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Anthropology and Literature

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The concept

Definitions of *literary anthropology* or *anthropological criticism* included in the newest theoretical reference books mention only the names of the already forgotten players of the critical scene (such as Maud Bodkin, Philippe Wheelwright, or Northrop Frye) accompanied by notions held in contempt by contemporary literary theory, such as “archetype,” “myth,” “ritual,” or “symbol.”¹ Understood in this fashion, literary anthropology is – or should I say, was – to be identified with a search for constant human cultural dispositions and is strongly anchored in psychology and ethnography – admittedly, rarely explored by literary studies today. The so called “anthropological turn”² in literary research questioned, in a way, its methodological roots, replacing the reconstruction of invariants of human behaviors with interpretations of cultural dependence of human experience.

While searching for descriptions of anthropology of literature in contemporary literature on the subject one encounters – with the exception of Polish sources – several surprises. The odd formulation of *literary anthropology* itself resembles in its

¹ See: Mangaro, M. “Anthropological Theory and Criticism.” *The John Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism*, 2nd edition. Groden, M. Kreiswirth, M. and Szeman, I. (eds.) John Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 2005; Bell, M. “Anthropology and/as Myth in Modern Criticism.” *Literary Theory and Criticism: An Oxford Guide*. Waugh, (ed.) Oxford University Press, Oxford: 2006. Literary anthropology is omitted from *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*. Leith, V.B. (ed.) Norton, New York: 2001 and *Critical Terms for Literary Study*. Lentricchia, F. University of Chicago Press, Chicago: 1995.

² See: *The Anthropological Turn in Literary Studies*. J. Schlaeger (ed.), Gunter Narr Verlag, Tübingen: 1996.

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incongruence terms such as *ethical physics* or *aesthetic chemistry*, and it is thus hardly unexpected that the dictionaries of anthropology endow it with a decidedly pejorative meaning. Anthropologists – and I am speaking here of the “serious” anthropologists who tend to view literature as frivolous entertainment – are not eager to embrace the connection between literature and anthropology, an attitude perfectly exemplified by the definition of “literary anthropology” included in *The Dictionary of Anthropology*, published by the certainly reliable Blackwell in 1997.³ The author of the definition criticizes Clifford Geertz, presented as the author of the canonical work in the field: instead of explaining objectively existing cultural phenomena, Geertz treats them as texts and interprets them basing on the assumption (a wrong one, the reader is led to believe) that culture is made of webs of significance that we spin and are suspended in. Geertz’s hermeneutics, finding its fullest realization in the “dense description,” is not met with recognition since an analysis of cultural practices as texts fails to take us closer to what these practices really are and floats instead in the void of multifaceted and hardly reliable readings. As “dense description” cannot be objectively legitimized – relying on the principle of *constructing* meaning instead of finding it – it remains of little worth as a scientific method. It is here precisely, in the proclaimed semantic uncertainty, that the author’s reluctance finds its source. He concludes:

Interpretations proposed in the absence of validation procedures are constructed without reason. Strictly speaking, such interpretations are arrived at through guessing, as Geertz said they should be. They are speculations of what the anthropologist says the informants say the natives say. Plainly spoken, they are gossip. So the literary anthropologists’ interpretations seem to be their impressions of the Other’s gossip. Any project which, like literary anthropology, proposes to replace science with gossip would seem to be of dubious merit.⁴

Undoubtedly, for the so called “hard” anthropologists, stuck in the archaic conflict between explaining and understanding, literary anthropology as an irresponsible heresy unnecessarily diluting a strong scientific paradigm. And yet, paradoxially, Geertz, viewed by the anthropologists as a relativising postmodernist, is one of the unquestionable champions of anthropology of literature. From the perspective of the traditional-ethnographical anthropology, anthropology of literature must be understood as literary anthropology, in other words, as gossip of dubious merit.

There is, however, a different approach, one that does not distinguish between better and worse anthropologies and simply proposes the existence of different anthropologies. In his newest book, *How to Do Theory*, Wolfgang Iser writes:

We still have ethnography, which is basically what the practitioners of anthropology are concerned with, but we also have philosophical, cultural, historical, even literary

³ The publisher declares that the dictionary “is designed to become the standard reference guide to the discipline of social and cultural anthropology.”

