

Models for genetic criticism

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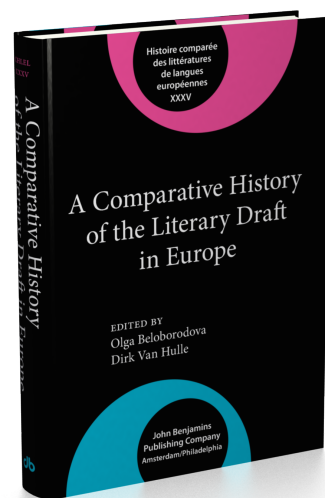
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2.2.2 Models for genetic criticism

Daniel Ferrer

Genetic critics are faced with what scientists call an inverse problem: starting from the observed effects (the final work and all the available traces left in the course of the labour of creation), they want to reconstruct the process that produced these effects. The solution of such problems generally involves the production of models and their subsequent adjustment to the empirical data. More generally, models are used to provide us with a simplified representation of reality whenever the data is too rich and the factors involved are too complex to be directly apprehended. In our field, models can hardly be mathematical formulae governing sets of identified parameters; they are more likely to be analogies that help us to grasp the peculiar logic that is at work in the creative process. Some of these models are implicit in the work of genetic critics: it is preferable to make them explicit so as to be conscious of their limitations.

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In the recent coronavirus crisis, the use of models was very much in evidence. Given a series of unexplained symptoms caused by an unknown agent and an unexpected rate of propagation of the symptoms, it was necessary to produce a series of biological, epidemiological, statistical and logistic models in order to understand what was going on, to predict what was going to happen and to devise ways of dealing with the situation. Luckily, our predicament is much less tragic and the need for models in the domain of genetic criticism does not present itself with the same urgency. Our models are not required to predict the future, in the absolute sense. It is expected that in the future they will be found relevant when we examine the traces of (past) creation.

Genetic criticism is faced with what scientists call an *inverse problem*: starting from the observed effects (in our case, the final work and all the available traces left in the course of the labour of creation), it strives to reconstruct the process that produced these effects. The solution of such problems usually involves the production of models and their subsequent adjustment to the empirical data. More generally, models are used to provide us with a simplified representation of reality whenever the data is too rich and the factors involved are too complex to be directly apprehended. This is the case of the kind of reverse engineering that we are trying to perform on writer's manuscripts, in which the shape and position on the page of each stroke of the pen as well as its relation to multiple previous and following versions, are potentially significant, not to mention writers' libraries, material or virtual, that involve millions of printed signs

and tens of thousands of annotations and marks.¹ It is clearly impossible to process such wealth of data without shortcuts.

Whether we want it or not, we constantly and automatically use models to process reality. The human brain works with implicit models, built in or learnt from experience, that we only question when we are forced to do so. This tendency generates countless biases and errors of appreciation (see for instance Kahneman 2011). Therefore it is preferable to elaborate explicit models than to rely on unconscious habits of thought, such as (in the case of genetic criticism) the *post hoc ergo propter hoc* fallacy or the ready-made explanations of folk psychology.

In our field, models can hardly be mathematical formulae governing sets of identified parameters; they are more likely to be analogies that help us to grasp the logic that is at work in the creative process. We also need models to understand the peculiar nature of the objects we study, the writers' working manuscripts.² And we even need models to understand what exactly we are doing with these objects. Since our data is particularly rich, no single model can give us an adequate representation of all the aspects of these highly complex matters.

A model and its limitations: Manuscripts as film

A model of our activity that comes readily to mind is that of cinematographic reconstruction. Manuscripts can be considered as photographs recording successive stages of the creative process. The juxtaposition of these frozen images generates a moving picture that restores the flow of invention.

Like every model, this one rests on a number of presuppositions. It implies that nothing of importance happens in the interval between the images, nothing more than the continuity that is automatically supplied by the persistence of our vision. It is true that genetic criticism has to make do with the discontinuous data that are available and must pretend that what is not present on the extant manuscripts can be interpolated. We know that the interval between the different stages revealed by the extant documents can vary considerably, from a few seconds to whole decades, but even when it is very short, we can never be sure that a series of sharp turns did not occur during that time, which would reduce considerably the value of the linear interpolation that is the only resource of the geneticist.

If we were to take the model literally, it would imply that no movement can be generated from a single image and that we cannot learn anything about the process from an isolated manuscript. We know that this is not true, that most drafts reveal two or more stages imbricated on

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1. And this is nothing, compared to what born-digital archives have in store for us, for instance in the case of film, where they include not only the drafts of the scenarios and the email correspondence between the numerous protagonists, all the productions documents, down to the smallest invoice, but also every image filmed by each of the digital cameras during all the shooting and the preliminary trials, an overwhelming amount of gigabytes.
 2. Everything that is being said here about writers and manuscripts should be transposed to different forms of creation and the relevant working documents.

the same surface (for instance through the cancellations and additions), so that it is often possible to reconstruct a large part of the genetic process from a single document.

