‘Poetics and periods in literary history. A first draft’

A.L. Sötemann

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Poetics and periods in literary history
A first draft

‘Literary studies exist for the comprehension of literature’, Leonard Forster said a couple of years ago in his Presidential address to the Modern Humanities Research Association.¹ What should sound as a hometruth to everyone concerned, is, alas, in no way accepted practice, as the Address abundantly made clear. All too many people are continuously looking round for a prophet's cloak, if not in order to flaunt it themselves, then to hide under it. The fear of joining in ‘Literary studies as flight from literature’, of losing oneself in generalizations and abstractions, instead of coming to grips with literature itself, may well result in a reluctance to try and cope with broader issues, even if one is perfectly aware of the fact that a poem, a novel or an oeuvre, is unique in certain respects only, and that from another perspective it is historically conditioned, internally - in its images, its language, composition and themes - as well as externally - in the view it tries to convey of man's situation in the world.

A naturalist novel by Emile Zola or a symbolist poem by Wallace Stevens - La terre or The man with the blue guitar - is and aspires to be unique; otherwise there would have been no conceivable motive for Zola or for Stevens to write yet another novel or poem. On the other hand the Dutch poet J.C. Bloem once wrote that he had tried: ‘to express some essential aspects of life in such a way that it could have been done only by myself, and by no one else’.² Now this is only feasible when a poem by Bloem is recognized as such, that is to say, it must have important qualities in common with the rest of his work. ‘Il est essentiel pour l'artiste qu'il sache s'imiter soi même’, as Paul Valéry puts it: ‘C'est le seul moyen de bâtir une oeuvre [...] L'artiste prend pour modèle son meilleur état’.³ An author's publications must possess a certain consistency, although he may develop in the course of his career in such a way that it is not easy to find a simple - or even a rather complicated - formula that allows for bracketing Werther, Hermann und Dorothea and Faust.

Nevertheless I believe that Valéry's viewpoint can hardly be challenged. An author's style in the broadest sense, his ‘idiom’, is what differentiates and characterizes his work and what makes it sufficiently original to gain our devoted attention, if all goes well.

¹L. Forster: ‘Literary studies as flight from literature?’
But - again - there can be little doubt about the existence of a degree of coherence, exerting its influence beyond the limits of one particular oeuvre. A literary work can only be experienced and appreciated against a wider common background. It has to be recognized as belonging to a certain order of artistic phenomena. If it does not fulfil an impressive number of explicit and implicit expectations of its readers, it is incomprehensible, artistically spoken. ‘The poem which is absolutely original is absolutely bad; it is in the bad sense “subjective” with no relation to the world to which it appeals. Originality, in other words, is by no means a simple idea in the criticism of poetry. True originality is merely development’.  

And this is where a seemingly inextricable mass of conflicting opinions manifest themselves. If Eliot is right in maintaining that true originality cannot be anything but development - it can hardly be doubted that this is so, because originality, if anything, presupposes a norm from which it is a deviation - an unavoidable conclusion is that at any moment in (literary) history there must be a system, or at the very least a complex, of norms upon which it is possible for an author in some respects to infringe. So it would seem that René Wellek is right in trying to distinguish periods in literary history by looking for ‘a regulative concept, a system of norms dominating a specific time, whose rise and eventual decline it would be possible to trace and which we can set clearly apart from the norms of the periods that precede and follow it’.  

Now the problem is that Wellek has a much too simple way of presenting the situation, in several aspects. One needs hardly to be reminded of the ‘Romanticism-controversy’. Nor of the problems arising from his attempt to define a period concept of symbolism. A.G. Lehmann studied The symbolist aesthetic in France, 1885-1895 - a single decade in a single country - only to arrive at the conclusion that ‘the terms “literary symbol” and “symbolist”, having been introduced and fortified by a series of mischances, should never have been allowed to remain in usage [...] We may end by seeing no more than a mass of opinion out of which the less responsible critic may produce very much what he chooses for a new fancy theory of art [...]’  

