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Preface

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Preface

The following text examines the fictional treatment of American history and focuses on the question how a particular period, the Progressive era, gets reinterpreted in American historical fiction, i.e. in John Dos Passos' novel The 42nd Parallel, which forms the first part of the seminal modernist trilogy U.S.A., and E.L. Doctorow's critically-acclaimed and widely-read bestseller Ragtime. It would be appropriate to open the investigation with a brief statement describing my theoretical position.

The choice of the topic inevitably suggests a number of underlying beliefs. I believe that historical issues are never settled once and for all, but are subject to constant reevaluations and reinterpretations as other aspects of historical reality are taken into account, get examined and assigned a place in historians' accounts. These new elements, discovered thanks to a new approach or angle of vision on the part of the historian, alter the relative positioning of the individual elements of which the picture of historical reality consists. What has been central to the understanding of a certain period may become marginal, what has been missing from the picture may move to the center. At the same time I would argue that there is no such thing as a THE understanding of a period, a single history, but at any given time one has to do with a far more complex picture of a number of competing histories, as characterized by "forces of heterogeneity, contradiction, fragmentation, and difference." (Montrose in Veaser 20)

Further I believe that the historians' approaches, angles of vision or priorities are influenced by the state of knowledge and historical experience of the society whose members they are as well as by their respective political beliefs and ideological values (no matter whether they are consciously held or not). In other words, their attention, or lack thereof, to certain historical phenomena as well as the nature of their historical explanations are informed by the culture to which they belong.

Similarly I am convinced that what has been said about historians applies to very much the same extent to writers of fiction. Just like historians, the writers

are, in one way or another, influenced – or constituted – by their cultures. These influences, of course, have an impact on their artistic production which in turn affects the society. Such influences can be traced down even if the writer is in conscious opposition to the society and its dominant values. I do not believe that writers live in a kind of vacuum and their works therefore can be isolated from the social, cultural and philosophical developments of their day. Hence, the New Critical approach to a work of art as an isolated unit is, in my opinion, only legitimate for the purpose of a narrow textual analysis when, say, a teacher of literature wants to demonstrate to his or her students the wide variety of poetic devices in a complex text. But the numerous possibilities of interpreting the very same piece are far from exhausted then.

I declare my most sincere adherence to eclecticism in literary studies or cultural criticism. Despite the danger of suffering a “nervous breakdown” and being aware of the danger of the charge that “seeking to understand everybody’s point of view quite often suggests that [the pluralist critic is] disinterestedly up on a high or in the middle, and trying to resolve conflicting viewpoints into a consensus implies a refusal of the truth that some conflicts can be resolved on one side alone” (Eagleton 199), I would still maintain that one can examine a text from, say, a structuralist, psychoanalytical, deconstructionist, or feminist point of view and each of these approaches has the potential of yielding valuable results. Likewise I am convinced that shifting one’s attention to the reader, and examining his or her reception is equally worthwhile, just like applying a number of other approaches I have not mentioned. For all their shortcomings, the proliferation of different theories have given us terminological and methodical tools for more advanced forms of literary criticism as well as a more relevant cultural critique. Against the charge that adhering to a number of approaches, some of which may be mutually exclusive, ultimately means the abandoning of a point of view, or the cancelling out of one’s own position I would posit another grave danger – when one theory is mechanically singled out to explain all the surrounding social and cultural phenomena by reducing the virtually unfathomable complexity of our world and minds to one hegemonical, dogmatic and intolerant version of reality, i.e. something which people of my generation and cultural background had the “privilege” of getting immediately in touch with but which, I realize, is unfortunately neither confined to our our past, nor to our geographical position. Thus it is somewhat disturbing to see bright, intelligent people embracing new idols on the hitparade of recent critical theories, embracing their single view of reality, repeating – paradoxically sometimes in a very ingenious way – their jargonised truths, while virtually sneering at other ways of approaching literature, culture or society.

Along with a number of scholars who have been loosely grouped and labelled as “new historicists” or came to regard themselves as practitioners of “cul-

tural poetics," I believe there is a reciprocal relation between texts and history, i.e. I share the chlaistic view that texts are historical just as history is textual.

