

# A New Territory? Literary Criticism as a Literary Genre

Tymon Adamczewski

**Abstract** The purpose of the present paper is to study the developments within the field of literary study and literary theory from the perspective of the notion of literature. Since the changes in theoretical discourse at the turn of the 1960 and 1970s literary criticism has become more essayistic in style and descriptive in nature, covering a wide spectrum of cultural phenomena and sharing various features previously reserved for literary or artistic activity. The initial reactions to the omnipresence of structuralism—together with its methodological limitations—resulted in original positions countering the objective modes of literary study. What is more, such standpoints, initially reflecting the counter-cultural vehemence of the times, fit into the anti-systematic tradition (Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Derrida) which questions the borders between philosophy/theory and art/literature. In the work of such thinkers as Roland Barthes or Jacques Derrida one might observe transformations of the approach to understanding the object of study, the purpose of literary criticism or the way of reading literature. As a result, it is interesting to analyse the selected examples of post-1960s critical discourses in order to determine their traits and possible similarities or differences shared with literary discourse and verify their usefulness for literary study. Particular attention is paid to the work of Barthes, Derrida and post-modern thinking in the light of crossing borders and opening up new territories for interpretation in literary and culture studies. Therefore, such concepts as literature, style, and theory are analysed in the context of contemporary theoretical discourse.

---

T. Adamczewski (✉)  
Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland  
e-mail: tymon.a@wp.pl

## 1 Introduction

Accompanying the social, cultural and political changes at the turn of the late 1960s and early 1970s, theoretical discourse underwent radical reformulations resulting in new possibilities of approaching literature. The erstwhile dominant structuralist critical positions were gradually supplanted by more philosophically inclined approaches, especially by the ones aiming to revise the considerably more traditional tenets, and frequently grouped under such terms as ‘post-structuralism’, or ‘post-modernism’. The 1970s also brought in significant modifications of the nature and function of academic disciplines together with a refashioned role and shape of universities, which suddenly, in the aftermath of the civil-rights, leftist, or feminist movements’ initial momentum, had to cater for newly-emerged political issues simultaneously opening a novel dimension for academic discourses. Among the turbulent transformations of the time considerable methodological permissiveness entered literary studies, not least with the introduction and subsequent proliferation of the notion of ‘text’.

Viewed as a part of the communicative system, the concept exerted a profound influence on the relationships and functions of the author, the reader and the ‘literary’. Contrasted with the idea of the ‘text’, literary work lost its meaning as an autonomous object of study. Defined by Barthes (1971) as an entity held in language and as an embodiment of a subversive force with regard to the old classifications, it became one of the key concepts in the post-1970s theoretical debate. The subsequent post-structuralist emphasis on ubiquitous textuality, despite its gradual waning throughout the latter part of the twentieth century, resulted not only in a particular blurring of boundaries between once separate discourses but also instigated a change in the ontological and epistemological status of the theoretical discourse, which, among its other effects, gave rise to numerous speculative positions such as ‘culture studies’ and the establishment of a set of key terms used by theorist, philosophers, readers, writers and critics alike. Once reserved for the discussion of ‘the literary’, criticism seems to perfectly reflect these changes and constitutes a record of the reshufflings marking the development of contemporary literary studies.

In “From Work to Text”, the essay founding the textual studies, Barthes (1971, p. 57) himself relies on a literary device: the proposition of the text’s traits concerning method, genres, signs, plurality, filiation, reading and pleasure is indeed ‘metaphorical’. His meditations, typifying the emblematic post-structuralist preoccupation with language and signification, offer a seemingly provisional definition of the whole concept of the text as “that space where no language has a hold over any other, where languages circulate” (Barthes 1971, p. 64). By stating further that “the discourse on the Text should itself be nothing other than text, research, textual activity, since the Text is that social space which leaves no language safe, outside, nor any subject of the enunciation in position as judge, master, analyst, confessor, decoder”, Barthes (1971, p. 64) ultimately obliterates the traditional boundaries between the eponymous concepts of a ‘work’ and ‘text’.

Since “the theory of the Text can coincide only with the practice of writing” (Barthes 1971, p. 57), what is advocated is a novel, less-objectifying meta-language producing a more creative approach to reading and writing.

