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On reading and literariness: The (im)possibility of literary theory

Barbara Dolenc

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Zagreb

Doctoral Studies in Literature, Performing Arts, Film and Culture

PhD student

barbaradolenc@hotmail.com

This paper analyses how readings of literary texts by Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze can contribute to the research of literariness in the field of literary theory. Furthermore, the paper elaborates how such radical changes in the understanding of literariness simultaneously affect the (im)possibility of literary theory. In other words, an attempt will be made to argue that it is possible to re-evaluate the objectives and the purpose of a theoretical approach to a literary text based on the legacy of the two philosophers.

Key words: event, literature, literariness, reading, theory

Is it nowadays, in the context of literary scholarships, still necessary to read works by Jacques Derrida and Gilles Deleuze from the perspective of a literary theory, given that the theory has been *institutionalized*? Is there a need for re-evaluation of the institutionalized legacy of both authors or better to rephrase the question: why should literary theory read philosophical works again in order to study literature? What are the objectives and the purpose of the literary theory? Is it possible to discuss literary theory in the first place given the stiff competition and dynamic shifts among the ruling theories? Should literary theory simply be rejected as unsustainable project, because even “literary theories cannot seem to agree” on the question: what is literature, “neither is there a theory that is convincingly more powerful than others” (Solar 2014: 30)?¹ However, despite the discomfort and the disagreement, which signal that the discussion is much needed, it seems that there is a tacit consensus on the existence of literary texts or the *research subject*, as the condition of possibility for justifying the disciplinary subsistence of literary “institution” (Derrida 1992b: 36). Therefore, if it is uncertain

¹ The quote from the book *Književnost: vrlo kratak uvod u njezinu teoriju, povijest i kritiku* (Solar 2014: 30) is translated into English by the author of this paper.

what is defining the essence of literature, at least it is certain that there are writing and reading practices. So, if literary texts are studied, then there is something because of and by what these texts are being read as literary texts – it is literariness.

In this sense, the concept was presented by Roman Jakobson in his early paper “The Newest Russian Poetry: V. Xlebnikov”, where he stated that “the subject of literary scholarship is not literature but literariness, that is, that which makes of a given work a work of literature” (1997: 179). The genealogy of the concept of literariness in the context of literary theory is, of course, complex, and it is tightly connected, among others, to the tradition of the Russian formalism, structuralism and linguistics. Furthermore, it is related to analysing the technique of creating literary work, by taking into account “the autonomy of the aesthetic function” (Jakobson 1987: 378) as differentiating characteristic of art in society but, at the same time, with scientific formation of the literary theory based on specific methodology, on objectiveness and terminology, as professionalized and institutionally legitimate study of literature (Juvan 2011: 125), hence isolated and different in relation to aesthetics or philosophy. Nevertheless, in the second half of the 20th century with intensive institutional, epistemological and methodological changes in science in general, the legitimacy of literary theory is put into question, especially in the context of reserving the right to study the ontology of literature. In short, effects of deconstruction affected literary theory as well. Production of literary theories was initiated, as well as the mutual competition in occupying power positions, especially dominant and institutionalized at American departments for literature, in addition to the appearance of the (interdisciplinary) cultural studies, whose interest areas also include literature. Since then, the discussions on the resistance to the theory or the end of the theory have constantly interchanged, so this too has consequently affected the dispersion of studying literariness. According to Marko Juvan, for example, studying literariness can be divided into three, equally limited, theoretical approaches: literariness as an objective characteristic of the literary text, literariness as convention and literariness as an effect based on a canon (2011: 128 - 140). Therefore, referring to works by Jonathan Culler and Paul de Man, the author concludes that inextricable problem of literariness is simultaneously “the question of the existence or dissolution of literary theory as a discipline” (Juvan 2011: 128), e.g. it indicates the crisis in the institutional literary scholarship. To rephrase, this tension proves that literary theory is still *in* deconstruction, in aporetic experience of re-evaluation. It is worth to remember that when speaking of deconstruction Derrida states that it “is inventive or it is nothing at all; it does not settle for methodical procedures” (1992a: 337), but “it opens up a passageway”, it opens up a possibility. Elaborating further on that thought, it could be said that it opens up “a *poros*” (Gasché 2007: 332), it gives a chance for an invention of a new exit out of a seemingly dead-end, aporetic condition. Instead of ignoring or simply accepting the state of paralyzing disorder in the context of literary theory (in the context where politics of literary theories precedes studying literariness, while close reading of the literary text is often neglected at the expense of demonstrating predefined assumptions about language, subject,

gender, identity, ideology, economy, culture, etc., contained *within* the text) a search for an exit is imposed. This exit would open up a discussion on further needs and possibilities for theoretical approach to literature which is not simply reduced to a choice and an application of the given methodological procedures and rules. If the *imperative* of literary theory is reading literary texts, the state of *undecidability* is a challenge to find the much-needed exit, over and over again.

