

Chapter 7

The Oppressive and the Subversive Sides of Theoretical Discourse

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Abstract

Although theory is usually opposed to practice, literary theory many times performs the practical purpose of evaluating literary history and criticism. Not only theoretical texts may discuss what is allowed and what is forbidden when one speaks of literature, but debates, discussions, critiques also frequently use theory as a tool to prove that the other is wrong since they committed something theory forbids. Through such acts, theory emerges as the police of literary criticism, with those performing such acts implicitly claiming the power to reward the good and punish the naughty. This article analyzes some examples of forbiddance (the ‘fallacies’ of New Criticism) and reward (Mikhail Bakhtin’s survey of those scholars who at least partially realized the polyphony of Dostoevsky’s writing). The case study with which the article ends takes on the history of the Department for Literary Theory (at the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences), to show both the oppressive and the subversive potential of literary theory.

Key words: literary theory; discursive power; fallacy; heresy; Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences

1. Introduction

University courses on the history of literary theory usually start with classical antiquity, sometimes with the aesthetic thoughts implied in the Homeric epics, sometimes with discursive texts (or at least passages) by Plato and Aristotle, focusing on literature exclusively. I would not deny that Aristotle’s *Poetics* can be regarded as literary theory, the same way as Petronius’ *Satyricon* can be regarded as a novel on the basis of a modern generic experience that preforms the reading of premodern texts. The discipline, as a discipline, however, started developing in the first half of the 20th century with Russian formalism, with the Prague school, and with New Criticism. From its very foundation, however, the discipline has not only been pure theory, i.e., pure contemplation, but also practical instruction. Theorists do not only try to describe how one reads, but also to tell how one should and should not read. They try to define literature or literariness, and its workings, but such definitions also prescribe what literary analysis should and should not be about.

As literary theory is the meta-discipline of literary criticism, its task is (or can be) to define the rules of the game. In Jakobson's famous simile about the main task of literary studies, they are similar to police work, and theory seems to tell the police how to proceed:

The object of study in literary science is not literature but "literariness," that is, what makes a given work a literary work. Meanwhile, the situation has been that historians of literature act like nothing so much as policemen, out to arrest a certain culprit, take into custody (just in case) everything and everyone they find at the scene as well as any passers-by for good measure. The historians of literature have helped themselves to everything – environment, psychology, politics, philosophy. Instead of a *science of literature* they have worked up a concoction of homemade disciplines (Jakobson 1921, 11, qtd by Ejxenbaum 1971, 8).

If theory is the supervisor of literary "field work," its position implies an amount of power. A judge, a referee, an instructor, or a lawmaker enjoy wider powers than the players, pupils, or simple folks who must follow the rules. Such claims on behalf of literary theory, however, would be worthless, if those supposed to follow the rules or regulations disregard the respective impositions. For instance, those literary historians who rebelled against the rule of theory tried to act as if they could do without theory. Literary theorists, however, did their best to show that everybody applies some kind of theory, that there is no innocent, theory-less literary criticism and history. There may be unconscious theoretical presuppositions, but they are dangerous. Therefore, all literary scholars should state their theoretical standpoints, and if they do, they are already in the realm ruled by theory.

2. The Oppressive Side of It

2.1. Punishment, Exclusion

Let us consider some rhetorical techniques through which literary theory gets the upper-hand. When the New Critics discredited several theoretical presuppositions and working methods in literary criticism, there seems to have been some uncertainty about the style of debate, until a less aggressive usage was generally adopted. Nowadays we refer to their restrictions as "fallacies." Intentional fallacy, biographical fallacy, genetic fallacy (or the "fallacy of origins," which can be construed as either a comprehensive category of all the three or synonymous with the latter – Wellek and Warren 1942, 65 and 88), and affective fallacy: they are all mistakes caused by faulty presuppositions regarding the analysis of literary works' meaning. As if a legislator or a schoolmaster were showing what is the rational, good behavior, and what is naughty in a critic's mistakes. Do not collect the author's biographical data to explain a text, because it is wrong; do not investigate the textual models of a text to explain its meaning, because it is wrong; do not try to find out the author's intention to explain a text, because it is wrong; do not communicate your emotions about a text, because it is category mistake to speak about what something does instead of what it is; and so on.

