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# Literary Institutions and the Institution of Literature in the Wake of Theory

by Dimitar Kambourov

All thought aspires to mathematics  
as all art aspires to music.

*Pater*

Art is perfectly useless  
and all bad poetry is sincere

*Wilde*

Literature makes nothing happen  
Literature makes nothing happen

*B. Johnson*

Literature is vanishing, no doubt about it. Literature searches in vain, not finding anything to say. And anything said about it vanishes as being literally inscribed in literature that vanishes. The ambition to write about such a predicament without falling into literature's abyss is a kind of vanity, as usual in vain. The more so as, contrary to its long self-lamenting tradition, literature now hardly finds the strength or will to announce its decline, wrapping its failure in muteness.

It was Hegel who first predicted the end of literature. At the time such an end was not observable: it was rather prophesied as a side effect of the End of History.<sup>1</sup> As Vlad Godzich reminds us in the introduction to his brilliant collection of essays *The Culture of Literacy*, the latter is foreseen to come when the Spirit finally manages to invest itself in the material world, making it conscious to the stage when the distinction between matter and Spirit vanishes. This is the advent of Absolute Knowledge, in which the intermediate figure of the State withers away to be replaced by self-regulating and autonomous institutions of knowledge that no longer need to communicate with each other, for they all partake of the Spirit and do nothing more than to manage its day-to-day investment in the world. This moment corresponds to the posthistorical state. In such a world, Knowledge is *no longer surprised* (italics mine, D.K.) by anything since the Spirit is coextensive with all there is to be known, and the only problems that remain are problems of local management (m.i., D.K.). The all-encompassing concern with efficiency and competence takes the form of exclusive specialised practice and rejects as inefficient any broader concerns.

It is obvious that such a condition makes literature totally inadequate, so the latter is insistently expected to wither, or to endure a Kafka-like metamorphosis. This is the Hegel's dialectical logic, somewhat readily accepted by his successors and foes from Marx to Foucault.

After Daniel Bell and Francis Fukuyama's actualisations of Hegelian view postulating an interdependence between history and knowledge, Godzich's summary hardly sounds striking and thus inspiring. Moreover, Godzich somewhat cunningly formulates his argument in the tension between a culture of literacy with its prerequisite decline and the theory being in a process of coerced withering.<sup>2</sup> Yet it

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<sup>1</sup> It seems that neither Marx, nor Kierkegaard, nor Nietzsche have disagreed with their master here.

<sup>2</sup> These forces are clearly in the ascendancy at present, and the Hegelian view of the posthistorical state is closer to realization than ever, especially since the collapse of its Marxist alternative still rooted in the paramount function of the state. The literacy programs that already exist evince a relation to language, and proclaim mastery and competence as their goals. They are likely to gain ground in the universities as the frenzy over competitiveness with the foreign powers increases and the economic situation justifies doing away with the 'frills' of interpretation and other forms of literary study. As I observed earlier, their growing hegemony has only found literary theory in its path. It is my contention that theory has arisen out of the same ground as the new literacy, but whereas the latter has sought to accommodate, or even further, the emergence of the posthistorical state, theory has sought to oppose this emergence, frequently as blindly as literacy on its side of the divide.

seems to me that his attitude is rather promising in a shattering condition of literary institutions and the institution of literature. If literacy as a Medieval project of universal language, of a common medium, creates the preconditions for language's more or less conscious exclusion from the avant-stage of the European intellectual concern until the age of Enlightenment, literature is engaged both with normalisation and unification of language, as well as with the preservation of the linguistic differences of the oral forms of language and (thus) of the semantic differences and undecidabilities.

In a sense literature has always functioned as a provocation of literacy, while at the same time being its most powerful institution and efficient device. Thus I would attempt to both extend and shrink Godzich's issue: I will re-examine the case as a temporally evolving contradiction between the culture of literacy and the culture of literature, or, to put it somewhat more openly, of culture of identity and culture of difference, the latter presented by literature namely because it turns out to be the most internally and inherently differential project of the New Times.

The greatest survivor among the programs broadcast by the state radio in totalitarian Bulgaria read 'Literature, Art' (although in the case of radio the punctuation is always a matter of imagination). The title simultaneously separated and gathered its parts, implying thus either that literature is not art or that it is more than art, or that literature is art to the utmost, dwelling somehow on the both sides of the margin, dividing art from the unknown territory beyond. Unlikely to be casual, such a case encompasses the problematic status of literature as a Modernity project. Literature was a basic constituting agent of the rigid national identities and their state prolongations; along with it literature was a liberating and autonomising project, especially with regard to language, which proved to be one of the central issues of Modernity. Now, if the nation and state are being expected to be on the wane, it sounds logical that the institutions responsible for their constitution, will be withering as well. Thus the first function of literature should go away with the state and even could be expected to take part in that global suicidal project. Yet what about the second great function of literature to preserve orality, variety, diversity and the whole range of difference, whose greatest promoter proved to be recent theory.

