

Time in Literature

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I want to use these 20 minutes to raise some questions on our attitude to Time in regards to books. I say books and not Literature, and I hope by the end of my brief talk I will have convinced you of the reason for this preference.

The first question is: does time appear in our cultural tradition together with the written word? As you all know, we distinguish History from Pre-historic time precisely along the border marked by the invention of the written word. From that moment onwards we will have things and their linguistic and symbolic representation.

I shall give a simple example of this separation: God will appear in the Bible as Ya-ve-he, *I am what is*, but the word which indicates what is cannot be written as it makes it past. Can we read the word “is” without immediately thinking that “is” in fact “was”, or at least “has been”, and that it can only be a projection from the past in which that “is” has materially been written?

We know of words and language pre-dating this moment, where meaning and form separate in such a dramatic way. We have forms of pictorial representation, but no written language can obviously seek into what was before writing.

We think the moment I am describing to happen between 4 and 6 thousand years ago in the Mesopotamic plain, when nomadic tribes of the Paleolithic age, who used to orient themselves looking at stars, finally settle, develop a different relationship with animals, build towns, canals, establish their civilization as something apart from Nature.

The way the classical world looked at this pre-historic time, as we call it today, is rather different from the way we look

at it today. Plato refers to it in *Timaeus*, writing about Atlantis, as a world before our own but not a primitive world. Indeed a golden age from which we were separated by writing. Also St. John, at the beginning of his gospel, refers to the word which was with God, and then came to earth and became flesh. St. John is referring here to Christ, some 2000 years after the frontier that I am indicating, but he repeats the fundamental transformation of the Neolithic revolution, best embodied by Genesis and the Bible. There was a moment, and instant which is the beginning of time; everything originated there, we have departed from there and the linear follow up of that moment is time. Time, like history, has a beginning, it evolves (the word itself means to unfold like scrolls, that is to say like written books with their linear development), it has an aim, a final moment in front, the arrival of the Messaiah or the end of days, the cooling of the sun. This bigger, cosmic frame, replicates our interpretation of human experience, it has the same pattern: we are born, we go through years and then we die.

The scholar Giorgio De Santillana is a solitary modern thinker to have felt a great fascination for the epoch before the word. Unlike our common, rather self content perception of the pre-historic time as a barbaric and undeveloped age, he thought of that original age as an epoch of mysterious greatness. In his opinion, these ancestors of ours must have had some formidable ability in mathematical calculus: we inherit from them the observation of the movement of stars, the Zodiac, and in his opinion also a network of common features which is a substratum of several mythologies of the Historic period. In his book *Hamlet's mill (Il mulino di Amleto)* he suggests that there may have been a link between several cultural similarities in worlds that our conception of the prehistoric age as "undeveloped" epoch would not explain. The idea of Indo-European language is related to this pre-written epoch. We imagine our language to have developed from a previous substratum of a language no longer existing.

This is not the place where we can examine the validity of De Santillana's findings. I only want to draw your attention to this border between the paleolithic and the neolithic, the pre-written and the written, a word that exists before our description of it and a word which is completely written of and about. This is the moment in which meaning is produced as an inner entity of expression, and we are newly awakened to this development of meaning by the cyber epoch, where a further step is taken in this direction. We are all very aware of how emails have transformed working places and relationships in exchanges where we only want the gist. Life is so fast with modern communication technologies that we always and only want to get to the point. We live through bullet points, as if existence was a series of tasks to be ticked away as we go through our years, like in a career. Hitchcock's remark, on film being life with its boring bits left out, has become our motto and when we sit on a train, rather than looking at the landscape around us or to the other passengers, many people take out their mobile phone and inform other, remote people, of their movements, or take out a laptop and get down to work. Our Departments are still resembling medieval Abbeys with our cells next to each other, but the real cell is now the computer, where we think of the world, through which we talk with the world. Only when written in an email a message to a colleague, who may be working in the same room, has properly been passed on.

This has not happened without its price being paid by all of us: it has increased the value of meaning, of the alteration between expression and content that I am referring to in the Neolithic revolution.

We can only interpret the world through a variety of symbols, words that are in place of things (hammer, chair) and more complicated words, like love or infinity, that are in place of some less easy to define entities.

This border, which appears to be so remote in the past, is with us every day. When we finish with our computer and get

out in the open air, look at the sky to check if it's raining or not, sometimes look at the stars, or when we get our hands next to an open fire to warm them up, or when after a tedious verbal skirmish with our partner we get to touch each other, and kiss and make love, we succeed in overcoming the border of the word and its alterity from the universe, we test the distance between tangible reality and its linguistic representation. When we sleep, when we eat. When we dream and long for something which is not a thing, but a nostalgia, the sense of being removed from our real being, of not being at one with ourselves. We feel as living somewhere else and think with affection of a different landscape, or we miss a person who is not with us, all traces of our archetypal nomadism.

