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LITERARY TEXT AS A TYPE OF DISCOURSE AND AS AN ARTWORK

Abstract

The article aims to focus on a literary text as a type of discourse with a markedly distinct character which is directly connected with its aesthetic nature. It is assumed that the heterogeneous nature of a literary text naturally brings about the need of interdisciplinary approach. As a discourse type it can receive treatment within linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. On the other hand, as a work of art, since it shares the characteristics with other types of art, a literary text naturally falls under the interest of analytical aesthetics. It is emphasized that the recognition of the aesthetic value in literature definitely requires to acknowledge the particular relevance of literary aesthetics and its application to the study of literary discourse. This article introduces, on the one hand, the views of the scholars overtly claiming that literary discourse should be treated in the same terms as any other discourse, and, on the other hand, it discusses the theories supporting the idea of the separate identity of literature. In addition, the article also highlights the views concerning the concept of aesthetic value and promotes the belief that the latter - totally unique - stands apart from any type of value making literature aesthetic in nature.

Keywords: literary discourse; artwork; interdisciplinary approach; aesthetic value.

1. Introduction

This article introduces, on the one hand, the views of the scholars unequivocally claiming that literary discourse should be treated on the same terms as any other discourse. On the other hand, it discusses the theories supporting the idea of the separate identity of literature. Moreover, the article

argues that treating literary text no more than a discourse type leaves neglected its markedly distinct character which is directly connected with its aesthetic nature of an artwork.

The heterogeneous nature of a literary text naturally brings about the need of an interdisciplinary approach. As a discourse type, it can receive treatment within linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis, and, as a work of art, since it shares the characteristics with other types of art, analytical aesthetics turns out to be the very discipline which should always be included in the interdisciplinary field of research whenever the problem of its aesthetic nature is at stake.

Hence, the present article applies interdisciplinary methodology to combine the experience amassed by the disciplines studying a literary text as a discourse type – such as linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis -with the experience of the discipline taking interest in a literary text as an artwork - such as analytical aesthetics, and, naturally, with the discipline, which has always been concerned with the study of the concept of literature – literary studies. The article argues that the recognition of the aesthetic value in literature definitely requires acknowledging the particular relevance of literary aesthetics and its application to the study of literary discourse.

2. Discussion

In discussing the heterogeneous nature of a literary text, J. Johansen characterizes it as “a highly structured artifact, the product of a craft with a long tradition” ((Johansen 2002: xii) and notes that “its heterogeneity stems from the fact that literary texts are linguistic utterances communicated from an author to a readership at a given time under specific social and cultural condition... thus literary texts should be studied as texts” (Ibid.).

Like any other text, literary text is also produced in the process of communication and for the purpose of communication – it is created by its sender - author – and directed to the receivers – readers. But at the same time, as a work of art, it shares the characteristics with other types of art. However, unlike other types of artwork, literary works exist in a verbal medium. “Literature is not merely language: literature is art”, states S.H. Olsen in his work “The End of Literary Theory” (Olsen 1987: 72). The author characterises the dimensional nature of literary work in the following way:

“Literary work is an expression written or spoken in a language. It is a type of utterance produced by a speaker and presented to a group of receivers at a certain point in time. It consists, like any other utterance, of words and sentences grouped in sequence to form a meaningful message. This linguistic dimension of a literary work is in part a physical dimension. These characters make up the words and sentences in a language which the reader must know if he is to understand the work. The literary work, then, is, on the one hand, a linguistic fact.

On the other hand, literary work is also a work of art. It has aesthetic properties and values which distinguish it from other types of utterance, written or spoken. It is by virtue of these aesthetic properties that the literary work has a special claim on a reader’s attention as one of the great cultural goods, and it is the aesthetic properties which yield the value which makes the reader’s attention to the text worthwhile. The literary work is an aesthetic object or has an aesthetic dimension as well as being a linguistic fact”(Olsen 1978: 5).

