

Poetics

Through the Prism of Cultural Studies

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Reading it today, there's something quaint about the prediction made by eminent scholar and theoretist of literature Michał Głowiński, in a text written in the 1980s, that the dichotomy between internal and external methodologies inherited from the reaction against Positivism would eventually be abandoned, yielding to the advent of a new era in literary studies, thanks to the application of an integral method based on a communicative conception of the work of literature.¹ Reality has not been kind to what then appeared to be well-grounded hopes for a spectacular culmination of the best and undoubtedly the most original period in the history of Polish literary theory. A paradigm change did take place, but it took a form completely different from what our exponents of communications theory expected.

The post-structuralist deconstructionist revolt that occurred in Polish literary studies in the 1990s led to a conceptual dismantling of modern literary theory and a de facto break in the evolutionary continuity of Polish thought relating to literary theory, setting the stage for the later turn that truly, profoundly reshaped both the discipline and the discourse of literary scholarship. From today's perspective, that revolt looks in many ways like an epistemological drama, displaced in time, that overlooked the specific social, political and historical aspects of the Polish humanist tradition, as well as the particular function of literature and Polish Studies in cultural production and identity formation, in both a historical and a theoretical context.² A process that developed in the world of Western literary scholarship through systematic, intensive, critical reflection over the course of nearly a quarter century amounted in Poland to an intensified effort by translators and editors, focused on the presentation and

¹ See M. Głowiński, "Od metod zewnętrznych i wewnętrznych do komunikacji literackiej" (From External and Internal Methods to Literary Communication) in: Głowiński, *Prace wybrane* (Selected Works), vol. 3, *Dzieło wobec odbiorcy. Szkice z komunikacji literackiej* (The Work with Respect to the Receiver. Sketches from Literary Communication), Kraków 1998, pp. 7-23.

² There has yet to be written a (cultural) history of Polish literary theory that would take into account not only the complex results for intellectual life of the accelerated assimilation of Western theory, but also the influence of specific local historical, political and social factors on the form and effects of the reception of ideas and concepts developed in different cultural conditions. See the interesting approach to this problem in its wider politico-cultural context in Galin Tihanov's article "Why Did Modern Literary Theory Originate in Central and Eastern Europe? And Why Is It Now Dead?" (*Teksty Drugie* 2007, *Common Knowledge* 2004, 10/1, pp. 61-81 4).

popularization of theoretical foundations, usually without a clear demonstration of their interpretative application and rarely leading to any attempt at original, critical development of the concepts involved. The applicability of deconstructionist tools to the study of Polish literature turned out to be so limited that Janusz Sławiński in the mid-1990s was able to state with satisfaction and irony the real sense of dissonance between apocalyptic proclamations, on the one hand, and everyday literary scholarly practice on the other, though the examples he gave of such practices, which even then sounded disturbingly anachronistic³ and gave rise to the conjecture that the picture they painted of academic Polonists' conscientious sedulity, while believed by Sławiński to be a positive one, resulted more from routine and conservative reluctance toward change of any kind than a rational desire to protect the status of the discipline.

Before this process of accelerated assimilation of the lessons of post-structuralism and deconstruction could reach its conclusion, there began an equally rapid assimilation of theoretical currents associated with the cultural turn. These two great methodological upheavals, which in the West took place over several decades, in Poland happened to some degree parallel with one another, with the result that it was difficult to clearly grasp the peculiar individual effects that each of them had on literary studies. Simply put, the change that swept over literary scholarship during the period of post-structuralism and deconstructionism's expansion represented primarily a departure from the understanding of literary theory as an independent and homogenous entity, a science focused on determining general principles of the literary work's construction and creation and the specific nature of its linguistic structure, that is, everything that had been previously defined under the institutional rubric of literature. Scholars' interest turned toward the literary text, which at the same time was deprived of its objective status, in a putative effort to return it to its separate position by undermining the theoretical framing and metaphysical foundations that had long governed interpretation and the relations between scholar and text. Modern literary theory, in its most orthodox, scientific version, relying on a formalized and technicalized model of the poetics of language poetics through the prism of linguistics oriented for the most part, if not entirely, on the description and analysis of literature in its systemic dimension, came under attack. Modern theory had maintained a haughty indifference toward the singularity or historicity of the literary text, and equally toward individual acts of textual interpretation, while also imposing cognitive limitations and uniform procedures on the latter.

