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# From Metaphysics to Ethics.

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## From Metaphysics to Ethics

Meaning is situated in the ethical.

E. Levinas<sup>1</sup>

While postmodernity was declared modernity's critical phase already a while ago (and poststructuralism – a critical stage of structuralism), for some time now yet another stage in the evolution of postmodernism / poststructuralism has been increasingly written about. It seems to have begun in the mid-80s with the waning of the so called “proper” (in other words: critically-polemical, or even, as some might say, the revolutionary-contesting) energy of the postmodern thinkers and the gradually more apparent attempts at building a new rationality. These have not yet been given a name of their own, which is symptomatic in itself. And while categorizing them as a post-postmodern or a post-poststructural phase has clear weaknesses, it also has certain advantages, as such labeling highlights the already well known and – owing to J.F. Lyotard – probably well familiar properties of all “post-” phases: their inherent lack of independence and a complex, critically – polemically – radical attitude to what came before.<sup>2</sup>

We already know that in postmodernity/poststructuralism, the critically-polemical energy was directed at the modernist rationality, built on the metaphysics

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<sup>1</sup> Levinas, E. “Meaning and Sense” Transl. in: *Collected Philosophical Papers*, transl. Alphonso Ligis, Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, Dordrecht, Boston, Lancaster, 1987.100.

<sup>2</sup> See: Lyotard, J. F. “Nota o sensach przedrostka post-” [Note on the meaning of ‘Post-’] *Postmodernizm dla dzieci. Korespondencja. 1982-1985*. Transl. Migasiński, J. Warszawa, 1998

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

of presence and whose overriding ideas of mind, universality, progress or safe epistemological basis became less and less obvious already in the late 60s.<sup>3</sup> The fiasco of all forms of dogmatism and cognitive fundamentalism was the biggest stake of the incipient breakthroughs. Several critical currents of the postmodern thought focused their attempts on revealing the questionable character of all basis anchoring cognition and the utopia of universalism and objectivity, on pointing out the illusion of teleological models and, first and foremost, on debunking all attempts at achieving undeniable certainty. Following the critique of the modernist ontological and epistemological paradigm, several new qualities of postmodern mentality emerged, among them accidentalness (and with it the conviction of absence of permanent ontological basis); pluralism (multiplicity of decision centers with their own criteria of rationality); fluidity (temporariness, locality, contextuality, and the transience of potential quasi-grounding); and finally, uncertainty, purposelessness, and radically conceived processuality.<sup>4</sup>

Postmodern reluctance towards the metaphysical presence as a basic narrative legitimizing the modern thought and giving it with a definite, systemic shape is a well-known phenomenon. But it is also no secret that postmodern criticism in its proper stage made us aware of more than the fact that models and constructions of modern thought are fragile or largely mystified or, as some would even say, purely theoretical. It also made us aware of something entirely opposite: that foundations are indispensable, in other words, that the tempting cognitive nomadism requires, if not a strong foundation, then at least some minute points of reference. Consequently, while the critical phase of modernity was characterized by engaging tradition (Lyotard), or demarcating the limitations of the past program (Derrida), and debunking weaknesses of used up models, the following phase (the one that started in the 80s) looks for provisional substitutional points of reference, something far more modest and feeble, something discreet but nonetheless capable of providing a replacement for the quasi-transcendental order. What we are talking about here, then, is often referred to as a softer kind of rationality (weak thinking, *penzero debole*), one that is not anti-metaphysical but rather exo- or para-metaphysical. Naturally, the latter does not result in the disappearance of metaphysics from the face of the earth but rather in its ceasing to function as the Greatest of Great Narratives, ceding ground to other possibilities. One of the goals here is also to reconcile with

life under conditions of permanent and incurable uncertainty; a life in the presence of an unlimited quantity of competing forms of life, unable to prove their claims to be grounded in anything more solid and binding than their own historically shaped conventions.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> More on this in: Burzyńska, A. *Dekonstrukcja i interpretacja*. Kraków, 2001. (part II: "Przeciw interpretacji," czyli burzliwe lata 60." 77-274.)

<sup>4</sup> It is not without reason that Zygmunt Bauman often speaks of "liquid modernity" instead of postmodernity. See also: "Życie do natychmiastowego użytku." *Gazeta Wyborcza*. 3-4 November 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Bauman, Z. *Legislators and Interpreters*. Cornell University Press, 1987

In an initial estimate of those other possibilities in the late 80s, the authors of the Introduction to *After Philosophy: End of Transformation?*<sup>6</sup> found them mostly in pragmatics, hermeneutics, rhetoric, and politics.<sup>6</sup> However, those aside, it is ethics, or the “ethical turn” or the “renaissance of the order of value” that is talked about most frequently.<sup>7</sup> This is because when one speaks of the modest aspirations of the new post-postmodern rationality, one speaks not of a project aiming to explore the real state of things (Rorty) and, consequently, tame the future, but rather of one the one that aims to be useful and exist in “the practical and moral sense of the ability and real possibility to act in the name of good and truth.”<sup>8</sup>

However, even if the “ethical turn” is to be treated as an important consequence of the postmodern thought, as Fekete observes in *Life After Postmodernism*,<sup>9</sup> (as it gets its impetus from the series of critical reflections on modernity<sup>10</sup>), it is important to note that what we are witness in is not postmodernity giving ethics a chance to get out of metaphysics’s shadow but rather ethics revealing itself as postmodernism’s chance for survival.