⁴ “Literary Anthropology.” *Dictionary of Anthropology*. T. J. Barfield (ed.) Blackwell, London: 1997. 294-295.

anthropology, distinguished by their respective objectives and their methodological presuppositions.⁵

Let us assume that this, in fact, is the case – in other words that the anthropology of literature has an objective, and let us pose it some questions.

Three questions

The notion of “anthropology of literature” has several meanings and the phenomena it refers to may be very different from one another. It can, thus, refer to a discipline – anthropology – that chose literature as its subject. From this perspective, anthropology *studies* literature, literature is the subject of its investigations. Succinctly put, *literature is the subject of the study of humanity* (as the latter seems the most faithful translation of “anthropology”), in other words, literature is an area of human activity which can (and perhaps even should) be included in the repertoire of subjects investigated by the study of humanity. Anthropology of literature – as a study of humanity – refers, thus, to a scientific discipline – humanistic by its very nature – which from the spheres of human activity chooses literature and investigates it. Why? Evidently following from the assumption that literature has something important to say about humanity. Wolfgang Iser writes: “Since literature as a medium has been with us more or less since the beginning of recorded time, its presence must presumably meet certain anthropological needs.”⁶ Just as anthropology of everyday life tells us something about the human being viewed through the lens of their everyday life (how it rests, how it gossips), anthropology of literature tells us something important about the human being viewed through the lens of literature. But this “something” is, and should be, neither trivial nor unimportant. As the study of humanity, anthropology does not focus on the issues of marginal importance, it aims to capture the *essence of the human* by analyzing its creations. It assumes that literature belongs to the class of human creations that reveal the essence of humanity. Just as there is a place for anthropology of wandering, anthropology of card games, and anthropology of laughter, anthropology of literature, because of its subject, may reveal the basic principles (or fantasies) of being human and thus places itself in the center of academic research. If anthropology studies literature, and literature tells us what it means to be human, then anthropology of literature is clearly destined to hit the nail on the head. Whoever knows what the essence is, is no longer a mere

⁵ Iser, W. *How to Do Theory*. Blackwell, London 2006. 131. It is worth mentioning that in his discussion of anthropological theory, Iser refers to the work of Erik Gans, virtually unknown in Poland. Gans authored, among others, *The End of Culture: Toward a Generative Anthropology*. University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles: 1985 and *Signs of Paradox: Irony, Resentment, and Other Mimetic Structures*. Stanford University Press, Stanford: 1997.

⁶ W. Iser. “Towards a Literary Anthropology.” *Prospecting. From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1989. 263-264. Further quotations from this work are indicated in the text as PF.

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scholar but a scholar of essence, which in itself is an incredibly serious matter. To point out the classical reasoning behind the maneuver that elevates the study of literature above all sciences, let me refer to the work by an American academic, Richard van Oort, the author of *The Critic as Ethnographer*:

For if humanity is defined as the culture-using animal, and if culture is defined as that object which invites symbolic interpretation, then it follows that literary studies stands at the center of an anthropology founded on these assumptions. For who is better trained than the literary critic in the exercise of searching for symbolic significance, of reading beyond the literal surface to see the deeper, more sacred meaning beneath?⁷

The question is clearly rhetorical and its rhetoric quite legitimate indeed. As professional readers, scholars of literature have been indeed extremely meticulously equipped to read the text of human nature. This is also how humanities are still defined today: as an arduous deciphering of the text of human nature, which in itself is troublesome because defined as such humanities should also include genetics whose achievement in the reading of the code of human behaviors cannot be overestimated.

Another question, namely, what anthropology of *literature* is, concerns only a seemingly different matter. What we are asking about here is not what anthropology of literature studies (literature, clearly) and why (clearly for fundamental reasons), but rather what makes literature an anthropological phenomenon, or to be more precise, what defines the anthropological character of literature? After a closer look we must conclude that the anthropological character of literature comes from the fact that literature is a space where human nature reveals itself, in other words, that it is through literature that the human being finds its essence. But what does it mean that the human being *is* human through literature? The answers are not as plentiful as it would seem, as they all center around one – admittedly fundamental – issue. And so, the human being is human because it *uses* literature *as a tool* to understand the world and to understand itself. Both writing and reading literature helps the human being in solving some sort of problem it has with itself and the surrounding world. Man is man when he imitates others, says Aristotle; man is only completely a man, says Schiller, when he plays; man is man, says Wolfgang Iser, through the play of imitation. In each of these (and in several other) cases, a human being arrives at its humanity by using some sort of tool to understand the world. It matters little how this tool is to be defined. It can be painting, theater or literature, or – simply – language. What is important is the fact that without the tool, man is helpless when facing the overwhelming reality.