In practice, however, deconstruction, while it undermined quite nearly all the previous axioms of modern literary theory, did not violate the inherent textual paradigm of structuralism, which upheld a concern with linguistic mechanisms of meaning creation. It simply transferred the emphasis to those properties of the text that render impossible the attribution

³ Most literary scholars, Sławiński wrote, move on without further hesitation toward normal career work whose effect is to support and affirm their existence: after all, they must write that article that was commissioned on the necessity of a fifth layer in the Ingarden model of the literary work, explain to students who the real addressee of Słowacki's *Rozłączenie* (Separation) is, review a doctoral dissertation on personal narration in the stories of Żeromski, write a recommendation that a young author's book on the autobiographical secrets of Berent's writings be published... When one looks at the current field of literary studies from the angle of its ordinary tasks, it can seem a singularly stable institution—immunized against the onslaught from all sides of revolutions, upheavals, acts of devastation or nihilistic attacks" (J. Sławiński, "Miejsce interpretacji" (The place of interpretation), in: Sławiński, *Miejsce interpretacji* (The Place of Interpretation), Gdańsk 2006, pp. 85-86).

to it of a final, integral meaning and keep us enmeshed within the internal contradictions and aporias that accompany its explication. All of which fed the hope that once the critical and theoretical impulse represented chiefly by the deconstruction school at Yale had lost its momentum, literary scholarship could retain its separate disciplinary identity, based on the distinctive character of its subject and methodology.⁴

Post-structuralism and deconstruction undermined the basic beliefs to which modern literary theory swore allegiance, but did not offer a real alternative proposal for how to study literature that could be directly applied to the practice of reading. The absence of new, original readings and interpretations inspired by the theoretical underpinnings of deconstruction allowed proclamations of a “crisis in the discipline” to be taken with a grain of salt and opposed with interpretative and critical practice that continued to rely on traditional categories of literary scholarship and the traditional understanding of what scholars and critics do. Actual change occurred only with the anthropologico-cultural turn, which removed the previous conception of texts and textuality and introduced a new, cultural definition of the subject of literary studies. We must therefore agree with Galin Tihanov, who ties the development of literary theory as a separate scholarly discipline not to post-structuralism, but to Wolfgang Iser’s later turn toward “literary anthropology.”⁵ The place of literary theory was then taken by general cultural theory, and the textual world of literature was plunged into a cultural universe in which the prototypical character of works of literature has been relegated, it would seem, to mere wishful thinking on the part of literature scholars attempting to fight their way with their scholarly apparatus to the first ranks of scholars comprising the avant-garde of contemporary cultural studies. Literature can of course be recognized as a prototypical subject, but with the recognition at the same time that equal value may emerge from the study of “a small, completely nondescript portion of all of the texts functioning in a culture and deformed by that culture.”⁶

In that context, what does the status of the theory of literature and poetics look like today, in a culturally-oriented field of literary studies? In order to be able to give even a provisional answer to the question, it’s essential to remember that the status of these disciplines is directly dependent on the status of the subject of literary studies itself. That subject is certainly no longer literature as traditionally understood, conceived as an individual sphere of reference, distinguished on the basis of certain particular properties assigned to a certain category of texts and determined by their literariness. One may, as Michał Paweł Markowski would have it, see this separation of this specific subject and subsequent creation of specific analytical and descriptive methods as the original sin of literary studies, the “absolutist codification

⁴ Peter Brooks, describing the reigning atmosphere in the literature departments of American universities in the mid-1980s, recalled among other things a fairly widespread expectation of more advanced and critical textual studies, inspired by post-structural analyses, but continuing to focus on an analysis of generalized rules of meaning creation in literary texts. (See P. Brooks, “Aesthetics and Ideology: What Happened to Poetics?” in *Critical Inquiry*, 20/3, p. 509).

⁵ G. Tihanov, op. cit., p. 131.

