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## Embracing Postmodernity: Recycling and Rhetoric Instead of Knowledge?

### 1. Orphaned Literature

Postmodern discourses devoted to literature are usually considered narcissistically positioned towards themselves; as nontransparent, aesthetically infused, and autoreferential, according to a given programme. More appropriately, therefore, these discourses can be claimed to orphan their “object” of interest and cognition: being independent, autonomous and dynamic, it is fact in located beyond them; historical and literary, it is only realized and materialized in particular works, artistic movements, writers, readership, or literary institutions. Further, because of their positioning towards themselves, the discourses rarely delve into the “object’s” diversity, modifications, and the process of becoming. They like to think of literature as being “an unfathomable mystery” or an unknowable “thing in itself”. This, in turn, justifies free manipulations of texts and various attributions of arbitrary properties. The image of a work fuses with the perception of a reader, a critic, or a scholar, that is, with their cognitive labor and the discourse around them. In other words, the reception itself determines the identity of a work.

We are quite familiar with the reasons for this self-positioning. It is embodied in a deep and paralysing mistrust of knowledge of the subject [*wiedza przedmiotowa*], which has lost its magical power as “the mirror of nature” and the reflector of truth about nature<sup>1</sup>. Methodology, the ally and the foundation for knowledge of the subject, becomes censored when postmodern criticism undermines and criticizes it, and treats it not only as useless but also harmful – it is accused of hampering a free and subject-related [*podmiotowy*] contact with literature, of coming between the cognitive subject and the cognized phenomenon like an intruder and of disturbing and deforming their indirect and spontaneous relation. Moreover, methodology is criticized for distorting the image of literature because of the procedure of examination: external, science-originating, and inherently autonomous from writing. Thus, methodology restricts the subject – reader, critic, or scholar – in the free, aesthetic and imaginative experiencing

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<sup>1</sup> Richard Rorty presented his accusations of “mirror” knowledge in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

of texts, and functions as a restricting and alienating entity. Is it not enough to consider the word “methodology” as stigmatizing? Is it not enough to put an equals sign between a methodologist and a doctrinarian, a dogmatist and a censor? Should we then exclude methodologists, like poets, from Plato’s ideal state?

The accusations, despite being rather old (made before by various intuitionists), seem serious and easy to succumb to. It is important to note, however, that postmodern critique, general as well as particular, relating to the subject-related literary criticism, can be easily reversed. That is to say, one can ask whether mind is able to cope with a surprizing and unpredictable reality in general, and with literary and aesthetic reality in particular, alone and without any method. Some claim, therefore, that mind in itself will never govern reality and simultaneously escape atavisms, illusions, false perceptions, and incidental influences: the Marxist, Nietzschean, and Freudian criticism of rationality has made it clear that a transparent and self-governing mind is an abstraction, and even more so, when mind differentiates itself from body, psychological mechanisms, and social conditionings, and aims for self-dependence. Of course, following Richard Rorty, we can celebrate the contingency of such a mind, but it is disputable whether any pillars of knowledge can be ever built upon it.

The question of method (or methods) is the key here. Giving up any methodical procedure does not only result in difficulties in differentiating and separating a cognized object from its perceptual and linguistic representation, but also makes it possible to identify this phenomenon with a non-equivalent, secondary, or accidental representation. These representations, in turn, cause false reasoning, ineffectual actions, or lead to wrong decisions. At the same time, scholars deprive themselves of tools that, used practically and evaluated critically, could protect them from misunderstandings that can result in negative, and sometimes extreme situations.

Aiming towards unlimited and objective cognitive freedom seems to be a source of the dominant antinomies of postmodernity<sup>2</sup>. These antinomies are not only created by risky transpositions of the political, social, and economic ideals of liberalism into a qualitatively different sphere of cognition, knowledge, and science. Also, they result from postmodernity’s, despite numerous actions, being incapable of reducing the cognitive relation towards the object and of freeing itself from the difficult dualism of subject-object. Hence it seems that the elimination of objectivity causes a crisis

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<sup>2</sup> By postmodernity I do not mean a narrowly defined postmodernism, but a quite wide scientific paradigm that includes poststructuralism, deconstructionism, neopragmatism, culturalism, cognitivism, and obviously post-modernism. One criterion of postmodernism is, chiefly, a critical distance towards the ideology of modernity and a search for other solutions.

and a pathological condition in a domain of knowledge, because what we eventually deal with is a literally and figuratively empty and objectless knowledge.

