

CULTURE STUDIES BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION: THE SYNOD OF WHITBY AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

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Abstract. *The paper will focus on the importance of history for cultural studies following the views of Frederik Brogger that if culture is defined as belief systems then cultural studies must be an interdisciplinary combination of anthropological, historical, linguistic, and literary approaches. Within the historical context various issues should be tackled, such as explanation vs. interpretation, referentiality vs. figurativeness, the particular vs. the representative, and, for the purpose of this presentation, fact vs. fiction. The wide-spread misconception that history deals exclusively with facts while fiction is the domain of literature will be analysed in relation to a 7th century historical event, the Synod of Whitby, which was more or less a random choice since all historical events pose the problem of interpretation. The earliest written record considered a fact will be discussed from the point of unreliability of sources in order to show that they inevitably become fiction in the sense of interpretation. The real religious, economic and political reasons which led to the Synod of Whitby will be also mentioned with the idea of stressing the importance of history for the discipline of cultural studies.*

CULTURE STUDIES BETWEEN FACT AND FICTION: THE SYNOD OF WHITBY AND ITS INTERPRETATIONS

The broadest context for this revisiting of culture studies as a historical discipline is the study of English as a foreign language. The traditional framework of foreign language studies includes three interrelated fields: language, literature and culture, which practice will not be elaborated on here. It is also evident that culture studies have been developing most rapidly in the last 30 years or so in English language departments due to the realisation of the significance of culture for the acquisition of language. If the goal of language studies is communication in the widest sense then a good knowledge of the culture is essential for good linguistic competence. Since culture studies can be approached from a few different standpoints, of anthropology, linguistics, literature, history, philology, didactics etc. the focus of this presentation will be culture studies as a historical discipline.

The narrowing of the focus of research onto history and its significance for the understanding of a particular culture and consequent understanding and acquisition of its language does not imply the reduction of the complexity of historical issues when tackled by culture studies academics. The points of explanation vs. interpretation, referentiality vs. figurativeness, fact vs. fiction, and the particular vs. the representative have to be touched upon whatever the perspective taken and whichever the historical event analysed. Therefore, the centring upon the relationship between fact and fiction in history will not and must not exclude other relevant relationships mentioned above since only in their interplay can one get a glimpse as close to truth as possible into the historical event under observation.

What is of paramount importance is definitely the language, not only because culture studies belongs in the English department curriculum, but also and primarily because of the dialogic relationship between language and history. Similarly to Bakhtin's concept of sociocultural dimension of language uses according to which language lies on the borderline between oneself and the other, it is possible to view the dialogic relationship between the text and its historical context. In this sense, history approximates literature since a literary text should also be analysed within its cultural and historical context. The starting premise for all this is that language, literature and culture are text-oriented disciplines and that therefore the study of history is also based on the analysis of, usually, non-literary texts. This is only one more argument in favour of culture studies being listed among English department courses where the English language is studied as a foreign, target language within the context of the native culture and customarily with access to the written texts only.

However, another point which conventionally differentiates history from literature is its involvement with facts. While literature, by definition which is proving more than reductive, taking into account the genres of autobiography, biography, life writing, fictionalised histories, etc., deals exclusively with fiction, history proper is supposed to treat only facts. Many authors have pointed out the untenability of this supposition. Brogger claims that "the idea of a non-interpretive, exclusively factual 'objectivity' is a myth" (79). A fact cannot be simply explained, it is always interpreted, even in the most sincere attempts at preserving objectivity. And if such conscious effort at suppressing one's affective response is missing, a fact may be turned into its opposite, which sometimes also finds its way into history books. One example will suffice. A cartoon from the time of the war in Vietnam shows two American soldiers pushing their way through tall reeds and discussing an event from the night before. "Hear of the bombing raid last night? 2,300 tons!" says one. The other replies: "That wasn't a bombing raid! It was a Protective Reaction Strike!" This exchange may illustrate the complexity of the issue. The event in question has not even entered history books and it is already a cause for differing interpretations. What is foregrounded is again the language. The two soldiers talk about the same event which involves a discharge of 2,300 tons of explosives but since they use different verbal formulations referring to it, the meanings that are created are also different. Consequently, the dropping of so many tons of bombs may have equally positive as negative connotations, depending on the language used. In this process of linguistic manipulation the fact is almost lost, it is fictionalised, or, to put it in another way, someone's fictions are factualised. An assault becomes a protective measure, and history is transformed into fiction. For more examples of this procedure as to how to make facts fictional or vice versa, how to make fiction look factual, one should refer to the film *Wag*