⁶ W. Bolecki, “Pytania o przedmiot literaturoznawstwa” (Questions About the Subject of Literary Studies), in: *Polonistyka w przebudowie* (Polish Studies in Transition), vol. 1, ed. M. Czermińska et al, Kraków 2005, p. 7.

of one language of description, the fetishization of one type of discourse,”⁷ but it cannot be denied that the discipline owes both its history and its most spectacular accomplishments to precisely such thorough reflection on its own nature, character and foundations. It should also be remembered that those aspirations represented an ongoing process, whose historical dimension allows us today to perceive in the history of modern literary theory the critical impulse for the entire body of twentieth-century literary studies – for literary history as well, interwoven with theory in a permanent dialectical tangle, tirelessly problematizing and questioning the foundations and axioms of the discipline to which it gave birth.

If literary theory today has become merely the history of twentieth-century doctrines of the study of literature, that is mainly because its subject, the literary work or the phenomenon of literature broadly defined, set aside based on certain historically variable, provisional and always tentative but nonetheless at least locally and temporarily binding criteria, has a purely historical status now, belonging to an irreversibly closed-off era whose beginning is marked by the Russian formalist school and whose end, at least in Poland, is marked by the sociologically oriented theory of literary communication, chronologically the last stage of the structuralist approach, aimed at analyzing this specific subject, characterized by a particular form of linguistic organization. This does not mean, however, that literary theory is now of interest only to antique collectors. On the contrary, as a separate area of Polish Studies it is indispensable to that field’s continued existence, since only theory provides the tools that allow a convincing argument to be made on behalf of the separate and specific nature of literature as a field of study that, aside from its culturally and historically conditioned nature, can rightfully aspire to being privileged in certain aspects (both aesthetic and cognitive), above all, other kinds of products of man’s cultural activity (if nothing else, by virtue of its formal construction, demanding a certain mode of reception).⁸

Of course literary theory, through the act of binding its subject to a certain specific language of presentation, is to a corresponding extent involved in describing that subject and thereby creating or inventing it. The pedagogical uses of teaching the history of twentieth-century literary theory do not stem from an insistence on the universal (and therefore ahistorical) truth, adequacy, or exclusivity of this language, but rather from showing its historical nature, restoring to the discipline its (to a great extent overlooked) historical and simultaneously constructivist dimension. This is all the more relevant in view of the fact that the cultural-anthropological reorientation of literary scholarship has in practice led, despite its declared premises, to the narrowing and flattening of historical perspectives on the phenomena under analysis.⁹

⁷ M.P. Markowski, *Polityka wrażliwości. Wprowadzenie do humanistyki* (The Politics of Sensitivity. Introduction to the Humanities), Kraków 2013, p. 209.

⁸ Whether we need to preserve this identity (of Polish Studies and its subject of study) is a different question, and the answer is far from obvious. Perhaps Polish Studies should give up the status of a national philology and become an integral part of literary studies, while the latter should gradually be transformed into a sub-discipline of cultural studies?

⁹ Włodzimierz Bolecki takes a similar position on this issue, observing that the results of the cultural turn in literary scholarship “are marked in terms of methodology by... a radical break with historicism, and in terms of the field of literary scholarship by a break with the history of literature. Both have the effect of rejecting historicity as an integral feature of all social and cultural phenomena and as an elementary cognitive horizon of all cognitive acts in the humanities”(W. Bolecki, op. cit., p. 7).

If modern literary theory today gives the impression of a discipline deprived not only of a future, but also of practical meaning for culturally oriented literary scholarship, poetics would seem to occupy a relatively safe place, as is demonstrated not only by the popularity of the concept, currently used in the humanities in innovative and often controversial juxtapositions (“poetics of gender,” “poetics of experience,” “somatopoetics,” “geopoetics”) but also by the time-tested practical utility of the tools it has developed, serving not only the analysis but also the interpretation of all different kinds of texts (the usefulness of poetological categories in various spheres of the humanities is confirmed by, for example, the career enjoyed by the category of narration in contemporary historical research). Poetics thus understood, oriented toward a pragmatic interpretative and critical approach, is not, needless to say, a “general theory” revealing universal methods of creating meaning in a literary work, but rather a container of practical tools for gauging the functions of various textual and discursive practices. The relations between literary theory, poetics, interpretation theory and interpretation itself are complex in character and, in my view, cannot be reduced as was recently suggested by Michał Paweł Markowski to an insurmountable antagonism between affirmative, life-giving interpretation and sterile theory, always finally characterized as “analytic poetics” or “philosophical interpretation theory.”¹⁰

