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## Literature? History of literature?

It seems that thinking about the history of literature today should begin with a general overview of the present state of literary studies. Already in 1995, in his speech entitled *The Place of Interpretation*, Janusz Sławiński stated:

“If we took seriously all statements of poststructuralist revisionists, the manifestos of cognitive skepticism, the arias of the followers of Derridean thinking and deconstruction – all of which are performed and applauded on so many stages all over the world – we should determine that there is no longer any justification for the existence of our discipline, and for this reason we should quit and search for a new profession, leaving only those who are capable of evocatively discussing subtle varieties of the absence of our former discipline” (Sławiński 59).

And then:

“We may only howl in despair, or look for a thick hemp rope. Whatever you want to capture, in a moment vanishes in elusiveness, turns into a phantom, is hidden in the absence; simple research activities turn out to be impractical, invalid, or absurd; each task appears to be too ambitious and monstrously burdened with the impossibility of being undertaken. One may think that the object of literary inquiry has simply vanished, that our discipline has squandered all cognitive certainties that previously constituted its identity, that it has lost its basis and – what follows – its *raison d’être*” (Sławiński 61).

Evidently, it seems we need first to define our understanding of “the object of literary inquiry”, so as not to let it vanish in “elusiveness”, or “turn into a phantom”. In fact, our understanding of the term “literature” may already substantially discriminate our standpoints from other propositions. For example, Benjamin Harshaw states that:

“Literature as a phenomenon in society [...] is a complex and open-ended conglomerate of genres, norms, texts, writers, institutions, publishing houses, journals, mediating agencies, and so on, embedded in the polysystem of a culture [...]” (Harshaw, 240–241).

Literature can be also defined as the only social system of activity, which allows for breaking the principle of conformity of opinions and statements with the commonly accepted cultural (intersubjective) model of the world. This system (understood there as a mechanism rather) is based primarily on two conventions: the aesthetic one and that of polyvalence<sup>1</sup>. Or maybe literature should be simply labeled “the written”?

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<sup>1</sup> See S.J. Schmidt. “The Fiction Is that Reality Exists: A Constructivist Model of Reality, Fiction, and Literature”. *Poetics Today*. 1984, vol. 5:2, s. 263–264.

One can notice, too, that in addition to the above “definitions” of the term, two other – contrasting – meanings of “literature” are commonly accepted: literature is seen either as a set of texts considered as literary by a historically, culturally and ethnically defined community, or as a set of texts endowed with the specific features of an artistic work.

So what is a literary scholar supposed to do? Should he/she describe the system of various social phenomena, or examine the mechanism of social action that breaks with the cultural model of the world? Or should he/she study who - and why and in what conditions –assumes certain social attitudes? It is somehow tempting to say that all these possibilities are situated closer to sociology than to literary studies.

Still one can perversely return to the ancient and rather tautological belief that literature is simply a set of literary texts, and that the immediate object of literary studies is then obviously a literary text. The uniqueness of such a text among other texts would originate from the observation that as a linguistic structure it is subordinated to an additional organization dictated by an individual supercode (artistic idiolect) and aimed at imposing extra meanings on both particular signals and the entire text. The primary objective of such a text is to disclose its unique arrangement, which is meant to provoke the aesthetic experience of the reader. It would mean, among other things, that the intrinsic nature of a literary text lies, above all, in its primary informational service to nothing but itself (its autoreferential function)<sup>2</sup>.

As can be seen, we would agree here with Umberto Eco, who – according to Stephen Collini – continues to believe that a text has its own “nature”, and that the ultimate objective of interpretation is an attempt at explaining this nature<sup>3</sup>. Hence our standpoint here turns out to be also “contaminated” with essentialism!

It is perhaps worth reminding that in 1984, the academic interests of Western post-structuralists were, generally speaking, still focused on the text itself, on “how” meanings are created within the text rather than on “what” the text says (as if the former did not condition the latter!). Then, in the decade of 1985–1995, something must have happened to provoke Sławiński’s statement, quoted at the beginning of our essay. If only for the sake of its being objected to, I would like to state clearly that what happened

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<sup>2</sup> Let us be explicit here: as opposed to biography, it does not serve the gathering of information concerning the life of an author; as opposed to history, it does not serve a revealing of factual data about our reality, past or present; it also differs from a grammar book, as it does not serve the acquisition of the language in which it has been written, and so on. What is more, when we speak about the autoreferentiality of a text (its poetic function), we do not negate the presence of other Jakobsonian functions that accompany the poetic one. We speak about the dominant position of the poetic function rather than the elimination of other functions.