As Derrida himself emphasizes in an interview published in the collection *Positions*, in one of his texts "The Double Session" he tries "to mark a certain wariness about the motif of 'literarity'" (1981a: 70), towards literariness engaged in the play between "truth" and "*mimetologism*", in the context of history of literature from Plato to Mallarmé, that is, a certain interpretation of *mimesis* (1981b: 183). In his opinion, problematic with that history is the fact that the texts are a subject to the "metaphysics of presence", the logocentrism and the "transcendent reading". As a consequence of these three factors the meaning of the text, and at the same time, the ontology of literature, is derived from the signified outside of the text. However, in the same interview, he states that the "decisive progress" was made in the 20th century when "the question of literarity, notably starting with the Russian formalists" was "explicitly formulated" (Derrida 1981a: 70). The study of literariness "has permitted the avoidance of certain number of reductions and misconstruings that always will have a tendency to re-emerge (thematism, sociologism, historicism, psychologism in all their most disguised forms)". Still, by making such statement, he does not support formalism. As a matter of fact, he distances himself from it, emphasizing limitations of "purely formalist criticism" which take interest only in "the code, the pure play of signifiers, the technical manipulation of a text-object, thereby overlooking the genetic effects or the ("historical", if you will) inscription of the text read and of the new text this criticism itself writes" (Derrida 1981a: 47). Later, in the lecture "Rams: Uninterrupted Dialogue – Between Two Infinities, the Poem," he says that "formal analysis" belongs to the "order of calculable guarantees and decidable evidence" (Derrida 2005: 152).

To read literary text as the literary text it does not mean to extract from within the text, as if from within the shaped object, concrete elements of literariness which essentially make it the literary text. On the contrary, "literarity is not a natural essence, an intrinsic property of the text", so "there is no text which is literary in itself" (Derrida 1992b: 44). Instead of the essence, Derrida talks about "the experience of literature" (1992b: 45). He insists that "if it has no definition, what is heralded and refused under the name of literature cannot be identified with any other discourse" (Derrida 1992b: 47), for instance, scientific or philosophical discourse, but, at the same time, literature is necessarily open to other discourses. Derrida is interested in texts by Joyce, Mallarmé, Artaud, Kafka as examples of radical experience of the "crisis" in literature, because these texts question the very possibility of their existence. They shake "the authority and the pertinence" of the very philosophical question "what is literature", resisting "the literary institution". So, the *strength* of the literary event depends on the singular performance of the crisis in literature, and the effects of that strength are

possible to experience in reading the literary text. Derrida connects literariness with reading, explaining that it is created as “correlative of an intentional relation to the text” (1992b: 44) and it is inextricably related to the contextual response to the structure of the text recognized in the reading as conventions from the history of literature, institutional rules or “the law of the genre”. Since the event of the literary text happens in reading, what opens the singular literary text to the future readings is “writing as iterative structure” (Derrida 1982: 315). If the literary texts were closed into the unique context of their writing, there could be no literary event, because of the structural impossibility of reading. Readability of a text necessarily depends on the iterability, on the possibility to wrench the text from its context to open it up to the new readings, “citing” in interminable moving or relocating through other contexts, independently or just the opposite to the absence of the author, as well as (empirically verifiable) reader. It should be added, there is no pure singularity of the event.

To respond to the singular literary event implies to affirm, “*giving oneself up to the most idiomatic aspects of the work*”, while also “*taking account of the historical context*” (Derrida 1992b: 68), of what is shared with the literary institution. The event of the poem in “Rams”, according to Derrida remains: “the place of a unique experience...the unreadable is no longer opposed to the readable. Remaining unreadable, it secretes and keeps secret, in the same body, the chances of infinite, unfinished readings” (2005: 148). So, it is not possible to read the unreadable, still, it does not confront itself to the readable, on the contrary. Derrida insists that “we must do everything to attempt to know the determinable meaning of the poem” (2005: 149), as this is one of the conditions for a literary text to function as a literary text in the framework of the literary institution. However, if it would be possible to detect the determinable meaning of the poem with a particular analytical process, “even then we wouldn’t exhaust the trace of this remainder, the very remaining of this remainder, which makes the poem both readable and unreadable to us” (Derrida 2005: 150). Because of this unreadable trace, it is possible to read the poem constantly over and over again, to involve the reader with the logic of countersignature, to affirm the event of the text in reading, but to provoke the counter-reading, to counter-sign another, equally singular event, which *demand the answer* – another reading. There is no way to verify the event, it can only happen in the event of reading.