## I. Life after postmodernism: Taking an Ethical Turn.<sup>11</sup>

Released from the imposed anchoring, the trust of  
postmodern man is adrift in search of new havens.

Z. Bauman<sup>12</sup>

There is also another way to describe the phenomena above. In the attempts to come to terms with the burdens of metaphysics made by 20<sup>th</sup> century thought, there are at least three noticeable philosophical turns that in consequence affected humanities as a whole.

<sup>6</sup> See: “General Introduction.” *After Philosophy. End of Transformation?* Baynes K., Bohman, J. and McCarthy, T. (eds.) Cambridge, Mass.: 1987. 1-18. Politics is viewed here mostly through Foucault (i.e. the relation of knowledge and power) and Habermas (critique of ideology.) Those new possibilities pointed out and discussed also in the slightly newer book by H. L. Fairlamb: *Critical Conditions. Postmodernity and the Question of Foundations*. Cambridge, 1994.

<sup>7</sup> See: Smart, B. *Postmodernizm*. [Postmodernism] trans. M. Wasilewski. Poznań, 1998. Also: Markowski, M. P. “Zwrot etyczny w badaniach literackich.” [The ethical turn in literary studies] *Pamiętnik literacki*, 2001 Vol. 1.

<sup>8</sup> Kaniowski, A. M. “Filozofia po ‘lingwistycznym zwrocie.’” *Teksty drugie*. 1990 Vol. 5-6. 99.

<sup>9</sup> Fekete, J. *Life After Postmodernism. Essays on Value and Culture*. London, 1988.

<sup>10</sup> Smart, B. *Postmodernizm*. 106.

<sup>11</sup> I am borrowing (and not without reason) the second part of this title from Simon Critchley’s review of Jacques Derrida’s *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas* (Paris 1997) “Taking an Ethical Turn” *Times Literary Supplement*. October, 17. 1997.

<sup>12</sup> Bauman, Z. *Dwa szkice o moralności ponowoczesnej*. Warszawa: 1994. 39.

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

Recapitulating the impact of the linguistic turn in philosophy in his 1967 anthology,<sup>13</sup> Richard Rorty was probably unaware that he was in fact foretelling the coming of a new age. The *linguistic turn* (whether in form of neopositivist or postempirical philosophy of science, several varieties of transcendentalism, logic-semantic models of Frege or Rousset, finally, de Saussure's structural semiotics, Levi-Strauss's structural anthropology or Heidegger-Gadamerian hermeneutics) gave the 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy its last strong foothold. Through its deeper understanding of language, linguistic philosophy was to solve the problems that metaphysics failed to solve once and for all, and by doing so force it to retire, Rorty notes in the Introduction.<sup>14</sup> The linguistic turn – as Jacques Derrida observed rather early – despite its promises was firmly stuck within the “walls” of metaphysical thought. In late 60s, the exaggeration of “putting language in the center of every experience”<sup>15</sup> as well as limitations of the semantic approach were increasingly noticed.

The image of language as a system of anonymous and unifying principles outlined by the structural semantics, stripped from it certain constitutive features, such as its individual and creative character.<sup>16</sup>

Broadly speaking, it was the disappointment in the traps of linguistic philosophy that was the strongest impulse both behind the emergence of poststructural criticism and its several varieties, and behind the following philosophical turn, the *pragmatic turn*. It took a very explicit form – that of American neopragmatism (Putnam, Davidson, Hacking, Bernstein, Rorty) – but was clearly noticeable in deconstruction itself as well.<sup>17</sup> In *The Consequences of Pragmatism* (1979) Rorty points to the inevitable “pragmatization” of philosophy. Rorty noticed this phenomenon mostly in the tradition of logical positivism but it very quickly turned out that it characterizes all philosophies based on language, or at least those that (contrary to analytical philosophy) decided to stop wallowing in self-adoration. It was a transformation that Rorty experienced himself between 1967 and the end of 70s, changing into a proponent and a worthy

<sup>13</sup> Rorty, Richard M. *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method*. Rorty, R. M. (ed.) Chicago: 1967.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>15</sup> Which is one of Derrida's definitions of logocentrism. See: Jacques Derrida in a [televised] conversation with Kamila Drecka in “Ogród Sztuk.” Further references to this conversation are based on the Polish translation from French by M. Bieńczyk. [Here translated from Polish – A.W.]

<sup>16</sup> Kaniowski, A. W. *Filozofia po “lingwistycznym zwrocie.”* 101

<sup>17</sup> See for instance: Haverkamp, A. “Deconstruction is/as Neopragmatism? Preliminary Remarks on Deconstruction in America.” *Deconstruction is/as America: A New Sense of the Political*. Haverkamp, A. (ed.) New York: 1995. Derrida often emphasized the value of practice (see for instance: *Positions* trans. by A. Dziadek. Bytom: 1997. 83); he also referred to grammatology as “pragmatology” (see: “Some Questions and Responses.” *The Linguistics of Writing: Arguments between Language and Literature*. Fabb N., Attridge D., Durrant A. and McCabe, C. (eds.) Manchester: 1987) The very project of early deconstruction was also strongly pragmatic in character. (More on this in: Burzyńska, *Dekonstrukcja...*)

