changing worlds & signs of the times

Selected Proceedings
from the 10th International Conference
of the Hellenic Semiotics Society

EDITORS
Eleftheria Deltsou
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The expression of worldviews through narratives and chronotopes of liquid times

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Abstract

This paper is primarily based on the idea that past and present periods of ruptures, revolutions and transformations share certain characteristics, particularly in the field of literature. One of the fundamental necessities of worlds in conflict and emerging societies is that of stability. In this article I examine the potential stabilizing effect of the act of narration, focusing on narratives of worlds in conflict and the evolution and functions of the chronotope of the castle. At the same time other questions arise concerning the worldviews constructed and the role of the reader in the decodification of the message and its success.

Keywords

chronotope , **time** , **castle** , **narratology** , **reception** , **worldviews**

In contemporary society, the notions of time and space have radically changed and the emergence of new necessities, textualities, art forms, narratives and technologies are the sings of the upcoming modern world. This new reality is reflected in the following event: while working at my home office late one night I come across an e-mail for proposals for SEMIO 2013. In the introduction there was a reference to Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity" and the idea that human actions are condemned to insecurity and uncertainty. It was only a few days since I had finished reading Bauman's book which was sent to me via mail after an electronic order and eventually an electronic payment. Later that night, I got mail from a friend who is genuinely interested in new technologies and art forms. As he explained, his persistence was generated by a human need for stability and control over his life. "The existence of machines and new technologies has a reassuring effect since it represents an ideal of determinism and reliability; anything conceived and created by man can be explained and controlled", he said. "Just like in the case of narratives" I added and this is how the idea for this paper started.

The power of the narrative act itself is an undeniable fact in all narrative theories. However trite it may seem to mention the characteristic example of Sechrazade's stories and their purely narrative function, as described in Gerard Genette's *Figures III*, yet, this example remains the ultimate evidence that the force of the narrative act that can even reassure the narrator's survival is unlimited. The cognitive schema of instability - stability (of crisis – solution) is frequently developed in numerous narrative sequences either in the form of internal crisis or that of insecurity and uncertainty generated by the social and historical context. This paper is primarily based on the idea that past and present periods of ruptures, revolutions and transformations share certain characteristics, particularly in the way they are reflected in literature.

According to Bauman "Five of the basic concepts around which the orthodox narratives of the human condition tend to be wrapped" are "emancipation, individuality, time/space, work and community" (Bauman 2006, p. 8). Our study of Victor Hugo's *Ninety-Three* and Robert Merle's *Malevil* is based, although not limited to, on these notions as well as on the significance of the castle as a literary symbol and chronotope. From a sociological point of view, we are obliged to place the writing of the work in its historical context. The composition of *Ninety-Three* begins in 1872 and is clearly influenced by the events of the years 1870 – 71 the fall of the Empire, the invasion, the siege of Paris, the defeat. In his introduction to the Garnier edition of the book, Jean Boudout comments : "How could he not feel upset and obliged to take position in front of the insurrection which made suddenly palpable the revolutionary idea, questioned the past and seemed to announce at the same time for the near future an even more tremendous social Revolution?" (Boudout, 1967, p. XX). As for *Malevil*, published in 1972, the obvious influence is the state of conflict and extreme tension that become known as the Cold War. After World War II nuclear weapons were developed by the Soviet Union (1949), the UK

(1952), France (1960) and the People's Republic of China (1964) so the threat of a nuclear war was imminent, thus causing uncertainty and insecurity in the global community.

The two narratives in question belong to different genres. On the one hand, Victor Hugo places his narrative temporally in the year 1793, one of the most difficult years in the history of the French Revolution. Although he persistently confirmed that it was not a historical novel in the sense of W. Scott's tradition, Hugo looks retrospectively at the errors of history. For him, both politically and socially, history is transformed into a series of moral lessons for the present. According to Lukacs, "(b)y demonstrating the errors of the past, he wishes to affect the present" (Lukacs, 1969, p. 87). *Malevil*, on the other hand, is an anticipation novel, which reflects the fear of a nuclear holocaust by narrating the total destruction after the explosion of a nuclear bomb (which constitutes a science – fiction element) and the way that a human community is organized to survive, with all their psychological tensions (creating a kind of post – apocalyptic image of the world).

