

Historical and Literary Sources: A Complementary View

Abstract

In chapter 18 of his famous *Mimesis* (1946) on French realism and naturalism Erich Auerbach's basic assumption is that the novels are 'Zeugnisse' of their historical epoch. Without paying much attention to theoretical reflection he adopts a double viewpoint on the texts, as literary structure and as historical source, however taking it for granted that they constitute one approach. Through references to Lukacs and to Balzac the working paper discusses two types of relation between literature and history allowing for an analysis of literature as part of cultural history. They may be regarded as supplementary to each other, one completing the lacunae of the other, or they may be considered to be complementary to each other, articulating incompatible but equally important aspects of historically embedded meaning production.

1. Literature and history

In chapter 18 of *Mimesis*, "Im Hôtel de la Mole", Erich Auerbach gives a detailed account of 19th century French realism and naturalism. In this chapter, as elsewhere in *Mimesis*, we witness the author's erudition and his striking ability to make, out of detailed textual analysis and historical generalisations, a seamlessly interwoven texture threaded with a few tinted lines of theoretical principles. But this merge of different aspects of the critical discourse also reduces the range of historical and theoretical reflections in their own right. It seems to me that Auerbach

makes certain untenable assumptions on the nature of the relationship between literature and history and therefore jumps too easily to conclusions that deserve a more extended analysis.

Auerbach quotes and analyses meticulously the moment in Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* when Julien Sorel, to the astonishment of the snobbish abbé Pirard, declares that he prefers a supper for 40 sous to the boring dinner with the noble family. To grasp Julien's both spontaneous and carefully designed behavior in the de la Mole family Auerbach claims that it is "nur aus der politisch-gesellschaftlichen Konstellation des aktuellen geschichtlichen Augenblicks zu verstehen" (Auerbach 1994: 424). The historical moment is thus repeated in the narrated moment. A little later Auerbach approaches Balzac's "Darstellungsweise", the specific symbiosis of characters and their environments in Balzac, especially in *Le Père Goriot*. This "atmosphärische Realistik" is interpreted as "ein Erzeugnis seiner Epoche, sie ist selbst Teil und Produkt einer Atmosphäre" (ib.: 441), an atmosphere that includes contemporary biology and theories of consciousness. The real historical atmosphere is repeated as the narrated realistic atmosphere.

In other words, in order to understand literature properly we will have to *supplement* it with historical sources, both on the level of the characters, as in the case of Julien's behavior, and on the level of the author, as in the case of Honoré's narrative technique or, to put it in more general terms, both on the level of representational reference, as in the case of Julien, and on the level of representational technique, as in the case of Honoré. But is this supplementing possible and on which conditions? It is clear that in Auerbach mimesis as repetition (cf. Melberg 1995) is not based on a set of aesthetic devices (cf. Jakobson 1960), but is both a referential and technical operation. Following his evasive, at times almost hostile, attitude to theoretical deliberations (Auerbach 1994: 509, 517), Auerbach vaguely presupposes a continuity between fiction and reality, between historical documentation and literary representation.

In sharp contrast to theoretical oriented literary scholars, as for instance Georg Lukács (Lukács 1965), Auerbach makes it clear at the end of chapter 18 that his interest in history is not expressed in any rigorous historical analysis or social theory:

Die ernsthafte Behandlung der alltäglichen Wirklichkeit, das Aufsteigen breiterer und sozial tieferstehender Menschengruppen zu Gegenständen problematisch-existentieller Darstellung einerseits – die Einbettung der beliebig alltäglichen Personen und Ereignisse in den Gesamtverlauf der zeitgenössischen Geschichte, der geschichtlich bewegte Hintergrund andererseits – dies sind, wie wir glauben, die Grundlagen des modernen Realismus, und es ist natürlich, daß die breite und elastische Form des Prosaromans sich für eine so viele Elemente zusammenfassende Wiedergabe immer mehr durchsetzte. (Auerbach 1994: 458f)

Here Auerbach points to a society that has no fundamental determining features, let alone any cohesion. It is a mere collection of "viele Elemente" and consists of "Menschengruppen." It is literature that makes a "zusammenfassende Wiedergabe" out of it. Although the text itself is the ultimate touchstone for his analysis, Auerbach also refers constantly to the transformation of social and historical reality into literature, especially in chapter 18, in order to validate his readings. In spite of his admitted neglect of theory, Auerbach therefore cannot escape the need to be more explicit about the *conditions* for the linkage of literature and history from *his* specific point of view. This is what I set out to do in this paper, on his behalf as it were, beginning with a discussion on the role of sources.

