

LITERATURE, FICTION, LIFE: THE PERPETUAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract: What is literature and why do they (still) say such terrible things about it? A question like that may be a good starting point for a theoretical approach meant to investigate the relationship between literature, fiction, and life. My intention here, among other things, is to plea for the cultural and humanistic significances of literature, and to analyze concepts such as fiction, language, literarity, reference, as well as to underline the cognitive values of literary fiction. Peter Lamarque, Antoine Compagnon, Jonathan Culler (to mention only few of the theoreticians invoked here) are my “partners” in this approach.

Keywords: cultural and humanistic significances, literarity, fiction, language

Literature and/or fiction

In order to understand today, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, what literary theory/the theory of literature is/has become, we must firstly answer an equally difficult question, namely: what is literature? I say “difficult” because both Antoine Compagnon and Jonathan Culler asked the same question and ended up admitting the impossibility of formulating an all-encompassing definition valid for any epoch or cultural space. Another influential twentieth-century French thinker, Michel Foucault – an assiduous reader of the major American literature represented by Faulkner, as well as authors of very different kinds, both French and foreign, both classic and contemporary – acknowledged that for him literature was “la grande étrangère,” and that his relationship with it was both critical and strategic. The sense Foucault applies to the term “literature” encompasses a particular way of using language and constructing meaning, which we find not only in literary works properly speaking, but also in philosophical and essayistic texts. Nor did Ezra Pound, “il miglior fabbro,” as T. S. Eliot named him in the title-page dedication to *The Wasteland*, think otherwise: in his opinion, “great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree.”¹ This definition, as laconic as it is suggestive, was formulated in 1934 by one of the most cerebral creators of the twentieth century, for whom creation meant the conscious construction of meaning. The reductive view we have today about literature as *belles lettres* is to a certain extent the consequence of romantic doctrine, albeit “adjusted” to fit the view put forward and imposed upon the concept by Russian formalism and late structuralism in its extreme version.

In order to gain a better understanding of literature’s metamorphoses, it is vital that we go back in time. As we shall return to the notion of “literature” below, let us for now pause at the beginning of the nineteenth century in France. A first attempt to define literature as an “art of thinking and expressing oneself”² is made in 1800 by Madame de Staël, one of the most brilliant minds of the romantic generation. Although she prefers to talk about literature “in its widest

¹ Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading*, with an introduction by Michael Dirda. New Directions, 2010, p. 28.

² Doamna de Staël, *Despre literatură considerată în raporturile ei cu instituțiile sociale* (1800), trans. Angela Ion, in Angela Ion (ed.), *Arte poetice. Romantismul*, Editura Univers, Bucharest, 1982, p. 219.

sense, including, that is, philosophical writings and works of the imagination, in other words all that relates to the exercise of thought in writing, with the exception of the natural sciences,”³ the refined Germaine de Staël’s approach is one that highlights the status of literature as an *art* of both the word and thought. Madame de Staël’s viewpoint, which is of great conceptual acuity, gives prominence not only to literature’s aesthetic value, essential in articulating its specific difference, but also to its capacity to speak of the human condition, and therefore she adds a cognitive dimension to the aesthetic dimension.