<sup>3</sup> See: S. Collini. Wstęp: “Interpretacja skończona i nieskończona”. *Interpretacja i nadinterpretacja*, ed. S. Collini, transl. T. Bieroń. Kraków, 1996, s. 4.

in those years was a general shift in the object of literary studies<sup>4</sup> – what was observed was a general return to issues which had been previously considered as overtly non-artistic, matters which had been placed in the domain of sociology, politics, philosophy, psychology, and other disciplines. There is not enough space here for a more elaborate discussion of this transformation (and fortunately so, since the discussion would be anything but interesting!). It is enough to note that in order to write a history, one needs to realize what this history is supposed to cover. One can write a history of ideas, or a history of literary reception, or a political history, or a history of culture in the broadest sense of this term. But if what is meant is a history of literature, it should be logical that the result of such an enterprise should be the history of the literary art<sup>5</sup>.

We have attempted to repeat an old postulate, that it is a literary work – be it a single text or a structured set of texts – that should be seen as the proper domain for literary studies. In contemporary scholarly practice it is the name of an author, and not any of the structural aspects, which determines most frequently the range of interpreted texts. The justification for the topic of such a study is often rather “weak” and seems somehow accidental<sup>6</sup>, unless its conclusions reveal more theoretical or literary historical motivation<sup>7</sup>. Sometimes texts are studied either in relation to the literary conventions in which they are rooted<sup>8</sup>, or in connection with the stages of evolution of literary genres<sup>9</sup>: conclusions coming from interpretations of a great number of literary texts allow the scholar to draw conclusions of a higher order, to characterize features of various systems that are revealed both synchronically and diachronically, depending on both the research

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<sup>4</sup> One can also say that we have mistaken literary criticism for literary studies: we are more interested in our personal associations provoked by a text than in the ways in which this text was built as an artistic work. When we talk about literature other than contemporary, we most frequently observe the lack of historical awareness on the part of the researcher, the interpreter, the scholar, and we may suspect that there is additional insufficiency of methodological competence. In this case, the historical view of literature is certainly not possible.

<sup>5</sup> The topic of “academic course-books on the history of literature” is excluded from the present discussion, as they encompass data not on only literary texts but also on literary criticism, on individual authors (biographical notes!), on socio-political background and sometimes on theater (not drama!).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: U. Terentowicz-Fotyga, *Semiotyka przestrzeni kobiecych w powieściach Virginii Woolf*. Lublin, 2006. It should be however admitted that regardless of this choice of texts, an analysis of various aspects of the given author always contributes to the foundations of literary studies.

<sup>7</sup> See, for instance: L. Gruszewska-Blaim. *Gra w SS. Poetyka (nie)powieści Jerzego Kosińskiego*. Lublin, 2005 and G. Maziarczyk. *The Narratee in Contemporary British Fiction. A Typological Study*. Lublin, 2005.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, a study on conventions structuring characters: W. Nowicki. *Awatary szaleństwa. O zjawisku donkichotyżmu w powieści angielskiej XVIII wieku*. Lublin, 2008. A whole variety of conventions and their interrelations are presented in: B. Klonowska. *Contaminations: Magic Realism in Contemporary British Fiction*. Lublin, 2006. Let us also mention in this context the books stressing relationships of texts with literary tradition: B. Kowalik. *A Woman's Pastoral. Dialogue with Literary Tradition in Barbara Pym's Fiction*. Lublin, 2002 and J. Węgródzka. *Patterns of Enchantment: E. Nesbit and the Traditions of Children's Literature*. Gdańsk, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> See A. Blaim. “The English Robinsonade of the Eighteenth Century”, *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, 275(1990); T. Kostkiewiczowa. *Oda w poezji polskiej. Dzieje gatunku*. Wrocław, 1996, G. Trębicki. *Fantasy. Ewolucja gatunku*. Kraków, 2007.

perspective which is adopted and on the scope of the material studied<sup>10</sup>. In this way, rudimentary material for a history of literature is gathered.

