

Towards Expanding a Set of Functions: How to Read Janusz Sławiński's *O opisie*

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Understandably, one of the most important reasons for searching for methods that oppose (“abandon” or “transgress”) textualism in contemporary literary theory is the need to formulate questions that structuralism cannot answer. When we cannot answer a question by referring to various autonomous theories and schools of linguistics— which ultimately means that we cannot analyze a given phenomenon within the structuralist framework – then we look for answers in the extra-textual reality, most often drawing on various cultural theories.

Toril Moi did exactly that. In her significant and widely discussed book *Revolution of the Ordinary*, she looks for theories and methods of analyzing literary texts that will allow the reader to “closely” understand a given work, while maintaining the ability to formulate valuable critical conclusions. Moi criticizes theories that are associated with the broadly understood hermeneutics of suspicion (Marxist, feminist or postcolonial critics, among others).¹ In the process, she reviews her own methods of textual analysis (as a feminist critic), similarly to how Terry Eagleton criticized the manner in which he used Marxist literary theory.² Moi argues that

¹ Toril Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary: Literary Studies after Wittgenstein, Austin, and Cavell* (Chicago; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2017), pp. 175–95.

² Terry Eagleton, *How to read literature* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014).

analyzing a text from a strictly defined ideological position often results in merely confirming the adopted methods and theories and does not really say anything about the text in question:

To read the text suspiciously is to see it as a symptom of something else. That “something else” usually turns out to be a theoretical or political insight possessed by the critic in advance of the reading. Instead of responding to the text’s concerns, the critic forces it to submit to his or her own theoretical or political schemes. The result is often entirely predictable readings.³

Therefore, Moi argues that we should “return to the text.” Instead of performing linguistic analysis, we should search for answers to the questions which the literary work itself poses. In this way, Moi rejects hermeneutics of suspicion, defined as a systematic set of actions to be performed while working with the text, but it does not mean that she dismisses the possibility of finding in literature arguments or answers to the most important political questions. She only observes that one should not decide in advance, prior to reading the text, whether the reading will focus on the reconstruction of the power dynamics (in terms of class, gender, or ethnicity) hidden in the text. Instead, she proposes asking questions to which the text will give the most interesting answers.⁴

Moi proposes to search for these questions in the text, or rather, to search for pretexts to ask such questions, by first asking the more basic question “Why this?” in reference to selected fragments of the text. While it may sound simple, this question becomes an interesting and complex theoretical problem with which Moi engages throughout her book. It determines that the starting point of analysis and the choice of the text to which this question refers is conditioned by the reader’s emotions and erudition. The reader will only ask “Why this?” if some element of the text draws his or her attention, most often due to its incompatibility with a certain “model.” The fragment in question must challenge reflexive or intuitive expectations of the reader. The immediate reason for asking “Why this?” is therefore, understood in purely psychological terms, surprise. However, the extent to which the reader is surprised by a given text or its fragment depends on his or her erudition and knowledge of conventions – the knowledge of conventions allows him or her to notice that a given element is incongruous. Paradoxically, the entire analysis ultimately depends on the professional and learned “ability to be surprised.”⁵

Moi further rightly points out that neither a “suspicious” critic (because he or she will not be able to ask the right questions) nor a structuralist scholar (regardless of whether he or she draws on European structuralism which, in turn, is based on Russian formalism; New Criticism, or post-structuralism) will be able to find the answers to these questions. Linguistic schools oppose asking questions about the significance of variants in the text (because it seems that the question “Why this?” translates into “Why is this specific element here?”⁶) because they describe and analyze individual components of the literary work in terms of their impact on the entire structure. It was this limitation that made Moi question New Criticism’s dogma of intentional fallacy and strive to understand and reconstruct the meaning of and the intention behind individual elements of the

³ Moi, *Revolution of the Ordinary*, p. 175.

⁴ Moi, p. 191.

⁵ Moi, pp. 185–91.

