

Translated by Bartosz Lutostański

On Scientism in Literary Criticism

“Which twentieth-century literary critical approach has constituted a methodology in any strict sense of the word?” This is a question that could be easily dismissed through closer analysis; for example we could indicate the inadequacy of the term “methodology” or present the obscurity of the phrase “in any strict sense of the word” – there are just a small number of strict senses. One example of a narrow (therefore strict) sense of a methodology can be presented in order to point out to which cognitive areas such analyses might lead. Proverbially, methodology is a tool. It is a specific part of frequently hazy theoretical discussions that may have some practical applications. An enumeration of these tools is traditionally included in introductions to scientific/scholarly papers. A methodology, therefore, becomes a part of a descriptive poetics in an introduction, a kind of introductology.

If this definition is correct, it could perhaps be possible to show the points where theory becomes methodology in one of its strict senses. However, the process of pauperization, cuttings, and modelings, necessary for a theoretical concept to become a sort of tool shed, results in a theory turning into an empty entity, not a “real” theory. Odd though it seems, many would agree that this is the commonest understanding of methodology in literary studies (especially in the history of literature). Yet it needs to be added that other perspectives are also possible. First, the methodology of literary studies is represented by auxiliary approaches (a serious analysis of which would be a critical issue). Second, a strict understanding of methodology would be honed, were it differentiated from theory, as is the case in the philosophy of science¹.

Yet with the temptation to dismiss the problem aside, we can turn it into a positive and crucial issue. I believe that the paraphrased question from the outset raises the issue of the moments in history when literary studies acquired the status of science. And it is a peculiar science indeed, because when the question concerns methodology, a somewhat strict understanding of science is presupposed and other parameters of “being science” are effectively excluded or at least made of less importance. For example, recent analyses from the history of literary studies predominantly focus

¹ The latter point will be briefly discussed below. Other conclusions have recently been put forward by the famous Polish scholar Henryk Markiewicz in his “Theory and Method in Literary Studies” (*Teoria i metoda w badaniach literackich*).

on a contextual, sociological, and paradigmatic understanding of these studies. In a way, “external methods” revolving around the context of discovery have dominated the analysis of the history and theory of literary studies. Hence, “internal methods”, those focused on the context of substantiation, have become unfashionable.

Going down the second path, we hereby turn the initial question into a narrower one, “Were the *cognitive procedures* and the *products* of literary studies of a scientific character? If so, at what moments in their history?” This question is in turn about a scientific approach within literary studies.

“Scientism” is a term of invective (see Blackburn) or at least an expression of a radical standpoint in certain philosophical issues. However, this is not a reason for turning down scientism because scientific analyses would definitely be poorer without it. All the same, if scientism is used mainly with an emotional and qualitative sense, it loses its distinctive features and signifies dogmatism, extremeness, or a lack of refinement and sensitivity. However, it must be noted that accusing a philosopher of scientism differs from accusing a literary scholar or a biologist of scientism. The last is immune to such accusations because scientism in that field is an advantage (as obvious as the delivery of letters is to a postman’s advantage) – a biologist is always a man/woman of scientism. It is different for a philosopher, and the accusations of scientism presuppose that the accused’s opinions are wrong. A philosophical scientist, to put it mildly, denies the validity and necessity for examining certain areas of philosophy, particularly metaphysics. In other words, such a person believes that what can be meaningfully expressed in philosophy does not transcend scientific cognition, and when push comes to shove, what is left is physics, without any metas.

What might a recognition of scientism in literary studies mean? We should first put aside the use of the term for offensive purposes. Inasmuch as it is mainly defined in a negative and oppositional way (as an idea of the superiority of scientific cognition, instead of one offered by art or metaphysics), the term can acquire various variant-like additional senses. The very term “science” is a point of indeterminacy in such a definition; in philosophy we can find numerous narrowing perspectives that treat all science as some idealized or model *natural* science: physics is its prototype, and, for example, Ernest Rutherford’s scientific credo, “All science is either physics or stamp collecting,” is a good case in point². So it is no wonder that science (including the humanities) is supposed to be measured by means of natural scientific notions. This is *naturalism* in its clearest form.

² Rudolph Carnap’s physicalism best exemplifies this faith in science.

According to such a definition, a scientific literary critic is the one who either believes that his scholarly occupation ought to be expressed in the language of the natural sciences or, what is far more common, he or she believes that literary critical notions and truths can be reconciled by means of certain basic truths elaborated by the natural sciences (e.g. biology) or reduced to them. Most frequently, natural scientific notions constitute a sort of a pillar for scientific notions relating to literature. Nowadays, naturalism or naturalistic scientism characterizes, for example, (radically constructivist and neurosemiotic) cognitive literary studies based on neurological propositions. However, because of terminological reasons, scientism is a more convenient term than naturalism here, since naturalism has its own fixed place in the history and theory of literature as a certain writing device or, more widely, as a certain intention of literature. Therefore, scientism should be considered as a so-called *subject naturalism* [*naturalizm przedmiotowy*], although naturalistic scientism has also its own methodological version (more common in literary studies).