The objectlessness is nowadays filled with various and makeshift devices, whilst the subject-related discourse [*dyskurs przedmiotowy*] has undergone a change into other kinds of discourses, in particular autoreferential and rhetorical (performative) ones. Effectively, subject-related discourses are replaced by object-related discourses [*uprzedmiotowione*]. Are the latter better than the former? The indirectness of linguistic happening and working is, in fact, an attempt here to create a substitute object that would be arbitrary and completely subjected to the writer. The cognizant or critical discourse of an author acquires, or seems to acquire, the features of an autonomous, independent subject-related discourse, frequently governed by a totally different set of rules and directed towards a different set of aims. As a result, cognitive penetration and understanding becomes appropriation. This appropriation is deceitfully expressed in the autonomy of the cognitive discourse, by nature heterotelic, and within this discourse in the blurring of the difference between subject language and metalanguage. Jean-François Lyotard wrote about the replacement of the referential paradigm with that of “adlinguisticity,” in which “one speaks about speech, writes about writing,” and where a text dissolves in the obscurity of intertextuality (71). Moreover, Franklin R. Ankersmit has also commented upon the problem, in the following way:

“Science was the alpha and omega of the modernists and the structuralists; they saw science as not only the most important given but at the same time the ultimate given of modernity. Scientific rationality as such does not pose a problem for postmodernists and poststructuralists; they look at it, as it were, from outside or from above” (140).

According to Ankersmit – viewing scientific rationality “from outside or from above” – a shift of interest occurred: from the internal rules of scientific cognition to “the functioning of science and of scientific information itself” (141). It needs to be noted at this juncture that a similar (polemic and pamphletary) style of presentation on subject knowledge, methodology, and science in general does not delete the legitimacy of the critique or deny the accusations it made or the problems it raised. The negativity of the critique is not only expressed in the act of negation. Rather, the critique presents a number of remarks that make it possible constructively to evaluate the deficiencies of the critiqued disciplines and, particularly, the indispositions of literary studies. However, this does not mean that we ought to tolerate deficiencies in argumentation for this reason, and accept the viewpoint of the opponents of subject knowledge, scientific rationality, or science in general. On the contrary, we should be grateful, inasmuch as this provocative and negative critique of postmodernity discloses, first, gaps, simplifications, and misuses in the scientific

concepts of positivism, neopositivism, phenomenology, analytical approaches, and structuralism. It makes us also realize how many concepts and theories are in fact arbitrary, *a priori* or metaphorical, such as one of literary phenomena existing in a system, or that a work of literature is a structure. Moreover, the critique is frequently right to question ideas frequently considered “science” that in fact have more to do with faith than with fact-based knowledge; the concepts of system and structure are good cases in point whenever they are generalized and mechanically transposed on any phenomenon.

The critique, second, draws attention to things the existence of which was not hitherto noticed and whose significance was much overvalued, or the other way round – undervalued. In other words, the critique of postmodernity redresses a science-specific image of literary and cultural reality: postmodernity made us realize the critical significance of phenomena such as parody, pastiche, irony, the grotesque, or anamorphosis, important in the creation of culture and style. They had been noticed before but their influence had rather been local and peripheral.

The critique has also focused our attention on the changed character of the functioning of tradition in postmodern civilization. That is, it stressed the influence of historical conditions, obscured by formalism and structuralism, on the shape of cultural and literary phenomena. Finally, the critique legitimized a number of aesthetic ideas that had been marginalized before, and questioned others whose position seemed unshakeable. One such idea was the *avant-garde principium* of innovativeness, so insignificant when confronted with postmodernity.

Third, the critique of postmodernity recharts the previous literary map and re-evaluates the past from this perspective. Whether this has been done convincingly or not is a question for further discussion. Still, postmodern critical ideas allow us to rethink many issues again. A good case in point is the much-disputed opposition of postmodernism and modernism, which has widened the term of modernism and made it easy to create one formation with the Enlightenment, Romanticism, and naturalism, despite these being hitherto deemed separate on the basis of certain criteria (for instance, the binary oppositions of feeling – brain, spirit – nature, etc.), and hostile to each other, as oppositional and self-excluding.

