scope and intelligence of Thomas Peterson's enterprise makes of *Alberto Moravia* an indispensable addition to Moravia criticism.

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Cristina Della Coletta. *Plotting the Past. Metamorphoses of Historical Narrative in Modern Italian Fiction*. Indiana: Purdue University Press, 1996. Pp. 268.

Nietzsche once wrote that "[t]he measurement of the opinions and deeds of the past by the universal opinions of the present is called 'objectivity'" (*The Use and Abuse of History* 44). He subsequently alters this assumption by suggesting that an objective plotting of history is naive since the narrative rendering of past events is by necessity mediated through the present act of interpretative organization, itself a highly subjective (and therefore, literary) strategy that "requires above all a great artistic faculty" (46). For Nietzsche, therefore, historical writing is not objective but is essentially a literary enterprise involving a subjective reconfiguration of the past by means of the discursive practices of the present which have an organizing function as that which imposes sense on contingent past events. In Nietzsche's definition of history writing: "its real value lies in inventing ingenious variations on a probably commonplace theme, in raising the popular melody to a universal symbol and showing what a world of depth, power and beauty exists in it" (46).

In exposing the aesthetic and relative nature of historical narrative and the fictional status of epistemological objectivity (which Nietzsche calls a "pious illusion") Nietzsche aligns himself with contemporary postmodern poetics which classify all textual documentation of the past as subjective discourses, the epistemological foundations of which are determined by the literary principle of "emplotment" (*Plotting* 60). That is, only by artificially organizing the temporal events comprising experience within the contained framework offered by a narrative plot do the incidents of the past become ordered, acquire continuity and are, therefore, intelligible to the human mind.

In *Plotting the Past* Cristina Della Coletta recalls Nietzsche's dictum by itemizing novels that self-consciously explore and expose the subjective nature of the literary "emplotment" of the past. The author shows that the self-legitimizing powers of alternative fiction-making thematized in postmodern historical novels ("critical historical novel") question and subvert standard historical factuality and reveal the essentially provisional and highly subjective status of all knowledge and historical discourse. The fact that all forms of acquired knowledge originate from textuality and are organized by the subjectivity of the author suggests that the act of writing itself offers alternative forms of knowledge which may be seen as subverting and challenging normative historical truths and exposing the latter as fictional constructs.

In concert with other theorists (Hutcheon, Eco, Jameson) Della Coletta contends that the postmodern revival of historical fiction writing is underpinned by a self-aware critical revisiting of the historical novel's ontological and epistemological relation

with historical events and with the discursive knowledge-yielding modalities shaping those events into intelligible facts (*Poetics of Postmodernism*. New York & London: U of Toronto P, 1988. 89). In her Introductory chapter Della Coletta writes: "Transformative and revisionist, these 'critical' historical novels embark on a discussion of the meaning of writing within the genre of historical fiction, thus participating in the evolution of the genre while also charting its historical development, assessing its aesthetic function, and evaluating its hermeneutical power" (*Plotting 2*). Departing from the premise that knowledge of experience (unorganized events devoid of narrative sense) becomes meaningful only when relegated to textuality (emplotment of facts), postmodern aesthetics reveal that the past as narrative history is essentially a discursive re-organization of events which, prior to the act of textual intervention, "do not exist for any historian" (*A Poetics* 122). As such, discourses of history are subjective interpretations which have been selected among others as the transmitters of historical information. Given the fact that historiography is a result of selection, exclusion and interpretation, the narrated past as a putative attestation of truth, according to Della Coletta, has come under critical revision in order to include historical perspectives that have been silenced by traditional accounts, thus revealing the essentially fictive, and therefore, provisional nature of all epistemological discourse. The "hybrid genre" which undertakes such a task Della Coletta calls the "critical historical novel," otherwise known as "historiographic meta-fiction" (*A Poetics*). The novel is comprised of historical events which, once organized within a plot, acquire the status of narrative facts which paradoxically embrace and undermine the alleged truth claims of historical sources, ultimately revealing the latter's fictive and discursive status and questioning all forms of authoritative discourse. According to Della Coletta, the telology of this questioning of authority is to alter ideological perceptions and communicate a paradigm of social tolerance which may be seen as promoting the acceptance of traditionally silenced heterogeneous points of view, such as feminist discourse, ethnic discourse and all forms of marginal experience.

A case in point is Della Coletta's chapter dedicated to the examination of Elsa Morante's *La storia*. This "critical historical novel" is an example of the ways in which the past, as inscribed in traditional historical discourse, has silenced the marginal elements of society, such as women and children. Della Coletta argues that the novel voices the idea that, inasmuch as history has relegated all forms of experience which have traditionally struggled against the normative philosophy of patriarchal order or influence to silence, it is evil and immoral. Therefore, "Truth is set on the side of the fictional invention that acquires, in this way, an important ethical value. Fictional reality bears the essence of a valuable historical and poetic truth, one that recounts the parallel story of women, children, and other marginal characters as they cope, endure, and in their different ways challenge the dominant order" (123). Thus fiction, by voicing the individual struggle of characters who are validated in their inventions of alternative constructs, aims at subverting hierarchical differentiation and in its place install a universal tolerance for diversity.