The division proposed by Markowski nonetheless seems apposite. Modern literary theory, in spite of its many different schools and scholarly traditions, can in fact be divided into two fundamental camps. The first one, in which we should place all formal-structural currents (from the Russian Formalists through Structuralism to the French narratological school), but also Ingarden’s phenomenological theory of the construction of the literary work, undertook the search for general, systemic rules for the creation and functioning of the literary utterance, a “grammar of literature,” encompassing a formalized model of poetics as well. The second consists of those theoretical schools which centered their concerns on the interpretation of the literary text, attempting to develop some version of a “theory of interpretation,” and thus a type of general guiding principles enabling proper interpretation or, more often, a theoretical model for the act of interpretation itself. Here we would include all hermeneutical currents (including, for example, psychoanalytical readings), the German-Swiss interpretation school, various reader-reception and response theories, and, at least up to a point, deconstruction. Among them there would also be a place for those currents, such as American New Criticism or the Polish Structuralist school, that emerged from the traditions of formal analysis, but devoted great attention to interpretations of particular texts, by no means treating them merely as manifestations of theoretical concepts.

The opposition of poetics as the science of general, systematic rules of the construction and functioning of the literary utterance to interpretation as a subjective practice focused on the unitary dimension of the literary work and the singularity of its reading, though possessing a long and well-established tradition, is nonetheless usually based on a rigid, scientific understanding of poetics, what in fact amounts, in Anna Burzyńska’s phrase, to “an agglomeration of the most radical formulations of 1960s structuralist theoreticians,” a product “rather of

¹⁰M.P. Markowski, “Interpretacja i literatura” (Interpretation and Literature), *Teksty Drugie* (Alternate Texts) 2001, 5, p. 51.

selective reading, than of factual analysis of its varied versions.”¹¹ In practice within the field of literary studies, the distinct methods and goals of poetics and interpretation have not on the whole led to their separation or mutual exclusivity, but rather to a search for ways to overcome the gaps between singularity and generality.¹² Dogmatically maintaining this dichotomy now seems an anachronism, carrying associations with, on the one hand, the position of structuralist linguistic poetics’ most orthodox adherents,¹³ and, on the other hand, the position of those who represent an anti-theoretical solution, equally radical and disunited in their views.¹⁴

Even Tzvetan Todorov in his *Poetics*, justifiably considered one of the most complete presentations of formalized Structuralist poetics, being far from any kind of revisionism in its treatment of basic Structuralist assumptions, expressed the complementarity of these two types of cognitive activity, referring to their “intimate interpenetration” as the basis of literary studies:

The relation between poetics and interpretation is one of complementarity par excellence. A theoretical reflection upon poetics that is not sustained by observation of existing works always turns out to be sterile and invalid. [...] Interpretation both precedes and follows poetics: the notions of poetics are produced according to the necessities of concrete analysis, which in turn may advance only by using the instruments elaborated by doctrine. Neither of the two activities takes precedence over the other: both are “secondary.” This intimate interpenetration [...] often makes the work of criticism an incessant oscillation between poetics and interpretation [...].¹⁵

Todorov clearly emphasizes that it is possible to differentiate the purposes and methods of poetics and interpretation, and even desirable to do so at the level of abstraction; but where the reading practice of literary studies, and thus interaction with actual literary texts, is involved, what takes place is an “incessant oscillation between poetics and interpretation,” which we recognize as the essence of “literary studies.” Janusz Sławiński tended, as we know, to see the poetic analysis of a literary work as an introductory phase, leading into its interpretation (though he made no secret of the fact that the two cognitive procedures are governed by different laws and oriented toward different goals, so that there is no natural or smooth transition between them).¹⁶ Paul Ricoeur took a similar view of the connection between structural analysis and interpretation. In the work of Todorov, this mutual relationship takes on an intriguing form, suggesting an oscillation without a clear beginning or result, a circular or

¹¹A. Burzyńska, “Poetyka po strukturalizmie” (Poetics after Structuralism), in: Burzyńska, *Anty-teoria literatury* (Anti-Theory of Literature), Kraków 2006, p. 381, footnote 9.

¹²See R. Seamons, “Poetics Against Itself. On the Self-Destruction of Modern Scientific Criticism,” *PMLA* 1989, 3, p. 303.