Both *Ninety–Three* and *Malevil* narrate the story of worlds in conflict in search of stability. The significance of the castle acquires new dimensions, embracing all the classical connotations of the feudal system, social status, wealth and power, but also presented in a frame of solidity and stability which resists time. The Tourge, the old fortress in *Ninety – Three*, is only one of the locations evoked by the narrator as the action takes place in different parts of the country in the South, but also in Paris. However, the castle is the center of the action and all the important moments of the narrative macro–sequence, namely the resolution and the final situation, are located there. Furthermore, the Tourgue is the place where Lantenac, Gauvain and Cimourdain, the three protagonists, first meet and create family bonds. The same place later becomes the center of the rupture, the last encounter of all the characters and Cimourdain's and Gauvain's death. It is also where all the characters are given a chance to contemplate and solve their moral and ideological crisis through a monologue or a dialogue, in an attempt to justify their actions by emphasizing the process of transformation of the state of consciousness. This chance is at the same time an opportunity for the three main characters to gain the role of the hero, which is not clearly and easily discernible from the beginning as all of them become the hero (as defined in Greimas's actantial model) leaving the functions of the adjuvant and the adversary to the other two. Time and space are interwoven in the literary chronotope of the castle as "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole" (Bakhtin, 1988, p. 84). At this point, we are tempted to claim, that despite the differences between Hugo's novel and the traditional historical novel, *Ninety-Three* is also a historical novel, if we accept that "it is precisely the chronotope that defines genres and generic distinctions (Bakhtin, 1988, p. 85). Nevertheless, the historicity of castle time, in the narrow sense of the word, that is restricted to the time of the historical past, which has influenced the development of the historical novel, is deliberated from its antiquated character in Hugo's work. The signifi-

cance of the castle in the past as a symbol of feudal power is not negligible, as it links the members of the family to the territory and between them, emphasizing Gauvain's bonds with his uncle Lantenac and the nobility of the area, thus accentuating the former's rupture with the aristocratic values in favor of a democratic vision. Even though the importance of the past is retained, what acquires extraordinary importance in *Ninety – Three* is the chronotopic value of the castle for the concretization of the present as this is the place where denouements and all the major dialogues and monologues occur, revealing the characters' ideologies. Most important the castle exists as the mediator between character's personal development and the political, social and historical evolution. The time/space frame of the castle finally, is extended beyond Gauvain's death, the sacrifice of the visionary hero, who shows the way for a potential change in the course of history and mankind. His sacrifice can make a difference, if received and interpreted properly by future generations and the castle, or even the remnants of it, will always constitute a reminder of this selfless, altruistic act, and Gauvain's visionary dream of civilization and progress. The end of the narration in *Ninety–Three* seams, in fact, inconclusive demanding continuation. It moves into the future at the moment that the cycle of History recommences until the hero's sacrifice will make a difference and change the world as a result of an ultimate reception event. This implies that time is cyclical, History repeats itself (but is not unavoidable) and from a bakhtinian perspective time in *Ninety–Three* is perceived as in the novel of human emergence, where man's emergence is accomplished in real historical time with its chronotopic nature. Man emerges along with the world. He is on the border, between two epochs, at the transition point from one to the other (Bakhtin, 1986). And it is not historical determinism the factor which influences the evolution, the transition and the choices. For Hugo, historical necessities are limited to a secondary role, in favor of eternal human values.