2. There are sources and sources

Some sources give water, others give oil, and still others are of disease, conflict, or wonder. Social unrest, economic hardship, competition for oil wealth, perhaps a political pronouncement, and general economic determinations, all these can be sources of historical events. These sorts

of sources are all themselves the origin or cause of that which springs from them. But there are other historical sources. They are not sources of history, but sources of knowledge about history. And that is something completely different. When we investigate, say, a political document that actually triggered an event, then the character of its role as a historical source has changed. From being a source of events it has become a source for interpretation and thus in the nature of a literary text. The historian and the literary critic may both become its interpreters, although not necessarily of the same kind. Here, in this historico-literary limbo, so uncanny for many historians of a positivistic bent, we find Auerbach when he declares that a literary text is "ein Erzeugnis seiner Epoche" (ib.: 441). "Erzeugnis" raises the problem, not of cluster of determining social factors, but of the - often twisted - truth value and interpretability of the text (cf. Ellrodt 1996, Furst 1995, Holton 1994, Jauß (ed.) 1969, Prendergast 1986, Ricoeur 1983-86, esp. vol. 3, and also Ronen 1994, Ryan 1991). An illumination of this theoretical twilightzone of interpretation is thus crucial for Auerbach's line of thought.

In the following I take historical sources to be any items of testimony that fulfill two requirements: 1) they document that events have taken place, and 2) they are capable of being interpreted. If the first requirement is not met – in the cases, say, of fraudulent sources, or poems – then the interpretation, no matter how reasonable, is invalid. If *only* the first requirement is met – a cryptic pottery fragment, an unreadable inscription – then the material in question can also not function as a historical source.

The value of sources for the documentation and interpretation of history lies therefore not only in the fact that they document that events are real. There are indeed many things that do so without being historical sources (although in some cases they may provide data for other sciences). Usable historical sources document historically relevant aspects of reality, mostly those that rely on human actions. Furthermore, it is not enough that the sources are interpretable. They must furnish knowledge, recognized as valid, about historically

relevant aspects of reality: the effects and preconditions of human action, their voluntary or involuntary character, their unfolding etc. Here the term history is simply taken – and I agree – to cover all processes in which humans are involved. Natural processes are not regarded here as historical processes, unless they are seen in an interplay with human activities. Sources document all aspects of human capacities that are active in this process and the effects of that activity. Historical reality is therefore also a social reality. The objectivity of sources therefore has to be associated not only with direct empirical reliability or comprehensibility. Sources are chosen for their objectivity according to prescribed criteria for reality and knowledge that historiography recognizes.

Consequently, the criteria delimiting the field of possible sources can be debated, as it happens for instance in new branches of history like environmental history or history of mentalities. Here for example biological or meteorological data, hitherto regarded as documenting real but for historical research irrelevant events, will have to be integrated among historical sources. Or, in the case of history of mentalities, fiction or philosophical systems, presumably without reference to what many historians consider to be the unquestioned realm of historical facts, will have to be included among the sources to be interpreted. A new theory of history may be needed in order to select and interpret new type of data. To recognize historical sources as relevant sources therefore requires more than reference to empirical truth and interpretability. It also presupposes a theory of history defining their relevance. It is never selfevident that certain items acquire a status as a relevant historical sources. A distinction between right or wrong sources is untenable in its unchangeable rigidity, whereas a distinction between relevant and irrelevant sources opens for redefinition of sources, of history, of research interest, and of fields of knowledge.

