

LEO SPITZER "LINGUISTICS AND LITERARY HISTORY" (1948)

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Here, Spitzer's goal is to "suggest the ultimate unity of linguistics and literary history" (207). He begins by recounting an "autobiographical sketch of my first academic experiences" (207) with the goal of revealing how the "made my way through the maze of linguistics . . . toward the enchanted garden of literary history" (207). He stresses that his goal is also to emphasise that there is a "paradise in linguistics" (207) as much as there is a "labyrinth in literary history" (207), that the "methods and the degree of certainty in both are basically the same" (207), and that the attack on the humanities is "unwarranted" (207). His reason in recounting his autobiographical experiences is to show that a scholar is "conditioned . . . by his first experiences, by his *Erlibnis*" (207).

Spitzer recounts how, although a German, he studied French at university out of sheer "adoration of the French way of life" (208). He studied linguistics with a well-known scholar of the day, Wilhelm Meyer-Lubke, where the focus was on how Latin was transmogrified into modern French:

in these classes we saw Latin *a* moving, according to relentless phonetic laws, towards French *e* (*pater* > *père*). . . . In all this, there were many facts and much rigour in the establishment of facts, but all was vague in regard to the general ideas underlying these facts. What was the mystery behind the refusal of Latin sounds or cases to stay put and behave themselves? We saw incessant change working in language – but why? I was a long while realising that Meyer-Lubke was offering only the *pre*-history of French (as he established it by a comparison with the other Romance languages), not its history. And we were never allowed to contemplate a phenomenon in its quite being, to look into its face: was always looked at neighbours or at its predecessors. . . . There were presented to us the relationships of phenomenon *a* and phenomenon *b*; but phenomenon *a* and phenomenon *b* did not exist in themselves, nor did the historical line *a-b*. . . . [W]here was reflected in this teaching my sensuous, witty, disciplined Frenchman, in his presumably 1000 years of existence? He was left out in the cold while we talked about his language. (208)

Spitzer experienced something analogous in the classroom of the "great literary historian Philipp August Becker" (208) in whose hands "that ideal Frenchman seemed to show some faint signs of life" (209) but for whom the "treatment of the contents [was] only subsidiary to the really scholarly work, which consisted in fixing the dates and historical data of these works of art" (209): the

existing works of art were stepping-stones from which to proceed to other works of art, contemporary or previous, which were in reality quite heterogeneous. It seemed indiscrete to ask what made them works of art, what was expressed them, and why these expressions appeared in France, at that particular time. Again, it was prehistory, not history, that we were offered, and a kind of materialist prehistory at that. In this attitude of positivism, exterior events were taken thus seriously only to evade the more completely the real question: why did the phenomena Pèlerinage and École des Femmes happen at all? (209)

In "both fields, that of linguistics as well as of literary history . . . a meaningless industriousness prevailed: not only was this kind of humanities not centered on a particular people in a particular time, but the subject matter itself had got lost: Man" (209).

However, fortunately, Spitzer did not give up his graduate studies: by "not

abandoning this sham science, by seeking, instead, to appropriate it, I came to recognise its true value as well as my own possibilities of work" (209). He learned to use the "tools of science offered me" (209).

Spitzer then turns his attention to the "path that leads from the most routine-like techniques of the linguist toward the work of the literary historian" (209). He focuses to this end on etymology (the tracing of the linguistic roots of words), tracing in this case the genealogy of the word 'conundrum' which, he argues, is related to the French term 'calembredaine' in that they share a common history of phonetic and semantic variations. But, he asks,

what can be the humanistic, the spiritual value of this . . . juggling with word forms? . . . An etymology introduces meaning into the meaningless: in our case, the evolution of two words in time – that is, a piece of linguistic history – has been cleared up. What seemed an agglomeration of mere sounds now appears motivated. We feel the same 'inner click' accompanying our comprehension of this evolution in time as when we have grasped the meaning of a sentence or a poem – which then become more than the sum total of their single words or sounds. . . . In the problem which we chose, two words which seemed erratic and fantastic, with no definite relationships in English, have been unified among themselves and related to a French word-family. (211)

What it reveals is the "sway of French influence" (211) on English: the "English and French word-families . . . must have belonged to one Anglo-French word-family during that period" (211-212). Since, however, a "loan-word rarely feels completely at home in its new environment, we have the manifold variations of the word, which fell apart into two word-groups . . . The instability and disunity of the word-family is symptomatic of its position in the new environment" (212).