Moreover, Barthes’ textual study seems to inscribe this part of his work into the heritage of a socially conscious Critical Theory. What the French intellectual shares with Max Horkheimer—one of the leading Frankfurt School’s theorists—is a particular awareness of the social, i.e. political, implications of textuality, and, in fact, the view of theory as a liberating discourse, which is classified as *polemical*, *corrective*, and *oppositional* and which mobilizes the subjective relationships involving the scientist as a social being (Horkheimer 2002, p. 197). In addition, the textual-critical practice acquires the status of a creative production at least partly similar to the traditional artistic literary creations as a record of a particular encounter with a text, and producing, in effect, yet another text for analysis. Marking the beginnings of a new territory, Barthes’ work not only describes a new, ‘open-ended’ object of study but also affects criticism as a theoretical practice distorting the boundaries between formerly established distinctions, genres or fields. In fact, such was the concept’s richness that it stimulated further inquiry in other fields with the works of such authors as Michel Foucault, or Julia Kristeva.

In stylistic terms, the post-structuralist textuality and interest in language as a means of communication and signification overlap with the interest in etymology, the emphasis on a somewhat personal declamatory style, or unusually extravagant methodological and typographical practices. In fact, the coinages of new words and terms, the introduction of the first-person pronoun (see e.g. *S/Z* by Barthes)—contrasted with the more objective and impersonal rhetoric of the frequently passive voice endemic to the hitherto dominant structuralist discourses—and the excessive textual fireworks of Jacques Derrida’s latter work correspond to an effort of finding new means of expression, perhaps similar in vein to the efforts of modernist artists.

With its disparate discourses and modes, post structuralism—frequently referred to as French Theory—exhibits the radical forces of transformations at work in the practices of literary critics. It traces the movement from the objective, detached structuralist meta-discourse to the altogether different methodology which centres on the intricacies of language as a medium of communication and draws on its self-referential qualities, such as the constant play of meanings, while also accommodating a degree of political significance. Interestingly, the term French Theory represents the frequently reductive tendency of many present day discourses attempting to represent the originally diverse, rich and otherwise disparate theoretical positions, e.g. of such *maîtres à penser* as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jacques Lacan, or Roland Barthes, in a narrow and simplified form. Such is the case, for example, with deconstruction, which, due to its American filtering in the 1970s, often boils down to political practice. Nevertheless, the impact of the French thinker’s works on the theoretical discourse in general turned it into a less rigid form of scholarly practice, simultaneously producing as many controversies as supporters of the new modes of theoretical meditations. In spite of the critical voices or the charges of deliberate haziness of argumentation—especially in the

case of deconstruction—it can be argued that the theoretical developments of the turn of the 1960 and 1970s can be looked at from the perspective of literature, or studied, as it were, in their own right. Indeed, the theoretical texts of the French thinkers, dealing not solely with literary production, exhibit striking affinities to literary works: not only with respect to the use of particular aesthetic tropes, rhetorical figures or structural devices present in the critical discourse, but even more as an embodiment of an often personal experience, or a document of an encounter with a text, which shares various features with many areas of interests of the traditional literary production—whatever its definition for the time being might be.

Consequently, the present paper focuses on this relationship between literary criticism, theory and literature and the possibilities of looking at literary meta-discourse from the perspective of the notion of literature. It deliberately centres on the works of selected French thinkers due to the most explicit degree in which their critical texts illustrate the issues at hand.

## 2 Theory's Limits

The possibility of studying literary criticism from the point of view of literature is invariably related to the opposition between theory and practice. Problematic as the distinction might currently be, one may look at the development of the theoretical ponderings—including the ones concerning literature—as a reaction to this pair elaborated on already by Plato and Aristotle. Presently however, as numerous post-war literary texts and critical orientations point out, the split between theory and practice is never complete and, in fact, the contemporary Western philosophy partly constitutes an effort of showing that such a clear-cut distinction implies rigid hierarchical differentiation. Jacques Derrida's work is immensely informative in this respect—also in terms of his fundamental influence on literary studies—since it aims to show, among other issues, that such binary oppositions are implicitly interrelated and that in such a contrasting framework one discourse is given precedence over another. Therefore, even though it might seem that theory underlies practice, the latter never constitutes a simple and passive reflection of the former. Actually, one does not need to look very far in order to notice the reciprocal nature of this relationship: practice never consists in a mere application of theoretical premises and the two notions constantly interact, since in order to create literature one needs to ponder on its mechanisms in the first place. All human practice is, in this light, implicitly theoretical and the reflection about literature might be either silently included in the practice of creating it, or constitutes an overt meta-discourse commenting, accompanying and explaining literature (Ayers 2008, p. 4). Traditionally literature was seen not solely as an expression of an author's creativity, but at the same time, as a comment on the nature of the whole discipline. This feeling is expressed in the bulk of contemporary so-called postmodern fiction, which incorporates the meditations on the status of literary discourse into the