¹³Maria Renata Mayenowa enunciated this position in the mid-1980s in her extended afterword to Todorov’s *Introduction to Poetics*, in which she polemicizes with the French scholar by unequivocally declaring that “these two positions [poetics and interpretation – T.K.] are utterly irreconcilable and cannot create two complementary modes of cognitive activity,” and that she does not consider “conciliationist” attempts to join them possible or necessary (M. R. Mayenowa, *O perspektywie poetyki inaczej* (A Different View of the Perspective of Poetics), in: T. Todorov, *Poetyka* (Poetics), trans. S. Cichowicz, Warszawa 1984, p. 119).

¹⁴The restrictiveness and harmfulness of all theory, including poetics, understood as a general theory of the construction of the literary work, is argued by, among others, Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels in “Against Theory”, *Critical Inquiry* 1982, 8/4, pp. 723-742.

¹⁵T. Todorov, *Introduction to Poetics*, Minneapolis 1984, pp. 7-8.

¹⁶Andrzej Szahaj criticizes the methodological dualism built into this approach. See Szahaj, “Sławiński o interpretacji. Analiza krytyczna” (Sławiński on Interpretation. A Critical Analysis), *Teksty Drugie* 2013, 5.

rather pendular movement, demanding constant verification of the effects of interpretation against the general linguistic rules of meaning construction— both those peculiar to literature in its narrow institutional dimension (genre, style, intertexts), and those that we can educe from the general semiotic rules governing the creation of meaningful utterances, within which the language of the literary work is treated as one type of code, subject to the general principles of understanding that characterize semiotics as the study of signs. The possibility of discerning general rules of organization for the literary work emerges, however, from the “observation of existing works.”¹⁷ It is they, in their role as object of scholarly literary analysis, that define the actual state and condition of poetics, which retains its universality, but simultaneously must continually perfect and improve its tools, adapting them to changing needs, defined by new literary works that demand new or at least modified descriptive implements.

The problem is that contemporary “literary studies practice,” joining in itself these two “positions” of poetics and interpretation, is no longer conditioned by its traditional subject, but is revealed to be a certain specific type of procedure, that can be adapted with varying degrees of success – to all types of texts, including those lacking what at a given moment are the properties assigned to historical literary texts.¹⁸ The results of this “literary” procedure of analysis and interpretation, which joins textual inquiry to an analysis of the text’s formal properties that determine its communicative function, can and often do lead to an expansion of the array of tools and operative concepts of poetics itself. An increase in the stock of available instruments gives rise to the possibility of expanding the competencies and subject field of poetics. That is how the mutual transformation takes place, in which poetics previously restricted to the study of “literariness” as a particular function of language defining the literary work loses its autonomous, “neutral,” non-culturally-conditioned dimension and acquires its cultural dimension, thanks to the introduction of discourses other than the literary into its sphere of inspiration, which in turn grow conscious of their textual character thanks to the spectacular expansion of categories and concepts developed by poetics. Since the subject field of poetics is no longer the field of literature, literature becomes by necessity just another form of meaningful expression, by no means a privileged one, forced to fight for its position and deprived of the main weapon that it was guaranteed by traditional formal-structuralist poetics and literary theory, the conviction of its particular status and specific features. Now, in fighting for its prestige, literature must typically resort to pragmatic and utilitarian arguments, proving its usefulness toward achieving various goals which are doubtless important but hardly specific to it, e.g., existential, social, political or emancipatory ones¹⁹ while its aesthetic aspect, that “purposeless purpose” which once constituted the essence of the work of

¹⁷ T. Todorov, op. cit., p. 7.

¹⁸ On the need to develop a pluralistic poetics, understood as particular lexicons of analytical terms adapted to the needs of new critical and theoretical languages, see Adam F. Kola, “Języki teorii – języki poetyki. O zmianie paradygmatu, która wciąż czeka na dopełnienie” (Languages of Theory, Languages of Poetics. On the Paradigm Shift Still Waiting for Completion), *Tekstualia* 2013, 4, pp. 93-104.