Wellek himself opposes symbolism ‘to realism and naturalism at one end [...] and the new avant-garde movements after 1914 [...] which constitute a clear break on the other side.’ Anna Balakian, however, in her book The symbolist movement, takes naturalism in her stride, and considers symbolism ‘to have reached its apogee around 1920’. We may go on to point to Hugo Friedrich's Die
Struktur der modernen Lyrik (± 1850-1950), who opposes a very similar conception of poetry to classicism, romanticism and naturalism (both Wellek and Balakian are not so certain about the absence of relations between romanticism and symbolism, whereas they hold contrary views on those between naturalism and symbolism). F. Kermode, to conclude with, sees the whole of European literature from the late eighteenth century till the present time as ‘one epoch’, which he calls ‘Romantic’.  

An even more spectacular illustration of the insurmountable difficulties that arise from the attempts at working out period concepts, is provided by Wellek single-handedly in his article ‘The concept of realism in literary scholarship’ - the very same study from which I quoted his definition of the term. First of all he is bound to admit that his conclusion about the character of realism is ‘disconcertingly trivial’: ‘Realism as a period concept [...] means “the objective representation of contemporary social reality”. It claims to be all inclusive in subject matter and aims to be objective in method, even though this objectivity is hardly ever achieved in practice. Realism is didactic, moralist, reformist. Without always realising the conflict between description and prescription it tries to reconcile the two in the concept of “type”. In some writing, but not all, realism becomes historic: it grasps social reality as dynamic evolution.’

Second, realism should be, if anything, a post-romantic and pre-symbolist period, but the list of realist authors includes Balzac and Dickens on one side, and Zola, Ibsen and Henry James on the other side, while Wellek confesses that he ‘cannot see why Richardson and Fielding should not, stylistically, artistically deserve the description “realist”’. He also mentions in passing Jane Austen, who was an exact contemporary of the romantic poets in England. Moreover, there is no reason whatsoever as to why a host of twentieth-century authors should not be included under the same heading.

Apart from the fact that it would be a remarkable feat to point out the stylistic and artistic qualities that unite Richardson, Austen, Dostoevski, Flaubert, the Goncourt brothers and Zola, to mention just a few ‘realists’ - Wellek does not even try to do so - it is clear that ‘realism’ is of no conceivable use as a ‘period concept’, because it embraces more than two centuries without any noticeable interruption. This is even longer than the - more or less identical - epoch Kermode claims for romanticism.

To add to the confusion Wellek states that there are quite a number of striking analogies between realism and classicism.
So where do we stand now? Having started from the apparently unshakeable positions taken up by Bloem, Valéry and Eliot, we have strayed very far from literature itself, in what Henry James has called ‘the dim wilderness of theory’.\textsuperscript{13} Would not it be better to give up and return to literature itself?

Maybe it is a bit early in the day to do so. Relatively few people will deny that there is ‘something’ which could be called romanticism, and, for that matter, realism, classicism, and symbolism, however difficult it may be to work out serviceable specifications for these ‘somethings’. However divergent and even contradictory definitions may be, the outstanding problem appears to lie in the difficulty of finding defensible demarcation lines for the several periods, rather than in ‘internal’ aspects. The more so because many scholars feel that other ‘periods’, such as Biedermeier, impressionism, ‘art nouveau’, expressionism, dadaism, futurism, surrealism and many more have to be wedged in somewhere and somehow.

Now the first chapter of M.H. Abrams' book \textit{The mirror and the lamp} treats ‘Some co-ordinates of art criticism’\textsuperscript{14}. The author distinguishes ‘four elements in the total situation of a work of art’, the \textit{work} itself: the artistic product, the maker of the work: the \textit{artist}, the \textit{audience} (i.e. the reader), and the world, the \textit{universe} to which the work of art, directly or indirectly, refers. He goes on to say that ‘Although any reasonably adequate theory takes account of all four elements, almost all theories [...] exhibit a discernable orientation toward only one.’ This starting-point accounts for four different kinds of literary theories: the ‘objective’ ones (concentrating on the more or less autonomous artifact), the ‘expressive’ ones (accentuating the author's role, and considering the work of art primarily as a result of the creative process: ‘the combined product of the poet's perceptions, thoughts and feelings’), ‘pragmatic’ theories (first of all looking ‘at the work of art as a means to an end, an instrument for getting something done, and tend[ing] to judge its value according to its success in achieving that aim’), and, lastly, ‘mimetic’ conceptions (‘the explanation of arts as essentially an imitation of aspects of the universe’).

