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Cultural Nature: A Few Words on the Object of Literary Cognition.

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Cultural Nature: A Few Words on the Object of Literary Cognition

1.

At the outset, let me state that I am concerned with two objects in particular: subjects understood as themes of literary works and those constituted by their performance as objects of literary cognition. It is my belief that both are connected by “cultural nature” (the reader must forgive this oxymoronic name). It is a feature, which at the same time differentiates them from the objects known from everyday experience or the sciences. For this reason, I understand “literary cognition” as both the type of knowledge introduced by literature and professional literary studies. In this case, what binds together these two kinds of literary cognition together (I am referring to the inseparability of the method and the outcome of cognition) is a factor that distinguishes it from typical, scientific forms of cognition (we can set aside the specifics of this literary cognition, and all its connections with the cultural cognition, for later). I will begin with the question of the status of a literary work, or in broader terms: a specific artistic object (along with a short history of transformation of its interpretation), later attempting to show by one or two examples the specific status that such objects can achieve in literature.

2.

The most widespread view of the nature of the work of art (whether a painting or literary work) assumes that it contains a set of features we could describe as “significant,” meaning autonomous, invariable and independent from the context. The proper reception of such an object is composed of the three following operations:

1) the removal (or suspension) of any cognitive, evaluative, or emotional approaches and “superstitions,” which could disfigure our perception; 2) the identification of established constitutive features, whose presence (or lack) makes possible; and 3) the recognition of the object’s category of belonging (that is, establishing whether we are dealing with a work of art, applied art, a masterwork or kitsch, poem or prose). In short, we decide that what we are reading is an example of a poem, because its language marks it in a certain way that we recognize as poetic. We consider a piece of art a masterpiece of Renaissance painting because it stands out with its style and artistic solutions, which we recognize as an embodiment of the highest ambitions and possibilities, and as a fulfillment of tasks standing before art of that period, etc.

This view of the nature of the work of art and the character of artistic cognition, which transposes features of the modern cognition of scientific, physical objects onto the field of art, allows us to treat the results of artistic cognition in the scientific categories of truth and objective measurement. If the work of art contains such objective (observer independent) features, then acknowledging and observing should prove not only possible, but necessary for proper interpretation – which, as its outcome, ought to provide a full and final explanation of the work in question. Any discrepancies in interpretation are thereby treated as errors in the cognitive process – results of mistakes at work, emerging from a lack in knowledge or skills. As it is easy to observe, the power of this concept lies in cognitive optimism and the reassurance of self-worth amongst researchers (precisely because full and comprehensive cognition is always possible within this mindset). The inherent weakness of this concept and its realization lies in its tendency to omit contradictory data. This is what ultimately led to its diminished status, or at least critical reevaluation in the 19th, and especially in the 20th, centuries.

Awareness of the fact that the features of works of art that are supposedly objective and directly accessible in their nature only at first sight, and likewise that the reception, reading experience, or aesthetic elation of art only pretends to be spontaneous and individual – all this suspicious knowledge only recently made its way into reflections on the artistic and literary canon. One of the earliest observations on this subject was recorded in the 19th century:

I won’t be too daring if I insist [wrote Julian Klin-Kaliszewski in *Essays from 1868*] that none of the crowd admiring a Rafaelian *masterpiece does not marvel over it out of deep conviction. If cultivated, the admirer will repeat foolishly memorized and lofty phrases from the art critics. He will follow the old saying “repeat your prayers after mother.” He believes the outcry of awe heard from others.*¹ (Emphasis by R.N.)

Klin – our somewhat forgotten, pre-modernist and original essayist – continues his reflections in a pioneering (meaning: “pre-Benjamin”) direction of observation according to which the work of art loses its powerful aura of influence and turns into a melancholic souvenir. As he himself states, for his contemporaries the work of art became a “beautiful historic monument” (53), with which they are unable to

¹ Klin-Kaliszewski, J., *Essays*, Warsaw 1868: 52. <http://rain.org.pl>

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generate any authentic connection (whether intellectual, aesthetic, or emotional). This inability comes from a radical change in sensitivity and interests. But other consequences of his reflections are also noteworthy, particularly when viewed as “pre-Gombrowicz” institutional critiques of the status and nature of cognition of the work of art. According to Klin’s observations, the reason for our lack of contact with the work of art is not simply the aforementioned factors, but also for reasons that are far more fundamental and belong to both the work and its audience.