However, New Criticism sometimes also used another word to describe the activity

of their “villains,” namely heresy. Before Wimsatt and Beardsley published their paper on the intentional fallacy (Wimsatt and Beardsley 1946, cf. also Wimsatt and Beardsley 1949), C.S. Lewis described more or less the same phenomenon as “personal heresy” in his controversy with Tillyard (Lewis and Tillyard 1939), while Cleanth Brooks wrote the final chapter of his *Well Wrought Urn* on the “heresy of paraphrase” (Brooks 1947, 157-175). Heretics are not only mistaken: they elaborate an alternate system of false beliefs, which challenges the harmonious unity of the orthodox system of thought that all true believer is called upon to defend.

Discussions, debates, and intellectual clashes between various schools are integral parts of the normal workings of modern academic systems. Discrediting the other through the usage of creative vocabulary may seem unfair when it comes to the unspoken rules of academic discourse. Yet, such acts may have been necessary to the establishment of a new discipline—and to its positioning in the academia. We may find it more acceptable to position ourselves as instructors of those poor, fallible colleagues in need of a disclosure of their fallacies, rather than priests of the true religion ready to burn the heretics at the stake. While religious differences evoke the memory of many violent instances, from wars to genocide to organized terror.¹ It would be unfair to play with such associations just because of some metaphors. Obviously, no such violence was ever involved in the advance of New Criticism.

René Wellek and Austin Warren were more tolerant in their categorization of biographical, historical, and cultural historical research under the “literary studies” heading, although with the caveat that they perform an “extrinsic approach” to literature, or “preliminary operations,” in contrast with the “intrinsic study of literature” or literary studies “in the strictest sense.” However, they also speak of fallacies in order to describe attempts at displaying cases of extrinsic approach as if it were intrinsic study, and despite the generally descriptive (apparently “objective”) style, they sometimes may slip in the language of the legislator:

...the psychological study of the writer, as type and as individual, or the study of the creative process [...] are subdivisions of the psychology of art: though, at times, they may serve as engaging pedagogic approaches to the study of literature, *we should disavow* any attempt to evaluate literary works in terms of their origins (the genetic fallacy). (Wellek & Warren 1942, 88, italics mine)

The “we” in the highlighted expression does not refer to the two authors (which would make the “should” functionless) but to a community including the authors and all the readers. It is not the position of a god saying what *you should* do, but rather of a Moses bringing the tablets and telling his fellow humans that *we should* obey this commandment and disavow temptation. Speaking about the social function of literature, Wellek and Warren also revisit Edgar Allan Poe’s “didactic heresy,” and complete it with an opposite heresy regarding literature as pure entertainment, to arrive at their

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¹It is a different question that the blame of unorthodoxy or deviation could have been fatal in communist context. Different, since the religious metaphor of “heresy” was not used in that context, which favored “sects” and “renegades” instead. What is, however, revealing is the implication that one claims the right to settle the true “dogma,” to tell orthodoxy from heresy, to define the correct way of thought and practice.

“polar heresies.” (Wellek & Warren 1942, 19-20)

2.2 Rewarding

“Heresy” seems to rather belong to the legislator’s language than the schoolmaster’s. Rule formulation and forbiddance, however, are not the only strategy through which a ‘schoolmaster’ can assume an authoritative position. Mikhail Bakhtin, for example, never said that one should interpret Dostoevsky’s works as polyphonic novels, or that one should not interpret them as monologic. He simply stated that the polyphonic novel is Dostoevsky’s great achievement and surveyed the previous scholarly literature giving some credits to those who at least partially realized the polyphonic nature of Dostoevsky’s poetics, and black marks for the failure to understand it more properly. The role of this schoolmaster is not to teach how to do it, but to check whose solution is acceptable or not. Of course, s/he knows what the satisfactory solution is, and therefore can evaluate the pupils’ performance.