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Now, in the nineties, as theory appears to be on the wane and as a new recession visits its devastation upon universities, the support for literacy is vanishing, and this in spite of the fact that an 'educational lag' of the same magnitude as the 'missile lag' of the early sixties has been consensually diagnosed. Before universities are further 'rationalized' and made into more 'efficient' loci of cultural reproduction and of the production of marketable knowledge, the links between the debates on literacy and those on theory must be examined.

The problem is even more crucial, since it is rather the second function that falls away whence the identity politics of literature gains new territories. It seems to me that Godzich's argument about state's would-be readiness to die, could be made precise through the case of literature, which should be expected to demonstrate the same todestrieb eagerness. Rather, both state and literature in a somewhat lizard way are prone to cut off their differential part and to take their place as identity-institutions, dedicated to preserving the treasuries of national and other common values which could not be covered by the institutions of market, economy and profit-providing cultural reproduction. If the state and literature played out their liberal and liberating program in favour of variety and diversity, now they prove to get on the other side of the barricade, occupying rather conservative positions in a deep contradiction to their somewhat forced flexibility of both self-imposing and self-negating, or rather of their self-imposed self-negation.

Thus if the state voluntarily shrinks its validity of preserver and distributor of mostly symbolic capital, promoting the market institutions whose interest in culture will be mostly instrumental, we could discern a similar would-be suicidal rationale in the literary institutions and the institution of literature. If any content today is just an instrumental form for profit, we could suppose that the very literary field finds its medium, literary or better poetic language, inadequate, non-relevant for the actual market competition. Are then the changes in the literary institutions so nakedly coerced by the private or state money distributors or budget suppliers, or the symptoms of fatigue and boredom are more and differently telling. Could we explain the massive flight away from the profession of literary scholars as directly or indirectly forced by the system, or is there some inherent trait in literature that has been driven to an end, which diminishes the interest in it. And was not the same immanence that drastically intensified the interest towards literature in the 1960s and 70s, which, from the 80s up to now, has cast so many institutions and individuals overboard.

Three exits seem to be possible: either increasing oblivion over literature as an inefficient and subversively anti-modern in either sense project of Modernity, whose functions are going to be appropriated by other institutions and media; or a kind of Hegelian negation/preservation, as the institution of literature, being no more an instance of authoritative speaking, precipitates traces, reminders, residues in the new instances of authority, and thus its regime continues to interfere in the sheer broadcasting ether, sporadically spoiling the serene media politics of music that took the power nowadays; or, finally, the shrinking of literature to a kind of institutions of sublimation and transfer of negativity, of any kind of *Fleurs du Mal*,

turning thus into a kind of dumping ground, safeguarded by the invalidity of its own medium.

In a sense, all of them are taking place now. Literary studies are being transformed in cultural studies; they are being forced to change into writing and composition initiatives; they are under pressure to change their curriculum either towards different arts, new media, etc. discursive and semiotic practices, or the emphasis is laid on politics, on the authors' being black, female, homosexual, etc. or otherwise tackling minority issues; there are very few scholars in the field who keep their initial fidelity to literature (and often they are not the most insightful ones, as the later Harold Bloom's and Frank Kermode's books infer), so the field of literary studies has never been so vastly spread and devastatingly disseminated over neighbouring fields and bibliographies, not least because of the notorious trespasses endeavoured by the field's representatives in the last 20 years.

Yet in the very overwhelming regime of mass-media there remains something of the notorious theory period of the 70s, although the song does not remain the same. Should we consider the case of theory in the last couple of decades as a kind of separate reality, or was it a kind of radicalisation of the case of literature in the last couple of centuries? We should recall the history of the theoretical treatment of literature in order to demonstrate that the case of theory is a kind of taking literary inherence to its limits, which turns to be a kind of (tress-)passing beyond, where literature will stop being what it were not, as a possible formulae for it would read.

Roughly stated, theory was both an anti-dialectical and counter-historical project, although it has been prescribing an utopian horizon dooming to failure.