We could say that we never really confront the work of art – face to face. The “Rafaelian masterpiece” does not only reveal its autonomous, pictorial qualities to the viewer, but also gives specific hints concerning its origin, value, social assessment (authorial attribution, place in the museum’s hierarchy, the manner of exposition, etc.) The piece of art presents itself to us along with the contexts which define its value and its very sense. It stands in front of us, always already “packaged” in its previous readings and with a communal (accepted in a given culture) manual of collective “use,” of its position and function. It meets us already recognized, interpreted, and assessed, and it is already incorporated in the institutional order of tradition and culture. The viewer is unable to directly experience and learn about the true nature of the work of art. He may try to replace some of his “preconceptions,” his own preferences, habits of perception, and stereotypical reactions with others, like self-acquired knowledge, second-hand knowledge (e.g., coming from Baedekers, which were popular back in those days, or even a “herd” reaction forced on the individual by the community). In this light, perception seems to be so strongly conditioned by our previously amassed knowledge that we are unable to decide whether the features of the object are a direct result of a discovery of its objective qualities, or the projection of its own perceptual schemata back upon itself.

I called this remark pre-Gombrowicz because of the pamphlet, written almost a hundred years after Klin’s observation, entitled “Against Poets.” There, Gombrowicz not only proposes a provocative thesis, stating that “almost no one likes poems and poetry, and the world of poems is a fictional and fake one,” but he also effectively makes fun of the objective assumptions of traditional aesthetics, particularly the claim that “art astounds us, because it is beautiful.” He writes:

Do you think that, if not taught at school, we would have so much ready-made admiration for it later in our lives? Do you believe that if not for our entire cultural organization that imposes art on us, we would be so interested in it?

In the end, this is how he summarizes his entire line of thought, almost paraphrasing his long forgotten predecessor:

Everyone “acts” as if they were in awe, even though nobody is “genuinely” amazed to such extent...Apparently this is how it should be and this is in accord with the natural order of things, where art, along with the awe it evokes, are more an outcome of a work of the collective spirit, than the direct response of an individual.

The consciousness of the cultural conditioning of cognition (including art), which led Gombrowicz to the outskirts of so-called institutional art theory, is today a part

of widely accepted, even common, knowledge. But it has not always been the case. It seems like it has been a question more for contemporary thinkers and a source of cognitive crisis they have experienced. It has also constituted a problem, the solution to which defined the specifics of their theoretical research.

Let me turn to one more reflection of a similar kind. It is a reflection which generalizes and expands a similar kind of observations on the field of human cognition in general. This is an excerpt from digressions by Henri Bergson, delivered during his lecture for Sorbonne students in 1895:

Finally, we all have noticed foreigners in front of our monuments and within our walls. They hold books in their hands which, without a doubt, describe wonders they find themselves surrounded by. But aren't they forgetting, so engulfed in their reading, about the very things they came to witness? *And so, many among us drift through being with our eyes fixed on the formulas that we find in a very particular, internal guidebook, forgetting to look into life itself.* They read in order to be guided by what is said and to think about words rather than things. But there may be more and something better to it, than a simple absentmindedness. Maybe there is some natural and essential law that wants our mind to receive pre-made ideas and live under protection – awaiting an act of will by someone continually postponed. This act of will could strengthen the mind...they situate themselves [these "pre-made ideas"] between the eye and the object and present a comfortable simplification. For some of us, they will situate themselves there until the art comes to open our eyes to nature.² (Emphasis by R.N.)

The metaphor of a tourist is one of the most popular ways of describing characteristics of contemporary life in anthropology and sociology. It is enough to look at essays by Zygmunt Bauman, where this exact metaphor has been used, which, along with a "vagrant" and "nomad," has become a model illustration of the standard, postmodern types of personality (illustrating the situation of rootless individuals without any purpose, contrasting with the older figure of a "pilgrim," who kept his eyes locked on the goal, regardless whether it was located in an earthly or heavenly domain).

