

RECONSTRUCTING HISTORICISM – HISTORICISM AND BERGSONISM

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Abstract:

The ‘Great literature’ is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree’. In Great literature needs to be interpreted because it reveals human values only suggestively. Literary theory before 1970, however, usually connoted the ‘theory of literature’. The distinction is an important one. As Andrea Nightingale points out in her essay on ancient Greek literary theory, the first theorists were the formalist, Aristotle, and the moral and political critic, Plato. In the Republic and the Poetics, Plato and Aristotle were certainly interested in classifying literary genres and in identifying convention, forms, and figures of literary works, and were more interested in underlying categories than in individual texts. They were not critics, therefore, or literary historians; but neither were they ‘theorists’ in the modern sense of the term.

Introduction:

All critics are historian up to a point. The aptness of the texts the interpret demands accommodations of critical approach to negotiate historical differences. Equally, if a work of literature speaks to us now with a contemporary relevance, that inevitably plays some part in our evaluations. So far, this give and take is only what one would expect. Historian becomes more interest when it addresses questions of perennial philosophical importance, such as the relations when it addresses questions of history and aesthetics. Are historical and aesthetic discourses necessarily opposed in their tasks, or do they offer each other mutual support?

HISTORICISM AND BERGSONISM:

One way of describing the achievement of the ‘Arcades Project’ relevant to countering the end-of-history theorists is as a striking use of the versatility of literary creativity to propagate itself by undoing its own literary privilege-to lose its soul, if you like, and gain the whole world as an allegory of what it has lost. By this act of collection, things swim into unusual historical focus, as the startling reproductions of an inspiration now become cliched. Ever modified by present difference, the past, the subject of history, escapes Hegelian

confinement to a finished scheme. But this freedom depends on the observer turning dandy, Flannery, detached observer of his own sensations and of the allegory his memory involuntarily creates around him. This is the Hegelian arabesque that Benjamin draws from Baudelaire to Proust. As a materialist, Benjamin characteristically views this as working a passage from the original romantic sentiment for landscape to its reproduction in relish for the city's modernity. Procrustean sensibility then exists in unlikely technical prostheses, transforming art into panorama, daguerreotype, photography, and so on.

Benjamin mentions Henri Bergson in this connection, and Bergson, a neglected figure, is worth recovering for discussions of history. Bergson tries to render consciousness elusive to scientific reduction by ascribing to it a kind of creative evolution maintaining its generalization particularity. In this he is no different from near-contemporary idealists like Croce. But for Benjamin, Bergson's *Mémoires* helps describe 'the way things are for the great collector'. For Bergson I am different each moment of my life, in the sense that my distinctive consciousness, in which each present alters and shapes the durée of my past, is unrepeatable. Not that I grasp myself as a series of creative moments. Each intuition of my identity re-creates the past from the perspective of a newly assimilated future. Continuity is already built into each intuition of my present. We understand ourselves as having become what we are, but our understanding of this explanatory genesis changes with us, rather than getting established by comparison with some other self that we also, impossibly, are. Self-consciousness is retrospectively legislative. It submits the past to methods of analysis which it didn't itself possess. But the past's retroactive in this way will then produce our future in still different ways, in a constant process of creative evolution, rather like the history of effect we looked at earlier. There's no going back, because what going back would amount to is always a function of what we are now. Constantly reworked, the past cannot, according to Bergson, precede 'the creative act which constitutes' it. And that creativity is kept on the move, is kept differing from itself, by the re-considerations prompted by the formative past it has just revised. There is no set of transcendental conditions that we can abstract from our experience of this creativity. We are constantly collecting ourselves.

The near-contemporary, slowed-down English version of this comes in T.S.Eliot's 'Traditional and individual Talent'. But by contrast with Benjamin's use of Bergson, Eliot's historian dialectic tries to stabilize the past as an agglutinative creativity. More just gets added on; tradition is never repudiated; its equilibrium is never upset by the collector's liberation of its captives into an egregious existence. Eliot's stabilizing sources, one should note, lie in the Hegelian, F.H. Bradley, rather than in Bergson. In the writings of Bergson, a Jewish free-thinker whose work was put on the index by the Vatican, many sensed the radical dynamic which attracted Benjamin and would have repelled Eliot. For the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, to whom Foucault claimed the late twentieth century, belonged, Bergsonism described an exemplary escape from generalities. The freedom which Bergson thought was exercised by creating the difference between past and present produced

the duree of a new integrity, a new particularity, a new effect, not at all a bland continuity of consciousness or a Hegelian negation. The rehabilitation by Deleuze and his collaborator, Felix Guattari, of the literariness of history follows as a consequence of this view of Bergson's: 'A great novelist is above all an artist who invents unknown or unrecognized affects [just as, one might add, Deleuze thinks that the great philosopher, as opposed to the historian of philosophy, invents concepts] and brings them to light in the become of his characters'. Continuity, Bergson and Deleuze would say, is how, reflectively selectively, and pragmatically, we stabilize the world and ourselves as a result of this creativity. It is not the case that there is a us a historical continuity, a 'becoming', and that the novelist subsequently interprets it to give us a sense of her characters' duration. History is, rather, the continuity projected back from the duration of different moment creative of 'becoming'. Each moment resumes our entire existence, the same existence, but anew. History is accounted for by both Bergson and Deleuze as, in Deleuze's words, 'the same which is sad of the different'. Clearly, then, an impossible foreknowledge of the 'unforeseeable' resources of literary production is required of those who think that history has ended. Aesthetics, but aesthetics tied to a power to transform itself beyond immediate recognition, has, Benjamin would have appreciated, saved history.

Benjamin, and then Deleuze, re-articulates Bergsonism to describe Modernism's defining loss of aura, the translation of poetry into prose, the perpetuation of the work of art in an age of mechanical reproduction. To see the loss of aura as loss, and nothing more, was to ignore the democratic advantages inhering in its reproduction. That pessimism repeated the mistake of the bourgeois in *The Communist Manifesto*, who believed the loss of his cultural to be the loss of all culture.

Conclusion:

Benjamin's point is, of course, that the technological advances increasing reproducibility need not serve an alienating instrumentality exercised, for purely commercial reasons, on an originally humane form of expression. He implicitly counters Adorno's blanket condemnation of the 'culture industry' by a revisioning of Marxism which, like the reinterpretation of Marx by Benjamin's contemporaries, recovers the allegorizing, aesthetic impulse through which Marx thought natural history could continue. No Hegelian terminus can, for the young Marx, inhibit our power to continue finding different reflection of ourselves. Once simulated, the circumstances determining our lives look clichéd in comparison with the allegory which they can now furnish of just that reproductive ability, whose exercise characterizes us as human and propels forward our natural history.

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