

## CRITICAL READING AND LITERARY COMMUNICATION

Marina MUREȘANU IONESCU<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Prof., PhD "Apollonia" University of Iași, Romania

Corresponding author: Marina Mureșanu Ionescu; e-mail; marina.muresanu@yahoo.fr

### Abstract

The informational content provided by literature has a specific nature. Literature is defined as an equally mediating and mediated system, the transmission-reception (writing-reading) activity establishing the transmitter-receiver contact, thus assuring the transfer of some piece of information. Nowadays, one may mention the formation of a new culture of reading, along with a deadlock in the theory of reading: no comment upon reading - which is not in itself reading - is possible, any longer. The semiology of reading attempts at filling in some blank spaces, which assumes a systematic examination of all aspects involved in the action of reading, from deciphering of graphical signs up to problems of interpretation and reception. *Critical reading* has the power to bring together all these facets of reading. By its all-embracing capacity, it may be viewed as an encyclopaedic metatextual discourse, which renders difficult to circumscribe its borders. Critical reading possesses a series of features which may be equally viewed as defining elements: it is multiple, open, reiterated, retro-active, being, generally, the result of a series of re-readings. The multiplicity of critical reading may also derive from the diversity of contexts (space, time, socio-historical conditions, etc.) within which the act of reading is produced. Implicitly and compulsorily, critical reading is *intertextual*. Just on the line, it tends to be *total* or *totalizing*, when aiming at bringing together as many as possible modalities for understanding the text.

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The more common question frequently asked in relation with *literary communication* refers to the extent to which it may be either integrated or subordinated to the complex domain of *communication*, in general, and also investigated from the same perspective. If the answer is an affirmative one, one should necessarily assure an as exact as possible definition of the specificity of artistic communication and, against this background, identify the characteristic features of literary communication. As a matter of fact, all aspects of the real (non-artistic communication) are reconstructed in a transposed, lagging manner within the literary space.

According to René Berger (Berger, 1976), the first task of art is that of being "communicative or of communication", as it (the art) is not a concept but, first of all, it is an integrating activity among the other social activities, while aesthetic emotions, more than being a simple *catharsis*, express the need of some groups of harmonizing their affective and sensible condition for living together and for taking common actions.

The informational content provided by literature has a specific nature. Literature is defined as an equally mediating and mediated system (Mureșanu Ionescu, 1996), the transmission-reception (writing-reading) activity establishing the transmitter-receiver contact, thus assuring the transfer of some piece of information. The superiority of this type of communication, whose physical support can be but the text, refers mainly to its independence on space and time restrictions, as well as to the relative firmness of the forms responsible for communicational efficiency. We are therefore witnessing the development of an immense exchange activity - **reading** - which is actually beyond any control, due to the possibilities offered by traslations, transpositions, interpretations. The literature of the world appears as a *No Man's Land*, capable of medating all types of contacts, situated at any level, which explains the astonishing complexity of the habit and act of reading.

In the field of literary research, reading is a process of pragmatic nature, developed within a common zone of competence of the transmitter and receiver (author - reader), by means of which the system representing the text is disassembled, perceived in its functionality as a whole and invested with meaning. Reading is a semiosis, involving correlation of the content with a given

expression (Greimas & Courtès, 1979). Reading sets up a productive and creative text-reader relation, as well as an aesthetic effect. In this way, reading becomes nominalization: "to read is to struggle for giving names, to read is to impose to the sentences of the text a semantic transformation" (Barthes, 1970). From this perspective, reading may be viewed as a technique and a practical activity exercised upon the text / work (an "execution", to use the term known in all other arts, involving a rhetoric of its own) (Charles, 1977).

Summing up and correlating all these elements lead necessarily to the elaboration of a *theory of reading*, whose main objectives are: a) establishment of the reading parameters; b) establishment of a typology of a both synchronic and diachronic reading, different from other modalities of approaching a text, related to reading or subordinated to it; c) integration of the themes of reading within the sciences of language and of literature, in general.

As an interactive activity between the literary work and the reader, reading is characterized by a quite turmoiled history, confused, in its essence, with the various forms of "critical reading", in general. Starting from traditional hermeneutics up to the annihilating nihilism of Derrida and Paul De Man, each epoch reads its literature in a specific manner. The reading modalities characteristic for a certain moment become clues for defining the status of the literary forms of the respective period, as well as for the configuration of a specific mentality. The themes of reading, a "massive, enormous, omnipresent object" (Charles, 1977) by the large range of implications it assumes, comes to be practically mistaken with the themes of literature, taken as a whole (Cornea, 1988): literary creation, text, context, metatext, paratext, intertext, genre, meaning, reference, code, isotopy, reception (with its different hypostases) - all appearing as concepts entering the sphere of reading, turned to good account and re-evaluated through reading.

