

## REVIEWS

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**Lubomír Doležel. *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History: The Postmodern Stage*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010, 171 pp. ISBN 978-0-8018-9463-3**

*Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* is the fourth book by Lubomír Doležel published in English. Though Doležel, a Czech-born Canadian narratologist, is nearly ninety years old, he still observes the rule he set for himself in the 1960s, that is, to publish a new monograph every decade. Consequently, *O stylu moderní české prózy* (On the Style of Modern Czech Prose, 1960) was followed by *Narrative Modes in Czech Literature* (1973) and an original history of the structuralist theory of literature, *Occidental Poetics: Tradition and Progress* (1990). His conception of the theory of possible worlds and the theory of literary fiction, which he developed in articles beginning in the 1970s, culminated in the book *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds* (1998) and the volume under review.

In *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* Doležel follows on consistently from *Heterocosmica*, applying its concepts and theories to a new problem. Whereas *Heterocosmica* offers a new theory of fictional representation with the key concept of 'fictional worlds', which contain the entities that the text of the fictional work represents, *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* points, by means of this theory, to the fundamental differences between fictional and historical representation.

The relationship between the fictional and the factual has been important to narratology since the 1970s. For a long time, however, the emphasis was only on the first member of the pair. This was because it was necessary to defend the autonomy of fiction against the claim that in fiction it was a matter merely of 'pretended speech acts',<sup>1</sup> and also because narratologists had chosen material for their analyses almost exclusively from the area of fiction. Thus, in the early 1990s, a leading French narratologist, Gérard Genette, admitted his 'own guilt, having once chosen the title *Narrative Discourse* [*Discours du récit*, 1972; English ed., 1980] for a study that was manifestly limited to fictional narrative, and having repeated the offense in *Narrative Discourse Revisited* [*Nouveau discours du récit*, 1983; English ed., 1988], despite a theoretical protest against this excessively one-sided practice of what really should be called a *restricted narratology*'.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> John R. Searle, 'The Logical Status of Fictional Discourse', in idem, *Expression and Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 58–75, 74.

<sup>2</sup> Gérard Genette, *Fiction and Diction* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 55–6.

It was in the book *Fiction & Diction* that Genette attempted to make up for this shortcoming. Here he tries to use the concepts and theories of his own two discussions of narration, which sought to determine the difference between fictional narrative and factual narrative. His chief premise is that the difference appears not in the content, but in the mode of narration, to be specific, in the relationship between the author and the narrator. 'It seems to me,' Genette claims, 'that their rigorous identification ( $A = N$ ), insofar as it can be established, defines factual narrative.'<sup>3</sup> And, he adds, 'I would not say, however, that there is an *index* here allowing us to distinguish fiction from nonfiction'.<sup>4</sup> It seems, then, that if it is clear that the author and the narrator are the same person, we are facing a factual narrative, but if they are not, we are still facing fiction. But can we, in general, justifiably postulate that the author and the narrator are identical? Genette's concluding words on this question, unfortunately do not offer much certainty: 'It is no doubt the most difficult relation to pin down (thus providing a bone to pick for narratologists), and it is sometimes the most ambiguous, as is, after all, the relation between truth and fiction: who would dare rule on the status of Nerval's *Aurelia*, or Breton's *Nadja*?'<sup>5</sup>

Doležel's approach initially appears analogical to Genette's. First of all, he constructed his theory of fiction, which he has now applied to the relationship between fictional and historical narration. Doležel's theory of fiction, unlike Genette's rhetorical theory, is not, however, aimed primarily at the text.<sup>6</sup> It is ontological. Doležel thus does not remain at the level of the text, but creates a model of context too, which he calls a fictional world. From Doležel's point of view Genette's differentiation thus gains ontological support: the author is always part of the actual world, whereas the narrator refers either to the fictional world or the historical, depending on what context the text belongs to. A problem arises, however, concerning what context to include the text in and it is this question which *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* touches upon.

Typical of Doležel's approach in this volume is, on the one hand, the attempt to anchor the whole question historically and, on the other, a strong sense of involvement. Because Doležel believes that the difficulties in the relationship between the fictional and historical acquired a particular urgency in the postmodern period, he seeks to define the period in theoretical terms in his

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>6</sup> For Genette's special concept of literary rhetoric, see Christopher Harlos, 'Rhetoric, Structuralism, and Figurative Discourse: Gérard Genette's Concept of Rhetoric,' *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 19 (1986): 209–23.

introductory 'Remarks on Postmodernism'. And in the analytical chapters of the book (Chs 3–5) he focuses on postmodern historical and fictional texts. The strong sense of involvement stems from the way in which the theoretical core of the book is formulated (Chs 1 and 2). In Chapter One he introduces the 'postmodern challenge', the subject of which is the claim that there is no substantial difference between historical narrative and fictional narrative, whereas in Chapter Two he defends their essential difference. Grasping the problem as a political struggle is not an end in itself, for awareness of this difference has, according to Doležel, serious ethical consequences: without it human knowledge cannot really develop.