There remains a third question tying literature and anthropology. This one asks not about the *purpose* of man using literature, nor about the purpose of the anthropologist using it, but rather what literature can tell us about the human being. Also, in this case one quickly concludes that literature tells us simply what the human being is: how it loves, how it hates, plots, remembers and forgets, how

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⁷ Van Oort, Richard. "The Critic as Ethnographer." *New Literary History*. 2004. No 4 (35). 622.

it talks and how it slurs. Also in this case literature is a place where essence of humanity reveals itself. This is how literature has been understood from the very beginning, before the coining of the term “anthropology” which, *nota bene*, is a rather new invention, a modern one, unknown not only to Homer but also to Shakespeare who is said to have invented the human.⁸ A human being talks in literature about itself, it presents itself, replays in literature its defeats and raptures. Frankly, up until Mallarmé came up with the idea that literature replays only the defeats and raptures of language, literature had always been treated “anthropologically,” that is as a space of articulation of what the human being is, even when it was agreed that the articulation changes when the language which makes it possible does. In this sense, anthropology as the study of the human and human behaviors eagerly looks into the works of literature as literature is an interesting document of humanity in action or – to put it as clearly as possible – a “source for anthropological research.”⁹

Evidently, all three questions that anthropology poses literature share a similar concern. It revolves around what the human being really is (not out of a whim and not in occasional circumstance). And if the truth about the human reveals itself through literature, then the fundamental question must be as follows: why is literature necessary to humans at all? Why do they continue to produce it? Why do they read it? This question can take another, more difficult form. Why do *we* need literature?

Why literature?

A short snippet found on the webpage of *German Anthropology Online* describes Wolfgang Iser’s *Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre. Perspektiven literarischer Antopologie* in the following words: “This study, first published in 1993, regards literature as a mirror of anthropological (human) equipment and generates a form of this understanding which – according to the author – cannot be gained from cultural anthropology, nor from philosophical anthropology.”¹⁰ The author of this lapidary but important passage speaks of literature as “a mirror of anthropological (human)

⁸ Naturally, I am referring here to Harold Bloom’s book on Shakespeare whose subtitle reads *The Invention of the Human*. It should be noted, too, that the term was first used by Shakespeare’s contemporary, Otto Cassman between 1594-1595 in *Psychologia Anthropologica; sive Animæ Humanæ Doctrina* and in *Anthropologia. Pars II. Hoc est de Fabrica Humani Corporis*.

⁹ Winner, Thomas G. “Literature as a Source for Anthropological Research: The Case of Jaroslav Hašek’s ‘Good Soldier Švejk.’” *Literary Anthropology: A New Interdisciplinary Approach to People, Signs, and Literature*. Poyatos, F. (ed.) University of New Brunswick Press, New Brunswick, 1988. It is, I believe, one of the first attempts to form a new sub-discipline – the anthropology of literature – within literary studies. The book itself rarely appears in the bibliographies of literary anthropologists despite the fact that over two decades ago it foretold the emergence of a “new interdisciplinary area,” making current demands for it an instance of rather banal tactlessness.

¹⁰ from: <http://www.anthropology-online.de/Aga05/0057.html> (accessed April 6, 2013) (A.W.)

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equipment.” Naturally, the mirror that reflects the equipment is also an equipment and this precisely how Wolfgang Iser, one of the founding fathers of anthropology of literature, treats literature – instrumentally.