Other interesting issues are introduced by the radical and postmodern critique of metaphysics and the axiology resulting from it. Some radical representatives of that critique, however, are wrong to perceive a form of metaphysics in secularized science, although

it stimulates obvious technological and civilizational development<sup>3</sup>. It is equally unfounded, I believe, to consider rationalism, scientism, and realism as metaphysical formations. From a historical point of view, they opposed the image of the world created in metaphysics and caused its intellectual failure. On the other hand, it is not so clear that postmodern concepts are automatically free of metaphysical assumptions and suggestions.

Foregrounding the deficiencies and groundless usurpations of a given science, postmodern critique clears the ground for questions and quests that by nature aim towards hitherto barely conscious or articulated and weakly recognized phenomena. Therefore, it indicates raptures and unknowns in the current representation of reality, and thus incites us to recognize and reconsider them. Such a critique, as a result, should be perceived as an incentive for science. It creates the need to strengthen propounded solutions and, in consequence, initiates the reconstruction and revival of a connection with an examined reality and social and cultural surroundings. Therefore, postmodern negativism, so reluctantly accepted, works towards the paradoxical positivity of science. As an opponent, postmodernity is often “an active cooperator” with science. The real danger for the latter is not the negating, however radical, critique that points out insufficiency of cognition and knowledge, but rather blind faith in one’s own perfection and omnipotence that conceals those insufficiencies or portrays them as virtues, which also happens.

True enough, postmodern critique makes us aware that cognition, knowledge, science, the creation, circulation, and processing of information have become a problem of contemporary civilization, and that previous, often nineteenth-century modes of evaluation of them fail. Of course, it is not postmodernity’s fault that the twentieth century has altered the basic conditions of civilizational existence. The postmodern mission has become to signal, and, in a way, to symbolize and promote rapid changes, whereas the unwillingness to change often opposes their early harbingers<sup>4</sup>.

Unfamiliar events, relationships, and facts, let me repeat this unobvious obviousness, take precedence over theory that has to take them into account and adapt to them. Otherwise, theory becomes “theory of theory” and deals with its own heritage or evolves into a mummified canon. Although postmodern proponents of “theory” fight this obviousness and frequently despise subjectivity and close a discourse in discourse, the reality

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<sup>3</sup> Michael Ryan associates metaphysics with a suggestion of “absolute transcendence”, justifying the search for the last solutions, main principles, binarism governing being, etc., and, first and foremost, buttressing the current social order. Ryan contradicts the idea of transcendence with the idea of sequencing, which reduces uncrossable boundaries and differences to something relative and alternating. See: *Marxism and Deconstruction: A Critical Articulation*, pp. 7–10.

<sup>4</sup> The unwillingness to search for constructive elements in postmodernism makes undeniable changes seem incomprehensible and unnecessary, and stubbornness seems the only reaction possible. Yet such stubbornness, in fact, justifies the critique of hitherto dominating concepts for their unwillingness to change and adapt.

of changes in literature, culture, and civilization paradoxically facilitates postmodernity and its critical pathos. Also, the reality, thus, warns its opponents and critics against ignoring its presence.

These remarks, let us recapitulate, do not at all lead to the view that the postmodern critique of subject knowledge or methodology is to be uncritically embraced: it is not legitimized only because of its own "postmodernity" (and hence fashionable status?) or that it sees real and imaginary opponents, as Ankersmith arrogantly declared, "from outside or from above". The only aspect that indeed legitimizes the critique in question is that it stresses the inadequacy of previous descriptions and critical and scientific solutions. The rule of any critique is that it is universal in itself, and this, in turn, means that what is critiqued is not only its object but the critique itself. Postmodern critique, like any other, is not an exception here; nor is the critique of the critique either.

## 2. What about literary criticism?

Civilizational changes, which have in recent decades occurred on a global scale, have exerted influence not only on literature and its place in culture, but also have altered literary criticism. All the alterations have made us realize, and thus they have emphasized, the workings of poststructuralism, deconstructionism, liberal neopragmatism, and postmodernism. All these movements handicapped, and in some cases even destroyed, the previous (positivist, phenomenological, and structural) fundamentals of criticism. Even the issues which hitherto seemed clear and settled, like the contents and extent of literary criticism, the ways of problematizing literary phenomena, leading analytical categories, the decidability of cognitive judgments on literature, methods of their justifying, etc., have all become problematic.