The best known examples of such a type of pastoral discourse can be found (apart from Bakhtin) in Roland Barthes. The theoretical chapters of *S/Z* abound in utterances like “Do this!”, “Act this way!”, “We should read the text as if...”, “We must claim the right to...” (Barthes 1970, *passim*.) Does a reader have any other option than follow the prophet in the desert? “The Death of the Author” makes a clear distinction between previous and present conditions of reading, demarcated by the realization that the author does not exist anymore. Although Barthes describes in detail how a reading with an Author works, it is obvious that such a reading is impossible or morally unacceptable after the turning point, since “We know now...” and “Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile,” and “We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer...” (Barthes 1977, 146, 147, and 148). If a reader of the essay decides to be a reader with an Author despite everything, they will find themselves not only in the position of atavistic anachronisms (as someone who does not know what “we know”), but also in that of the stupid reactionary who sticks to a “myth” and does not want “to give writing a future” (*ibid.*). But this is only what a meta-reader of the discursive strategies explains. The text does not really punish readers for disobedience, since it does not count on such a reaction at all: such readers cannot exist *now*. It rather rewards everyone, because everyone is united in the revelation that gives a purpose for all future readings, in the agenda of giving writing a future.

3. The Subversive Side of It

The power I have been speaking about is discursive power, not political or institutional. The idea, however, can logically emerge that discursive power can or should be converted into institutional power. Those who have the knowledge about how literary criticism is properly performed, should make the decisions about jobs and resources, etc. Nevertheless, we have a kind of primary experience that literary theory is subversive or revolutionary. New Criticism was an intellectual revolution; Structuralism and Post-structuralism were associated with subversive thinking; when Communism ended in Central- and Eastern-Europe, literary theory became very popular, and it was received as the wind of freedom. Theory can be subversive as well: a claim for the discursive power is challenging the institutional or political power.

3.1 A Case Study

The foundation history of the Department for Literary Theory of the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences can be an example revealing both the oppressive and the subversive potential of literary theory; the example may be so telling because of the extreme context of a communist dictatorship. In a totalitarian system, everything can be oppressive, but it is just logical that those in power wanted to ascribe a policing function to literary theory, which would transform inherent claim for discursive power into political oppression.

The Hungarian Academy of Sciences was founded in 1831, but it was so radically transformed in 1949 that only the name and the headquarters (built in 1865) remained the same. Previously it was an autonomous institution with the mission to propagate Hungarian language and promote literature and scholarship, but in 1949 it became an organization that, directly influenced by the Communist Party, was supposed to control all the academic and, more importantly, scientific activities of the country. This Soviet-like Academy established a network of research institutes, one of which being the Institute for Literary Studies, established in the January of 1956. Three years later, the Institute established a department for literary theory, with the supervising party authorities' explicit hope and demand that it provide intellectual ammunition for ideological debates, supporting official Marxism and suppressing everything else. But that is something the department never did.

