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The Possibilities of Theory – the Theory of Possibilities

This essay attempts to describe a new field of research in contemporary literary theory, defined in terms of performative, dramatic, and dramaturgical interactions and relations. The focus is placed on the dynamic movement of concepts and categories, as it allows theory to keep up with the constant new developments in literature and culture. These movements give rise to a dramatic discourse that replaces traditional methodologies. Such a transdisciplinary dialogue allows for a complex play of meanings. Any theory is a sum of choices made from among many possibilities, compatible approaches and ideas, and potential perspectives. In the new theoretical perspective described in this essay, no theory of a work of art is rejected and each remains valid, as long as it functions inclusively in a field of many different possibilities. The dramaturgy of concepts, the potential tensions and possible contradictions between them, which, paradoxically, are not mutually exclusive, complex plays and displacements, fractures and entanglements, open up new theoretical horizons.

Indeed, we should ask whether the time of grand theories has passed or whether one of the most comprehensive literary theories is being created today, as it unites all past and future concepts involved in the study, interpretation, and reception of literature. It is the theory of possibilities.

KEYWORDS: literary theory, performativity, synthesis, dramaticity, dramaturgy, turn in literature, traveling concepts

> *Sometimes theory seems less an account of anything than an activity – something you do or you don't. You can be involved with theory; you can teach or study theory; you can hate theory or be afraid of it. None of this, though, helps much to understand what theory is.*
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> J. Culler, *Literary Theory*

> […] *w języku, którym mówimy, nie wypowie się wszystkich tych tragicznych kalectw i ograniczeń języka, którym mówimy. Nie da się nawet opowiedzieć, dlaczego pewnych rzeczy nie da się opowiedzieć* […] *the language we speak cannot express all these tragic*

incapacities and limitations of the
language we speak. You cannot even say
why certain things cannot be said.

J. Dukaj, *Lód* [Ice]

Literary theory has never been homogeneous. Moreover, it became literary theory relatively late. Jonathan Culler emphasizes that initially we only talked about "theory," without any further contexts.[1] Culler further writes that literary theory is "a body of thinking and writing whose limits are exceedingly hard to define."[2] However, it is not only due to the fact that we are constantly searching for new literary and interpretative methodologies[3] (although this has inspired many new theories) but also due to the fact that literature, by default, transgresses its own boundaries and engages in a critical discourse with other cultural fields.

Literature is an almost undefinable entity because every attempt to enclose it within rigid theoretical frameworks has sooner or later ended in failure. Perhaps we should adopt a different perspective and no longer ask about the limits of literature and instead reflect on whether literature has ever had any boundaries? Even in Aristotle's *Poetics*, which provided a theoretical framework for the study of literature for centuries, we find gaps and understatements, which allow us to describe it as a certain possibility – a hypothesis of an unfinished grand theory. The chapter on comedy remains lost. Perhaps classic theoretical thought is just one perspective from which looking at a work of art? Many others exist.

The many different literary theories and definitions of a literary work and the numerous different answers to the question about what literature is seem in themselves to prove that the only indisputable form of literature is potentiality. Various theoretical approaches have been developed over the centuries and there has always been at least one formal, content-related, or theoretical issue that defied the imposed frameworks and rendered the definitions of literature more and more general, and thus also more and more broad and less and less hermetic. This, in turn, led to new problems with defining what could and what could not be considered literature. Many different literary and literary-related phenomena inspired different attempts at systematization, gave rise to new revolutionary concepts, and triggered wars between competing schools of literary studies. The end of

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[1] See J. Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford 2011, p. 1.

[2] *Ibidem*, p. 3.

[3] *Cf. ibidem*, pp. 3–4.

literature,[4] the death of the author,[5] and the end of theory have been announced many times. Reflecting on whether literary theory still exists, Anna Burzyńska jokingly writes that:

> The moment a poster advertising a scholarly meeting which revolved around the question "Does literary theory still exist?" appeared on the bulletin board of the Faculty of Polish Studies at the Jagiellonian University, at least a dozen people grabbed my hand in the corridor and asked hopefully: "It doesn't exist, right? Certainly, it doesn't exist?" Others, half-jokingly, said to me: "Listen, I will come to your meeting if you announce that theory does not exist…"[6]

Burzyńska emphasizes that "[w]e all know that people hate theory; it is, of course, nothing new, even though we still cannot explain the reasons behind it. This animosity stems from both the dream of *The* Grand Theory which could explain all literary forms and experiences […] as well as the many different complex theoretical concepts (sign of the times)."[7] The latest research trends in the field of literary studies have given rise to many theories that now coexist, intertwine, and tangle; they create tensions and alliances, and ultimately turn into a strange, polyvocal, even cacophonous entity known as literary theory.

"The Old" vs. "The Young"

The study of literature has been subject to dramatic changes, defined in terms of the so-called turns, that is "points of interest; changes in focus."[8] However, it seems that in this case the basic meaning of the word – "change

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[4] Joseph Hillis Miller begins *On Literature* by discussing the end of literature. He points to a paradox that all theorists must face: "the end of literature is at hand. Literature's time is almost up. It is about time. It is about, that is, the different epochs of different media. Literature, in spite of its approaching end, is nevertheless perennial and universal. It will survive all historical and technological changes. Literature is a feature of any human culture at any time and place. These two contradictory premises must govern all serious reflection 'on literature' these days". J.H. Miller, *On Literature*, London 2002, p. 1.

[5] See R. Barthes, *The Death of The Author*, trans. S. Heath, [in:] *idem*, *Image-Music-Text*, London 1977, pp. 142–148.

[6] A. Burzyńska, *Czy teoria literatury jeszcze istnieje?* [Does Literary Theory Still Exist?], "Teksty Drugie" 2006, no. 1–2, p. 40. Burzyńska discusses the history of literary theory in a light and accessible way, all the way up until the 2000s.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 41.

[8] *Zwrot* [turn], [entry in:] *Słownik Języka Polskiego* [Dictionary of the Polish Language], online, https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/zwrot.html (accessed: 10.10.2023).

in the direction of movement"[9] – is more telling because each new turn has not only moved away from the concept of literature and literary theory as static and constant but also opened up new fields of research, literally making literary scholars turn to specific questions and problems.

The greatest blow to the traditional grand theory of structuralism was dealt by the "young"[10] in 1966 at the conference "The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man." It was there that post-structuralism was born, paving the way for virtually all new critical literary perspectives. Jacques Derrida's paper "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences" opened a discussion about both literary theory as such and postmodern culture in general, leading to the birth of postmodernism.[11] As Burzyńska emphasizes, "the most important thing in this theoretical

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[9] *Ibidem*. The problems with defining "turns" have been discussed by such scholars as Grażyna Gajewska in *Antropologia cyborgów wobec zwrotu performatywnego* [Anthropology of Cyborgs and the Performative Turn] (See G. Gajewska, *Antropologia cyborgów wobec zwrotu performatywnego*, [in:] *'Zwroty' badawcze w humanistyce. Konteksty poznawcze, kulturowe i społeczno-instytucjonalne* ['Turns' in the Humanities: Cognitive, Cultural, and Socio-Institutional Contexts], eds. J. Kowalewski and W. Piasek, Toruń 2010, p. 117). Anna Krajewska, on the other hand, discusses "turns" in the context of dance, where "dance stands for permanent changes in the field. It relies not so much on choreography as on one's own unique and sometimes unpredictable expression which animates this field, this realm of dance. Everything that is found in this space (field) undergoes remodeling. Dance becomes performative (the boundaries between a (more or less) codified script and free bodily expression are blurred) as the person who reinterprets the areas traversed turns (literally – as they dance – and figuratively – by adopting new research perspectives)" (A. Krajewska, *'Zwrot dramatyczny' a literaturoznawstwo performatywne* [The 'Dramatic Turn' and Performative Literary Studies], "Przestrzenie Teorii" 2012, no. 17, p. 38).