 Succinctly, but nevertheless clearly enough, Abrams shows that each of these conceptions has a long tradition, dating back to Plato, Aristotle, Longinus, Horace, Cicero and Plotinus, via many intermediate phases. His thesis, however, is that the expressive theories come into full bloom only in the second half of the eighteenth and particularly in the early nineteenth century, whereas the objective approach was ‘comparatively rare’: ‘it was just beginning to emerge’ in this same period.\textsuperscript{15} One needs hardly...
to be reminded of the fact that afterwards objective conceptions of literature were to come to the fore in a remarkable way.

Abrams aimed at writing a study on ‘Romantic theory and the critical tradition’, and he did so in a most distinguished way. But his book inevitably bears obvious traces of the concentration on this subject. To put it very crudely: one gets the impression that eighteenth century pragmatic theories were superseded by the expressive ones, and that this was all that happened at the time. It stands to reason that the situation was far more complicated. We have seen, a while ago, that a mimetic tradition has survived for more than two centuries without interruption. It is not only in France that a tradition we may with some justice call classical has persisted in spite of several onslaughts. The same holds good for romantic conceptions up to our own time, and Abrams may have called the objective approach ‘comparatively rare’ - since the time of Baudelaire it is very much alive. Neither should we forget that literary historians often tend to concentrate on either poetry or prose and consequently run the risk of disregarding the fact that different literary conceptions exist simultaneously ‘on the other side’. Furthermore, we are all inclined to attribute contemporary importance and influence to authors we now consider to be the prominent representatives of their period, such as Coleridge, who, according to Wellek ‘remained isolated in his time and country’, to say nothing of Blake.

The main point, however, is that in itself it is not plausible that each of the four differently slanted complexes of literary conceptions should have existed or at least dominated the literary scene only during a certain time: mimetic and pragmatic ones for more than two millennia, expressive theories for a couple of decades in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, a mimetic one again for some decennia after that, and an objective complex during the last quarter of the nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

I submit that in principle these four categories have very little to do with periods in literary history, but that, at least in more recent times, they coexist, although at particular moments a number of outstanding authors - artists who in retrospect determine our general image of the time - may rally round one specific conception of literature.

If one is prepared to accept the thesis that the four groups of theories are diachronic instead of synchronic concepts, a number of ‘period problems’ disappear: it is no longer necessary to draw temporal boundaries after which one complex of theories is more or less summarily replaced by another. Jane Austen may hold her

\[\text{A.L. Sötemann, ‘Poetics and periods in literary history. A first draft’}\]
mimetic or realist convictions next to her expressive or romantic contemporaries Coleridge and Wordsworth. No difficulty arises from the fact that *Les fleurs du mal* and *Madame Bovary* appeared in 1857, written by authors who both were born in 1821. Émile Zola and Stéphane Mallarmé need not be thrust together into one Procrustes-bed. And Paul Valéry can go on expounding objective or symbolist theories in spite of surrealist and other ‘modernist’ revolutions, and he may even have ‘poetical’ children in our own day.

A number of years ago I was struck by the fact that the Dutch poet Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953) and his younger colleague Gerrit Kouwenaar (b. 1923) held very similar, if not identical views on the genesis, nature, and means and ends of poetry, in spite of the widely different character of their work. On closer observation it appeared that their poetics were shared by quite an impressive number of Dutch poets, from P.C. Boutens (1870-1943) to H.C. ten Berge (b. 1938), and that these conceptions virtually or wholly coincided with ‘symbolist’ poetics from Baudelaire onwards (Mallarmé, Valéry, George, Rimke, Yeats, Eliot, Crane and Stevens, to mention just a few names). In other words, there is a reasonably well-defined coherent complex of insights into the nature and function of poetry that can be called an objective or symbolist tradition in western literature since about 1850, allowing for reasonable individual variations of course. The general degree of resemblance is fundamental and by far surpasses the number of dissimilarities.