The so-called cultural turn, that is now aggressively developing, backgrounded the linguistic and semiotic approach<sup>5</sup>. Many disciplines have found themselves at a stage of profound crisis, including previously dominating theories and the history of literature. The link between the latter two disciplines with criteria and scientific methods has significantly loosened, and the theory and history of literature have moved closer to and acquired the form of criticism and literary journalism. Therefore, they have become somewhat hazy "disciplines" without any definite markers. What is needed, then, is a discussion about the new paradigms that are shaping and ordering literary criticism,

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<sup>5</sup> The problematics of the culture turn have been discussed in a cornucopia of works including *Literatur und Kulturwissenschaften: Positionen, Theorien, Modelle*, ed. H. Böhme and K. Scherpe, Hamburg: Rowohlt 1996; *Beyond the Cultural Turn: New Directions in the Study of Society and Culture*, ed. V. E. Bonnell and L. Hunt, Berkeley: University of California Press 1999; *Konzepte der Kulturwissenschaften: Theoretische Grundlagen – Ansätze – Perspektiven*, ed. A. Nünning, V. Nünning, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2003.

and are able to replace the quickly aging and partly anachronistic conceptions of positivism, phenomenology, and structuralism.

Such an undermining of the foundations of literary criticism was not an effect of the activity of bad demons, nor certainly was it an accident. It resulted from a cultural undermining of the identity and determinacy of artistic literature, and from a blurring of its boundaries, and, thus, its autonomy in the field of verbal and cultural discourses. Further, this process of undermining was facilitated by new ways of linking literature with other types of discourses and forms of culture, by a multiplication of heterogeneous phenomena (mixed, hybrid, etc.) with formal and genre properties that are unknown or difficult to define. The projects that postulated a break from “pure literature” or “pure science” also caused concern, inasmuch as they propounded direct political interventionism, visible both in leftish emancipatory demands and the informing activities of “inspectors” in central and Eastern Europe.

The question of truth was a particularly popular moot point as truth had traditionally been considered the target of cognition, knowledge, and science. In a way, postmodernism annulled the question of the truth or falsehood of an utterance. “Truth was made rather than found,” wrote Richard Rorty in “The Contingency of Language;” “truth is a property of linguistic entities, of sentences” (Rorty 7). Within such a paradigm, the truth of an utterance overlaps with its linguistic suggestiveness, its power to exert influence. The choice of language is decisive and it occurs in a Nietzschean way – beyond good and evil. Therefore, according to this interpretation, language is contingent; it exists “in” a reality, happens in it, and intermingles with it inseparably. So it is not a separate phenomenon, capable of reflecting and judging it; the internal linguistic segregation of utterance into approvable “true” utterances and disqualifiable “wrong” utterances is not possible. Interpretation therefore rather reflects claims on power than real search for truthfulness.

Such an approach to truth diverges from a classical definition of truth, considering it as *adequatio rei et intellectus*. Alfred Tarski quotes a classic passage from Aristotle: “To say what is that is not, or of what is not that it is, is false, while to say of what is that it is, or of what is not that it is not, is true” (Tarski 343). This definition, simple and clear as it is, referred to a notion that it is possible indisputably to constitute “what is” and “what is not” in reality. Further, it accepted a comparison of verbal testimony with an actual state independent of it, and, in consequence, made it possible to make a legitimate evaluation of such a testimony in the categories of “truth” and “false”. Therefore, the definition presupposed a real or potential translation of one entity into the categories of consciousness and language; or, in other words, it acknowledged the decidability and validity of the mind’s judgements about the world.

Postmodernity, however, questioned this decidability and validity. In turn, it assumed that the obviousness of “what is” and “what is not” is disputable, undecidable, and beyond the mind’s capacities. This is an effect of issues with both the object and the subject. The former issues emphasize the changeability of reality, and the impossibility of stopping and immobilizing phenomena happening in it: changes, replacements, interspersions of things. In addition, they indicate the practical impossibility of a definite constitution of “what is” and “what is not”. This can be illustrated by reference to literature and the undisturbed appearance of new texts, all aspiring to artistic “literariness”. Their presence and reception, it was argued, modify the past in a backward fashion by changing ways of viewing, valuing, and ordering it; influencing forms of its presence and kinds of reference to it; constantly destroying representations of the past and constructing them anew.