Up to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century literature was strongly engaged in constituting and legitimising the new national State. From Herder through Hypolith Taine and Dilthey up to Plekhanov and Roland Barthes the Spirit of the (brand-newly constructed) nation is prone to be held by the literature of a country. The critics' and historians' task than would have been to elicit and demonstrate the circumscribing power of literature as a tracing mirror of national essence (be it Gaelic rationality, German spirit, or Russian soul), rather than an objective world reflection (in Stendhal's notorious mirror metaphor) or a personal expression. In this sense literature was the most powerful manifestation of the national language treasure and the source of national identity. Thus from different trends of Romanticism through Cultural Historical and Spiritual Historical Schools up to the New Criticism, semiotics and structuralism (see Levi-Strauss analysis on cheese and fromage) the organic unity and identity with national dominance or overtone have been demanded from literature. That's why literature has ever been very much in the core of identity politics, be it the identity of the nation, the state, the character, or what-

ever. Even Marxism was fastidious to urge literature to make too easily class difference, although it did not have any qualms in using it for the metaphorical transfer from working class to the oppressed peoples, or to the progressive humanity. By the way, the mute shift, endeavoured by the late totalitarianism from class to nation (and open nationalism) owes much to the communists' prudence to go not that far...

Yet with Russian Formalism that appeared in the second decade of the century, a project of sheer literary theory was started. Its initial program was both revolutionary and conservative (which speaks more about the essence of literature than about the internal contradiction of the school). On the one hand the formalists strove for a science of literature based on reliable quantitative methods; treating literary language either like machine, or like an organism, they tried to demonstrate that there is nothing mysterious about literature: it is made by words, rather than by feelings or ideas, with the insistence that the words play the role of devices, techniques, whose objective has nothing to do with any spirit or soul but was just a way to attract and keep attention to it. Thus the poetic language was autonomous, autotelic, autoreferential entity with no targets outside itself. It was a radicalised Kantianism and the meaning there was, if at all, appearing as a compromise and finally another trick for attracting and keeping the mind.

Yet such a radical view had a rather old motivation. For what the formalism was doing in fact was just to summon back literature among the other arts. Yet this time under the name of its unique sign system rather than under the umbrella of aesthetics.

Yet since literature shares the most widespread medium—the rather controversially called natural social language—it ought to present its language as autonomous in pursue of an aesthetic value. But since it is absurd to announce full autonomy and uniqueness, it was urged to concede to be a language twisted and estranged<sup>3</sup> that differs and defers from everyday language, which was to be automated and algebraic. What is interesting here is that in order to obtain artistic virtue, literature had to sacrifice the idea that it shares its medium with society and culture.<sup>4</sup>

The advent of literary theory is thus marked by literature's departure from language and communication that are all-too-ideologically impregnated. Poetic lan-

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<sup>3</sup> Zabaven in both meanings in Bulgarian

<sup>4</sup> It makes the very initiative of commenting on a literary work a very troublesome task, since it is but a translation of its uniqueness into a language of culture. Yet the critical activity is meant to preserve the impression of that uniqueness, thus fulfilling its debt.

guage or literariness ('literaturnost') provides neither reference, nor representation, nor mimesis, nor expression. The ambition is nothing less than to surpass the notorious non-referentiality of music.

Thus from its starting point theory construes a literature that has nothing to do with the values of identity. On the contrary, literature was sought to be caught in the very principle of difference: although the latter was not always clearly discerned, it was the implicit strategy even when the commonplaces of identity and unity were being preserved as a rhetorical surface. And the real literary process which developed parallel to theory have been far from a passive sample. A project that still expects its master would demonstrate the mutual inter-inspiration between theoretical and literary praxes, most impressive when remaining unnoticeable for both sides. Now it is a commonplace that the so called post-romantic literature has been stretched between the effort to compensate the fundamental arbitrariness between the words and the things referred and on the other hand the growing disbelief that such an effort would produce but a sham *als ob*, as if effect of correspondence, of seeming identity.

Thus theory was slowly coming to the awareness that such an ideologically divulged discursive sphere as literature is the most promising instance for criticising any ideology, because of the always already failing literary commitment to ideology. Being unavoidably contradictive and antinomous, literature was pointing to the inherent inconsistency of any ideological inscription. It is not that literature stops being ideological matter: it is, but in a somewhat inefficient way, since it permanently bares, strips naked, and refers to its ideological stature, pointing it out. The only uniqueness that literature could aspire for in comparison to the other discursive practices would be the baring, and keeping naked, of the fundamental difference between phenomenality and referentiality, the latter thanks to the unique patient and sincere acceptance of an epistemology of a rhetorically affected, infected and constituted language. And since there was no other discourse eager to announce its rhetorical status, and since all the discourses remain are apt to aspiring after, motivating, stimulating or simulating the reliable character of their sign systems, overtly or cunningly neglecting their own rhetoricity, literature or literature-thus-taken occurs to be a feeble but reflexive epistemology with no ontological aspirations. Paradoxical as it might seem, the most self-suspicious language (literature has ever had a special level for expressing the inexpressibility of the world, man, etc.) proves to be the more reliable language, since it pays attention to the very condition of its (unreliable) speaking. If until then the problem with language has been posed and dissolved quantitatively, i.e. through taking measures for restricting

or diminishing the unreliability in question, now the problem seemed to be rather more radically, i.e. qualitatively, posed.<sup>5</sup>

