

# **METHOD, MESSAGE AND MANIPULATION: REMARKS ON THE WRITING OF HISTORY: SOME EXAMPLES OF THE RECEPTION - AND NON-RECEPTION - OF NARRATIVITY IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIAN AND CZECH HISTORIOGRAPHY<sup>1</sup>**

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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of our meeting attracts attention even by the first two nouns in its title: “construction” and “deconstruction.” These two terms signal a way of thinking about history that was inherent in the discipline from its very beginning, but at the same time is perpetually liable to processes of elimination, oblivion, obscuring and other forms of marginalization.

This approach reflects the status of history as a particular type of evidence, of history not conceived as a set of facts and a reconstruction of factually grounded relations, causalities and their links, but as the very establishment and manipulation of these facts.

This type of investigation is historical as well as meta-historical. It is the actual performance of historical practice and at the same time it seeks to distance itself from that practice. It poses questions about its own rules and conditions, its regulations and norms, and about its own language, which always imposes a certain degree of distortion and manipulation on the sub-

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1 I would like to thank Dr. Vladimír Urbánek from the Institute of Philosophy at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic for his valuable advice and consultation, without which this paper could not have come into existence.

ject of its investigation, as Hayden White<sup>2</sup> and other adherents of Intellectual History<sup>3</sup> began to point out in the 1970s.

When history is discussed as a specific “construction” or “deconstruction,” emphasis is put on the borders of the discipline, together with its limitations, style, narrativity and rhetorical power, its side effects and their limits, the methodological self-censorship and its usage, clichés, the correctness of the methods; i.e., everything that, in reality, remains outside of the factual nature of historical phenomena and the varying relationships between historical facts. This shift of focus can occur in two ways; attention is drawn either to the sphere that “anticipates” facticity, or to the one that “follows” it.

The question of what “anticipates” historical facticity focuses on the way in which an event or phenomenon becomes historical, the way in which it becomes part of the prestigious and privileged archive or museum called History, which is distinguished by its permanent influence on the present – by its capacity to endow events with immortality, indelibility and irrevocability, by preserving them in the eternal memory of culture.

The question of what “follows” historical facticity concerns the whole sphere of activity that models history – creating, producing and composing history out of singular segments that are

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2 First, in his famous *Metahistory* [Hyden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore, London, 1973), Ch. XII], and later, for instance, in his paper on Historicism, “History and the Figurative Imagination,” where he questions the distinction between history and historicism, with regard to the nature of language which always produces secondary and implicit meanings parallel to the direct designation [Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, London, 1978 and 1996), p. 13]. He compares it to the differentiation between historiography and the philosophy of history and considers the perseverance in such a differentiation as useless, since any interpretation of history contains most of the elements that conventional theories include in historicism [White, *Tropics of Discourse*, pp. 2-3].

3 D. LaCapra, *Rethinking Intellectual History: Texts, Contexts, Languages* (Ithaca/New York, 1983); F.R. Ankersmit, *Narrative Logic: A Semantic Analysis of the Historian’s Language* (The Hague, 1983), and other works.

authorized, often on the basis of aleatoric logic, by the dictatorship of facticity.

It seems that the sphere of “(de)construction,” in particular, was affected by a lack of criticism or even ignorance in post-Soviet and post-communist scholarship in the humanities. In this context, A. Ia. Gurevich aptly calls attention to the lack of an epistemological background for investigation in the field of history.<sup>4</sup>

“Narrating” is the third term included in the title of this paper that seems to be symptomatic of the framing of our discussion. It suggests a perspective that views history as a story. According to Paul Ricoeur,<sup>5</sup> historical knowledge cannot exist without narrative understanding (“mise-en-intrigue”). A story signifies the presence of fictional elements and construction of an immanent, unique and singular world, of an immanent semantic totality. A story implies a narrator who organizes the text, thus becoming one of its characters. A story either adheres to a particular genre or breaks it; it produces stylistic innovation and neologisms.

This relationship between “narrating” and “history” proves that history, as a discourse generated mainly by means of texts, is also subject to the rules of textual interpretation and to hermeneutics, and at numerous points overlaps with the theory of literature, provided that the latter is not viewed as the theory of individual works of art, but rather as the theory of writing and reading, the theory of text production, of construction of meaning and form, and of the effect and reception of texts.<sup>6</sup> Howev-

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4 A.J. Gurevich, “Istorik kontsa XX veka v poiskakh metoda. Vstupitel’nye zamechaniia,” *Odissei. Chelovek v istorii* (1996), p. 5.

5 Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit* 1-3 (Paris: Seuil, 1983 - 1985).

6 In contemporary Czech historiography, Zdeněk Beneš, for one, who applies and describes such an approach, defining historiographical analysis as follows: “Its essence is the conception of a historical work as a historical text; i.e., as a semantic area where on one hand the information given by the author is conveyed, on the other hand, new information comes into existence as a product of the reader’s understanding and interpretation of the text. A historical text therefore presents a unity of the method of its generation, the final form and its reception” [Zdeněk Beneš, *Historický text a historická skutečnost* (Praha: Karolinum, 1993), p. 161].

er, when analyzing narrativity, we have to bear in mind that historiography is not conducted only by the means of texts, but also through other media representing the past. Moreover, the subject of the discipline does not include texts alone but also immense layers of non-textual culture, see for example Gurevich in his article “Territoriia istorika.”<sup>7</sup>

The text of the invitation to this conference also mentions the period of globalization and European integration, using categories of specific historical time, namely the 1990s and the transition to the first decade following the year 2000. For the Czech and Russian milieu, which will be the main source of examples and documentation in my paper, this period presents – or could present – a radical turning point in the writing of history.