Irrelevant sources will be of three kinds. First, we have those that can not contribute with any knowledge to the type of historical processes foregrounded by the implicit or explicit theory of history

behind the criteria of relevance. My diary is an interpretable document about facts in my life, but it is completely irrelevant for the history of Denmark from any view point. Second, we face sources that are relevant under certain circumstances and which in such cases can be used on the basis of the same criteria according to which the sources of primary relevance are selected. The diary of one of the former prime ministers of Denmark may be integrated to substantiate or modify the interpretation of certain political events that have been investigated through other primary sources. This type of source I call a *supplementary source*. Third, we encounter sources that can only be declared relevant if other criteria are used than those taken into account to select, validate and interpret a given cluster of relevant sources. If not they are irrelevant. Such sources I call *complementary sources*. My argument in this paper is that literature in certain but not all contexts can play the role as a complementary source, and that this is the case in Auerbach's analysis of modern realism. Moreover, the distinctions just made will prove useful to compensate for the lack of theoretical reflection in Auerbach concerning the linkage of literature and history.

3. Auerbach and supplementary sources

When Auerbach, as mentioned above, holds that Balzac's texts are "Zeugnisse", he implicitly admits that the interpretation of literature in relation to its historical context is carried out on the conditions of the historical sources. The literary text shows lacunae that impede the interpretation. It has to be supplemented with other texts. Here knowledge of history, that is historical sources, adds a necessary dimension both of reality and of interpretability to the literary texts. Moreover, when this implicit claim is advanced both on behalf of the character (Julien Sorel) and of the author (Balzac), it is obvious that the reference to the "Konstellation des geschichtlichen Augenblicks", as we learned from Auerbach, can only be made at the price of abandoning the literariness and fictionality of literature. This is the condition for the continuous *va-et-vient* between literature and history, also, one has to add, when history learns from literature about the unavoidable

representational power of narrative techniques, as for instance in Hayden White (White 1987, cf. Ricoeur 1983-86, esp. vol. 3), or when the content of literary descriptions is used as a historical source, as for instance in Louis Chevalier (Chevalier 1978). Therefore, if Auerbach really wants to refer to literature as a "Zeugnis" of history, he will have to be theoretically more explicit. Otherwise literature will disappear as literature in front of his very interpreting eyes, while he is filling the interpretative gaps that derive from the very literariness of the texts.

His most explicit notion, the *figura*, is used to explain the relation between two phenomena separated in time and space (Auerbach 1994: 74f). A relation of the *figura* type occurs when an event or a person A refers to an event or a person B, and when event or person B at the same time contains A; B so to speak constitutes the reality of A. This is the case when for example events in Jewish history (A) as referred to in the Old Testament appear in the New Testament (B) to be prophecies about the life of Jews and therefore constitute the reality or meaningfulness of A and thus contain A (ib.: 51f). But, as Auerbach openly states, this specific meaningproduction is obsolete in modern realism (ib: 516), presumably because the relationship to be dealt with here concerns a text and its contemporary historical context. A theory that integrates historical reality in literary interpretation without ending up excluding literature is needed. The mechanism of *figura* cannot be used. Here the distinction between supplementary and complementary sources comes in.

Let us begin with a quotation and approach it in Auerbach's manner as a "Zeugnis" of history and then gradually, "almählich" as Auerbach likes it, try to improve the reading with a more consistent view of the linkage between literature and history.

Depuis le guichet qui mène au pont du Carroussel, jusqu'à la rue du Musée, tout homme venu, ne fût-ce que pour quelques jours, à Paris, remarque une dizaine de maisons à façades ruinées, où les propriétaires découragés ne font aucune réparation, et qui sont le résidu d'un ancien quartier en démolition depuis le jour où

Napoléon résolut de terminer le Louvre. La rue et l'impasse du Doyenné, voilà les seules voies intérieures de ce pâtre sombre et désert où les habitants sont probablement des fantômes, car on n'y voit jamais personne. Le pavé, beaucoup plus bas que celui de la chaussée de la rue du Musée, se trouve au niveau de celle de la rue Froidmanteau. Enterrés déjà par l'exhaussement de la place, ces maisons sont enveloppées de l'ombre éternelle que projettent les hautes galeries du Louvre, noircies de ce côté par le souffle du Nord. Les ténèbres, le silence, l'air glacial, la profondeur caverneuse du sol concourent à faire de ces maisons des espèces de cryptes, des tombeaux vivants.