However, such kind of view does not always prevail in contemporary scholarly contexts and a central debate among scholars, whether literary text should be treated and theorized as just another type of discourse without any distinctive peculiarities, or as a special kind of entity with a markedly distinct character from other types of communication, still continues.

Since literature uses language as the medium of its expression, linguistic theories and methods of analysis have been successfully applied to literary texts. The understanding of a text as a verbal record of a communicative act brought about the need to study literary text and literary communication within verbal communication in general. Through the influence of speech act theories, notably, philosophical pragmatic theories of J. Searle, J. Austin and P. Grice, literary works have been considered as analogies of utterances produced with the intentions of the writer. It has become a frequent practice to stress the relevance of pragmatics and speech act theories to the study of literary texts (See Pratt 1977). Within a number of theories of these disciplines there is a belief that all texts have “the implication of utterance” (Firth 1957: 226) - fictional dialogues, for example, can be explored in the same way as other naturally occurring dialogues in everyday discourse (see Burton’s study of the drama dialogue - Burton 1980). Many linguists and discourse theorists started to approach literature as a social discourse (see Fowler, 1981; Toolan 1990: 273-277). R. Fowler in the sociolinguistic frame examines how writers use language as long as their linguistic choices reflect and, at the same time, influence the society (see Fowler, 1981; Carter & Simpson 1995 : 10-12). Fowler’s idea about literature as social discourse

presented below reflects the standard view of those theories which hold that literary discourse should be theorized just like any other discourse:

“A written text, or a spoken discourse, is (among other relevant ways of looking at it) the mediation of a set of ideas using forms of expression drawn from one, or more usually, more than one, variety/ies. ‘Literature’ is not a distinct variety; any of the texts which are regarded as ‘literary’ can be analyzed as being built out of one or more varieties just as other texts are. Some of the varieties used in the constitution of a specific ‘literary’ text may tend to occur regularly in some, but not all, ‘other’ literary texts, but they are not restricted to ‘literary’ texts (rhyme and alliteration are found in advertisements); and ‘literary’ texts also draw upon patterns which tend to occur in ‘non-literary’ texts (conversation, news report). This stylistic overlapping and the absence of any necessary and sufficient linguistic criterion is well known though often ignored” (Fowler 1981: 21).

Further, Fowler decidedly proposes that literary discourse as any other type of discourse should be viewed as part of social structure:

“There is a dialectical interrelationship between language and social structure: the varieties of linguistic usage are both products of socioeconomic forces and institutions – reflexes of such factors as power relations, occupational roles, social stratification, etc. – and practices which are instrumental in forming and legitimating these same social forces and institutions. The New Critics and Formalist vehemently denied that ‘literature’ had social determinants and social consequences, but a sociolinguistic theory... will show that all discourse is part of social structure...” (ibid.).

Fabb and Durant also distinctly develop the idea that all forms of discourse operate within the social and political context and literary discourse is no exception (Fabb and Durant 1987:4). They argue that there is no reason to believe that literature can be separated from other kinds of written text:

“Over the last twenty-five years, there have been repeated assaults on the idea that literature can be usefully separated off from other kinds of written text. In the first place, it is difficult to identify any formal properties of literary language which do not also appear in the non-literary language. Secondly, in much modernist literature ‘literary language’ achieves its effects by code-switching between registers, including those of speech, and so embeds - and works largely by contrast with - varieties usually classified as non-literary language. Thirdly, it appears that both traditionally ‘literary’ and ‘non-literary’ kinds of discourse share a common range of properties when considered pragmatically, from the point of view of the kinds of communicative acts they perform” (ibid.: 6).

This pattern of thought, since it promotes the idea of the complete denial of the separate identity of literature, often leads to such an extreme as replacement of literary criticism with discourse theory or linguistic criticism:

M. L. Pratt states that as there is no qualitative difference between poetic and non-poetic discourse, “it is both possible and necessary to develop a unified theory of discourse which allows talking about literature in the same terms we use to talk about all the other things people do with language” (Pratt 1977: vii).