We must now deal with the question of what position Doležel himself has taken. Thomas Pavel, another prominent theorist of fictional worlds, claims: 'despite differences in tone and style, Doležel's work belongs to the same intellectual family as deconstruction and postmodernism.'<sup>7</sup> But this family has many branches and Doležel himself in his introductory 'Remarks on Postmodernism' recognizes three of them. He calls the most radical of them the ideology of 'endism' (p. 5), which, with its rejection of logocentrism, de facto excludes any cognitive activity. The second variant of postmodern thinking is, according to Doležel, less radical; rather than wholly rejecting knowledge, it puts it on new ontological and epistemological foundations. In this branch Doležel includes deconstruction in literary criticism and with the authors of the 'postmodern challenge' to historiography, Roland Barthes and Hayden White. The third branch is, according to Doležel, 'moderate' (p. 5), for it does not reject the advances made and tested by the previous stages of history, primarily the modernist, but partly perhaps also the positivist. It is in this third branch that Doležel would see 'a prefigurement of new postmodern developments' (p. 6) and we could, in return, see Doležel as a representative of this branch of postmodernism.

The essence of the 'postmodern challenge', which was formulated by Barthes and White, is presented in Chapter One. Barthes, at a more general level, claims that language and, together with it, narrative cannot refer to anything beyond themselves, and because historiography can be expressed only by means of language and narrative, its relationship to the real world is only pretended and is actually no different from the one offered by works of fiction, from which it anyway borrows many of its devices. White's view is markedly more concrete and consists in differentiating between two levels of historical narrative: a lower

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Pavel, 'Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds', review of *Heterocosmica: Fiction and Possible Worlds*, by Lubomir Doležel, *Comparative Literature* 52 (2000): 266.

level, comprising individual events, and a higher level of poetic and rhetorical emplotment, which is the 'way by which a sequence of events fashioned into a story is gradually revealed to be a story of a particular kind'.<sup>8</sup> Doležel rejects Barthes's view for the simple reason that, according to him, it strips historiography of the possibility of empirical knowledge. The danger of White's distinction, Doležel believes, is in his conception of the second level of historical narrative. For whereas White relativistically claims that the history of an event or period may be written in any genre, Doležel reckons that we must, by scholarly research, determine which 'genre' stands closest to it, that is to say, that the meaning that we ascribe to the past is not arbitrary, but is derived from empirical knowledge.

Doležel takes up the postmodern challenge in Chapter Two, 'Representation of the Past and Possible Worlds'. Here he claims that a mere appeal to 'the truth functionality of historical discourse' (p. 28) is not enough to rebut it. What is necessary is to shift 'the problem of the relationship between fiction and history from the level of discourse to the level of world' (p. 33). From this point of view, Doležel believes, the functional and structural differences between works of fiction and works of history are palpable. The chief difference in their functions is, according to him, that the fictional worlds are 'imaginary alternates of the actual world' (p. 33), whereas the fictional worlds are 'cognitive models of the actual past' (p. 33), whereby the term 'model', as he states in a note, means a 'cognitive tool applicable not only to historical universals ("laws" of society or epoch) but also, and primarily, to ordered sets of particular units – sequences of historical events, constellations of historical persons, designs of individual periods, and so on' (p. 134). In terms of structure, these two kinds of world then differ in three fundamental respects. First, a historical world must, unlike a fictional world, be physically possible and logically consistent. Second, whereas the traits of the figures of a historical world must be 'reconstructed from available evidence' (p. 37), the creator of fiction can ignore this requirement. And third, whereas gaps in a fictional world cannot be filled, because they are of an ontological nature, gaps in a historical world are epistemological, and can therefore be filled by new evidence. But the most fundamental distinction between a historical world and fictional world is at the pragmatic level. A fictional world is a result of an act of *poiesis* (a work of imagination), whereas a historical world stems from *noesis* (the play of cognition). This difference at the pragmatic level has its consequences at the level of the text: fictional

<sup>8</sup> Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7.

statements are performatives with 'lack of truth valuation' and historical statements are constatives with 'the attending truth functionality' (p. 44).