And here emerges the somewhat ironic reversal of the whole project of critique, acutely reminiscent the Dostoyevskian dilemma “if God is dead, everything is possible.” Let us recall that one of Derridian referrals to literature points it as the dis-

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<sup>5</sup> Let me propose a short overview of the work of two in the beginning independent thinkers with rather different intellectual rationale, who gradually combined their forces in subverting the field of literature and the humanities. I mean Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, the inventor of deconstruction and the most efficient literary theorist, who considerably changed the field of literary studies, literary criticism and dealing with literature. Derrida used literature as a part of his rather more ambitious project for thorough transformation of the Logocentric, Phallogocentric Eurocentric mind; the other working from the other side: elaborating some realms of seemingly restricted significance as poems, parts of novels, autobiographies, lectures or papers, and from this starting point overthrew some stable philosophical prejudices. What is important for my point is that both of them demonstrated the importance of literary discourse on a larger scale, since the literary discourse put at stake the actual epistemological project in the humanities. It was a rather unique situation, at least for the humanities in the 20th Century, when literary discourse was declared to be the very starting point for thinking through the difficulties and problematicity of any discourse, which pretended to be autoreflexive and aware for the question of its status and authority to speak. For literature was the only discourse that acknowledged, conceded, yielded, and even trusted the figural, rhetorical ground of its epistemological project. The latter made it so to say exemplary in a situation in which the other discourses were hardly prepared to acknowledge the same ground, oscillating between refusing, neglecting, omitting or treating as secondary or epiphenomenal their own figurative language. The very unreliability of literary discourse thus turned out to be exemplary, but along with it literature's acceptance and coping with such a predicament was provokingly exemplary as well. It seemed that the acknowledged weakness, the competence about its own flimsy thought would be an advantageous position with regard to profound thought, which seemed like a colossus on clay legs. Literature, which was in a relatively healthy condition in the beginning of the century, when for the first time it was granted an autonomous, self-signifying language, (it is not clear to what extent literature had coveted this language), now seemed to be paradigmatic for the whole field of language, or at least linguistic complexity. Literature somehow combined the necessity of freedom with the freedom of necessity. It was operating with metaphors, yet pointing to their metaphoricity, which no other discourse bothered or dared to do. Thus literature expected interpretation, reading of those metaphors, not reading behind or beyond them. The literature after Flaubert and Mallarmé proved to be prevalently auto-reflexive discourse, paying attention to the way it was done, rather than to the things it was saying, if the latter was not at all redundant.

Deconstruction was indeed a great success of literature and the literary field. Literature was institutionalised like a paradigmatic discourse. Every serious discipline in the humanities demonstrated a readiness to reflect its own literary constructs and even to treat them like valuable epistemological instruments rather than like blunders that should be eradicated.



course that could say everything and anything.<sup>6</sup> If literature should be taken as a sample and starting point, it radically changes the requirements for discursive regime, since the regime of truth or better the true presentation of truth will be displaced by the principle of efficiency, i.e. by the ability to convince. The epistemology of rhetoric will be superseded by the more classical form of a rhetoric of convincing. The whole theoretical project thus occurs to be the condition for its displacing and purging out: deconstruction deconstructs itself, though far from the disciplinary way it was criticising the disciplinarity of the modern society. Not that there were not severe attacks against theory from the positions of humanity, morality or political commitment. More than this, deconstruction was dismissed by the left and the right with completely opposite arguments: the leftist demonstrated its cultural and political conservatism; the right wing attacked its distrust and value subversion. What is remarkable, is that being in severe opposition, both the left and the right spectre demonstrated their adherence to the politics of identity. Thus strangely to some extent the contemporary discourse in the humanities is more literary than ever before where the very literature is rejected as an institution and authority, and the literary institutions are losing their subject and objectives. We could go further and acknowledge that the theoretical project with literature as a starting point was thoroughly successful, which meant its full acceptance as the politics of media, as well as the politics of politics. Theory furnished with rhetorics, argumentation and (im)moral grounds the whole anti-theoretical range: from the ivy-league conservative academia through Madonna/di-Caprio successfulness to the market compulsion that made my literary department at the first Bulgarian private university to take financial refuge through the courses of writing and composition, predetermined for the better part of the already admitted illiterate students. (And

