INTERTEXTUALITY, IDEOLOGY AND TRUTH: RE-READING KRISTEVA THROUGH ROMAN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Among current participants in the debates about historiography and intertextuality, there are those who claim that historical narrative and its interpretation constitutes a special case which must affect our understanding of the place and function of intertextuality in this genre. There are others who contend not only that historiography is to be considered as contiguous to other literary and especially poetic genres, but that this contiguity should profoundly influence our understanding of intertextuality in poetry. It is not that scholars of historiography should learn from critics of epic and elegy, but that these critics should take note of what emerges from the study of historiographic intertextuality and should enrich their practice accordingly. One reason for this is that the historiographical turn to intertextuality has considerably raised the stakes of a reading practice which, confined to the poetic genres, can too often become a self-sustaining and circular exercise. In historiography, discussions of intertextuality necessarily entail confronting the extent to which language is thought of as referential, and to what it refers. Here too participants divide between those who emphasis the historical text's relation to 'reality' or 'real life', and those who emphasise its relation to 'truth'. Although I will focus on 'truth' in this paper, I want to start from the valuable observations made by critics, starting from Cynthia Damon (2010), who demonstrated how, for historical agents, 'real life' is itself experienced through narrative and textuality, and is therefore inherently intertextual. The referentiality of language, therefore, is already made richer and more complex, not because the encounter with 'real life' is deferred,[1] but because 'real life' constitutes materiality and agency activated by narrative and historical understanding.

But by choosing to emphasise 'truth' and 'ideology' in the place of 'real life', I want to draw attention to two aspects of the narratives of real life, which are the vehicles of historical understanding, which activate agency in the material world, and which are re-represented through the historiographical text. The first has to do with the multiplicity of these narratives and their competition: as Will Batstone observes, 'we are all telling stories to serve our own interests'.[2] The extent to which any narrative

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[1] As suggested by Culler (1976) 1383.

[2] Batstone (2009) 38.

succeeds in achieving and maintaining a position of power can be seen in the efficacy of its claim to truth—or in the degree of activity it provokes from those who seek to expose it as a lie. In other words, I am interested here in the narratives of real life which we call ideology, and in how the critique of ideology in historiography may at times proceed as a form of resistance. The second aspect of the ideological narrative which I want to draw attention to is crucial for the historiographical critique. Ideology is tenacious of power because it operates as a highly sophisticated and many-layered symbolic structure: it is by no means a crude narrative, easily exposed as tendentious.

The representation and critique of ideology in the historical text, therefore, entails a high degree of self-reflectiveness about language. Words become viewed not merely as signs for things but as veils obscuring the truth; an accompanying trope is the claim that words are beginning to mean differently from how they are meant to mean. And I am obviously referring here to the trope picked up by the Roman historians from Thucydides' history of the Peloponnesian war, in his account of *stasis* at Corcyra (Thuc. 3.82.4):

> καὶ τὴν εἰωθυῖαν ἀξίωσιν τῶν ὀνομάτων ἐς τὰ ἔργα ἀντήλλαξαν τῇ δικαιώσει. τόλμα μὲν γὰρ ἀλόγιστος ἀνδρεία φιλέταιρος ἐνομίσθη, μέλλησις δὲ προμηθὴς δειλία εὐπρεπής, τὸ δὲ σῶφρον τοῦ ἀνάνδρου πρόσχημα, καὶ τὸπρὸς ἅπαν ξυνετὸν ἐπὶ πᾶν ἀργόν· τὸ δ᾽ ἐμπλήκτως ὀξὺ ἀνδρὸς μοίρᾳ προσετέθη, ἀσφαλείᾳ δὲ τὸ ἐπιβουλεύσασθαι ἀποτροπῆς πρόφασις εὔλογος.