[10] I have used this term to emphasize a certain kinship with the great historical and literary disputes between the "old" and the "young." Anna Burzyńska notes that "the theoretical dispute between poststructuralists and structuralists to some extent resembled the dispute between romantics and classicists. Structuralists relied on pure reason – rules, conceptual schemes, universal models, generalizations, grammars, systems, and taxonomies. And poststructuralists relied on […] reason – but reason devoid of many illusions, which had been dispelled by, among others, Freud. Therefore, the forays undertaken by poststructuralists were intended to shine the light of theoretical reflection on everything which, for obvious reasons, the model of "strong" theory rejected and yet what could be found in the living language of literature: the experiences of writing and reading, creative freedom of writing and interpretation, the pleasure of reading, the sensuality of language, the physicality of the subject, and above all the unique nature of literature as an event" (A. Burzyńska, *Czy teoria literatury…, op. cit.*, pp. 42–43).

[11] Poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postmodernity are often used interchangeably. Although they are related, they describe slightly different cultural phenomena. Poststructuralism refers to literary studies and, to put it simply, is a methodology used to study different texts. Postmodernism is a philosophical trend which seeks to revise the modernist belief in the systemic and permanent nature of concepts and values. Postmodernism is all about liquidity. Postmodernity, on the other hand, (derived from postmodernist assumptions)

dispute […] was the age-old gap between theory and practice, which had been deepened by the modern paradigm of knowledge – specifically, the constantly growing gap between the theory and practice of interpretation. Therefore, what was mostly criticized was, above all, theory's tendency to control interpretation."[12] Poststructuralism also became a matrix of other "post-movements," contributing greatly to the pluralization of theory. It was the beginning of an extremely important critical discussion.[13]

Indeed, we should start our discussion of cultural post-revolutions by examining the prefix "post." Paradoxically, it signifies the transformation of the "old" into the "new," regardless of what follows it. Burzyńska thoroughly analyzes the meanings of "post" in her article *Poststrukturalizm, dekonstrukcja, feminizm, gender, dyskursy mniejszości i co dalej?* [Post-structuralism, Deconstruction, Feminism, Gender, Minority Discourses and What's Next?]. She draws attention to the fact that the prefix "post," regardless of what theoretical, cultural, or philosophical phenomenon it is associated with, "points not only to its apparent dependence on what follows […] but also to a quite complex relationship between both. 'Post' means as much as 'after (something)' and (at the same time) 'meta.' However, 'meta' in this case means not only 'beyond' or 'about (something)' […] but also […] implies a shock therapy."[14] Burzyńska compares the meaning of "post" with Heidegger's "Verwindung" in order to thematize "a specific tradition (model, paradigm) which is *verwinded* (that is experimentally suspended) so that it can be thoroughly analyzed. It means both 'overcoming' and focusing on something; it means a withdrawal (from) and a turn (towards) something; it means questioning some assumptions and developing others (usually in a radicalized form); it means intimacy and reluctance, love and hate. […] In short, 'post' is a critical process within a given tradition (model, paradigm). But note that it is 'critical' in the philosophical sense, that is it is focused on examining the possible."[15] All areas of research acquired by postmodernist thought therefore inherently contain contradictions, which paradoxically coexist, mutually construct, and legitimize each other. They become simultaneous possibilities that interact, and which allow one to choose one's interpretive path more or less at will.

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is primarily concerned with reflection on social issues. In this article, I do not follow such strict distinctions and I use all three terms interchangeably.

[12] A. Burzyńska, *Czy teoria literatury…*, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

[13] I will not discuss all 'post' trends, as it exceeds the scope of this essay and is in itself unoriginal.

[14] See A. Burzyńska, *Poststrukturalizm, dekonstrukcja, feminizm, gender, dyskursy mniejszości i co dalej?* [Poststructuralism, Deconstruction, Feminism, Gender, Minority Discourses and What's Next?], "Przestrzenie Teorii" 2002, no. 1, p. 69.

[15] *Ibidem*, pp. 69–70.

We also cannot forget that by challenging the systemic nature of theory, poststructuralists democratized it, ensuring that new theoretical concepts would be developed in relation to specific literary phenomena. Thus, they bridged the gap between theory and practice and, at the same time, gave rise to different "turns." They, in turn, led to the birth of other analytical and interpretive trends.

Turns at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries[16]

Literature functions in a wider cultural context. In the light of the above reflections on postmodernism, such a statement seems somewhat risky because it seems to deprive the literary text of the ability to function in isolation from history, the author, and the circumstances of its creation, i.e. everything that poststructuralists tried to challenge. However, texts and culture coexist, regardless of time and place, because literature always affects the reader here and now, evoking associations and projecting references to his or her times. The cultural turn that took place in the 1990s opened literary studies to other, not necessarily related, fields, which made literature interact, albeit still from an autonomous position, with culture. The relationship between literature and culture is dynamic and liquid yet constant.

Ryszard Nycz explains that the cultural theory of literature was based on three main principles. Firstly, literary studies were meant to remain a separate and original discipline – one which was not dependent on the theory and methodology of cultural studies. Secondly, "literary studies were to be re-connected with the wider cultural context by (a) emphasizing that the cultural is not located outside the literary, as it constitutes the inalienable and inherent element of both literary studies and literature; and by

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[16] Writing about turns in the latest humanistic theories, I make use of the theory of possibilities and subjectively pick and choose the most important ones. I realize that I do not comment on many important changes/turns. In the introduction to the edited collection *'Zwroty' badawcze w humanistyce. Konteksty poznawcze, kulturowe i społeczno-instytucjonalne* ['Turns' in the humanities: Cognitive, cultural, and socio-institutional contexts], Jacek Kowalewski and Wojciech Piasek provide a (as they observe, most likely incomplete) list of 'turns' in the Polish humanities. "So, we have the anthropological turn, the cultural turn, the Darwinian turn, the dramatic turn, the ethical turn, the iconic turn, the interpretive turn, the turn to things, the narrativist turn, the performative turn, the cognitive turn, the pragmatic turn, the rhetorical turn, the topographic turn…" (See *'Zwroty' badawcze w humanistyce. Konteksty poznawcze, kulturowe i społeczno-instytucjonalne*, eds. J. Kowalewski and W. Piasek, Toruń 2010, p. 7). All these (and other) cultural changes were of great importance for literary studies. However, discussing all of them exceeds the scope of this essay.

(b) using the critical categories and contexts of cultural studies (race, class, gender, age, ethnicity, power, etc.) in the study of literature […] (text, genre, narrative , fiction, performativity, interpretation, etc.)."[17] Thirdly, the goal was to restore the view of "(the study of) literature as a source of knowledge about the world, insofar as (a) literature should no longer be reduced to linguistic and communicative experiments and rules and (b) literature should again be seen as a textual (discursive) representation of reality – as such, literature, as an object of study, is both similar to and different from other human sciences."[18] In a broader context, the changes introduced by the cultural theory of literature are discussed in a collective volume edited by Ryszard Nycz and Michał Paweł Markowski, entitled *Kulturowa teoria literatury. Główne pojęcia i problemy* [The Cultural Theory of Literature: Key Concepts and Problems].[19]

Burzyńska argues that the cultural turn in theory has been "one of the most important developments in the humanities in recent years."[20] It is hard to disagree with this statement. Without the cultural turn, all subsequent innovations in literary studies and literary theory would probably get lost in the wider postmodernist theoretical landscape; despite announcing the end of theory, postmodernism began to transform into another grand theory – the theory of academic negation and chaos.