Bergson uses this metaphor for a similar reason: he wants to make the features of the contemporary model of personality clearly visible, even though he finds it to be the quintessence of a specifically modern existential-cognitive conditioning of man at the turn of the centuries.

The foundation for this "touristic" transposition of metaphor is a comparison between the situation of a man in the universe to the situation of an alien or "foreigner" finding himself in unknown territory and recognizing only objects available to him through his previously acquired, pocket "guidebook" of knowledge. It is a comparison that exceptionally conveys the experience of contemporary writers and thinkers. This "ready-made" knowledge "stands between the eye and the object," says Bergson, and invokes the classic dualistic model of cognition. According to that model, on the one side we have an objective and unconditioned world, and on the other, an independent object. And between them, there exists a net of linguistic-cultural categories and expectations that by deforming the results of cognition, at

² Bergson, H. "Common Sense and Classical Sciences" *Horizons*, 1911: 198.

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the same time builds a symbolic universe of social reality which provides man with a “certain kind of care.”

Bergson further argues that the task of philosophy and hard sciences is the delivery (invention) of special tools – methods, techniques, and specialized dictionaries – allowing for breaks through the layer of everyday, practical imaginings to the fundamental reality, in order to grasp it without the deformations that result from the conditions characteristic for common cognition. The high profile of art, according to his concept, comes from its role as a model example of fulfilling (by its own means) this most difficult (for modern consciousness) cognitive task: art (literature) forces us to reject perceptual routine, language automatons, and terminological stereotypes (at the same time teaching us how to do it), and thereby “opens our eyes to nature.” From Bergson’s perspective, artistic cognition, in the past treated as imperfect, contaminated by its own flawed form of scientific cognition, becomes a model for human cognition in general – particularly a model of cultural cognition.

At this point, I would like to refer to a third (after Klin-Kaliszewski and Bergson) witness in this trial against a common sense approach to the nature of the work of art and the character of its cognition. I am referring to Stanley Fish, a literary scholar as original as he is inventive. In his article, “How to Recognize a Poem When You See One,” Fish describes an experiment he conducted on his students at the University at Buffalo, where he taught courses in linguistic studies (devoted to questions of modern stylistics) and literary studies (focused on English religious poetry from the 17th century). After classes in linguistics, students of metaphysical poetry would enter the classroom. One time, they have encountered these words written on the blackboard:

Jacobs-Rosenbaum
Levin
Thorne
Hayes
Ohman (?)

Fish explains that these were the names of some of the leading linguists working on adapting the framework of transformative-generative grammar to serve as a tool of stylistic analysis (and the question mark standing after the last name was there to mark Fish’s uncertainty concerning spelling of the name). At the beginning of the next class with his literary theory students, he circled the names on the blackboard and told the group that it is yet another religious poem, just like those they had previously discussed. He then asked for an interpretation. I will not relate all the details of the collective reading, but we can simply say that the challenge was readily accepted. The first student to interpret the poem decided that the text is a type of hieroglyph. He could not decide, however, whether it was designed to resemble a cross or an altar. Others followed: the name “Jacob” was interpreted as a reference to Jacob’s ladder and the name Rosenbaum as an allusion to the rose bush (this was the cause for appreciation for originality – the traditional allegory

of Jacob's ladder, the Christian pathway of ascendance to heaven, was replaced by the rose bush – a reference to the Virgin Mary, often described as a rose without thorns). Recognizing the iconographic riddle in the text prompted other questions: how is a man supposed to reach heaven by climbing a rose bush? The answer was delivered by the following hypothesis: with the help of a fruit from the rose bush – the fruit from Mary's womb – Jesus Christ. It was a hypothesis that was backed by the analysis of the word "Thorne," which "in an obvious way" was a reference to the crown of thorns, a symbol of suffering and the price paid for our salvation, etc. Finally, let me just add that the last word was explained with three, mutually supporting, explanations. Proposed explanations included: 1) An omen – the poem is, after all, a prophecy; 2) An exclamation – Oh, man! – the poem talks about how the fate of man is intertwined with God's grand scheme; and finally, 3) the word could simply mean 'amen' – a correct and proper ending for any poem praising God's love and grace. Fish recalls that after such an exhaustive reading of the "poem" no one was surprised by the fact that S, O and N were the most frequently recurring letters.