Lorsqu'on passe en cabriolet le long de ce demi-quartier mort, et que le regard s'engage dans la ruelle du Doyenné, l'âme a froid, l'on se demande qui peut demeurer là, ce qui doit s'y passer le soir, à l'heure où cette ruelle se change en coupe-gorge, et où les vices de Paris, enveloppés du manteau de la nuit, se donnent pleine carrière.

Is this text a historical source as defined earlier? If yes, what sort of actual events does it document, and what sort of knowledge can we obtain about them? It certainly *might* be a source. The study of history, after all, is about changes in society and environment under the influence of human actions and motives. Working from the name of the city and street names, we can quickly localize the events described in the quotation as occurring in and near the slum quarters in the courtyard of the Louvre in Paris, during or after the reign of one of the Napoléons. The description is of a process of decay, resulting from failed human plans and actions of broad, and therefore representative, character, ranging from those of Napoléon down to those of the anonymous landlords and tenants. The failure of all of them has been made worse by unfavorable natural influences. The quarter is falling to ruin because of Napoléon's only half-realized construction project, motivated presumably by power politics, to enhance Paris' monumentality through the completion of the Louvre. For that reason,

it has become both unprofitable and dangerous to live in the quarter. All rational motives for settling in this slum having disappeared, the only people living there do so out of necessity. We could easily find other material to supplement both the data drawn from this quotation and our interpretation of it.

Seen from this perspective, a source like this text *documents* the existence of closed events that are directly dependent on, or at least bear on, human actions. Occurrences in nature, which can be documented quite precisely, do not become historical sources until they intrude on the cultural sphere and contribute to the documentation of these sorts of events as the climatic conditions referred to in the quotation (a more general example is the decline of forests due to overexploitation). When looked upon as a historical source, the reality behind the text is seen more as a series of closed states of affairs covered with human fingerprints, than as an ongoing process.

When these sources are subsequently used for *interpretation*, then we must search for the inner and reciprocal connections of the factors determining such state of affairs. We are looking for explanations primarily concerned with material actions, as they are governed by certain motives and rational interests that are causes of a certain historical situation (as regards, for example, political power, access to resources, control of trade routes or, as it might be the case in the quotation, speculation in real estate). Other types of motives (for example, fanaticism, mythological modes of consciousness, aesthetic experiences, the quest for subjective identity, self-perception, and the like) only come under consideration as secondary explanations, when other material is lacking; otherwise they are weeded out as irrational elements, and the sources in which such motives are manifested can be declared irrelevant. The interpretation of historical sources is not concerned with what motivates people to live and take part in historical reality in the first place, but rather with the competing interests within that historical reality that bring about events that can be observed and can be given an interpretation with a general perspective. As the quotation, however, suggests – "l'on se demande

qui peut demeurer là" – not everything and everyone will follow this explanatory model.

We therefore need more precise information about the actions and acting persons referred to in the quotation. And we must also be sure that our perception of place, time, and events is correct. The function of a text as a source thus depends on whether *supplementary sources* can substantiate the documentation and elaborate on the interpretation. If one has too few sources, one is forced to make guesses. If one has too many, one must pick and choose among them. What occurs in both cases is an extension of the governing explanatory model: the relevant state of affairs is a closed but complex behavioral situation, relying on certain interests. When I now reveal that the text I have used here is fiction, namely a short passage from Honoré de Balzac's novel *La Cousine Bette* from 1846 (Balzac 1966: 27) the need for an accuracy test is acute. In short: if literature is to be used as a historical source in the traditional sense, it must be supplemented. Moreover, one must pay no attention to its status as literature, because in that case there is nothing to add, and if additions are made they cannot supplement any palpable reality which in fiction by principle is absent. The patient will die, but the fever will leave him. Nevertheless, we have proceeded as Auerbach *nolens volens* would have done. We have seen the text as a "Zeugnis" of a certain historical "Augenblick", but are left somewhat dissatisfied, both in terms of interpretation, of aesthetic experience and of theory.