Respectively, embracing cultural studies also prompted a theoretical interest in the emotions and affect in literary studies. As Barbara Myrdzik emphasizes, the affective turn sparked three coexisting and independent trends; they approach affect as a bodily phenomenon, as a symptom, and as a flow of intensity.[21] Such a vision of affect is closely related to the concept of emotion, which for Myrdzik is a transformed and recognized affect, whose "form is determined by the social and cultural context."[22] Emotions

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[17] R. Nycz, *Antropologia literatury – kulturowa teoria literatury – poetyka doświadczenia* [Anthropology of Literature – Cultural Theory of Literature – Poetics of Experience], "Teksty Drugie" 2007, no. 6, p. 38.

[18] *Ibidem*, pp. 38–39.

[19] See *Kulturowa teoria literatury* [The Cultural Theory of Literature], eds. M.P. Markowski and R. Nycz, Kraków 2012. Apart from essays by Markowski and Nycz, we also find in the collection texts by Anna Burzyńska, Roma Sendyka, Elżbieta Rybicka, Anna Łebkowska and Teresa Walas, among others. The variety of critical approaches adopted by the abovementioned scholars is a testament to how broad the cultural theory of literature is as a category.

[20] A. Burzyńska, *Kulturowy zwrot teorii* [The Cultural Turn in Theory], [in:] *Kulturowa teoria literatury*, eds. M.P. Markowski and R. Nycz, Kraków 2012, p. 42.

[21] See B. Myrdzik, *O niektórych konsekwencjach zwrotu afektywnego w badaniach kulturowych* [On Some Consequences of the Affective Turn in Cultural Studies], "Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska Lublin – Polonia Sectio N" 2017, vol. 2, pp. 116–117.

[22] *Ibidem*, p. 120.

are ambiguous because they rely on "[…] seemingly paradoxical oppositions – they engage both meaning and feeling, and belong to the sphere of both the corporeal and the reflexive. Emotional experiences are private and individual, but they are also transmitted to others and shaped by the community."[23] Ryszard Nycz also refers to the community in his introduction to the special issue of "Teksty Drugie" devoted to affective manifestos:

> […] emotions and feelings which are jointly manifested and articulated are shared in both senses of the word: they unify and differentiate; they unite and divide at the same time. They stimulate groundbreaking, unpredictable, political actions and retroactively modify the shared memory of the collective past. The sterilized image of the classic subject, the I who is rational and in full control of himself, his relationships with others and the world, needs to be replaced by the vision of an individual with an embodied mind who does not so much control but evokes and negotiates his needs and goals, his relationships with others as well as with the more-than-human world – and all this takes place in the open-ended field of sensory and affective experiences.[24]

The influence of affective theory was particularly visible in the changes that took place in the processes of constructing identity and subjectivity. Its postulated openness to community experience was particularly appreciated by the scholars who believed that the "classic rational subject" described by Nycz limited the freedom and individuality of the I and his own vision of himself. "The concept of the disintegrated, melancholic, dispersed 'self' in 'internal exile' clashed with gender and queer theories, which assumed that gender is conventional – it is a social construct. […] The sensory aspect of the emerging I thus became extremely important. Philosophy and art again focused on the body. […] Affect made one open to a wide range of relationships and engagements, including disability studies."[25]

The return of affect has, to some extent, paved the way for another trend which focused on the affective subject that "makes kin" with others. The posthuman turn, one of the most significant theoretical revolutions since the advent of poststructuralism, influenced most cultural theories of the late 20th century. The birth of the posthuman – man entangled in complex relationships with nature and equal to other-than-human beings; a human-cyborg who becomes one with a machine that allows him to live or enhance his imperfect nature; machines with human features, intelligence and sensitivity; the Vitruvian man who, as Ihab Hassan writes,

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[23] *Ibidem*.

[24] R. Nycz, *Afektywne manifesty. Wstęp* [Affective Manifestos: Introduction], "Teksty Drugie" 2014, no. 1, pp. 9–10.

[25] B. Myrdzik, *op. cit.*, p. 121.

"has broken through its enclosing circle and square, and spread across the cosmos"[26] – constitutes a turning point in how we think about man's role in nature and, more broadly, in the universe, as well as a premise for revising the categories of identity and subjectivity. Monika Bakke emphasizes that "man – the human form of life – has been changing faster and more radically than ever before. This happens both on a material level, through the direct impact of technology on the human body, and on a mental level, as science proves just how closely we interact with other-than-human life forms, which contributes to an increase in ethical awareness."[27] Man has lost his privileged position in the natural world, becoming merely one of the many cogs that power the mechanism of the universe.

Posthumanism, like most theoretical trends, is not homogeneous. We can distinguish between its purely philosophical varieties (focused on deconstructing the classic modern humanities[28]), technosophical and transhumanist variants (which focus on the relationship between man and technology and the achievements of biotechnology[29]), and variants which focus the distinction between *bios* and *zoe* (the study of all forms of life and the interactions between them[30]). Posthumanism is also read in the wider context of what Bauman calls fluidity. Grażyna Gajewska writes that "[t]he theoretical and critical reflection focuses on fluid relationships […] between the human and the non-human, that is, between humans and technology, things, as well as between humans and other animals or, even more broadly, plants, sand, and water. Distinctions into species, genders, sexual orientations, races, and social classes give way to a non-essentialist concept of the self – one in constant motion, one acting in entanglement with humans and non-humans."[31] Importantly, posthuman theories also engage with the concept of *in silico*, that is, life in the digital space.

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[26] I. Hassan, *Prometheus as Performer: Toward Posthumanism Culture?*, "The Georgia Review" 1977, vol. 31, no. 4, [quote after:] P. Zawojski, *Posthumanizm, czyli humanizm naszych czasów* [Posthumanism, or the Humanism of Our Times], "Kultura i Historia" 2017, no. 32, p. 69.

[27] M. Bakke, *Bio-transfiguracje. Sztuka i estetyka posthumanizmu* [Bio-Transfigurations: The Art and Aesthetics of Posthumanism], Poznań 2012, p. 7.

[28] It is worth mentioning here Jacques Derrida, Michael Foucault, Charles Taylor, and Giorgio Agamben, among other theorists.

[29] See the works of Elaine Graham, Donna Haraway, Jürgen Habermas, Max More, or the Polish scholar Grażyna Gajewska.

[30] See the works of Carry Wolfe, Donna Haraway, Elizabeth Grosz, and the Polish scholar Monika Bakke.

[31] G. Gajewska, *Arcy-nie-ludzkie. Przez science fiction do antropologii cyborgów* [Arch-non-human: From Science Fiction to Cyborg Anthropology], Poznań 2010, p. 46.

Compared to other new developments, the performative turn and the dramaturgical turn seem to be relatively new phenomena (at least in Poland). However, in my opinion, they mark the most significant change in the approach to literary studies and theory, because they shift the methodological focus from describing concepts and phenomena to (reflecting on) their actual use in analysis – the given critical needs and horizons. As Ewa Domańska writes, "[p]erformance studies scholars emphasize that there is an integral connection between the study of performance and performance itself, which is why many scholars are not only theoreticians but also practitioners, that is, artists, actors, dancers, etc. Indeed, many scholars in the humanities no longer rely on science and turn to art as an alternative form of representing, analyzing, understanding, and changing the world. For non-artists, art is increasingly becoming a way of creating, presenting and transmitting knowledge that is more important than science."[32] Performativity has become a paradigm of a new theory of culture in which the scholar is the participant, the interpreter, and the creator, that is, an autotelic subject of research. By emphasizing the liquidity of the boundaries between artistic (and literary) theory and practice, performativity also connects two seemingly separate orders. In the performative approach, the work is both the starting point of theory, its integral component, and the final result of a creative process which gives rise to both. Such a way of creating and working with theory thus poses a challenge to synthetic approaches, allowing one to freely choose one of many possible actions implied in a literary work or trend.

