THE TAPHONOMIC PROJECT – AN ESSAY

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Abstract

Though old or new or wide apart, domains may help understanding, offering fresh points of view. In this essay, taphonomy, an extremely complex science, a union – with a mathematical meaning – of different scientific sets, is put to test against text analysis and the theory of myths proving – like in a painter's ébauche – its applicability. Both taphonomy and the domains proposed are about embedding, and what we show is that the techniques and principles of traceability can be applied to deconstruct texts as well as myths.

Keywords: taphonomy, text, embedding, myths, analysis

Taphonomy: A Definition

"In a 1940 issue of an obscure American journal (Efremov, 1940: 81-93), the Russian paleontologist I. A. Efremov announced taphonomy as a new branch of paleontology. Taphonomy is the study of fossils in their geological contexts with a view to sorting out the factors intervening between death and definitive burial that bias the fossil record in certain ways and render paleoecological reconstruction difficult. It is, in other words, the study of patterns and causes of the incomplete fossil record." (Dodson 1980: 631)

The most interesting part of this definition is the reference to the context (here, geological) as more important (for this kind of study, at least) than the text itself (fossils, in this particular case – though, practically any text is already a *con*-text).

The Text: Dis-membered

It is known that a text is a combination of layers, we also happen to speak of the tectonics of a text referring to both the geological meaning and the art of producing useful and beautiful constructions (*tektonos* meaning carpenter). From the geological point of view tectonics refers to the deformation of earth's crust or to the

structural changes caused thereby, meaning which leads to *epeirogenesis*, the process of making continents, through which large portions of the earth's crust are raised above the sea (*epeiros* meaning mainland). Most of the time, the layers of the words are studied without taking into consideration the epeirogenetic factors, the factors which enable us to use or see some layers and not others, some sides and not the hidden sides, hence an incomplete view and use of the words. The new linguistic approaches, such as the distributional analysis or the relational analysis, assert the rigidity of the diachronical context, of the syntagm as well. The structure is rigid and not the words embedded in, the relation is fixed (a certain structure confers the word a certain function be it grammatical or lexical). The words in themselves are portholes through which worlds of meanings can be perceived in a perpetual Lacan shift, a glide of *significata*, a flight of hovering *significata*. A text is an apocryphal Henry Moresque reclinig woman, compactness of shade and nothingness of light (the concept of *Yin-Yang* reversed), the form being obtained under the impact of the outwardly pulsating inner tension. A text is a Moresca, a staged fancy dress ball, a Morisco, a dance of meanings, an intricate Moresque pattern. We have to go beyond – it was felt and not only by Bernardo Morliacense (Morliacense 12 c.), a twelfth century Benedictine, or Umberto Eco, the twentieth century semiotician that *stat rosa pristina nomine, nomina nuda tenemus* (Eco, 1980), through the rose we hold the pristine name, the bare name (or could it be barren?) of the word.

Half way between them, there is Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (Act II, Scene II):

Juliet:
What's in a name?

or *Hamlet*, Act II, Scene II (same Act, same Scene, quite a coincidence):

Polonius:
/.../ What do you read, my lord?
Hamlet:
Words, words, words.

The Myths: Re-membered

Taphonomy is not *taphos* and *nomen* (the name of the grave), it is *taphos* and *nomos*, i. e. the rule of the grave. The word is a tomb of meanings, time and civilizations tumbled down together, layers of history in just one word. Taphonomy could be the study of why signs change – should socialization be the only meaning? Taphonomy could also be very useful in the study of myths since they are actually fossils. There could be at least two ways of applying taphonomy to myths: 1. abstractly, the study of the myths in themselves as self-sufficient forms,

as types of a certain mind and thought – revolution or involution could be studied and referred to what brings about the possible change (most of the time it is a matter of policy, but the other types of knowledge have their good or bad influence, too); 2. concretely, the study of the myths as they appear in and influence, or are influenced by, other texts, be they scientific or merely literary – the latter will, of course, be preponderant; it is in fact the field we are most interested in.

