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The Other Side of Philology. Stories of Literary Creation

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ABSTRACT

It is generally accepted that modern philology, which has given us such a deep insight into the writer's creative process, does not – and cannot - cover all the stages through which a literary work passes as it comes into existence. What mainly eludes us are actually the earliest steps of the creative process, that is to say, the birth of an idea or, at least, its coming to the surface of the author's consciousness.

Despite its elusiveness, or maybe because of it, the very act of literary creation has exerted a strong fascination, more so on artists themselves than on scholars, who are well aware they cannot grasp it. Artists work with one imperfect yet extraordinary tool which enables them to get closer than philologists to the core of the matter: memory. It is through their personal recollections - sailing between flashes of clear vision and dull moments of only vague remembrance - that writers have often delivered accounts of the origin of a literary idea, its first appearance and its growth before any written form is reached.

Authorial supplements, epilogues, post-scripta, prefaces: all these writings serve as the only available set of clues which allow us to look back into what comes before the first written traces of a text, that is, notes, plans, sketches, maybe drawings, and the very first drafts. Needless to say, birth, or creation, comes before the beginning as an historical act; but the description of it delivered by the writer comes at the end, as one can account for the genesis of a work only after its conclusion. Thus these *post eventum* recollections can also be read as a peculiar philological document, the only one indeed which is able to provide such information on incipient writing.

My paper presents the first results of my research on this subject.

This approach raises a series of preliminary issues, which are discussed in the beginning.

First, chronological boundaries should be established. In order to tell the story of artistic creation, the artist must first be aware that creation is not a gift or a sudden illumination, but a process. And this process has a development -a development that is worth remembering and telling. From this point of view, only 19th and 20th century texts meet the needs of this approach.

A second point to be considered is the fact that the writer takes the liberty of embodying his recollections in very different genres, not all of them paratextual. Besides prefaces, afterwords, and notes, proper creative genres such as stories or even novels should also be counted as well as mixed, dual genres such as the interview. Thus the writers' records of the last two centuries must be faced as partial, personally-oriented, and widely varied sorts of documents. Still they can offer a great deal of new insight into the creative process.

Third, it is to be considered that a writer's account does carry a level of personal elaboration and interpretation of memory which makes it not suitable to be evaluated in terms of objectivity. In short, a writer delivers his own version of the history of the creative process. This is - more than history - story. Thus, any critical approach is bound to consider these co-existing, sometimes conflicting aspects of history and story; factual report and creative work, (claimed) objectivity and personal point of view.

The latter point raises a new, more important problem that is, ultimately, how to approach the object of this research, stories of literary creation. Should they be taken as truth? Or as a set of fictional texts? Or as a peculiar form of autobiography? Needless to say, a detailed answer will be possible only when more analysis has been done. Nevertheless, my working hypothesis is that stories of literary creation should be read as an exercise in self-criticism that is performed by authors for two main reasons: 1) to control the interpretation of their own work; 2) to re-gain authority as creators. It is significant that stories of creation became popular at the beginning of the Romantic epoch when, on the one hand, the myth of the creative genius was born, on the other hand the idea of divine inspiration became obsolete, and a new interest in arts as labor and skills was spreading. Thus stories of creation are a means to re-affirm the authors'

authority, and their control over the whole process involving their work, including its final interpretation.

After discussing these theoretical points, my paper has tested the productive effectiveness of an approach to the dynamics of literary creation through writers' reports. As a first attempt to chart a limited selection of a very abundant amount of material, it has focused on three case studies selected among different genres: the Prefaces of Henry James; several stories and a play by Luigi Pirandello; and some interviews from the "Paris Review."

My analysis of these texts has concentrated in particular on two issues: 1) the vocabulary and some recurrent sets of metaphors, their origins and their appearances in the writing of different authors even in different languages; 2) the individuation of the very seminal starting point (e.g. the image of a certain character), a practice that has shown a variety of results but also some significant overlapping in different writers' reports.

Eventually an initial typology for descriptions of the beginnings of writing in different authors has been drawn.