A more serious limitation of this model is that it suggests that manuscripts are passive surfaces that simply record traces of the creative process, like the chemical emulsion on the surface of the film records the light and shade generated by the horse galloping in front of it. It implies that genetic documents have no agency, that the interaction between the writer and his manuscript is not an important part of the process. This is definitely not a correct description of the actual practice of writers, as we will see below.

Importing models and adjusting them: Diasystem/creolisation/agrammaticality

Models are frequently imported from other disciplines and adapted or transposed to suit our needs. For instance, the model created by Cesare Segre (or rather adapted by him from dialectology) to account for the changes introduced by copyists in Medieval epics can be illuminating from a genetic point of view: instead of treating them simply as errors to be eliminated, as pure entropic noise, beyond any possible rationalisation, he tried to account for them structurally. The linguistic system of the copyist is basically the same as the author's (or the previous copyist's) but it has changed on some points, constituting what dialectologists call a *diasystem*. The variants introduced by the copyist reflect interferences between the two branches of the diasystem. If we transpose the model in the field of genetic criticism, we will consider that the changes introduced by the writer on his own manuscript reflect a local alteration of the project, an interference between two related but partially distinct systems of intentionality. Segre suggests that we might go as far as to speak of *creolisation*, that is to say the appropriation of the materials of a basic language in order to produce an autonomous language, ruled by its own grammar (Segre 1976, 1979). We can see that a similar process of interference between different systems occurs in the course of writing, in so far as the writer's point of view constantly changes as part of the creative process, so that what is already written must be reinterpreted from a new perspective (marginally new, in most cases, but sometimes radically new), somehow like the scribe who strives to assimilate the text he is copying to his own linguistic system. Variants are a testimony to this process of reinterpretation that sometimes amounts to a creolisation.

The idea of a perturbation in the text caused by the interference of another system can remind us of Michael Riffaterre's model of intertextuality, with its "connector" linking the text and the intertext, generating a perturbation that he calls "agrammaticality" or "catachresis" (Riffaterre 1980, 1981). The connector is grammatical in its original location, in the intertext, but it stands out as agrammatical in the text. Even if we do not know the intertext, it is implied in the text through the connector. The agrammaticality caused by the presence of the extraneous element betrays the influence of the intertext. In the same way, the superseded versions are present in the final text through the interferences between the stratified projects.

Combining models

It is sometimes useful to combine different models imported from different horizons. I once spoke jokingly of a Freudo-bathmologico-Bakhtinian model (Ferrer 2000) or even of a Freudo-bathmologico-Bakhtino-Goodmanian model (Ferrer 2009). I was trying to go beyond the structural explanation provided by the models presented in the previous section and give a more dynamic account of the way superseded versions of the text remain active in the final work, and no single extant model seems able to do that.

To put it very succinctly, the model is Freudian because Freud makes it clear that one cannot fully understand an utterance by considering solely its present state, without reconstructing the history of its enunciation, its transformational history. This is the basis of the fundamental Freudian concept of transference, but the idea is also in evidence in Freud's interpretation of *Witz*.

Bathmology is the science of degrees delineated by Roland Barthes, after Pascal. According to Pascal, the same attitude, respect for the powers that be, has a different significance for the mob, for what he calls the half-clever, for the clever, for bigoted Christians, and for the true believer. The external behaviour of the clever man and the mob is apparently the same, but it is fundamentally different because the clever man's attitude exists in full knowledge of the position of the mob and of the position of the half-clever. In the same way, if a first variant introduces an addition, and a second variant later cancels that addition, the third state, in spite of appearances, will not be identical to the first because it remembers the first two states and silently alludes to them.

The model is also Bakhtinian, because it integrates Mikhail Bakhtin's ideas of the counter-statement, of dialogic rejoinder, "directed toward its referential object, [and] at the same time reacting intensely to someone else's word", and most specifically of what Bakhtin calls "hidden polemic", his conception of a discourse that, to quote *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "draws in, as it were, sucks in to itself the other's" discourse (Bakhtin 1984: 197). In this model of the genetic process, it is not the discourse of the other that is the hidden basis of the statement, but one's own past utterance, and the "hidden polemic" is of course even more obscured since it is not applied to a published text but to material that usually remains private.