4. Complementary sources

At this point, literary critics and historians could part ways, and forget their kinship: "I'll take care of my literature, you take care of your history. If you forget about literature witnessing anything else than imagination, then I'll stop using your well documented but narrow picture of reality." When supplementation is the only possible way of cooperating, the study of literature will inevitably be absorbed by the study of history if they do not follow separate ways. But there is more to the idea of the historical source than supplementation, so let us

dwell at the crossroads a little longer. In fact, we are facing a problem parallel to the one Niels Bohr presented to a group of biologists at a congress in Bologna in 1937, when he was supposed to explain the insights of quantum mechanics regarding knowledge and objectivity, and apply them to other sciences (Bohr 1937).

Biologists can study living organisms as objects comprised of atoms and particles, exactly like all other physical objects, but there is a price: they must abandon attempts to explain what it means to be alive. Life becomes an axiom, rather than an object for study. The question: What does it mean to be alive? cannot be asked. Conversely, if one wants to understand physical organisms as living, one must bring in factors from beyond physics, such as instinct, intentionality, memory, speech and so on, and take the very physicality of the phenomenon for granted. Now the question: What does it mean to be a material entity? cannot be asked. Bohr's point is that one cannot merely stick the two kinds of knowledge together and thus create a single larger kind of knowledge. A continuous integration of supplementary sources toward a more and more encompassing synthesis is not possible. One must accept that in certain case to understand different phenomena we must create different types of knowledge, which may all be correct on their own terms, but cannot be converted into some common denominator. They are, as Bohr said, *complementary*.

The same logic is at work when when history and literary studies deal with sources (cf. Larsen 1994). In their use of sources, historians must also take it for granted that behind the closed state of affairs under observation, there is a continuous process that we ourselves are part of, and that people, including ourselves, are motivated to take part in it, even if we cannot objectify this relationship (as, for example, psychology, anthropology, or aesthetics set out to do). It is only when grounded on this presupposition that our knowledge about the epochs or situations we distantly observe as cut out of the historical process becomes relevant historical knowledge. The question: What is the historical process? cannot be asked. Literary studies, too, rely on implicit presuppositions. They will have to assume that there

exists a reality with which literature is both relying on and playing around with. Fiction would be powerless and culturally irrelevant were there not a reality to deny, to distort, to turn upside down etc. The question: What is reality? cannot be asked without the answer being trapped by Epimenides' paradox: It is true that I'm lying.

In this perspective it becomes clear that history and literary studies do not deal with the same object, but with each other's tacit presuppositions as, for example, when Lukács through literature asks the question about the nature of the historical process. Only if the basic assumptions of the two interpretative enterprises are the same, as Auerbach seems to believe in the chapter on realism, the continuous supplementing process is possible. And this, I believe, is a rare case. And if they are not identical, then the problem arises when and on what conditions a complementary use of sources, in history and in literary studies, is possible and relevant.

I hold that such conditions are historical, and not essential based on, say, the universal nature of art. Furthermore, they are bound to historical phenomena that are not mere events or state of affairs, but fundamental principles for our participation in history. Finally, they become necessary conditions for the use of complementary sources if they materialize in historical complexes that both change the physical lay-out of our environments and challenge our ideas both of what events, situations, state of affairs really are, what the historical flow is, and what the reality is that literature is playing around with. To refer to historical reality as a historical moment, as Auerbach does, is too vague although he develops it a little. Lukács, on the other hand, is far too general when he points to the changing subject-object relations during capitalism as the objective basis of literature.

5. The modern city and complementary sources

I will propose that *the modern city* as a historical phenomenon is a historical locus where the complementary use of sources is possible and relevant in relation to modern realism. This paper is not the place to give a detailed account of the development of urban culture. When

urban forms, first in Europe and a little later in the USA, became expansive especially from the 19th century onward, it turned into a global phenomenon that redefined whatever local urban forms it met with, or developed from. Its effects, therefore, reach beyond the city limits and become a cross-cultural structuring of quotidian life on all levels. Therefore it has become increasingly difficult to rely on traditional categories of time, space, and action and, therefore, also difficult to define historical sources, in order to aid our understanding of the city in its entirety as a historical phenomenon.