In light of the fact that the novel genre is considered to be the literary locus where both history and fiction collide and where history's epistemological and ethical limitations are exposed, Della Coletta's thesis may be seen as purporting the notion that the novel genre be seen as the intellectual, epistemological and ideological forum for a critical discussion and rethinking of the normative historical discourses of the past for

the purpose of demonstrating a self-conscious coming to terms with the fact that all knowledge of experience as inscribed in historical documents is essentially discursive and subjective, and therefore, in need of critical re-assessment. Given this questioning of normative epistemological structures, one can assume that by examining novels which shift the locus of historical meaning from author to character, from text to reader and from alleged objectivity to concrete subjectivity, Della Coletta places herself within the on-going debate regarding the Postmodern preoccupation with the epistemological fragmentation of knowledge and with the implications to the literary configuration of experience. Such implications, according to Della Coletta, are manifested in the dynamic composition of the "modern critical historical novel," the formal structure of which reflects the necessity to rethink traditional attitudes and normative and absolutist ways of thinking about the world.

Thus the heuristic strategy Della Coletta adopts in her study is to juxtapose Alessandro Manzoni's normative assumptions about the historical novel with three modern "critical historical novels" which, by intermingling historical factuality with fictional invention, demonstrate a challenge and a critical reassessment of the discursive practices which shape and organize human experience.

In the two introductory chapters which are dedicated to expounding Manzoni's normative poetics within a dynamic theory of genre, the author embarks on a critical discussion which aims to show that Manzoni's "Promessi sposi" and his proscriptive treatise "On the Historical Novel" (in which Manzoni subsequently rejected the historical novel genre on the grounds that its hybrid form is contradictory to the achievement of truth) underscore an epistemological as well as a dialectical connection with the three novels she has chosen to analyze. Because these novels are symbiotic genres itemizing both historical fact and fictitious events, all three challenge (and therefore revise) Manzoni's normative assumptions about the historical novel's claim to truth by demonstrating the epistemological and ethical validity of fictional organizations and reconstructions of human experience.

The critical novels therefore demonstrate how individual perceptions of history are aesthetically organized and therefore subject to the inherent principles of literary organization. Since history and fiction are intertwined, it stands to reason that fiction, in exposing the provisional status of historical documentation and the ethical validity of alternative constructs, concurrently exposes history as a doxastic world, as essentially another discursive construct the goal of which is to organize reality according to idiosyncratic paradigms encoded in literary emplotment.

The novels constituting Della Coletta's study are Tomasi di Lampedusa's *Il gattopardo*, Elsa Morante's *La Storia*, and Umberto Eco's *Il nome della rosa*. Situating the discussion of the novels within the light of contemporary critical methodologies such as dynamic genre theory, reader response, feminist criticism and the linguistically oriented Italian avant-guard, Della Coletta thematizes how Modern Italian historiographic fiction, in challenging Manzoni's notion of genre purity ("the classical tenet of the separation of genres") by integrating and interspersing historical fact with fictional structures, breaths new life into the genre Manzoni popularized in Italy and reconfigures it within the context of the essential issues (such as the "delegitimation" of absolute knowledge by fictional alternatives) characterizing postmodern literary aesthetics. Conversely, in validating Manzoni's view that "historians are, in a way, storytellers" who partake of the latter's fictional tools in order "to better represent the

variety and complexity of historical reality," these three critical narratives moreover serve as a legacy to Manzoni's position as one who theorized and contemplated upon "the problematic and contradictory parameters of a genre which inevitably shapes and renders intelligible the apparent chaos of historical occurrence" (198).

Thus, according to Della Coletta, the modern critical historical novel not only self-consciously criticizes its own discursive and signifying practices by underscoring the epistemological validity of fiction-making, but moreover reveals a "critical tête-à-tête" with Manzoni's own assumptions about the fictional inevitability of historical reconstruction. In fact, in the chapters dedicated to the analysis of the novels, Della Coletta not only itemizes the latter as examples of a postmodern disclosure of the limitations and the "culturally and historically determined strategies" of knowledge, but the author also succeeds in revealing the precursory nature of Manzoni's changing views; for as author of the *On the Historical Novel*, however strongly Manzoni promoted the classical tenet and relegated truth to a discernable "historical referent," as the author of the *Promessi sposi* he showed nevertheless that "[f]acts exist only in and through plots in which they take importance imposed upon them by the historiographer's logic," thereby artistically delineating how his brand of "historiography exploits the novel's narrative strategies to explain the multifarious variety as well as the 'true' order of history" (66, 68).