It was observed that fossils are best kept in certain geological conditions, myths also need a minimal context that enables them to get manifest. Taphnomists also noticed that "tendency for the remains of small mammals to be underrepresented in comparison with the standing crop and for the relatively indestructible large animals to be overrepresented" (Dodson, 1980: 631). Well-structured and complex myths which once were the backbone of a giant mythological construct are still productive in literature and they also created a pattern for new myths to be conceived upon, even nowadays. Fertility myths are still very well represented, as regeneration is important to life – almost all the myths are or at least could be related to a basic core of fertility myths. Sometimes the context is not so large (world-wide) and abstract, it is a longer/shorter text or just a few words.

Such a context is the title of a poem, *The Silver Fanged Boar* (Doinaş, 1966). Mythic residues, fossils of myths are made obvious by the non-verisimilitude of such an animal, the reader being thus introduced into a metaphorical world. *Silver* is a metal connected to the moon, the *fang* by its form and by the spear (the mutilating or killing instrument) is also associated to the moon, the boar is also a symbol also linked to the moon by the primordial water into which it plunges to bring out dirt to create the Earth. It is not only the context but also the terathologic image that brings about the upsurge of the myth. Though the context is partially incomplete, the contiguity of the symbols helps the reader understand it, also, it did not oblige the poet to develop the context, he relied on the *déjà connu*. The *déjà connu* assumption is quite dangerous because, in time, only these abbreviated forms will be used. It is a process similar to the way in which quotations were given in the Middle Ages, hence the present failure to understand some texts due to incomplete reference. Understanding the abbreviated forms was the sign of initiation. Sometimes such a small context is not sufficient, e. g. *the dark heart of the forest*, but relating it to a hunting scenario (should we say *kinegetic* scenarios?) we can decipher it. The forest is connected to the house as it is one of the primordial houses; the heart of the forest is, of course, the middle of a forest. The house among houses is the labyrinth, thus the middle of the forest is in fact the evil center of the labyrinth, i.e. the place where the Minotaur is. Here, too, the contiguity of the symbols facilitated understanding its power of relevance was diminished as the poet also relied on the larger context, the hunting scenario. Hence, taphonomically speaking, the scarcity of mythical "fossils" follows a certain pattern, a symbolically contiguous set of elements and is accounted for by,

among other things, the assumption of the *déjà connu*, ultimately a form of socialization.

To cite Efremov (Efremov, 1940: 93), we agree that taphonomy is "the science of the laws of embedding", […] "taphonomical research allows us to glance into the depth of ages from another point of view than that which is in general use […]" and its principles may be applied to texts, in general, and myths, in particular.

Rudolf Richter, in 1928, anticipated taphonomy by introducing actuopaleontology (Richter, 1928) whose principles are summarized and commented by Efremov:

(1) The science of life-marks (*Lebensspuren*) (Abel, 1935), which can be named ichnology[1].

(2) The science of the destruction of animals and of the embedding of their remains. It can be subdivided into, (a) tanatology, the causes of death and its immediate results, (b) comidology, the transportation of animal remains, (c) biostratonomy (Weigelt, 1927), the science of embedding and (d) necrology, the decay of animal remains down to diagenesis[2].

(3) The science of biofacies[3]. This comprises such different parts of ecology (in the strict sense of the word) as bionomy (Walther, 1893-94) and morphonomy; they are analyzed from the point of view so important for the paleontologist, the areal differences of life as a reaction to the outer surroundings.

Both languages and myths are living things, they are born and they die and get embedded in time, which means that the studies should be diachronical, synchronical, contextual and holistic.

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[1] The study of trace fossils which includes tracks and other impressions and traces. (http://digsfossils.com/fossils/footprints_main.html)

[2] Change in a sediment after its deposition. (http://www.gly.uga.edu/speleoatlas/SAglossary1.html)

[3] Rock unit, or an association of rock units, characterized by the presence of a *fossil* assemblage that is restricted to that particular *facies* and that is typical of a specific environment. (http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O13-biofacies.html) Facies: Sum total of features that reflect the specific environmental conditions under which a given rock was formed or deposited. The features may be lithologic, sedimentological, or faunal. In a sedimentary facies, *mineral* composition,*sedimentary structures*, and bedding characteristics are all diagnostic of a specific rock or lithofacies. (http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1O13-facies.html)

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