¹⁹ The same is true of literary scholarship that, in overcoming the particular theoretical “instrumentation,” methodology and descriptive poetics created through the analysis interpretation of literary texts, can only be used for extra-aesthetic purposes, external in some way or other to literature: these can be existential, as in Michał Paweł Markowski’s project of “humanistic sensitivity”, in which the interpretation of literature serves the renewal of our relationships with the world and other people, or political, as in Jan Sowa’s notes, in his critique of Markowski’s postulates in a review of his book, toward an “emancipatory humanities,” in which interpretation is perceived as primarily a tool of struggle for social justice.

art in general, has been almost completely marginalized. That marginalization of the aesthetic dimension of the literary work is a natural by-product of the marginalization of classical poetics, since there is no way to speak of aesthetic or artistic properties and the virtues of a literary work without reference to its formal features linguistic, stylistic, or genre conventions grasped in historical perspective against the background of literary tradition: the history of change and evolution that occurs within and creates tradition. It should be remembered that the spectacular expansion of poetics to other fields of the humanities than that of literary studies has been accompanied by a simultaneous devaluation of the formalist-structuralist model of poetics, which served toward a generalized, systematic description of the literary work, and a transformation of its traditional subject of inquiry, thus also a departure from the study of literary texts and a turn toward broadly understood “discursive” cultural practices, whether social, political, or ideological.

In contemporary culturally-oriented literary scholarship, we no longer read about the reflections of “literary theory,” but rather of “cultural theory,” in whose sphere categories taken from the arsenal of classical poetics, such as narration, genre, or fiction, emerge side by side on equal terms with concepts from anthropology, ethnography or cultural studies, such as ethnicity, cultural gender, or the body. There should be nothing peculiar about this, given that in twentieth-century literary theory the assimilation of categories, concepts or whole methodologies was anything but exceptional: it should suffice to mention the inspiration provided by psychoanalysis, or Marxist and mythographic criticism, or the sociology of literature.²⁰ In each case, however, these borrowings were meant to enhance (by providing greater depth and versatility) the understanding of the specific problems of this separate sphere of research whose subject was works of literature. The current metamorphosis, however, represents a fundamental transformation not only of literary theory, but also of its subject, by means of its displacement from the relatively independent sphere of linguistic productions, distinguished based on (always insufficient, arguable and temporary) formal and semantic properties toward the considerably less well-defined field of culture, encompassing in addition to literature other forms of human creative and signifying (semasiological) activity and reaching further toward the even wider sphere of human experience as the primary category of all forms (discursive and non-discursive, rational and affective, conscious and unconscious) of communication between people.

The displacement of the works of literary culture into such a broadly defined sphere deprives them of the status of a separate subject of the study of literature, one susceptible to even the most provisional definition, and transforms it into a subject of cultural studies. Starting from

²⁰In fact, all modern literary theory is really, in its most influential formalist-structuralist form, based on linguistic reflection. It was from linguistics that theory took its line of basic concepts and methods of studying a literary work. The first modern literary scholars were often above all specialists in linguistics, so that we can with only slight exaggeration state that the independent field of literature was created and set apart as a result of borrowings from linguistics, and that the very autonomy of modern literary theory is inescapably indebted to a separate discipline, whose kinship is far from obvious and results from a particular conception, not in any way predestined, of the literary work as an intentional linguistic production governed by particular principles of structural and semantic organization. The adoption of the hermeneutic perspective, on the other hand, does not require the use of linguistics-based tools, and therefore puts in question the notion of a fundamental intimate relationship between the two disciplines, which to the formalist-structuralist perspective seems obvious.

that point, all attempts at an essentialist definition of one's subject and its nature by means of literary studies become obsolete. They are replaced by narrowly operational definitions, typical of cultural studies relying on a pragmatic approach that places the literary work and its analysis in practical categories (chiefly existential-anthropological) as a unique kind of "practice of understanding" or wide-ranging definitions which strip literature of its specificity and render it one of many types of human cultural activity, by no means a privileged one, and often treat it instrumentally and with considerable oversimplification. Awareness of the fundamental impossibility of separating the subject of knowledge from the act of knowledge also means that the center of attention is no longer given to the properties of the object of knowledge itself (an ontological problem), nor to the intersubjective procedures of its cognition (an epistemological problem), but our ways of knowing and experiencing it, which are both ways of shaping/forming that object and, reflexively, of shaping/forming ourselves (an existential problem). This participatory formulation of subject-object relations, typical for pragmatic, existential hermeneutics, is actually characteristic of other areas of the humanities as well: in anthropologico-cultural scholarship one sees a change from "participatory observation," typical for traditional, "ethnographic" anthropology, to "thick description" as a specific method for postmodern, "literary" anthropology, in which the object of a work's description is not so much revealed as constructed. In the study of history, a similar transition has taken place, from the objective understanding of history as a collection of objective facts in need of reconstruction and impartial exhibition to a conception of history as a narrative subordinated to the tropological rules of narration and always primarily produced by the story-teller.

