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### The Constitution of the Artistic Values of Literature

Kształtowanie artystycznych wartości literackich

Формирование художественно-литературных достоинств

Almost throughout the history of European culture the formulations of the evaluative criteria of the literary work have as a rule placed the cognitive functions of the work over the aesthetic ones.

Thus, antiquity, the Middle Ages, and modern classicism alike recognized as valuable only such literary creation which respected the prescription of faithful representation by striving to achieve correspondence between the world presented in the literary work and its external reality. However, this faithfulness of representation was variously understood in different epochs.

In antiquity it meant primarily imitation (*mimesis*) and presentation of the external world (*nature*). In the Middle Ages it had the sense of revealing the transcendental world (spiritual and ideal) by means of a constant store of symbolic forms. In modern classicism the faithfulness of representation was binding for the literary work in a double system of reference: the world was to be depicted in the manner of the ancients. Historically the latest manifestation of the postulate of faithful representation was the program of 20th-century "realism" which acknowledged the correspondence with external reality as the main source of values in the literary work and a proper criterion of its evaluation. All the later formulas of "realism" invoked this conception.

Thus, in different periods the concept of the faithfulness of representation (and, in this sense, also the *truthfulness* of the literary work) had different meanings and scopes.

Yet, the recognition of a literary work as (possibly) being in agreement with reality may only take place on the basis of some concept of the *true* nature of reality, such as formulated by the historically determined kind of thinking (antiquity, the Middle Ages etc.). Therefore, the formula of the faithfulness of representation either is always subordinated to some historical view of the world or else it becomes a groundless absolutization of a certain chosen concept of *truthfulness*.

Medieval literature differed so much from that of antiquity because, while preserving the imitative understanding of the role of *poesy*, it reflected radical changes in the mediaeval view of the nature of things and of the *reality* which the literary work was to show.

Following in the steps of antique examples the literature of modern classicism imposed a number of rules (proper modes of presentation) on the task of recreating reality; their poetic convention, together with the accepted principle of probability, determined the image of the world contained in the work. To represent faithfully meant then to depict the world in a manner which avoided the presentation of unusual events, expressed no violent emotions, and broke no rules of the so-called "good taste".

Thus, the poetic convention also indirectly expressed a certain view of the world which determined the nature of what the literary work showed.

Generally speaking, each variety of faithful representation is conditioned by some historical world view. The latter decides about the manner of its realization and determines the criteria of *truthfulness* of the literary work. (This is probably a reason for the occurrence of so many theoretical varieties of *realisms*, covering artistic phenomena of greatly different scopes). The problem of representativeness cannot be considered in isolation from what, for whom, and for what reasons is regarded as representative.

However, the acknowledgement of cognitive values in the literary work to some extent presupposes an autonomous treatment of the world presented in the work. If we assume that the stratum of represented objectivities in the work is merely a copy of the historical situation in which the work came into being, it would be meaningless to confront its *content* with the experiences of subsequent epochs and generations. The life of the literary work in its historically changeable concretizations consists precisely in discovering mainly such cognitive values of the work which prove lasting and retain their significance also in different historical situations.

The faithfulness of representation may be realized only in forms limited by a historical world view, but the evaluation of the value of the truthfulness of the work consists in going beyond the determination of this world view. In other words, the work comes into being by force of a world view but it is then evaluated mainly in aspects of different modes of thought. One may thus state that the cognitive tasks of the literary work are historically changeable as much as the evaluative criteria of its cognitive values.

The aesthetic effects of the literary work seem to be somehow *fused* with its presentational function which conditions their character and specificity. At the same time, it is much easier to say which and what aesthetic functions are not specifically literary than to provide positive characterization of the nature of aesthetic literary functions.

It seems to me that because of the character of the construction of the literary work its formal valuable moments play a subordinate role in the set of its artistic values. The literary work is also "lacking" in values of immediate sensory influence. Apart from the stratum of word sounds, all the other components of the work are not fully qualitative and sensory. The world presented in the literary work cannot therefore directly affect one with the beauty of a *shape* or *appearance*.

Likewise, the concept of aesthetic value defined as a "coherence of the adjustment of the qualitative moments of the work" has no proper application to the literary work

unless the concept of "quality" is expanded enough to cover non-sensory moments which are *not immediately given*.