the Dog. The aspect of ideological and political manipulation will not be tackled here although it does belong in the field of culture studies. The idea was to stress the significance of language whose meaning mysteriously weavers between what is written or spoken and what is meant by it, leaving ample room for ambiguity. Since history out of necessity deals with written texts, the knowledge of facts a historian gets out of them is the one he constructs or linguistically makes in the act of reading them. This is the standpoint of reader-oriented critics like Stanley Fish and others.

To support the contention that "all written or oral sources are imaginative constructions" (Brogger, 90) I chose at random a text that represents a reliable historical source for a 7th century religious event, the Synod of Whitby. The Synod was organised in order to come to an agreement concerning the date for the keeping of Easter, and for this purpose the representatives of both Christian churches present in Northumbria at that time were invited. Northumbria occupied the northern part of Great Britain, mainly the location of modern Scotland. The two churches whose interests clashed in that area were the Irish and the Roman Catholic church. The King's choice of the date of Easter was to decide the future of religion in Britain.

The two branches of Christianity were represented by their best men, Colman and Wilfrid respectively, who were supposed to convince Oswy, the king of Northumbria, of the solidity of their faith and righteousness of their claims. The only instrument the clerical advocates could use was language so that the fates of the churches depended on their rhetoric skills. Colman spoke briefly referring to the greatest figure of the Celtic Church, Columba, the founder of Iona and a great Christian missionary who undertook the conversion of Scotland. He mentioned John the Evangelist and stressed the Celtic tradition and their loyalty to the forefathers. The exponent of the Roman church began by reminding the King of the Synod of Nicaea which resolved on the lunar cycle, confirming the date previously fixed for Easter celebrations. Wilfrid appealed to the authority of the Roman Church and concluded his explication by quoting the words of the apostolic see: "He who condemns any one of these let him be accursed" (Sachse, 27).

King Oswy's logical response was to be expected: "Tell me which is greater in the kingdom of heaven, Columba or the Apostle Peter?" (Sachse, 27). When the whole Synod by acclamation put Peter before Columba, the King's choice was simple: "He is the porter and keeps the keys," he said and officially accepted the Roman Catholic form of worship. His act entailed the prevalence of the Roman Church in Britain and its subsequent dominance there for the following one thousand years.

The historian who recorded this event was Eddius Stephanus, a priest of the time, and the text can be found in his book *Life of Bishop Wilfrid*, which may be considered a primary source. Since Stephanus was a contemporary of Colman and Wilfrid, his report on the Synod of Whitby, though rather short, should be taken as accurate. Venerable Bede also wrote about this momentous event in his *Historia Ecclesiastica* but more than seventy years after the Synod. The supposition is that Stephanus was diachronically closer to the event so that the dialogic relationship between his report and the historical context may throw more light on the facts that were recorded.

The starting point may be Christianity as the widest context for the Synod of Whitby. Stephanus correctly refers to the actual bone of contention, different dates for Easter, and in terms of geography clearly delineates the boundary between the two religious customs. With a proper background in the history of Christianity, a modern reader realises what was perfectly familiar to the people of 7th and 8th century Britain. The text implicitly re-

fers to the two waves of Christianisation, one converting the indigenous Celts up to the 5th century, and the other converting the Anglo-Saxons who started settling the Isles in the 5th century¹. The difference in the religious practice concerning Easter was in fact produced by the isolation of Irish Christianity which had lost contact with Rome after 455, exactly at the time when hordes of the Anglo-Saxons threatened the British Celts. By the 7th century, the Celtic Church of Wales, Ireland and Scotland had already developed autochthonous forms of worship, unacceptable to the See in Rome. That was the pretext for the Synod of Whitby which was supposed to make the king choose for his people, as was a common practice, a "better" version of Christianity, presumably to help them avoid moral confusion and prevent sinful practice.