A further layer can be added by transposing Nelson Goodman's analysis of variation (in the musical sense) as a means of understanding the mechanism of the counterstatement, how a word can be influenced by another external word (see Goodman 1988). It is a form of allusion, referring to it through its similarities and its differences, through the positive and negative exemplification of its various characteristics. For the writer in the process of creation, each variant has the status of a variation, alluding to the preceding version and exemplifying positively and contrastively its potentialities. For the reader of the manuscripts, superseded variants are paradoxically a kind of variation on the final work. They exemplify, contrastively, its characteristics and aid in its interpretation.

This model may help us to understand one of the most important and most difficult concepts of genetic criticism, the concept of *avant-texte*. The *avant-texte* is always defined retrospectively and arbitrarily, in relation to the final work. We could say that the *avant-texte* includes every document (anterior to the final work) that can be construed as entering in a relation of variation to the final work.

The gradualist model: Bergson/Ingarden/Valéry

A model that all geneticists have in common is the gradualist model. In their experience, the work is not created by a sudden stroke of genius: it is the result of a process that can be complex or simple, laborious or facile, protracted or short, but that takes place in time. This is the only way to solve the problem raised by Henri Bergson's convincing demonstration that the future is not foreseeable from the present, that it is not even possible before it happens. The impression that *Hamlet* was possible before it was written is a retrospective illusion (Bergson 1969). But if that is the case, how did *Hamlet* come to exist? Genetic criticism cannot be content to invoke the mystery of genius or "creative evolution". The answer is that it came gradually into existence. We have no draft for *Hamlet*, but if we look for instance at the manuscripts of Joyce, we can see that, when he started to write *Finnegans Wake* in 1923, *Finnegans Wake* as we know it was absolutely impossible, but it became possible by a series of gradual efforts, of small leaps, by putting things on paper and then discovering retrospectively, as a reader of his own jottings, the potential of what he had just written.

At this point it is useful to refer to the aesthetics of reception and Roman Ingarden's model of reading that considers the literary text as an incomplete object that must be actualised by the reader in order to transform it into an aesthetic object. This actualisation requires that the reader should fill in the numerous gaps and places of indeterminacy (Ingarden 1973). Since writers are readers of their own manuscripts at each stage of the development of their work, this suggests that much of the labour of writing consists in acts of reading and interpretation, of explication of the implicit, of determining the indeterminate, of actualising the virtualities present in the manuscripts.

In *Tel Quel*, Paul Valéry compares the composition of a masterpiece to a game of chance. After billions of throws only the luckiest one is retained as the result, producing an artificial impression of consummate ease. Valéry remarks that the implied author generated by such a work is "infiniment peu probable" (Valéry 1943: 158). The actual author is absolutely incapable to create the work spontaneously: creation requires a protracted effort and the help of chance. The spontaneous creation of the work is absolutely improbable, so the actual author will multiply the trials, throw the dice many times to increase the probability of producing something that will give the impression that it is generated spontaneously.

Ten years before, in one of his notebooks, James Joyce (JJ) also uses the gambling model in an apparently contradictory way: "JJ no gambler because/his style gambles/infininitely probable" (Joyce 2002: 32; 65). This is because of the very particular nature of the "style" of *Finnegans Wake*, which is crafted in such a way that it cannot fail: any reader can find in it what he or she

is looking for. But it took Joyce sixteen years and a vast number of dice throws to come to that result.

Inescapable models

Even those geneticists who have no theoretical ambition must be conscious that they are constantly fabricating models when they produce genetic narratives: story-telling (selecting events and ordering them) is a form of modelling. If there is to be a renewal of the discipline, it should perhaps distance itself from nineteenth-century modes and imagine new forms of genetic narratives.

But modelling is essential to genetic criticism in a more specific way. The notion of *avant-texte*, a defining characteristic of the discipline, implies a modelling of the extant documents. It was defined by Jean Bellemin-Noël as “a form of reconstruction of what came before a text, established by a critic with a specific method, in order to be studied in continuity with the final result” (Bellemin-Noël 1977: 9; my translation). The *avant-texte* is determined in relation to the text, on the basis of a particular conception of the text. It is not an empirical given, but a construction, like the cartographic models of projection that allow a two-dimensional representation of the globe. It is a modelling of the empirical data selected among an unlimited number of facts.

There is a strong resistance to this idea. It seems evident that the documents are there, have been there all the time, waiting to be gathered. But this gathering implies an implicit or explicit point of view that recognises them as relevant documents in relation to the final work and that distinguishes the relevant aspects within each document. Bergson remarked that before Romanticism, there was no pre-Romanticism. What we consider as the Romantic aspects of the Classics simply did not exist before Romanticism brought it to existence. In the same way, it is only the final text that causes the *avant-texte* to emerge from the mass of final documents. But since the final text is itself a multi-dimensional reality, it requires a prior modelling (“a critic with a specific method”).

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