Because it is the function of the observed phenomena which should be, or is usually at the center of attention, the boundaries of the analyzed structural level need always to be crossed. The function is defined by a relationship; it is – after all – a reference to something: a reference of a phonemic level to the syntactic, a reference of the literary arrangement to the semantics of the text, a reference of the textual composition to the genre system, and so on. Also the artistry of a text, as its function is dependent on numerous intratextual relations, manifests itself in opposition to the extratextual elements, and thus discloses relations with them (the opposition is binary and bilaterally symmetrical – the text and the interpretative context<sup>11</sup>).

Exploring the synchronic and diachronic relationships between texts can lead to attempts at formulating rules and principles governing the development of literary art (i.e. governing the process of literary history), to the formulation of these principles through further application of even higher level of abstraction, and to the discovery of more and more distant and generalized functions of the observed textual phenomena (texts).

On the one hand, there arises a danger: the reliability of statements – and therefore their legitimacy – decreases in direct proportion to the increasing distance between the conclusions of such studies and concrete textual signals. On the other hand, a systemic view of the literary material (historical structures of kinds, genres, supragenres, conventions, and stereotypes) is ultimately a kind of strategy of explanatory description. Such use of “systemic” tools of interpretation and explanation permits in effect a placing of the analyzed text(s) in a variously delineated intertextual space.

The study of a set of texts may, of course, encounter a number of difficulties. How broad should be the competence of the scholar so as to allow him/her to identify dominant tendencies in the particular elements of literary texts, and to understand their functions in a diachronic perspective? Understanding the function of all such factors as the reference to both the intellectual background of the given epoch and its literary currents, and in particular to the ever changing state of literary awareness, to the perception of categories such as space, time, history, and humanity – all this should be

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<sup>10</sup> If the interest in an individual artistic phenomenon is a feature that differentiates literary studies from many other scholarly disciplines, the perspectives of literary historical syntheses and the possibility of theoretical modeling of the discovered facts, ordering them into systems and formulating their laws, testify to the similarity of our discipline to other disciplines. Moreover, as each literary text offers a definite model of the fictional world, studying this model is an equally lawful procedure as any other scholarly or scientific study of phenomenal reality.

<sup>11</sup> See: J. Lotman. *Struktura tekstu artystycznego*. Warszawa, 1984, s.74–76. But we assume this does not mean that the context of interpretation always demands detailed observation!

the more deeply comprehended the more decisively a study is oriented towards a synthesis of a literary-historical character. I am also convinced that in both analytical procedures and in the exposure of synthetical overviews, literary theoretical instruments become truly invaluable<sup>12</sup>.

What is particularly needed in studies on the history of literature is not only substantial scholarly experience but also particularly broad competence and erudition, and this, perhaps, makes history of literature the field for specialists with the title of professor<sup>13</sup>. In order comprehensibly to trace transformations of literary genres, even in a limited period of time, one needs to present a study in the size of a voluminous monograph, testifying to a knowledge of such an amount of texts which could permit accurate synthetic generalization. Regretfully, nowadays such monographs are published less and less frequently.

One would like to dream of a situation quite different from the one presented at the outset of this discussion. To dream of a situation in which at least every second or third dissertation would try to synthesize a particular stage in the evolution of a selected genre. To dream of teams of interpreters working on the synchronous cross-sections of poetry, prose, and drama, at the borderlines of various epochs of national literatures. Perhaps in this imaginary situation the issues and problems of literary history would not appear alien even to the youngest scholars in our field of studies.

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<sup>12</sup> To avoid possible misunderstandings, we should distinguish between methodological directives from the theory of textual phenomena. Whereas the former is understood as a metadisciplinary reflection comprising an elementary set of statements defining the studied object, its essence and nature, and additionally determining aims, scope and ways of explaining the explored [research] material within the field of a given academic discipline, the latter aims at building models of textual phenomena and processes, their functioning, evolution, and transformations.

<sup>13</sup> It is possible that in times of general haste, the epoch of a "rat race", and the administrative evaluation of younger and senior scholars, it is more profitable to multiply publications which interpret individual texts rather than concentrate on time-consuming studies on broader horizons of, for example, the evolution of certain genres. There is, of course, nothing wrong with this – more elaborate encounters with new texts (the principle is: the more the better) constitute a basis for the next stage in scholarly inquiry: towards historical perspectives on the art of literature.

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