If the Tourgue, the castle, in *Ninety – Three*, is clearly presented as the fundamental chronotope of the novel, in Merle's Malevil, the 13th century grand fortress, the name of which serves as title of the book, becomes the only center of action and consequently the only chronotope organizing the narrative sequence. The novel immediately starts with the distinction between a "world before" and a world "after" and between them there is "the day of the event". It is the story of seven people, who after the explosion of an atomic bomb, which destroyed almost all life by a sudden rise of temperature, survived thanks to the strong thick walls of the cellar of Malevil. Having returned to a primitive era, they organize their life to survive. The first three chapters evoke the "world before" through the memories of the narrator, Emmanuel, who narrates seven different memories, the first of which took place in 1948 and the last in April 1977, which is five years after the publication of the book. The importance of the castle is demonstrated from the beginning, since Malevil figures in the narrator's childhood memories as the siege of the Circle, the secret society he established with his schoolmates. The fate of

the "half ruined" castle is interwoven with that of the narrator and later with the destiny of humanity. As young Emmanuel grows up, his bonds with Malevil are reinforced by a practical need for more space for his horse breeding activities and buying Malevil becomes a necessity: "And Malevil, in the middle of there affaires, was my reward, my love(s), my madness" (Merle, 1972, p. 45). It is obvious that the symbolic and chonotopic value of the castle in Merle's novel has no affinities with the chronotope of the castle in the historical novel. The intersection of time and space is underlined as early as the second page of the novel : "But for us, the past is twice past, the lost time is double lost, as with it we have lost the universe where it passed" (Merle, 1972, p. 10). After the day of the explosion there is no time since the progress of years and centuries was interrupted. The characters try to reestablish a linear progression in the chaos by saying: "before" – "the day of the event" –"after", but his "after" designates an uncertain present and a hypothetical future. There is no present and future time outside the space of the castle and there is no other space outside the present of the life of the community of Malevil. The world of before, described as "protected" and "easy", contrasts the insecurity, difficulty and uncertainty of the liquid present of the "after" world. Time becomes concrete only in the narrative and can only be perceived and cognized through the act of narration, in other words there is no time other than what Paul Ricoeur calls "temps raconté" – narrated time (Ricoeur, 1985). According to Bauman (Bauman, 2006, p.10): "Indeed, modernity is, apart from anything else, perhaps more than anything else, the history of time: modernity is the time when time has a history" and in this sense, Malevil is a narrative inserted in the frame of modernity.

The last part of the narrative which serves as conclusion is written by Thomas, one of Emmanuel's friends who, thanks to his remarkable intellectual capacities, not only becomes Emmanuel's successor after the latter's death, bur also the extra – diegetic narrator of Malevil, whose narration takes the form of Notes, in which he makes some comments on Emmanuel's narrative and sometimes even questions his reliability. However, he cannot neglect his respect for Emmanuel's narrative in the form of journal, which he offers to the reader intact and without any kind of corrections. After all, he accepts that Emmanuel's reality is one of the possible realities. Thomas's last note gives to Malevil a different temporal dimension. As the citizens of Malevil and La Roque – another community of survivors – decide to proceed with the research and experiments for the fabrication of weapons, the circle of history begins again.

Apart from the importance of the chronotope of the castle in both *Ninety–Three* and *Malevil*, we realize that the conception of time and history as a circle is another common element, which reinforces the idea that agitated times of big revolutions or transformations have a sort of repetitive character. The worldview expressed in the novels in question is optimistic, although *Ninety–Three* ends with a double death and *Malevil* with the reconstruction of everything, including the evil humanity has already faced. The last

words of Thomas are: "So we can from now on look at the future with confidence. If at least the word "confidence" is the one which is appropriate"(Merle, 1972, p.636). It is precisely the aspect of a feeling of a continuous threat that becomes unavoidable in liquid modernity, even when the history of mankind is viewed in an optimistic perspective. As far as *Ninety–Three* is concerned, the death of two of the main characters is devoid of negative pessimistic dimensions as the final situation is not dictated by a social – historical determinism. Every individual remains in front of his consciousness, responsible for his actions. The insurgence of this new form of heroism along with the deep belief in progress constructs through the narrative sequence an overall optimistic world view.

