

The Theory of Fictional Worlds from the Perspective of Structural Analysis

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A great portion of 20th-century literary criticism was focused on questions such as "What defines literature?" or "What makes literature different from other types of discourse?". After a period when the question of poetry had been formulated as a problem of historical or biographical context, the time came to articulate the *specific* laws regulating the structure of literary work. Yet, it would be profoundly imprecise to view this new epoch as a coherent whole where different schools (e.g., Russian Formalism, New Criticism, Prague and French Structuralism) are bound by the same question and where the differences appear only at the level of particular solutions. The fact is that there has never been universal agreement on the form that should shape this question and that would open the common field of possible answers. This is the point of view from which one must understand the polemics and discussions between different schools and scholars. They don't deal as much with particular findings but rather with the very sense of the questions mentioned above.

It would be equally inadequate to describe this situation of literary theory as the past state of affairs. In the present it is still the problem of the form in which the questions should be posed that provokes discussions between literary critics: Is it a question of a particular experience (phenomenology, Kantian aesthetics), a problem of a specific *langue* regulating particular poetic *paroles* (Todorov, Greimas), or is it a question of individual *valeur* belonging to particular utterances independent of a literary code (Meschonnic)? In this paper I would like to enter these discussions from the perspective of structural poetics and I will attempt to sketch out at least a general outline of some of the key issues. As a partner to debate I have chosen one particular theory of literature, a theory inspired by modern developments in the field of philosophical logic and analytical philosophy, namely, the Theory of Fictional Worlds that describes literary discourse on the basis of the concept of fiction. The reasons why I want to focus on this theory are as follows:

The Theory of Fictional Worlds presents itself as a conception based on the notion of sign. Lubomír Doležel, the prominent representative of this school, asserts in the introduction to his book *Heterocosmica*:

The ground for the unified theory has to be prepared by bringing together in comparison and confrontation the various conceptions of fictionality, which have been formulated in isolation. I believe that fictionality is primarily a semantic phenomenon located on the axis 'representation (sign) - world', its formal and pragmatic aspects are not denied but have an auxiliary theoretical role. (Doležel 1998, 2)

In this particular context, the concept of sign is interpreted as a relation between text and fictional world, that is, as a specific relation between an aesthetically effective level of intension (i.e., the level of text, analogous to Frege's Sinn) and an

aesthetically neutral level of represented entities that constitute themselves *independently* of a particular text (reference, Frege's *Bedeutung*) (Doležel 1998, 139 ff.). Doležel describes the status of these entities on the basis of the Theory of Possible Worlds (esp. Kripke) which he partially reformulates in order to adjust this theory to the specific features of the fictional universe (e.g., the fictional world is conceived as a "small world", that is, not all questions concerning its entities or, more precisely, concerning facts constituting the world can be answered).

On the basis of these presuppositions Doležel holds that extensional level of a particular work can be paraphrased in different texts, that is, different utterances can refer to the same object (to a fictional object created by text). On the other hand, the intensional structure is principally unique: "[I]ntension is necessarily linked to texture, to the form (structuring) of its expression; it is constituted by those meanings, which the verbal sign acquires through and in texture." (Doležel 1998, 137-138).

In accordance with these presuppositions Lubomír Doležel describes the role of the reader as follows:

Readers access fictional worlds in reception, by reading and processing literary texts. The text-processing activities involve many different skills and depend on many variables, such as the type of reader, the style and purpose of his or her reading, and so on. But possible worlds semantics insist that the fictional world is constructed by its author and the reader's role is to reconstruct it. The text that was composed by the writer's labors is a set of instructions for the reader, according to which the world reconstruction proceeds (...). Having reconstructed the fictional world as a mental image, the reader can ponder it and make it a part of his experience, just as he experientially appropriates the actual world. (Doležel 1998, 21)

I have chosen this theory as "a partner to discussion" because I assume (and this assumption should be justified later) that the structuralist formulation of the questions mentioned in the first paragraph requires critique of those literary theories that are based on the notion of sign. In other words, if we intend to articulate the specific features of literary discourse from the structuralist point of view we must explain in what sense one cannot see literary utterance as a semiotic object. This also means: As far as the problem of fiction is necessarily connected to the concept of sign (in posing the question of fiction we study the ontological status of *represented* entities) the question of literature must be studied independently of the question of fiction (or non-fiction). This critique presents the first step of our investigation because the perspective of fiction and the perspective of sign largely dominate the current debates on literature. The Theory of Fictional Worlds is the right partner to debate with because it explicitly connects these concepts together.