In the beginning, reading was mainly of alegoric nature. The "hermeneutic" activity, starting with the stoics, involves interpretation and exegesis of texts, unveiling of a hidden meaning (of Homer's text, for example), which goes beyond the grammatical and rhetoric

analysis. Starting with the end of Antiquity and along the whole Middle Age, hermeneutics gets extended to the exegesis of biblical texts, by developing a four-levelled interpretative system: the literal, alegorical, tropological and anagogical meaning. Later on, hermeneutics is subjected to a gradual secularization process, being applied to texts different from the sacred ones, an extension always interpreted as a deviation from the norm. The German romanticism created modern hermeneutics, defined in 1900, by Wilhelm Dilthey, as "the art of interpreting written monuments", which may be viewed as synonymous with critical reading. With Heidegger, Gadamer, Hirsch, Ricoeur, hermeneutics acquires a philosophical and literary validation.

However, as, from a hermeneutic perspective, to read is an *art* depending on the experience and culture of the individual, elaboration of a generalizing theoretical methodology is impossible. In this way, creation of a *theory of reading* that should consider equally the determinations of *internal* coherence, deriving from the coherence of the work, as well as those of *external* coherence, becomes necessary: no reading can disregard certain objective data (of historical, linguistic, etc. nature) about the work. The idea lying at the basis of the modern theory of reading is that the literary phenomenon includes not only the text, but also its reader and the whole assembly of possible reactions of the reader *versus* the text - enunciation and statement (Riffaterre, 1979).

The reader, the great disregarded character, comes to be placed in the forestage, whereas the center of attraction of the literary phenomenon gets shifted from the space between creator and work, to that between work and reader. The solutions available for bringing to full account this relation were multiple. Among the most important ones, worth mentioning were *identification reading*, applied especially by thematic criticism (Georges Poulet, Jean Starobinski) and the *aesthetics of reception* (Gadamer, Jauss). Just on the line, identification involves a reciprocal blurring of both author and reader, up to developing an *impersonal* work and reading (Maurice Blanchot). Opposed to a coherent reading (of any type), there appears

the deconstructivistic orientation (actually, an antireading) which, promoting the principle of "an active and methodical bewilderment" (Derrida), brings into discussion the very existence of reading. To deconstruct means to put into evidence, in a programmatic manner, the absence of any coherence, thus making the text burst out, in search of its contradictions and inconsistencies. The hermeneutic circle is substituted by paradox and antinomy: analysis, reading will never end, yet they will create a tensional space, in which meanings are continuously composed and decomposed. For numerous theoreticians, reading is included in the text, being somehow "programmed" by it which, in its turn, can exist exclusively through reading. The text becomes the equivalent of a musical score which is brought to life only through its interpretation (Riffaterre, 1979). Reading thus becomes a construction, a production of the text, an active and creative reception.

From the perspective of poetics, the object of reading is the individual text, namely the description and disassembling of the system. Even if it makes use of the instruments of poetics, reading is not its mere application, attempting instead at filling in the spaces still unexhausted by it: reading involves a reciprocal relationing of all elements of the text, not as to their general significance, but for putting into evidence the uniqueness of the text. Reading aims at catching the work, by means of language, as difference. In this way, reading becomes the most adequate practice capable of revealing the originality of the text as a monument (Riffaterre, 1979), and equally of the interpreter, to whom reading (a reading among others) permits producing of a very personal opinion.

The importance given to reading in the contemporary literary research brought about re-evaluation of numerous concepts, starting from literarity up to the literary history itself. The text can resist exclusively only by passing the "test of efficiency of creation" (Riffaterre, 1979). The efficacy of any text depends on its capacity of being perceived. The "monumental" text resists to the wear of successive readings. From the perspective of reading, the history of literature becomes a study on the "survival" of

the literary creations, by means of a cumulative effect of the succeeding generations. The "life" of a creation depends on the balance between the immutable code of the text and the ever-changing code of its subsequent readings. Literary reality appears as a functional system involving a fixed element, the work, and a variable one, the world and time within which this creation is consumed. In other words, successive readings may be viewed as variants of a basic invariant element - the text. Reading enriches the work by accumulating information as, in each text, an inestimable reserve of possible decodings is being overlapped. (Corti, 1981) The specific character of literary communication lies mainly in the act of reading, once known that, unlike the current one, literary communication includes only two of the components of communication - the message (the text) and the reader - the other ones having a mere representation (Riffaterre, 1979). The literary work comes into being, with each reading, within the space between the two instances.

