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FROM WORK TO TEXT AND BACK AGAIN

Abstract

It has become a common practice in contemporary literary criticism that the concepts “literary text” and “literary work” are used as interchangeable synonyms and over the past few decades, the term "text" has occupied the place of "work". This article aims to discuss the reasons for stimulating this tendency and to specify the appropriateness of such use. It also stresses the particular relevance of not conflating the two aforementioned concepts into the same area of enquiry and attempts to draw the line between them.

1. Introduction

There has been a tendency of using the terms “literary work” and “literary text” indiscriminately, without specifying in which sense they may be distinguished from each other. Such indiscriminate use signifies either lack of precision or deliberate accentuation that they, in fact, are interchangeable synonyms. This fact leads up to significant confusion about many vital theoretical aspects concerning the nature of literature itself.

The article aims to discuss the important factors which prepared the way for the confusion of the terms “literary text” and “literary work” and attempts to draw the line between the aforementioned concepts by specifying the appropriateness of their use. It claims that the above task cannot be achieved solely by employing the theories of literary studies and other disciplines interested in literature as a linguistic fact and also as a form of art should be included in the interdisciplinary field of enquiry about the problem in question. Hence, the article is on interdisciplinary line.

The twentieth-century literary studies has become an interdisciplinary field of science. Its preoccupation with the problem how literature uses language as the medium of its expression and the emphasis on the textual analysis naturally determined its connection with other sciences interested in the concept of text, notably linguistics, text linguistics, pragmatics and discourse analysis. Apart from its verbal nature, literature possesses the nature of art, and consequently, as a form of art, it falls under the special interest of analytical aesthetics. The latter, viewed primarily as the philosophy of arts, studies all forms of art and is concerned with their interpretation. Hence, it is not surprising that analytical aesthetics has been seeking collaboration with literary studies.

Richard Shusterman points out that literary criticism is the most developed “aesthetic counterpart of science in academic art criticism” (Shusterman 1987:118) and that analytic aestheticians are “most frequently and closely concerned themselves with it” (ibid.). However, he rightly notes that if aesthetics willingly seeks such collaboration, literary criticism “seems to be rejecting its own traditional ground where literary aesthetics seemed... to be heading” (Shusterman 1986: 35). Peter Lamarque expresses his concern that unlike aestheticians, who are ready for collaboration, literary critics reveal a “marked reluctance to acknowledge the relevance of aesthetics to literature” (Lamarque 2007: 27).

Throughout its history, analytical aesthetics finds the study of a literary work as a type of artwork and its interpretation as one of its major concerns. Consequently, analytic aestheticians usually employ the term “literary work” rather than “literary text”. Conversely, contemporary literary theory reveals considerable reluctance of using the term “literary work” after poststructuralism decidedly replaced it with “literary text”.

The article argues that the specification about the use of the terms “literary work” and “literary text” requires an interdisciplinary view about the problem and hopes that their

appropriate distinction will shed light on many theoretically relevant issues concerning the nature of literature.

## **2. The Focus on Textuality in Contemporary Literary Theory**

The fact that the notion of work has been replaced by the text in contemporary literary theory is not coincidental and several important factors can be singled out to explicate the reason for such replacement. For this purpose, I will provide a brief outline of the precondition of the tendency of shifting emphasis from work to text.

### **a) Russian Formalist Focus on Language Use and New Critical Focus on the “Words on the Page”**

One of the factors that contributed to the rise of separate and independent “science of literature”, initiated by Formalists at the beginning of the twentieth century, was a redirection of focus from studying literature in terms of social, religious, political, etc. backgrounds to formal properties of literary works and establishment of criticism for the purpose of “scientific” activity. In Boris Exjebaum’s words<sup>1</sup>, “what brought together the initial group of the Formalists was the desire to liberate the poetic word from the fetters of philosophical and religious tendencies, which had achieved considerable prominence in Symbolism” (quoted in Erlich 1980 : 71-72). He states that “the verse is born from the need to concentrate attention on the word, to take a close look at it, to play with it”<sup>2</sup> (Ibid: 67).

Russian Formalists put forward the conception of poetic language and tried to determine what makes it different from ordinary language. As Roman Jakobson proposed it, the object of literary science was not literature but literariness and the Formalists insisted that it was peculiar language use that makes poetic language stand out of the norm. Such “deviation” was referred to as “defamiliarization”(estrangement) By Victor Shklovsky in “Art as

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<sup>1</sup> Exjebaum, B. 1927. *Literatura. Teorija, kritika, polemika*. Leningrad, pp. 90-91.