continuator of James, Peirce, and Dewey. Moving beyond the system of language – in the direction of linguistic experience, linguistic practices, language in use, as well as focus on the questions of economy and utility – was undoubtedly a natural consequence of this direction taken by linguistic philosophy. However, the pragmatism brought also the awareness that pragmatics without ethics can take one to rather dangerous places. It is hardly surprising that the most antifundamentalist and at the same time the most pragmatically oriented attitudes already at the end of the 70s took a clear turn to ethics. It was noticeable both in the development of the Derridean thought and the American deconstructivism and in the evolution of neopragmatism.<sup>18</sup> The next turn in the humanities, the *ethical turn*, was in fact a return. It was not meant to determine an entirely new direction but to bring to the surface and reformulate all that has implicitly been there already in the varied forms of the poststructural achievement. At the beginning of the 80s, it had to be uttered directly to repel the accusations of exaggerated liberalism, anarchy, and lack of constraint (in case of neopragmatism) or narcissism, crypto-essentialism, and being blinded by the myth of “textual autonomy”<sup>19</sup> (in the case of deconstruction). If the pragmatic turn turned out to be the natural consequence, and a necessity resulting from, the linguistic turn, the ethical turn became both a necessity and one of the most obvious consequences of pragmatism, both in philosophy and in the literary studies.

## 2. From the “weak” theories of interpretation to the ethics of reading – the consequence of pragmatism.

Today’s identity crisis boils down to the question of retaining the identity one has constructed as well as finding an identity that would have a minimal chance of stable social recognition.

Z. Bauman<sup>20</sup>

This short introduction discussing the general intellectual climate accompanying post-postmodernism and the individual turns in the method of humanistic reflection will not only allow me to outline a broader context for the current ethical turn, it will also help me point to analogous phenomena in literary studies. We are more than well aware of the fact that literary studies, too, experienced a linguistic turn, believed to be a universal antidote to the numerous ailments of literary

<sup>18</sup> This can clearly be seen in Rorty who, having questioned the fundamentalist claims of representational philosophy (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*), moved on to defining his own idea of philosophy, one morally enriching (“edifying philosophy”) and reacting to everything that is important to the development of culture and individuals.

<sup>19</sup> See: Fairlamb, H.L. *Critical Conditions*. // 137-138. <http://rcin.org.pl>

<sup>20</sup> Bauman, Z. “Nad granicami anarchizmu interpretacyjnego.” *Teksty Drugie*. 1997 Vol. 6. 41.

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

studies (both the positivist burden and those resulting from the phenomenologist ego-logy, finally, the traps and illusions of traditional hermeneutics.) But also in the field of literary studies the disappointment and the huge crisis following from the relatively little gain and rather remarkable loss resulting from the adaptation of the linguistic models in literary research brought about the need to revise structuralism (a very broad definition of postmodernism) which eventually led to the revision of almost the entire tradition of the (modern) theoretical-literary reflection. However, both the developments of the early French poststructuralists (Barthes, Foucault, Kristeva) and the directions of the early (strategic) Derridean deconstruction, the practices of American deconstructivists, finally the official launch of American neo-pragmatism in literary studies,<sup>21</sup> all revealed that the most important stake of the poststructural revision were the issues most crucial to literary studies: the questions of theory of literary work and its interpretation. Poststructuralism brought a deep crisis of modern theory<sup>22</sup> and resulted in a critique of models based on the metaphysical premise – their teleology, centrist inklings as well as their attempts to secure for themselves theoretical safety. However, as much as the first, “critical” phase of poststructuralism was aimed mostly at announcing “the end of Theory,” the attempts of the following (post-poststructural) one were, again, directed rather at finding a *modus vivendi* after the “closure” of the exhausted tradition.<sup>23</sup> The questioning of cognitive fundamentalism (in case of literary theory: rejection of parameters of modern theory, such as universality, objectivity, cognitive neutrality and meta-linguisticity<sup>24</sup>) endowed literary research with strong pragmatic tendencies and resulted first and foremost in the “weak” theories of reading (the plural is not accidental, of course), replacing the “strong” theory of interpretation. The “weakness” did not entail their actual weakness but a conscious acceptance of minimalized theoretical claims and a very strong preference for reading practices.<sup>25</sup>

However, those transformations resulted in new doubts. It was agreed that the modern theory/theory of interpretation could not realize its promises of explaining literature in terms of probable generalizations, nor was it able to justify its technicist claims to explaining everything that is literary. The fiasco of the theory

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<sup>21</sup> See: *Against Theory. Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*. Mitchell, W. J. T. (ed.) Chicago: 1985.

<sup>22</sup> Both Derrida and the deconstructivists, and the American neo-pragmatists believe that all onto-hermeneutical models of interpretations (in other words all models contained within the modern paradigm, aimed at making presence of sense) were burdened with the metaphysical cognitive habits.

<sup>23</sup> See also: *After Poststructuralism. Interdisciplinarity and Literary Theory*. Esterlin, N. and Riebkling, B. Evanston: 1993.

<sup>24</sup> See: Ryszard Nycz's "Literaturologia. Spojrzenie wstecz na dzieje nowoczesnej myśli teoretycznoliterackiej w Polsce." *Język modernizmu: Prolegomena historycznoliterackie*. Wrocław: 1997.