This gives rise to an exceptionally original concept in Polish literary studies, namely the dramatic theory of literature created by Anna Krajewska. Krajewska based her theory on the writings of the Polish philosopher Józef Tischner, and especially his conviction that "to understand drama is to understand that man is a dramatic being."[33] Krajewska combines the theory and practice of writing into one coherent act of dramatic performance and experience in which different tensions and nuances give rise to a new universal category of the dramatic. In a narrow understanding, it is used in the analysis and interpretation of literary texts and reflects on how theory works. In a broader sense, it describes past, present and future cultural relations and constitutes a new vision of the dramatic theory of culture based on a dialogue between various discourses. Krajewska emphasizes that "new dramatic discourses seem to appear in the humanities as such. In fact, we should extend the scope of our analytical horizons and speak not

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[32] E. Domańska, *"Zwrot performatywny" we współczesnej humanistyce* ["The Performative Turn" in the Contemporary Humanities], "Teksty Drugie" 2007, no. 5, p. 51.
[33] J. Tischner, *Filozofia dramatu* [The Philosophy of Drama], Kraków 2006, p. 5.

only of literary studies but also other disciplines, and as such speak of *the dramatic theory of culture*, or even of *dramatic theory* (full stop because the understanding of theory itself has also changed – it is no longer a system […] but a field of fluctuations and doubts)."[34]

So what is the future of theory in contemporary literary studies? Let us consider the facts. Many attempts at analyzing literary texts from a completely new perspective have emerged in recent years. Concepts that challenge mainstream literary studies are becoming more and more popular. Many literary scholars are seeking inspiration in other disciplines, including science. One thing is certain. The future of theory, generally speaking, is ambivalent and dynamic.

> The "dramatic turn" that took place in culture in the second half of the 20th century, and especially at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries, made us redefine how we see the world – we acknowledged cognitive and theoretical uncertainty and processivity and liquidity of the current changes, which cannot be described by means of any metalinguistic definitions. Anti-binary thinking, emphasizing interactivity, blurring the divisions between creators, recipients, and critics… Indeed, the "dramatic turn" permanently shifted the emphasis, to put it briefly, from the narrative perspective to the dramatic structure.[35]

It can be said that today theory is losing (or has already lost) its contexts. However, paradoxically, this is not a flaw but the greatest advantage of contemporary literary theory. Burzyńska suggests "that literary theory today is simply an open set of various languages of interpretation which mediate between literature and life – these languages allow for constant new recontextualizations of literary texts."[36] Theory is effectively a sum of many potential possibilities. It involves actively choosing compatible approaches and ideas and considering possible perspectives. The very definition of "theory," as Culler wrote, points to only one of its many meanings.

Perhaps the era of grand theories has passed. Or perhaps one of the most comprehensive and versatile theories is being created today? After all, it embraces all past and future concepts involved in the study, interpretation, and reception of literature. It recognizes the fact that literary works are "liquid" and transgenic and that literary categories may be vague. It also challenges the very definitions of literature.

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[34] A. Krajewska, *Dramatyczna teoria literatury* [Dramatic Theory of Literature], Poznań 2009, p. 22; emphasis – A. Krajewska.

[35] A. Krajewska, *"Zwrot dramatyczny"…, op. cit.*, p. 42.

[36] A. Burzyńska, *Czy teoria literatury…, op. cit.*, p. 57.

In his monumental novel *Lód* [Ice], Jacek Dukaj thus reflects on the way we describe reality:

> Język do opisu naszych zachowań istnieje, ponieważ tej rzeczywistości doświadcza wielu ludzi i mogą między sobą omówić czyjąś ostentacyjną uprzejmość lub czyjeś *faux pas*. Język do opisu mnie samego nie istnieje, ponieważ tej rzeczywistości nie doświadcza nikt poza mną. Byłby to język do jednoosobowego użytku, język niewypowiadalny, niezapisywalny. Każdy musi sam go stworzyć [The language used to describe our behavior exists because many people experience this reality, and they can discuss among themselves someone's ostentatious politeness or someone's *faux pas*. There is no language to describe the self because no one experiences this reality except me. It would be a language intended for single use, an unspeakable and unwritable language. Everyone has to create it themselves].[37]

Dukaj seems to comment on the inherent paradox of every theory that is forced to look at literature from the outside, as it is unable to create a language suitable for each and every literary work. Any universal approach is therefore flawed; it is as limited as the language used to describe literature. To some extent, even theory "full stop" – the theory of possibilities – is limited in this sense. However, it has one advantage, insofar as it does not categorize/organize/describe literary works and trends using any fixed or specific categories. On the contrary, it adopts a pluralistic position, absorbing the languages of all theories – they coexist as operational possibilities and are employed to describe different cultural, social, and/or literary phenomena as needed. As such, no concept of the work is rejected and each remains valid, as long as it exists in the field of possibilities as one of many possibilities. The dramaturgy of concepts, the potential tensions and possible contradictions between them, which, paradoxically, are not mutually exclusive, the plays and displacements, fractures and entanglements,[38] open up new theoretical horizons. As Anna Krajewska writes:

> Literature is no longer just the art of words. It is a combination of various languages and materials (words are part of a drawing, a drawing triggers a verbal reaction)

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[37] J. Dukaj, *Lód* [Ice], vol. 1, Kraków 2016, p. 31.

[38] I also use this term as defined by Anna Krajewska, who emphasizes that "[t]he way we read and comment on literary works today affects the entire history of literature. An interpretive intervention in even one poem transforms the history of literature. The way we write about literature changes it. Indeed, one could say that such a vision of literary studies stems from a vision of the world proposed by modern physics, and specifically quantum entanglement. Entangled particles form a whole. Even when separated and apart, they remain connected – one still depends on the other. By determining the parameters of one, we gain knowledge about both as an entangled whole" (A. Krajewska, *Splątanie literackie* [Literary Entanglement], "Przestrzenie Teorii" 2012, no. 17, p. 8).

as well as media and acts of interactive reception and creation (the printed word coexists with the digital word, reading is interactive – the reader has to choose his own path, understood metaphorically as the path of life but sometimes also literally as the surface on which one walks, as seen in some liberatic works and/or as a soundtrack to a film). The act of reading is technological: we use computers, cameras, smartphones, QR code readers, etc. They are effectively extensions of our senses and artistic tools. We live in more and more parallel worlds.[39]

However, if literature is a set of possibilities, then it is possible that anything and everything is literature. This seems to blur the boundaries of the discipline and does not lead to any specific conclusions. However, discussing contemporary literary phenomena using a common denominator requires a compromise; concepts which describe what contemporary literature is and, even more importantly, what it may become in the near future must be flexible. The eternal question of what literature is returns – multimedia innovations do not only transform and expand the category of literature but also redefine it by limiting or even removing the human factor from the creative process. A new approach to literary theory thus goes back to its roots, combining the traditional search for the definition of literature with understanding that the findings may be completely unpredictable.

New aspects of old categories

First, let me explain what I mean by "old." The temporal aspect is, in my view, relative, because I consider Roman Ingarden's notion of concretization from the 1930s, Jacques Derrida's dive into deconstruction in the 1960s, and Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquidity developed at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries to be equally "old." In my understanding, "old" concepts are concepts which are recognized, well-established, and widely used in literary studies and, in a broader perspective, in cultural studies. Literary scholars use such terms to show how universal and ingenious they are and, on the contrary, to prove how outdated and obsolete they have become. This notwithstanding, I must emphasize that "old" is not used pejoratively; on the contrary, my intention is to pay tribute to the foundations of the discipline. The binary opposition between the "old" and the "new," which has marked the history of literary trends and theories, does not apply here because the "new" theory of possibilities embraces all "old" categories, allowing them to coexist, without competition and contra-

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[39] A. Krajewska, *Różewicza sztuki splątane. Interpretacja performatywna* [Różewicz's Entangled Arts: A Performative Interpretation], "Przestrzenie Teorii" 2014, no. 21, p. 41.

dictions – they constantly interact and circulate in the field of literary and cultural production.