Until the end of the 1980s, historiography concerning communist countries – local as well as international, official as well as dissident – was for obvious reasons inadequately burdened by ideological interpretation and misinterpretation, by a claim to a simplified understanding of truthfulness in historical representation that was often unjustified from a methodological point of view. It aimed at a category of truthfulness in the political and ideological sense that was not subject to historical investigation.<sup>8</sup>

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7 A.J. Gurevich, “Territoriia istorika,” *Chelovek v istorii* (1996), pp. 99-101.

8 The discussion on truthfulness as an issue inherent to the discipline of history developed simultaneously with this external conception of truth, while the materials for such research were symptomatically taken mostly from earlier periods of history. It is well illustrated by Zdeněk Beneš [*Historický text a historická skutečnost*, pp. 156-160] in his quotations of other sources on the issue: a medievalist monograph by B. Guenée [*Historie et Culture historique dans l'Occident médiéval* (Paris, 1980)], F.J. Schmale [*Funktion und Formen mittelalterlichen Geschichtschreibung*, (Darmstadt, 1985)], A.Ia. Gurevich, and a more general reflection by semiotician J.M. Lotman [*Štruktúra umeleckého textu* (Bratislava, 1990)]. Beneš' conception of truthfulness as an immanent quality of text (not as a claim for verification by empiric reality), is undoubtedly inspired also by the work of Polish scholar J. Topolski [*Prawda i model w historiografii* (Łódź, 1982)], since Beneš quotes the significant passage on application of Ingarden's conception of truthfulness as a corre-

During the 1990s, archives and libraries, inaccessible during the former period, were opened and materials concerning the latest discussions from the field of historical methodology ceased to be an unattainable rarity. Nonetheless, it seems appropriate to use the mode of potentiality when speaking of a change in the conception of history after 1990. While the barriers between official and unofficial facts, hypotheses and conceptions lost their relevance in the space of just a few years, the majority of professional historiographers have continued to see the problems of methodology in the techniques of data collection, verification and analysis; in the treatment of sources and common methods in comparative analysis and textual semantics; and in analytic reading of documents, terminological issues or other types of intentional or contextual manipulation of data.

Apart from this technical perspective, a truly fundamental discussion is also unfolding, often on the borders of the discipline, concerning the very nature of historical narration, its sources and difficulties, and the implicit aspects that lie behind the construction of historical meaning. In the common practice of writing and reading history, these constitutive aspects remain transparent or invisible matrices, since all the attention usually focuses on questions such as when and where something “real” took place, who caused it, what the responses were, what influenced the participants, and what happened next.

Let me present several discrete observations that should illustrate the problems of narrativity in the historical disciplines at the present time, observations that should be understood as the singular, fragmentary inspections of an outside observer who views the problems of history writing from the distant position of philology. However, this “distant position” is, perhaps, exactly what contemporary historiography needs, since it appears that history must be questioned from positions that undermine its seeming identity, homogeneity and indisputability.

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spondence between the reality of a particular text and the reader’s idea of a factual reality [R. Ingarden, *Studia z estetyki* (Warszawa, 1957), p. 399; Beneš, *Historický text a historická skutečnost*, p. 27].

Arthur C. Danto formulated an apparently obvious thesis in his work from the mid-1960s<sup>9</sup> when he pointed out that “history tells stories” and called for inevitable methodological consequences to be drawn from the narrativization of events represented by a historical text. This viewpoint must naturally be confronted with the opposite one: the question of in what way and by what means artistic narration influences and interferes with historical discourse.

This point of view has also been explored. As early as 1967, Roland Barthes highlighted the reliance of historical works on tropes and the figurative nature of their language in his article on “Historical Discourse.”<sup>10</sup> Later, in 1973, Hayden White added that historical narration is subject to the system of literary genres, and that history writing must be analyzed as a type of prosaic discourse, with regard to its rhetorical devices<sup>11</sup> and according to different modalities of figurative language.<sup>12</sup> Even the master of Russian historical science, A. J. Gurevich, who defends historiography against radical and biased postmodernist opinions, wrote in the mid-1990s that historians lack their own professional language.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, the question remains as to extent to which these doubts concerning historical narration have become part of historical thinking and historiographical practice. The reader’s experience suggests that the above mentioned impulses have raised adequate critical responses in the fields of philosophy, comparative research and theory of literature, whereas authors from the field of historical investigation have been affected only minimally in their ways of reflection.

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9 Arthur C. Danto, *Analytical Philosophy of History* (Cambridge, 1965). For responses to Danto’s theory in the German and Russian academic milieu, cf. I.P. Smirnov, “Novyi istorizm kak moment istorii,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 47:1(2001), p. 66.

10 Roland Barthes, “Historical Discourse,” *Social Science Information* 6:4 (1967), pp. 145-154.

11 White differentiates metaphoric, metonymic, synecdochic and ironic modes of historical discourse [White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 21].

12 White, *Tropics of discourse*, p. 7.

13 Gurevich, “Istoriik kontsa XX veka v poiskakh metoda,” p. 8.

## 1. THE UNEXPLOITED IMPULSE OF TARTU SEMIOTICS

Perhaps the only significant programmatic and collective conception of methodology in the humanities to be produced by the intellectual community of the Soviet bloc in the last third of the 20th century – and the only one to contribute to progressive international discussions on the presumptions of writing and interpretation – came from the Moscow-Tartu School of Semiotics that formed around the personality of Iurii Mikhailovich Lotman in Estonia in the first half of the 1960s.

When we seek a broader theoretical base for methodological discussions such as the Russian debate on New Historicism and its Russian counterpart, it is not surprising that Lotman and the Tartu School figure prominently in the critical discourse.<sup>14</sup>

The Tartu School also formulated important theses in the field of history, such as the article by Boris A. Uspenskii,<sup>15</sup> in which he presented a typical paradigm of semiotic interpretation: historical process as “sentence formation”; i.e., as a type of communication where the role of a code is fulfilled by a specific language transformed in the course of time. This language is understood in a broader sense than in linguistics as a mechanism for generating texts, and the reception of events is understood as the reading of a text.