Although Deleuze did not study the problematic of reading as extensively as Derrida, it is more than obvious that writing inevitably includes reading, or better to say, the logic of countersignature. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze says “it is the characteristic of events to be expressed or expressible, uttered or utterable, in propositions” (1990: 12), so *in* language and *with* language. This relation is crucial. Instead of posing the question “what is the sense of the event”, it should be emphasized that “the event is sense itself” (Deleuze 1990: 22), the effect of the language. Therefore, the sense cannot be extracted as an essence out of a particular object; on the contrary, it is produced. The event “does not exist outside of the propositions which express it”, but it is “not the same as the proposition”, because “what is expressed is not the same as the expression”. In fact, it does not

exist before the preposition, but the event “pre-inheres in it”, thus “giving it a foundation and a condition” (Deleuze 1990: 181). The event, in its irreducibility, renders language possible: “the expression is founded on the event, as an entity of the expressible or the expressed”. Without the event, there would be only “an indistinct noise” (Deleuze 1990: 182). Because the sense is the event, “it is not something to discover, to restore and to re-employ; it is something to produce by a new machinery” (Deleuze 1990: 72). Therefore, is it possible to say that the logic of sense is actually the logic of inventing a style in literature? Furthermore, if the sense is the effect of the language, does the logic of creating events imply creating sense?

For the purpose of studying literariness of literary text, it is important to highlight the statement about the work of art from the book *What is Philosophy?*: “the work of art is a bloc of sensations, a compound of percepts and affects” (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 164). As such, “it exists in itself”. That means to write “a monument” as bloc of sensations that “owe their preservation only to themselves”, and that “provide the event with the compound that celebrates it” (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 168). Created sensation, the compound of percepts and affects, does not refer to an “object (reference)”, but only to “its material”. It is the percept or the affect of the material itself, yet “not the same thing as the material” (for instance, canvas, colour, stone, etc.). Creating the bloc of sensations consist of inventing different *method* with every author, regardless of literature, music or painting: “the writer’s specific materials are words and syntax, the created syntax that ascends irresistibly into his work and passes into sensation” (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 167). According to Deleuze and Guattari, the writer invents affects and percepts and expresses them as becoming, bearing in mind that “becoming is neither an imitation nor an experienced sympathy, nor even an imaginary identification” (1994: 173). Inventing a style includes “creating a syntax” that makes words “pass into sensations that makes the standard language stammer, tremble, cry, or even sing” (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 176).

In his text “Literature and Life”, Deleuze, referring to Proust, says that literature *in* language “opens up a kind of foreign language within language, which is neither another language nor a rediscovered patois, but a becoming-other of language, a minorization of this major language” (1998: 5). This becoming-other of language is the creation of the syntax that Deleuze and Guattari talk about in *What is philosophy?* It brings about the “destruction of the maternal language”, but also “the invention of a new language within language”, a new bloc of sensation created in this language. Instead of studying the literary texts as objects extracted from the history of literature, Deleuze focuses on writing as becoming, as an event of the language. It is comparable to the experience of a crisis in literary institution, in Derrida’s terms. Inventing a style by creating a syntax means that writing is not reducible to definable, calculable forms. Instead, writing is “always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed, and goes beyond the matter of any livable or lived experience” (Deleuze 1998: 1). The aim of the writing is not to attain a form through identification, imitation or mimesis. When creating “foreign language in language”, one engages into the process of limitless, formless

becoming, for instance, becoming-woman, becoming-animal, becoming-molecule, etc. Bearing in mind *The Logic of Sense*, becoming could be perceived as writing, expressing events-singularities: "to find the zone of proximity, indiscernibility or indifferentiation where one can no longer be distinguished from a woman, an animal or a molecule – neither imprecise nor general, but unforeseen and nonpreexistent, singularized out of a population rather than determined in a form" (Deleuze 1998: 1–2). The work of art, the literary text in particular, seen by Deleuze and Guattari as "a monument", "a bloc of sensations", is "independent of the creator through the self-positing of the created, which is preserved in itself" (1994: 164), created in writing, by inventing style, syntax, as becoming of the event.