actual writing together with the observations about the perception of reality. Interwoven into the literary practice, the metafictional or theoretical dimension emphasises the way in which this type of fiction parallels the problems facing today's theoretical and literary ponderings such as the debatable status of the very notion of theory, the growing anxiety and awareness about language as a means of communication, literary forms, the very act of writing, and their relationship with reality. In this way fiction mimics the changes in the areas of contemporary intellectual inquiry and evidences the link with the theoretical and philosophical traditions questioning the legitimacy of human inquiry and its status and relation to the material world.

Accordingly, the main problem with the exact definition of literary theory is the difficulty in determining its boundaries. On the one hand, theory as a meta-discourse can signify a type of an external, detached contemplation devoted to epistemological inquiry involving learning, systematising and aiming at a formulaic description of the *praxis*. In this respect, theory fits into a long-standing tradition of the systematic strain in Western philosophy exemplified by the work of Aristotle, or Immanuel Kant which ascribes to theory the place of an objective and explanatory discourse. Practice is thus located in a subservient post and further demonstrates the links between the philosophical and literary meditations. Hence, such thinking locates theory in a space beyond practice, which, in turn, is governed from without, and believed to contain distinct features or characteristics. However, the bulk of ongoing critical debate demonstrates the opposite, i.e. the effacement of boundaries, persistent questioning the notion of style, or the insistence on interdisciplinarity, all of which work to dissolve the original clear-cut distinctions. In fact, most of contemporary thought devoted to theory concerns its repeated entanglement with practice. Many critics stress that theory is not a notion neatly described by a set of rules, or characteristics, to be found in some official documents about 'Literary Theory', but can also be located in criticism and commentary, and "may be silently embodied in literary works, in the practice of their creation, distribution and reception, and—if we are to assume any relationship between 'literature' and 'life' at all—theory as discourse and as practice will reveal itself as to belong in large part to the cultural, social and political discourses, institutions and practices of which it is part" (Ayers 2008, p. 4). It should be clear by now that recent discussions stress theory's *immanence*, or the fact of its continuous involvement with institutions other than University (Ayers 2008, p. 5). Thus, theory does no longer occupy the external, abstract dimension of a master discourse but, as it is aptly characterised by Jameson (1991), serves to include a plethora of discourses, also working within the domain of practice additionally shaped by its relation to and concern with the social or cultural fields of which it is part. In addition, the notion of theory is entangled in criticism and literary theory, all of which have undergone significant transformations merging into a "new discursive genre" of a "theoretical discourse" (Jameson 1991, pp. x–xvi), which, according to this American critic, performs a political function of discrediting the autonomy of academic disciplines, and thereby the classification of texts they perpetuate, into political philosophies, historical and social speculation, novels and

plays, philosophy, and autobiographical writing, each of which is claimed by a separate tradition (Jameson 1991, pp. xvi, 240). Originally dating back to the 1960s, theoretical discourse is endemic to the postmodern era, which effaces the former distinctions between particular disciplines, and, at least partly, preserves its subversive force against the more traditional academic sites of knowledge and regular forms of intellectual inquiry, attempting simultaneously to translate this into concrete practice and politics.

Inherently linked with the practice of criticism, the field of theory is thus subject to little agreement about its content, meaning and boundaries. Unfortunately, theory's heterogeneity, which includes numerous disparate discourses and speaks with various voices, contributes to the problematic nature of the essence and omnipresence of the concept. Theory is in fact ubiquitous: there is just so much of it about that it can be easily found in academic bookshops and scholarly journals (Macey 2000, p. v); and the students in departments of literary—and cultural studies are increasingly required to read 'theory' rather than what was once termed 'literary criticism' or even 'theory of literature' (Macey 2000, p. 379). The contemporary insistence on interdisciplinarity and plurality of discourses within the modern humanities stems partly from the decline of the power and importance of traditional disciplines, as well as from the effort to question their status and influence. The fact that 'theory' has poured over numerous fields of human activity testifies to important changes in the way in which the role, as well as the status of theory is perceived in contemporary culture. No longer seen as a master-explanatory discourse, theory, its scope of interest, and the spectrum of the objects of its study has certainly widened and diversified. Various forms of the present day theory might be thus identified among the most distant domains of contemporary intellectual activity such as film, literature, culture, women studies, arts, or politics in general. Doubtlessly, the contemporary theoretical discourse incorporates numerous diverse aspects of theoretical ponderings, including the questions of methodology, interpretation as well as the aims to which they are to lead.