Humanist cognition also came under suspicion and the fire of criticism. Its complex conditioning was foregrounded – biology, society, culture, psyche. Without Cartesian transparency, understood as an ability to decipher and establish oneself in the acts of thinking, humanist consciousness lost the ability to differentiate words from things and things from images of those things; it surrendered to alienation and objectified discourses [*urzeczwione dyskursy*], which replaced extratextual (psychological, bodily, social, and physical) reality and relieved thinking from the effort and pain of getting to the origins of the reality. At the same time, such discourses doubled the effort as well as the pain, because the products of thinking became the objects of the thinking and thus a vicious circle began. Therefore, the obviousness of “what is” and “what is not” no longer existed and the transparency of thought and utterance concerning “what is” and “what is not” became obscured. The factor of “obviousness” became in fact homeless, ungraspable and, as a matter of fact, totally useless. Ancient, classical thought became the only asylum for abandoned and betrayed truth; the same ancient thought that had produced the ideal of truth and handed it on to the future – apparently, the gift turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

Postmodernity, influenced by John L. Austin and analytical philosophy, replaced truth-reaching with felicity-searching. Felicity is far from truth and paraphrases the pragmatic criteria of effectiveness. In the domain of literary criticism, it converges with fame and publicity, appearances in the media, and entering into the wide public sphere. Felicity ignores cognitive representation; whether the discourse is “true” or “false,” the proponents of felicity argue, is unimportant if it sinks in silence and emptiness. The publicity of discourse, on the other hand, makes it a reality and, as a reality, a truth. Therefore, say postmodernists, truth is a sign of itself; truth is what is believed to be true.



Following Rorty, truth is “made” so there is no need to differentiate “what is” from “what is not”<sup>6</sup>. Neither is there any necessity to use auxiliary methods in seeking the truth, since it is subject to fate, chance, accident, and, in short, felicity.

Thus, postmodern theoretical anger and pathos chiefly opposes “fundamentalism”. The question, however, is whether such a stance is not groundless (is an antifundamentalist position not a fundamentalist position?), and what the consequences are of producing and promoting alternative concepts without any presuppositions accepted in advance, even metaphysical ones (for instance, “the world is governed by an invisible watchmaker”). But are concepts without any presuppositions possible at all? Do they exist? Certainly even the greatest sympathy for thinking without presuppositions should not protect such thinking from critique. That is, the antifundamentalist position, as it tries to exclude any presuppositions accepted with a leap of faith, must be proved by its own “certainties”. But do those certainties not eventually replace the dismissed presuppositions? And do the spontaneously (and therefore mechanically) accepted certainties prove more useful in understanding literature than the condemned and reduced presuppositions and methods?

The presuppositionless experiencing of literature can result in a passive surrender to its effects or to the aforementioned felicitous speaking and writing about it. Felicity, however, ignores classical rules of truthfulness and leads straight to rhetoric. When we think about audience and the success of reception, this prefers effectiveness and not truthfulness. To know means to believe and accept, even if the content of believing is fiction according to the classical definition of truth, or even, to put it more strongly, nonsense. In other words, felicity does not offer any means of separating the sheep from the goats. Felicitous “cognition” is therefore applied to a duplicate reality – derivative from the original or constructed upon it. This resembles literary studies based on the history of literature textbooks without, in fact, reading the works discussed in them. The textbook itself, however, is not the knowledge of artistic literature, but provides only “knowledge about knowledge,” or, in short, information about information.

Such information, unlike what postmodernity’s proponents claim, fails to be compatible with reality. Although, following Ankersmith, we can argue that “the reality is the information itself and no longer the reality behind that information” (140). The meaning of such a claim, however, equals its negation. As a matter of fact, it expresses the desire hidden in the categorical judgment to negate any reality,

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<sup>6</sup> The reality of media-publicized opinion regarding a given work or writer also “creates” the reality of phenomena to which such an opinion refers. Knowledge, cognition, and truth lose, literally and figuratively, the fundamentals of being, independent of the one who cognizes, the fundamentals on which knowledge, cognition, and truth were “naively” based.

but the reality in information. The discourse of postmodernity thus shifts a number of difficult or disputable issues of cognition into the field of myth-making. It seems to claim, following the *Bible*, *Oedipus the King*, or *The Phenomenology of Spirit* by Hegel, that cognition of previously unknown things can result in divided, distressed, and despondent consciousness. Yet we still want to escape an original and blissful unconsciousness, but this escape, as we know from history, offers only a momentary and rather deceitful comfort.

