PRZEGLĄDY I RECENZJE

SURVEYS AND REVIEWS

PRZEGLĄDY - SURVEYS

L'JUBOMIR PLESNíK
Nitra

A STORY OF THE NITRA SCHOOL

1. An Official Version of the Story

In literary studies the expression "Nitra school" denotes an output of the former Cabinet of Literary Communication which has become the present Institute of Literary and Artistic Communication at the Faculty of Arts of the University of Constantine the Philosopher in Nitra.

The "Nitra School" story has its canonised version. Here are its basic points:

1. "The Nitra School" was formed at the end of the 1960s. It was marked by an emphasis on scholarly correctness of semiotic-communicational research into text and on its concrete interpretative manifestation. At the background of the over-ideologised literary studies in former Czechoslovakia, the School was perceived as a nice methodological innovation.

2. Methodologically, the work of the "Nitra School" was connected with the so-called texto-centric, structural, or semiological line in literary studies, in the pre WW II period represented especially by Russian formalism and Czechoslovak structuralism. At the time of the "Nitra School" genesis this line of research was carried out, among others, through a semantic, or information aesthetics as well as through New Criticism and post WW II structuralist and semiological initiatives in the French speaking countries, etc.

3. The research of the "Nitra School" was characterised by the principles of team work of interdisciplinar character. The emphasis was put on the questions of the interpretation of the artwork, the theory of the text, the theory of literary communication and the theory of literary meta-com-

munication, or intertextual linking (translation, literary education, etc.). Since the 1970s, the research has been internationally acknowledged.

2. The Metaphor of a Personal Version of the Story

Without an intention to challenge the official version outlined above, I will submit (not against it or against other inner versions, but parallel with them!) my own understanding of the "Nitra School" story.

Immediately after my coming to the Institute (in 1983), I perceived its status through canonised eyes. However, it gradually assumed a different shape. Figuratively speaking, instead of a highway with a one–direction movement – which is the metaphor of that outer version – it reminded me more and more of a multilevel crossing; the intersection of two roads which – as it always happen in multilevel crossings – first get closer, circling and intersecting each other, only to continue later in their own directions. One of the roads had a character of a multi-lane highway with the direction pointers of world theoretical centres. For its main constructor I took Anton Popovič. The second road reminded me somehow of a track for a lonely runner. That runner was František Miko.

3. Two Aspects of Theory

Non–figuratively speaking, I identified, from within, two strategies of theoretical behaviour in the "Nitra School". I will stop to consider them, since they contain actual methodological problem facing current human sciences, the problem that exceeds the confines of the "Nitra School" as well as the borders of literary theory.

In my opinion the basic difference between the two aspects of theoretical behaviour which I want to consider consists in that from which they centrally derive their legitimacy; semiotically speaking, in the chice of the context a theoretical text decisively relates to through its sense.

As for the first aspect, the theoretical statement is decisively influenced by other theoretical texts, that is the context of conceptual statements (conceptuality is understood here in a narrow way, as a sign of theoretical style characterised by abstractness, semiological nature, facticity, etc.).

The force behind the first aspect of knowing is other theoretical texts which:

1. primarily motivate that theoretical act – through an energy of estrangement of the automated rhetorics (the argumentation of "overcome procedures") or through coming to terms with current speech games (the argumentation principle of "new trends");

2. monopolise their themes (the central object of their conceptual re- or de-construction is another theoretical text);

3. become a determining criterion of the correctness of a theoretical act (using the principle of "agreement or non-agreement with authoritative texts" as the main argument);

4. are main realisational output (a strategic aim of a theoretical act is to occupy a representative position among other conceptual discourses).

The most important sign of this episteme is the fact that the context of conceptual statements here assumes the validity of a referential reality. For example, by literary taste are purposefully meant its conceptual definitions (a history of literary taste or its analysis are presented as a history or analysis of theoretical statements about the taste). This pan-conceptual strategy prevails in current theoretical discourses about literature and art (it does not need an advocate, which is also a reason why I will not deal with its priorities, expressed in its ability to ensure: communication in the contact of professionals, methodological evidence, immediate control, deduction and justification through a reference to other theoretical texts, etc.).

I will concentrate now on the second aspect of theory. By this I mean a strategy which, within the "Nitra School", was emphasised by František Miko (if two aspects of theory are juxtaposed here, it has to be stressed that a plurality of the modes of knowing is aimed at, not the challenging of one of the two aspects; the acceptance of one or the other strategy, it has to be said, does neither, a priori, cast a doubt on the value of a theoretical act, nor ensures its quality).