The consequence of the subordination of the vocal (formal) component of the work is that the effects of the "aesthetically active form" certainly do not belong to the main functions of the literary work.

One may also doubt if the literary work at all has any form of construction specific for itself (like painting or architecture).

Hence, all aesthetic formalism fails to provide a proper perspective for the description of the values and functions of the literary work. In keeping with its calling, it qualifies artistic creation exclusively in respect to the effects of the *formal* components of the work, while in literary works the latter are prompted by the moments of *content* and, on a higher plane, also by the world views which condition the appearance of some artistic forms.

Although traditional aesthetic categories, such as the tragic, the sublime, the comic, the grotesque, do denote in a general way the qualitative label of the world presented in the work, yet they do not forejudge the tenor and nature of individual realizations of the values, since they are merely single variants of value constituting. Besides, most literary works have qualitative endowments which cannot be covered by any one of these categories since they are neither *grotesque* nor *comic* nor still *tragic*.

Thus, among these various approaches to artistic values we cannot find the one that could be used without objections in apprehending the artistic qualifications of the literary work.

Is there any way out of the dilemma?

It seems to me that the manner of constituting values by the literary work justifies the use of a certain traditional aesthetic category, though in a new formulation of its sense and scope. I have in mind the classical principle of *appropriateness (decorum)*, in which agreement between the *theme* of the work and the means of artistic expression was a measure of the work's value.

I propose to understand *appropriateness* as a "coherence of the elements of content and form in the work" which conditions its aesthetic effects and to consider what scope of its use would be justified.

The classical principle of "appropriateness" (*decorum*) combined the postulate of the relation between the moments of content and form of the work with a store of constant rules of creating the literary work. For example, French classicism claimed that the *alexandrine* was the proper (and only) line for *tragedy* and that only a ruler could be its hero. In this way the principle had, in fact, the sense of an aesthetic norm and the end of classicism in European culture also put an end to the norm.

The definition of *appropriateness* proposed by me does not concern any historical set of forms in creating the literary work. If we expand the concept of *appropriateness* to cover the whole history of European literature, it will become evident that in each phase of its existence literature respected a different kind of *appropriateness*, the *decorum* principle meant one thing in antiquity, something else in the Middle Ages, and still another thing in modern times.

Because of the historical variety of *content* of literary works and aspects of the world contained in them, the problem of the *appropriateness* of content and form of the work

may be differentiated depending on the set of literary phenomena accepted as its exponent.

The harmonious unity of the moments of content and form of the work will have a different shape in a work which strives for an *objectivizing* presentation than in a work containing a *subjective* vision of the world. In turn, a "subjective" attitude to the world presented in the work is not by itself either more or less valuable than the *objectivizing* approach; nor is a *grotesque* form of the world any more valuable than, for instance, a *tragic* vision of the world depicted in the work. They are all, within their own limits, equally significant apprehensions, while their specific character assumes different modes of presentation as appropriate for *grotesque*, *tragic*, *subjective* or *objective* varieties.

Since each of them allows a multiplicity of possible artistic realizations within a variant it constitutes (e.g. different works containing a subjective view of the world), the question of "adjusting the moments of content and form" becomes a measure of the individual value of some literary works. For there exists no constant repertory of the forms to create, for instance, a *grotesque work*, yet among the works of the *grotesque* character one may distinguish those which are artistically more valuable than others.

Thus, artistic value constitutes an offshoot of an individual realization of the harmonious unity of the moments of content and form of the work. In a work characterized by a high degree of coherence, all, or, speaking cautiously, most formal moments seem purposeful precisely in respect to the strictly individual character of the world depicted in the work. In consequence, the artistic form acquires a certain *appearance of necessity* as if what the work speaks about could only be presented in the manner in which it has been done. One may thus say that a valuable work establishes a rule for itself and in itself it constitutes its accomplishment.

At the same time, each literary work (and any object of art) emphasizes its distinctiveness exclusively by defining itself in respect to what is regarded as common and typical. Originality may manifest itself only in reference to usual, common, and repeated formulas. After all, a departure from a norm assumes the norm's existence. The presence of some stable and commonly accepted norms in a certain phase of a culture does not in principle counteract a creation of unusual, peculiar, and distinct works.