This long, but nonetheless instructive, anecdote leads Fish to conclusions with far reaching consequences. It is a false assumption to claim that we first identify constitutive features of a given text, and only later recognize it as a specific kind of poem. It is the other way around: the act of recognition is first – seeing something as this particular "something" (belonging to a category, which is well known for us). This act triggers the knowledge, techniques and skills which enable the identification of (expected and sought after) constitutive features in a given work. The interpretation, Fish concludes, is not an art of explanation, but of construction. Critics do not "read" poems for us, they "create" them.

I summon this radical statement not to proclaim Fish's era, or to discourage philological education, supposedly pointless since the "truth" of the text is arbitrarily ascribed and not read from between the lines with the use of skills acquired through hard work. On the contrary, I believe that only professional knowledge can save us from threats of peremptory doctrines or anarchic elements. I believe that thanks to comparing and contrasting these opposite views on the nature of artistic cognition – the conviction that art delights us because it is beautiful, and at the very same time, the assumption that it is beautiful because we are collectively enchanted, allows us to observe the specific characteristics of the cultural status of the work of art and perpetually active cultural conditionings of its cognition.

3.

Let me know move to the next type of object and literary cognition that concerns the question of the status of the object as a target of literary description or representation, and the recognition of literature as a specific tool, or medium, for achieving cognition. Disregarding the incredibly rich history of the relations between literature and reality, I will refer to only two (extremely relevant) examples, as well as to one (extremely symptomatic) example of literary polemic. Below is

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a famous poem by Wallace Stevens, “Study of Two Pears,” in which the poet relates his attempts to describe the object and, at the same time, talks about the abilities and limitations of literature:

I
Opusculum paedagogum.
The pears are not viols,
Nudes or bottles.
They resemble nothing else.

II
They are yellow forms
Composed of curves
Bulging toward the base.
They are touched red.

VI
The shadows of the pears
Are blobs on the green cloth.
The pears are not seen
As the observer wills.

Simplistic at first sight, the poem by Stevens has been intensely commented upon, and for a good reason. The poem is complex and rich with literary, aesthetic, and philosophical implications. I will only note that it is not simply a description of pears, but also an ekphrasis – a study/description of an art work – in this case a still life. The poem combines the philosophical task of performing a phenomenological analysis, which by suspending stereotypical approaches and common knowledge about the world attempts to reveal the nature of “peariness” and the task of the literary manifest. It realizes the goals of contemporary poetry: creating a description that will increase incredibility – a description, which through breaking with a perceptual routine (of seeing of what we have already seen and known before, and what we already know we should see) attempts to show us the object as if seen for the first time. At the same time, all the dynamics of the processual character of cognition remain in place. The conclusion of the poem is in recognition of the failure of the undertaking: We are not able to grasp the essence of “peariness.” We are sentenced to “fictions” (Stevens wrote about it many times in his essays). A special and privileged position between those fictions belongs to poetry, which, without arriving at the core of things, at least equips the world with the “fictions of the highest rank,” without which we could not understand it.