Let's introduce the arguments supporting these assertions. In this paper I will focus on three groups of problems. Discussion of these problems should enable us to point at three principles characterizing poetical text. The first realm of problems

deals with the fact that the Theory of Fictional Worlds (developing a semiotic perspective) isolates one of the layers originally constituted inside the structure. As far as the question of layers is concerned I will preliminarily define the notion of structure as a specific type of whole and I will try to articulate analytical principles connected to this key concept.

The second set of problems deals with Doležel's assertion that the role of the reader is to reconstruct the fictional world represented (signified) by literary text. This assertion implies that the layer of "represented entities" dominates the utterance. In contrast to this conception I shall point at the phenomenon of dynamic organization of structure. This and the former principle (the concept of structure) make it possible to define literary criticism as a principally "empirical" discipline: critic must always let the structure itself to display its own elements and their specific configuration.

The last group of problems deals with the question of meaning of literary work. My intention is not to come up with an elaborate theory explaining different aspects of this problem. In the context of polemics with the Theory of Fictional Worlds I will only try to demonstrate that the question of meaning is not necessarily limited to deciphering of an intensional layer and reconstructing aesthetically neutral facts or entities (extensional level). I will try to prove that the reader always reads the whole structure as a specific type of unity: A text "give sense" insofar as the reader can conceive the complex structural unity and the "rhythm" of poetic sequence¹.

Fictional worlds and the general concept of structure

Let's start with the following passage from *Heterocosmica* dealing with the processes of creating and reading:

Extensions are available only through intensions and, conversely, intensions are fixed by extensions. We can speculate that the authors conceive the fictional world first as an extensional structure, inventing the story, individuating the acting persons in their properties and relationships, setting them in landscapes and cityscapes; then, by writing a text of a particular texture, they give an intensional shape to the world. Conversely, the readers are presented first with the intensional structuring, since they access the fictional world through the text's texture; by information of formalized paraphrasing they translate the texture into

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¹ The following investigations and assertions have been partially inspired by following authors: the concept of structure as a functional unity develops the concept of structural whole as it was formulated in the Prague Structuralist School, namely, by J. Mukarovský and M. Jankovič (see Mukarovský 1978, Jankovič 2005). The critique of literary semiotics stems from the poetics of H. Meschonnic (esp. Meschonnic 1982) and É. Benveniste's linguistics of *discourse* (see Benveniste 1966 and 1974). Finally, the concept of meaning as a structured field has been partially inspired by concept of "systemical reading" that represents the key notion in poetics of H. Losener (see Losener 1999).

extensional representations and thus reconstruct the extensional world structure and its parts - story, character portraits, landscapes, and cityscapes. Following the reader's reconstruction, fictional macrosemantics involves three successive analytic procedures: it apprehends the regularities of texture; from these regularities it derives the intensional structuring of the world; by applying an extensional metalanguage (e.g., paraphrase) it reconstructs the extensional worlds structuring. (Doležel 1998,142-143)

From this point of view the layer of fictional objects constitutes itself independently of the particular text or, let's say, independently of intratextual relations: The author *first* creates a field of aesthetically neutral entities, a fictional world as an aggregate of different objects, events, and characters, and *then* writes a text of a particular structure. The fact that according to Doležel the constitution of this layer is fully independent of the level of texture is also underlined by his assertion that the reader is able to construct the same fictional world using a different text (paraphrase).

What exactly does it mean that the extensional level is independent of the textual level? Since Doležel counts towards the elements of texture "poetic figures and devices, the meaning of rhymes and sound patterns, anagrams and other covert meanings, "poetry of grammar", the "semantic gesture", narrative models, represented discourse" (Doležel 1998, 138), this presupposition indicates that none of these "formal" structures can have an effect on identity, function and character of objects belonging to the level of fictional world. It is obvious that Doležel has two types of relations on mind. On the one hand, there are the relations between textual entities. Considering this type of relations he presupposes that even a minimal change of texture can influence the specific meaning (*Sinn*) of the intensional level. Holding this Doležel gets very close to the concept of structure: a character of each intensional element depends on the position of other elements and *vice versa*. On the other hand, one can observe a quite different relation between elements of texture and elements of fictional world. This type of relation is not structural but rather denotative - the intensional layer simply signifies the represented objects and a change in texture (a paraphrase of the original version) does not have any effect on the meaning and the function of the fictional objects or events (that is, on the theme represented by the text).

These assertions can be infirmed on the basis of the presupposition that none of the elements of literary discourse escapes the process of structuring. Since Doležel places the elements of theme (characters, objects and events) on the level of reference, that means on the level which does not enter the structural relations, he isolates the layer of represented objects and supposes that theme can bear only one function (to turn up as a set of objects referred to).