Iridescence of concretization

Indeed, we can find traces of the theory of literary possibilities in structuralism. As we venture into what marks the beginning of contemporary literary theory, we should pay special attention to Ingarden's notion of concretization. The eminent philosopher states that "[i]n the concretization of a literary work, places of indeterminacy are usually removed by filling out with concrete details (…). This 'filling-out' (…) can vary with different concretizations;" "The concretization of the literary work is thus still schematic, but less so than the work itself."[40] For Ingarden, concretization was an integral component of the literary work, and he thus accepted a certain amount of freedom involved in the process of "filling-out," thanks to which the work could exist in the reader's imagination. Each reader, however, can fill out the places of indeterminacy in the text in his or her own way, depending on the many different contexts of reception. As such, it can be said that the literary work is repeatedly (co)created by its readers and exists as a set of possibilities that need to be determined, or else it will never be completed.

Artur Mordka refers to the formal ambiguity of Ingarden's notion using the concepts of "iridescence" or "opalescence"[41] (coined by Ingarden) and "oscillation"[42] (which is a term Ingarden used to describe semantic "flickering"[43]), defining them as the many different modes of existence found in the literary work that belong to many different realities around which the text constantly oscillates, moves, dances. This movement may only be brought to a halt by the reader.[44] Mordka identifies those concepts at the stratum of linguistic sound formations and at the stratum of meaning units.[45] However, he notes that "Ingarden argued that the basic meaning of a given expression is subject to iridescence; he thus further stated that it is always present in a work of art provided it is not understood. Certainly, this is often the case, but there are also works in which it is difficult to

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[40] R. Ingarden, *Cognition of the Literary Work of Art*, trans. R.A. Crowley and K. Olsen, Evanston 1973, pp. 13–14.

[41] *Ibidem*, p. 68.

[42] A. Mordka, *Romana Ingardena opalizacje i oscylacje literackie* [Roman Ingarden's Concept of Literary Iridescence and Oscillation], "Galicja. Studia i Materiały" 2022, no. 8, p. 284.

[43] R. Ingarden, *op. cit.*, pp. 68–69.

[44] See A. Mordka, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

[45] See *ibidem*, p. 286.

determine which meaning should be considered basic. Linguistic habits often come into play here, but sometimes they do not help much and are often misleading." Mordka argues that the movement of meanings is very complex. "Oscillation" is for him a kind of play between the literal and the new meanings projected by the work.

Mordka refers to Franz Kafka's *The Trial* to illustrate how iridescence and opalescence and oscillation work in the literary work. I think that Jacek Dukaj's aforementioned novel *Lód* is also a good example of this process.

The life story of the main character and narrator, Benedykt Gierosławski, branches out into an infinite number of possibilities, constituting alternatives to the main plotline. Both the narrator and other characters tell finite and infinite stories, which unfold in parallel; only the now is true, because the past and the future offer infinite possibilities and alternative life stories. The characters in the novel reflect on Tadeusz Kotarbiński's two-valued logic, suggesting that the binary division in which a given object either possesses a certain feature or its negation is insufficient to describe reality. Gierosławski, a genius mathematician and a compulsory liar, introduces a third value: a state when something is neither true nor false because it does not exist. The question of "true or false" thus defines Gierosławski's life story – it is a major yet unsolvable problem that either reverberates in the narrative background or comes to the fore. Dukaj provocatively states that the past and the future cannot materially exist, because they are concretizations (additions, guesses, acts of forgetting and filling out) made by the storyteller.[46] Just like Gierosławski, the reader must constantly move in between believing in and questioning the protagonist's actions and intentions. Gierosławski always exists in between final concretizations.

Indeed, what Gierosławski reflects on brings to mind Ingarden's notions of iridescence, opalescence, and concretization. The Lviv philosopher argued that readers brought to life ambiguous meanings that defied systematization. However, he also accepted the fact that concretization cannot be tamed because the reader can "actualize, in the course of his reading, various aspects on his own initiative, as it were. But in doing this he would not be bound at all by the work, and it would be entirely a matter of chance as to what aspects

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[46] The character wonders: "Jeśli ma się rację i nie istnieje jedna przeszłość, nie może również istnieć jedna pamięć przeszłości: pamięta się wiele wersyj wzajem sobie przeczących, a umysł usiłuje je jakoś pogodzić, i stąd rozmyte wspomnienia, fałszywe memorje, białe plamy, gdzie pamięci się na siebie nałożyły, zamazały, zniwelowały" [If one is right and there is no one past, there cannot be one memory of the past: one remembers many versions that contradict one another, and the mind tries to somehow reconcile them, and hence we have blurred memories, false memories, blank spots where memories overlap, mix, and cancel each other out] (J. Dukaj, *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 269).

were in fact actualized."[47] Perhaps we should ask after Gierosławski: true or false? Literature is materialized in human memory; it is only one of many possibilities, one version that the reader accepts as true. Thus, the literary work is theoretically infinite, never complete, even if it creates a seemingly closed whole, because "between the unequivocally determined (the 'common') elements of the content and those belonging to ambiguous expressions, there exists only a loose, not finally fixed connection. This is the basis for the 'iridescent,' the 'opalescent,' character of the entire correlate content."[48]

Deconstructive hopscotch

Deconstruction, developed by the French philosopher Jacques Derrida (who also overturned the old order of modernism in Baltimore), is regarded to be the most radical phase of poststructuralism because, to put it simply, it rejects all structures. However, Derrida believed that his theory was somewhat misconstrued. He pointed primarily to the positive connotations of the concept, stating that it should not be used as a methodology. Indeed, deconstruction was based on Martin Heidegger's ontological philosophy.[49] As such, the category of deconstruction echoes the views of Gierosławski who believes that the source of the anti-binary logic lies in the limits of language. Wojciech Słomski writes that "[a]ccording to Derrida, we will only be able to understand how we think, and at the same time how we do not think, if we become aware of the constraints that bind us, which, according to Derrida, are linguistic in nature."[50] However, in the late 20th century, deconstruction emerged as a completely new, one might even say, somewhat revolutionary, theory. Difficult to define and pin down as it was, it was consequently adopted as *the* new anti-systemic theory in the humanities. However, it is worth repeating after Derrida that: "[…] nontotalization can also be determined in another way: no longer from the standpoint of a concept of finitude as relegation to the empirical, but from the standpoint of the concept of *play*. If totalization no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalization. This field is in effect that of

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[47] R. Ingarden, *op. cit.*, p. 277.

[48] *Ibidem*, p. 144.

[49] See W. Słomski, *Derrida. Dekonstrukcja i jej konsekwencje* [Derrida: Deconstruction and Its Consequences], "Prosopon. Europejskie Studia Społeczno-Humanistyczne" 2018, no. 25(4), p. 177.

[50] *Ibidem*, p. 179.

play, that is to say, a field of infinite substitutions only because it is finite […].”[51] This play (of possibilities) gave rise to deconstruction in literature. Słomski emphasizes that “the aim of deconstruction is not to understand what the text is about, at least at surface level, but to discover what the text does not explicitly say and thanks to which it can lay claim to the truth.”[52]

In some cases, literary play literally turns into an actual game, but it still functions within the Derridean field of infinite possibilities. The plasticity and susceptibility of (all) literature to transformation is demonstrated by multimedia interventions in texts which are structurally seemingly uniform and yet potentially “playable.” An example of such a metamorphosis is *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie: adaptacja sieciowa* [The Saragossa Manuscript: An Internet Adaptation] (Mariusz Pisarski's hypertextual rendition of Jan Potocki's novel[53]), and the online game *Bałwochwał* [Idol Worshipper], based on Bruno Schulz's short stories, and developed by Mariusz Pisarski, Marcin Bylak and Artur Sosen Klimaszewski.[54]

Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie is an illustrated novel, a graphic novel. Even the original text is non-linear and functions as a kind of intradiegetic (Alfonso de Wardes partakes in a complex game/trial) and extradiegetic game (the story is non-linear and very complex). The dense network of relationships between places, plots, and characters transcends the frame-tale or the story-within-a story generic conventions which are often used to describe the novel. This text should indeed be described as a tangle (Mariusz Pisarski described it as such at the Ha!wangarda festival; the term brings to mind Anna Krajewska's dramatic “entanglement”[55]) or a rhizome. As a story-within-a story which lends itself to hypertextualization, *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie* is a great example of a work in which the dramatic is revealed through the tension between the text (and its inherent transformative possibilities) and the reader who shapes the text in the process of reading. This tension is constantly changing and evolving but it is always present because in *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie* the reader must not only follow but, above all, create the narrative by traversing different readerly “paths.”