<sup>25</sup> Discussed in more detail in Burzyńska, A. "Ponowoczesna kondycja (interpretacji)." *Dekonstrukcja...*

establishing norms of correctness *a priori* was also clear. It was also unanimously accepted that the debunking of the idea of “correct interpretation,”<sup>26</sup> rejection of the idea of “lawmaking” for “translation” (Bauman) and giving up on the search for final truth replaced by participation in the dialogue between traditions (Rorty) were the most important achievements of post-structuralism. However, it has become increasingly pertinent to answer the following question: how to behave in the conditions of postmodern anarchism that is not supposed to be equaled with anarchism, total lack of restraint and complete relativism. In other words, if the collapse of the theoretical legitimization, resulting, among others, from them being deconstructed, was not to result in the destruction of literary research as a discipline, it could not lead to a situation – especially in the case of interpretation – where we agree that every interpretation is possible and equally good. With loosened or “weakened” theoretical norms there emerged a need to rely on other type of “sanction,” as important or perhaps even more important than the “criteria” and “norms” of correctness, allowing to make choices among and to assign value to interpretations. As one of the proponents of pragmatism rightly noted, facing the “fiasco of theoretical restriction,” the ethical restriction placed on the arbitrariness of interpretation gains new importance.<sup>27</sup>

1987 witnessed publication of Joseph Hillis Miller’s *The Ethics of Reading*, which reaped the ethical consequences of deconstruction, and John D. Caputo’s *Radical Hermeneutics: Deconstruction and the Hermeneutic Project*, which pointed to the ethical background in Derrida thought. In 1988, Tobin Siebers’s *The Ethics of Criticism* summarized the most important inspirations for ethical literary studies, Wayne C. Booth’s *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction* investigated the connection between Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism and the ethics of reading, Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Contingencies of Values: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory* presented the project of axiology as an important part of critical theory, and Geoffrey G. Harpham outlined the perspectives for post-ethics in *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*.<sup>28</sup> Also in 1988 – undoubtedly the most prolific year for ethical literary criticism – Denis Donoghue remarked on the ethical issues being at that time the most debated issue in the American literary studies.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, in the late 80s the ethical turn became a commonly recognized fact, confirmed by the discussions and its summaries published in the following years,<sup>30</sup> indicating the presence of at least several strands of theory and proving a significant diversification within the

<sup>26</sup> Rorty, R. “Dekonstrukcja.” *Teksty Drugie*. 1997 Vol. 3. 205.

<sup>27</sup> Szahaj, A. “Granice anarchizmu interpretacyjnego.” *Teksty Drugie*. 1997 Vol. 6. 24.

<sup>28</sup> Respectively: New York: 1988; Berkeley: 1988; Harvard: 1988; Chicago: 1988.

<sup>29</sup> “Their Master Steps.” *Times Literary Supplement*. 1988 December. 16-22.

<sup>30</sup> See for instance: Norris, Christopher. *Truth and the Ethics of Criticism*. Manchester and New York: 1994; also the January volume of *PMLA* from 1999 (edited by Lawrence Buell) discussed by M. P. Markowski. Since Markowski’s article includes also the basic bibliography of the ethical current in the literary research, I feel released from the obligation to provide one.

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

discussed phenomenon.<sup>31</sup> The most important issues, however, were contained in the hermeneutic area and concerned (the ever-returning) question of boundaries and possibilities of interpretation. This is also clearly visible in the case of deconstruction and neo-pragmatism, especially in the confrontation with the “ethical moment,” decisive for the development of both theories.<sup>32</sup>

## 3. Ethic before metaphysics, responsibility before the text, in other words: the effect of deconstruction.

Several important effects, especially in the realm of ethics and politics, result from the micrologic phenomena in the language. Therefore, I believe it is my obligation not to dismiss the minute and, moreover, to do everything in my power to direct attention of those who read me or listen to me, to those tiny, micrologic differences.

J. Derrida<sup>33</sup>

Asked about the ethical phase of deconstruction, Jacques Derrida usually disagrees about it being a separate stage crowning the achievement of himself and his Yale students. Despite the fact that, especially when we trace the history of American deconstructionist criticism, this is precisely the impression one could get,<sup>34</sup> important practices of Derrida himself seem to validate his declaration. Ethical elements can be found in his work from the very start, beginning with the famous *Violence and Metaphysics*,<sup>35</sup> his polemic with Levinas, revealing nonetheless Derrida’s careful and strongly engaged interest in the issues of ethics. In the early 80s, both Derrida and a few other representatives of deconstructionist criticism (for instance, Hillis Miller) came to the conclusion<sup>36</sup> that while the ethical subtext has been inscribed

<sup>31</sup> Markowski, following Buell, distinguishes six separate tendencies: a renewal of a critical tradition based on moral reflection (Arnold, Leavis), ethical orientation in contemporary philosophy (Nussbaum, Rorty), the influence of Foucault and his reflection on the problem of auto-creation, Derrida’s discussion with Levinas, expansion of colonial research and the growing professionalization of scientific research with the resulting reformulations of ethics.

<sup>32</sup> Mapp, N. “Deconstruction.” *Encyclopedia of Literature and Criticism*. Coyle M., Garside P., Kelsall M. and Peck, J. (eds.) London: 1991. 753

<sup>33</sup> Conversation in “Ogród Sztuk.”