Spitzer is at pains to stress, however, even the meaning of the French word itself is unstable and this is because such "juggling" (212) is endemic in all linguistic communities:

this juggling in itself is psychologically and culturally motivated; language is not, as the behaviouristic, antimentalistic or materialistic school of linguists, rampant in some universities, would have it: a meaningless agglomeration of corpses: dead word-material, automatic 'speech-habits' unleashed by a trigger motion. A certain automatism . . . is certainly not true for the history of the words: the linguistic creation is always meaningful and . . . clear-minded. . . . (212)

It is a "feeling for the appositeness of nomenclatures" (212) which motivates the joining of sounds to meanings by particular "communities" (212). It was when the "creative, the Renaissance, phase had passed that English let the words congeal, petrify" (212). This was a function of the "decision of the community which, in eighteenth century England, passed from the Renaissance attitude to the classicist attitude to ward language, which would replace creativity by standardisation and regulation. Another cultural climate. Another style" (212). He points out that "every word has its own history, not to be confused with that of any other" (212). But "what repeats itself in all word-histories is the possibility of recognising the signs of a people at work, culturally and psychologically" (213).

Spitzer points out that he "first followed the inductive method – or rather a quick intuition – in order to identify *conundrum* with *calembredaine*; later, I had to proceed deductively, to verify whether my assumed etymon concorded with all the known data, whether it really explained all the semantic and phonetic variations" (213). This "to-and-from movement is a basic requirement in all humanistic studies" (213), Spitzer says. To "add two phenomena within a framework adds something to the knowledge about their common nature. There is no mathematical demonstrability in such an equation, only a feeling of inner evidence" (213-214) which is the "fruit of observation combined with experience, of precision supplemented by imagination – the

dosage of which cannot be fixed a priori, but only in the concrete case" (214). Moreover, there is no question of being able to presume that "this is the way things happened" (214) but of "belief. . . . And who says belief, says suasion: I have, deliberately and tendentiously, grouped the variants of *conundrum* in the most plausible order for the purpose of winning your assent" (214) even though there are other possible, "more easily believable etymologies, reached at the cost of less stretching and bending" (214). In short, "our etymological study has illuminated a stretch of linguistic history, which is connected with psychology and history of civilisation; it has suggested a web of interrelations between language and the soul of the speaker" (214).

Arguing that the "best document of the soul of a nation is its literature and since the latter is nothing but its language as this is written down by elect speakers" (214), Spitzer suggests that it is possible to "grasp the spirit of a nation in the language of its outstanding works of literature" (214). Believing that it might be rash to assume, as Karl Vossler "prematurely" (214) did, that the "whole of a national literature" (214) is comparable to the "whole of a national language" (214), Spitzer preferred to ask "Can one distinguish the soul of a particular . . . writer in his particular language?" (214). Alluding to Buffon's famous saying "Le style c'est l'homme" ('style is the man'), Spitzer looked to the field of stylistics in order to explore a "more rigorously scientific definition of an individual style" (214), the "definition of a linguist [replacing] . . . the casual, impressionistic remarks of literary critics" (214-215). Stylistics, he thought "might bridge the gap between linguistics and literary history" (215). Bearing in mind the Latin saying 'individuum est ineffabile' (the individual is inscrutable or undefinable), Spitzer concluded that the

individualistic stylistic deviation from the general norm must represent a historical step taken by the writer . . . : it must reveal a shift of the soul of the epoch, a shift of which the writer has become conscious and which he would translate into a necessarily new linguistic form; perhaps it would be possible to determine the historical step, psychological as well as linguistic? (215)

In his "reading of modern French novels" (215), accordingly, Spitzer would underline all "expressions which struck me as aberrant from general usage" (215) and concluded that they, "taken together, seemed to offer a certain consistency" (215). He sought to "establish a common denominator for all or most of these deviations, . . . the common spiritual etymon, the psychological root, of several individual 'traits of style' in a writer" (215).