Stein Haugom Olsen puts forward similar arguments in his attempt to distinguish between *literature* and *fiction*. Put briefly, the fundamental criterion upon which we might base such a distinction is in Olsen’s view aesthetic value, which is not to be found in works of fiction, but is essential in works of literature. The author of *The End of Literary Theory* gives as one example the novels of Barbara Cartland, which, although fictions, are not literary works. The decision to place literature in opposition with fiction is nonetheless arbitrary, even if at first sight such a distinction might justify British librarians’ practice of separating the “Literature” from the “Fiction” section, as ironically noted by Antoine Compagnon, who draws upon a different but just as questionable concept to describe this genre of books, namely “popular literature”. It is not easy to unburden “fiction” of its cultural memory, given the term’s long history, and here we might mention Wayne Booth’s celebrated study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, translated into Romanian as *Retorica Romanului* (The Rhetoric of the Novel). It is sufficient that we set out from the etymology of the term “fiction”, which derives from the Latin verb *fungo* (*fungere, finxi, fictum*), which means to mould, shape, form, but also to invent, forge, fabricate. In Latin, as a substantive, *fictum* also means “falsehood”. It must be said, however, that most literary theorists draw a distinction between *fictive* and *fictional*. In other words, not everything that is fictional is necessarily fictive, i.e. false or invented, not having any connexion to the truth(s) of the real world. But everything that is fictive is, of course, also fictional, because every “falsehood” presupposes a construct, a *mise en scène*. In history, there is as much fiction as there is in literature, if we employ the term in its etymological sense of *configuration*, of moulding, because the historian, proceeding from documents or from real events themselves, reconstructs, he configures a historical structure. In the absence of a viewpoint that might structure and lend meaning to events, history would be nothing but a shapeless mass of facts. Following in the footsteps of Croce, George Călinescu drew the distinction, for the first time in Romanian culture, between the raw fact and the historical fact, in “Tehnica criticii si a istoriei literare” (The Technique of Literary Criticism and History), a study included in the volume *Principii de estetică* (Principles of Aesthetics), published in 1939. We find the same arguments impeccably articulated by Călinescu in the work of another famous theorist, Hayden White, who in the 1970s developed a theory of historiographical discourse, setting out from the idea that in its fundamentals the historian’s mission does not differ from that of the writer, and that fiction as an act of moulding is implicit in every historiographical endeavour.

British researcher Natalie Zemon Davies has written a study on the subject of fiction in archival documents. She examines petitions for clemency in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century France, documents in which the stories of the accused are recounted in abundant detail. If we read these accounts without knowing that they were about real people in real difficulties, or that

³ Idem, p. 218.

their purpose was to gain a pardon from the king or seigneur, we might think that they were miniature narratives from the period, reminiscent of Boccaccio's tales from the *Decameron*, for example. Fiction, etymologically speaking, appears whenever one is placed in the situation of recounting an event to which one has been witness or in which one has played a certain part. In this sense, every narrative is a fiction and it would mean that we were oversimplifying the meaning of a highly complex concept if we reduced its usage to commercial literature, as Stein Haugom Olsen would have it. In the chapter "Literature, fiction, and reality. A problematic relationship," from *The End of Literary Theory*, Olsen discusses the relationship between literature and fiction and their relation to reality. The hypothesis from which the Norwegian theorist proceeds is that "literature is expected to express ideas about man's nature and his position in the world" (Olsen, 160), which, in his view, would lead to an apparent contradiction between literature and fiction, defined solely as invention and imagination. I must say that I am not convinced by this kind of approach to the relationship between literature and fiction. Even if we are able to accept that not every fiction is also implicitly a literary work, the opposition seems to me arbitrary and, in the final instance, wholly without significance.

Perpetual dialogue

Perhaps it would not go amiss if we recalled a well-known remark made by Deleuze, which reflects his conviction that more important than defining literature is an understanding of the way in which literature *functions* as a social practice. This is also the point at which the two major French thinkers, Foucault and Deleuze, intersect, both of them concerned with exploring what lies "beyond" language and is at the same time evoked through language.⁴ "La pensée du dehors," a concept for which Foucault found inspiration in the writings of Maurice Blanchot, might be the best formula to talk about literature as an interface between language and the world, between (the author's and subsequently the reader's) interiority and exteriority. And since I have mentioned Maurice Blanchot, a writer and theorist of great conceptual subtlety, I might also cite a title from his bibliography as one way of talking about literature: literature as an "entretien infini." It is, let us admit, a formula that captures the dialogic essence of literature, an endless conversation, via the text, between the author's consciousness and the countless consciousnesses that come to encounter the literary work, on the one hand, and between the author and the world in which he or she lives, on the other. To gain a deeper understanding of literature, it is absolutely necessary, in other words, that the rhetorical approach be combined with a phenomenological perspective. Literature is not only disengaged language, torn away from its contextual determinants, but also language produced by a consciousness deeply rooted into the world, i.e. in space and time. Thanks to this dual "rootedness" in an individual consciousness and a given spatiotemporal context, literature enables, "above modes and time," a dialogue of worlds: the world of the author, the world of the work and the world of the reader. In any event, herein resides the entire fascination that literature endlessly exerts, in the opportunity it gives the reader to contribute, with his or her own consciousness, with his or her own life and unique sensibility, to a periodic