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[51] J. Derrida, S*tructure Sign and Play in the Discourse of Human Sciences*, trans. A. Bass, [in:] *idem*, *Writing and Difference*, Chicago 1978, p. 289.

[52] W. Słomski, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

[53] *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie* [The Saragossa Manuscript], http://archiwum.ha.art. pl/rekopis/00_intro.html (accessed: 14.10.2023).

[54] *Bałwochwał* [Idol Worshipper], https://techsty.art.pl/Balwochwal/start.html (accessed: 14.10.2023).

[55] A. Krajewska, *Splątanie literackie*, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

The readerly experience is transformed on two levels: on the one hand, reading becomes an online interactive experience – the reader discovers new, unexpected, and infinite semantic combinations (the text is liquid, constantly moving); on the other hand, the reader is engaged in the creation of hypertextual networks (the text is broken down and built back up) and plays with the possibilities offered by random selection (randomization).

The structure of Potocki's novel not only enables deconstruction and reconstruction of textual mechanisms but also illustrates how Derridean iterability works, insofar as "the meaning of a written sign may be changed when it is repeated, [which – E.W.] paves the way for the decontextualization and recontextualization of text."[56] Iterability eliminates from the text (the written sign) the presence of the sender (and the "embodied semantic intention"[57] of the transmitted message, that is the literary work) and the recipient (the one who deciphers it), thus opening up endless possibilities of choice within the field of play. Moreover, literary concepts and mathematical theories intertwine in the text, endowing it (also in its paper form) with some hypertextual features. The reader does not know, as Derrida writes, where the center of the text is – it can be anywhere and nowhere.

Bałwochwał is based on a similar concept as the online version of *Rękopis znaleziony w Saragossie*, but the original text has been deconstructed to such an extent that traditional linear reading is no longer possible. The most important change, however, concerns the protagonist. The first sentence reads: "You enter the market square; it is empty and yellowed by the heat, swept clean by hot breezes…"[58] "You" clearly indicates that the author's literary *alter ego* Joseph disappears, and the player-reader takes over the story. The reader can play with the text, make his or her own choices, and follow different paths, disregarding the original plot and structure. The reader thus creates completely new variants of the story.

In both cases, however, the reader does not have full control over the text because the variants are limited, insofar as they only include the options envisioned by the creators of the game. However, it clearly shows that literature is never confined to a given framework but is instead a set of possibilities – readerly interpretations, re-readings, remediations, and the potential metamorphic properties of texts themselves. The hypertextual novel is a self-constructing entity – it becomes what it is as it is

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[56] T. Załuski, *Powtórzenie jako iterowalność w filozofii Jaques'a Derridy* [Repetition as Iterability in Jacques Derrida's Philosophy], [in:] *idem*, *Modernizm artystyczny i powtórzenie* [Artistic Modernism and Repetition], Kraków 2008, p. 55.

[57] *Ibidem*, p. 54.

[58] See *Bałwochwał*, *op. cit.*

read. Each readerly path is a new event. Reading and literature become performative.

Liquid histories

The concept of liquidity in literary studies is associated primarily with Zygmunt Bauman's 1999 book *Liquid Modernity*, which exerted a great influence on theory and criticism at the turn of the 20th and the 21st centuries. Bauman argues that the term postmodernity should not be used to describe reality because modernity has never ended: it has only transformed into a more, as the scholar puts it in his book, liquid form. Bauman's understanding of the category of liquidity is rooted in sociology but its source is actually the thought of Heraclitus of Ephesus, the essence of which is the concept of *panta rhei* – everything flows.[59] Nothing happens twice, because even if something seems the same, the passage of time changes its essence.

Monika Błaszczak draws attention to understanding "liquidity" as "'melting,' 'dissolving,' or 'condensing.' Bauman often reflects on ambiguity, changeability, instability, fragmentation, uncertainty, episodic nature of life, lack of order. As such, liquidity refers to views, lifestyles, and the ways in which one perceives the world and functions in it."[60] The concept of liquidity may be used to describe social and broadly defined cultural phenomena and it also personally affects the individual, the "I," constructed in the context of unstable reality. "Liquid identity describes being in the world that is subject to constant change. It is a never-ending, pulsating, process."[61]

Such a concept of identity may also be found in Gierosławski's self-referential reflections. The protagonist of Dukaj's novel tries to define himself in a truly Derridean way: he does not define himself through the known but describes his existence through negation.[62] The mathematician states:

Skoro nie wiesz, kim jesteś, przynajmniej miej pewność, kim nie jesteś. Wepchnęło się łepetynę w umywalkę, pod strumień wody zimnej. Wcale nie po to, żeby otrzeźwieć do myśli bystrzejszych i umysłu jaśniejszego – lecz żeby właśnie nie myśleć o niczym poza tą zimną wodą, żeby zatrzymać rozćmieczoną imaginację, która już przeskakuje do następnej możliwości, i następnej, i następnej, a każda jednako prawdziwa [If one does not know who one is, then at least one should

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[59] Monika Błaszczak writes more about the category of fluidity and the philosophy of Heraclitus. See M. Błaszczak, *Płynność – od Heraklita do Baumana* [Liquidity – from Heraclitus to Bauman], "Przestrzenie Teorii" 2019, no. 31, pp. 113–114.

[60] *Ibidem*, p. 112.

[61] *Ibidem*.

[62] *Cf.* W. Słomski, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

know who one is not. One shoves one's head into a sink and allows cool water to run over it. Not at all to sober up, to sharpen one's thoughts, to awake to a clearer mind – but so as not to think about anything except this cold water, to stop the flicker of the imagination that moves to the next possibility, and the next, and the next, and each of them is true].[63]

The indeterminacy of the "I" is additionally emphasized by the use of the somewhat impersonal pronoun "one" – the reader may thus choose who the narrator should be(come). The changeable human nature and liquid identity are contrasted with the firmness of ice, which, paradoxically, is not static – it moves in tides and the mind moves with it (the mind moves in-between the rational and the irrational; the word "flicker" refers to the ontological instability and complexity of perception) – and it must provide a counterweight to the inherently chaotic human nature. The entire world in *Lód* is therefore rooted in liquidity and may thus collapse at any moment because, as Błaszczak emphasizes, "liquidity is a 'liquid' category, it is ambiguous, it 'pulsates,' moving from variability and fragmentation to credibility, understandability and efficiency."[64] Even if the truth freezes for a moment, liquids change state of matter.

Theory (at) play

Contemporary methodological categories are often vague and elusive (the influence of deconstruction) as well as liquid and fluctuating (the influence of postmodernism and the concept of liquid modernity). These properties seem theoretically counterproductive but in the contemporary complex, polyphonic, and multifaceted world, only flexible concepts are able to capture the essence of constant rapid changes.

Transdisciplinarity,[65] breaking down the boundaries between different disciplines and creating hybrid fields of research, is very popular today, as

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[63] J. Dukaj, *op. cit.*, vol. 1, pp. 642–643.