<sup>34</sup> The ethical phase was indeed the final phase of the “classical Yale school” and it launched the ethical-political model of literary studies in America. One has to agree, though, that while the ethical element indeed came to the forefront in their writing only at the very end, it had been inscribed in the subtext of their activities almost from the very beginning. (More on this in: Burzyńska, A. *Krajobraz po dekonstrukcji*. (Part I) *Ruch literacki*. 1995. Vol. 1.

<sup>35</sup> First published in 1964.

<sup>36</sup> Perhaps influenced by debate on Heidegger and de Man accused of collaboration

in their work from the very beginning, it has not always been clearly visible and not to everyone.<sup>37</sup> Despite numerous auto-commentaries made by Derrida and his Yale students, deconstruction could hardly be seen as an intervention directed against institutional knowledge and all varieties of intellectual monopolism, against marginalization of variously defined minorities. Bringing all those questions to the surface was not as much deconstruction's response to the demands of the ever clearer tendencies in American literary studies, as it was an inspiration for those tendencies and a premise for a thorough re-orientation of its model.

Naturally, the ethical issues became most clearly visible in Derrida's writing whose later period of activity – especially everything he wrote on the “other,” responsibility, friendship, gift, hospitality, death and religion<sup>38</sup> – was not characterized by the domination of ethics but rather exclusively devoted to it. And it was characterized by very clear determination. Considering that Derrida's early (strategic) deconstruction (from the period between 1966 and 1974) focused (among others) on critical analysis of the metaphysical basis underlying theory of interpretation (revision of onto-hermeneutics) and that it was precisely the deconstructive practices that questioned the validity of the majority of traditional claims made by theory of interpretation, and that a great part of Derrida's work was a result of a deep disappointment in the traditional models of interpretation,<sup>39</sup> the results of his critical analyses had to be practical. And such they were, both taking form of concrete reading practices that did not attempt (as Derrida himself would say) to conquer the reading texts at all cost, and in the formulated beliefs (*ex post*) on reading resulting in a unique ethic of reading – a project of quantitatively modest output but also one that was thoroughly thought through.<sup>40</sup>

Derrida's deconstruction does not propose traditionally understood ethics, deconstructing it, in fact. However, a certain understanding of ethics, something “arch-ethical” is inasmuch its source as one of its most important results. Ethics is practically the core of deconstruction and deconstruction enables the new thinking of ethical issues. Derrida's ethics is a kind of ethical experience (more on this later), one that *happens* in a particular act of reading rather than *is* in it. Responsibility – not as much a category as a basic requirement of ethics preceding the text itself (just as in Levinas's thought it preceded ontology) – means a contextual position-

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with the Nazis.

<sup>37</sup> More on this in: Burzyńska, A. *Krajobraz...* Parts I and II.

<sup>38</sup> Since this essay is meant to be an overview, I do not analyze those problems in further detail. Among the newest Polish publications on the subject, see: Gutorow, J. *Na kresach człowieka. Sześć esejów o dekonstrukcji*. Opole: 2001 and Markowski, M. P. “Dekonstrukcja i religia.” *Res Publica Nova*. 2001 Vol. 10.

<sup>39</sup> “No model of reading seems to me at the moment ready to measure up to this text – which I would like to read as a *text* not as a document.” Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology*. JHU Press. 149. Transl. to Polish by B. Banasiak. Warszawa: 1999.

<sup>40</sup> See for instance: “This Strange Institution Called Literature.” Translated to Polish by M. P. Markowski. *Literatura na Świecie*. 1998 Vol. 11-12; *Dekonstrukcja w badaniach literackich*. Nycz, R. (ed.) Gdańsk: 2000.

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

ing and authentic engagement of the reader.<sup>41</sup> If there is a clear connection between Derrida's earliest practices and the last, in his thought there are also clear traces of those inspirations that have proven decisive for his ethical views and that connect Derrida's philosophical initiation with his mature works. I am speaking here mostly of the connection between Derrida's philosophy and Levinas' thought, discussed by Lawrence Buell who believes it to be the most significant embodiment of the ethical turn in the post-structuralist humanities. Derrida himself (in his final remarks) stated simply that Levinas's thought woke us all up.<sup>42</sup> Around the time of *Violence and Metaphysics*, Derrida was interested in the very strategy of questioning the metaphysics (through ethics) adapted by Levinas in *Totality and Infinity*, and the trap the philosopher was caught in when "in an attempt to build his discourse he was forced to accept in it that which he tried to free himself from."<sup>43</sup> But also here one will notice something that will much later become very important for Derrida: a search for a way to move beyond metaphysics, a need for dialogue, intersubjective "grounding" of sense, endless openness to the "other" and deep respect for its otherness, responsibility of reply, necessity of abandoning language as a tool for description and turning to *ethos* etc. It was Levinas who also most astutely foresaw that ethic is more than a supplement or replacement for metaphysics, it is a necessity of thinking that will take the risk of opening itself to the unpredictable. This particular element (that I will try to return to at the end of my paper) became undoubtedly the most important one for Derrida.

## 4. Unmethodological criticism or: how to fruitfully use literature without abusing it.

how things look if we drop the demand for a theory which unifies the public and private, and are content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.