To this feeling turns Giacomo Leopardi in one of his most famous poem, "Canto notturno di un pastore errante dell'Asia" ("Night-Song Of A Wandering Shepherd of Asia"), written in 1831.

It is another of the extraordinary intuition of our greatest poet to have set the border between these worlds in that place and that moment. In the poem the shepherd asks the moon of the meaning of our life, our loneliness. Are there any reasons for the way we live, endure sorrow and pain? What is our status and condition if we consider the dimension of the Universe? Looking at his herd, the shepherd envies its unawareness of this questions, the erring produced by words, interpretation, science, religion, thought. He seems in tune with Hölderlin's famous lines against the German people in *Hyperion*: "Barbaren von alters Her, durch Fleiß und Religion und Wissenschaft selbst barbarischer geworden". Barbarian of a previous epoch, who made themselves even more barbaric through work, religion, science. An idea very dear to Hölderlin and Leopardi alike, who saw in the Greek world not the past, but the kernel of human experience. A kernel betrayed by our insisting on development, reasoning, in our going away from truth and reality. Leopardi

looks at his herd and he envies the fact that they are before language and meaning. They simply are.

It is interesting to note that this poem is written when time is most forcefully introduced by the Hegelian philosophy in all our thinking of reality. It's through Romanticism that we look at Histories of literature, of science, of art, of medicine. Anthologies in the 18th century, like in the Classical period, were not trying to elicit "historicity" as the meaning, the real meaning of things. For instance the famous *Antologia Palatina* is composed of different wreaths which are thematic, not chronological.

When Romanticism begins to describe the individual reading as "subjective" interpretation, History begins to separate us from the past. We look at these books today and ask ourselves what did they mean for them, rather than what do they mean for us.

The development of this historical view of the past, mainly through philology, has given us reliable texts and a scientific attitude towards the study of our tradition; Arnaldo Momigliano indicates this moment in the late XVIII c., when with the renewed passion for excavations, antiquarians begin to have data to juxtapose to classical literature; but it is worth stopping a moment and wondering whether it is not because of this further historicization of time that we cannot really imagine, like Dante, to have as a guide to the other world a poet born 1300 years before, and to meet all those poets and philosophers we would like to confer with in Limbo.

Our time separates generation from generation through a severe objectivity, a material grasp of the meaning of words which dissipates any ambiguity, but possibly also any real proximity. We develop abilities to delve into the past that are so specialized, nowadays, that an expert on Dante may not be able to share much with an expert on Bruno.

I will swiftly come to my conclusions, which are of course provisional and indeed almost self destructive. Because

the first victim of my argument has to be the idea of literature. The Latin idea of literature, the first degree of our departure, if we follow Leopardi and Hölderlin in their line of thought. That texts, on their own, belonging to the tradition of a written language or of a specific area of interests, be it history, poetry, science etc., can constitute a separate field, is certainly something not commendable. We are not the guardians of this separateness. If we are, Literature may be indeed what Ted Hughes describes in his *God help the wolf after whom the dogs do not bark*, when describing the reaction to Sylvia Plaths poetry. He writes:

The Colleges lifted their head. It did seem
 You disturbed something just perfected
 That they were holding carefully, all of a piece,
 till the glue had dried. And as if
 reporting some felony to the police
 They let you know that you were not John Donne.
 You no longer care. Did you save their names?
 But then they let you know, day by day,
 their contempt for everything you attempted,
 took pains to inject their bile, as for your health,
 Into their homeopathic letters,
 Envelopes full of carefully broken glass
 To lodge behind your eyes so you would see.

If this is literature, and I certainly know what Hughes is referring to, some special realm which guards sensibility in the form of historic competence, casting snobbishly away the uninitiated, I think none of us would like to be working for it. This is literature as a garment of privilege and Gombrich has already said it more eloquently than me, in his beautiful introduction to his *History of Art*, which we are not in the trade of providing fodder for this class battle.

But we do spend a lot of time on books, looking at the moon and the stars, like Leopardi and Dante, at the frontier of

meaning where words appear and, like the first settled shepherd in a neolithic community, talk to us for the first time. When words which we do not know what exactly do they mean, like love or being, carry in our epoch the welcome and cumbersome weight of ancient presence. This is the miracle we witness and we long for a new event, the repetition of that *fainomai*, that appearance, when we take a book in our hands. Can it be this time too like when we read *Anna Karenina*, or the *Iliad*? Will it take us so deep and far? Somewhere in us we hope this unread book may do it once more, in the secret dialogue we entertain as readers, through the author, with all the real world beyond both of us. With the same, undiminished enthusiasm, we look at texts to abolish space and time, to travel through them, to reach beyond the limitations of our experience and yet to test all we feel and know about this world. We want to see things happen, we want the word to be what helps us to see, not let time consign the strength of this perception to some other epoch, remote and separated from us. We settle, like those tired shepherds, in the neolithic village of words, around a warm fire, with a sense of greatness not to be forgotten. A sense of greatness that we feed with our struggle to continue in our understanding.