How does the second aspect of knowing legitimise itself? Its legitimisation comes from what exceeds the homogeneous field of a scientific discourse, what itself is not a scientific discourse and therefore creates its heterogeneous environment, the otherness context. The representatives of the "Nitra School" have approached that context of otherness either from the point of view of intention, calling it "life world", process - "living through", "sensing", or result - "experience".

Placing a theoretical statement in the mentioned referential framework may seem suspicious, especially at the background of the contemporary turning away from the questions of being and consciousness to the questions of language, be them derivable from the Saussure's *Cours de linguistique générale*, Wittgenstein's work *Tractatus logico-philosophicus* or Heidegger's works ("Was ist das - die Philosophie?", etc.). But to what arbiter does a theoretical text appeal to in the light of this tendency, if outside texts, outside the embodiment in the

language, that arbiter - the context of "lived world", "experience" or
"experiencing" - is thought impossible to exist. I must stress here that in
the works of the "Nitra School" representatives that context was
identified as a product of different semioses. In it was identified the
wholeness of outer and inner statements, realised in various styles
(primarily in the colloquial style, as well as in administration, artistic,
scientific and other styles) and in different sign systems (including the
bodily one). Therefore with regard to the above mentioned two
strategies of theoretical conduct, the whole problem of the so-called
language turn can be considered ambiguous.

The motive power behind the second episteme is thus a holistically
understood context of otherness with which we are concerned not only
as theoreticians, but as complex people of our life as well. It is in this
context where the theoretical act of the second aspect looks for its
motivating challenges. This context intends through concepts. The
harmony with this context is a dominant criterion of the correctness of
a theoretical statement. From this context the theoretical act derives its
sense and through its sense it also turns back to it. Naturally, sta-
tements of this type of knowing can be "read" also in the pan-con-
ceptual code. For example, the concept of experience - in such a way
that we referentially support it exclusively by theoretical texts, which
build on it (through the statements of empiricism, philosophy of life,
positivism, etc.). In this case we, understandably, stay within the first
episteme, not entering the second one. Therefore I would not derive the
methodological background of the second, experiential aspect of know-
ing, from such a reading of great paradigms (including pragmatism).
The tradition with which this aspect is connected leads across the
paradigms and has its roots rather in practical stylistics, rhetoric and
normative poetics (or in praxeologically aimed parts of sciences about
individual kinds of art).

Instrumentally, that is from a perspective of the transfer of scien-
tific information, of generic and stylistic identity and, especially, from
a perspective of semantic construction, the second aspect of theory is
also firmly planted into the context of scientific statements. Otherwise, it
would not be scientifically possible, since the mentioned two aspects of
science do not really operate in an isolated contraposition, in the
extremely sharpened form of distinctive signs to which I limit myself
here. In fact, they form a complementary continuum. A decisive vehicle
of strategic sense, be it denoted as the first or last one - and with this
I am concerned here - is, however, only one.

4. A Story of the Second Aspect

In the Nitra School, the strategic framework of the second aspect of theory, which has just been outlined, has established itself in the conditions of research and teaching. It happened in several stages.

In the first stage of the activity of the "Nitra School" (from the foundation of the Institute in 1968 roughly to the end of the early 1980s), the situation of the second aspect of theory can be characterised at a contrasting background of an immanent approach to the text. Drawing on formalist and structuralist research, this approach focused on the literary text itself, in the context of a developmental order, that is, in the context of literariness. This model was schematically developed into a communicational and, later on, metacommunicational scheme. In the code of the first aspect of theory, the model could be contemporaneously perceived as a fresh innovation of traditional and a prompt citation of current tends in literary critical thinking. Within the second theoretical strategy (with its intention not to lose from sight the sense of the text as a functional link to the context of otherness), the communication model represented, however, mostly an expression of effort to explore the structure of the text from a perspective of its influence on man. (Terms from both ends of communication chain – communicant, receiver, addressee, recipient, percipient, reader, as well as the expedient, addresser, sender, author, creator, etc. – have been thus covered by a trivial concept of "man" here. This requires an explanation. As is known, literary critical terms are traditionally connected with a corpus of the text. Within the mentioned strategy, the aim was to identify its "human context" which is terminologically covered mainly by philosophy and psychology, applying the concepts of the subject, consciousness, being, experience, or psyche, living through, apperception and other psychical functions. This brought certain risk, for the mentioned concepts live, in the code conditions of the mother disciplines, their own semantic life. Here they are subject to special interpretations, corrections as well as challenges. However, we wanted to incorporate into literary theory a human sense of its subject and not to enter a "foreign land" of other scientific fields. So despite the fact that in the works of František Miko and his disciples the mentioned concepts are frequently used, they never resulted in psychological or philosophical competencies. They were transformed into literary critical conceptual language, within it approaching the sense they had in colloquial style from which they had been, after all, taken over by the scientific language (the procedure is not exceptional, rare is only its reflection). If then, for example, the category of subject