⁶ Moi, p. 203.

text by analyzing features that are in the text.⁷ Intention, Moi argues, drawing on Stanley Cavell, remains an internal element of the text, because its final form is the outcome of intention:

If we think of a text as something someone has wanted to be precisely the way it is, Cavil argues, there is no difference between “what is intended” and “what is there.” What is there is what is intended. To ask “Why this?” – for example why the author wants *this* word *here*, in this specific position in the line, is not ask about “something anterior” to the poem. It is to ask about what’s *there*, on full display, in the poem, or painting, or film.⁸

However, the danger of this approach lies in the fact that, as I have mentioned earlier, the question “Why this?” also implies the question “... and not something else?” The latter question may make the reader venture into the extratextual reality in his or her analysis. The deficiencies of the structural approach, which is focused on the study of the logical relationships between individual functions and actions in a given work (structure), made Moi accept this risk and reject the linguistic approach in favor of a better and more comprehensive (no longer “suspicious” but still hermeneutic) understanding of the work and its building blocks.

However, it seems that at least some of problems to which Moi points may be resolved by using structuralist methodology (which is linguistic and thus fully autonomous), if we redefine the structuralist approach to one aspect of the text which it has so far almost completely ignored, i.e. description. As long as we pose the question “Why this?” in relation to any action in the text, structuralism is able to come up with an answer (actually this is exactly what it does). However, structuralism almost completely ignores description – it claims that descriptive elements, as variant elements, have no impact on the structure of the work and are thus deemed irrelevant. This could not be further from the truth. Descriptive elements “complete” the narrative structure of the text. Description makes two works with a very similar structure different and at the same time equally noteworthy. No wonder, therefore, that Moi poses the question “Why this?” in relation to descriptive elements – the reading of the text would otherwise be incomplete.

Janusz Sławiński pointed to the same structuralist deficiencies in his 1981 article entitled *O opisie* [On description]. The Polish structuralist wrote the article because he believed that Roland Barthes oversimplified the role of description in his classic essay “Reality Effect.”⁹ The French thinker outlined the differences between the functional elements of the text, which are crucial for its structure (they operate at all three levels of the text defined by Barthes earlier in *Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative*: function, action and narration¹⁰), and descriptive elements, which, according to Barthes, operate only at the level of narration and thus at the level of *discourse* only. They do not influence *events* and *actions*. Barthes described how different descriptions influence the text differently; however, he nevertheless argued that the primary role of all descriptive elements in the narrative is the production of

⁷ Moi, pp. 200–205.

⁸ Moi, p. 203.

⁹ Janusz Sławiński, „O opisie”, *Teksty: teoria literatury, krytyka, interpretacja* 55, no. 1 (1981): 121–23.

¹⁰ Roland Barthes, “Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narrative”, *New Literary History*, Vol. 6, No. 2, On Narrative and Narratives (Winter, 1975), pp. 237–272.

the titular “reality effect.” Description visualizes and strengthens the fictional ontology of the represented world, hiding its non-referential character (the absence of the referent).¹¹

Dissatisfied with such a simplified characteristic of descriptive elements, Sławiński tried to systematically order the possible positions they may occupy in the structure of the narrative. In his essay, he distinguishes between three categories of description:

1. based on their physical arrangement in the actual physical (material) text (this category includes: “condensed description,” “dispersed description,” and “developed and integrated description”),
2. based on the way the semantic content of the description is organized (“localization model,” “logical and hierarchical model,” and “operational model”),
3. based on the stylistic attributes of description (the scholar distinguishes between eight opposing pairs of strategies which govern descriptions, the given pair determines the relationship between the reader and the described fictional object; Sławiński lists here, among others, the opposition between compactness and lengthiness of description; using understandable language in opposition to hermetic or professional terminology; or the opposition between description based on metonymy and, respectively, on metaphor).¹²