“Historical process” can be understood as a form of communication between society and the individual, society and God, society and fate, etc., and what is important in all cases is the interpretation of events and the meaning ascribed to them by the system of social consciousness. The role of a code is fulfilled by a specific “language” (this term is not understood in the narrow linguistic sense, but in the broader semiotic meaning of the

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14 S. Kozlov emphasizes this in his article *Rendez-vous with “novyi istorizm”* [S. Kozlov, “Kak dumaiut istoriki,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 42 (2000), pp. 5-13, esp. 9-10]. M. Gronas points to the same in his article [Michail Gronas, “Aktual’nosnt’ Lotmana,” *Novaia russkaia kniga – kriticheskoe obozrenie* 1 (2002), pp. 18-20].

15 B.A. Uspenskii, “Istoriia i semiotika: (Vospriiatie vremeni kak semioticheskaia problema),” *Trudy po znakovym sistemam* 22 (1988), pp. 66-84.



word), which decides whether particular facts will be considered real or potential in the respective historical and cultural context. The meaning is assigned to events: a collective *reads the text* of events. It is possible to say that historical process in its elementary phase is a process of forming new “sentences” in a particular “language.” The way they will be read by their social addressee (the society) determines the feedback.

Thus, Uspenskii concludes that the nature of history is essentially semiotic, based on operations with signs, whose signification (*znakovost*) is determined by the subject for it is the subject which attributes historical relevance or signification to selected phenomena: “The nature of history is semiotic in the sense that it presupposes the semiotization of reality – transformation of a non-sign into a sign, non-history into history.”<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, from the standpoint of semiotics, Uspenskii rejects the image of history as a reconstruction of the development from earlier contexts to the present, and boldly replaces it with the opposite perspective, using the theory of dreams formulated by the innovative Russian mathematician, theologian and art historian Pavel Florenskii. Uspenskii writes: “It is a striking paradox: on one hand, it is absolutely clear that the whole story seen in the dream was provoked by a noise that woke us up; on the other hand, events that lead to the noise seem to be logically related to it; i.e., as if the noise itself was predestined by them. The *preceding* events were thus provoked by the *finale*, while in the composition of the dream *plot*, the finale is linked with the preceding events by causal relations.” Past events are selected, constructed and interpreted from the present point of view; therefore, the past is organized as a text read from the present point of view.

It is worthy of note that the Tartu School has raised but a minimum response from the community of East-European historians,<sup>17</sup> and has never been established as a canonic practice

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16 Uspenskii, “Istoriia i semiotika,” pp. 66-84.

17 See, for examples, the above-mentioned monograph by Zdeněk Beneš, who uses the category of a “historical text,” referring to Lotman’s theory [Beneš, *Historický text a historická skutečnost*, p. 25].



or become the subject of a systematic criticism or rebuttal, nor even the stimulus for an alternative conception at an equivalent theoretical level. Nonetheless, the Tartu School has remained the domain of philology and literary theory, where it has provoked a livelier and more attentive reception.

Literary and philosophical theories of textuality, which were often characterized by numerous aspects of convergence with fiction or essay form, have offered many innovative and disquieting models of relationships to the text, including those formulated by Russian semioticians and the works of “Western” representatives of hermeneutics, intertextuality and post-structuralism.<sup>18</sup> The reception of their work by historians was limited, especially in Eastern Europe and Russia, where the texts of these authors was translated immediately after the change of political regimes and raised an intense response in the field of philology, at least at major universities and academic institutions.

This is not to assert the universal validity of the philosophy formulated by the above-mentioned authors. On the contrary, many of their theses on textuality are disputed or even outdated today. However, valuable insights may yet be gained through critical analysis of the disturbing impulses those theses contained.

It appears that the stimuli from theories of literature and the text were reserved for the so-called earlier historical literature, where the category of genres becomes crucial for a researcher to be able to extract material for historical science from the syncretic context of chronicles, memoirs, *vitas*, annals, introductions, calendars, documents, dramas or epic poetry.

However, the interference of theories of literature, texts, genres and writing with historiographic research is obviously not just a matter of earlier periods in which historical narration was not sufficiently specified. On the contrary, the more autonomous the discourse of historic interpretation becomes, the more

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18 For example J.M. Lotman, A. Piatigorskii, V.V. Ivanov, B.A. Uspenskii, V.N. Toporov or V.M. Zhivov, Paul Ricoeur, François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Roland Barthes, Gilles Deleuze, Julia Kristeva or Tzvetan Todorov.

likely are its conventions and conditionality to be forgotten and eliminated, even though they play a highly significant role in the formation of meaning in any historical communication.

In the chapter on “The Essential Principles of Historiographic Analysis” from his book *Historical Text and Historical Reality*, Beneš rightly indicates, without any specification of time, genre or axiology, that “a historical text can be characterized as any verbal structure (...) conveying information on historical reality in a way and to an extent that allows its interpretation.”<sup>19</sup>

I omit Beneš’ questionable assertion that such a structure must have “the character of a totality,” which seems to be rather vague and unjustified, as well as the supplement on “historical rationality;” i.e., the indispensable and historically conditioned system of rules that have equal meaning and importance for all historians.<sup>20</sup> Although the idea of an a priori totality and obligatory rules shared by an imaginary set of all historians seem to be hardly defensible, in general, Beneš reaches the substantial conclusion that any text allowing interpretation is historical. At this point, he could have quoted a maxim by Louis Adrian Montrose from the late 1980s: “text is historical, history is textual.”<sup>21</sup>

Attempts to define the historical text inspired a more ironic response in Alexandr Etkind, a Russian critic who will be discussed in the following chapter. In his view,<sup>22</sup> the scientific character of a text can be recognized only when references and footnotes are present, just as the literary character of a text requires their absence.<sup>23</sup> He thus attempts to re-establish the pos-

19 Beneš, *Historický text a historická skutečnost*, p. 26.

20 Ibid.

21 L.A. Montrose, “Professing the Renaissance: The Poetics and Politics of Culture,” in H.A. Veveser, ed., *New Historicism* (New York, London, 1989), p. 21.