disappeared from the part of philosophical discourse, the concept of man in the live speech remains.)

The point of departure for the second stage of the "Nitra School" story (the 1980s and the early 1990s) was an emblematic thesis about the unity of text and communication. This concept was explained in a twofold way: 1. as an indivisibility of the different (example: "unity of soul and body"), and 2. as a correspondence (example: "unity of opinions"). František Miko and his disciples subscribed to the second explanation (unity as identity). Originally, this was supported only by a conviction, based on intuition, that an effort to interpret the work from the aspect of its human validity cannot result in the stepping out beyond the borders of the text, that is the extension of the research, but on the contrary, its intensification. That called however, for some definition of the text's borders, for coming to terms with the text's ontology. The answer to this question was a thesis, stressed in a parallel way, about the reception (Miko) or functional being (Plesník) of the text. Thus work as a semantic and formal quality has been placed in the sphere of human consciousness.

Outwardly, the works dealing with those problems had a form of unreal abstractions. Inwardly, however, they had very concrete consequences. Human experiencing sense or the experience of a work's reception - that is what represents a context of otherness in relation to a clearly theoretical act - were thus stripped off of their status of being a secondary reflection of the work, an outward replica to it, and were given a validity of the field in which the text as an aesthetic object happens. In agreement with the strategy of the second aspect, it was a justification of the procedure through which the researcher intervenes with the interpretation of the text (also) as a complex personality, that is in a way of experience and the scholar operates (also) with that form of the work which is thus given to him/her.

Since Charles Morris, the classic of modern semiotics calls the relation of the sign to the interpreter (man) a pragmatic dimension of semiosis (alongside the syntactic and semantic dimensions), we named this conception pragmatic.

The seemingly abstract ontological exploration had also organisational and practical consequences for the Institute of Language and Literary Communication. The reception was attributed an onto--constitutive task. This was a main argument in favour of the change of the Institute from clearly a research institution to one combining research and pedagogy. The teaching process was thus elevated from

an auxiliary extension of the research to an instrument of direct connection with the reception of the works, that is with the object of our exploration. Bearing this in mind, the project of teaching called "aesthetics turned to life" was begun in the Institute. It programmatically takes into account (also) those formal and generic manifestations of literature and art with which the students, theparticipants in the reception of the works, deal in real context of a living culture. This moment has been included into the Institute's research projects as well. In them, the idea of the poetics of reception and pragmatic aesthetics of the text has been fulfilled in a twofold way: first projects have selectively targeted the trends in contemporary arts which have not been systematically treated so far, that is the brutality, juvenilisation and visualisation of expression. Additional projects have dealt with reinterpretation, from the perspective of reception and pragmatics, of phenomena which are traditional subjects of literary and art criticism (problems of morphology, form and composition of an artistic text).

The last of the conceptual shifts (from the mid 1990s down to the present) is not so much an in 7 dependent stage as rather a complementation of previous research results. The cardinal question of the second aspect of knowing, the question of human sense, has been transferred here to the knowing itself, to the literary critical text. It is the question of the effect of theoretical knowledge on man, on the quality of his/her life. The problem is typologically close to Schopenhauer's understanding of eudaimonology. Late works of František Miko and his disciples show that art theories, if they want to come to terms with their eudaimonological sense, should open themselves to the context of otherness, not only thematically, but in their performance as well. This means that, without any detriment to their conceptual essence, they will begin to communicate directly with other levels of the researcher's life world or consciousness, that they will open themselves to what forms a semantic "environment" of the theorising itself. This is why in the naming of this conception the metaphorical attributes of environmental or ecological consideration have been used.

These challenging questions have been dealt with by several scholars (Arthur Schopenhauer, Carl Gustav Jung, Martin Heidegger, to name the most important ones), addressing the sense of their field of research at the background of essential existential questions in their own ways. But these are already different stories...