This leads to the second point and somewhat narrows the context. The cause for the Synod was not the real reason for it. The Celtic-Roman rivalry was, meaning that the two churches were not simply different, they were opposed. Not only the observation of Easter but all religious paraphernalia distinguished the two Christian branches in Britain, from the notion of original sin to the shape of tonsure². In the last paragraph, Stephanus refers to the command that if Colman rejects the tonsure and the Easter rule, he must retire. That is what Colman did and his act was symbolic of the destiny of the whole Celtic Church. It was overpowered by a mighty enemy and had to withdraw, though it did not disappear. The discontent of the Celts has been fuelled to this day by their national humiliation at the hands of the Anglo-Saxon invaders, and by the suppression of their religion first by the Roman Catholic Church in the 7th c. and later by the Anglican Episcopal Church in the 16th c.

The third point is related to the words Stephanus chooses to describe the two speakers. He says that Colman spoke "boldly," while Wilfrid addressed the King "with his customary humility." This may look like his attempt at objectivity, an expression of his intention to realistically render the scene, so that Colman and Wilfrid do not become stock characters, but real individuals. However, a literate man at the beginning of the 8th century, when Stephanus wrote his book, must have been aware of the heavy connotations of these words. The inevitable association would be the Pelagius-St. Augustine controversy of the 5th century which was a theoretical culmination of the differences between the ideological views of the two Christian theologians and their followers in different parts of the world. Pelagius was, unlike St. Augustine, convinced of man's original goodness or at least of his perfectibility based on his free will, while St. Augustine supported the doctrine of original sin and man's corruptibility which made God's grace necessary for salvation. The former insisted on man's dignity and personal relationship with God, the latter on humbleness and obedience to the Church. No wonder then Stephanus describes Colman as bold. He was a follower of Columba who was in turn a disciple of Pelagius, and Stephanus did not miss a chance to insinuate that Colman was closely related to the heresy of Pelagius.

On the other hand, he probably believed he was paying Wilfrid a service by describing him as humble and fearful of authority, which Colman was not. After all, Stephanus

¹ "England had become Christian very quickly. By 660 only Sussex and the Isle of Wight had not accepted the new faith. Twenty years later, English teachers returned to the lands from which the Anglo-Saxons had come, bringing Christianity to much of Germany." (McDowall, 14).

² "The men of Iona, like the Welsh, had a date for Easter different from the Roman; and their priest-monks shaved from ear to ear across the front of the head / possibly a reminiscence of Druidism – instead of making a round tonsure on the crown." (Trevelyan, 63)

was Wilfrid's biographer and even if had fought hard against it, he was biased towards Wilfrid. So, standing before the King, Wilfrid behaves as a priest standing before the Pope, and does what was indeed customary: shows excessive respect and humility. This is what the Roman Church expected from its subjects, being hierarchically organised and demanding absolute obedience. Vansittart sums up the rivalry between the Celtic and Roman churches in two sentences: "The contest was between very different concepts of human behaviour, human nature, human needs. Rome had gathered astute, legalistic and sophisticated careerists into the vast administrative apparatus of the Church, impatient with the loosely-organised, theologically speculative and individualistic Celts" (37). In this sense, Colman was indeed representative of Celtic insubordination, or that is probably how Stephanus wanted his readers to see him, triggered by the word "bold". The hypocritical humbleness of Wilfrid is what a modern reader sees in the text, knowing him for a "ruthless, sophisticated authoritarian... administrator and diplomat of international standing, 'progressive,' with all the potency and limitations of that many-sided word" (Wansittart, 37).

So, collective assumptions and values are most often present in the text which is usually not only an expression of but also a reaction to a specific period. At the beginning of the 8th century, Stephanus most certainly felt inclined to criticise the aberrations of the Celtic Church under the guise of authenticity.

The next point will touch on the two universally acknowledged Christian figures the speakers referred to. They are John the Evangelist and Peter the Apostle. When calling on the authority of John the Evangelist, "who leaned on the breast of the Lord at supper," Colman reverts to the Celtic tradition of friendship, brotherhood and loyalty. The whole Celtic church observed Easter on the date John did, out of love for him. He was a man who held religious meetings wherever he went, preaching the Gospel to the willing and actually communicating with the people. That was also the tradition of the Irish monks and for that reason St. John was highly respected among the Celts.