Literary criticism, as a seemingly more restricted branch of 'theory', may serve as a good example of the current problems affecting the concept under consideration because reading literature nowadays involves much more than it used to. Instead of limiting the understanding of this activity to a simple discussion of the way texts portray class or gender, Habib (2008), for example, acknowledges the significance of modern criticism and theory in its ability to recognise the full consequences of the practice of reading literary texts. Reading literature today entails something significantly different than it used to do still half a century ago and has very tangible consequences in the light of the present socio-political situation. According to the critic, not only the social institutions, traditionally perceived as harbouring widely understood positive intellectual values and the possibility of free-thinking, are now threatened but because of the transformations in the humanities, church, public sphere, media and the impact of technology and capitalism on life in general, theory touches upon the democratic process itself and

the very values endemic to it (Habib 2008, p. 1). Indeed, the insistence on the link between the political and cultural phenomena heavily influences the consequences of practising literary criticism, and theory as such. Despite the initial differences in modes or aims of literary theories, what binds the disparate instances of theory together is the fact that they all revolve around the reading of texts. This straightforward conclusion has fundamental consequences for understanding the nature and purpose of theory and criticism and its relation to literature. If the post-war literary theory emphasises theory's immanence, its accompanying features consist in the attempts at refashioning the distinctions between literature and criticism as well as in subversion against the possibilities of a stable and fixed interpretation supplying an objective and final truth about a given text.

Consequently, contemporary literary criticism is still related to critical theory. For Lois Tyson (2006, p. 6) for example, since criticism and theory try "to explain the assumptions and values upon which various forms of literary criticism rest", literary criticism is, in fact, critical theory put into practice. For her, the critics' activity does not rest in the evaluation of literature but its explanation, especially with respect to the theories which involve a desire to change the world—such as, for example, feminism or Marxism—which benefit even from the 'flawed' works, since through them they can expose the operation of oppressive ideologies. Consequently, criticism does not always aim at finding faults with literary works, but focuses on the explanation of literary works with respect to their production, meaning, design and beauty. On the other hand, critics also tend to be more centred on one another's interpretations, rather than literary works themselves.

### 3 Reading Criticism as Literature

Reading anything *as* literature suggests that what is to be read can be approached at least in two ways: in a literary and non-literary manner. Moreover, it implies an ability to formulate a clear definition of the notion of literature together with the way in which it is, or should be read, assuming the method and forms of attention directed at the texts under scrutiny. This, on the other hand, presupposes the set of qualities and characteristics typical for the texts generally labelled as literary. Consequently, the training in the ability to read texts in such a way, simultaneously producing a proper discourse for their description, results in the production of a class of authorities, or individuals believed to be able to describe, explain and comment on the texts in question. That is exactly what the post-structuralist critics rebelled against, hence their work could also be looked at as an effort to dissent from the domination of authorities—an idea corresponding to the 1968 student upheavals across the Western culture.

On the other hand, this attitude also suggests the idea of a particular, 'literary' attention which is directed at texts and leaves it to the reader to decide which texts

are in fact literary, instead of recognising a set of qualities in the texts themselves.<sup>1</sup> The notion of text characterized by Roland Barthes together with the Linguistic Turn in the late 1960s, deconstruction, postmodernism, and the general blurring of borderlines between practice and theory, or philosophy and literature, contributed to a novel view on criticism. As Jacques Derrida comments:

Literature has often been read in terms of a dominant meaning or of a dominant form; although a given critical tradition may emphasise one of these at the expense of the other, or insist on their interdependence, this does not diminish the determining force of the philosophical categories themselves. Or it has been read as understandable in terms of origin (biographical, historical, socio-economic, psychoanalytic) or goal (aesthetic, moral, spiritual, political), or as fundamentally mimetic and therefore answerable to a classical notion of truth. The result has been the representation of literature as itself governed by these oppositions and assumptions, a representation which one cannot simply call “inaccurate” since it responds to a marked tendency in a large part of the Western literary writing. Of course, the literary tradition is far from homogeneous, and some works of literature, criticism, and literary theory have resisted such philosophical categories more than others—not by abolishing mimesis, reference, form, content, genre, origin, intention, and so on, but by staging, suspending, and testing these concepts, showing them to other than the self-consistent, controlling categories they are usually taken to be (Derrida 1992, pp. 3–4).