### **3. Embracing postmodernity. Repetition and rhetoric instead of method**

Antipositivism was the twentieth century's main subject of literary studies. At that time positivism was challenged and broken away from, accused of wrong theoretical methodologies (scientism, monomethodology, genetism, causalism, psychological, biographical and sociological reductionism, atomism, the cult of facts and neglect of theory, naturalism, mimetism, evolutionism, descriptiveness, documentariness, a mechanic understanding of historical regularities, "influenceology," etc.). It now seems doubtful, however, whether the positivist project and heritage were evaluated earnestly, and whether its ideals were replaced with truly better ones. A contumacious critic can insist on pointing out the weakly theoretical factographicness of positivism being replaced with the doctrinal, although factographically empty, theoreticism of phenomenology and structuralism.

An interpretation of the history of knowledge, which narrowly orders and evaluates the past from the perspective of "breaking points" and "revolutionary turning points," is treated with particular reserve because it is mapped according to preferences and criteria of the present (synchrony), and hence it dismisses challenges taken up by past epochs or problems that had to be solved and conditions that had influenced them. These factors seem, in fact, decisive in the process of creating literary and humanist knowledge; arguably, it is hard to criticise Romanticism for having a self-understanding different from that in the subsequent movements. Such notorious and ruthless dominance of the present facilitates the processes of myth-making of both the past and the present, and the attitudes of the present to previous epochs. Therefore we are dealing with a kind of "terror of the moment", which, after all, undermines itself, since it drastically reduces its memory and undermines a sense of continuity.

"Scientific, objective truth is exclusively a matter of establishing what the world, the physical as well as the spiritual, is in fact," wrote Edmund Husserl (6), expressing thus a general opinion about the task of positivist sciences, which was to give literary criticism its independence and constitute its subject. However, claimed Husserl critically, "merely fact-minded sciences make merely fact-minded people" (6), which, in fact, no longer sounds like an accusation; there is nothing wrong in examining a human being

(an individual or species) as “fact”. Rather, it would be wrong to overlook such examinations or such examinations of human creations, literature included. Yet abstaining from references to facts and stopping at examinations of only fact-associated consciousness or fact-built discourses, postmodernity somehow becomes a false mirror of dated positivism.

Positivist knowledge is grounded on the anthropological condition of its capacity and meaningfulness. Modern thought (modernism) noticed the condition mainly in the autonomy and freedom of mind, in its confronting a reality that is different from and usually independent of it (see Habermas). The idea of a transparent and non-falsified transcription of reality became the motor for such modern thought, but also the reason for its embarrassing failures, since it too easily dismissed significant differences in the nature of examined objects and the means for examining them. The rule of *una scientia* collided with the empirical variety of senses (always anchored in biology, society, language, culture) and the uncontainable variety and changeability of phenomena. Thus the rule could never become reality.

This issue is a problem even today, in the postmodern age: the order of literary criticism and the order of reality still fail to meet (and it comes as no surprise because they never met (perhaps with the exception of normative, French, seventeenth-century classicism), although that would be the ideal of cognition). The problematic victory of postmodernity is usually expressed in the hasty and illusory obscuring of the difference between these orders. In the past, before such conclusions could ever be drawn, philosophical idealism, similarly to modernism, accentuated the exclusiveness, purposefulness, and necessity of knowledge, and would prophetically step in. Hegel defines the rules of the philosophy in a following way:

“However, to knowledge, the goal is as necessarily fixed as is the series of the progression. The goal lies at that point where knowledge no longer has the need to go beyond itself, that is, where knowledge works itself out, and where the concept corresponds to the object and the object to the concept. Progress towards this goal is thus also unrelenting, and satisfaction is not to be found at any prior station on the way” (51).

This reflection leads to the question of whether postmodernity was not too hasty in claiming that appropriate conditions were in place; the conditions of “where the concept corresponds to the object and the object to the concept”. Were it so, we would be right to relish in the knowledge about knowledge and creating discourses about discourses. However, the truth is that knowledge always needs to “go beyond itself” and the entirety of knowledge embodied in the unity of the concept and the object remains a distant, unfulfilled dream.

Nonetheless, the dream liberates critical consciousness; a number of methodological and research approaches inspired by Enlightenment rationalism and its derivatives became the target of postmodernity's critique: historical schools of scientism, empirical movements, structuralism, analytical philosophy, phenomenology, and the like. The target, however, was evidently ambiguous; on the one hand it underwent a happy "deconstruction" and, on the other, it became entangled with alternative concepts that often were simply masked paraphrases of the questioned solutions. Deconstruction served merely for "recycling": the negated theories and methods began their second life in the negating theories.