As it has already been stated in the introductory part, literariness is among fundamental concepts both for the determination of the research subject and for the sustainability of the literary theory in the institutional sense. Instead of perceiving radical irreducibility of literature, or impossibility of coming to an understanding on intrinsic features of literariness, as the dead-end condition and the weakness of the literary theory, it is necessary to start again from the literary text, more precisely, from singular event of language. Theory's answer is still, of course, a reading. But a theory which affirms the possibility of the event of the literary text through the experience of reading, as becoming, can no longer rely on the application of predefined methodological procedures. The significance of the re-evaluated concept of literariness for the literary theory is precisely in that it provides the theory with the possibility to demonstrate that specificity of literature cannot be objectively verified, divided, extracted, interpreted, simply, that it cannot be mastered and subordinated by the production of factual knowledge following the methodology taken from other disciplines. Therefore, it proves that the sustainability of the theory based on theorems, rules, strict procedures or methods in the context of the literary scholarships is impossible. In other words, reading of the literary text, using theoretical approach, is invented in the singular experience of affirming that singular event exactly as the literary text, because of the interweaving of "calculable" and "incalculable", because of the idiomatic, "unreadable", "unhidden secret" (Clark 2005: 132), "style" and that what is "readable", recognisable, iterable or shared with the "literary institution". To read a literary text does not mean to verify postulates of the literary theory on a concrete example. Instead, it means to *give oneself up to* the singularity, to recognise the event of the text in reading, but also to have the possibility to answer it with the performance writing which would create "equally singular" event of the counter-signature.

Furthermore, if writing is becoming, "always incomplete, always in the midst of being formed" (Deleuze 1998: 1), and if with creating blocs of sensations, the artist "is always adding new varieties to the world" (Deleuze/Guattari 1994: 175), the conclusion is imposed that literature is constantly *becoming*. Therefore, if it is not possible to prescribe the method of reading the singularity, the potential of reformulating the literary theory *in* the literary theory that is *becoming* should be questioned. The absence of systematic methodological apparatus in latter context of literary scholarship should by no means result in relativism and literalization of

theory, such as creative writing genre. There still remains the paradoxical question about the purpose of such reading under conditions that presuppose scientific contribution, so it needs to be further considered. Such practice of reading and writing should remain analytic and theoretically precise in the classic sense of philosophical *insight*, but not transgressing into the philosophy of literature, because interpreting a literary text would then, contradictory, imply the risk of imposing the production of sense once more as “the transcendental signified” (Derrida 1981a: 49). Furthermore, in scientific, institutional context of studying literature, the practice of literary theory that is *becoming* while reading the literary text as singular event, could rather be related to the analysis on how the “style” as becoming of language is functioning, on how this idiomatic, immanent or “unreadable” aspect of the text is related to the “literary institution”, on how does it produce effects of literariness, on how this literary text as event of language creates sense and how this sense acts in the context of reading, or what are the effects of that irreducible, impersonal event of language. Obvious challenges such theory would face are, surely, a risk of ahistorical literary scholarship (that would neglect the context specificities – the writing of the text and the occurrence of reading), the relationship with the literary criticism and the question of evaluation, or, for example, the challenge of *teaching* – how and why – should one read the singular event of a literary text.

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O čitanju i literarnosti – (ne)mogućnost teorije književnosti

U tekstu se propituje postoji li potreba za teorijom književnosti nakon bujanja tržišnog natjecanja i brze smjene dominantnih, iako ne i uvjerljivo nadmoćnih, književnih teorija od druge polovice 20.st. Kontekst je to u kojem različite književne teorije nisu usuglašene oko predmeta istraživanja, te se pomno čitanje književnog teksta i istraživanje literarnosti, dakle ono zbog čega i po čemu određeni književni tekst *jest* književni tekst, često zanemaruje nauštrb odabira i primjene unaprijed definiranih metodoloških postupaka i pretpostavki. Kompleksna problematika proučavanja literarnosti je prema teoretičaru Marku Juvanu upravo pokazatelj krize institucionalnog okvira proučavanja književnosti. Stoga, ako se *imperativom* teorije književnosti još uvijek smatra čitanje književnih tekstova, potrebno je iznova afirmirati istraživanje literarnosti i na taj način propitati koje su mogućnosti teorijskog pristupa književnosti nakon *institucionalizacije* teorije. Budući da su Jacques Derrida i Gilles Deleuze intenzivno pisali o književnosti, ovdje se pokušava ukazati na potencijal njihovog nasljeđa za pokušaj invencije novog izlaza iz naizgled bezizlaznog, aporetičnog stanja teorije književnosti *u* dekonstrukciji. Radikalne promjene u razumijevanju literarnosti, čitanja ili književnog teksta kod obojice autora utječu na kritičko prevrednovanje ciljeva i svrhe teorije književnosti. Čitati književni tekst ne znači provjeriti postulate određene teorije na konkretnom primjeru, nego u iskustvu čitanja afirmirati mogućnost događanja književnog teksta upravo kao singularnog događaja jezika. Naposljetku, ako nije moguće propisati metodu čitanja književnog teksta, vrijedi propitati potencijal preformuliranja teorije književnosti *u* teoriju književnosti koja *postaje*.

Ključne riječi: čitanje, događaj, književnost, literarnost, teorija