This is where literature comes in – as one very specific source of information, among many, about such historical complexes. Its value in this regard derives from three characteristics that are truly related to its status as literary fiction, but very different from the quasi-objective descriptionism Auerbach refers to:

1) In literature, people's reflections on their own identity and sense of belonging are braided *inextricably* together with references to their relationship to the environment and each other. In a reality that takes on the forms of permanent flux, such as the urban environment, this indissoluble bond stands at the core of a person's reworking of reality, even if it is still not organized into representative, rational patterns of self-interest and action that can be traced in the usual type of historical sources.

2) Literature is concerned with the continual, actual influence of imaginary, which is to say *unreal*, representations on the thoughts and actions of people. Thus, for example, the urban mass is seldom a clearly defined physical entity, but is instead an agitated tug of war between the anonymous individual and the riotous crush. But in the urban conceptual realm, all this becomes one entity, the Mass, which represents a perpetual force, both attractive and repulsive, for actions, regardless of whether they are imaginary or not. The Mass is only a reality if it is real as a symbolic phenomenon (cf. Rudé 1964, Canetti 1985).

3) This brings us to literature's third important characteristic: its concern with the representations and effects of experiences at the

threshold of consciousness. This makes literature a valuable source for cultural knowledge that flows from the aesthetic form and aesthetic experience. In periods of transition, as is the case of the emerging metropolis and the entire period in which Auerbach locates modern realism, the threshold of what is consciously perceived or conceptualized and what is not, merge into each other and gets a new effect which is difficult to trace in sources according to the usual two criteria: unambiguous empirical verifiability and clear intentional interpretability. There is no doubt in my mind that the literature of modern realism that Auerbach calls a "Zeugnis" of a historical moment, embraces a historical reality of an urban origin penetrated by the material and cognitive instability just described. The interpretation of such a historical reality therefore needs literature as a complementary source that can focus our attention on the three aspects of human experience articulated in literature: the relation between identity and environment, the effect of the unreal on the real, and the threshold between consciousness and unconsciousness.

6. Sources of Self-Interpretation

Let us briefly return to the Balzac quotation to see how the complementarity works. On the one hand, the text gives us a description of a concrete, easily recognizable local space, while on the other hand, all the actions that might fill this space are either unreal (the landlords cannot do anything, the tenants are ghosts) or hypothetical (the text can only postulate what "tout homme" who comes to Paris will remark, or that the "on", driving by in the cab and looking into the alley, will fantasize about "ce qui doit s'y passer"). Thus the reality is depicted as simultaneously real and unreal. It is just this sort of universe that literature is good at representing.

The character of such spatial reality without fixed common objective features is therefore tied to the direct experience of the body. Sensation in the Balzac text is primarily confined to two senses: the sense involving distance – sight – which demarcates for us the limiting horizon for our actions, and enables us to keep a certain distance from

things close by; and the intimate sense, touch, which forms the ultimate border between our own body and the world around us, including the bodies of others, that forces itself upon us, here expressed in metaphors that are tied to confinement, concealment, cold, death and other expressions for the experience of a threatening intimacy. These two types of experience, oriented in opposite directions: away from oneself and toward oneself, are mastered in the private compartment, the cab, which remains in constant movement, protected by the distancing effect of the visual sense.

Such a reality, half actual, half hypothetical, in which one must keep in constant movement, rather than settle peacefully in a place, gives no opportunity for the achievement of some grand perceptual synthesis, rather nothing more than individual survival in whatever way possible (which is the concern of many of Balzac's novels, including this one, whose protagonist, la cousine Bette, lives in the Rue du Doyenné). The text therefore holds several views of the city: that of the narrator, who throws out hypotheses and "se demande" and therefore does not completely understand what is going on; and those of various anonymous persons, of which two kinds are merely chance passersby (the "on" driving by in the carriage, and the "tout homme"), while the two others (landlords and tenants) are, in principal, permanent residents, but in fact are as impotent and unreal as ghosts. A place, to be a place, acquires an identity, and it undergoes development through interconnected action and perception – but not here. The text cannot therefore be subsumed under one conception of the city that we could assign to Balzac like the contemporary theories of biology and mentality that Balzac is a "Zeugnis" of according to Auerbach. To look for an omniscient narrator as a spokesman of Balzac is not of much help. He is here identified with the "on" in the hurriedly passing carriage, at a safe distance, throwing out a cursory but frightened glance out of the window. (There are other literary texts about the city, including some by Balzac, that present a more unified perspective, but all texts from the 19th and 20th centuries have urban instability as a thematic assumption.)