> And in self-justification men inverted the usual verbal evaluations of actions. Irrational recklessness was now considered courageous commitment, hesitation while looking to the future was *high-styled* cowardice, moderation was a *cover* for lack of manhood, and circumspection meant inaction, while senseless anger now helped to define a true man, and deliberation for security was a *specious excuse* for dereliction. (trans. Lattimore)

Thucydides probes the inversion of language as if from outside the system, and his representation appears to be predicated on the assumption that the normative linguistic and moral universe has been restored. But the change he charts is already more complicated than the simple reversal of language, for the charge of using language as a cover rather than a sign is levelled at 'normative' speech by those who use 'inverted' speech. Just as Thucydides uncovers the misappropriation of words by historical agents in *stasis*, so their misappropriation of words proceeds by way of the same action of

uncovering an ugly 'truth' behind the words of others. The parallel between the historian's procedure and that of the ideology he decries has the potential to topple Thucydides from his metalinguistic perch and into the maelstrom of self-interested representations figured in his History.

As Ronald Syme observed, Thucydides' observations on language were 'highly relevant to the phraseology of the [Roman] revolutionary age'.[3] That relevance—evident in Lattimore's highly 'Sallustian' translation of Thucydides—is compounded by the tradition of receiving Thucydides through Sallust and Tacitus in the Latinate West.[4] But when the Roman historians speak in these Thucydidean terms, they pick up the precariousness of the historian's position and emphasise how he attempts through language to speak about language. Sallust's Cato is the necessary first step in this intertextual debate about ideology (Sall. *Cat.* 52.11):

> hic mihi quisquam mansuetudinem et misericordiam nominat? iam pridem equidem nos vera vocabula rerum amisimus. quia bona aliena largiri liberalitas, malarum rerum audacia fortitudo vocatur, eo res publica in extremo sita est.

> At this point does anyone bring up 'compassion' and 'mercy'? Long ago we lost the true names for things: squandering the property of another is called 'largesse'; daring to do wicked things is called 'courage'. And so the Republic is at the edge. (trans. Batstone)

Iam pridem equidem nos vera vocabula rerum amisimus: the crucial word here is *nos*, signalling the speaker's participation in a community, and—as evident throughout his speech—how he struggles *through* speech to make visible the dangerous slippage of meaning which he believes will bring his country to ruin. As he puts it (Sall. *Cat.* 52.7): *saepe numero, patres conscripti, multa verba in hoc ordine feci, saepe de luxuria atque avaritia nostrorum civium questus sum ….* But this is the historical agent, and the speech is an elaboration of the kind of debates summarised by Thucydides in his account of how men indicted each other for inverting the names of things. Yet when Sallust summarises the same phenomenon, and in the same terms, he makes a point of relativising his own position in relation to language (Sall. *Cat.* 38.2-3):

> contra eos [tribunos] summa ope nitebatur pleraque nobilitas senatus specie pro sua magnitudine. nam uti paucis verum absolvam, post illa

[3] Syme (1958) 196. n. 4.

[4] As I discuss in detail in O'Gorman (forthcoming).

tempora quicumque rem publicam agitavere honestis nominibus, alii sicuti populi iura defenderent, pars quo senatus auctoritas maxuma foret, bonum publicum simulantes pro sua quisque potentia certabant.

Against them most of the aristocracy struggled using every resource: for the Senate's sake, so it seemed, but really for their own aggrandisement. To put the truth in a few words, after those times whoever stirred up the Republic with honourable claims, some as if they were defending the rights of the people, others in order to secure the authority of the Senate, pretending to work for the public good, they struggled for their own power. (trans. Batstone)

Uti paucis verum absolvam: 'so that I may sum up the truth in a few words'—a 'mere aside' to mark his generalising repetition of how self-interest lay behind each political slogan of the late Republic. But that aside places at the centre of the account Sallust's own movement through language—*paucis*—towards truth—*verum*. It foregrounds the process of textual engagement rather than the finality of a textual product.

   Tacitus replicates this pattern in the first book of his *Histories*, where the speech of an historical agent—in this case the new emperor Otho—reflects back on a moment where the historian implicates himself in the linguistic struggle which determines the condition of the state. Otho's abuse of his rival and predecessor Galba in a speech to the praetorian guard diversifies the trope by using the change of language to illustrate the flaws of his character (Tac. *Hist.* 1.37.4):

quae usquam provincia, quae castra sunt nisi cruenta et maculata aut, ut ipse praedicat, emendata et correcta? nam quae alii scelera, hic remedia vocat, dum falsis nominibus severitatem pro saevitia, parsimoniam pro avaritia, supplicia et contumelias vestras disciplinam appellat.