There are historical variants of literary studies that are not reduced to the notions of natural sciences. Yet with scientific achievements in mind, literary critics attempt to employ or mirror certain scientific techniques and devices for their own purposes. This form of scientism is called *methodological naturalism*³. To put it simply and generally, literary criticism is very often suspected of this form of scientism when it struggles to be *empirical* in a deliberate and systematic way and when it attempts to *theorize* its knowledge. It is striking that this type of scientism relates to the two most important moments in the history of contemporary literary studies⁴. The first moment is the introduction of literary criticism into the professional and academic scientific disciplines. This took place in the second half of the nineteenth century, mainly because of the positivist claim for the empirical nature of literary studies [*empiryzacja literaturoznawstwa*]⁵. The second moment is the establishing of the formalist-structuralist theory of literature at the beginning of the twentieth century.

For several reasons, the structuralist form of literary studies⁶ was radically opposed to the positivist form. But the opposition was an immediate result of some disputes related to literary studies, and from a methodological perspective, both theories are extremely similar, mainly because of their faith in the *methodological value* of natural sciences

³ The differentiation of subject naturalism and methodological naturalism are drawn from Anna Patubicka's paper, "Naturalizm i antynaturalizm".

⁴ There are serious reasons for searching for the origins of modernism in literary studies before the contemporary twentieth-century theory of literature began.

⁵ Positivist knowledge is knowledge based on facts.

⁶ Structuralism is here a model of all twentieth-century ergocentrism.

(e.g. the genetic vs. the ergocentric). The value, it must be stressed, is methodological not theoretical, inasmuch as the latter pertains to a sort of *empiria* and constitutes the ground for the above variant of the subject naturalism. In this light Boris Eichenbaum's notion of "a new pathos of scientific positivism" in formalist literary criticism becomes clear. Eichenbaum differentiated the theoretical from the methodological order (although he himself confused the terms). In his account of the beginnings of formalism, he treated theory with considerable casualness. Just like a critical rationalist, he wrote that theory should be modified or abandoned if it becomes ineffective; the only inalienable value is science itself (see: Eichenbaum 99–140).

It needs to be added that the problem of differentiating the order of method and of theory is further complicated because of the idea of naturalism. That is, some procedures of transplanting the theories of the natural sciences onto the humanities have caused a blurring of the line between theory and method. For example, frequent naturalistic attempts at transposing Darwinian evolutionism into the humanities make it impossible to speak about the theory of evolution in its strict original sense; most of those attempts, such as memetics, presuppose an analogous recreation of a theoretical matrix in another empirical field: we speak about memes not genes. In this case we have to do with a radical form of methodological naturalism (or weak subject naturalism).

At the beginning of this paper, when introducing the key notions of empiricalness and the theorization of literary studies, I have used the sub-terms of "technique" or "tools". This might seem careless, since evidently I am discussing basic methodological issues. However, it cannot be overlooked that the annexing of basic methods of the natural sciences by scientific literary critics did not take place with necessary and important amendments. A literary historian, positivist as well as contemporary, is not capable of realizing an empirical claim in its natural scientific entirety. True, one can systematically amass, compare, and verify empirical materials, and one has elaborate means to do so. However, one cannot use any refined inductive techniques, not to mention any experimental ones. The literary historian's other feature, and one similar to the natural scientist's, is that he or she is not an empiricist in a strict sense⁷. Likewise, the fruitful labour of a literary scholar and theoretician brings about valuable generalizations, theoretical in nature, but he or she does not entertain the thought of that theory's ever being formalized and applied in any prognostic way, as happens in the natural sciences.

⁷ A strict empiricism is a philosophical idea of a possibility of acquiring knowledge *only* by means of sense data, unsustainable even in the natural sciences, which, devoid of theories, hypotheses, and bold visions, could not function.

The above discussion of scientism in literary criticism has the obviously positive, albeit risky, goal of pointing out the advantages of the scientific approach. A historical argument has already been presented, and what results from it is that scientism turns out to be the most fruitful when moderate (as in the above case of reduced and modified methodological naturalism). If we also consider the anti-positivist strict distinction of science between spirit and nature as unsustainable⁸, some typical anti-scientistic approaches will be seen in a new light.

In *The Rise of Hermeneutics* Wilhelm Dilthey wrote,

“This art of interpretation has developed in a manner as slow, gradual, and lawlike as the experimental investigation of nature itself. It originated in the personal and inspired virtuosity of the philologist, where it continues to flourish. Thus its tradition is predominantly handed down through personal contact with the great practitioners of exegesis or with their works. At the same time every art is conducted according to *rules*, which teach us how to overcome difficulties. They bequeath the results of the personal skill. Hence from early on there developed from the art of exegesis the *exposition of its rules*. And from conflict about these rules, from the struggle of various tendencies in the interpretation of fundamental works and the subsequent need to establish a basis for such rules, the science of hermeneutics itself came into being. Hermeneutics is the *theory of the rules of interpreting written monuments*” (238).

From the perspective of the above discussion, the Dilthey of the passage quoted should be included as an anti-naturalistic scientist professing the *ideal of the unity of science*.

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⁸ This has rather a historical significance since it resulted from the opposition to the naturalistic annexing of the humanities by positivism. A strict distinction is undermined by the following issues: the indeterminate place of psychology and its basic epistemological paradoxes, the idiographic character of some disciplines (e.g. geography) of the natural sciences, etc.

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