The above-quoted author, R. Fowler, in his book “Linguistic Criticism”, maintains that “Linguistic criticism is an introduction to the critical study of discourse; the chief emphasis is on those works of language hailed as “literary”, but I have tried to make it clear that all texts merit this sort of analysis, and that belief in an exclusive category “literature” or “literary language” is liable to prove a hindrance rather than a help (Fowler 1996: v).

T. Eaglton, a literary scholar, expresses the same idea in the following way: “My own view is that it is most useful to see “literature” a name which people give from time to time for different reasons to certain kinds of writing within a whole field of what Michael Foucault has called “discursive practices’, and that if anything is to be an object of study it is this whole field of practices rather than just those sometimes obscurely labelled “literature” [Eagleton 1983: 205].

According to H. Widdowson, “here the denial of the separate identity of literature is not only implicit in the inverted commas but explicitly stated” (Widdowson 1992: 185). He further explains that what Eaglton is saying is that “literary theory is emphatically not a theory of literature. It is a theory of discourse in general... Literary criticism is linguistic criticism. Its purpose is to examine how ideology is expressed, and control exerted, by means of socially determined discourses... Thus Fairclough’s exercises in what he calls the ‘critical discourse analysis’ of newspaper articles (Fairclough 1989) is...an example of literary theory in practice” (ibid.).

Literary theory has always been preoccupied with both studying the literary work and with the question of what literature is. However, there have been a number of shifts in focus from the beginning of the twentieth century onwards and different schools of literary criticism viewed the concept of literature from different angles.

It was a common practice for Formalism, particularly for Russian Formalism (Roman Jakobson, Viktor Shklovsky, Boris Tomashevsky, etc.) to regard literary works as standing out of the norm because of peculiar language use. Consequently, they believed that a number of formal elements, including rhythm, rhyme, meter, sound, imagery, syntax, etc.) made literature distinguished from other forms of discourse. The concept of “literariness”, first introduced by R. Jacobson, was considered to be the major object of literary science - it was “literariness” what made a given work a literary. “Literariness” was understood in terms of estrangement, i.e., deviation from ordinary language, referred to as “defamiliarization” (the concept first introduced by V. Shklovsky in his famous work “Art as Technique”) and “foregrounding” (a key concept for Prague Linguistic Circle, introduced by a Czech linguist J. Mukarovsky who stated that “the function of poetic language consists of the maximum foregrounding of the utterance”) (Mukarovsky 1964: 19).

New critics (Richards (1929), Brooks (1947), Eliot (1932), etc.) distinguished between the uses of the referential language of science and emotive language of poetry and argued that emotive language was primarily marked by aesthetic function and the aesthetic value was dominant in literature. In drawing a rigid borderline between literary and scientific discourse, Brooks, for example, maintains that poetry unifies and science differentiates: “it is not enough for the poet to analyze his experience as the scientist does, breaking it up into parts, distinguishing part from the part, classifying the various parts. His task is finally to unify experience” (Brooks 194). Influenced by Monroe C. Beardsley - a philosopher of aesthetics, new critics try to analyze how the artifact works on the basis of the objective study of the “words of the page” and not the author’s intention or reader’s emotional response.

Both for formalists and new critics, literary work is a self-contained aesthetic object – an autonomous verbal structure and that is where its autonomy lies. In spite of its autonomy, they still believe that it is closely connected with the social world, i.e. never exists absolutely independent of social or historical implications. “You can never draw the line between aesthetic criticism and moral and social criticism; you cannot draw a line between criticism and metaphysics; you start with literary criticism, and however rigorous an aesthete you may be, you are over the frontier into something else sooner or later... I may begin with moral criticism of Shakespeare and pass over into aesthetic criticism, or vice versa” (Eliot 1935: 42). Mukarovsky’s idea presented below may serve a representative example of how autonomy of literature and its aesthetic value was understood:

“The dominance of aesthetic value above all other values, a distinguishing feature of art, is thus something other than external superiority. The influence of aesthetic value is not that it swallows up and represses all remaining values but that it releases every one of them from direct contact with a corresponding life-value. It brings an entire assembly of values contained in the work as a dynamic whole into contact with a total system of those values which form the motive power of the life practice of the perceiving collective. What is the nature and goal of this contact? ... As a rule, the values contained in the artwork are somewhat different, both in their mutual relationships and in the quality of individual values, from the complex system of values which is valid for the collective (Mukarovsky 1964: 88-89)...”Viewed in this light, the autonomy of the artwork and the dominance of the aesthetic function and value within it appear not as destroyers of all contact between the work and reality – natural and social – but as constant stimuli for such contact”(ibid.: 90).