What province is there anywhere, what camp, that is not bloodstained and defiled, or, as Galba would say, purged and disciplined? For what other men call crimes he calls 'remedies', falsely naming cruelty 'strictness', avarice 'frugality', the punishments and insults you suffer 'discipline'. (trans. Moore)

As Dylan Sailor points out, Otho here 'displac[es] onto Galba his own egregious encouragement of separation of names from things';[5] even in this decontextualised quotation, moreover, Otho looks very like an agent who inverts language rather than insists on its normative use. The truth, as so often in Tacitus, is even more complex, for through different narrative perspectives in the preceding chapters, we have already seen how Galba's parsimony and strictness are both vitally necessary (*Hist.* 1.20) and dangerously harmful for the state (1.18 and *passim*). Here Tacitus reflects on the change of values over time, and the lack of political wisdom shown by anyone who does not acknowledge that change (Tac. *Hist.* 1.18.3):

> constat potuisse conciliari animos quantulacumque parci senis liberalitate; nocuit antiquus rigor et nimia severitas, cui iam pares non sumus.

> There is no question that [the praetorians'] loyalty could have been won by the slightest generosity on the part of this stingy old man. The cause of ruin was his old-fashioned strictness and excessive severity— qualities which we can no longer bear. (trans. Moore, adapted)

So what is the truth, the *veritas*, of Galba's *severitas*? Is Otho right to dissolve it into its component syllables, and reconfigure it as *saevitia*? In one sense, he is, for he correctly observes and acts upon the truth that his contemporary world no longer measures up to the absolute standard which Galba, unhistorically and unpolitically, insists upon. And Tacitus recognises that he too inhabits that world—*iam pares non sumus*—which does not, however, prevent him from making the historical judgement on Galba which is also a judgement upon himself. Both Tacitus and Galba occupy the position of Cato here, Galba attempting to 'fix' language (in every sense) and Tacitus lamenting its irrevocable slippage. But the political efficacy of a Cato is also under question—we remember that he cultivated *severitas* above all other virtues (Sall. *Cat.* 54.5)—and this question of political efficacy reflects back on Sallust's project as well.

But what has intertextuality to do with the critique of ideology and, conversely, what do these scenes have to do with intertextuality? The interrelation of these historical texts could be said to operate more at the level of discourse, since there are few precise verbal repetitions, and those that there are—ὀνόματα, *honesta nomina, falsa nomina*—employ such common words that the case can hardly be made for pointed allusion. And, since all these examples are taken from the same generic tradition, the transposition of this

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[5] Sailor (2008) 194.

discourse from text to text does not constitute what Kristeva calls 'the redistribution of several different sign systems'.[6] Indeed, the objection could be made that what we have in these examples is an instance of the shared language of a methodology—the vocabulary that historians use to proceed with the kind of analysis that is expected of their genre. And yet both the representation and the method of analysis in these scenes is precisely *about* intertextuality in that it posits a network of language-acts within which each individual utterance must insert itself, a process involving rupture as well as assimilation. But the emphasis here is on the network: intertextuality as a phenomenon beyond the individual, '… a practice in which language and the subject are merely moments'.[7] The network displays its ideological dimension both positively and negatively.

On the one hand, the network denotes a communal responsibility for language: Cato can insist on the true meanings of words, inserting his speech into the intertextual network in the mode of protest or correction. But he still has to lament that '*we* have lost the true names for things', acknowledging the power of the network, reproaching his fellow-citizens for their lack of vigilance, and reaffirming his co-citizenship. What this also demonstrates, however, is that intertextuality is deployed *both* in the attempt to change language (and thereby society) *and* in the resistance to that change: Cato's Thucydideanism provides him with a vocabulary to challenge prevailing ideology, but the language he uses is held in common with the senators he opposes, who use it otherwise. This is very different from the Kristevan understanding of intertextuality as a phenomenon intrinisically associated with the revolutionary struggle *against* ideology. There are two observations to make about this: first, as Lowell Edmunds observed,[8] Kristeva's view of ideology and revolution comes from a time of particular optimism about the possibility of change, whereas Sallust and especially Tacitus are more wary about the multiple relationships of word to perception, action, and change. The second point is that Kristeva herself abandoned the term 'intertextuality' precisely because of its appropriation in service of the ideology which she had intended it to shatter.