Nevertheless, one can point to the fact that - from the structuralist point of view - there are no objects that would turn up as identical entities with identical function throughout different textures. The specific function of theme in an utterance and the

meaning connected to this function always change and constitute themselves with regard to other textual elements.

Let's focus on the term function. This concept denotes a particular purpose of a particular component in the structure. From Doležel's point of view theme always functions as the object of reference, it always turns up as something represented, as a component which the utterance brings up to the field of the reader's sight. The function of thematic components, their purpose in the utterance is therefore to come up as objects the sentence "talks about", as described objects. As I have already pointed out, Doležel can make this assertion because he places theme outside the structural relations where the elements mutually determine each other and change their functions according to the transformations of the structural field. If I hold - contrary to this presupposition - that theme does not step outside the structural whole, that it is inserted in the structure, I primarily try to emphasize the fact that theme can bear

- as far as it is a component of a structure - an infinite number of functions (much like other layers of structure, such as compositional forms
- gradation, contrast, climax - and linguistic elements - on the level of sound: rhyme, euphony, alliteration; on the level of meaning: metaphor, metonymy, irony etc.). The structural whole constitutes a functional unity, a unity of mutual functional determinations.

As an example we can take the lists of objects one can find in *The Lay of the Cid* (the precious artefacts and treasures the conqueror Cid has gained through his glorious victories). The function of the thematic layer - in this particular case - is not to turn up as a pure object of reference; the theme does not represent a fictional universe that the utterance aims to inform us about. If we paraphrased the utterance to formulations describing the objects as simply "being there" or if we started to reconstruct the fictional world following the thematic field of the poem we would miss the sense of the speech. Such a reformulation would be misleading because the aim is not to "photograph" the objects but rather to emphasize the panegyric character of the verses. In this particular case all the components of the utterance (compositional forms and the components of language) are subordinated to the intention "to glorify" and it is this specific structural context that shapes the specific function of theme. From the point of view of the Theory of Fictional Worlds it does not matter whether we read *chansons de geste*, a naturalistic novel by Zola, or Old Greek panegyrics. The text always projects a fictional world and the role of the reader is always to "reconstruct" the world of fictional objects².

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2 Even if the function of the thematic layer is to present itself as a referent (as a component being talked about, as an object of description) it does not step out of the structural unity of the mutual functional determinations. We never encounter an object itself, "a pure object" but object with specific features that constitute themselves in relation to other textual levels and their configuration.

Now it should be clearer why I emphasized that the question of literature cannot be confused with the question of fiction. If we approach to literature from the perspective fiction we *a priori* assume that literature only describes or represents. We have to cast doubt on this assumption to make the first step towards the structural poetics. From this perspective we can preliminarily formulate the question of literature as a question of structural field articulating its specific functions.

Structure as a dynamic unity

I have just touched upon another feature of the Theory of Fictional Worlds that I intend to discuss in the following part of the paper. One could talk about a specific kind of *apriorism* characterizing this school of literary criticism. By the word *apriorism* I mean a specific approach to literature when we apply particular categories to literary texts without reflecting which components of the particular text are crucial to its structure and which are not.

Let's make the point clearer. I am not trying to say that general categories (e.g., the categories of narrative) are useless for the analysis. I am not arguing for some kind of nominalism supposing that each novel or poem constitutes an absolute singularity out of reach of any theoretical description. I am only emphasizing the fact that a critic before starting his analysis must let the utterance itself display which components are essential to the work, that is, which elements regulate the shape or the unity of the particular utterance, which elements of the structured sequence are subordinated to the dominating components and which elements are marginal regarding the particular shape of the text. If the Theory of Fictional Worlds claims that the role of the reader is to reconstruct fictional universe we can consider this position to be aprioristic: it presupposes — disregarding which layer is important for the particular text — that the level of represented objects constitutes the key component of a text *as such*. It is the same as to suppose — in the case of description of a poem — that the analysis is over when all the sound patterns, rhythms, rhymes and euphonious structures have been enumerated. This attitude does not reflect the fact that the poem could put aside the euphonious elements and that it can be structured, for example, according to a specific configuration of its semantic components. The position of the Theory of Fictional Worlds is very similar to this type of analysis: it enumerates fictional objects without reflecting on the importance of the thematic layer for the particular work.