As for ideology, the two narrative sequences promote the idea of the progress of mankind through the emancipation of the individual. The process of emancipation is based mostly on the existence of a vision founded on democratic principles and human ethics in both narratives. *Malevil* adds the value of work to these elements. Progress and emancipation are also directly related to the political organization of the society. The reader easily understands that the comparison between a democratic political system and a tyrannical government or aristocratic in *Malevil* and *Ninety–Three* respectively, does not serve any other aim than to underline the supremacy of democratic values and procedures. Individuality in both narrative sequences is directly related to citizenship and placed in the service of community. In the ideal model of individuality promoted in these two novels, there is no place for corrosion and disintegration of citizenship endangering the latter (Bauman, 2006) and individuality in this case is identified with personal responsibility for one's acts and the individual's offer to the other members of the community according to their potential.

From a narratological viewpoint, the two sequences present many differences regarding the act of narration. *Ninety – Three* is a third person narrative narrated by an omniscient hetero-diegetic narrator, whereas in *Malevil* both Emmanuel and Thomas are homo-diegetic narrators with an internal point of view. Despite the obvious differences, the aspiration of these narrators is to take advantage of the stabilizing effect of the act of narration. In the care of *Ninety–Three* it is the product, the narrative itself, which can change the course of History and give an end to the rupture and instability of revolutionary times. The originality of the narrative lies in the way the narrator exceeds his historical function and examines the readability of his story. *Ninety–Three* is a narrative on the border between historical and epic, on the merges of history, a "page drawn from the book of destiny" (Roman, 1995), a moral lesson for future generation of readers.

In *Malevil*, the success of the message is less dependent on the reception. The journalistic form proves that narration is primarily an internal necessity of the narrator. In a world like the world "after" narration becomes the only way to conceive the notion of time and space, and to revive the world as it used to be. Moreover, it helps the narrator make an estimation of the present situation, redefine himself, organize his thoughts and

find a sense of stability. The act of narration is identified with survival as Emmanuel does not stop his narrative until the end of his life and this act has a reassuring effect through the creation of the illusion of control of the narrative universe.

We cannot help but be convinced that narratives acquire an extraordinary significance in agitated periods of history and particularly in contemporary societies, defined by fluidity. Narratives become a way to understand the world surrounding us, our place in it, our potential and our limits. In the *Limits of Interpretation*, Umberto Eco explains that when we understand the destiny of a narrative hero, we, "as citizens of the real world, begin to understand that we often bear up our destiny only because we understand our world in the same way as narrative heroes understand theirs. Narratology implies that maybe our viewpoint of the real world is as imperfect as that of the heroes of narrative" (Eco, 1993, p.254). This reality creates the paradox of the narrative. While every narrative sequence is constructed around at least two major transformations, the complication which destabilizes the initial situation and the solution which leads to the final situation (Adam, 2001), the act of narration is a speech genre aiming at the creation of a feeling of stability.

The expression of an optimistic worldview, as in the novels studied, is often dictated by a need to transpose the worldview created in the narrative world to the real world with the mediation of the extra- diegetic narrator or the reader. In *Ninety – Three* and *Malevil*, the feeling of security and stability is also provided by the chronotope of the castle which becomes a sign of the past which ensures, however, continuation into the future. The castle as the organizing center for the fundamental narrative events of the novel is no longer a chronotope exclusively designating the genre of the historical or gothic novel and the concretization of the time/space of feudal eras. In Hugo's 19th century novel, the castle becomes the chronotope of revolutionary times and big changes. The evolution of the chronotope of the castle is even more evident in *Malevil*, in which it constitutes the only possible concrete time / space in an empty world where time has ceased.

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