For example, Spitzer reveals that he noted in the novels of a (today unknown) French writer Charles-Louis Philippe a certain tendency to use causal phrases (phrases containing 'à cause de' or 'parce que' [both of which means 'because'] and 'car' ['for' in English] for example) in a very particular and, thus, identifiable way – in each case, he suggests, the relationship of cause and effect is presented as "objectively valid" (216). He submits that "all these expansions of causal usages in Philippe cannot be due to chance: there must be 'something the matter' with his conception of causality" (216) for which reason "we must pass from Philippe's style to the psychological etymon, to the radix in his soul" (216), what Spitzer terms "pseudo-objective motivation" (216):

Philippe, when presenting causality as a binding for his characters, seems to recognise a rather objective cogency in their sometimes awkward, sometimes platitudinous, sometimes semipoetic reasonings; his attitude shows a fatalistic, half-critical, half-understanding, humourous sympathy with the necessary errors and thwarted strivings of these underworld beings dwarfed by inexorable social forces. The pseudo-objective motivation, manifest in his style, is the clue to Philippe's *Weltanschauung*: he sees . . . without revolt but with deep grief and a Christian spirit of contemplativity, the world functioning wrongly with an appearance of rightness, of objective logic. (216-217)

In this way, Spitzer contends, "we have made the trip from language or style to the soul. And on this journey we may catch a glimpse into a historical evolution of the French soul in the twentieth century" (217). First, we are "given insight into the soul of a writer who has become conscious of the fatalism weighing on the masses, then, into that of a section of the French nation itself, who faint protest is voiced by our author" (217). All this is very different from the "timeless, placeless philology of the older school" (217): in its place, we have an "explanation of the concrete *hinc et nunc* of a historical phenomenon" (217).

Spitzer points out that in the foregoing, the "to-and-fro movement we found to be basic with the humanist has been followed here too" (217):

first we grouped together certain causal expressions, . . . then hunted out their psychological explanation, and finally, sought to verify whether the element of 'pseudo-objective motivation' concurred with what we know, from other sources, about the elements of his inspiration. Again a belief is involved . . . that the mind of the author is a kind of solar system into whose orbit all categories of things are attracted: language, motivation, plot, are only satellites of this mythological entity (as my antimentalistic adversaries would call it): *mens Philippina*. The linguist as well as his literary colleague must always ascend to the etymon which is behind all those particular so-called literary or stylistic devices which the literary historians are wont to list. And the individual *mens Philippina* is a reflection of the *mens Franco-gallica* of the twentieth century; its ineffability consists precisely in Philippe's anticipatory sensitivity for the spiritual needs of the nation. (217)

In short, by taking "stock" (217) of the "patent linguistic deviations" (217), the "philologist" (217) seeks to "build up his 'psychogram' of the individual artist" (217).

The question is, does the foregoing tendency to "indulge in arbitrary whimsicality" (217) also apply to "writers of more remote times" (217)? Will not be found in writers such as Dante or Rabelais, by contrast to modern ones, a "balanced language, with no deviations from common usage" (217)? Spitzer is of the view that "[w]hoever has thought strongly and felt strongly has innovated in his language; mental creativity immediately inscribes itself into the language, where it becomes linguistic creativity; the trite and petrified in language is never sufficient for the needs of expression felt by a strong personality" (218). In his own thesis devoted to Rabelais (1910), Spitzer sought to closely examine the former's many and most radical neologisms, these being outrageous to the point where "we no longer recognise this French language, which has become a chaotic word-world" (219), something very "startling with the French, who are generally considered to inhabit an orderly, clearly regulated, well-policed language" (219). The result is an "effect of terror, so that, from the well-known emerges the shape of the unknown" (219). Spitzer's goal was to explore what these coinages revealed, taken together, about the author and the socio-historical context in which he wrote. Those who adopt the older approach, "by explaining every coinage separately, by dissolving the forest into trees, . . . lose sight of the whole phenomenon: they no longer see the forest" (219). Spitzer cites particular examples which make him feel "frightened" (219) and "shaken" (220) and experience sheer "horror" (220). It is the "gigantic voice of Rabelais which cries to us directly across the gulf of the centuries, as shattering now as at the hour when Rabelais begot these word-monsters" (220). All in all, Rabelais' "word-formation reflects an attitude somewhere between reality and irreality, with its shudders of horror and its comic relief" (220). He concludes that "everything in Rabelais' work tends toward the creation of a world of irreality" (220).

Spitzer suggests that "what has been disclosed by the study of Rabelais' language, the literary study would corroborate" (220), language being "only one outward crystallisation of the 'inward form,' or, to use another metaphor, the lifeblood of poetic creation is everywhere the same, whether we tap the organism at 'language'

or 'ideas', at 'plot' or at 'composition'" (220). As a linguist, it is "from the linguistic angle that I started to find my way to his unity" (220). Whatever the angle, the goal is to

work from the surface to the 'inward life-centre' of the work of art: first observing details about the superficial details of the particular work (and the 'ideas' expressed by a poet are . . . only one of the superficial traits in a work of art); then grouping these details and seeking to integrate them into a creative principle which may have been present in the soul of the artist; and, finally, making the return trip to all the other groups of observations in order to find whether the 'inward form' one has tentatively constructed gives an account of the whole. The scholar will surely be able to state, after three or four of these 'fro-voyages,' whether he has found the life-giving centre, the sun of the solar system. (220-221)

By this point, Spitzer argues, the critic will "know whether he is really permanently installed in the centre, or whether he finds himself in an 'excentric' or peripheric position)" (220).