22 A. Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 47:1 (2001), p. 21.

23 In relation to the concealment of sources while assuming significant aspects of someone else’s texts in fiction, Etkind refers to a classic work written on this topic by Harold Bloom [Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973)].

sibility of differentiation between texts according to their character and intention, of postulating distinctions that were removed and refuted by the radical statements of 20th-century theoreticians. Thus, in 1946, R. G. Collingwood published a work in which he refused to differentiate between historical research and the novel, referring to the authors' aim – identical in both cases – of presenting their world as coherent.<sup>24</sup>

The conclusion, relevant to the contemporary context of the relationship between historical research and literature, was aptly expressed by Etkind: "(...) the border between history and philology is guarded from one side only. Philologists like to cross it, while historians do not."<sup>25</sup>

## 2. THE NEW HISTORICISM – THE RUSSIAN VERSION

One of the liveliest debates on historicism and textual analysis to have emerged in Russia within the last decade, and one which met with a response from specialists, was the recent "dispute on new historicism."<sup>26</sup> Authors belonging to a range of disciplines in the humanities (symptomatically without the participation of professional historians) have demonstrated their individual understanding of the school, which originally came into existence primarily through the work of Stephen Greenblatt<sup>27</sup> and the *Representations* magazine published at Berkeley. It is characteristic that the whole discussion concerning all types of thought on history was published by the magazine *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, and was, to a considerable extent, provoked

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24 R.G. Collingwood, "The Historical Imagination," in R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), pp. 231-249. See also Smirnov, "Novyi istorizm kak moment istorii," p. 43.

25 Etkind, "Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia," p. 12.

26 See *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 42 (2000) and 47 (2001).

27 See S. Greenblatt, *Shakespearean Negotiations: The Circulation of Social Energy in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1988); S. Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990).

by Etkind<sup>28</sup> – as if philology in Russia still played the role of instigator of theoretical investigation in the humanities, although radical international professionalization in various fields of sociology or theoretical geography and art criticism cannot be disregarded (B. Dubin, L. Gudkov, V. Kaganskii, I. Sandomirskia, V. Miziano, E. Ďogot', and V. Tupicyn).

New Historicism, which, according to Etkind, differs from social history, Marxism, formalism, psychoanalysis, structuralism, and semiotics as well as deconstruction, proposes to examine not historical events, but people and texts in their mutual relationship – a perspective whereby the text is repeatedly put into context.<sup>29</sup>

Here we can see a patent intention to recover biography, psychologism, individualism, and the relationship between “life and work of art”<sup>30</sup> for the sake of history, and, at the same time, to respect the text with all the external aspects that pervade and

28 He became popular mainly due to the following books: Alexandr Etkind, *Eros nevozmozhnogo* (Moskva, 1994); *Sodom i psikhea. Ocherki intellektual'noi istorii serebriannogo veka* (Moskva, IC-Garant, 1996); *Khlyst. Sekty, literatura i revoliutsia* (Moskva: NLO, 1998); *Tolkovanie puteshestvii. Rossiia i Amerika v travelogakh i intertekstakh* (Moskv: NLO, 2002).

29 Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia,” pp. 7, 9; S. Greenblatt, one of the inventors of New Historicism, insists on the reciprocal relationship between text and context, cf. Smirnov, “Novyi istorizm kak moment istorii,” p. 51.

30 The author points out the legitimization of direct links between an author's ideas and life [Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia,” p. 8]. Foucault's conception of discourse (a collective act on a spiritual level), on the basis of a new conception in contrast with the trend of New Historicism, as well as Barthes' thesis on the death of the author, are regarded by Etkind as an expression of leftist tendencies, peculiar to Russian formalism and French structuralism. According to Etkind, post-structuralism and Russian semiotics in the works of their supreme representatives lessen the depersonalizing pathos by reviving interest in life, context and history – in this connection, the author states the difference between Derrida's *Grammatology* and another of his books, *La carte postale*, that includes autobiographical and historical data and their circumstances, similar to Lotman's development from the early structuralist stage to the late “behavioral semiotics” [Ibid., pp. 13-14].

constitute it, without the text being inferred from them. In this conception, the text does not reveal truth or reality, but CREATES reality.<sup>31</sup> Etkind formulates a methodology consisting of three components: intertextual analysis, discourse analysis and biographical analysis, and also introduces a quadrangle consisting of history, ideology, creation and everyday life.<sup>32</sup>

According to Etkind, this methodology is not an a priori conception illustrated by specific material; on the contrary, it is “wrapped in the material, hidden in its interpretation.”<sup>33</sup> Here we can observe symptoms of a phenomenon typical of all disciplines in the humanities in Russia at the turn of the 21st century: a skepticism towards theoretical thinking and an intense revival of source studies and archival publications, memoirs and eye witness accounts. It is a choice of genres in which the theoretical distance necessary for any attempt to establish different versions of adequate understanding seems to be transparent, “invisible” or, rather, non-existent. Etkind relates New Historicism with a “return to details” and “eclecticism,” without attributing any pejorative meaning to these designations.<sup>34</sup> In general, parallels with other types of “microhistory” can be traced, for example, in the works of Carlo Ginsburg, C. Poni, and E. Grendi.<sup>35</sup>

While the strategy of Close Reading (Paul de Man and others) presupposed internal reading, New Historicism also requires a quality expressed in the adjective “close,” meaning near, slow or concentrated. At the same time, it insists on the external or surface viewpoint, characteristic of the original “fast” or “distanced” reading – that is to say, historical reading – oriented primarily on general meaning and content, not on detailed nuances.<sup>36</sup>

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31 Ibid., p. 39.