[64] M. Błaszczak, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

[65] I use this concept in the understanding of Justyna Tabaszewska, who writes that "[t]ransdisciplinarity […] strives to go beyond the boundaries of individual disciplines and question traditional divisions. What distinguishes transdisciplinarity from interdisciplinarity is the approach to the existing boundaries between disciplines: while interdisciplinarity examines the borderlands between disciplines, drawing on methodologies that do not contradict one another, transdisciplinarity ventures into areas which are difficult to define or which cannot be described within the limits of traditional disciplines" (J. Tabaszewska, *"Wędrujące pojęcia". Koncepcja Mieke Bal — przykład inter- czy transdyscyplinarności?* ["Travelling Concepts": Is Mieke Bal's Concept an Example of Interdisciplinarity or Transdisciplinarity?], "Studia Europaea Gnesnensia" 2013, no. 8, p. 117).

seen in Mieke Bal's notion of "travelling concepts." As Roma Sendyka notes, "Bal deliberately and consistently tests the strength of interdisciplinary walls."[66] The Dutch scholar, critic and artist relies on dynamic interpretation[67] and in her open-ended method of cultural analysis draws on, affect theory, among other theories, which she uses to connect different interpretative orders, media, and disciplines.[68]

"But concepts are not fixed," Bal writes, "[t]hey travel – between disciplines, between individual scholars, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities. Between disciplines, their meaning, reach, and operational value differ."[69] Therefore, in order to realize the full potential of concepts, they should be freed and allowed to travel in between different disciplines, where they will be able to demonstrate their full causative power. Although Bal focuses on cultural studies, her theory may be adapted to contemporary literary studies.

Performance studies as a discipline also fundamentally changed the paradigm of how we analyze and interpret texts of culture. "The one overriding and underlying assumption of performance studies is that the field is open," Richard Schechner writes, "[t]here is no finality to performance studies, either theoretically or operationally."[70] The basic assumption of performance studies is that the discipline relies on agency and action, and thus critical categories must be in constant motion. The "performative turn" described above, which was to a certain degree triggered by the popularity of the new discipline, has changed how we think about concepts forever, endowing them with operational freedom.

The dramatic and dramaturgy

Anna Krajewska's concept of the dramatic theory of literature shifted the theoretical focus from purely descriptive towards playful – theory is playing of/with the text. The dramatic has redefined the relation between the author (resurrected and involved in the process of creation), the work (experienced and co-created by the author and the reader), and the reader (experiencing and co-creating the work). This is by no means a novelty; the

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[66] R. Sendyka, *(Praktyczna) podróż do obiektów (teoretycznych). Mieke Bal i jej* Wędrujące pojęcia [(Practical) Journey to (Theoretical) Objects: Mieke Bal's Travelling Concepts], "Stan Rzeczy" 2016, no. 1(10), p. 398.

[67] See *ibidem*, pp. 404–405.

[68] *Cf.* B. Myrdzik, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

[69] M. Bal, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide*, Toronto 2002, p. 24.

[70] R. Schechner, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, London and New York 2002, p. 1.

dramatic foundations of storytelling date back to ancient writers and theoreticians. However, interpreting dynamic and complex contemporary culture through the lens of the dramatic is indeed innovative. In this approach, the dramatic, as a critical category, is innovative and, most importantly, conceptually comprehensive enough to describe art, theory, and reception and the complex relations between them. It is also specific enough (it may be described as a defined, although constantly expanding, field) so as not to be reduced to a catch-all concept (used to justify the theory of everything).

The dramatic, as a critical concept in the contemporary humanities, relies on experience, defined primarily as a relationship with the object of experience or as active participation in a given (series of) events. As Krajewska writes, "[t]he dramatic is based on the performative order (defined as an 'event,' an 'action' that unfolds, an action that is iterative, as an experience of a liminal, dramaturgical modality)."[71] Dramatic (re)enactment is clearly connected with the theater and the use of theatrical concepts in literary theory. Dialogue, scene, act, play, (re)enactment, imitation, interaction, or event[72] are seen as operational concepts – they move beyond the boundaries of the discipline and are used in humanistic discourse as such.

The dramatic functions in between categories, discourses, disciplines, and finally in between the work, the author, and the recipient, which renders (the act of) interpretation more dynamic: it sets it in motion. As a result, different interpretations collide, merge, and entangle, creating new fields of research. Dramaturgy is one of them. "The essence of the dramatic is the tension created by constant movement, displacement, and transformation of various aspects of reality."[73] These movements give rise to a new dramatic discourse that replaces traditional methodologies; it is essentially dialogical, based on play, as concepts and meanings freely travel across disciplines and give rise to new theories. Krajewska writes: "Let's try to capture the dramatic movement of concepts across disciplines – how their meaning changes when they transcend their literary meaning or when they cross disciplinary boundaries. Concepts operate in new contexts. They travel. They create constellations. Concepts cross the boundaries of the discipline and bridge the gap between science and art. They are endowed with new meanings. They engage in a dialogue and become entangled."[74] Like other concepts which actively function in the same field, dramaturgy, by its very

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[71] A. Krajewska, *Dramatyczna teoria literatury*, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

[72] *Cf. ibidem*, p. 25.

[73] E. Woźniak-Czech, *Portret performatywny. Ślad, wymazywanie, nieobecność* [Performative Portrait: Trace, Erasure, Absence], Poznań 2018, p. 21.

[74] A. Krajewska, *Dramaturgia pojęć* [Dramaturgy of Concepts], "Przestrzenie Teorii" 2021, no. 36, p. 8.

nature, eludes definitions and methodological routinization. Instead, it gives rise to a research methodology which productively uses the tensions that arise "in between." It draws on the relational potential of a given work or works. Instead of devising terminologies and methods of working with the object, instead of building totalitarian, and thus pointless, approaches to a given issue, the "dramatic" theoretician creates, as Schechner put it, an open field – one that is open to other scholars. He or she selects from among various different possibilities those that attract (or repel) one another, those that correlate (or collide), those that create transgenic hybrids that, in turn, give rise to new open interactive fields.

The "dramatic" approach to theory demonstrates just how complex the concept of possibility is: firstly, it shows that it is possible to revive theory;[75] secondly, it shows that, when freed from the constraints of the discipline, the broadly defined humanities "can still achieve a lot";[76] thirdly, and finally, there is still untapped potential in theory.[77]

(Im)possible works

(Non)existent literary works best illustrate the potential of possibilities. Let us imagine a library of works that do not exist, such as the one described by Jorge Luis Borges in "The Library of Babel." For Umberto Eco, this library is a metaphor for the world or the universe: "[o]ne of the properties of Borges's library is that it not only contains countless volumes in endless, repeated rooms but can display volumes containing all the possible combinations of twenty-five letters of the alphabet, so that one cannot imagine any combination of characters that the library has not foreseen."[78] Borges's library therefore contains, hypothetically, endless narrative possibilities. As such, it is also a metaphor for the endless possibilities of literature and thus also for the endless possibilities of theory (at) play.

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[75] *Możliwość* – «fakt, że coś jest możliwe» [Possibility – 'a chance that something may happen'], [entry in:] *Słownik Języka Polskiego*, online, https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/mo%C5%B-Cliwo%C5%9B%C4%87.html (accessed: 20.10.2023).

[76] *Możliwość* – «zdolności, predyspozycje psychiczne i fizyczne człowieka, dzięki którym może on coś osiągnąć» [Possibility – 'abilities or qualities that could make someone or something better in the future'], [entry in:] *Słownik Języka Polskiego*, online, https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/mo%C5%BCliwo%C5%9B%C4%87.html (accessed: 20.10.2023).

[77] *Możliwość* – «tkwiąca w czymś i ujawniająca się w sprzyjających warunkach zdolność do działania i osiągania jakichś efektów» [Possibility – 'unspecified qualities of a promising nature; potential'], [entry in:] *Słownik Języka Polskiego*, online, https://sjp.pwn.pl/szukaj/mo%C5%BCliwo%C5%9B%C4%87.html (20.10.2023).