⁴ Foucault's essay "La Pensée du dehors", published in 1966, was later republished in *Dits et écrits*. In Deleuze's study on Foucault, published by Minuit in 1986, the concept is examined in close connexion with that of the "fold", the surface "between" exterior and interior and simultaneously belonging to both orders. This view of literature as an interstice has its origins in the thought of Maurice Blanchot.

reconstruction of the world(s) of the literary work. For, reading, any type of reading, means participation, active involvement, *performance*. It may be said that literature, like music and theatre, is an *allographic* art, to use the terminology of Nelson Goodman (1968), as quoted by Peter Kivy in *The Performance of Reading: An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*, a non-conformist approach, brimming with challenges to readymade ideas. Although it is not through performance that it exists, literature does exist insofar as it is read, and according to Kivy reading is process, interpretation, representation. A digression on the history of reading allows Kivy to draw a series of conclusions about the consequences that the transition from reading aloud to silent have had on the evolution of literary species, as well as on the way in which authors and readers alike have related to literature. The ancient epics, the poetry of the troubadours and the romances of the Middle Ages, all of which are texts that we read in mass editions today, circulated in oral form for many centuries, *interpreted* – in the sense of being performed, as well as in the hermeneutic senses – by rhapsodes, minnesingers, trouvères, troubadours. Ion, the ancient rhapsode, who lends his name to a dialogue by Plato, is not only an actor, but also the first hermeneute in the modern sense, as his acting performance is also at the same time an interpretation of the Homeric text, and it is this dual hypostasis that Plato is commenting on. And so, for the English theorist, the emergence of the novel and above all its rise to the position of the central genre in Western Europe in the eighteenth century was a natural result of the spread of silent reading. More interesting still is the hypothesis that Kivy puts forward in regard to the emergence of the epistolary and the diary novel, as intermediate forms between orally performed and silently read literature:

With regard to the letter novel, *to read is to perform*. [...] And the same can be said, I think, for that other popular 18th-century novel type, the “journal” or “diary” novel, where the reader plays the part of a journal or diary reader, but, I presume, the idea is much the same. Whoever “I” am, I am not reading a diary or a journal. I am reading an artistic representation of one; more exactly, I am acting the part of someone reading a diary or journal, under the hypothesis being entertained here⁵.

It is another way of saying that the distance between the “I” thematised by the work and the concrete “I” of the real reader (and of the real author) never vanish, however strong the illusion of their superposition might be. Literature is also a problem of the temporal and spatial distance between multiple possible worlds, between the “I”-now-writing and the “I”-now-reading, as well as between the “I”-now-writing (the author) and the “I”-now-narrating/acting (the narrator/character). But this distance is not intended to separate, but to be repeatedly traversed by different receptors, who each time set out from a different point and each time follow a different journey of understanding. And nor could it be otherwise, as long as we are in continual motion, and the world around us is changing at every moment. A centre and source of meaning from the phenomenological viewpoint, the human consciousness is determined by its positioning in time and space, which makes the experience of absolute identity impossible. If old Heraclitus was right to claim that we cannot step into the same river twice, it is just as true that we cannot read the same book twice, or to put it

⁵ Peter Kivy, *The Performance of Reading. An Essay in the Philosophy of Literature*. Blackwell, 2006, p. 21

more accurately, we cannot read the same book *in the same way*, even if we read it a dozen times. Depending on the purpose of our reading, on our mood, our age and, implicitly, our experience of reading and life, we will each time have a perception different than on our previous readings. Moreover, once we have satisfied our curiosity about what is happening to the characters, about what the ending is and how it was arrived at, we will be more attentive to the details, to the secondary characters, to the textual signals that were overlooked on our first encounter with the text. The distinction put forward by Roman Ingarden, between the work as a *material object*, as a unique linguistic structure, transformed into an *aesthetic object* via reading, evidences the transformations undergone by a literary work during the reading process and highlights its potentially infinite nature. Although in terms of its verbal construction *The Brothers Karamazov*, for example, is a unique work, there are as many aesthetic objects corresponding to this material object as there are readings of the novel.