I would like to focus on the second “semantic” category. Motivations and reasons behind two other categories, which refer, respectively, to composition and style, may in most cases be derived from traditional structuralist analysis. The distribution of individual descriptive elements on the material plane of the text usually depends on the dynamics of a given narrative sequence: the “condensed” and “dispersed” descriptions render the narrative more dynamic, while the “developed and integrated description” slows it down. Of course, this is not always the case and one can probably find texts in which a narrator manages to render the plot more dynamic by means of lengthy and detailed descriptions. Respectively, there are also texts in which descriptions reduced to the bare essentials still render the narrative monotonous. Indeed, one is able to justify the choice behind the compositional distribution of descriptive elements by analyzing how it affects the narrative. However, the manner in which a given style of description (or stylistic elements) influences the work is usually self-evident. Sławiński lists the basic functions of various stylistic solutions in his article. For example: the use of colloquial and literary language in descriptions renders them understandable and clear, while using specialist terminology makes them difficult to understand. Short descriptions direct the reader’s attention to the plot, while lengthy descriptions direct the reader’s attention to the realities of the represented world. Descriptions that are based on metonymy allow the writer, and thus the reader, to construct an easily recognizable and almost tangible fictional space governed by “types,” while metaphorical descriptions render the narrative more poetical and the represented world more indefinite, labile, and oneiric, and so on.¹³

¹¹Roland Barthes, “The reality effect”, in R. Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), pp. 141-148.

¹²Sławiński, „O opisie”, pp. 123–34.

¹³Sławiński, pp. 132–34.

In the context of the semantics of the story, Sławiński's classification exemplified a novel approach in structuralist theory. It allowed scholars to study the impact of descriptions on the narrative structure not only in terms of formal organization or the very presence of descriptions in the text but also in regards to the impact of the semantics of description on the events and actions presented in the text. If we are able to tell *what* a given element brings to the narrative, then we can ask "*why* this?" and, by extension, "why this and not something else?"

Sławiński distinguishes between the following three description models in terms of their "semantic content:"

1. The "localization model" defines the distribution of individual objects referred to in the narrative in represented world/space:

The names of objects, elements and features are combined in the text mainly with the help of predicates indicating location, distance and direction. This model gives rise to all descriptions which co-constitute the represented world of the text.¹⁴

2. The "logical and hierarchical model" allows one to make the description of some crucial object represented by a given descriptive part more detailed by dividing it into smaller fragments that are then listed in the text. For example, we are dealing with this model when the narrator first refers to a building and then lists all rooms and objects that are in it:

Predicates predominantly establish a relation between the partial meanings of names to the "collective" meaning of the supra-name, which may be actual or potential. The order in which partial names appear in the description is not arbitrary and it may even be completely obligatory.¹⁵

The "operational model" links the described elements of the represented world of the text to the perceptual processes of a character. The description is thus conditioned by the (subjective) narrative perspective adopted:

[...] descriptive predicates are conditioned and limited to words or phrases which refer to perception, observation, recognition, interpretation of the seen, ordering of perceptual data, systematization of knowledge, i.e. operations which involve classifying, typologizing, comparing, etc. – in other words, to words and phrases which denote phases, variations and modes of the cognitive process.¹⁶

What distinguishes Sławiński's classification from earlier structuralist approaches to description is that the Polish scholar endows descriptive elements with relative autonomy with respect to the matrix of functions of events and actions of individual characters in the text. When Barthes analyzes descriptive elements, he calls "indices" "integrative units" and divides them into "indices proper" and "informants." Here cognizes the significance of these elements for the story's structure, but he also further argues that their role is always conditioned by the

¹⁴Sławiński, p. 129.

¹⁵Sławiński, p. 130.

¹⁶Sławiński, p. 130.

narrative structure made of “*nuclei*” and “*catalyses*” (Barthes would say: indices “integrate” the “distribution” of the function).¹⁷ Therefore, descriptive components never have a direct influence on the narrative structure; they shape its specific element, which, in turn, co-shapes the entire structure. Admittedly, descriptive components have their own semantic “surpluses” (i.e. content not related to narrative functions). As such, however, in the opinion of Barthes and most structuralists, structuralist analysis should not be concerned with them.