In 1954 the Academy established a sub-committee on literary theory, which failed to start working, but in the inaugural meeting the convened scholars declared the tasks of the would-be organization, which were repeated in the first 5-year-plan of the new Institute for Literary Studies, established in 1956: to promote the Marxist-Leninist methods of literary studies and to criticize the "bourgeois" methods. However, when the institute started planning a department for literary theory, the very first program already formalized something, which seems at the first sight only slightly different; but in the given context—in a period when people trained themselves to read between the lines—it was basically different. On the one hand, that document stated: "The problems of socialist realism must be the centre of the group's work," on the other, it explicitly refused any claim for a commissar position in literary studies: "One should not suppose that the group will decide all theoretical questions. Their task is to keep those questions on the surface." Instead of answering every question with the unchallengeable certainty of an authoritative body, they wanted to ask questions again and again, and keep as many problems open as possible. The other task was described as "documentation," i.e. collecting data and informing the academic community of the current trends in literary theory. Instead of criticizing or refuting bourgeois theories, simply documenting them. This can be interpreted as the program of a non-oppressive literary theory, since it refuses to formulate any "truth," any "right" approach as contrasted with the wrong ones. But is it still theory? The aim of this activity is not building a consistent theoretical system, but it is rather close to the etymological, original Greek meaning of the word theory, namely seeing, witnessing. In this program the theoretician is only asking questions (also the same questions again and again) and ponders all the possible answers without the intention of ever selecting a single right one. In the context of a communist dictatorship, where there are official answers for every question), this

strategy is not only non-oppressive, but rather subversive both intellectually and politically.

This alternative attitude towards the goal of literary theory (namely challenging answers to every question continuously instead of providing and enforcing the final official answers) was the result partly of the involvement of the designated chair of the department, Lajos Nyíró (1921–2014), partly of the rather tolerant and highly intellectual climate of the newly established institute, which also functioned as a shelter for those less reliable scholars who were not allowed to teach at a university (cf. Bezeczky 2007, 586). The political power aiming at monolithic centralization everywhere did not like the new department's activity. I will only highlight two peaks of the rather continuous conflicts between the communist party (then called the Hungarian Socialist Labor Party) and the Department for Literary Theory.

The party line in literary theory was determined by the essential notion of “eternal realism.” The theory was not complicated: the party line held that, just as the history of philosophy is an eternal struggle between materialism and idealism, literary history is a struggle between realism and anti-realism; realism is good, anti-realism is bad. This meant that, if somebody wanted to write about, say, ancient lyric poetry, one should have proven that it was realist in one way or another. (A classical philologist in the late 1950s and early 1960s worked on promoting Catullus as the representative figure of Latin popular realism) (Horváth 1957). In 1959 the Institute for Literary Studies organized a workshop entitled “The conclusions of the Soviet discussions on realism” (*A szovjet realizmus vita tanulságai* 1959),² which showed that this theory had already been overcome in the Soviet Union. If it is so, scholars on the periphery of the communist universe should follow the centre and be allowed to get rid of realism as the only valid viewpoint of evaluation. Nyíró, who attended a university in the Soviet Union, knew very well the intellectual trends there, and did not depend on the official party channels of indoctrination.

This revolt against the concept of eternal realism eventually resulted in a collection of papers edited by Nyíró, *The Literature of Socialism*. Nobody contributed to the volume directly; rather, Nyíró selected papers and essays dealing with the question of realism from the period 1963–66, but only those that challenged the concept of “eternal realism.” In the notes, he offered further reading for every paper, namely the texts of their antagonists. In the editorial introduction to the notes he also stated that the standpoint that realism should be regarded as the characteristic of only one or two well defined historical periods “is represented by the employees of the Institute for Literary Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and literary historians grouped around the journal *Kritika* (Nyíró 1966, 397).” *Kritika* (which means both ‘critique’ and ‘criticism’) was the monthly journal of the institute, launched in 1963, which soon gained some popularity. Therefore, Nyíró clearly indicated that there was a school in literary theory, which had their headquarters and their journal at the Institute. The publication of that book, however, was not a real triumph: a couple of months later the Party realized that the content was subversive and withdrew the book (oral communication by Lajos Nyíró). It was already the time of a softening dictatorship:

□The proceedings have been published as “manuscript”: *A szovjet realizmus vita tanulságai: a Magyar Tudományos Akadémia Irodalomtörténeti Intézetében 1958. dec. 17-én tartott vita jegyzőkönyvi kivonata*. Budapest: Felsőoktatási Jegyzetellátó Vállalat, 1959.

copies found in the bookstores and in the storage of the publishing house were destroyed, but the authorities did not care about copies already sold, including those on the library shelves.