From the aesthetics of reception to the theory of reception

As a compromise solution between rhetorical and expressive theories and the sociological view of literature, *the aesthetics of reception* – whose principles were elaborated by Hans Robert Jauss towards the end of the 1960s – confers upon the reader the status of being the author's partner, not only in the process of constructing meaning, but also in that of representation. In contrast to the *theory of reception* (or the theory of aesthetic response – *Wirkungstheorie*), formulated by Wolfgang Iser (1970) and focussed on the way in which the structure of the literary text (*die Appelstruktur der Texte*) determines the emergence of an implicit reader, provoking a given response on the part of that reader, the *aesthetics of reception* shifts the focus from the work to the receptor and explores the reactions to the work of concrete readers. As Jauss is looking at real readers (critics, literary historians, essayists) rather than implicit readers – since the aesthetics of reception takes as its departure point the observations provided to the author by a *history* of reception – it becomes obvious how important the *context* is in the process of interpreting the literary work and not only. I say “not only” because even the way in which we define and understand the concept of literature is to a large extent historically conditioned.

Over the course of time, the criteria that readers draw upon in order to interpret a text or to receive a work of art are altered to such an extent that sometimes the position of a work within a literary canon may shift, moving from the centre to the periphery (or in the opposite direction), and sometimes the very status of the work may be altered. Setting out from the idea that “each literary work, the same as literature, constitutes a system” that is self-contained, I. N. Tynyanov elaborates a highly original theory of literary evolution as the *substitution* of systems.⁶ Central to his vision is the concept of the “literary fact” whose definition encompasses major differences between Tynyanov's conception of literature and that of the other Russian formalists, particularly Jakobson, Shklovsky and Tomashevsky, for whom *literariness*, as an ensemble of specific procedures, is the primordial problem of the study of literature. Aware of the fact that “the definition of literature, based on fundamental

⁶ I. N. Tînianov, “Despre evoluția literară”, trans. Mihai Pop, in *Ce este literatura? Școala formală rusă* (What is Literature? The Russian Formalist School), edited and with a preface by Mihai Pop, Editura Univers, Bucharest, 1983, pp. 591-601.

‘features’, comes into conflict with the living *literary fact*,⁷ Tynyanov remarks upon the dynamism of the literary phenomenon, determined by the obvious shift in the status of texts from one period to another. The conclusion reached by the Russian theorist in 1929 is also perfectly valid today, all the more so given that in the meantime the aesthetics of reception, the new historicism and deconstructivism have supplied arguments in support of Tynyanov’s ideas:

What the “literary fact” is to one period will be a linguistic phenomenon relating to social life in another period and vice versa, depending on the literary system in relation to which the fact is situated. Thus, a letter of Derzhavin to a friend is a fact from social life; in the period of Karamzin and Pushkin, the same friendly letter is a literary fact. Let us compare the literary nature of the memoirs and journals in one system and their extra-literary nature in the other. The isolated study of a work does not allow us to be certain that we are talking correctly about its construction or that we are talking about the construction of the work itself.⁸

Had they read the foregoing passage carefully, the later proponents of pure structuralism would have been prevented from committing the error of completely isolating the work from its contexts. It is not the intrinsic features, specific procedures or formal structure that determine whether a text belongs to literature or not, but rather the relations the work in question establishes, *at a given moment*, with literary and neighbouring series, including social life, which, correlated with literature through the verbal aspect, as well as in the general gnoseological framework, attributes to the work a specific “orientation” and enables representation. Tynyanov prefers to talk about *functions* rather than procedures, which enable connexions exterior to the work. Depending on their orientation, Tynyanov distinguishes between the *auto-nomous* function, based on which an element of the work is correlated “with a series of similar elements belonging to other series,” and the *syno-nomous* function, a result of the former, which reflects the constructive rôle that each element plays within the work. I think it is extremely important that Tynyanov conceives literature as “a continuously evolving series,” placing the emphasis on the dynamic of intra- and extra-literary relations. Far from reducing the study of literature to the study of forms, torn from any contextualisation, Tynyanov draws attention to the risk of excessively abstracting and statically isolating the work. In his study of 1924 the subtle and visionary Russian theorist points out:

Although they may be studied, the procedures run the risk of being studied outside their function, given that *the essence of the new construct may consist of the new use of old procedures, in their new constructive signification*, and precisely for this reason they are unable to come within the purview of a “static” analysis.⁹

In other words, *literariness* is not only a matter for rhetoric, for the intrinsic study of the literary work, because the study of procedures cannot be separated from the analysis of the functions they serve within each separate literary series. Consequently, the history of

⁷ I. N. Tînianov, “Faptul literar”, trans. Tatiana Nicolescu, in *Ce este literatura? Școala formală rusă*, p. 604.

⁸ Tînianov, “Despre evoluția literară”, p. 594.

⁹ Tînianov, “Faptul literar”, p. 606.

literature is incomplete if in the history of creative procedures there be not also a history of the procedures of literary reception, which Pierre Bourdieu much later regards as “the indispensable complement to the history of instruments of production.” A good many decades were to pass before the idea of literature’s “continuous dynamism” put forward by Tynyanov in the 1920s became fundamental to the theoretical discourse. Perhaps one of the most subtle observations formulated by Tynyanov is that of the non-arbitrariness of the connexion between function and form, correlated with another relating once again to the historical conditioning of this connexion and implicitly the manner in which the literary series correlate with social life. The idea that each period has its own historically constructed and socially validated artistic code has become a commonplace in recent decades, but its origin must be sought in the writings of Tynyanov. Likewise, the concept of the “interpretive community”, developed by Stanley Fish in *Is There a Text in This Class* in the 1980s, has its seeds in the theory of literary series conceived by Tynyanov and in the way in which he understood the “dynamism” of literature:

Each period brings to the fore certain phenomena from the past which are close to it and consigns others to oblivion. We are obviously talking about secondary phenomena, about a new processing of readymade material. The historical Pushkin is different to the Pushkin we find in the interpretation of the Symbolists. And the Pushkin the Symbolists saw cannot be compared with the significance the poet has had in the evolution of Russian literature. Every period chooses its own necessary material, but the use of these materials becomes characteristic only of a given period.¹⁰

If we accept Stanley Fish’s definition of an interpretive community as a set of community assumptions, plus a set of reading strategies that orients the reading process at a given historical moment, then we might have a plausible explanation for the multitude (and variety) of interpretations applied to a literary work over the course of time. We need only think of the ideological reading grids the communist totalitarian system imposed upon literature in order to understand the importance of perspective, taking the concrete form in a set of suppositions and reading strategies, both in the identification of the literary fact and in the construction of the meaning of a literary work.

The role of intention

In regard to shifts in the status of a work, let us recall another of Tynyanov’s observations, according to which the “‘definition’ of literature may be analysed only in its evolution,” because the “*properties* of literature, which seem to us to be *fundamental*, primary, are continually changing and do not characterise literature as such.”¹¹ In other words, notions such as “the aesthetic” or “belles lettres” are not ineluctable consequences of a given structure, but are attributes of a given work at a given moment. Defined as a *dynamic linguistic construct*, literature is not a close, immutable structure, but a dynamic phenomenon in perpetual motion. One eloquent example of the dynamism of the literary system is the

¹⁰ *Idem*, p. 606.