In this context, it becomes difficult to talk about poetics "capturing" new spheres of knowledge or assimilating categories and concepts proper to other areas of reflection in the humanities, since firm boundaries separating particular disciplines from each other are being obliterated, together with the more basic boundary separating the object of scholarly study from the scholar, which enabled the development of methodological foundations for scholarship and of their respective regulatory and verificatory procedures.²¹ In a field thus reorganized, the insistence on being able to maintain some kind of clear-cut methodological and conceptual identity, allowing for the relative specificity and separate status for the study of literature, seems not sufficiently to take into account the transformations that have resulted from the deterioration of such disciplinary and epistemological distinctions. Even if one managed, in the proclamatory mode, at the price of considerable conceptual effort, to save this relative specificity, it seems decidedly too paltry to render possible the *de facto* survival of the study of literature as a separate discipline. On the other hand, the price that must be paid for the use, in other fields and for other purposes than originally intended, the categories and concepts developed by poetics and literary theory for the study of literary texts (narration, genre, fiction) is the gradual loss of their "identity," their original, peculiar meaning and function.

In my view, a symptomatic and particularly telling example of this process of "loss of identity" is the new "cultural," extremely broad understanding of poetics itself, which today signifies

²¹It is not an accident that it is difficult to speak clearly and precisely about a cultural studies methodology, since cultural studies are characterized rather by programmatic atheoreticity and rather free methodological syncretism (certain individual cases, such as Mieke Bal's proposal, featuring a remarkably systematic approach and highly developed theoretical consciousness, are rare exceptions that confirm rather than disproving the rule).

the description and analysis not only of signifying discursive practices, but of any human activity in which some general, to some extent repeatable rules of semiotic organization, apparent in the categories of purpose, regularity, and internal structure, can be perceived. This is leading toward such a profound transformation of the foundational semantics of this concept that it is becoming detached from its original semantic field, laying out an entirely new sphere of inquiry as well as new rules for the use of the tools of poetics themselves, i.e., through their investment with a “practical,” inventive and causative dimension at the expense of the traditional descriptive and systematizing function. I have nothing against measures of this type. I perceive and fully appreciate the benefits they have to offer, but I do not feel that they will enhance the position of literary studies, since the belief in the prototypical nature of literary phenomena, as model examples for new adaptations –outside the realm of autonomously defined literariness – proven in application to literary concepts and categories, seems to me an illusion maintained by literary studies scholars, to whom, because of their professional, narrowly specialized education, attained in the last days of traditional Polish Studies, literature itself represents the natural sphere of exemplification and objective reference. For a scholar whose orientation is not centered on literature, prototypical materials will be something other than literary works, for example, audiovisual culture, film, everyday life, microsociological phenomena, etc., which may have the result (not difficult to imagine) that in their formulation, the “poetics of experience” or “somapoetics” will dispense with literature entirely, or will relegate it to a marginal position, in other words, the position occupied in literature-centered cultural poetics by film, theater, the visual arts, new media, spatial architecture, or the history of ordinary life.

If we do agree, however, that it is still worth defending the specificity and separate status of literary studies in our day (including, and perhaps especially, culturally oriented literary studies), then their disciplinary identity demands that we uphold not so much the broad, cultural understanding of poetics as the narrow, specialized analytical skills that are necessary for the survival of the unique form of reading that literary reading represents, conceived as hermeneutic activity, directed toward the most versatile possible understanding of the text, distinguished from all other hermeneutic acts by its use of the specific tools provided by traditional theoretical and descriptive poetics, slowing down the process of interpretation, taking away its immediate, utilitarian character and bringing to mind the now too often neglected aesthetic dimension, without which no concept of culture and no concept of the study of culture can convincingly or gratifyingly take shape.