The demolishing of positivist, rigorous theories originating in neopositivism, phenomenology, and structuralism took its toll. Postmodern proposals have been characterized by a programmed, often exhibitionistic, theoretical eclecticism, by a lack of cohesion, of care about structural order, and by a chaotic richness of languages. Yet it is hard to see those features as trespasses. Quite the contrary, this state of "nebula" has been considered as positive and much to be desired. Therefore, postmodern obscurity, incoherence in thinking, pastiche duplicity, impressionistic subjectivism, repetitions, a tendency toward compilation, syncretism, mixing of matter, and the like, acquired the characteristics of highbrow intellectuality and came to be deemed positive. The re-evaluation started to resemble resentment when the old virtues turned into vices and inadequacies and shortages turned into virtues.

Rhetoric, ennobled by the pervasive media, has changed into an ersatz of positivist, methodologically and factually based literary criticism. Apart from the abovementioned association of knowledge with opinion and subjection to linguistic and persuasive effectiveness, the influence of rhetoric manifested itself in transposing the characteristics of an object (say, artistic literature) into the discourse of criticism, which resulted in the aestheticisation and limited fictionalisation of knowledge and scientific discourses. The borderlines and functional differences between the discourse of literary studies and that of literature have in effect been obliterated. This was possible thanks to an aesthetic libertinism and the changing languages of interpretation, as well as the abandonment of the notion of the correspondence between truth and reality. Postmodern aestheticization and fictionalization used freshness, suggestiveness, and commonness of judgment as the yardstick: the method, its presence and testimony, was no longer necessary.

Importantly, the replacement of knowledge by rhetoric has caused crucial changes in the definition of knowledge itself. These changes have expressed themselves in the rejection of knowledge, defined as innovative *reaching towards the unknown*,

and as solving the mysteries of nature and spirit. The matter of postmodern knowledge about literature and the humanities is mainly reinterpretation of ready-made knowledge. The phrase “the anxiety of influence” has turned into a cliché because countless repetitions, reproductions, and paraphrases of existing works and theories have become a commonplace. They acquired a grotesque form when dissertations began proposing “revivals” or “going back to the roots” (therefore always presupposing the repetition of previous inquiries).

Hence postmodernity brought about a revision of the dominant model and ethos of modern science, as we knew it since Galileo, Bacon, and Newton, especially in the humanities, and we returned to the scholastic concept of “deduction of knowledge from knowledge”. In other words, there is scholarliness instead of science, science expressed now by means of the exegesis of respected scholars, hermeneutic speculation, and orator-ship. Scientific terms now function merely as rhetorical topoi, the criteria for identification of knowledge have been lowered, and the rules of excluding unreal knowledge through real knowledge, uncertain through certain, out-dated through up-to-date have changed. Specific, determinate, and pure knowledge has dissolved in the pot of mixed discourses; its objectivity has diffused in identifying reality with descriptive language interpreting it in order to arbitrarily construe that language as the only, autonomous, self-sufficient, immanent rules- and conditions-driven reality. The novelty or even distinctness of “language as language” has successfully been replaced by questions concerning communicated sense. So eloquence has become an independent and self-sufficient value, capable of replacing or concealing reference. Finally, connotations have superseded denotations. The *linguistic turn*, however, dominant in the middle of the twentieth century, has been outbid by the *cultural turn* in the last decades of the last century. Once autonomous in structuralistic concepts, language has lost this feature as well, and, because of the cultural turn, turned into the hybrid, “decentralised”, and polymorphous cultural identity of a writer.

In the process of postmodern transvaluation, the description of reality has been backgrounded and obscured by the literary, textual, and linguistic reality of the description itself. Thus, the description culminated in the descriptions of descriptions, probing out its possibilities and borders. The cognition of reality has turned into search for metaphors and other devices; discovery has become auto-creation; writing has turned into activity (that is, into manipulation aimed at creating judgments); truth has become a matter of the properties of written sentences; a cognizant subject has turned into a net of beliefs and desires; the scientist has become a poet (Rorty). Analogously to language, knowledge has turned into a game devoid of external being-ness transcending it; the field

of being-ness itself has moved towards knowledge reception and consumption. Kant's wishful dream of knowledge for knowledge's sake grotesquely resonates in postmodernity.

The new rhetorical nature of knowledge has become largely a domain of linguistic and textual operations, and the name of "science" is a shield against hackneyed duplications often aspiring to the honorable title of "a new linguistic game" or "a new dictionary". No longer do we measure the meaningfulness of a scientific utterance by means of its cognitive objective contents, but by the name of the scientist and the publicity of the utterance. The only justification of presented opinions became a rich (often even decorous, from the cognitive viewpoint) net of citations, including as many currently popular personalities known from the media as possible; and the only way of evaluating an utterance became "being interesting," "being famous", or "being quoted". The forms of publicizing and consuming knowledge far exceeded scientific, cognitive, and value-oriented standards.

