

## Bogdan Bogdanov: What is Literature?

What is literature?<sup>1</sup> You can see what language does when I say “What is literature?” with this verb, with this copula. It immediately makes the allegation that I am about to tell you precisely what literature is. Of course, I shall stick to my approach, which was succinctly formulated: respect for the way we speak in general, not for the language of science, not for some specialised jargon, but for everyday parlance. When we speak – we inevitably say what some things “are”. And they are something, we attach clear predicates to them and through these predicates we are trying to impress that they are precisely what we predicate of them. About some things there is no doubt, they are what they are and what is predicated of them is absolutely or to a great extent true, however, there are those things about which the very copula, the verb ‘to be’ somehow commits us to the idea that this must be the truth. University lecturers must always teach what is true.

So, “what is literature?” – I must reply immediately and together with this “what is literature” I need to keep my loyalty to what I called respect for everyday speech. In everyday speech we say that something is whatever, but nothing prevents us in a while to claim something totally different and this proceeds from the spontaneity of conversations. In everyday speech we feel free to contradict what we have said – however, what matters is not so much the contradiction, but the fact that we pile up predicates of one and the same thing. It is this manner of speaking that I am going to present to you. As I tell you what literature is, in a minute you will hear me say that literature is a lot more things, that it has many more predicates. We shall not have a definition which restricts us and turns literature into a clear-cut object. Be that as it may, when talking about something – let us assume it is literature, time, or love, or loyalty – we need a number of predicates motivated with the necessary reasoning.

We present things which exist as if they existed outside language, which is also where literature abides – outside language, but at the same time inside our language we place a temporary object whose existence can be more certain than that object from the outside – and this is the very magic of speaking; this is the magic we use, usually – in a more mundane, linear fashion. We need to impress quickly that what we are talking about is precisely as we say and nothing other. As you can see, I shall be talking to you about literature as an object but at the same time I shall be talking to you about talking as such, because I claim: it does not matter what we talk about. Every single object, whatever it is, can be denoted with another word or can be defined in a different way, from a different perspective. We denote something, but on the other hand, we make our denotation at a concrete moment, in a specific mood, among a specific group of people to whom we speak, with whom we need to share a common language and understanding, i.e. apart from denoting, we also mark this mismatch between denotation and presentation, which is a major magic of speaking. There is a difference between the external object, no matter whether this is something which can be identified, and between the object of our speech. It does not coincide with the external object, because the object we are talking about is an object in this particular speech and for those who are talking about it. I employ the idea of an object as something which does not coincide with that aspect and that meaning of the thing under discussion. It is the same with literature. If it was not a difficult thing, it would not exist, over and over again talking and writing about the same question. This is what keeps speech alive. Live speech is always speech at a particular moment in time, among some people who happen to be there at the time of speaking.

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<sup>1</sup> The lecture is a transcript of the second meeting of the seminar held on November 12<sup>th</sup> 2009.

Essentially there are two types of objects: one type are manifest and the others – non-manifest. The latter kind are also called non-ostensive so that the Latinate root can give them greater weight. Ostensive objects are clear, we can say this is that, and the other is another thing and we can point a finger at them – they stand right there, before our eyes. The non-ostensive objects are more difficult to discuss because in some way they always create problems, although we can always give examples. There are some non-ostensive objects which appear absolutely clear to all. Such an object which exists to a great extent by virtue of the feeling we experience and which helps us recognise it clearly via the magic of the word is the thing called ‘love’. This non-ostensive thing ‘love’, as well as most ostensive things cannot exist in another way than in a class of similar objects. It may appear to us that love is unique and we would like this word to be crystal clear, but, in effect, love immediately disintegrates into different types and realisations, which, in turn, merge into other shapes and forms of affection. In the language of logic, these are called classes. This is a class of love-affection, but also - a broader one, a class of various feelings. This is true of everything: we think in terms of classes – so that ostensible objects are also in a class of their own, about which we have a special rank in our conscience. However, we tend to severely simplify what our brain does and we quickly reduce our brain activity to basic ideas and circumstances, while in fact things are considerably more complex. Besides, everything is part of more than one class. One of the issues that I keep saying and try to impress on my audience – without much success, unfortunately, is that there is a class ‘human’ and this class is very complex, because it splits into several sub-classes, in which there are, for instance, contemporary and past people, Europeans, Bulgarians, Muslims, there are various classes of people but all of them are included in the class ‘animal’. And being part of the class ‘animal’, they are related to both simple mononuclear living creatures and to higher classes.