32 Ibid., p. 8.

33 Ibid., p. 8.

34 Ibid., p. 11.

35 See, Ewa Domańska, *Mikrohistorie. Spotkania w międzyświatach. Wydawnictwo Poznańskie* (Poznań, 1999).

36 Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia,” p. 9.

In his commentary, I. P. Smirnov builds on this trend to legitimize the category of externality, defending it against traditional pejorative meanings, and, in this respect, even denying the differentiation of internal and external, inherent and extrinsic: “there is nothing external to history *per definitionem*.”<sup>37</sup>

New Historicism, as interpreted by Etkind, offers an inspiring combination of interest in everything external – circumstances, biographies, ideas and events – with an interest in textual semantics that is reconstructed in the process of Close Reading with regard to the facts and findings of contexts. However, it is not a matter of modeling an identity between text (fiction, imagination) and reality, but rather of establishing their clearer definition and renewing contacts between them. Etkind illustrates this substantial difference<sup>38</sup> with a primitive, yet vivid example: Either we connect two banks by filling up the stream, or we bridge them.

Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin, competent and knowledgeable critics of Etkind’s adaptation of New Historicism to the Russian scholarly context, point out the difficulties of the suggested interpretation. Firstly, Etkind’s conception relates the local historical situation to the author and his work without subtle attention to specific, ascertainable connections, which Gudkov and Dubin consider to be a trivialization of Foucault’s theory. Secondly, in his individual interpretative works, Etkind focuses his efforts on publishing delicate details from the lives of his heroes, and this cheap orientation on issues of power and eroticism, or scandalous ideologies, is passed off as a new achievement of historical science. Moreover, Gudkov and Dubin, professional sociologists with ambitions in the discipline of history, blame Etkind for an exceedingly complex conception of the text, which is presented as any kind of document, ranging from private correspondence, recorded dialogues, bits of gossip or archival sources to pure inventions recorded in a diary.

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37 Smirnov, “Novyi istorizm kak moment istorii,” p. 57.

38 Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia,” p. 15.

Anything can be a text – and here the authors observe a continuation of the early Tartu school.<sup>39</sup> In their opinion, Etkind's emphasis on source studies and establishing specific contexts is devalued by his deficit reference to a number of disciplines such as Hermeneutics, the sociology of ideologies and knowledge, and the formation of epistemological questions in general.<sup>40</sup>

In short, Dubin and Gudkov see Etkind's inventiveness as a turn toward superficiality in scholarship – albeit well documented – and as a popular search for scandalous background and intimate details about the heroes of the history of a culture.

His mixture of conceptions, influences, schools and theories leads the critics to the conclusion that this universal, humanitarian essay form presents a manifestation of incompetence, a sort of para-science or pop-science.

Gudkov and Dubin find this to be a phenomenon characteristic of the period following the late '80s and early '90s, when the end of censorship and the relatively stable mechanisms of Soviet institutional control blurred the borders between professional scholarly work and the popular essay form, which invaded the field of "science," or pure scholarship, and led to the incorporation of various alternative teachings. The examples given by the authors are the ethnocultural racism of Lev Gumiliov, the anthroposophy of Jelena Blavatskaia and Rudolf Steiner, and the theories on the brain and consciousness formulated by Stanislav Grof and Carlos Castaneda.

Gudkov and Dubin consider amateurism to be a significant feature of Russian investigations in the humanities during the 1990s, and categorize such texts as fictional or literary, since, as opposed to professional scholarship, they create their own thought context with a specific method of argumentation and

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39 Etkind proposes body as the binary opposition to text, whereas his critics strictly reject the reduction of history to bodies and texts [Ibid., pp. 97-98].

40 Lev Gudkov, Boris Dubin, "Razdvoenie nozha v nozhnitsy, ili dialektika zhelaniia (O rabote Aleksandra Etkinda «Novyi istorizm, russkaia versiia»)»" *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, 47 (2001), pp. 80-81.



axiology. Such studies often produce an impressive, dramatic narrative that is more attractive than a scholarly interpretation, which invariably insists on verification of the presented factual or methodological statements, defines the framework of validity for its theses or programmatic judgements with maximum precision, and so on.<sup>41</sup>

The popularity of “marginal academics,” as they are called by Dubin and Gudkov (apart from Etkind and Gumiliov, they include essayists like Boris Paramonov and Mikhail Epstein in this influential group), is made possible by the conservative and unproductive milieu of Soviet and post-Soviet Russian scholarship, which gives the impression that any heresy or opposition against it is proper and justified. The repulsiveness of traditional Russian methodological sciences has led younger scholars, even during their study visits abroad, to orient themselves towards simplifying unconventional approaches, including a variety of showy methods, which the audience, grateful for easily comprehensible and thematically tempting intellectual nourishment, elevates to the status of a cult, fashion or model.

Etkind’s understanding and appropriation (or application) of New Historicism is blamed by Dubin and Gudkov mainly for its vulgarizing reduction of cultural material and its tendency to always search for the same type of conflict, based exclusively on trauma.<sup>42</sup> History and literature are treated on the basis of instinctive and sensual propensities, primitive desires and motivations, which foreground eros and the desire for power.

The danger of the popularity of such popularizers is seen in their impact on the unstable milieu of the Russian academic and intellectual elite, which is unable to sustain a consistent level of quality in its own research, resulting in the possible marginalization such trends.

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41 Ibid., p. 90.