The situation turned for the fiercer in 1970, when a collection of papers came out, which was edited by Nyírő: *Literary Scholarship: Essays on the Trends in Twentieth-century Literary Scholarship* (Nyírő 1970). Nyírő asked the contributors not to be polemic, but try to find the useful, interesting, positive ideas in every trend. Yet, what was missing from the book was Marxist literary theory. Nyírő had tried to include four papers on Marxism, but the communist censors forbade it. Their argument was that even four papers – as opposed to a dozen papers on non-Marxist schools – would fail to show Marxism as the only right and valuable approach, for that would seem “weightless.” The other scandal caused by Nyírő’s team was that they displayed Marxism itself as having various competitive trends. To them, Marxist literary theory was not the monolithic phenomenon Party authorities wanted. Four papers on Marxist trends in the 20th century would have also suggested that there were various branches of Marxist literary scholarship, which the Communist Party would never admit. And so the book came out without any discussion of Marxism, containing only papers on “bourgeois” trends, which, what is more, were described and interpreted, rather than bludgeoned into defeat. A long critique was published in the Communist Party’s central newspaper. Entitled “The Critique of Uncriticalness” (Borkay 1971), it pointed out that uncritical description of non-Marxist trends may disorient readers and encourage plurality.

This is how even descriptive literary theory became subversive in the context of dictatorship. But this was only a part of the story. In 1966 the Department for Literary Theory decided that enough has been written about realism and socialist literary criticism and started actively promoting structuralism, especially in the journal *Kritika*.³ In 1971 this group published four books: a reader of translated texts called *Structuralism*, two collective volumes of poetry and short-story analyses, respectively, and a monograph, by Pál Miklós (1927-2002), called *Reading and Meaning*. (Hankiss 1971a, Hankiss 1971b, Hankiss 1971c, Miklós 1971). The productivity and intellectual impact of the school alarmed the officials. We should also mention a book published two years earlier, entitled *From the Folk Song to the Absurd Drama* (Hankiss 1969). Its author, Elemér Hankiss (1928–2015), editor of three volumes which came out in 1971, achieved considerable popularity in Hungary. Of all these publications, the collection of poetry analyses was probably the most upsetting for the party authorities, because it taught high-school teachers to analyze poems by using structuralist method, instead of the usual Marxist approach.

It is rather ironic that the Central Committee’s counterattack was based on the idea that the Institute for Literary Studies had monopolized literary theory and behaved as the centre of hermeneutical power. Monopolies are bad, said the Communist Party, and took away the *Kritika*. Pál Pándi was appointed the new Editor-in-Chief, a commissar in literary studies, and the voice of the party itself. The Central Committee also published a declaration, which actually forbade structuralism (see Bezeczký 2007, *passim*).

Lajos Nyírő told me once that during the whole period he was the head of the Department for Literary Theory (between 1959-1985), every morning his first thought

was, “I wonder if the department and the institute still exist?” The dictatorial system clearly saw that literary theory may be a powerful tool to police literary criticism on national level and established an institution for that purpose, but the employed scholars refused to play the role of policemen. Their intellectual horizon was too wide, their insight too deep, and their literary taste too refined to accept that rather primitive dichotomy that literary phenomena are either realist or anti-realist, and, axiologically, that the former was good, while the latter was evil. Instead, the literary scholars had the courage to show how many things one can do with literary theory, at a time when the simple display of various possibilities was nothing short of subversive in the monolithic system’s eye. Such display was regarded as such by the political power, which reacted by suppressing and isolating their publications and taking away their journal.

Very probably, the literary scholars saw this display in similar colors. A scholar who worked for the Institute in the early 1970s described the fervor of the period as follows: “It was a revolution, and we knew it was” (Horváth 1994, 42).

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