It is difficult to imagine how this theory could deal with poems of Velimir Chlebnikov who works with so-called *zaumnyj* language keeping down the thematic layer. Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style* could also cause trouble to this type of description: in this particular text we encounter a dozen of versions of the same story always articulated in a different jargon. It would be useless if a critic enumerated all the characters and events again and again. The returning of the same

theme emphasizes different linguistic articulations, the theme represents only a subordinated level of the text.

The reasons for criticizing this view on literature are primarily methodological. If a specific element corresponding to a general category appears in a particular work it does not necessarily imply we must make it the object of analysis. As far as the component represents a marginal aspect of the particular structure and only minimally participates on its shaping it could be even misleading to assume that the corresponding category is expressing something in the poem. Regarding this principle one can define another feature of the textual structure. It is not only a whole of mutual relations in which the character of each element depends on the position of other structural components. It is an *hierarchical* complex of functions: on the one hand, it contains dominating elements, on the other hand, it is constituted by subordinated layers that support the function of those. From the aprioristic point of view one could describe the utterance endlessly (make a list of different focalisators, sound patterns, poetical figures or enumerate all the fictional characters, objects and events) and one would always find something in the structure corresponding to these categories (every narrative "contains" a point of view, specific characters, a particular relation between *sujet* and *fabula* etc.) – yet only some categories are meaningful for the particular structure, in other words, only some categories can in the particular case describe the specific shape of the structured sequence. Therefore, the key operation characterizing the work of a critic is not to find out if there is something in the text corresponding to particular concepts, his task is to find out what is - in a particular case - important and what is not. To be sensitive to the literary expression means to be sensitive to its "fields of relevance".

Considering this feature of the literary structure I will talk (following the traditional structuralist concept) about the dynamic nature of text. The word "dynamic" should point to the fact that the relation between dominating components and subdued layers must be characterized in terms of tension: the dominating component compresses other elements but principally any of these elements can get into the position of the dominating principle during the further development of the sequence. This transformation of the hierarchy leads to reconfiguration of the whole structure: subordinated layers will develop according to the logic of the new dominating element, the previously dominating layer does not determine the sequence anymore and articulates itself newly according to the actual shape of the utterance. The transformations do not have to take place only within a particular level (for example, new formation that does not fit to the previous rhythmic structure can come up on the level of sound patterning) but also between different levels (for example in the end of Vladimir Sorokin's novel *Marina's thirtieth love* the sequence fluently switches from the level of theme to the level of language).

This principle implies that it would not be precise to assert that one has to observe fields of relevance of a particular *text*. One has to inspect individually each

phase of the particular poetic sequence. The critic must suppose that configuration can radically change anytime throughout the movement of the work.

Structure and its meaning

In the beginning of this paper I have asserted that the main task for literary criticism is to separate the concept of literature from the concept of sign. All the points I have raised up so far represent an ingredient of this critique. If I (in the first part) was arguing against removing of a particular structural component (theme) from the structure I actually tried to demonstrate that a theme of an utterance is not a *signifié* and therefore it does not step out from the structural whole. If I was (in the second part) insisting on the assumption that any structural level can become the dominating component I could have also said that one cannot divide the elements of the work into the realm of the signifying form (sound patterns, composition) and the realm of the signified content (concepts, "fictional objects") representing the meaning to which we should penetrate through the signifying level and to which we should always direct our attention. In the last part of this paper I would like to - following the critique of sign — focus on the problem of the meaning of a literary work and outline a conception that would introduce a specific notion of reading based on the idea of structure, a conception that would not be based on the idea of interpretation or deciphering of signs.

Following previous critical assertions (primarily the questioning of the extensional level) and the notion of dynamic structure (its hierarchical organization and tension between its constitutive layers) we can abandon the concept of meaning as a level of reference signified by text (or by textual form) and introduce the concept of meaning as a specific unity of the structural field that is constantly changing as the utterance moves on to new phases of the text (the hierarchy and its elements are permanently subject to transformation). Therefore it would be more precise to talk about a "meaningful unity" instead of a "meaning": we do not understand a text because we are able to get through the signifying elements to the signified level of sign but rather because we are able to register a specific coherence of the structural field and its development through different phases of textual sequence. To make this point clearer

I must explain what holds the different elements of the structural field together, that is, what is the principal of the structural unity.

As far as the phenomenon of structure turns out to be a unity of heterogeneous elements (sound patterns, figures of meaning, composition etc.) we cannot say that the unity resides in the coherence of one of the textual levels. One can imagine a coherent narrative where all the elements of the story constitute a perfect functional unity. Yet, this type of coherence does not exclude the possibility that the text will make no sense to the reader. For example, we could easily build up a coherent story expressed through different jargons where permanent switching from one type of

linguistic expression to another would significantly complicate the unity of sequence.