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<sup>6</sup> Deconstruction raised literature to the position of an inevitable element in any discourse. It deserves mentioning that before that structuralism implied the same. But since structuralism treated narrative as a consistent part of any discourse, now deconstruction subjugated the narrative to rhetoric and announced the latter to be the insurmountable constituent. But the very deconstructive or post-structuralist re-evaluation of literature thus put under question the margins of literature. The erasure of the margin between literary and non-literary discourse resulted in literature's losing its fragile identity. Thus literature's promoters made it vulnerable to the aspirations of other discourses in the humanities (for example, psychoanalysis overwhelmed the narrative; rhetorical analysis made the political speech and the poem equally susceptible to interpretation; aesthetic qualities turned out to be political or communal convention). At the moment when literature turned out to be the inevitable coefficient in any type of discourse, it lost its high standing; it stopped being the ambiguous institution that it was: a discourse that is authorised to say both everything and whatever; a discourse that is both encyclopaedic and irresponsible.

there is no doubt that, since the departments need students' fees, they would have prepared their own courses of "sufficient literacy" had their students failed on the general pass/no exam. Ironically enough, this is may be the only point of overlap between the Bulgarian and American academic situation.)

Thus theory is in the process of being replaced by the politics of literacy in a more global sense; the latter proclaims linguistic mastery and competence as its goals. It is likely to gain ground in the universities as the frenzy over principle of competitiveness increases and the economic situation justifies doing away with the "frills" of interpretation and other forms of literary study.

Now, it is interesting what is coming to replace that "frills" of interpretation, not only in the field of literature, but in the broader scene of the humanities nowadays.

Let us start with the somewhat postponed conclusion that the decline of literature as an institution and the crisis of literary studies could be seen as a symptom, effect and, in its turn, as a secondary cause for the radical change of the language's place in actual cultural condition. A new regime of language is, like a web-site, under construction. Language is widely taken post-theoretically, which is to be both pre-theoretically and non-literary, but rhetorically to the utmost. A literary opening of language towards difference of writing is spotted out as exactly the cancerous-like deviation that does not need to mention along its overcoming or bypassing. Language is about to start pretending for transparency and universality, being cunningly partial and perfidiously coloured.

The process of globalization of English as the contemporary lingua franca both demonstrates the ambition and the side effects of such an initiative, since the basic, or technical, or business, or whatever form of pigeon English is transparent in the sense of a truncated richness of nuances and connotations, i.e. of truncated literariness. A modern, somewhat ironical, but profoundly serious initiative has been lately announced for complete translation of universal writings into pigeon English, since the latter is the language of the twenty-first century. As Godzich wrote, "these development, combined with the impulse toward ever greater efficiency mandated by the competitiveness of the marketplace and the need to maximise profits, have made it inevitable that the position occupied by language in our culture undergo radical change. This is tantamount to saying that the culture of literacy has been faced with transformations that it cannot control, if not with extinction altogether. The 'crisis of literacy' deplored by the media and public figures of every political persuasion is but the symptom of this larger epochal shift, and the remedies offered by the new writing programs are nothing but a blind groping with the nature of this problem." What kind of shift would be that, how could we formulate its fea-

tures and objective? In other words, what will be preserved of language and literature and what will be sacrificed for the purposes of survival?

An attempt to map out the case of literature in a process of losing its positions and identity, or better its difference and differentiability, under the assaults of internal and external foes, would face the problem of grand number: the enthusiastic blurring of the margins between literature and the other discourses, resulting in literature losing its *differencia specifica* and thus the institutional position of non-authorised authority; the 'fault' or strategic reluctance of deconstruction to provide an institutional infrastructure for literary field after harnessing it in its critique of logocentrism; the massive literaturisation of non-literary genres and discourses in parallel process of literature's liberation of literature as a result of attracting journalistic, popularly-scientific and academic discourses; the new technologies and the media politics of music-and-image, the case of (M)TV, video and Oscar-targeted cinema, that turned literature into a time-engulfing machine of slow and vague difficulty in comparison to the new media's omnipresence, winning the competition in the condition of evaporated illusion for unmediated knowledge and communication;<sup>7</sup> after the post-structuralism and deconstruction, the dead of the author, of the work, of the message, of the position and properly articulated attitude, literature was 'scapegoated' as the most conspicuous and hopefully sole incarnation of such plague, etc., the list could be continued.

Yet it would be helpful to propose a telling interpretative figure to encompass the global complexity of the process after theory and literature.