42 Ibid., p. 98.

### 3. THE IDEOLOGIZED DE-IDEOLOGIZATION OF HISTORY

After several versions of the “dictatorship of truth” during the Soviet or communist period, when truthfulness in its vulgar imperativeness affected official as well as uncensored research, it was not by chance that the interpretative strategy of New Historicism met with such a positive response in the 1990s, sometimes being epistemologically related to pragmatism (e.g., by Richard Rorty<sup>43</sup>) for its refusal to consider the issue of truthfulness as relevant.<sup>44</sup>

New Historicism pays special attention to the creation of stories and histories (the Russian plural “istorii” includes both meanings),<sup>45</sup> and to the study and construction of narrativity,<sup>46</sup> where aspects of different disciplines and views coincide.

The less successful forms of emancipation from the former dictatorship of officially manipulated truthfulness are the various expressions of “liberated historiography,” which basically present no more than new versions of vulgar ideological manipulations, lacking any reflection of the means used for the achievement of their goals.

The new *History of Russia*, published in Prague by the prestigious publishing house Lidové noviny in 1995,<sup>47</sup> can serve as a representative example. Particularly in the section dedicated to the modern history of Russia, this work relies heavily on the traditional work of V. O. Kliuchevskii for its factography. It also refers repeatedly to the monumental but methodologically limited sociological and political opus of T. G. Masaryk, *Russia and Europe*, but does not achieve Masaryk’s well-read and wide-

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43 Richard Rorty, “Nineteenth-Century Idealism and Twentieth-Century Textualism,” in Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 139-159.

44 Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia,” pp. 11, 39.

45 See, *ibid.*, p. 12.

46 Generally considered to be a substantial contribution to the theory of narrativity in historiography is the following article: Lawrence Stone, “The Revival of Narrative,” *Past and Present* 85 (1979), pp. 3-24.

47 Milan Švankmajer, Václav Veber, Zdeněk Sládek, Vladislav Moulis, *Dějiny Ruska* (Praha: Lidové noviny, 1995).

ranging interpretation, which enables the reader to accept or revise his opinions and conclusions even in cases that today might seem oversimplified or limited by Masaryk's orientation as a practical European politician.

In any case, the trouble with the new *History of Russia* is not only that its authors do not explain what their essential and relevant sources were (and why). What is much more serious is their style of argumentation and evaluation. Without a single hint that they are aware of the manipulative and even organizing influence of the rhetorical devices in their interpretation, the authors use ironic and arrogant formulations, expressions and whole phrases that ridicule or condemn individual historical personae, and analyze the historical process with the unveiled intention of unmasking and denouncing Russian imperialism, militarism, autocracy and the continuity of tsarist and Soviet state despotism.

They fulfill their purpose largely by providing popular information from the private lives of the tsarist family or disgraceful details from the lives of state potentates.

There is a remarkable difference between this and the previous version of the *History of Russia*, written by nearly the same authors in 1967, which was rich in content and correct, despite the bias of the time and ideological clichés present in the text. The new version shows a knowledgeable, yet methodologically unreflective and emotional, or even hysterical, effort to overcome the trauma caused by the obedient historiography of the communist period, when Russian history was written according to the requirements of the establishment and censorship.

The suppressed resistance against the power of occupation was now being compensated for: former official or semi-official historians gained a historiographical retribution for their own loyalty. This act might be understandable from the psychological point of view, but it remains problematic in its confusion of genres, since the text was not conceived as a provocative pamphlet – which would justify its means and figures of expression – but as an academic history for specialists and the general public, published in the reputable *History of States* series.

In his 1978 article on Historicism, History and the Figurative Imagination, Hayden White gives a brilliant analysis of an extract from Taylor's *History of Germany*, which was published in New York immediately after the Second World War,<sup>48</sup> to demonstrate that even a highly regarded author with no intention of adapting historical reality inevitably uses rhetorical devices that transfigure selected facts into a story. The resulting story then forms its own causality and axiology, as well as a very vivid axiology of the narrated facts on the level of the secondary semantics generated by its metaphorical language.

The authors of the 1995 *History of Russia* used more brutal methods, presenting a one-sided account of individual historical figures – supported by bits of gossip and popular myth – within the banal opposition of the Russian political system versus Western European traditions.

Another truly disastrous method is that of their historical references to literature. Without any conception of the themes and motivations that lead to the inclusion of a writer of fiction in this historical narration, the reader learns about Dostoevskii's debts as well as his "complex inner life" – a bizarre historical characterization that seems to combine features of parody and caricature.

However, it is possible that the authors' perplexity was rooted deeper in the unanswered question concerning the possible ways of dealing with the themes of art in historiography. Although this assumption cannot be verified by satisfactory documentation, its validity is confirmed, for example, by the professionally imposing opus on the Russian revolution written by Richard Pipes, a classic of western modern history writing on Russia. Pipes violently polarizes the aesthetic field on the spectrum of pro-revolutionary versus anti-revolutionary – a simplifying scheme that does not allow him to mention the authors who played the most significant role in forming the artistic context of the period in question.

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48 A.J.P. Taylor, *The Course of German History: A Survey of the Development of Germany since 1815* (New York, 1946).

Of course, the method of presenting art in the historical narration of a certain epoch is a tangential issue compared to the fundamental question of history writing in today's context of methodological discussion.

If we focus on the mainstream of Czech historiography, it seems that nobody is interested in this fundamental question. It was omitted even in the programmatic text that was written by a remarkable young Czech historian and published last year under the promising title: *Possible Approaches to the Study of Czech Historical Science in the Years 1945-2000*.<sup>49</sup>

This substantial deficit becomes obvious, for example, in the Czech historians' interest in the new knowledge of and materials available on Russian history. In spring 2002, in Prague, the editors of the journal *Slovanský přehled (Slavic Review)* arranged a professional discussion on this issue, based on an extensive paper by Zdeněk Sládek, the doyen of the discipline. However, the paper, as well as the contributions of other knowledgeable participants (Bohuslav Litera, Jan Wanner, Vladimír Šlapentoch, Emil Voráček et al.), while displaying a brilliant erudition in the latest publications and discoveries, focused on issues of ideology and content. One of the topics discussed was the old dilemma concerning the nature of Russia: whether it is a normal country with "abnormal" regimes or a different civilization; whether communism differs from other forms of totalitarianism; and to what extent tsarism was passed down to the USSR.