Sławiński attempted to classify descriptive components and offer theoretical tools that would allow one to determine their role in constituting the represented world of the text, with particular emphasis on space. The classification proposed by Sławiński allows us to ask “why” a given element appeared in the narrative text, even if it is a detail that does not enter into visible relations with any other narrative components of the story.

However, the above tools can only be used to partially address the doubts articulated by Toril Moi. I will illustrate my argument by referring to the following fragment of *Closely watched trains*:

I was drawing near to the curve of the track; already the twelve hoofs of those dead horses were visible in the distance, jutting towards the sky like the columns in the cathedral crypt at Stará Boleslav. I thought of Masha, and of how we met for the first time, when I was still with the track superintendent. He gave us two buckets of red paint and told us to paint the fence round the entire state workshops. Masha began by the railway track, just as I did. We stood facing each other with the tall wire fence between us, at our feet we each had a bucket of cinnabar paint, we each had a brush, and we stippled away with our brushes opposite each other and painted that fence, she from her side and I from mine.

There were four kilometres altogether of this fence; for five months we stood facing each other like this, and there wasn't anything we didn't say to each other, Masha and I, but always there was this fence between us. After we'd painted two kilometres of it, one day I'd done just as high as Masha's mouth with this red color, and I told her that I loved her, and she, from her side, had painted just up to there, too, and she said that she loved me, too... and she looked into my eyes, and, as this was in a ditch and among tall goosefoot plants, I put out my lips, and we kissed through the newly painted fence, and when we opened our eyes she had a sort of tiny red fence-pale striped across her mouth, and so had I, and we burst out laughing, and from that moment on we were happy.

When I came to those dead horses, I sat down on the belly of one of them, and leaned my head against his leg. The head of the second horse was gazing at me with bulging eyes, as though even this dead horse had lived with me through what might very well have happened to me only a few minutes ago.¹⁸

I shall not perform a sequential analysis of the above fragment because that would be a traditional structural approach. Barthes comprehensively described the cognitive values of such an analysis. The hooves of dead horses in the sky correlate with the image of Miloš leaning his head against one of them. There is also a five-unit logical sequence that leads the reader to the pornographic index on Miloš and Masha's lips (characters are given red paint—they spend many weeks together

¹⁷Barthes, “An introduction to the structuralist analysis of narrative”, pp. 245-249.

¹⁸Bohumil Hrabal, *Closely watched trains* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), pp. 30-31.

painting the fence –they develop feelings for one another–they kiss through the painted fence –the paint leaves “fence-pale” marks around their mouths. I consistently refer to paint and painting, because the shortest description of this sequence would read as follows: “the paint the two characters are given to paint the fence is the correlate of the paint on the face of both characters after they kissed”). We can also list “indices proper” (the characters are separated by a fence, which takes five months to paint; apart from temporal and spatial information, this unit also carries additional symbolic meaning: because of war, the characters cannot simply be two happy young people in love - the fence evokes the terror of the camps, etc.) and “informants” (“there were four kilometres altogether of this fence” – this information makes the represented world more real). Indeed, the methods of constructing structures of activities and events have been analyzed for decades. Instead, let us use Sławiński’s classification to analyze descriptive components.

All descriptive elements in the above fragment are governed by the operational principle, which means that their arrangement and form are subordinated to the perception of the narrator, who is also the protagonist. This applies both to the memory of the first kiss with Masha and the narrative frame, the “now” of the novel, in which the protagonist is walking towards the dead horses. Numerous location predicates (hooves “visible in the distance,” the fence round the state workshop, the fact that the characters are on the opposite sides of the fence, etc.) make the scenery of both sequences more tangible and interesting. On the other hand, the choice and the order of elements which further appear in the represented world do not disturb the logical and hierarchical sequence Sławiński distinguishes (bucket-paint-brush, horse-belly-leg-head-eye, etc.). A list of individual descriptive elements made in accordance with this model would give a clear picture of “why” the individual fragments were in exactly that position. Of course, I employed Sławiński’s classification to a limited extent. A full analysis would be much more complicated and at the same time more detailed:

It should be definitely emphasized that the models highlighted above are not separate. Although it is possible to find descriptions almost completely controlled by one of these models [...], they usually coexist in a given description. Rarely does the descriptive representation of space [...] not include categories related to the logical and hierarchical model. People, things or animals are often described in terms of spatial entities, which activates the terminology associated with the localization model. On the other hand, relativization of meaning characteristic for the operational model is not limited at all by the type of the referent described [...]. In a word, the models in question can mix, cross, and interfere within the same description.¹⁹

Toril Moi, however, challenges structuralists still further. If we are able to determine the reasons for why individual components appear in the text, we are also able to reconstruct the logic behind the text or its fragment. However, we are not able to determine why given elements were employed. Neither Barthes’ nor Sławiński’s method, nor, for that matter, any other structuralist theory, will provide us with answers to such questions as: why was the paint in a bucket and not in a can? Why did the fence enclose a workshop and not a warehouse? Why did goosefoot plants and not saltbush plants grow in the ditch? Structuralist analysis not only does not answer such questions, but also *does not seek* answers to them. Structuralist analysis only lists the functions played by the respective elements in the entire structure. It only asks “Why *this*?” but not “Why is *this* here *and not something* else instead?”

¹⁹Sławiński, “O opisie”, p. 131.

For Moi, this signifies the exhaustion of the cognitive possibilities of structuralist, and, in general, textual analysis, so she decides to adopt a non-linguistic approach. However, I would like to argue that the significant shortcoming of structuralism, to which Moi has pointed, is not a result of the excessive rigor and excessive limitation of the structuralist school. On the contrary, structuralist analysis fails because its approach to the text is not strictly linguistic, which gives rise to observations that are based on projections of non-linguistic reality.

Let us consider the following hypothesis: “Miloš dared to tell Masha that he loved her, because the fence they were painting was high. Miloš associated the high fence with reaching high and the ambition to constantly expand his abilities, which strengthened his confidence. This means that if the fence had been low, the protagonist would not have had the courage to confess his love.”

The above statement may be easily discredited as unfounded, naive, cognitively sterile (it significantly reduces the hero’s motivations), and finally, to quote Umberto Eco, paranoiac.²⁰

All these accusations can be more or less easily justified, but only insofar as they refer to the criteria of the interpretative essay and not structuralist analysis. The interpretative essay provides the reader with a view of the structure of a literary work from the most convincing or interesting perspective. However, the structure which is supposedly reconstructed in such an analysis is a purely abstract concept. It is a model that predicts every possible configuration of cause-and-effect relations, provided that the links between them actually appear in the text. As such, it also includes the least convincing textual elements, as evidenced by the interpretation proposed above.

I wish to argue that that ignoring such possibilities is a sign of the shortcoming, to which Moi has pointed. William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley have referred as “the intentional fallacy” and, to which Cleanth Brooks has referred as “the heresy of paraphrase.”²¹ If a diagram which illustrates the structure of the work does not account for all possible configurations of the relationship between the elements on the function matrix, it means that the elements in question have been selected arbitrarily. It is, therefore, a poetological variant of “the heresy of paraphrase,” which also implies the existence of an external entity whose intention it was to exclude certain possibilities from the function matrix. We could thus ironically remind Barthes that “the author is very much alive.”

Indeed, it was Barthes who did not account for descriptive elements in the analysis of sequences, arguing that syntagmatic analysis deals with sequence and structure, while paradigmatic analysis deals with description.²² Sławiński did not argue with Barthes in this matter, associating the narrative with the syntactic order and descriptions with the lexical and semantic order.²³

²⁰Umberto Eco *et al.*, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 48-49.

²¹William K. Wimsatt Jr. and Monroe C. Beardsley, “The intentional fallacy”, *The Sewanee Review*, vol. 54, no. 3 (Jul. - Sep., 1946), pp. 468-488; Cleanth Brooks, “The heresy of paraphrase”, in *The Well-Wrought Urn*. San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, 1947, pp. 192-214.