I have purposely used Stevens’ poem as translated by Miłosz (although there are different versions available) [the original of Stevens is cited here – translator], because Miłosz is the author of an important polemic, both artistic and discursive one. Alongside this polemic, he managed to formulate his own vision of literature’s tasks and responsibility to reality. Although many of the poetic ambitions and thoughts of Stevens could seem closely related to those of the Polish poet, Miłosz

never hides his disapproval for his older, American colleague. He sees in him the embodiment of a drive to turn away from the world, a drive to treat the descriptions of its elements solely as a pretext for one's own, subjective vision – an apology for the autonomy of literature. In a long commentary included in *Life on Islands* (and earlier in a short note in *The Extracts From the Useful Tomes*), Miłosz discusses in detail various techniques and efforts involved in the description of pears, seen as if for the first time (or maybe described to somebody who has never seen them before). He concludes (not without certain satisfaction) that the means used by Stevens are not sufficient to grasp the essence of “peariness.” As one might assume, his dislike came not from the failure of the poetic effort of the representation, but rather from the skeptical resignation with which Stevens separated poetry from reality, refusing its right to mimicry. In reality, there is nothing more distant from Miłosz's stance than disbelief in reality and the sin of giving up on an effort of its display. This can be seen clearly in the artistic polemic, which took place much earlier (almost half a century earlier, in fact) than the mentioned discursive polemic, in a very significant poem entitled *On This Earth of Ours*. In that poem, in a rightfully famous stanza, we read:

And the word that came out of darkness was a pear.
I circled it, skipping, trying out my wings.
And when I almost tasted its sweetness – it moved away.
So I run to the sugar pear tree – very corner of the garden back then,
White paint peeling of the shutters,
Cornel bush and rustling of the people long gone.
So I run to the pear tree – right by the field
Behind this and not other fence, brook, neighborhood.
I run – *Pyrus Communis*, Bera, Bergamot.
For nothing. Between me and the pear – equipages, countries.
And so I will live, enchanted.

With great courage, Miłosz reverses the point of view. From the fiction of the “innocent eye” (putting all knowledge in quotation marks), describing the unknown object, he moves to the fiction of the “inhuman” observer in the garden of reality. His cognition of the essence of the object is clouded irreversibly by the images of the concrete specimens of different species in a very concrete space-time (“sugar pear tree,” “bera,” “Behind this and not other fence, brook, neighborhood”). They allow themselves to be caught in their historical concreteness, precisely thanks to human memory, knowledge and imagination. But most importantly, thanks to language, which most faithfully preserves the cultural essence of things and people. That is why, in this case, the failure of the undertaking (“For nothing. Between me and the pear equipages, countries”) is not a call for resignation, but a call to question the way this search is conducted. There is no pear, as such, Miłosz seems to be saying. No one ever saw the “pear,” so to demand from literature that it capture such a non-existent object is to sentence it to chase a chimera. It means to reduce literature to the role of “fiction of the highest rank.” One could say that the polemic between Miłosz and Stevens, at least from this perspective, is an illustration of a fundamental

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dispute between the two major orientations of contemporary literature: one seeking essence (the true nature of the object or reality), which ends up worshipping itself, and one that seeks to encapsulate the “entirety” of reality, but ends with nursing and meticulously preserving every (even the weakest) signs of “multi-layered concretes” (Miłosz’s term) out of which the human experience of reality is built.

4.

It is time to briefly summarize these few observations concerning the cultural nature of the objects of literary cognition. That is to say, the objects which are works perceived as objects of literary interpretation and those objects constructed and interpreted within a literary work. Firstly, we should accept what we have learned from Klin-Kaliszewski: in case of the work of art, we are not able to effectively separate formal features of language from broad and diverse cultural meanings, which to an equal extent establish its nature. Secondly, we should learn our lesson from Bergson (and his multiple followers): the cultural conditioning of cognition makes it impossible for us to successfully distinguish between the content of experience and the conditions of this content’s appearance within experience (in other words, what we learn/know from the means, circumstances or medium, which serve the cognition). What (especially contemporary) thought discovers, immediately becomes thought itself. What can be uttered in a given language, is permanently co-constituted by this language. And thirdly, we should agree with at least one consequence of Fish’s thesis: in the case of literary interpretation, we are also unable to clearly distinguish between the features of the means of cognition (the language of description) from the features of the object (the result). We cannot ultimately decide whether what we describe is discovered in the texts, or if it is just an effect of applied analytical conventions.