R. Rorty<sup>44</sup>

In the famous discussion of interpretation and overinterpretation which took place in Cambridge in 1990, Rorty confesses:

In other words, I distrust both the structuralist idea that knowing more about 'textual mechanisms' is essential for literary criticism and the post-structuralist idea that detecting the presence, or the subversion, of metaphysical hierarchies is essential.

<sup>41</sup> See also: Markowski, M. P. "Zwrot etyczny..." 242.

<sup>42</sup> See: Gutorow, J. "Uwagi o etyce dekonstrukcji." *Na kresach...* 58.

<sup>43</sup> Conversation in "Ogród Sztuk." <http://rcin.org.pl>

<sup>44</sup> *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*. Cambridge University Press, 1989. xv. Translated to Polish by W. J. Popowski as *Przygodność, ironia, solidarność*. Warszawa: 1996

He adds:

Reading texts is a matter of reading them in the light of other texts, people, obsessions, bits of information, or what have you, and seeing what happens... But what excites and convinces is a function of the needs and purposes of those who are being excited and convinced. So it seems to me simpler to scrap the distinction between interpreting texts and using texts.<sup>45</sup>

Rorty's proposal of unmethodological criticism – one that, as he explains elsewhere, 1) gives up on the search for “what a text ‘really’ is about” 2) has no guaranteed criteria for success 3) stops “succumbing to the old occultist urge to crack codes, to distinguish between reality and appearance” 4) as well as making the “invidious distinction between getting it right and making it useful” 5) while being passionate, invested and “inspired”<sup>46</sup> instead – was an attempt to adapt the idea of philosophical neo-pragmatism to the theory (or, rather, “theory”) of interpretation. The scarceness of the theoretical assumption noticeable in his program was entirely intentional: Rorty, first and foremost, strove to put aside theoretical instruction and programs, opening up the field of experience – the concrete practice of reading – which was to be limited by only one necessary condition, an “appetite” for literature. His other postulates, championed also by Stanley Fish, seem equally convincing – among them the postulate of “interpretative anarchism” (placing the possible “legitimizations” of interpretation in the sphere of social and cultural contexts restricted only locally, admitting only relative “objectivity” of interpretation reached via a consensus among communities, abandoning the old-fashioned idea of “interpretation,” teeming with hermeneutic superstition, for the enriching “uses” of literature). Rorty's idea reflects his concept of “weaker” rationality as “civility”<sup>47</sup> that “feels no need for a foundation more solid than reciprocal loyalty” (Science as Solidarity, 45) relying on

a set of moral virtues: tolerance, respect for the opinions of those around one, willingness to listen, reliance on persuasion rather than force... On this construction, to be rational is simply to discuss any topic – religious, literary or scientific – in a way which eschews dogmatism, defensiveness and righteous indignation. (ibid. 37)

It is almost impossible to resist the charm of Richard Rorty and his liberal utopia transferred to the field literary studies. One feels the urge to shout “yes!” upon hearing the appeal to stop viewing literary texts as if one was viewing a sample under a histologist's microscope, to let the texts evoke love or hate so that they destabilize and change our purposes – so that, for instance (as Rorty suggests), the interpreters

<sup>45</sup> *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Collini, S. (ed.) Cambridge University Press: 1992. 105-106. Translated to Polish by T. Biedroń as *Interpretacja I nadinterpretacja*. Kraków: 1996.

<sup>46</sup> Ibidem. 105-108.

<sup>47</sup> Rorty believes that the humanities (contrary to the sciences) require only this version of rationality. “Rational” in this sense means “civilized” and rather than “methodical.” See “Science as Solidarity.” *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*. Translated to Polish as part of *Obiektywność, relatywizm i prawda* by J. Marganski (Warszawa: 1999) and by A. Chmielecki for *Literatura na Świecie*, 1991 Vol. 5.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

of *Heart of Darkness* begin to *really* care about Marlow's or Kurtz's fate, or about the mysterious woman "with helmeted head and tawny cheeks."<sup>48</sup> This is how one should approach literature! For Rorty, as well as for the author of *The Life After Postmodernism*

the prospect of learning to be at ease with limited warranties, and with the responsibility for issuing them, without the false security of inherited guarantees, is promising for a livelier, more colorful, more alert and (...) more tolerant culture.<sup>49</sup>

However, it is equally difficult to ignore one of the key scenes in Christoph Ransmayr's *The Last World*, where Ovid is banished to Tomi. In Ransmayr's version of the tale, Augustus does not pass the sentence: gazing at the rhinoceros in the inner courtyard (a gift of the procurator of Sumatra) and amazed by the extraordinary animal wallowing in its bog, Augustus barely notices the informant, dismissing him with an angry wave of hand. The meaning of his annoyed gesture is misconstrued and misused, and even though the entire situation is part of Ransmayr's historical fiction created, this particular use of a sign – as we have learned from history – leads to one of the greatest personal tragedies.<sup>50</sup> The above situation shows with utmost clarity that within the language of power, the interpretation of the sign (especially its proper interpretation) is not important, what is important is how it is going to be used. The use has direct consequences. Schmidt-Dengler remarks on the brachylogy characteristic of the language of power – no one knows precisely what the sign means, its use is left to the subjects.<sup>51</sup> The interpretation of the sign blurs and disappears, what remains is its use. Naturally, one does not need literary fiction to prove that the use of the sign, split from an understanding or based on misunderstanding may have serious consequences, but a masterful literary description suggestively emphasizes the problem at stake. An accidental misuse of the sign can cause trouble, a use that is based on a misunderstanding can cost life. Pragmatic theory of using literature must thus rely on a sturdy ground of competence, craft, art of understanding. It is also equally obvious that it needs more than "unforced agreement" of an imagined, solidary community of learned humanists, devoid of conflicts, arguments and dishonesty, where use can never transform to misuse.