Spitzer points out the main criticism of the approach of "mentalists" (221) such as himself is that offered by the "mechanist Yale school of linguists" (221) (the dominant behaviourism of the time) to the effect that what is happening here is the "explanation of a linguistic fact by an assumed psychological process for which the only evidence is the fact to be explained" (221). In defence of the philological position, Spitzer contends, firstly, that the normal procedure is to "embrace *all* the linguistic traits observable within a given author" (221) rather than "psychologising one trait" (221) and, secondly, that the "circle" (221) of which they speak is not a "vicious one" (221) in that it is a "basic operation in the humanities," (221), the so-called 'hermeneutical circle' discussed by Schleiermacher and Dilthey:

cognizance in philology is reached not only by the gradual progression from one detail to another detail, but the anticipation or divination of the whole – because 'the detail can be understood only by the whole and any explanation of detail presupposes the understanding of the whole.' Our to-and-fro voyage certain outward details to the inner centre and back again to other series of details is only an application of the principle of the 'philological circle.' . . . To proceed from some exterior traits of Philippe's or Rabelais' language to the soul or mental centre of Philippe or Rabelais, and back again to the rest of the exterior traits of Philippe's and Rabelais' works of art, is the same *modus operandi* as that which proceeds from some details of the Romance languages to a Vulgar Latin prototype and then, in reverse order, explains other details by this assumed prototype – or even, from that which infers from some of the outward, phonetic and semantic appearances of the English word *conundrum* to its medieval French soul, and back to all its phonetic and semantic traits. (221)

Spitzer's notion of the 'philological circle' is merely an expansion of what Dilthey and Schleiermacher had termed the 'hermeneutical circle.'

It is not enough to "posit a soul of Rabelais which creates from the real in the direction of the unreal" (221): rather, the "Rabelaisian entity must be integrated into a greater unit and located somewhere on a historical line" (221-222). Rabelais is a "solar system which, in its turn, forms part of a transcending system which embraces others as well as himself, others around, before and after him; we must place him, as the literary historians would say, within the framework of the history of ideas, or *Geistesgeschichte*" (222). The "power of wielding the word as though it were a world of its own between reality and irreality . . . cannot have sprung out of nothingness" (222). Spitzer links Rabelais to forbears like Pulci and an intellectual climate in which the "belief in the *universalia realia* has been shaken" (222) giving rise to a corresponding

trust in “such vicarious realities as words” (222). Spitzer argues that Rabelais gives rise in turn to subsequent writers like Balzac, Flaubert, Hugo, Celine, and Gide whose style is, in each case, very Rabelaisian in many respects. Spitzer warns that the historical line we have drawn (we may call it the evolution of an idea: the idea of ‘language become autonomous’), which is marked by the stages Pulci-Rabelais-Victor Hugo-Celine, is paralleled or crossed by other historical lines with other names located on the historical ladder. Victor Hugo is not Rabelais, although there may be Hugoesque traits in Rabelais, Rabelaisian traits in Hugo. We must not confuse a historical line with a solar system resting in itself: what appeared to us central in Rabelais may be peripheric in Victor Hugo, and the reverse. Every solar system, unique in itself, undefinable . . . to a certain extent, is traversed by different historical lines of ‘ideas,’ whose intersection produces the particular climate in which the great literary work matures – just as the system of a language is made up of the intersections of different historical lines of the *calembredaine-conundrum* variety. (223-224)

Spitzer summarises:

we started from a particular historical line, the etymology of a particular word-family, and found therein evidences of a change of historical climate as expressed in the innovations, linguistic and literary, of writers of two different epochs (the twentieth and the sixteenth), finally to arrive at the point of positing theoretically self-sufficient systems: the great works of art, determined by different historical developments and reflecting in all their outward details, linguistic as well as literary, their respective central ‘sun.’ (224)

His comments in this paper, he points out, are based on “scattered samples” (224) derived from “hundreds of such to-and-fro voyages” (224), “all directed by the same principles, but each one bound for an unpredictable goal” (224).

