doubt more suited to the expression of *states* of civilization than moments of violent rupture.'[17]