> … we examined the formation of a specific signifying system—the novel—as the result of a redistribution of several different sign systems: carnival, courtly poetry, scholastic discourse. The term *inter-textuality* denotes this transposition of one (or several) sign system(s)

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[6] Kristeva (1984) 59.

[7] Kristeva (1984) 14.

[8] Edmunds (2001) 8-16.

into another; but since this term has often been understood in the banal sense of 'study of sources,' we prefer the term *transposition* because it specifies that the passage from one signifying system to another demands a new articulation … of enunciative and denotative positionality.'[9]

The 'study of sources' is here renounced because it contributes to what Kristeva from the outset calls the 'statifying of language into idiolects':[10] it encourages a mode of reading which strictly delimits each text as the property of an individual and the product of one specific time, and regulates the commerce between texts according to rules of historicism and economic exchange. Such modes of reading have in greatly altered forms been preserved in the discipline of Classics, and it is clear that I continue to subscribe to these modes when I speak of 'Cato's Thucydideanism', for instance, and when I assume authorial intention throughout my analysis of these passages. But Kristeva's abandonment of the term 'intertextuality' in the face of this normative, what she calls 'necrophiliac' and 'fetishising' interpretative activity is testament to the power of ideology to integrate the *practice* of text and immobilise it as a textual *product*. Despite Kristeva's claim, therefore, that the signifying practice which she theorises has the power to 'exhaust the ever tenacious ideological institutions and apparatuses',[11] the term for which she is best known stands as a monument rather to ideology's tenacity and continued vigour.

Nevertheless, the Kristevan vision for text and reading is not entirely doomed, nor is it so divergent from current practice in Classics not to merit a more sustained consideration. First, Kristeva's emphasis on text as practice rather than as reified product enjoins a process of reading which, as she says 'retraces the path of production';[12] it seems to me that the historiographical texts I have looked at do not simply *represent* historical thought—they provoke historical thought in their readers as a necessary condition of reading the text. And I believe that is the premise of many people working on historiography. Although this is about as far removed from the kind of text Kristeva is talking about, the interpretative process appears structurally equivalent, and has the same ideological and political consequences as Kristeva wants to claim for her texts: namely, the continuum between writing, reading, and political action.

[9] Kristeva (1984) 59-60.

[10] Kristeva (1984) 13.

[11] Kristeva (1984) 15.

[12] Kristeva (1984) 103.

Yet this equivalence should be troubling, since historiography—whatever the political stance or linguistic innovation of the individual historian—is a normative social genre, actively participating in its own monumentalisation. It is also predominantly communicative, constituting as it does both representation and analysis of past events—what Kristeva calls the 'phenotext'.[13] Is the historical text then resistant to the more radical possibilities presented by Kristeva's concept of '*transposition*'?

> It has only been … in revolutionary periods that signifying practice has inscribed within the phenotext [sc. the text as communication] the plural, heterogeneous, and contradictory process of signification encompassing the flow of drives, material discontinuity, political struggle, and the pulverization of language.[14]

Here we are reminded more forcefully that Kristeva speaks of revolution in *poetic* language, which does not mean merely the language of poetic genres, but language which continually exceeds either communicative or interpretative functions, producing a 'surplus of meaning' beyond usefulness. Looking for such poetic language in Sallust and Tacitus—*if* such a project is possible—does not entail searching for allusions to Vergil and Ovid and seeing how they 'make sense' in their new contexts. It might involve more attention to what is nonsense, beyond sense or at the limit of sense in these prose authors, to what might count as 'verbal play' which is 'not really doing anything for the argument'. I am of course completely unsure about what the outcome of such an attempt might be, but I suspect it would pertain less to 'real life' but perhaps more to 'truth'; I continue to explore these and related questions in my ongoing research on Roman historiography.

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[13] Kristeva (1984) 87.

[14] Kristeva (1984) 88.

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