[78] U. Eco, *On Literature*, trans. M. McLaughlin, London 2012, p. 11.

Apart from Borges, Stanisław Lem also wrote about a non-existent library of fictional texts in his apocrypha, which include *A Perfect Vacuum* and *Imaginary Magnitude*. Lem's apocrypha praise possibilities. As drafts, sketches, and conceptual frameworks, they are inherently unstable and ambiguous. Even though they do not function as complete works, they exist subjectively as literature suspended in potentiality – possible and impossible at the same time.

A Perfect Vacuum is a collection of reviews of nonexistent books. Except for one – *A Perfect Vacuum* itself – which is reviewed first. Once the reader learns that one of Lem's actual books has been reviewed alongside nonexistent works, he begins to question his readerly reality. What is this book? If it can be touched, seen, opened, and, most importantly, read, then it is possible that *A Perfect Vacuum* actually exists. However, perceiving the work through its physicality defies the logic of individual reviews, because apart from the first one, all others discuss nonexistent entities. Moreover, Lem writes about himself as if he were someone else, a different Lem who, in a different universe, created another *A Perfect Vacuum*:

> Reviewing nonexistent books is not Lem's invention; we find such experiments not only in a contemporary writer, Jorge Luis Borges (for example, his "Investigations of the Writings of Herbert Quaine"), but the idea goes further back – and even Rabelais was not the first to make use of it. *A Perfect Vacuum* is unusual in that it purports to be an anthology made up entirely of such critiques. Pedantry or a joke, this methodicalness?[79]
>
> [...]
>
> *A Perfect Vacuum* turns out to be a tale of what is desired but is not to be had. It is a book of ungranted wishes. And the only subterfuge the evasive Lem might still avail himself of would be a counterattack: in the assertion that it was not I, the critic, but he himself, the author, who wrote the present review and added it to – and made it part of – *A Perfect Vacuum*.[80]

Interpretive friction between the reader (who finds the ontological status of the work ambiguous), the author (for whom the question of the (non)existence of the text remains open), and the autotelic work (which describes itself as if it did not exist) gives rise to an elusive network of dramatic relations, which shine through tensions, inaccuracies, and cognitive gaps. Contrary to what is announced in the title, *A Perfect Vacuum* is not a vacuum at all. It is filled with books that are disembodied, devoid of actual physical referents, and conventional plotlines, but they nevertheless exist,

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[79] S. Lem, *A Perfect Vacuum*, trans. M. Kandel, Evanston 1979, p. 3.
[80] *Ibidem*, p. 8.

suspended in potentiality, because Lem created them in his reviews. There is a possibility that they exist, although in potentiality and not in reality.

Imaginary Magnitude, respectively, is a collection of introductions to nonexistent books. However, it is not the possibility that these books may one day be written, productive and tempting as it may be, but the art of writing introductions itself that is the author's focus. It is expressed, of course, in a very suggestive introduction to "Introduction-writing."[81] Lem thus comments, half-jokingly, on contemporary literature and literary theory. Which scholar has not written at least one introduction in their career? Is it not true that most theoretical monographs are titled "introduction to…" or "outline of…"? Lem writes: "besides Introductions to Works, there are Introduction Works, for like the Holy Scriptures of any faith, the theses and futuromachies of scholars are Prefaces – to this world and the other. Thus reflection shows that the Realm of Introductions is incomparably more vast than the Realm of Literature, for what the latter endeavors to *realize*, Introductions merely announce from afar."[82] The goal is to come closer – that is why I have introduced (sic!) a new literary theory, or more precisely, a new dramaturgical approach to literary theory that does not look at literature from afar. It no longer functions as an Introduction Work but becomes one with literature. Entangled, it is both its reflection and its driving force.

Where is the author? Where is literature?

One of the introductions in Lem's *Imaginary Magnitude* is devoted to a phenomenon that is very important today, both from a creative and a theoretical perspective. Indeed, Lem presents his readers with an introduction to the five volumes of *A History of Bitic Literature*. "By bitic literature," Lem writes, "we mean any [literary] work of nonhuman origin – one whose real author is not a human being. (He may have been the author indirectly, however, by performing the function which generated the real author's acts of creation.) The discipline which studies the entire class of such writing is bitistics. There is still no uniformity of opinion as to the dimensions of this research field."[83] The definition of bitic literature sounds surprisingly familiar and somewhat prophetic, especially considering the fact that *Imaginary Magnitude* was published in 1973. Bitic literature is being created today and arouses as much interest as controversy. I am referring of course to texts created solely by artificial intelligence (AI). Considering the pace

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[81] See S. Lem, *Imaginary Magnitude*, trans. M.E. Heine, London 1984, p. 1.
[82] *Ibidem*, p. 2.
[83] *Ibidem*, p. 41.

with which technology develops, it can be concluded that a separate research field devoted solely to AI-generated literature will emerge in the near future.

In 2016, a novella, whose title translates to "The Day a Computer Writes a Novel," was submitted for the third-annual Hoshi Shinichi Literary Award. It was a strong entry but in the end it did not win. There would be nothing surprising about this if not for the fact that this novella was actually written by a computer and its title was not just meant to generate interest but… was in fact true. It raised many questions. If the text written by artificial intelligence, and not by a human being, had won, who would have accepted the award? We once again come face to face with the question about the author's status. Is the resurrected author symbolically dead again? And the novella itself? If it was not written by a human being, what is it? New technologies and new forms of literature, created *in silico*, that is exclusively in the digital space, pose new challenges to theory.

Two years later, in 2018, the first novel written solely by artificial intelligence was published in France by JBE (Jean Boîte Éditions).[84] In the future, the year 2022 may be considered the turning point in literary revolution because that year ChatGPT, an AI system that can write a novel in a few hours based on configurations set by the user, debuted on the Internet. New possibilities offered by ChatGPT shined a spotlight on new problems and controversies. Fake books, especially e-books, supposedly written by famous authors have appeared.[85] Moreover, many famous writers complain that their works are being used illegally because the software uses them to "learn" to write. Some writers, including George R.R. Martin and John Grisham, filed a copyright infringement lawsuit against the creators of ChatGPT.[86] It was a historic decision.

It is only a matter of time before a virtual "Library of Babel" is created, consisting of works created exclusively by AI algorithms. Borges's fictional vision may come true, but will it really be a library of our dreams? In his parodic review of the nonexistent book *Die kultur als fehler* (*Civilization as Mistake*), Lem makes an accurate and prophetic statement about contemporary literature: "We live in an era of transition […] and never is it so unutterably difficult to make out the road traveled and the road that

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[84] See https://www.jbe-books.com/products/1-the-road-by-an-artificial-neural (accessed: 30.04.2023).

[85] See U. Lesman, *Plaga fałszywych książek. Sztuczna inteligencja podszyła się pod znanych pisarzy* [A Plague of Fake Books: Artificial Intelligence Impersonates Famous Writers], https://cyfrowa.rp.pl/technologie/art38957171-plaga-falszywych-ksiazek-sztuczna-inteligencja-podszyla-sie-pod-znanych-pisarzy (accessed: 20.10.2023).

[86] *Znani pisarze pozywają twórców ChatGPT* [Famous Writers Are Suing the Makers of ChatGPT], https://rynek-ksiazki.pl/aktualnosci/znani-pisarze-pozywaja-tworcow-chatgpt/ (accessed: 30.09.2023).

extends into the future as in periods of transitions, for they are times of conceptual confusion."[87] The concepts in the contemporary humanities are inextricably entangled. They play (with) one another and collide with each other like atoms, which seemingly chaotically circulate in a huge particle accelerator. Is a new theoretical universe in store for us? It is a possibility.

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[87] S. Lem, *A Perfect Vacuum*, *op. cit.*, p. 138.

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