What can be said about people who take part in a process that simultaneously transforms them and their environment, displaces *their* identity and *its* character of reality? The very problem of subjective identity as coexistent with an environment of an unstable identity is at the heart of a historical complex such as the modern metropolis. Knowledge of such phenomena is what literature can offer. And when they are crucial to a historical reality, literature becomes crucial as well. If you want to know what the city and its cultural impact really is, and only wish to use traditional historical sources and make your conclusions along the lines of traditional use of the sources, you will not grasp the reality of the city. After all, Balzac is right in *Le Père Goriot*: "Ah! sachez-le: ce drame n'est ni une fiction, ni un roman. *All is true*, il est si véritable, que chacun peut en reconnaître les éléments chez soi, dans son cœur peut-être." (Balzac 1965: 217). And maybe he feels the thrill of the narrator Mira Jama in Isak Dinesen's story "The Diver": "It is to a poet a thing of awe to find that his story is true" (Dinesen 1958: 15).

The conditions for the interplay between history and literature are both bound to the narrative activity itself, to the power of literary form, and to the events and material involved in the narration. The historical sources present these conditions on three levels: 1) An *ontological* level – what is the ontological status of texts, events, texts as events generating historical events, social structures etc.? This is the level that mainly preoccupies Lukács. 2) An *epistemological* level – what type of knowledge do we obtain from the sources, what do they witness? Here Auerbachs is situated. 3) A *methodological* level – how do we distinguish between relevant and irrelevant, supplementary and complementary sources, how do we subsequently analyse the linkage of literature and history?

7. Textual analysis

My intention is not to denigrate historical source-reading and to offer literary insight as a way to redeem it. After all, I would not be able to conduct research on literature without anchoring myself in the human

experiences that historical knowledge describes, however literarily formulated. Neither am I arguing that all historians should begin to mine literature for material to fill the holes in their knowledge. Of course, literary texts and historical sources do not always need each other. The appropriateness of that approach depends on what sort of problems one is studying. There are historical subjects that have no relation to literature and art, and there are literary problems that can be dealt with without an explicit connection to history. But if one focuses on a historical complex of problems of the type that sets reality in operation – and it is this type that I cherish – then the use of complementary and not just supplementary sources is necessary to gain insight in the fact that the reality of the imagined, the reality of self-identity, and the reality of the unconscious is as real and influential on the flow of events as any navy, economical breakdown or territorial boundary. And when it becomes necessary to adopt such a complementary perspective, then one must also employ different methods for reading texts. That is the requirement, both of historians and of students of literature.

The reading of both literary texts and historical sources must indeed be meticulous. Thoroughness consists not only in having all the details; it requires having methods for organizing them. I will not examine reading methods here. But it is clear that as soon as one decides to use literature as a source, one cannot avoid paying attention to its representative techniques – the use of narrators, metaphors and other indirect forms of expression – precisely because literature's special knowledge, as just referred to in the three points, is often of fractured experiences that can be represented only in this way. And even when historical sources are sources of knowledge that can be verified beyond the sources, they have no effect until the knowledge is presented to someone and thus rhetorically embedded. In this case, too, the form and technique of presentation is important. After all, historiography has grown out of a literary genre, the tale or the story, and hence out of a basic human activity close to literature on which historians are still dependent: the story telling. This narrative or epic

genre is the aesthetic form in which people, actions and environment are combined and shaped so that they can be understood as parts of a process of self-interpretation, before we even know if the process is real or fictitious. Narration is the basis for Homer, Saxo, Balzac, and any national history. Rightly considered, it is exactly this that makes both history and literature exciting: by telling what we know, we become part of the reality we are talking about. This excitement is irresistibly present in Auerbach's *Mimesis*, but methodologically and theoretically it does not bring him to a more refined interrelationship between history and literature than mere supplementing.

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