Reading should be distinguished from other related modalities of approaching the literary phenomenon: a) *projection*, viewed as a remaking, in opposed direction, of the path run through by the creator, from the "source" towards the work; b) *comment*, which aims at explaining the meaning, in most cases already intuited prior to reading; c) *interpretation*, a step characteristic to hermeneutics, considering the text as a palimpsest and attempting at going beyond the apparent textual structure, as a different, more authentic text; d) *description*, an action characteristic to structural analysis producing no hierarchy or judgement.

*Poetic reading* (viewed from the perspective of poetics) attempts at bringing together, in an integrating action, general and private aspects, making possible induction of a "grammar" of the text and, consequently - to a higher or lower extent - its formalization. However, such reading is possible only within an abstract theoretical plan. Poetic reading hints not only at generality but also at the potentialities of the literary system.

Whichever the perspective from which it is considered, reading is an action of

intertextualization: on one side, any artistic text is written as a "reading" of all texts known by the author, with which it enters a dialectic relation of attraction and repulsion - a phenomenon more or less explicitly discernible in the new text (Genette, 1982). On the other side, through reading, the reader contemplates simultaneously the text he is reading within a more or less complex intertextual network, according to the structure of his/her expectations.

As a function of the level of the expectation horizon, there exist: *naive* reading, oriented more on the content of the message than on its form, *cultivated* reading, which is usually a "re-reading", based on a permanent shifting between deviation and norm or norms, *scholarly* reading, paying attention to the identification of the stylistic elements and *aesthetic reading*, which mainly appreciates such stylistic aspects (Dubois et al., 1970). These levels of reading may be reformulated as the opposition *consume reading* (naive, amusement reading)/*productive reading*, including analysis, interpretation, establishment of analogies and relations, up to becoming a possible re-writing of the text. The type or level of reading is also determined by the "receptive competence" of the reader (Stierle, 1979). Reading competence assumes knowledge of the various codes involved in the act of reading, as well as performance, evaluation and cooperation (Cornea, 1988). As a function of the mode of text evaluation, reading may be "prosaic", *valorising* and *critical*, the last of them being the only one capable of assuring "control of the impression".

Reading is different from *reception*, by the fact that reading favors what the text contains, whereas reception refers especially to the reaction of the subject confronted with the text - what the subject remembers, according to his/her personality and circumstances, which explains why, in the aesthetics of reception, the notion of *effect* holds a central position. The aesthetics of reception, theorized by Hans-Robert Jauss and the school of Konstanz, promotes a phenomenology of reading as an act, according to the pragmatic pattern of the acts of language. It enriched the notion of "expectation horizon" and reshaped numerous of the working concepts

of literary investigation, especially those of reader and literary history. Starting with Umberto Eco, the aesthetics of reception becomes a semiotics of a cooperating reading (Eco, 1985).

*Critical reading* is capable of bringing together all these aspects of reading. By its integrating capacity, it may be considered as an encyclopaedic metatextual discourse, which renders difficult a precise tracing of its boundaries. At the same time, critical reading is essentially equivocal, establishing an interaction between two types of discourse: the discourse which cites and the cited discourse. This interaction may be manifested in succession or simultaneously: analysis, interpretation, comment, understanding, defining hypotheses, projection, identification, description, dismantling, pleasure, deciphering, etc. Unlike common reading, critical reading is compelled to adopt a certain "tone", an attitude, thus appearing as an "interventionistic" genre (Barthes, 1966).

Critical reading possesses a series of features which may be equally viewed as defining elements: it is multiple, open, reiterated, retro-active, being, generally, the result of a series of re-readings. The multiplicity of critical reading may also derive from the diversity of contexts (space, time, socio-historical conditions, etc.) within which the act of reading is produced. Implicitly and compulsorily, critical reading is *intertextual*. Just on the line, it tends to be *total* or *totalizing*, when aiming at bringing together as many as possible modalities for understanding the text.

Confronting all these elements and orientations, or at least only part of them, one may notice the occurrence of a new culture of reading, along with a deadlock to be faced in the theory of reading: no comment upon reading - which is in itself reading - is possible. The semiology of reading, more and more well-established, attempts at filling in some blank spaces, by a systematic examination of all aspects involved in the act of reading, from deciphering of graphic signs up to problems of interpretation and reception. Whichever the perspective from which this problem is approached, reading remains "an event of knowledge" (Vlad, 1977), an essential aspect of the spiritual life of mankind along its whole evolution.

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