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<sup>7</sup> In the 20th Century literary discourse justified its presence mainly on the basis of difference, differentiability, deviation, waywardness, deformation, wrenching, etc. with regard to some degree zero of neutral everyday language. It was an utopian effort but nevertheless it worked to preserve the field and its status of semi-autonomy. The reverse move was made by deconstruction, i.e. an attempt to show the literariness in any other discourse and to require the same level of reflexivity, was an act of discovering literature everywhere, which soon was equal to nowhere: literature lost its *differencia specifica*, which was meagre anyway. The situation in the field of actual literary production: journalistic faction, encyclopaedia, novelised humanities helped to the blurring out the margin. And the pan-digestive media in a boalike gesture engulfed literature and in the same time spat out its bones, the very skeleton of the literary happening of language. In short, media made its best to blur the difference between referentiality and phenomenality, which was the main domain of literary exploration of language.

It meant three main procedures: making music the basic language of media politics; eliciting from literature the level of narrative and releasing it from its possible allegoricity; coercing media politics of music and literature, reduced to non-figural narrative to work in a common regime: the regime of cinema-interview-TV trial-rumour news.

To be sure, literature is not persecuted; it is not even out of interest; it just does not make any difference anymore. It means it is the same whether you are dealing with a literary or with a non-literary text. For the objectives are outside the text (contrary to one of the most misinterpreted Derridian statement); the text is treated just as a social document, and the fact that it is literature simply doesn't seem to matter: literary studies have almost become cultural studies. Or, as an introduction to the recently published 'Literature and Political Imagination' puts it rather bluntly, 'our concern is with what and how imaginative literature might contribute to political theorising and not vice/versa'.

Something in literature as such (with or without definition) jars with the needs of contemporary cultural politics, the fact that effects in truncating from literary body the disadvantaging organs and limbs: the widely hailed faction, or journalistic novel advent with the names of Doctorow, Capote, Wolfe and Mailer, together with the encyclopaedic high post-modern of Pynchon, Coover, John Barth, Barthelme, Calvino, Eco, Pavic, and not without support of the so called academic novel in the face of Fowles, Lodge, Malcolm Bradbury and Gilbert Adair produced the strange atmosphere in which post-modern literature was widely recognised as a literature post-mortem.

In July 1969 Roland Barthes asked: Can literature be anything for us other than a childhood memory? In other words, what in literature continues, persists, speaks, after we leave school? Crosswords, quiz shows, posters of somebody's hundredth anniversary, some allusions in the newspaper read for different purposes. The Teaching of Literature (which is the title of the colloquium where he read this paper) is almost tautological. Literature is what is taught, period. Nevertheless, he gives some ideas how to improve the teaching of literature, i.e. break the grammar that produces stereotyped individualities: dispense with authors, movements, schools, i.e. abolish from the acts of censorship as: social classes; sexuality and sex; concept of literature (literature goes without saying); language (it is clear that behind the classical idea of language there is always a political idea, linked to a consummation of power. Barthes announces himself against classicocentrism. And after that, at the very end, he offers three points of rectification: to do the history of literature backward, to make ourselves its centre. A second principle: replace the author, the school, and the movement by the text. Third principle: at every occasion and at every moment develop the polysemic reading of the text, recognise at least the rights of polysemy, open the text to symbolism. I believe that would produce a major decompression in the teaching of literature.

Ten years later, in his program essay *The Resistance to Theory*, Paul de Man (who appeared rather dismissive towards Barthes), commenting on the same sub-

ject, writes: teaching is not primarily an inter-subjective relationship between people but a cognitive process. The only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly, not personal; Analogies between teaching and show-business are excuses for having abdicated from the task. Scholarship has, in principle, to be eminently teachable. A question arises only if a tension develops between methods of understanding and the knowledge which those methods allow one to reach. If there is indeed something about literature, as such, which allows for a discrepancy between truth and method, between *Wahrheit* and *Methode*, then scholarship and theory are no longer necessarily compatible: the clear distinction between history and interpretation can no longer be taken for granted. For a method that cannot be made to suit the 'truth' of its object can only teach delusion. The most effective of these attacks will denounce theory as an obstacle to scholarship and, consequently, to teaching. For if this is indeed so, then it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true.

I will not comment on the involuntary pun with the theory as an obstacle to scholarship, which happily is not always the case. But in comparison to Barthes's optimistic everything goes, that does not pose the fundamental question whether literature is teachable, if it is what is taught, de Man is concerned about the very possibility to teach literature in concordance to the theoretical doubts about its teachability.