<sup>2</sup> Exjebaum, B. 1929. *Moj Vremennik*. Leningrad, p.40.

Technique”. In his famous work “Linguistics and Poetics” Jakobson announced poetics as an integral part of linguistics - “global science of verbal structure” (Jakobson 1987: 63). The function of poetic language, as Mukarovsky puts it, consists of “the maximum foregrounding of the utterance” (Mukarovsky 1964: 19). He explicates the notion of foregrounding as the conscious use of the utterance when appropriate norms are violated.

The emphasis on the constitutive role of language and the unique nature of poetic language was equally strong in New Criticism. Like Russian Formalists, New Critics also distanced themselves from any external considerations about literary works, dissociating them from political, moral, social, biographical or whatsoever contexts and focused on them as self-sufficient and self-contained verbal structures. Their focus exclusively rested on “the words on the page” – “what is there in the text” and distinguished emotive language of poetry from referential language of science, considering the former as marked by aesthetic function. Frank Raymond Leavis claimed that literature is “the fullest use of language”, (Leavis 1975: 44) “supreme creative art of language” (ibid: 51). It was the verbal object – text – and its analysis that was the domain of literary criticism. The meaning of the text was completely freed from the author’s intention and partly from the reader’s emotive response and both were acknowledged as fallacies ( see Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946; Wimsatt and Beardsley 1949).

#### **b) Replacement of “Work” with “Text “ in Literary Poststructuralism**

The preoccupation with the text-oriented approach (“what is there in the text?”) that was equally characteristic of Russian Formalist and New Critical schools of literary criticism, took an absolutely different turn in literary poststructuralism. The latter, like structuralism, out of which it originated and later redefined many of its premises, was heavily influenced by linguistics. Roland Barthes, one of the key figures of literary poststructuralism, notes that “literary work offers structuralism the picture of a structure homological with that of language” (Barthes 1967: 897) and that “structuralism emerged from linguistics and in literature, it finds an object which itself emerged from language” (ibid.). As Jonathan Culler points out, linguistics

was the very science providing “an algorithm for an exhaustive and unbiased description of a text” (Culler 1976 :57).

In the second half of the century, linguistics turned the whole focus to the concept of text, but before the latter became the primary object of study in language science, it was customary to limit with studying the sentence as the largest unit of language. The necessity to study language units within a broader unit than a sentence rose as a result of an inability to account for many linguistic phenomena without reference to the text (for example, article or pronoun). Language science moved beyond the sentence borderline and special science of texts – text linguistics as a branch of linguistics - emerged in the second half of the 20th century. Bo Pettersson so rightly notes that “text did not gain currency as a central notion for language in written or printed form until the early twentieth century and that it took another half-century before it became the central term in the western world. Second, ...as text in the 1960s and 1970s had a veritable boost in usage its semantic range underwent a related expansion” (Bo Pettersson, 2005: 133).

Being under a strong influence of linguistics, literary post-structuralism turned the concept of text as its major concern. Thus, contemporary literary theory with its clearly poststructuralist background became totally oriented at providing textual analysis.

Poststructuralists believed that there were no borders between text types and they all were just ‘écriture’ (writing). As Stein Haugom Olsen and Anders Pettersson point out in the introductory part of their work “From Text to Literature,” poststructuralists made the concept of text “logically prior the concept of literature and consequently removed any principled distinction between literary works and other genres of texts. In essence, the notion of “literary text replaced the notion of literary work” (Olsen and Pettersson, 2005: 2).

In his famous essay “From Work to Text”, Barthes argued that the conceptions of language and literature were moving towards interdisciplinarity as the object of literary studies and linguistics changed – this object became fluid and its range extended to interdisciplinary boundaries – “there is now the requirement of a new object, obtained by the sliding or

overturning of former categories. That object is the Text” (Barthes 1982: 156). He drew the line between the concepts of “work” and “text”. According to him, work can be characterized as something materially existing - a fragment of a substance, which can be seen on a bookshelf, in bookshops, in catalogues, in exam syllabuses and it can be held in a hand; whereas the text is a process of demonstration - it is held in language and only exists in the movement of a discourse (Ibid.: 156-157). If work functions as a general sign, for Barthes, quite the contrary, text practices the infinite deferment of the signified (Ibid.: 159), it is plural, plural in the sense that “it accomplishes the very plural of meaning – this plurality is not just the existence (or rather coexistence) of meanings that can fall under the scope of interpretation, but it is a “weave of signifiers” that blends “citations, references, echoes and cultural languages (cultural codes) (Ibid.: 160). Text, he claims, in contrast to work, can be read “without the guarantee of his Father” (Ibid.:161), i.e. the author and the latter can only be the “guest” in the text (Ibid.) The work, in contrast to text, according to him, is an object of consumption and the quality of work requires an appreciation of “taste” (Ibid.), whereas text empties the work from consumption and “gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice” (Ibid.: 162). Barthes finishes the essay with the Derridean belief that the theory of text can coincide only with the practice of writing” (Ibid.:164), suggesting that any type of text, as he puts it, “should itself be nothing other than text” (Ibid.).