In this respect, if literature consists in an eclectic heterogeneous and clever teasing out or testing of the traditional concepts used to describe or characterise it, then criticism and theory, especially in its French post-structuralist variety, can be seen as an example of a discourse operating between the fields of literature (artistic creation) and scholarly objectivity, even though simultaneously challenging this tradition.

The notion of text, due to its entanglement in language and simultaneous shifting of the positions of reader and writer, allows for a new perspective on the critical commentary. Traditionally, criticism is a predominantly a parasitical genre—it cannot exist without the original text to which it constantly has to refer to, or feed on. Through the image of a network the semantic textual plurality—etymologically retained within in the original meaning of the word ‘text’, i.e. ‘fabric’—works as a place of meetings for the three positions: the text, the author, or the reader/critic. In this way criticism can be seen, for example, as a form of autobiography, since as readers we are faced with a subject commenting on a yet another (literary) text. Such a perspective also parallels the way Jacques Derrida sees literature: as an “institution which allows one to *say everything, in every way*” (Derrida 1992, p. 36). Such a remark is especially informative in the view of the post-structuralist critique of the classical (New Critical, or Structuralist)

---

<sup>1</sup> Good sources which discuss this issue are, among others, Jonathan Culler’s (1997) *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, or *Literary Theory: An Introduction* by Terry Eagleton (1996).



theoretical pretence to its status as a privileged metalanguage. In fact, contemporary literary theory and criticism can be viewed from the perspective of borderlines, frontiers and demarcation lines. Even the father of deconstruction himself acknowledges the lack of necessity to distinguish between ‘literature’ and ‘literary criticism’, however, making a reservation that all forms of writing or reading should not be assimilated, but these new distinctions “ought to give up on the purity and linearity of the frontiers” (Derrida 1992, p. 52). This, in turn, leads to the questioning the traditional distinction between structuralism and post-structuralism. The former movement expressed epistemological fundamentalism, shared at some point by its most prominent exponents who expressed an explicit belief in the possibility of reaching under the veneer of transitional cultural phenomena or processes in order to obtain positive knowledge about the continuous, ordered base (or deep structures). In contrast, post-structuralism voices a general epistemological scepticism, most visible perhaps in the discussion about interpretation and criticism, and places theory within the domain of discourse. In this way, literary theory can neither provide an objective external perspective on the interpretative practice—because it itself relies on its results—nor on the literary practice—since it is itself entangled in the processes and conditions which were subject to analysis (Nycz 2000, pp. 21–23).

Accordingly, post-structuralist criticism seems closer to literary production since it is centred on the experience of the text rather than on its assessment from an external objective vantage point. In the same vein, criticism can be read as a literary genre, however, with several reservations. The dominant one being that contemporary criticism, or theory for that matter, has been heavily influenced with theoretical positions which had originated in philosophical inquiry (Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault) coupled with sociological and psychoanalytical observations (Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan) and resulted in their inclusion into literary studies departments. In consequence, (literary) texts were seen as cultural phenomena, or sites of ideology which, from a critical standpoint, should be analysed and resisted. As time went by, theory seemed to have turned into a meta-discourse focusing on determining the status of the dominant tenets. Therefore, literary theory has also evolved into an essayistic and self-commenting endeavour, employing numerous literary devices and textual strategies which contribute to the possibility of reading it as a (literary) genre, class or type.

## 4 Examples: Two Important Figures

The selection of examples is always crucial and particularly telling, also by means of exclusion of the aspects, issues or objects *not* chosen to illustrate a given point. In this case the situation is even more problematic given the scope, diversity and manner of the so called post-structuralist works. Nonetheless, the two authors whose critical works perhaps most clearly lend themselves to a literary attention are Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida and the choice of these thinkers seems to

me especially important due to a particular evolution of their respective critical positions, which may help to demonstrate certain points.