The most general assumptions of Iser’s anthropological project¹¹ state that fictionalizing is what determines the position of the human in the world. The human being is human (and not an animal) because it creates fictions, in other words, mediatory structures of imagination that help it understand not only the world but also itself. Literature, as fiction, is “the mirror that allows humans to see themselves reflected in their manifestations”¹² If culture is man’s reply to the challenge of the environment, then fiction, to quote Francis Bacon, the “shadow of satisfaction to the mind of man in those points wherein the nature of things doth deny it” is a scenario in which man attempts to outsmart nature.¹³ Iser refers to Beckett’s condensed “live or invent”¹⁴ line, upon which he comments: “we know that we live, but we don’t know what living is, and if we want to know, we have to invent what is denied us.” But man, apart from trying to explain what is incomprehensible (this is how knowledge is made) strives to discover, or rather, design a place for himself in the inhospitable world by creating – with the help of fiction – a world that fits him.¹⁵ In this sense, literary work – as Winnicott’s *transitional object* – is “a means of reaching outside of what we are caught up in.” Thus, literature acts an intermediary between ourselves and the world by transporting from the world elements that are known to us and

¹¹ My broad recapitulation is based on R. van Oort, “The Use of Fiction in Literary and Generative Anthropology: An Interview with Wolfgang Iser.” *Anthropoetics* III, Fall 1997/Winter 1998 no 2; W. Iser *Prospecting... and The Fictive and the Imaginary: Charting Literary Anthropology*. Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore: 1993. See also the following footnote.

¹² Iser, W. “What is Literary Anthropology? The Difference between Explanatory and Exploratory Fictions.” *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*. Clark, M.P. (ed), University of California Press, Berkeley: 2000. 177. Translated to Polish by A. Kowalcze-Pawlik. “Czym jest antropologia literatury? Różnica między fikcjami wyjaśniającymi a odkrywającymi.” *Teksty Drugie*, 2005 no 6.

¹³ In this sense, fiction is an equipment allowing to interpret symbolically (that is by referencing the symbolic universe of meanings which is absent from sensory experience) what animals can interpret only indexically. This, at least, is the thesis put forward by R. van Oort. See: “Critic as Enthographer.” *New Literary History*, 2004 No 4.

¹⁴ It may be worth adding that this is also what Gombrowicz says in the letter to Juan Carlos Gomez from Berlin (June 15, 1963): “please understand that so far I haven’t been able to find myself here, so far I only am here.” Gombrowicz, W. *Listy do Juana Carlosa Gomeza*. Transl. E. Zaleska. *Literatura na Świecie* 2001 No 4. 12-13. (here transl. from Polish – A.W.)

¹⁵ In the triad structure of human existence, Iser places fiction between reality [das Wirkliche] and imagination [das Imaginare], softening the opposition between reality and the mind. Fiction, created by our imagination, is an interpretation in which reality begins to make sense. In relation to the empirical world, the imaginary as otherness is a sort of holy madness that does not turn away from the world but intervenes in it.” *Prospecting*, 275.

creating its own world, one that exceeds that which is known from common experience but also ready to be appropriated by our existence. This way, literature fulfills a fundamental function: it interprets the outside world by creating structures that weaken its strangeness. In the interview with Richard van Oort, Iser says:

One could use literature as a medium in order to spotlight why human beings are prone to be with themselves and simultaneously outside themselves. We need fictions to come to grips with ends and beginnings. We are sure that we are born and that we shall die, but we have neither experience nor knowledge of either of them.

In other words, literary fiction exists *instead of* knowledge or *instead of* experience, or it is a structure broadening our experience or knowledge by including those areas that remain unavailable to experience or knowledge. In this sense, one could posit that the human being invents itself when it learns to represent itself which also entails presenting its life on the stage of fictions it produces. Commenting on Iser's theory, Gabriele Schwab writes: "fictions become our uncanny doubles, reflecting to us something we otherwise cannot perceive."¹⁶ This way, literature locates itself between two opposing orders: between that which can never be known and that which is perfectly knowable, between life as such and conceptual knowledge.¹⁷ As such, it is synonymous to our existence, which, too, is stretched between two poles: the all too human life (as Nietzsche would have put it) and the superhuman (following Aristotle) contemplation, that is, theory.