From chapters two through four Della Coletta focuses her analysis on the fact that the three exemplary novels document a challenge to Manzoni's normative aesthetics by promoting alternative fictions to traditional historical factuality, thereby demonstrating "how genres do not objectively and neutrally catalog" historical change, but rather offer alternative subjective interpretations of experience which are ethically more viable than historical accounts. Accordingly, Lampedusa's novel challenges Manzoni's realist precepts by thematizing a highly subjective character (Don Fabrizio) whose interpretations of the past differ conspicuously from those of the central focalizing agent, thereby engendering an interpretative dialectic between official history and personal history. Don Fabrizio's dreamy escapes in the exotic Sicily of his youthful memories is juxtaposed to the harsh reality of relentless historical change which is demonstrated in the younger generation's embrace of a new political and social paradigm based on middle-class values. However illusory Don Fabrizio's alternative world may be, it does nevertheless symbolize the self-legitimizing function of fiction and the necessity to rethink history in terms of personal experience.

Equally significant is Morante's novel as it becomes the site of a voicing of a feminist point of view which, similar to Lampedusa's novel, offers alternative modes "of making sense of reality and the past" and reveals how a fictionalization of experience preserves and represents the "marginal figures" of the past which authoritative and normative patriarchal history writing have relegated to silence.

Eco's novel is strategically placed in the final chapter not only because of its obvious chronology, but because it is the most revisionist insofar as it thematically and structurally complements the previous two novels by offering a multifarious selection of intertexts and subjective interpretations of history which question the validity of all discursive constructs, and therefore stands as an optimal example of the literary fragmentation of experience and the fictionality and changeability of historical interpretations. This novel which is comprised of allusions to other texts and therefore, to other systems of knowledge, is suggestive of the necessity of the modern novel to embrace a

variety of epistemological discourses in its attempts to account for an equally fragmented experiential reality.

In conclusion, Della Coletta's study is a well-organized account of the fact that what we see in the world is not nearly as important as how we negotiate it through narrative means. Put in another way, what we see and come to know in the world are sanctioned only because they are offered to us through an agent's subjective narrative. Events relentlessly evolve and change, but it is the agent of perception that ultimately organizes these experiences into intelligible facts loaded with existential meaning. It is this meaning-making responsibility that critical historical novels wish to thematize, and in doing so reveal the import of the act of narration. Therefore, the way we negotiate the world is by virtue of cognitive tools and interpretative "grids" which are based on the fundamental principles of literary emplotment. Each novel Della Coletta analyzed within the methodological framework of Manzoni's normative aesthetics and within the post-modern paradigm catalogues the universal and ethical validity of art (novel genre) as a cultural phenomenon whose principle function is to impose self-validation and legitimation upon experience, to voice the concerns of individuals, to arrange existence into a meaningful unit and to encourage us to accept our ethical responsibilities towards the formation of a more tolerant society. Della Coletta's study therefore, in revealing the epistemological possibilities of fiction and in proposing to view the modern "critical historical novel" as a possible counterpart and alternative to factual reconstructions and organizations of experience, illustrates the ethical function of literature, the purpose of which is to act "as a mediator between the real and the ideal, between humanity and truth, thus contributing to the betterment of human nature" (26).

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Ezio Raimondi. *Conversazioni. Una speranza contesa*. A cura di Davide Rondoni. Rimini: Guarnaldi, 1998.

Il curatore di questo godibilissimo libro, ossia il sollecitatore della conversazione (ma delle sollecitazioni è traccia solo nella breve introduzione), è un giovane di Forlì responsabile del Centro di Poesia Contemporanea dell'Università di Bologna, poeta lui stesso e traduttore. L'autore sollecitato è uno dei più noti italianisti del nostro tempo, classe 1924, bolognese oltre che, sin dal secondo dopoguerra, docente di letteratura italiana all'Università di Bologna. Uno dei pochi a cui oggi, senza stare qui a dar l'elenco dei suoi titoli (sta per sommi capi nei risvolti di copertina), possiamo all'unanimità attribuire a pieno merito il nome di maestro. Dice bene il curatore *in limine* che "un incontro è sempre un avvenimento contro il sistema" e dice meglio Raimondi alla fine del libro: "l'incontro rende uguali, ed ogni incontro è una novità" (169). C'è oggi un moltiplicarsi di riflessioni su cosa sia un incontro: ne è un segno *La conoscenza personale*, pure fresco di stampa, di Roberta de Monticelli. Sarà dunque anche un segno dei tempi, in un mondo in cui, nel lavoro e nell'ozio, si vive di fatto davanti allo schermo, quindi sempre più in quella che chiamano realtà virtuale; un