Yet neither can we say that the unity of text constitutes itself as the sum of unities belonging to different levels (homogenic linguistic form, thematic coherence, compositional consistency and so on). One can imagine a text which develops as a description of a crime story (theme), which is articulated in scientific discourse and which endlessly repeats certain syntactical structure. We obtain the unity of language (scientific discourse), the unity of theme (criminal story) and the unity of composition but not necessarily the textual unity. Different aspects of the text just don't fit together. These simple examples should demonstrate that the coherence of the structural field cannot be deduced from any particular element in the text. It is rather a matter of specific relations that penetrate the structural field and bind its components together.

In order to avoid an abstract solution to this problem we should develop our description of the textual unity from the reader's point of view and try to focus on what we see or what we experience when a work appears to us as a whole.

At this point we can return to the notion of hierarchical configuration. I have already suggested that the structure constitutes itself as a field of forces: the structured sequence develops as a continual movement of compressing of subordinated elements by the dominating layer. This wants to say that the subordinated components are selected and organized in such a way that they support the logic of the dominating elements and that - doing so - they let the dominating component to step in front of the reader's sight (emphasis). For example, if we want to emphasize a particular rhythm associated with panegyric poetry we must choose specific lexical components and organize them into such a form that they would not disturb the phrasing of the verse but support its specific shape. We would also have to choose a theme that would be adequate to the panegyric character of the rhythm. This theme must not be articulated into details as far as the detailed articulation might catch attention and transform the poem into a piece of descriptive poetry. When the reader observes the unity of text he observes precisely this type of movement: to understand the unity of a work means to be able to follow the dynamics of compressing and articulated emphasizing — we can see how the logic of one layer supports the logic of a different layer, we follow the slower or faster transformations and we observe how new elements enter this movement, how they change its rhythm and direction. Therefore, understanding of text cannot be reduced to perceiving the unity of one of the textual levels (e.g., the fictional world). Reader's sight follows the movement of the whole structural field that embraces all the elements. We do not read "something about something", we always read a structure, a field. This also means that a break or incoherence in one of the layers (e.g., causal inconsistency on the plane of fictional world) does not necessarily represent a break in the structural field. If it is the sound pattern that regulates the movement of sequence the breaks in the thematic level are marginal in regard to the textual unity. For example, Dadaistic poems are not incoherent, even though they

don't present a unified theme. Unified rhythm develops on the basis of figures of meaning or on the basis of graphical unity of the page.

A literary discourse introduces into this movement of the structural field specific types of relations. Contrary to other types of utterances the structure of poem keeps tension between the subdued and the dominating components, in other words, the literary sequence keeps a balance between the pole of unity (corresponding to the absolute dominance of the compressing component) and plurality (corresponding to the meaningless chaos where no particular logic is regulating the movement of the sequence). At this point we can — following the Kantian aesthetics — point at the reader's ability to judge by each particular case whether the structural field keeps tension between its constitutive elements or whether the utterance collapses into one of the poles (full subordination, full plurality). The term "judging" must be emphasized, it indicates that the specific relation of plurality and unity cannot be measured by an *a priori* principle but must be judged for each text separately. In other words, to encounter a structural tension does not mean to compare a particular poem with a concept prescribing how the structural elements should be organized but rather to observe the specific tension of textual elements in the movement of the particular structural field.

Let's summarize the key assertions that have been throughout the paper:

First, I focused on the general concept of structure. This notion designates a specific organization of utterance (not the linguistic "code") that constitutes itself as a functional unity. Describing utterance in this manner one cannot simply use the concept of fiction and the concept of sign to analyse a particular work of literature. These concepts don't reflect the fact that all the layers (even the level of theme) are inserted in the structure and that the function of each component depends on its position within the text. From the semiotic point of view it seems that there is a textual component of utterance bearing constantly the same function.

In the second part I tried to explicate the principal characteristics of structure as a hierarchically organized complex. Relations between structural elements are not "neutral", one can divide them into relations of subordination and dominance - there are elements determining certain shape of the structure and elements supporting the logic of central components. Following these assertions I emphasized the dynamic character of the structural field: any element can appear in the centre of the text and change the movement of the utterance according to its own logic.

In the end, I tried to introduce a general view on the problem of meaning. I argued against the concept of understanding the text as a process of deciphering. Presupposing the concept of structure as a specific unity penetrating heterogeneous levels of the text I described the act of understanding as a relation to the whole of the structural field. The structural unity of a poem appears as a specific tension that cannot be founded conceptually but rather must be "judged" for each particular

case.³

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