What we register as emotion should better be seen as a general circumstance, for instance, the sadness in the eyes of a dog, or an elderly woman. Bear in mind that what our emotions do, the product of our feelings are precisely such classifications, which classifications do not always achieve the status of language. Language cannot conceive them, but emotions can. The juxtaposition between the rational and the emotional is a true concurrence – it is not a genuine opposition, this is not the natural state in which a person exists: firstly, because a human being purely by virtue of his literacy cannot help but think at times. In fact, a person always thinks, but he does it in perfunctory and abstract terms, more often than not - and from a different point of view – he is unable to engage in anything unless there is some emotion in it. Feelings should always be there. Love is a feeling, an emotional state, but this is not what I am saying. I keep making the same claim – love is love, and in it there is incessant thinking. What we call feelings are states of broad, indiscriminate sensations. While I hereby propose a way to distinguish thinking from feeling in the same way that we are used to doing it in wholesale every day exchanges. And this is the way I am going to talk about what literature is.

What is literature?

The first way to define it – literature is not history, philosophy, or science – although these four areas make part of the class “human activity”. All the four disciplines present forms of thinking-cognition, discrete forms of thinking and cognition, or different methods of creating oral or written texts. A second definition – literature is shorthand for what we call ‘fiction’. The problem is that the borderline between fiction and non-fiction is not clear. We want to define what is fictional in literature but this is a category which shifts in time; it is one thing at a given moment, and a different one – at another one. Always when we try to define something, we seek to define it as an entity, i.e. via a trait which is innate to it, but, in fact, we end up defining it not only through the feature that pertains to it, but also via traits that distinguish it from other things, which make it different.

Part of the magic of words is ‘essence’, the term introduced by Aristotle and adopted in European science; a word we use to taunt our listeners – because they may not know what the essence of something is, but I do – i.e. a distinctive feature and I tell them, saying “the essence is this – end of story”. But if this is what a man’s essence is – an inborn trait, but this trait is also an external relation to something else, something which is different. Fiction can exist happily even without a concept of what literature is. Precisely this is the case with Aristotle and his *Poetics*, with which he presents an inaugural text of literary theory, and he complains at the beginning of his text that a general concept of literature is lacking, that a definition of poetry exists but a concept which would embrace also forms of prose fiction at the time of Aristotle does not exist. That is why ancient Greeks have launched a new coinage: λογοτεχνία, which names what we today call ‘fiction’. ‘Fiction’ is a historical category and it makes sense to have a history of art forms, however, apart from this historicity there are consistent features which are always there. The big issue is – which are those features that are always present?

The next definition – literature is a set of creative writing texts in a cultural environment. This is a completely pragmatic definition. Bulgarian literature, French literature, European literature, world literature .... All the literary texts in a cultural environment can be put together in a hyper text. This hyper text or the researcher who has compiled such a hyper text would then say: here is the model of Bulgarian fiction, or this hypertext can serve as a paragon of Bulgarian literature. Likewise, we sometimes set off a major work in a national literature, such as *Don Quixote* - for Spanish literature. We do not know which the major work of Bulgarian literature is – Pencho Slaveikov wants his songs to be one, but somehow Vasov’s novels have already occupied this position; however, we have moved on in time and our ideas are now different. A new hypertext can be created and such products have been made in the history of literature – a following of different forms of art in the history of a national literature. So, on the one hand we have a set of fiction texts, on the other – experience, be that a super hypertext, which can be a sample, or a series of samples connected historically in some sort of development.

We move on - literature as a fiction text. We recognise a literary text by its language. When I say ‘we’, I mean ancient Greeks, as well as any other environment – a specific type of speech, different from the everyday one, this is fiction. Poetic speech is easy to recognise – there is rhythm in it. Prosaic speech is quite specific too; there is also some type of rhythm in it. Whatever the difference between fiction and everyday speech, it is never nonexistent. Imaginative, rationally enhanced speech – this is the impression we get from the language of fiction. Written in a language which is easily recognisable as literary. Further on – a text with a specific coherence, a special texture – multilayered and ambivalent, a text where more than one speech form is employed and more than one discourse. A specifically deliberate text flow, in which two significant features occur in a sophisticated relation: on the one hand, a representation of something, an object, a specific world and reality which mean something to us – and we know that we have a literary text before us. At the same time, we can have a presentation of something which may easily be non-existent or be presented as different from what exists. A representation of something, an object, a specific world and reality and at the same time – a reflection, i.e. a specific type of thinking, within the very system of representation. Just like with feeling or thinking, we act in the same way with literature. We all know what literature is, but the very trait we deny literature is thought – science, philosophy, sociology think, literature does not. What we will be after here is the specific way in which literature thinks. And literature thinks in a modular fashion, i.e. – it thinks simultaneously in a number of different ways.

A specific type of modular thinking, which goes hand in hand with representation – this is a broad generalisation often made about literature. In Borges and *Odyssey* we have two different literary realisations in which we need to try and find out whether the two have something in common. Let us consider things we would not normally take into account – moreover, let us do it existentially. Let us think in the way that we read Borges or *Odyssey* – and then try and decipher, in the same way, the texts that flow within ourselves and around us.

And this is my plea: let us read literature as if we read ourselves. Rather than escape from ourselves in the Great Literature, because we are unable to come to terms with our own text. We are all creatures of text.