Consequently, ethics must be both the point of departure and the point of arrival for the pragmatic theory, something that its proponents are well aware of. This is why Rorty concludes: "the pragmatist... as a partisan of solidarity, his account of the value of cooperative human inquiry has only an ethical base, not an epistemological or metaphysical."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> All references to Rorty from *Interpretation...* 107.

<sup>49</sup> Fekete, J. *Life After...* x-xi.

<sup>50</sup> Ransmayr, Ch. *The Last World. A Novel with an Ovidian Repertory*. Grove Press: 1996.

<sup>51</sup> Schmidt-Dengler, W. "Nic nie zachowa swojej postaci." ["Keinem bleibt seine Gestalt": Christoph Ransmayrs Roman *Die letzte Welt*] Transl. from German by A. Wotkowicz in *Literatura na Świecie*. 1996 Vol. 8-9. 184.

<sup>52</sup> Rorty, R. "Science as Solidarity." 24.

The crowning achievement of the project is to be found in moral responsibility (as was in the case of deconstruction, although there it was differently justified) – one that leads to “attainment of unforced agreement with tolerant disagreement.”<sup>53</sup> And the latter formulation directs us to the final element of my inevitably short essay, an element that nonetheless needs to be emphasized. If the notion of “ethics” is used by almost all post-postmodern thinkers, one needs clarify the meaning of the term itself, as it commonly evokes rather fundamentalist associations.<sup>54</sup> The turn that we describe as ethical undoubtedly requires one more step, or – to be more precise – it is not a turn towards ethics understood traditionally or in the modern way. It is rather a “return of morality,”<sup>55</sup> of “morality uncovered” and, in fact, “morality without ethics.”<sup>56</sup>

If ethics has proven itself the most useful tool for questioning metaphysics on the way from postmodernism to post-postmodernism, morality – in the current age – has become a useful tool for questioning ethics.

## 5. Against ethics, or: the return of morality

I am against ethics.  
J.D. Caputo<sup>57</sup>

the end of “era of ethics” is the beginning of “era of  
morality”

Z Bauman<sup>58</sup>

Martin Jay was right to point to the achievement of poststructuralism (and of deconstruction in particular) in compelling us “to reflect on the costs of moral absolutism.”<sup>59</sup> Post-postmodern ethics (as well as theory) is a “weak” ethics but its “weakness” (just as in the case of theory) is not as much a weakness as it is its strength, resulting in a reduction of arbitrary imperatives and a shift towards practice, thus, towards morality.

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 41.

<sup>54</sup> The risk of fundamentalism looming behind the ethical turn was discussed by W. Kalaga in his essay on the boundaries of interpretative anarchism. “Tekst – wirtualność – interpretacja: w sprawie przybijania gwoździ.” *Teksty Drugie*. 1997 Vol. 6. 87.

<sup>55</sup> See: M. Foucault. “Return of morality.” Transl. to Polish by M. Radziwiłłowa as “Powrót do moralności. Ostatni wywiad z Michelelem Foucault (1926-1984)” in *Literatura na Świecie*. 1985 Vol. 10.

<sup>56</sup> Bauman, Z. “Dwa szkice...”

<sup>57</sup> *Against Ethics. Contributions to a Poetics of Obligations with Constant Reference to Deconstruction*. Bloomington: 1993. <http://rcin.org.pl>

<sup>58</sup> Bauman, Z. “Dwa szkice...” 83.

<sup>59</sup> In Markowski, M. P. “Zwrot etyczny...” 241

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

This perspective was outlined by Michel Foucault in his intellectual testimony in 1984, when the first signals of the ethical turn were registered.<sup>60</sup> He had already reached the end of his philosophical road whose finale was a moral project situated on the antipodes of the more or less radically understood ethics. “The search for a form of morality acceptable to everybody in the sense that everyone should submit to it” seemed “catastrophic”<sup>61</sup> to Foucault. As it was the case with Derrida or Rorty, ethics was inscribed in his thought from the very start, beginning with his focus on the “excluded,” his analyses of the ethically important relation between knowledge and power, his investigations of the mechanisms of repression and the influence of ideology on the individual. And as it was the case with two former thinkers, the ethical thought hidden between the lines of his writing was at one point brought to the surface to take form of the individualist ethics of taking “care of self,” rooted in classical practices, and, consequently, transformed into a search for individual methods of self-realization.