In summing up the distinction between text and work offered by Barthes, I will introduce Paisley Livingston’s words: “Roland Barthes... notoriously asserted that the concept of the work of art is part of a repressive ideology that should be replaced by a liberating conception of textuality. “Textuality” referred in his mind to a highly indeterminate and exciting sphere of semantic and erotic possibilities; “work” [une œuvre] was, on the contrary, an ideological drag involving wrong-headed thinking about fixed meanings, ownership, and repression” (Livingston 2012:12).

**3. Literary Aesthetic View About the problem of Replacement of “Work” with “Text”**

The Poststructuralist insisting fascination with “textualism” and disengaging it from outer reality, has been frequently criticized. Gerald Graff was among many others, who, in his book “Literature Against Itself” pointed out: “the concept of literary autonomy has come under fire recently from structuralist criticism, which attempts to demystify literature by showing that literary language, linguistic conventions, and “textuality”, not the imagination or consciousness of the writer, are the constitutive agents of writing” (Graff 1979:18).

Hogan Olsen in his essay “Literary Aesthetics and Literary Practice” argued that an account of the characteristic features and functions of literature should explain why it is worthwhile to single out certain texts as literary works (Olsen 1986: 1).

Olsen offers two different types of answer to this question - one is reductive and the other - non-reductive. In order to see the difference between them, he introduced a distinction between the notions of “textual feature” and “aesthetic feature”(Ibid.). According to him, textual features (such as phonological, syntactic, semantic and a minimum of rhetorical features) are possessed by all types of text. They all have style, content and structure (Ibid.) and “this notion of a textual feature will serve as a contrast to the notion of aesthetic feature. For the aesthetic features constitute a text a literary work of art, and the question “What is literature?” concerns the nature of a literary aesthetic feature” (Ibid.). A reductive answer makes an attempt to determine what textual features are necessary and sufficient for classifying a text as a literary work. But he argued that non-reductive analysis of literary aesthetic features “offers a more plausible and sophisticated account of literary aesthetic features than reductive theories” (Ibid.: 3) as he firmly believed that literature is a value concept and declared in his essay “Literary Theory and Literary Aesthetics” that “literary work is defined through the value which it is expected to yield” (Olsen 1986: 211) and pointed out that “literary theory has never been able to

come to terms with it” (Ibid.) and because of that it “has entered a crisis from which it does not recover” (Ibid.). He most emphatically claims that “a literary work cannot be defined through a set of textual features, be they relational, textual, or structural” (Ibid. 207).

Peter Lamarque and Stein Haugom Olsen in their work “Truth Fiction and Literature” argue that “a text is identified as a literary work by recognizing the author’s intention” (Lamarque and Olsen 1994: 255-256) and on this assumption, they build up their “institutional” conception of literary practice. I find it impossible to discuss the latter within the scope of an article, moreover, it will carry me away from the chief purpose of the paper – to discuss the distinction between the concepts of work and text. But what is worthwhile to note in this context is that in their institutional practice, the aforementioned two scholars, convincingly show how a text gets determinate textual features when it is construed as work. Basing on their institutional view, they draw the line between the two concepts and argue: “ The concept of ‘text’ is logically secondary to the concept of ‘work’ or related concepts which designate types of text. A text is always a text of something, of a literary work, a philosophical treatise, a historical chronicle, a historical monograph, a medical article, etc. A text cannot be understood just as a text” (Ibid.: 379).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Literary theory, seeking constant collaboration with linguistics, intensively applying linguistic methods “for an exhaustive and unbiased description of a text” (Culler 1976:57), turned the whole focus to the concept of text and replaced the concept of work with it. Literary Aesthetics expresses its concern that literary theory disregards the real value of literature by not acknowledging that literary work should be defined through its value and not through the textual features. I believe that the clear distinction between the two concepts – “work” and “text” - is not only a matter of terminological appropriateness but it will have further consequences about the way one treats literature- rests the whole focus on the textual analysis or, at the same time, devotes considerable attention to experiencing a work of literature as verbal art. This is a challenge for contemporary literary theory.



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