We should also learn from the lesson provided by literature itself. In that case, the fourth conclusion would be that literature, at least in its poetic incarnation (of both orientations mentioned above), speaks about the object of a kind which should not be identified with a physical object (regardless of similarities). It is either a philosophical construct “of an object in itself,” or a cultural-literary construct of an object as “multi-layered concreteness.” It is multi-layered, because it exists within human history and culture and is lived through and experienced by humans, saturated by meanings and values which constitute its cultural nature. Finally, the fifth conclusion would be that the artistic form serves here as not only a tool or a medium of “literary cognition,” but also as an important ingredient of the “objectival character” of a given object, that only after being represented in literary form it achieves its significant form, identity, and sense.

I have begun by recalling a widespread, commonsense view about the culturally unconditioned, autonomous features of the work of art, and arrived at the conclusion which recognizes culture as not only an important context, but also a necessary, ontological ingredient of the work itself. It explains, I hope to some extent, why the

understanding of a literary text cannot happen without an effort of expanding one's knowledge of culture in general. On the other hand, it allows us to understand an incredibly fast career of literary methods applied in other fields of study – originally created and perfected for the study of literary texts, probably the most dignified of discourses appearing in culture. One could claim that we observe this phenomenon today, particularly when culture “reflects on itself” in literature and vice versa. They both find long forgotten, marginalized, or even repressed features in those reflections, as well as elements of truth about their textual and cultural natures, respectively.

The core of the issue might reside in the fact that the mutual connection between the object and the means of its cognition (conditions and content, language and other elements) is not entirely a “literary” flaw, or its specificity. After all, it characterizes the uniqueness of the object and the means of learning cultural reality to the same extent. If cultural features are not only made accessible, but also determined by the characteristics of the discourse, it is fair to ask if discourse itself becomes a carrier in a double sense: as a medium and as a foundation. And what is culture, if not the social image of reality, constantly created (and from that perspective also a “text” of a certain kind), that is perceived as a world and not an image by the people who are situated inside of it? And finally, is there anyone working in this field, who could claim that he or she arrived (or soon will) at a position of an objective observer, and not a participant? That he or she will manage to step outside of culture in order to analyze it from this external position (from a perspective external to culture, and hence “inhuman”)?

The stakes of contemporary debates over the position of literature and the status of literary studies discourse are decided by, mostly, these two, conjoined and deepening processes: cultural reality becoming literary-morphemic (or becoming textual), and of the re-cultivation of literature and making it, again, one of the agents and practices of the discursive cultural reality – distinguished because of similarities, participation or even the cognitive competition with other practices, and not uniqueness, separateness, or opposition against the rest of cultural discourses. It seems appropriate to agree that literary images of the world, as well as the ones external to the literary realm, shape the symbolic universe, a discursive cultural territory that we belong to by co-creating, yielding, and trying to understand it. Theory, independent of modesty and reluctance, or the holistic impertinence of self-imposed tasks, has enough competence to examine (within its own categories) all the discursive practices co-creating this territory, but also a responsibility to go further and never stop its inquiries at the (illusory) border of literature's specificity. It needs to go further, toward cultural processes and relationships, which will define its status.

This optimistic forecast derived from an understanding of the contemporary position of theory needs to be supplemented with a slightly less optimistic observation. Does the commotion of methodological debates (indeed, gradually fading away and sometimes artificially reanimated) curtain off the unspoken drama of theoretical discourse? It is forced to manifest its self-satisfaction because of its unlimited scope of research, at the same time lacking any attributes that would be collectively

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accepted as distinguishing its identity and separateness. What is the solution? To guard itself (and become marginalized) or to pursue social recognition (for the price of becoming transparent and absorbed into cultural studies)? And is that the only alternative? Maybe it would be wiser to take cover within one's own scientific (sub-subdisciplinary) niche and attempt to wait through the theoretical turmoil, hoping that the solid craftsmanship of the classical philologist will survive? Theory, in its contemporary understanding, is only less than a hundred years old. Maybe we should consider the possibility of its disappearance in the new field of humanities... Among many conflicted, theoretical problems, the one touching upon the question of the very meaning of our profession – the place of literature and status of literary studies – is by all means not a controversial one.

Translation: Jan Pytalski