The writings of Barthes, the instigator of the “Death of the Author” (1968), who managed to produce a substantial array of various theoretical texts, are universally recognised as illustrating the transition from structuralist formality to the post-structuralist openness. However, whether it is the Barthes who reads into cultural phenomena trying to uncover the latent meaning of soap powders and detergents in *Mythologies* (1972 originally published in 1957), the Barthes (1974) analysing the most minute yet striking textual connotations in *S/Z*, or the Barthes (1975) pursuing *The Pleasure of the Text*, his writings produce a compelling discourse which, apart from its frequently unusual insights, infallibly grasps the reader’s attention. Moreover, his now canonical study of Balzac’s short realist story “Sarrasine” in *S/Z*, with the length of the whole commentary far exceeding the original narrative, is a perfect illustration of the way in which a textual commentary turns into a text. The critical discourse, through its particular insistence on the ideas of random selection of the lexias, or studied fragments, as well as personal remarks about their connotations results in producing the impression that both the meaning and a text’s functions depend on and are created by the very practice of reading. The scant methodology (compare e.g. the codes of narrative) used in his later critical commentaries serves to demonstrate and explain rather than prove a given point. If any method is used, it is rather employed not as a reductive formal tool, but as a suggestion for ways of approaching the text so as to observe the potential disruptive play of meanings in the original text. In this way, literary criticism becomes an informative written record of an almost personal confrontation with a text, doubtlessly enriching the experience of reading which, similarly to literary works, opens new perspectives on further encounters with writing.

Similarly immediately recognisable for his unusual textual strategies, the works of Derrida (1979) exemplify the philosophical tradition in literature and prove valuable in their own right. Literary criticism for Derrida (1992, p. 53) is in general “very philosophical in its form, even if the professionals in the matter haven’t been trained as philosophers, or if they declare suspicion of philosophy; literary criticism is perhaps structurally philosophical”. His notoriously difficult texts constantly brake away with all possible conventions, borders and frontiers; also in terms of typography as such works as Glas (1986), *The Truth in Painting*, or “Living On/Borderlines”—among others demonstrate. Apart from the content and form, which are frequently difficult to follow, since Derrida’s (1987) text themselves often illustrate the practice of deconstruction, the texts of the author of *De la grammatology* (1967) are akin to a certain extent to some modernist experiments with the powers of linguistic representation.

Needless to say, the writings of these two authors—as the representatives of the most infectious ‘French Theory’—with their concepts, forms and style of criticism have had a profound impact on the tradition of contemporary literary criticism and theory, the developments of which are equally associated with the late-1960s revolutions and the resulting theoretical transformations. The two thinkers as such

recognise the role which language plays in the reality and acknowledge the instabilities lying at its core but, equally importantly, their work, to an extent, demonstrates the fate of the revolutionary theoretical discourses. Both textuality and deconstruction can be described in the terms of subversion, radicalism and revolution which—despite their original disruptive force—have become, in a way, institutionalised, illustrating the consequences of such critical practice for the status and powers of literary studies as a discipline and its role in the process of education. In fact, both textuality and deconstruction have become a standard on university curricula and now constitute well-established methodologies for working with both—literary and non-literary—texts, in spite of Derrida's reservations that the aim of deconstruction is, actually political and that it "is not a method and cannot be transformed into one" (Derrida 1985, p. 3). Therefore, it seems thoroughly unnecessary to analyse the works of the post-structuralist critics, such as Derrida, Barthes or any other, from the point of view of traditional formal (literary) analysis in order to trace their use of allegory, metaphor, ellipsis, or any other figures, since the application of formalist or stylistic methodological apparatus to the texts would delimit their original explanatory powers and appeal. What is perhaps more important is the fact that yet another way in which one can look at such criticism is its historical significance—not without influence on the present shape of literary studies as well—since it also constitutes the record of responses to literary texts and the manner in which the critics, or philosophers have related themselves to them.

## 5 Conclusion

Paving the way for numerous contemporary approaches, the post-structuralist developments in the area of literary criticism and theory in general certainly set up a new territory for the theoretical ponderings of the past. Interestingly, the critical writings of especially the French thinkers, demonstrated a new style of theoretical commentary. On the one hand, the downside of such criticism at times consists in the impression of being incoherent, difficult to grasp and sceptical, since such criticism focuses on the negative aspects such as lacks, incongruities and inconsistencies of a text. The origins of such practice lie in its inclusion in the anti-systematic tradition in philosophy, exemplified by the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Frideric Nietzsche, or Ludwig Wittgenstein among others. Owing to this heritage, the type of criticism in question is much more personal (at times autobiographical), aphoristic or lyrical, but is equally capable of penetrating the problems under analysis.