The analytical part of the book focuses on three groups of texts: postmodern historiography (Ch. 3), postmodern historical fiction (Ch. 4), and counterfactual narratives of the past (Ch. 5). Considering these kinds of text, Doležel demonstrates his theoretical starting points and also demonstrates the importance of distinguishing between the historical and the fictional. Postmodern historiography is represented in Doležel's book by Simon Schama's works, for 'features and qualities of postmodern historiography are nowhere more apparent' (p. 52). Doležel concentrates on three books by Schama (on the French Revolution, the cultural history of the landscape, and the death of General James Wolfe in 1759), and provides an analysis of their stylistic devices and world-construing techniques. His conclusion is that Schama 'gets personally, almost physically close to the past, lives a surrogate life there surrounded by its people, messages, images' and 'it allows him to be both "objective" and subjective, to engage both historical research techniques and fictional imagination, to construct both historical and fictional worlds without confusing them' (p. 83).

The aim of the subsequent chapter is to demonstrate that the 'practice of postmodern historical fiction [...] denies the equation postulated by the postmodern challenge' (p. 100), because it uses history as something different from itself. A certain knowledge of historical facts (as historical facts) is, after all, necessary for an understanding of historical fiction even in the postmodern period. This is because its reader must obtain the relevant data from the 'common cultural encyclopedia' (p. 86) in order to be able to distinguish between fictional and fictionalized characters in the structure, for example, of an historical novel. It is necessary because the author, in creating a character with a counterpart in the real world, counts on the reader's knowing something about this person, and can, while developing his character, thus play with the meeting and disappointing of the reader's expectations. Doležel's analysis demonstrates that this game is even essential to postmodern historical fiction.

The last chapter deals with counterfactual narratives, which historians use to explore variants of historical developments that, though possible, did not actually take place, and whose essential feature is that all of their worlds are 'semantically fictional' (p. 122). Counterfactual thinking has indeed furnished historiography with some new insights: the 'idea of the contingency of history and the idea of the need to construct historical worlds as multidimensional models' (p. 119). Hence Doležel must answer the question whether fiction is a cognitive tool. Yes, it can be, he decides, but 'the construction of the fictional

counterfactual worlds has to approximate as closely as possible the procedures of historical-worlds construction' (p. 124). In the analytical chapters, Doležel has thus succeeded in demonstrating that both for postmodern historiography and for postmodern historical fiction, even for the extreme case of counterfactual history, in which historians use fiction to expand their understanding (and ours), it holds that they cannot get by in their work without differentiating between the historical and the fictional.

In his new book Doležel has undoubtedly achieved the aim that he has set himself here: he has credibly cast doubt on the claims of his opponents and has marshalled ingenious arguments to do so. The postmodern challenge has thus been met and the game of knowledge can continue. To what breadth and depth depends on how much the adherents of endism and the postmodern challenge will heed Doležel. But the reader of *Heterocosmica* may have expected something different from this book – namely a thoroughly worked-out theory of historical representation and a detailed model of an historical world, in short that which Doležel in his previous book masterfully achieved for the sphere of fiction.

In the book under review Doležel concentrates on postmodern historiography, one of whose features is a return to the history of events and their presentation by means of narration, which, however, is understood differently from traditional historiography. Yet for a complete theory of historical representation one would also need a thorough analysis of typical features of modernist historiography. Its fundamental principle is well described by an excerpt from a work by the historian Georg Iggers, quoted by Doležel, concerning Braudel's history of the Mediterranean, 'which distinguishes three different times, each with its own speed: the almost stationary time of the Mediterranean as a geographical space (*long durée*), the slow time of changes in social and economic structures (*conjunctures*), and the fast time of political events (*événements*)' (p. 134).<sup>9</sup> These differences in time are derived from the overall configuration of this model of history, in which modernist historians have emphasized social and economic structures, paying less attention to the level of events. Postmodern historians sought to rectify this when they began to show greater interest in the history of events, but that does not mean that they began to move beyond the modernist model of history. On the contrary, it is fair to see the multidimensional model of counterfactual historiography mentioned by Doležel as a promising means of solving the complicated relationship between the level of structures and the

<sup>9</sup> See Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, vols 1–2 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

level of events. For researchers in the sphere of historical representation, however, a difficult problem arises here, I believe – namely, what role do those *conjectures*, inevitably represented in all fiction (though differing from one author to the next), play in the historical world?

A person potentially interested in coming to terms with this problem will have at hand one sure and valuable support in Doležel's two most recent works.

In conclusion, one must add that the English edition of *Possible Worlds of Fiction and History* is not identical in content with the Czech edition, which was published by Academia two years ago under the title *Fikce a historie v období postmoderny*.<sup>10</sup> To give an idea of the extent of the changes I would mention that the bibliography now contains more than fifty additional authors. One of the most important changes in the actual text is the thoroughly revised introduction, in which Doležel generously admits some of the advantages of deconstructivist literary interpretation. This edition from Baltimore, we may reasonably assume, is therefore the definitive one.

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<sup>10</sup> Lubomír Doležel, *Fikce a historie v období postmoderny* (Prague: Academia, 2008).