Indeed, as Louis Montrose says, all writing in all its modes is culturally specific, embedded in a certain social and cultural situation. The texts belong to a certain historical period, they correspond to – or are structured according to – its state of knowledge, understanding(s) of reality, they are permeated by the contemporary (sometimes competing) value systems. This of course applies not only to the texts under the scholars' scrutiny, but also to the texts the scholars themselves produce. They, too, belong to their historical period. Thus, to use an example of this study, I declare a preliminary awareness of at least four different temporal levels, in fact four different historical realities. The Progressive Era itself and its texts; the late 1920s and 1930s when John Dos Passos wrote his account of the U.S.A. of the Progressive Era; the era of E.L. Doctorow's historical revision in the mid-seventies; and the present time of my own study – up to a point informed both by the state of critical awareness of the 1990s as well as by a cross-cultural dimension of somebody with a European background and a totalitarian, Communist past. The historicity of all these texts as well as their mutual interplay has to be reckoned with.

Under the textuality of history I understand the fact that knowledge is always mediated: except for one's own personal experience – although I am aware that even this kind of authenticity can be, sometimes quite convincingly, problematized – one is denied an experience that would be truly authentic. One is denied access to a "full and authentic past, a lived material existence, unmediated by the surviving textual traces of the society in question – traces whose survival we cannot assume to be merely contingent but must rather presume to be at least partially consequent upon complex and subtle social processes of preservation and effacement." (Montrose in Veaser 20) Likewise, the process of arranging these traces into a coherent story, providing historical explanations, selecting (or should I say inventing?) causal relations from the wealth of historical data, all these seem to be textual exercises in a never-ending process of mediation.

Although "great literature" has certain aesthetic qualities I have been taught to enjoy, I am also convinced that studying other less "respectable" genres and texts (dime novels, romance, pulp fiction of all kinds; popular press) or different cultural forms (advertising, music or perhaps even rodeos) can also provide us with relevant insights into who we are and where and how our cultures are moving. That is why, for instance, two chapters of my study deal with American popular culture where I examine the role of film and popular music in turn-of-the-century America as well as its treatment in both novels in question. Indeed, our consciousness is affected not only by what has traditionally been regarded as its great literature – how many people read poetry these days? – but by an almost endless barrage of "discourses, sign-systems, and signifying practices of all

kinds, from film and television to fiction and the language of natural science.” (Eagleton 210)

I want to stress that I realize the paramount importance of theory in today’s academic discourse; I am well aware of its all-pervading nature. Nevertheless I am also convinced that it is no less necessary to maintain some connection to the primary sources of the culture one deals with. Thus, rather than dwelling in the somewhat abstract metatextual theoretical universe, I find myself constantly tempted to get down and focus on the more practical applications of some of the above theories. In the course of the study I make use of several Foucauldian, New Historicist as well as certain Feminist notions, which I have found particularly useful for the purposes of my project. To other theories, on the other hand, I have paid less attention. For instance deconstruction has been virtually ignored. Therefore, unlike Christopher Morris, who in his book Models of Misrepresentation takes great pains in turning Doctorow into a deconstructionist writer, I am under no necessity to apologize for any point I am likely to make – something one should never forget to do, if one has a too literal understanding of Derrida’s teaching about the constant deference of meaning and the endless play of signifiers. On the rare and pleasurable moments of having an insight or two – while realizing their historical and cultural embeddedness – I will not argue their impossibility. For no matter how slippery or playful the signifiers, we should not stop talking, writing or thinking. I am quite positive that the father of deconstruction – unlike some of his less tolerant disciples – would agree.

Hence I believe that communication and reflection are as pleasurable and adventurous as they are necessary for our understanding of ourselves and our cultures. They also represent a chance of being able to raise the awareness of people toward more tolerance (e.g. of other races, cultures, ways of life), of bringing about a higher degree of emancipation (e.g. of women, minorities,) and – most importantly – they represent vital prerequisites of our global survival. Looking around at the condition the world finds itself in, it becomes self-evident how much reflection, communication and determination will be needed.

It is inevitable that I have not enumerated all the convictions my mind is permeated by, yet a kind of overall mental autobiography has not been the project I have set out to accomplish. Naturally there do remain many other beliefs – some of them more, some less conscious, some that I have been too shy to express. The attentive reader will certainly enjoy the process of uncovering them, pointing out their internal contradictions, and grin while pinning down the places where my own arguments run against each other and where my openly-stated beliefs are undermined by what I actually say.

Nevertheless, running the inevitable risk of being treated that way, I still find it meaningful to speak – to speak in general as well as to speak about literature. For the alternative to speaking is silence. Silence as such may not be a negative

thing. As the Moravian poet Jan Skácel reminded us, there can be many kinds of silence, silence of sharing, silence of nature, silence of understanding. But I am afraid of silence induced by fear. Thus I rather risk the fear of speaking up.