Spitzer’s “personal way has been from the observed detail to ever broadening units which rest, to an increasing degree, on speculation” (224). This is, he believes, the “philological, the inductive way, which seeks to show significance in the apparently futile, in contrast to the deductive procedure which begins with units assumed as given” (224). The latter is the “way followed by the theologians who start from on high, to take the downward path toward the earthly maze of detail, or by the mathematicians, who treat their axioms as if these were God-given” (224). In philology, Spitzer argues, “which deals with the all-too-human, with the interrelated and the intertwined aspects of human affairs, the deductive method has its place only as a verification of the principle found by induction – which rests on induction” (224). The “attempt to discover significance in the detail” (224), the “attitude which sees all manifestations of man as equally serious” (224), is an “outgrowth of the preestablished firm conviction, the ‘axiom,’ of the philologist, that details are not an inchoate chance aggregation of dispersed material through which no light shines” (224). Spitzer cites Pascal’s dictum that “Tu ne me chercherais pas si tu ne m’avais déjà trouvé” (224). For Spitzer, this is proof that there is a strong connection between the humanities and theology (after all, the very hermeneutical or philological circle was due to a theologian). It was Schleiermacher, too, who coined the term ‘weltanschauung’ which, for him, meant “to see, to cognise the universe in *its sensuous detail*” (225). The “Humanist believes in the power bestowed on the human mind of investigating the human mind” (225). The human mind is both a “tool and a goal” (225) but scholars in the humanities have lost “faith” (225) in such a view of man. The result is that a “man without belief in the human mind is a stunted human being” (225).

Spitzer points out that in the essays which follow this essay (which served as the theoretical preface to a collection of essays entitled Linguistics and Literary History) he has sought to “apply the principle of the ‘philological circle’ to various authors of different nations and periods” (225) in a series of essays that are partly “illustrations of

my procedure" (225) and partly "independent contributions to the understanding of the writers treated therein" (225). He warns the reader not to expect, though, "in my demonstration of this method, the systematic step-by-step procedure" (225) outlined earlier. When he spoke of a "series of back-and-forth movements (first the detail, then the whole, then another detail, etc.)" (225), he was merely employing a "linear and temporal figure in an attempt to describe states of apperception which . . . only too often co-exist" (225-226). He says that his "gift . . . of seeing part and whole together, at any moment" (226) is one for which he has been criticised. He says it is "impossible to offer the reader a step-by-step rationale to be applied to a work of art" (226) because, primarily, the "first step, on which all may hinge, can never be planned" (226) but is the "awareness of having been struck by a detail, followed by a conviction that this detail is connected basically with the work of art" (226). In other words, the starting point is purely arbitrary and based on whatever takes one's fancy. Any such "impression" (227) or "conviction" (227) is the result of "talent, experience, and faith" (227), rather than some discernible rational a priori principle which can then be applied practically. Sometimes it comes about by dint of much effort, that is, after staring for a long time blankly at the page before one: "suddenly, one word, one line, stands out, and we realise that, now, a relationship has been established between the poem and us" (227). From this point, "what with other observations adding themselves to the first, and with previous experiences of the circle intervening, and with associations given by previous education building up before me . . . it does not seem long until the characteristic 'click' occurs, which is the indication that detail and whole have found a common denominator – which gives the etymology of the writing" (227).

Past experience is not always, however, a predictor of or adequate to current interpretation. Each poem demands a "separate inspiration, a separate light from above" (227). A "Protean mutability is required of the critic, for the device which has proved successful for one work cannot be applied mechanically to another" (227). Such mutability is "gained only by repeated experiences with totally different writers" (227). The reason for this "lies in the fact of artistic expressivity itself: the artist lends to an outward phenomenon of language an inner significance" (228). This is nothing more than a "basic fact of language" (228) that "meaning is quite arbitrarily . . . associated with an acoustic phenomenon" (228). To put this another way, each meaningful use of a word (e.g. when we say the word 'cat') is the coupling of a sound (c-a-t) with a signification (in this case, a furry little four-legged creature). Just "*which* phenomena the literary artist will choose for the embodiment of his meaning is arbitrary" (228). To "overcome the impression of an arbitrary association in the work of art, the reader must seek to place himself in the creative centre of the artist himself – and recreate the artistic organism" (228). What allows the critic to do this is not only due to his "scholarly education" (228) but his "moral nature" (228), that is, the "choices, in ordering his life" (228) that serve to make his "soul ready for his scholarly task" (228). The critic must strive to "cleanse his mind from distraction by the inconsequential, from the obsession of everyday small details – to keep it open to the synthetic apprehension of the 'whole' of life, to the symbolism in nature and art and language" (228).