The current shift in the approaches to ethics is perhaps most clearly visible in Bauman’s numerous writings,<sup>62</sup> and most concisely formulated in one of the interviews: “morality never is and cannot be stable.”<sup>63</sup> Morality appears to be – Bauman writes elsewhere – a phenomenon just as contingent as other aspects of being are, and just as other aspects of being, lacking foundation, in this case, an ethical foundation.<sup>64</sup> Bauman continues to argue that contemporary morality can only take form of

<sup>60</sup> Foucault had to make an appearance in this short essay although cannot be discussed in more detail. His project, drawing on the classical tradition was clearly formulated in the essays devoted to the care of self: *History of Sexuality* Vol. 3 translated to Polish by T. Komendant as *Historia seksualności* (Warszawa: 1995); “Technologies of the Self” transl. and introduced by D. Leszczyński and L. Rasiński as “Techniki siebie.” *Filozofia, historia, polityka. Wybór pism; “Self Writing”* translated by M. P. Markowski: “Sobąpisanie.” *Powiedziane, napisane. Szaństwo i literatura*. T. Komendant (ed.) Warszawa: 1999. See also: Leszczyński D. and Rasiński L. “Wstęp.” *Filozofia, historia, polityka*. 36-39 and Veyne, P. “Ostatni Foucault i jego moralność.” [El Último Foucault y su Moral] transl. by T. Komendant. *Literatura na Świecie*. 1998 Vol. 6.

<sup>61</sup> Foucault, M. *Politics, Philosophy, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. Routledge: 1988. 254.

<sup>62</sup> *Postmodern Ethics*. Transl. by J. Bauman, J. Tokarska-Bakir: *Etyka nowoczesna*. Warszawa: 1996; “Postmodernizm, czyli nowoczesność bez złudzeń. Z prof. Baumanem rozmawia A. Chmielewski.” *Odra* 1995 Vol. 1. Bauman stresses the fact that the modern paradigm was characterized by morality being necessarily preceded by ethics, which in the result mean that “morality was a product of ethics; ethical principles were the means of production; ethical philosophy was the technology, and ethical preaching was the pragmatics of moral industry; good was its planned yield, evil its waste or substandard produce.” (“Morality without Ethics” 1995:34). Hence the resulting misconception we are taught from the earliest days that when ethics disappears, morality disappears as well, even though it is yet another theoretical fiction constructed by the traditional thought. It is a belief shared also by the post-poststructural thinkers. <http://rcin.org.pl>

<sup>63</sup> Bauman, Z. “Postmodernizm, czyli nowoczesność bez złudzeń...” 25.

<sup>64</sup> Bauman, Z. “Dwa szkice...” 51.

*ethically unfounded morality*. As a result it has to be uncontrollable and unpredictable. It creates itself and it can annul what it has created to rebuild it in a different form – all of which happens in within the act of tying and untying social bonds, all while people come together and separate, communicate and argue, accept or reject old or new bonds and loyalties.<sup>65</sup>

I am quoting Bauman *in extenso*, as it is not the first time that the observations on contemporary societies made by the author of *Legislators and Interpreters* parallel the state of literary studies, particularly the problems of interpreting literature. “Reluctance towards ethical arbitration” is increasingly common while acceptance of a “weak,” ethically uncoded morality becomes not only a necessity but a fully conscious decision, free from nostalgia and fear.

The notion that “moral autonomy means moral responsibility, non-get-riddable but also inalienable”<sup>66</sup> is familiar to deconstruction and neo-pragmatism as well. Neither Derrida and the deconstructionists, nor Rorty and the neo-pragmatists are interested in an ethical code imposed from above but rather in an ethical experience or a situation of moral choice created by the practice of reading. In his discussion of the difficult ethics of deconstruction, Bennington emphasizes that in Derrida’s thought “the non-ethical opening of ethics can be seen straightforwardly and yet intractably in the fact of reading, for example this, here, now.”<sup>67</sup> Derrida himself attempted to explain this (in a way) during his visit in Poland when, referencing Levinas, he spoke of taking responsibility which can never be programmed earlier but appears in form of an ethical experience. It is also what Rorty referred to when he talked about responsibility that cannot be imposed but is born (a distinction is also worth noting) in the moment of choice “between two hypotheses”<sup>68</sup> and is a responsibility before oneself and not anything else.

If we agree with Rorty’s evaluation, voiced in *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, that modern theory failed to deliver effective methods of interpretation, and that it did not manage to solve the ever-returning problem of boundaries and possibilities of interpretation, there can be also no doubt that contemporary ethics also fails to provide ready recipes, or limiting and yet comfortable principles. This is where Bauman’s diagnosis, although not it does not refer to the act of reading literature, proves highly adequate, as do so many others:

After the disappearance of the ethical smoke screen that had been covering the real condition of moral man, we can finally face the “naked truth” as it emerges from experience... and from the dilemmas confronted by the moral self in all their stark, philosophically untamed and probably unavoidable ambivalence.<sup>69</sup>

Those who write on the current changes in humanities believe the ethical turn to have brought not only the “opening of ethics” to morality, as stressed by Benning-

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 52.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 75.

<sup>67</sup> Bennington, D. *Interrupting Derrida*. London: 2000. 35.

<sup>68</sup> Rorty, “Science...” 35.

<sup>69</sup> Bauman, Z. “Dwa szkice...” 84.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

ton, but also an actual opening of literary studies to the unpredictable character of the meeting with literature and to the risk inscribed in every act of reading. It is, perhaps, an opening to the unpredictable, even unimaginable, future of the discipline, although, as Wayne C. Booth rightly argues in *The Company We Keep*, ethical criticism remains undoubtedly one of the most difficult modes of criticism that we have come to know.

*Translation: Anna Warso*