In contrast to new criticism, reader-response criticism centers not on the literary text as an independent verbal structure, but on the process of reading literature, granting the reader the role of a “meaning realizer” and offering co-partnership with creation the meaning of a literary text, hence the concept of aesthetic reception becomes the dominant one (see Fish, S. 1980; Iser 1974). The adherers of this view believe that the aesthetic effects of a literary text can be studied only in the context of aesthetic reception.

Literary poststructuralism removes any distinguishing features of literature from other types of writing. For J.Derrida all types of writing can be read as literature or as non-literature – “any piece of language, oral or written, can be “taken as literature” (Miller 2001:60) and for Roland Barthes, all texts involve undifferentiated writing, “écriture” (Barthes 1977).

Philosophy of art has always been concerned with literature as art. P. Lamarque notes that if literary critics show a “marked reluctance to acknowledge the relevance of aesthetics to literature (Lamarque 2008: 1), philosophical aestheticians “readily accept a place for literature” (ibid. 3). The study of aesthetic characteristics of literature is an important subfield of analytical aesthetics, though it rests its focus on all types of artwork, not specifically on literary artworks and it takes very little or no interest in other text types and textual meaning. It is for this reason that literary texts are usually referred to as “works” or “utterances” within the theories of analytical aesthetics. These theories, influenced by pragmatic theories, treat literary works as utterances with the belief that “the meaning of a work ... is identical to its utterance meaning” (Stecker 2008: 59). P. Lamarque notes that “the emphasis on

conveying and grasping meanings distracts attention from more fundamental issues about what literary works are and what they are valued for. Significantly there is no intention debate about aesthetic description. If we are to pursue the possibility of an aesthetics of literature it will be necessary to move beyond a focus on utterances and their meanings. A radical shift is needed from the picture of an author producing a text, communicating meaning, and inviting understanding, to that of an author creating a work, engaging practice, and inviting appreciation” (Lamarque 2008: 13-14).

3. Conclusions

The considerations about literary text no more than a discourse type, as discussed in a number of theories presented above, indeed distract attention from more “fundamental issues about what literary works are and what they are valued for” (Ibid.), as Lamarque puts it. I cannot but agree that focusing only on “utterances and their meanings” may bring down literary communication to no more than a kind of linguistic communication without any distinctive character, though it does not make me espouse the idea of ignoring the fact that literary text springs from the same origin as any other type of discourse. From this it would follow that there is a need for the conception which will allow us to reconsider the whole existing picture of literary communication and which will play a decisive role in the understanding of many important concepts intimately related with literary text both as a discourse type and as an artwork. I do believe that “cluster conception”, a very recent conception, introduced by a Swedish scholar Anders Pettersson (see Pettersson 2017) allows for such a possibility. In introducing a comprehensive understanding of the nature of the text and textual meaning on the one hand, and the nuanced picture of the mechanism of verbal communication in general, the conception also offers the possibility for a fundamental treatment of many aesthetically relevant issues.

I find it important to take into consideration that if we ignore aesthetic principles in studying a literary text, we shall amputate the most important part of it – the aesthetic value, not reducible to any kind of value, a unique value of literature. Hence, the recognition of this value in relation with the problem that makes literature distinct from other forms of art requires to acknowledge the particular relevance of literary aesthetics and its application to the study of literary discourse.

I do believe that the combination of literary theory not only with linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis but also with literary aesthetics will give a fuller and more comprehensive

understanding of many issues concerning the multidimensional nature of a literary text as a type of discourse and as an artwork.

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