Another set of topics focused on the so-called new historical material: unpublished memoirs of prominent party members, analysis of regional press and official speeches, and documents of everyday life, such as posters and private correspondence. The question of language and expression, articulation and narration was limited to a discussion of the difficulties in translating terminology.

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49 Martin Nodl, "Možné přístupy ke studiu dějin české historické vědy v letech 1945-2000," *Soudobé dějiny* 1 (2001), pp. 9-22.

It is understandable that after the end of confrontational cold war propaganda – which affected historiography as well as the status and perspective of individual authors – and after numerous archives were made accessible, there followed an intellectual and heuristic euphoria: the intoxicating experience of gathering new information that was previously taboo.

An illustrative example of this phenomenon can be found in the mosaic composition of the history of Stalinism presented in the study of an outstanding expert, Michal Reiman, who focuses on Soviet history through the new materials gathered from Russian authors, with a special regard to Mikoian's memoirs.<sup>50</sup>

Nevertheless, as long as the accumulation of statements and memories, documents, myths, assumptions and quotations does not confront the results of such activities with an equally intense interest in the implicit meanings that accompany the creation and processing of these historical documents; as long as the formulation of such findings and the methods and techniques of their mediation and representation in texts and other media are not the subject of commensurate interest, the reception of any research will be stuck in the naïve circles of intended or unconscious manipulations and uninterpreted deformations.

There is no pure “formation” without de-formation. For this very reason, a deliberately corrective approach and records of the conditions and circumstances informing any assertion (whether implicit or explicit) are indispensable. Any act of historiography inevitably leads to a particular narrative strategy. Reflection on this strategy is necessary for the reception of the communicated meaning.

According to Etkind, Historicism seeks a balance between faithfully copying sources and fantasizing about them.<sup>51</sup> To achieve such a balance requires self-reflection, or an awareness of the work's inherent principles, intentions and limitations.

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50 Michal Reiman, “Poválečné konflikty a rivalita na sovětské politické špici. Sovětské dějiny v nových dílech ruských autorů,” *Soudobé dějiny* 4 (2000), pp. 547-593, 1 (2001), pp. 44-58.

51 Etkind, “Novyi istorizm, russkaia versia,” p. 22.

The present era demands not just such reflection, but the most precise formulation of it possible, because the former genre of the historical novel provided space for the development of new narrative conceptions and, in some cases, historiosophic phantasms, which show the historicity of history in a different light.

#### 4. THE NEW HISTORICAL NOVEL

Twenty-five years ago, Hayden White wrote that any historical narrative is, in a sense, a work of art<sup>52</sup> and elaborated on this thesis from the point of view of rhetoric, pointing out the figurative power of language in historical texts. However, the genre of historical literature, which profits from the mutual relationship of historical material and artistic verbal arrangement, has always been present in the history of literature (or at least since the formation of the epic poem in the early Middle Ages) and has gone through developmental transformations.

One of the contemporary Russian authors who verbalizes the mutual relation of historical and literary discourses in a distinctive way is undoubtedly Alexandr Isaievich Solzhenitsyn, the master of historical narration in politically committed Russian literature.

Although professional historians in Russia and abroad basically ignore the methodology of his interpretation of the GULAG, the revolution, and its contemporary social context, he is still considered to be an author who has spoken “the truth” about history. In a number of his texts, irrespective of the intended artistic, publicistic, or purely political or historical genre,<sup>53</sup>

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52 White, *Tropics of Discourse*, p. 10.

53 For Solzhenitsyn, the issue of genre is crucial. The author often finds himself in a sphere of generic totalitarianism; therefore, a single text of his can be read as fiction as well as journalism, essay, ethical treatise, philippic, amateur theology (homily), political speech, autobiography or historical opus. At the beginning of the 1990s, when Solzhenitsyn’s pamphlet *How to Rebuild Russia* [Kak nam obustroit’ Rossiia (Leningrad: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1990)] was published, three authors (G. Amelin, A. Bliumbaum, I. Pil’shchikov) reached a rather general conclusion on



Solzhenitsyn generates historical evidence, or collects materials that can be regarded from the historical standpoint, as the subject of historical scholarship.

Nevertheless, he himself is not the kind of relater of history who would provide a professional interpretation. For this task, Solzhenitsyn has never assumed a sufficient distance from himself and from the images of himself that he systematically and purposefully produced and propagated in the course of his life, and which are the basis for the conception of the narrator in his texts, and which formed any kind of critical distance. Solzhenitsyn is not a historian. He established the closest relation to historiography in his epic *Red Circle*, where, on the basis of documents, he narrates the events preceding the Bolshevik revolution in four “knots,” divided into separate volumes.<sup>54</sup> Yet even in this case, his product is still a historical novel in which meanings are constituted in accordance with the aesthetic cosmos of the work and in accordance with the author’s position – not according to any claim of verifiability or conception of an objectifying interpretation. The significance of Solzhenitsyn’s fiction based on historical themes lies primarily in the originality of his narrative strategy.

Contemporary literary texts offer such a wide range of possible ways of narrating historical reality that they should be noted by the authors of scholarly historical materials as an illustration of the endless number of viewpoints that the material of history can generate.

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Solzhenitsyn’s work, describing it with the fitting term “mnogozhanrovost” (multiplicity of genres). In their opinion, it is the first thing that comes to mind when reading the pamphlet. The artistic character of Solzhenitsyn’s prose writing is examined by V. Grebenshchikov in his article [V. Grebenshchikov, “Solzhenitsyn – tribun ili khudozhnik? (K voprosu o khudozhestvennosti ‘Arhipelaga GULag’),” *Modern Fiction Studies* 23-1(1997), pp. 85-99.