On the other hand Mr. Kouwenaar's poetry itself has much in common with the work of his contemporary Sybren Polet (b. 1924), but Mr. Polet himself claims to belong to another ‘poetical’ tradition altogether. He professes to be an adherent of the ‘impure’ Whitmanites, as opposed to the ‘pure’ - and in Polet's view sterile - Baudelaire-tradition. Now Whitman's theory is far from univocal. It is possible to derive a very nearly objective conception of poetry from his prose-writings, but on the other hand the most relevant aspects are expressive or romantic - relevant with regard to the degree of consistency, of frequency, and in the light of his poetic practice. There can hardly be any doubt that Whitman's (and Verhaeren's) followers, such as several French post-symbolists, Claudel, Apollinaire, ‘communionist expressionists’ in Germany, Mayakovski and Pablo Neruda, were attracted by his romantic or expressive poetics and poetry, rather than by their symbolist or objective aspects. Which goes to say that, next to the symbolist tradition a romantic one is still alive in the twentieth century.
We noticed already that a similar claim can be made for mimetic or realist poetics, and, to a somewhat lesser extent, for pragmatic conceptions.

It goes without saying that the four diachronic ‘columns’ are not without their interrelations. As Abrams already put it: ‘any reasonably adequate theory takes some account of all four elements’.\(^{20}\) Apart from that it appears that the four poetics share a number of characteristics in couples. At the moment I can do no more than reproduce a rough and ready sketch:

\(^{20}\)The mirror and the lamp, p. 6.

**Expressive theories**

a. have a ‘metaphysical’ conception of the function of art; they are individualistic (stress originality), anti-rationalistic, anti-imitative, anti-rhetorical, conceive of writing as a creative act; accentuate the primacy of the suggestive, symbolic, image (the use of ‘indirections’); consider the lyrical poem to be the literary norm;

b. emphasize spontaneity and the role of feelings in the creative process;

c. the poet in their view is entirely subjective; he expresses his individual feelings and thereby the essence of life and the universe (poet as prophet); the poem is the result of organic growth.

**Objective theories**

a. share the aspects mentioned sub a with expressive theories;

b. emphasize conscious, cool workmanship in writing; strive for clearness;

c. consider the poem itself, separated from its author (‘un objet de consistance propre’ - Valéry) as the potential incorporation of the metaphysical secret; the poem creates its own reality; the poet uses words as raw material, but at a certain stage he surrenders the initiative to the language; the poem has to be clear, but cannot be simple (‘un énigme de cristal’ - Valéry); the poet often is obsessed by the possibilities and limitations of language - numerous poems are centered upon the writing of poetry.

**Mimetic theories**

a. have a practical, worldly, conception of the function of art; they aspire at an objective representation of reality, at impersonality, stress the typical rather than the individual; are often didactic, moralistic - non lyrical;

b. to a certain extent they often share b with expressive theories (no preoccupation by conscious elaborate craftsmanship);
c. show no special concern for genre, for the separation of levels of style, or of subjects.

**Pragmatic theories**

a/b. share a with mimetic and b with objective conceptions;

   c. pursue their effects by a consciously applied rhetoric strategy, orderly and well-defined, often ignoring the social implications - though not the moral aspect - of mimetic theories, and show a particular concern for consistent use of language.

In spite of its inadequacy I hope this sketch will provide a general idea of the interrelations between the four conceptions, and of their distinctive features.

A complicating factor is that each of the complexes is subject to changes in the course of time. Objective theory for instance once stressed musicality (albeit differently interpreted by several authors) as a central factor in poetry, whereas in twentieth century objectivist poetry it was replaced by *poésie parlante*; Mallarmé aspired to incorporate the metaphysical solution in a poem by means of extreme volatilization (: ‘le poème tu aux blancs’), and Kouwenaar for one does the exact opposite (‘what I really try to achieve is to create matter, substance in my poems’). Their basic problem, however, is the same, and so are the poetics.