All these changes were largely forced by market conditions. Depending on financial support, knowledge started to be an element of the market, a commodity or an instrument of political and economic authority. *Authority* has become the soul and conscience of *knowledge*. As the political and capital elites acquired the right to make financial decisions, without scientific competence, but rather struggling for voters' favor, the publicity and advertisement of a scientist's name became the substitute for proposed scientific content<sup>7</sup>.

Therefore, literary and humanist rhetoric has brought to life a number of new rules. For example:

1. The strategy of rhetorical discourse is, to paraphrase Rorty, to win for the new against the old. In a liberal society it is impossible to decide "whose side the truth is on" (scholars have their own truths; a postmodern scholar refers to advertisement rhetoric of "the new" against "the old;" these categories do not undergo a process of objectification other than a psychological one, and whatever seems new is new). Practically speaking, being marginally different is enough for a discourse to be propagated or tagged as "new". The paradox of postmodern rhetoric, however, comes from the monotonous repetitiveness of "new" ephemeral phenomena, and from "the new" frequently being, in fact, archaic but recalled in the right time and in a right package. The mechanism of advertisement,

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<sup>7</sup> By way of digression, the overproduction of knowledge plays a vital role in this process. Modern knowledge, no longer elitist, based on initiation, or intimately linked with priesthood, has become a mass product flooding the market and reducing the criteria of quality and readers' needs.

with its preference for the new in advertising a commodity, is here often employed for the sake of scientific and philosophical discourses. Eventually, this cult of newness makes postmodernity turn into “hypermodernity,” transposed onto the categories of market and commodity.

2. The discourses, not the properties of things, decide what modernity is or becomes. “[...] anything can be made to look good or bad by being redescribed,” wrote Rorty (73). The governing principle here is that things are not what they are, but what they seem to be. Rorty’s principle acquired philosophical motivation that minimizes the difference between a phenomenon and the essence of a thing, and between the thing and its representation. A classical continuum from Plato to Kant, noted for this distinction, is thus negated (Rorty 75).
3. One of the foundations of postmodern rhetoric is the conjoining of disparate phenomena in one superior generality, and then transposing the rhetorical (persuasive) negation from that generality on to specific phenomena. The undermining of specificity typically features in the use of the term “metaphysics”. With “metaphysics”, postmodern rhetoric tags glaringly different phenomena, originating in various places and diverse philosophical propositions. A good case in point is, on the one hand, positivist scientism and, on the other, Platonic idealism. Interestingly, the tendency to persuasive generalities, simplifications, and transpositions goes against the grain of the “nominalism” and “historicism” of postmodernity.
4. The principle of facilitated perception is expressed in postmodern rhetoric through dualist constructions, introduced, by the way, against the critique of dualism, and “metaphysical” by definition. An example of such “consistent inconsistency” can be the coquettish dualism of the metaphysician, that is, the ironist in Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity*.

All these remarks should conclude with questions. Do postmodern movements deprive literature of communicating knowledge that has been so far considered to be indispensable in the production and reception of literature and its aesthetic consumption? Is the production of literary criticism capable of doing without the mediation of methods and methodologies, hitherto deemed as helpful in obtaining, ordering, and falsifying it? What kind of literary criticism is capable of aspiring to truthfulness? What would that truthfulness be based on? And finally, does knowledge help or restrict one in experiencing literature?

Many more questions come to mind. The diagnoses discussed above result in, say, humanistic and literary knowledge losing the position that it once acquired, and in its status becoming vague and unsteady. This status has been principally

expressed in the absence or eradication of the criteria making it possible to differentiate essential from inessential knowledge, certain from uncertain, or useful from useless. One can also be under the strong impression that a civilizational overproduction of knowledge has blurred its boundaries and minimized its effectiveness. The dialectical principle of “quantity turns into quality” has been replaced by the principle of “quantity turns into non-quality”. In a nebula-like prosperity there are question marks pinned to the very meaningfulness of using the category of knowledge, especially that of “real knowledge”. It needs to be noted, however, that the critique of the category of truthfulness is a double-edged sword: ardent critics of truthfulness have also been deprived of the value of truthfulness.

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