54 Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, *Avgust chetyrnadtsatovo* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1971-1983); idem, *Oktyabr’ shestnadtsatogo* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1984); idem, *Mart semnadtsatogo* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1986); idem, *April’ semnadtsatogo* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1991).

Fiction naturally differs from scholarly works in that it lacks any claim to verifiability or support by documentation and strict correspondence to facts. At the same time, the subject of the author is present in both kinds of texts, regulating the method of narrating events, factual as well as fictional, to different extents.

Contemporary literature on historical themes offers a radical experience in this respect: while the authors of the 1960s and 1970s claimed that the meaning of history is co-established by narrative strategies, the artists in the 1990s show that historical material can become a source of narrative phantasms that have no claim to correspondence with reality. Instead, reality in these works is shaped according to aesthetic demands, to which historical reality, in turn, is fully and radically adjusted.

However, it is not a matter of leaving the universally shared historical framework within a codified genre, traditionally represented, for example, by science-fiction. The novels that have recently raised an intense response from the critics as well as the public in Russia treat history as a pure construction of human consciousness, without any claim to relatedness with the natural, empirically perceptible world. This approach implies that the very status of reality has been substantially shaken at its foundations.

In the novel *General i ego armia* (1994-96), Georgii Vladimov, one of the last Russian writers to support the conception of the author as the conscience of a nation, still makes it his aim to describe the true events of the Second World War (the main theme is the fate and significance of General Vlasov's army, kept concealed by Soviet historiography). In his novel *Svidanie s Bonapartom* (1983), Bulat Okudzhava continues to use history to develop allegorical parallels with the present and meditate on the task of the individual in the impersonal historical process. In his novel *Dva Ivana* (1980), Mark Kharitonov uses the historical period of tsar Ivan the Terrible to develop his metaphorically rich narrative of ideas concerning the tension between national and private histories, between the human mind and totalitarian power. Evgenii Popov, in his novel *Dusha patriota* (1989), still uses the historical scenery of Brezhnev's funeral to build the opposition between official national history and his

picturesque and absurd stories from the Moscow bohemian underground, in which life seems to intersect with the Soviet system only by chance.

Younger authors view historical reality – including the theme of the Second World War, which until recently was so sacred in the Russian milieu – as a fictional sphere of narrative operations, motivated exclusively by the constructive principles of their innovative prose writing. In the novel *Chapaev i Pustota* (1996), Viktor Pelevin sees the revolution and civil war, in which the story of commander Chapaev takes place, as a cocaine-induced delusion of the main character, a retrospective hallucination influenced by the cult versions of the story presented by Soviet literature, cinematography and folklore in the form of anecdotes. In the novel *Galuboe salo* (1999), Vladimir Sorokin narrates his own version of the postwar situation in Europe, which is divided by Stalin and Hitler according to the former Ribbentrop-Molotov plan after they defeat Great Britain with nuclear weapons and build a wall in Prague to separate Western Europe from the East. In the novel *Mifogennaia liubov' kast* (1999), Pavel Pepperstein and Sergei Anufriev narrate the history of the Second World War as seen by a communist, Dunaev, an narcotic phantom or spirit who experiences a war, which is presented in a style reminiscent of Soviet official historiography, as a hallucination or psychedelic trip.

Less extravagant, yet in this context equally significant, is the new book of essays *Europeana* (2001) by Patrik Ouředník, a Czech novelist, philologist and translator. His subject is the history of the 20th century conceived as a parody of a schoolbook interpretation or as a brief popular handbook with a continuous signalization of topics on the margins of the text. In short, laconic sentences, Ouředník randomly combines (in accordance with the chaos of reality) selected pieces of information about the terrors, victories, discoveries and bizarre contexts of the epoch as if they were accumulated by the 20th century itself, using bare facts, quotations, statistical data and records of the time. The narrator assumes the ironic position of an intentionally silent witness of the time, which itself reports on its successes and perversions; on propaganda, contraception, mass

murders, women's emancipation, the armament industry, and even the hygiene habits of the relatively recent past. Ouředník's 20th century is tragicomical and startling. His narrative sophistication lies in his stimulation of the impression that the authoritative narrator, who usually organizes the interpretation into a story, is missing. This subversive and concealed narrator not only manipulates verifiable facts in a very subtle way, but also constructs a crucial message on the nature and significance of historiographic narration, which he uses and caricatures, imitates and unmasks.

By the use of literary devices, the new Russian historical novel and the Czech essay illustrate the urgent need for historiography to closely examine the conditions and mechanisms that are used to create the image of the past by selecting and combining particular facts into narrative syntagma.

Is this scholarly formulation of the problem affected by the sphere of a priori narrative subjectivity and the arbitrary will of the individual in relation to history; i.e., by the sphere of literature on historical themes? Any act of historiography is meta-historical as well.<sup>55</sup> History does not exist as a substance, but is present only in the acts of construction and deconstruction, as the title of this conference suggests.<sup>56</sup> History consists of narratives. It seems inevitable not only to read historical narratives and see an imaginary past reality behind them, but also – and just as importantly – to pose the following critical questions: What are the component features of these narratives? What methods and tropes are they based on? What narrative conventions and linguistic mechanisms determine the way in which they establish meaning?

The thesis that nothing apart from the text exists (Derrida) has already been questioned. However, in cases where extra-textual reality is represented by means of a text, as indeed it is in

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55 White, *Metahistory*.

56 A clear and competent book on various versions of constructing historical reality and historical narration was recently published in Moscow: N.E. Kuposov, *Kak dumaiut istoriki* (Moskva: NLO, 2001).

historiography, we must inevitably ask questions not only about the mediated reality “behind” the text, but also about the structures and processes that mediate it and thus become autonomous, influential agents of purpose and meaning.