Moreover, the norms are not always formulated; formulated norms appear mainly in decadent and imitative stages of a culture when there occurs an intensified desire to consolidate and codify patterns derived from the past. Besides, no rule determines the full choice of the work's attributes; it generally defines the concept of the creative act and a scheme of the artistic product. This still provides many various possibilities of achieving original forms of the works by both individual manner of fulfilling the norm or by its creative infringement to achieve distinctiveness.

On the other hand, the lack of commonly accepted rules of artistic activity paradoxically promotes precisely the factors which unify artistic creation. The so-called *Romantic breakthrough*, carried out under the slogan of striving for absolute creative originality, led to a rejection of a common aesthetic norm. Post-romantic literature tried to fulfil that postulate of originality in a situation in which it was no longer quite clear what should be recognized as respecting the norm and what was its breaking. (Hence, probably, in modern art there are so many *substitute* actions which have the character of breaking a customary *taboo* or rules of common morality). For that reason, the access to an

artistic community propagating a certain superior style, direction of influence, and world views, is today perceived as a kind of condition of one's presence in culture. The distinctiveness of particular works is thus paid for with a servitude of participating in a group, while originality is tamed by the aims and assumptions of the "paternal" artistic trend. Since identity and unity of a trend condition the coherence of its world view premises, and of aesthetic assumptions in particular, the work belonging to it appears first of all in the role of a model artistic object, in some measure embodying the features of a program. Hence, there occurs a shift of certain functions of the work from the realm of *high literature* to that of popular literature or *entertainment*, so characteristic of contemporary letters; this is particularly true about those qualities and effects which shape the emotional category of reception.

In this way the lack of a general aesthetic norm creates a double uniformization of present literary production and brings a variety of works which are purposefully non-emotional and oriented towards aesthetic reception, on the one hand, and, on the other – works intentionally *entertaining*, characterized by great emotionality. Therefore, in both varieties the manner of integrating the moments of content and form is, to some extent, predetermined, though motivated by different concepts of value. They are conditioned by contradictory world views, reduced to an extreme choice: either a purely *artistic* work or a strictly *ludic* work, deprived of artistic ambitions. Hence, one may conclude that the lack of a common norm favours the appearance of phenomena deprived of artistic value, that is to say, phenomena which are not negative in the evaluative sense but which, on the whole, do not aspire to the creation of values of this kind and to the aesthetic form of reception.

If in works characterized by a high degree of coherence it is difficult to discover unnecessary or purposeless components, then in *incoherent* works *content* significantly jars with *form*, while the purposefulness of using accepted means of creation seems doubtful, especially if we assume that only aesthetically shaped components of the work are *purposeful*. For instance, in some works employing the form of a *tale* one may easily find elements which do not function aesthetically, such as all those descriptions which have no significant sense or characterization of protagonists and objects expanded above the average norm and without any apparent need.

It seems that Witkacy was right when he said that *brevity* is the measure of the work's value. However, the verdict should be taken *cum grano salis*. The problem is that it is easier to impose a strictly artistic organization on a short literary form while a longer form seems to a greater extent to be under the pressure of non-aesthetic factors; for instance, the *epic* variety of work is constructed as a report of events.

Let us take a closer look at some of the contemporary kinds of *entertainment* literature, at the types of programmatically *monofunctional* works, such as a *thriller* or *tear jerker (melodrama)*. In works of these kinds, whole complications in the plot, frequently greatly expanded, work to achieve a relatively modest effect in the form of producing an intended emotional reaction in the reader. Thus, without difficulty one can find in them components which are unnecessary even from the point of view of the assumed effects of these works. However, it is more important that these works themselves are not really "necessary" in respect to functions to which they aspire. For it is not the concrete story that *really* counts but only its effect. These works also have a scale of

values determined by the functional factor: more *valuable* are those works which are more moving, more *frightening* etc.

Thus, most of the *thrillers* and *melodramas* are interchangeable and *exemplary* (in Husserl's sense of the term) kinds of works. On the other hand, *polyfunctional* works, characterized by a high degree of integration of components, are irreplaceable precisely because of these individual effects to which they are entitled. These functions are realized by a selection of distinct and unrepeatable components, so they are as if fused with the work they belong to. A destruction of a work-carrier means then a loss of certain specific values in the world.

This strictly individual character of literary artistic values is also manifested in the nature of the moments of *content*. We are well aware of the fact that, for instance, the *truthfulness* of R. M. Rilke's poetry is something different than that of T. Mann's *Dr. Faustus* or that the value of *truth* in *The Good Soldier Schweik* is different than that of the medieval *Chanson de Roland*.