On the other hand, Wilfrid begins his exposé summoning the 318 holy fathers of Nicaea and also the apostolic see to back up his claim for the date of keeping Easter. This is a reflection of his dogmatic, hierarchical and bureaucratic frame of mind which was only a particular sample of the Roman Church world view. However, it is interesting that King Oswy's subsequent question juxtaposes Columba and the Apostle Peter. Peter was not explicitly mentioned and the powerful effect of his name on all present at Whitby deserves explanation. Paul Johnson describes in great detail the cult of St. Peter which made Rome a place of pilgrimage visited by numbers of eager believers. The faithful descended into the catacombs in hope of cure and salvation convinced that St. Peter was physically there. Furthermore, "while Peter's relics did their work from his tomb, his earthly persona was entrusted to the current Pope, who acted vicariously" (Johnson, 169). For that reason, as soon as the apostolic see was mentioned, the King thought of Peter, according to the description offered by Stephanus. Again, description in a historical source is inevitably at the same time interpretation. Taking into account the religious backdrop, Stephanus probably with most of his contemporaries found this meaning more than plausible. King Oswy "opted for Rome, as opposed to Iona, because he believed that St. Peter literally held the keys of Entrance to Heaven, and so was much more powerful than St. Columba" (Johnson, 166). Present-day readers may not be aware of the possible depth of faith in the 8th century and the research into the historical context of the period may in such cases prove extremely rewarding.

The last point is related to that remark. The way Stephanus describes King Oswy in these crucial moments may also have some import. He uses the adverbs "smilingly" and "wisely". Presumably, the King smiled when he asked the Synod the key question about Columba and Peter. Was he in doubt as to the answer? Certainly not, if one is acquainted with the then-reputation of St. Peter. A possible explanation for his mysterious smile may be implied in his wise, contrived answer by which he adopted the Roman religious practice. Namely, the King who beforehand knew which option was best for him could only smile at the cue provided by both Colman and Wilfrid. His decision looked like a natural and logical choice, to which no reasonable objections could be made. If 318 holy fathers along with St. Peter indicated the right path for the whole world, then the King of such a small kingdom as Northumbria could but condescend. What lay behind his wise reply in acknowledgement of the authority of the Church embodied in St. Peter was in fact his autocratic ambition, shared by other early Anglo-Saxon kings:

English conversion was encouraged by the Saxon kings who considered that the hierarchical example of the Christian church would support their royal authority. The church also provided advisers and administrators, through whom the kings could control their kingdoms more efficiently. The connection between church and state was consequently established at an early stage in English history. (Oakland, 299)

Oswy's idea in the 7th century was to strengthen his position by adopting Christianity and through conversion of his people ensure their subjugation. He needed the aggressive, militant attitude present in Wilfrid's words: "He who condemns any one of these let him be accursed." The Roman Church, however, was not of great help to him since Northumbria declined soon after his death. In the 8th century Mercian king Offa went a step further when he crowned his son at a church ceremony. His intention was to relate the state to the church and provide the institution of kingship with a divine aura. These were just the beginnings of institutional developments in Britain but soon the state was competing for power with the church, pulling the tug of war for many centuries.

Whatever it was that Stephanus observed and recorded as smiles, he gave the modern reader an indication of the true state of affairs. However, one can discern it only if aware of the dialogic relationship between the language of the written text and the actual historical context. What seems to be a true account of a historical event, full of facts and verifiable references proves to be a fiction which actually disguises the true intentions: to unite the church in Britain, to eradicate the Celtic tradition, to link Britain with Christian Europe, to ensure the king's absolute and indisputable power, to establish administration, government and law, and through all of these ensure the subordination of the people. It was indeed the first step towards England as a great power which it ultimately became. However, to draw these conclusions, the reader inevitably produces his own text while reading the source text and knowing that no source presents pure information. So, from fact to fiction and back to fact seems to be the legitimate road of culture studies.