It seems, however, that contemporary literary criticism does no longer constitute a new territory. It can nonetheless still be framed into a category of a genre, especially a historical one (a record of responses to literary texts and critical tendencies), which due to its multifarious content and scope of interdisciplinary interests—regardless of the problems with definition this produces—can still evidence important tendencies for the humanities. Namely, the mechanisms—also

visible within literary studies—which seem to govern contemporary Western culture: a certain absorbent power, which incorporates the once subversive and radical positions into standardized responses; methods taught within the same sites of knowledge; and power which these positions initially were critical of. What remains to be studied is perhaps the usefulness of the approaches presented here, and the possibility of viewing the critical texts from the perspective of literature. The solutions which seem most logical is the possibility of criticism's combination with various types of textual hermeneutics which might result in opening up diverse interesting and important contexts for literary study, and which seems to have been already initiated by some contemporaneous orientations. Nevertheless, the merits of the post-structuralist approaches remain in their contribution to democratization processes which work against the supremacy of the authorities. They result in the liberation of the critic from the position of a 'slave' of the text, language, concepts, or terminology. Additionally, the frequent inclusion of the political function, derived from various Marxist approaches, into the textual practices of criticism contributes to its significant position among the discourses of contemporary critical theory, which, on the other hand, have been preoccupied with a much wider set of 'texts' than the original literary ones. Besides, bearing in mind the influence on academic education and the critical business, the methodologies of many textual practices—despite their original hostility towards any forms of formalisation or systematisation—have become so widely employed and discussed in university classes that one needs to remember that such a representation of criticism is highly selective and simplifying, especially with respect to the original richness and heterogeneity of the critical discourses. Consequently, post-structuralist thinking about language and texts still reminds us of the vicissitudes of meaning and makes us more cautious about such issues as interpretation, or the seemingly simple reading practice.

## References

- Ayers, D. 2008. *Literary theory: a reintroduction*. UK: Blackwell Publishing.
- Barthes, R. 1968. The death of the author. In *The rustle of language*, trans. Richard Howard, pp. 49-56. California: University of California Press, 1989.
- Barthes, R. 1971. From work to text. Reprinted in *The rustle of language*, trans. Richard Howard, pp. 56- 64. California: University of California Press, 1989.
- Barthes, R. 1972. *Mythologies*. New York: The Noonday Press.
- Barthes, R. 1974. *S/Z*. USA: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Barthes, R. 1975. *The pleasure of the text*. USA: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux.
- Culler, J. 1997. *Literary theory: a very short introduction*. New York: OUP.
- Derrida, J. 1979. Living On/Borderlines. In *Deconstruction and criticism*, pp. 75 -177. London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul,
- Derrida, J. 1985. Letter to A Japanese Friend. In *Derrida and différance*, ed. David Wood and Robert Bernasconi, pp. 1-5. Warwick: Parousia.
- Derrida, J. 1986. *Glas*, trans. John P. Leavey, Jr. & Richard Rand. Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press.

- Derrida, J. 1987. *The truth in painting*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Ian McLeod, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Derrida, J. 1992. *Acts of literature*. Edited by Derek Attridge. New York, London: Routledge.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1996. *Literary theory: an introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Habib, M. A. Rafeq. 2008. *Modern literary criticism and theory. A history*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Horkheimer, M. 2002. *Critical theory: selected essays*. New York: The Continuum Publishing Company.
- Jameson, F. 1991. *Postmodernism, or, the cultural logic of late capitalism*. London – New York: Verso.
- Nycz, R. 2000. *Tekstowy świat: poststrukturalizm a wiedza o literaturze*. Kraków: TaiWPN Universitas.
- Macey, D. 2000. *The penguin dictionary of critical theory*. London: Penguin Books.
- Tyson, L. 2006. *Critical theory today. A user-friendly guide*. New York – London: Routledge.

Crossroads in Literature and Culture

Fabiszak, J.; Urbaniak-Rybicka, E.; Wolski, B. (Eds.)

2013, XVI, 532 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-642-21993-1