Now we could see that almost everything predicted and prescribed by the evil (unfortunately not bad) prophet Barthes has come true, and in the same time de Man's fundamental contradiction was dissolved in a quite Solomon-like or Pilatus-like way: theory was dismissed and fired, sacked and retired, while the teaching of literature was reorganised in accordance to Barthes's instructions, so as the class, sexual, racial, and other forms of social, cultural and political differences found their way to the very top or better to the very foundations of the profession, which forced a lot of literary departments to fairly acknowledge and endorse the new condition by becoming new-born cultural studies with a rather clear political commitment or at least politically correct agenda. The texts' polysemantism is not only 'at least' possible, but is institutionalised by the representatives of the groups and communities a class usually contains. The history is read backwards, with us and not with Shakespeare as a centre, and the canon is threatened to be opened up (a metaphor, strangely enough, not treated as all-too-phalocentric by its feminist practitioners) or multiplied, or even dismissed as a pure, and blind about it, ideological construct, which the aesthetic value easily proves to be as well.

To teach unreadability of literature or unteachability of that unreadability does not seem to be rigorous enough an initiative, and since the literary studies could

not remain the same after the theoretical impact, rather Pilatus-like institutional gesture was the divide-and-rule politics, devastating some weaker, and to be sure innocent and theoretically rather virgin departments, like Slavonic studies, thus warning the more dangerous departments like French Studies, Comparative literature and even English studies in USA, that if they don't take care to change in the expected direction, their destiny is already clear.

Yet what in literature made it teachable, contrary to de Man's concerns? What is this, that predetermines various political readings (be they committed to race, class, or gender), escaping the complications of literary undecidability and supplementarity of would be rigid oppositions? What is that in literature that resists any multiple interpretation, any ambiguity between equally valid and mutually presupposing differences, any non-confrontational contradiction. What was localised and removed as the cancerous body of theory? What restored the previously confined positions of literary history under the name of so called New Historicism? What made literature so susceptible, explanatory feeble and unable to resist? What showed the way for dragging literature, or its remains, into the fertile fields of interdisciplinarity and case studies? Which is that element or level of literature, which is both constitutive for it and requiring consistency, plausibility, causality, etc. values of identity? In other words, at which point is literature most vulnerable to the assaults of easy phenomenality of personal identification, of Parmenidean world and thought identical correspondence? To put it even more roughly, what makes us forget that literature is made by words, by non-visual constructs, and instigates us to identify it with the moving, feeling and acting behind the pages all-too-human mannequins? What is the starting point for literary education in school, which is about to become its final point: the point for departure?

For everybody who is acquainted at least remotely with the newest history of literary studies, the answer is somewhat too predictable, which partly explains the embarrassing lack of interest towards that phenomenon. The advent of narrative proves to be a last resort for language after its rhetoricity being acknowledged.

It deserves reminding that narrative with all its versions (plot, fabula, story, sujet, action, etc.) has a rather ambiguous glory in the history of modern literary studies. On the one hand, it was one of the literary elements most susceptible to scientific formalisation, which made it an object of some of the most insightful and changing face of literary understanding studies in twentieth century. On the other hand, it

was somehow not that high-rated<sup>8</sup> category because of its evident self-identity, that bypasses interpretation or transforms it in reproduction, representation, at last retelling of the same story. Yet deconstruction in its rhetorical and critical-linguistic analyses invested efforts to relegate narrative to the rhetoric of mimesis, i.e. to prosopopeia and metonymy, with the active collaboration of different forms of repetition and irony. Now the situation is mutely changed, since after the renovated interest in Benjamin's *The Storyteller*, and the contributions like Peter Brooks's explorations over Freudian story-telling<sup>9</sup>, Lyotard's announcement of the advent of small narratives<sup>10</sup>, Ross Chambers's interest in the seductive and convincing power of narrative<sup>11</sup>, Frederick Jameson's cultural analysis on the basis of narrative predominance<sup>12</sup> and some other attempts of in the sphere of social and cultural psychoanalysis<sup>13</sup>, and especially Thomas Pavel's *The Time Machine*, where he recognises that plot is a covering institution in our culture and that it imposes, like any institution, restrictions on mobility, proves an increasing interest in narrative, which has hardly something to do with the structuralist narratology. Rather adversely, narrative is predominantly treated in the scope of media and communication theories, which has nothing to do with epistemological potentials but justify a thoroughly seductive and simulative approach to narrative.

Here I will concentrate only on the one of the corollaries of narrative's reevaluation: narrative deprived of allegorical transcendence.