Then, of course, an author is not obliged to profess a specific poetic orthodoxy. No doubt Flaubert and Henry James should be termed mimetic or realist authors, but, as everybody knows, they were very conscious craftsmen, and several of Flaubert's statements on literature would sound perfectly plausible from the lips of a confessed symbolist. Consequently Flaubert's poetics should be situated somewhere between the four diachronic ‘columns’.

Lastly, there is no reason why an artist should not change his ‘poetical’ views in the course of his life. Emile Verhaeren, for one, started his career as a symbolist or objectivist, and afterwards was converted to an expressive or romantic conception of literature. The Flemish poet Paul van Ostaijen (1896-1928) went in the reverse direction, and finished as a convinced objectivist. This implies of course that the author's poetics should be sketched as an oblique line between the four diachronic ‘columns’, instead of a vertical one.

All this does not mean that we can do away with ‘periods’ in literary history.

In the first place because one of our premises has been that
Eliot was undoubtedly right in saying that ‘true originality is merely development’. At any moment prevailing complexes of literary conventions must be taken as a starting-point by an author who wants to be aesthetically understood.

The gradual suppression of explicit interference and moral judgment by the narrator in the second half of the nineteenth century - in *Madame Bovary* by Flaubert, and in a different way by Turgenev and Zola - was a prerequisite for the new type of novel inaugurated by Henry James (*The ambassadors*) and at the same time, independently, by the Dutchman Marcellus Emants (1848-1923; *Inwijding*). The new type was termed ‘personal’ by F. Stanzel.21

From this point of view literary history is a continuous process of changing existing conventions and developing new ones. It would seem doubtful whether it will prove possible to distinguish well-defined periods from this point of view, although the phenomena themselves are of the utmost importance and can be clearly pointed out.

Apart from this it is an indisputable fact that authors holding identical views with respect to genesis, nature, and ends and means of literature, can and do write very different poems and novels, the more so when they are not direct contemporaries. I mentioned the Dutch poets Nijhoff and Kouwenaar. On the other hand one may find striking similarities between authors who are living in the same time, but whose conceptions of literature are divergent, such as Kouwenaar and Polet.

There is something one may call period style, or, if the word style would seem too restrictive: idiom, or - vaguer still - affinity, which links contemporary authors together, irrespective of the theoretical or ‘poetical’ views they hold.

During the last decade of the nineteenth century a number of Dutch authors who, from the point of view of poetics, held quite distinct, not to say opposite views, nevertheless showed definite affinities in other respects. The expressive or romantic poet Herman Gorter (1864-1927), the mimetic or realist novelist Louis Couperus (1863-1923) and the objective or symbolist poets J.H. Leopold (1865-1925) and P.C. Boutens (1870-1943) have with some cause all been called impressionists. The justification would lie in their style and syntax.

It would also be possible to point to similarities between the poets Martinus Nijhoff (1894-1953), a convinced objectivist, E. du Perron (1899-1940), a realist-pragmatist, and J.C. Bloem (1887-1965), who should be placed very near the centre between

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the four ‘columns’, as far as their attitude towards and their handling of language in the pre-war years are concerned.

Maybe this approach could bring the hitherto insoluble problem of at least two coexisting expressionisms nearer to a solution as well.

I am quite aware that for the time being far more problems remain unsolved than I have been able to envisage in this first draft. Nevertheless I cherish some hope that these proposals for re-ordering literary history from a dual viewpoint: the diachronic perspective of poetics and the synchronic of ‘style’-periods, supplemented by the evolution of the complexes of literary conventions, can be of some use for finding a starting point from where it will be possible to leave ‘the dim wilderness of theory’ behind us on a road that leads back to ‘the comprehension of literature’, which is what we are here for.

[Relevante titels uit de bibliografie van de gehele bundel, pagina 247-255]