²²Barthes, “Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative”, p. 240.

²³Sławiński, “O opisie”, p. 128.

However, if we refer to the above interpretation, the “height” of the fence which encourages the protagonist to confess his love is a realization of a variant in the same sense as the choice a character has to make is, insofar as his or her decision determines the entire structure of the text (the sequence of events would change, depending on the actions of the character).²⁴ In the same way as Miloš could either confess his feelings and kiss Masha or not confess his feelings and (as a result) not kiss Masha, the fence could either be high, indirectly leading to the same narrative result as above, i.e. a kiss, or could be short and thus not lead to a kiss. Thus, the concept of “intention inscribed in the text” Moi proposed is reconciled with the textual analysis of the work: if the alternative within the semantic content of the given element is articulated, one may search for an answer to the question about the cause / intention / function (in this context these expressions become synonymous) of this (and only this) alternative.

Finally, it is important to consider how semantic content (which, as it turns out, can have a functional value) may be incorporated into the schematic model of the structure. In order to find an answer, one should ask the question: What function does it perform within the structure (not in terms of events and actions or any different order)? Since the features of the elements of the world represented in the text by descriptive elements are generally catalysts of further sequences in the narrative structure, I propose that their functions should collectively be referred to as causal functions. I wish to distinguish two subcategories within the category of causality (and there could be other possibilities).

The first subcategory is exemplified by the “height” of the fence discussed above; I propose to call it structural causality, because the choice of a given alternative in the sequences of events to come is determined by a feature, an attribute or an element of one of the objects in the world represented in the text.

In order to illustrate the second subcategory, I have to construct a model example in which the course of events is determined by the perspective from which the object is perceived. Let us assume that we read a story in which a thief does not decide to break into a house, because through a frosted window he sees a cardboard square hanging on a peg, which he mistakes for a circle, which is a sign from the accomplice servant that the owners are at home. However, if the thief moved a little to the side, he would be able to look into the room through a small hole in the window and see, without distortion, that the servant has in fact placed the square on the hanger, which was the agreed signal to break into the house.

In this case, the sequence of events is not determined by the feature of a given object (the shape) in the represented world, but by how the protagonist perceives it. Since this feature must be perceived by a subject but does not necessarily have to be associated with any character or even an impersonal narrator, I refer to Mieke Bal’s category of focalization, which she first introduced in 1985 in her groundbreaking study *Narratology*.²⁵ The category of the “focal-

²⁴Barthes explains how alternative narrative possibilities determine the significance of narrative units in the structure of the text: Barthes, “Introduction to the structural analysis of narrative”, p. 245-247.

²⁵See: Mieke Bal. “Story: Aspects”, in *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*, eds. Mieke Bal and Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 75-143; and Mieke Bal, “Text: Words and other signs”, in *Narratology: Introduction to the theory of narrative*, eds. Mieke Bal and Christine van Boheemen (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009), pp. 15-74.

izer,” which, as Bal observes, is almost synonymous with “perspective,” is convenient, insofar as the act of perception is subjectified. As such, it may be analyzed in isolation from others, as Bal puts it, agents. I propose to refer to the function of descriptive elements which depends on the perception of the described features of a given object as focalizational causality.

translated by Małgorzata Olsza

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KEYWORDS

intention

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ABSTRACT:

The article discusses the basic concepts of Janusz Sławiński's *O opisie* that are important for Polish literary studies in the wider context of the current discussion on the need to abandon the linguistic approach to literature in search of other ways to better understand the meaning of the work. Doubts expressed by Toril Moi in her book *Revolution of the Ordinary* regarding the analysis of texts from a traditional textual perspective become a pretext for revising some of the assumptions made by the structuralist school regarding the categories of description formulated, among others, by researchers such as Sławiński and Roland Barthes.

focalization

D E S C R I P T I O N

criticism

hermeneutics of suspicion

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