Anthropology and existence

Literature as a "decisive means of shaping cultural reality" is thus, Iser says, synonymous to existence, and consequently to how man copes with the experience of naked life. However, if naked life is devoid of meaning while knowledge makes sense permanent and narrows it down, then that which is contained between experience and knowledge – fiction – must be by definition semantically indeterminate. This undecidability, or split, however, concerns not the ontological status of fiction as a structure placed between the imaginary and the real but rather the human condition whose fictionalizing, *facultas fictionis*, is its irremovable characteristic. Iser believes that fiction acts as an intermediary not only between the human and the world but first and foremost between knowledge and existence and that it influences the lack of [direct] access of man to himself. This mediatory structure creates a gap in the subject which cannot be closed by turning from existence – neither by turning to pure experience, nor by turning to perfectly clear self-knowledge. Fictionalizing is both the cause and the effect of the radical shift of the subject in relation to itself, of

¹⁶ Schwab, G. "If Only I Were Not Obligated to Manifest': Iser's Aesthetics of Negativity." *New Literary History* 2000 No 1(31) 73-74. Schwab refers hereto the performative idea of fiction that Iser describes using the word "staging."

¹⁷ "Staging thus becomes a mode that functions to its maximum effect when knowledge and experience as ways of opening up the world come to the limits of their efficacy." Iser, *The Fictive and the Imaginary...* 298.

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the subject which – in order to understand itself – is forced to constantly interpret its own fictions. That which appears in fiction is not something belonging to actual experience but something absent from it.” For what is staged is the appearance of something that cannot become present” (FI 298). Thus, literature has a negative function:¹⁸ both in relation to the world that it does not present uninterpreted and in relation to the subject whom it draws into autoexegesis. This boundless ambivalence shows that literature does not answer the question of “what things are” but rather “what other ways are there for me to interpret the world and myself?”

Anthropologists and (their) existence

Which brings me to the key issue, closing this essay. When asked what connects anthropology and literature, I answer by completing Iser’s suggestions. His existence is an intermediary zone between naked life and conceptual knowledge. It is separated from life and knowledge by the abyss of interpretation, or to use Iser’s words, fiction. Life as such cannot be interpreted and resembles’ Gombrowicz’s black current, devoid of meaning. Knowledge indeed does help to tame this current but it prevents us from touching it. Paraphrasing Kant, I would say then that existence without life is empty, as it has to interpret something, but knowledge without existence is empty, as it interprets nothing.

If, as anthropologists of literature claim, literature is not only a form of experiencing or knowing reality, but a “reflection on what we are” as well, what are all of us who study literature to do with existence? Of course we can *study* existence the way one studies the amphibrach or modernism and then existence – incidentally, often confused with life itself – is indeed an attractive subject of study. But if man *uses* literature as an instrument to understand the world and himself, can scholars of literature – whose made using literature their profession and their calling – defend themselves from the influence of literature? What are we to do about *our own existence*, in other words, with the way we interpret literature and the world? Consider it a subject beyond discussion and thus do away with it? I believe that from the anthropological perspective there is no difference between literature, fiction and existence. Existence is a space where human being, in the attempt to understand itself, creates literature and other fictions, including anthropology understood as a discourse of man on man. What we seem to be facing here is the following: anthropologists who seek definite knowledge of the kind that would take away their interpretative ambivalence and that allows to mute languages other than their own, lose their subject (literature) in the process. However, when they assume that individual experience cannot be conveyed, then – by fetishizing life itself – they lose discursive access to literature. The middle course solution is to admit that studying literature does not differ from literature. Both discourses are immersed in existence which, let me repeat, is a linguistic element of self-understanding.

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¹⁸ Discussed brilliantly by G. Schwab.

If literature does not answer the question of “what things are,” but rather “what other ways are there for me to interpret the world and myself,” constantly shifting the position from which one could wish to ask the latter, then this fundamentally atopic character determines also the rules of conduct for literary anthropology. There is no single place from which one is to pose questions to literature, and the changeability of the position prevents the boundaries of academic disciplines from coalescing, preventing even the boundaries of anthropology from being established. This is why the status of literary anthropology appears highly ambiguous. If, focusing on literature, it eliminates its immobile “center of command” and gives up the conviction of being simply one of several figures of existence, it undermines itself and disappears as a separate discipline. But if it seals off its center of command with an impenetrable wall, convinced of its strong status as a discipline with its own separate procedures and rules of legitimization, it loses, or so I believe, access to its subject. In other words, the paradox inscribed into anthropology of literature is as follows: it can be either lukewarm and know nothing of its subject, or it can be fervent and taking little care of itself. To each their own.

Translation: Anna Warso