THE ORIGINAL TEXT: THE COUNCIL OF WHITBY , 664

On a certain occasion in the days of Colman, bishop of York and metropolitan, while Oswy and Alhfrith his son were reigning, the abbots and priests and men of all ranks in the orders of the Church gathered together in a monastery called Whitby, in the presence of the holy mother and most pious nun Hilda, as well as of the kings and two bishops,

namely Colman and Agilbert, to consider the question of the proper date for the keeping of Easter – whether in accordance with the British and Scottish manner and that of the whole of the northern district, Easter should be kept on the Sunday between the fourteenth day of the moon and the twenty-second, or whether the plan of the apostolic see was better, namely to celebrate Easter Sunday between the fifteenth day of the moon and the twenty-first. The opportunity was granted first of all to Bishop Colman, as was proper, to state his case in the presence of all. He boldly spoke in reply as follows: "Our fathers and their predecessors, plainly inspired by the Holy Spirit as was Columba, ordained the celebration of Easter on the fourteenth day of the moon, if it was a Sunday, following the example of the Apostle and Evangelists John who 'leaned on the breast of the Lord at supper' and was called the friend of the Lord. He celebrated Easter on the fourteenth day of the moon and we, like his disciples Polycarp and others, celebrate it on his authority; we dare not change it, for our father's sake, nor do we wish to do so. I have expressed the opinion of our party, do you state yours."

Agilbert the foreign bishop and Agatho his priest bade St. Wilfrid, priest and abbot, with his persuasive eloquence explain in his own tongue the system of the Roman Church and of the apostolic see. With his customary humility he answered in these words: "This question has already been admirably investigated by the three hundred and eighteen most holy and learned fathers gathered in Nicaea, a city of Bithynia. They fixed amongst other decisions upon a lunar cycle which recurs every nineteen years. This cycle shows that Easter is to be kept on the fourteenth day of the moon. This is the fixed rule of the apostolic see and of almost the whole world, and our fathers, after many decrees had been made, uttered these words: 'He who condemns any of these let him be accursed.'"

Then, after St. Wilfrid the priest had finished his speech, King Oswy smilingly asked them all: "Tell me which is greater in the kingdom of heaven, Columba or the Apostle Peter?" The whole synod answered with one voice and one consent: "The Lord settled this when he declared: 'Thou art Peter and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. And I will give thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.'"

The king wisely replied: "He is the porter and keeps the keys. With him I will have no differences nor will I agree with those who have such, nor in any single particular will I gainsay his decisions so long as I live."

So Bishop Colman was told what he must do, should he reject the tonsure and the Easter rule for fear of his fellow-countrymen, namely he must retire and leave his see to be taken by another and a better man. Thus indeed he did.

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STUDIJE KULTURE IZMEDJU ČINJENICA I FIKCIJE: SINOD U VITBIJU I NJEGOVE INTERPRETACIJE

Vesna Lopičić

U središtu ovoga rada jeste važnost istorije za studije kulture u skladu sa pogledima Frederika Brogera koji smatra da, ako kulturu definišemo kao sistem verovanja, onda studije kulture moraju biti jedna interdisciplinarna kombinacija antropoloških, istorijskih, lingvističkih i književnih pristupa. U okviru istorijskog konteksta, moraju se obraditi razna pitanja, kao što je odnos objašnjenja i interpretacije, referencijalnosti i figurativnosti, konkretnog i reprezentativnog i činjenica i fikcije, što i jeste predmet ovog rada. Široko rasprostranjena zabluda da se istorija bavi isključivo činjenicama dok je fikcija u domenu književnosti biće proučena u vezi sa Sinodom u Vitbiju, istorijskim događajem iz sedmog veka, koji je manje-više odabran slučajno jer svi istorijski događaji predstavljaju problem kada je u pitanju interpretacija. Najraniji sačuvani zapis koji se smatra činjenicom analiziran je sa stanovišta nepouzdanosti izvora da bi se pokazalo kako činjenice neizbežno postaju fikcija u smislu interpretacije. Pravi religijski, ekonomski i politički razlozi koji su doveli do Sinoda u Vitbiju će takođe biti pomenuti sa namerom da se naglasi važnost istorije za bavljenje studijama kulture kao naučnom disciplinom.