¹¹ *Idem*, p. 607.

chronicles written in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Moldavia and Wallachia, which are today studied in literary studies departments as representative examples of old Romanian literature, although none of the chroniclers *intended* to write literature; in any event, up until the beginning of the nineteenth century literary practice did not exist in Romanian culture, and even less so literary awareness. But this shift in status is also important because it draws attention to another aspect, regarded by some theorists as essential to the definition of literature, and ignored or minimised by others: authorial intention. After the theories inspired by positivism, which placed an equals sign between the meaning of the work and the author's intention, and the arguments of the American New Criticism, which denounced the intentional fallacy as a dangerous illusion, in the years when structuralism was at its apogee a total contestation of the role of the author was reached, and Roland Barthes saw the "death of the author" as the supreme condition for the emergence of the meaning of a work (1968), with the author being replaced in his eyes by language. I do not wish to reiterate here the long history of the debate surrounding the concepts of the author, intention and meaning, which are masterfully summarised by Antoine Compagnon in *The Demon of Theory*.¹² I would, however, like to look once more at the way in which Tynyanov discusses "the author's creative intention," reduced "to mere ferment and nothing more" by the way in which, inside the work, heterogeneous elements correlate with each other independently of the author's will. In support of this hypothesis, the theorist mentions the accounts of a number of major Russian writers, including Griboyedov and Pushkin, whose works, *Woe From Wit* and *Evgeny Onegin*, drastically departed from their authors' original intentions. Tolstoy himself, talking about *Anna Karenina*, remarked upon the distance between his intention to construct a social satire and the final result. Although Tolstoy originally wished to make Anna merely an adulterous, superficial, capricious woman, as he wrote the work gradually asserted its own "will" and Karenina became a tragic figure, a victim of the world in which she lived. One original synthesis, which takes up suggestions from reader-response theory and the aesthetics of reception, seems to me to be Stein Haugom Olsen's proposal, put forward in the first chapter of *The End of Literary Theory*, that we go beyond the apparent contradiction between rhetorical and mimetic theories (including those of the emotive-expressive kind) of literature by formulating a *theory of consecutiveness: supervenience theory*. According to Olsen, such a theory

accounts for aesthetic features by construing them as supervenient on textual features. An aesthetic feature, the theory says, is identified by a reader, in a literary work, through an aesthetic judgement as what one may call a *constellation* of textual features. A constellation of textual features constitutes an aesthetic feature of a particular work. It is not identified with reference to 'the world' or to human emotion, nor does it stand out as a constellation identifiable independently without exercise of aesthetic judgement. Outside the literary work in which a constellation is identified, the textual features constituting it cannot be recognized as a constellation. Nor does it exist as a constellation in a particular literary work for just any reader, but only for those who are able and willing to exercise aesthetic judgement. The constellation of textual features exists only as the object of an aesthetic judgement. These textual features deserve to be referred to as a

¹² In *Demonul teoriei* (The Demon of Theory), translated by Gabriel Marian and Andrei-Paul Corescu, Editura Echinox, Cluj, 2007, pp. 51-110.

‘constellation’ rather than as a mere ‘collection’ because the aesthetic judgement confers on them, taken together, a significance or a purposive coherence.¹³

Limited by our viewpoint, dwelling within the deceptive horizon of the present, we are often incapable of seeing and even less so of understanding what lies beyond these natural bounds of our perception. Even more significant (and troubling) is the pull exerted on us by literary works which, although they come from periods long since passed or evoke worlds beyond our existential horizons, continue to fascinate us and speak to us.

Until scientists discover the secret of time travel, it is literary works that will give readers the opportunity to access alien, possible worlds, worlds other than the one in which they live. Paradoxically, such alien worlds are transparent and opaque at the same time. Transparent because more often than not the reader is provided with much more information about fictional characters than he or she would ever be able to discover about people in the real world. For E. M. Forster, himself both a theorist and a novelist, it was obvious that if God had told the story of the creation of the world – in other words, if He had found Himself in the position of being a narrator, who produces a fictional reality through his discourse – then the whole world would have been nothing but a fiction, and we would have known almost everything about one another, just as we know almost everything about the characters in the novels we read. But these worlds are also opaque, because, although we have access to the characters’ interiority, the further away in space and time the universe in which they develop, the more difficult are they to understand, *at the limit* even becoming incomprehensible.

Translated by Alistair Ian Blyth

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¹³ Olsen, op. cit., p. 3.

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