One of the main features of post-modern decline and the advent of the new fundamentalism was the prosecution of allegory. For Jameson allegory was still a constitutive element of the post-modern, which was in contradiction with the pro-

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<sup>8</sup> In our value system, plot ranks low. School children write plot summaries, we expect them to go beyond this elementary level of narrative and to consider the intricacies of characterization and point of view, as well as to engage in a rudimentary critical discussion, and we do so primarily because it seems to be the element of narrative that least contribute to art. The apparent artlessness of plot may explain why literary criticism has tended to disdain it, as well as why those folklorists who view the object of their studies as artless tales value it. (Godzich, *The Culture of Literacy*)

<sup>9</sup> *Freud's Masterplot: Questions of narrative; Reading for the Plot* (New York: Knopf, 1984).

<sup>10</sup> In: *La condition Postmodern*

<sup>11</sup> In: *Story and Situation*

<sup>12</sup> "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* 1 (1979): [page numbers?]

<sup>13</sup> Mieke Bal, *Narratologie* (in French) (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977); Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan, *Narrative Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1983).

claimed post-modern taste for superficiality and flat surfaces. Nevertheless the immanent rupture of the post-modern could be fixed in the point of allegory. The turning point was the mute denunciation of allegory as a leading principle and its reducing, its purification to its very basis Q the narrative. In the beginning was the cinema of the 80s, which loudly proclaimed its desire for a well-told story. The radical non-allegoricity of music and the revival of colour in the visual arts were the second step. The whole cultural environment was infatuated by the new or recovered simplicity of pure narrative. Literature was placed in a predicament and it generally succumbed to the new order.

The irony (and the crisis of irony is the second point here) was that Paul de Man's attitude towards literature was based on a revival of allegory (and irony in a common regime). For him allegory was a kind of demystification and debunkment of the power of symbol, the latter treated as a false unity, as an illusory compound of the sensual and the transcendent, which were taken for coinciding there. Allegory was doing it by requiring a permanent and temporal process of reading, since the allegorised is allegory by itself that is to be read and so on to infinity. This infinity of reading was ironic, since it made the very reading impossible. Against the totality, and by this the spatiality of symbol, allegory functioned in the domain of time, so our life, our existence was at stake in the process of its production-reproduction. Because after allegorical deconstruction the pretences of symbol proved to be what they were—pretentious pretending. And literature was demonstrated as the very domain of this interpretative nostalgia for the symbol but nevertheless an interpretative insecurity conceding its impossibility. An example for this could be the impossibility for autobiography, treated as defacement, the revelation that any translation demonstrated the an always already disarticulated original, etc.

After de Man's death in 1983 the period of mourning effected in the great scandal of 1987, concerning the fact that in the beginning of 1940s the 23-years-old de Man had written a number of reviews with pro-nazi anti-Semitic accents. There were two types of responses to this event. The accusators tried to show that the whole of de Man's theory, and even his refusal to be taken as philosopher has to do with the simple justification or disarticulation of his juvenile writings. It is a long story, but I want to point to one reaction, which in my view is rather symptomatic for the cultural climate today.

In 1992 was published Gabriel Adair's novel *The Death of the Author*. It is an imagined autobiography of Paul de Man, in which he explains his intellectual and sensual life as enslaved by the fall of his youth. The novel is a criminal story, well written and highly appreciated in many countries. Recently an authoritative German critic called it a minute masterpiece. What is important for me is that the



novel is not only an attempt to debunk de Man and his theoretical insights: it does not have the necessary intellectual and moral power to do this. The novel is a performative of literature as a principally non-allegorical narrative. More than this, Adair's novel is a narrativisation of a figure of immense complexity. Yet here the author just wants to adjust the answer: to produce a criminal plot instead of reading the figurative sublime of this case. If we take Adair's novel as an incarnation of contemporary literature, then it denies its ironic allegory for the purposes of a well organised plot, in which the character who has committed a crime should simply be punished and there is no need to come back to this case, which seems to be solved. Adair is not a trash-producer, he is a serious intellectual. And it is the institution of day-to-day entertainment (not pleasure), i.e. the institution of successful non-literary literature that coerces him to make such a book. The cold simplicity of this understanding by narrating a cool-blooded story is an acute revelation for the crisis of literature after which, in a sense, came by because of deconstruction.<sup>14</sup> Every revolution eats its children. Deconstructive revolution does not make an exception.

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<sup>14</sup> It is a kind of musicalisation of narrative instead of its deconstructive treating as a trope, as *prosopopoia* (since the trop of *mimesis* is *prosopopoia*). Being principally self-identical, narrative is but an extended version of someone's hidden, concealed identity, including the identity of the estimated or reproachable values. De Man is a fascist from the beginning, which proves that something's wrong with theory of literature, not with literature itself, so the aim of the good citizen's literature is to purge itself out of any theory by smashing it to a flat, lean criminal narrative.