Although as many as three of the works mentioned above employ the form of a *tale*, they essentially differ in their manners of integrating the components of content and form and they have quite different aesthetic effects. Thus, not only are they not interchangeable but, strictly speaking, they are not even comparable with each other. One cannot say with any sense that, for example, *Chanson de Roland* is more valuable than *The Good Soldier Schweik*, since there are no grounds to treat them as realizations of the same type of values.

The manner of constituting values in the works, individual in polyfunctional works and typical in monofunctional works, determines the ontological status of literary works.

Very valuable polyfunctional works have the status of an *individual entity*, that is, of a specific and unrepeatable object, and only monofunctional works have the status of a *copy (exemplum)*, a typical product of a graded scale of values. Thus, the sphere of literary values spreads very widely, from non-relative and strictly individual values (i.e. *aesthetic* in the proper sense of the term) to relative and graded values (coinciding with the type of *utilitarian* values in a wide sense of the term).

Thus, it is not true that the literary work has a stable set of values and *literary* functions assigned to it (as an object of art), but the literary work acquires the status of a work of art in individual forms of the realization of values.

## STRESZCZENIE

Faktyczne i istotne zróżnicowanie tzw. literatury pięknej sprawia, że nie można dziełu literackiemu przypisać stałego zasobu funkcji i wartości. Wartości literackie urzeczywistniają się bowiem nader swoiście w różnych indywidualnych przypadkach. Nie zawsze także utwory literackie dążą do oddziaływania artystycznego. Zwłaszcza popularne gatunki współczesnej tzw. literatury „rozrywkowej” rezygnują z tworzenia wartości artystycznych, a głównym ich celem jest działanie na emocje odbiorcy przy pomocy najprostszych, stereotypowych środków wyrazu. Ten rodzaj produkcji literackiej powołuje do istnienia dziełka mające, jak to autor określa status „egzemplarza”, to jest wytworu typowego, umieszczonego we właściwej dla niego skali wartości „użytkowych”. Natomiast dzieła

wysoce artystycznie wartościowe mają status „indywiduum”, to jest przedmiotu indywidualnego i swoistego, przede wszystkim za sprawą oryginalnego charakteru urzeczywistnionych w nich wartości. Te drugie spełniają zarazem pewną ogólną regułę tworzenia, w proponowanym przeze mnie nowym określeniu jej sensu i zakresu. Jest nią tzw. zasada „stosowności” (decorum). Autor uznaje zatem, że wartość artystyczna utworu literackiego polega przede wszystkim na osiągnięciu harmonijnej jedności treściowych i formalnych momentów dzieła, choć w każdym odrębnym przypadku harmonijność ta jest uzyskana w sposób swoisty i niepowtarzalny. Można więc rzec, że prawdziwe dzieło sztuki literackiej samo ustanawia sobie regułę i samo jest jej urzeczywistnieniem.

## РЕЗЮМЕ

Фактическая и существенная неоднородность т.н. художественной литературы ведет к тому, что не возможно литературному произведению приписывать постоянного запаса функции и ценности. Литературные ценности реализуются своеобразно в разных индивидуальных случаях. Не всегда литературные произведения стремятся артистически воздействовать. Особенно популярные жанры современной т.н. литературы „развлекательной” отказываются от создания артистических ценностей, а главная их цель — это воздействие на эмоции потребителя самыми простыми, шаблонными средствами выражения. Этот род литературного производства создает произведения имеющие по мнению автора статус „экземпляра”, т.е. типичного продукта, находящегося в соответствующем масштабе „потребительской ценности”. Высокоартистические произведения обладают статусом „индивидуума”, т.е. индивидуального и особенного предмета, благодаря оригинальному характеру осуществленных в них ценностей. Эти произведения отвечают общим условиям творения, в предлагаемым мною новом определении его смысла и диапазона. Это т.н. принцип „соответствия” (decorum). Автор признает, что артистическая ценность литературного произведения заключается прежде всего в достижении гармонического единства содержательных и формальных моментов произведения, хотя в отдельном случае эта гармония достигается своеобразным и неповторяющимся образом. Можно утверждать, что настоящее произведение литературного искусства определяет принцип и его реализует.

