Deconstruction, Walt Whitman, and the Purpose of Literary Education

Anton Pokrivčák
Uniwersytet Technologiczno-Humanistyczny im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego w Radomiu, Poland
apokrivcak@gmail.com

Abstract
The article explores the purpose of literary theory, and, consequently, literary education at the beginning of the twenty-first century. It first discusses some of the ideas of Paul de Man for whom literary scholarship is challenged by the incompatibility between the nature of the object of literary theory and the methods used to analyse it. Then the author briefly traces some other ideas regarding the nature of literature and their reflection in establishing the purpose of literary education. A particular emphasis is paid to a re-evaluation of the universality of Walt Whitman’s message, as expressed in his “Song of Myself,” under the circumstances of contemporary ideological and cultural struggles.

Keywords
literary theory, education, deconstruction, teaching, universal, Walt Whitman

“Overfacile opinion notwithstanding,” Paul de Man wrote in his highly controversial article entitled “The Resistance to Theory” in 1982, “teaching is not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tangentially and contiguously involved. The only teaching worthy of the name is scholarly, not personal; analogies between teaching and various aspects of show business or guidance counseling are more often than not excuses for having abdicated the task. Scholarship has, in principle, to be eminently teachable” (de Man, 2002, p. 4).

Paul de Man was one of the preeminent theorists of deconstruction, a highly complex, difficult to understand, sophisticated, if not even esoteric movement aspiring to unmask the so-called “logocentric illusion beyond the Western metaphysics”.
However, he was not only a theorist, but a very successful teacher, admired by students who later became successful scholars/teachers themselves. In the mentioned article, he tried to reflect on the two aspects of the process facing each person involved in literary studies at a university level – teaching and scholarship. Not a difficult problem when one does natural sciences (mathematics, physics), or even social sciences, but a towering obstacle when doing literary studies, for in them one is constantly confronted by a constant feeling that what is taught is, in essence, ungraspable, making one to wonder, as Paul de Man did, whether such teaching is a scientific and cognitive process, or just an inter-subjective activity not worthy to bear the name of scholarship. If teaching is, de Man argued, a “cognitive process”, it should be scholarly. But in teaching literature, the object of teaching is a unique phenomenon resisting its own objectification and thus subverting the claims to truth initiated by the application of the scientific method. And if a method “cannot be made to suit the ‘truth’ of its object”, it “can only teach delusion” (p. 4). Therefore, “it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true” (p. 4). What is then this object, called literature, which we aspire to teach? Can we define it, theorise it as an object of scientific investigation? Can we teach it scientifically? Or is it really just delusion? Although Paul de Man, as a founding member of the relativistic deconstruction, was quite sceptical about much of this, his scepticism nevertheless provoked some fundamental questions concerning the nature and purpose of literary education.

In the past, literature was considered an essential manifestation of human knowledge which “tends to express the universal” (Aristotle), and is therefore much more important than history which would be concerned just with the particular. Moreover, great poets made poetry, usually taken broadly to stand for literature, or art in general, “to aspire to be a treasure-house of science” (Sidney). It was considered to be able to blend in the most intimate combination of “spirituality and sensuality, terrestrial and celestial, life and death” (Schlegel). Poetic imagination was also expected to fuse subject and object, a human being and the Creator, feeling and thought (Coleridge). “Poetic spirit of our human life” was the “creator and receiver both / Working but in alliance / with the works / Which it beholds” (Wordsworth), and poets “[were] the unacknowledged legislators of the world (Shelley).

The twentieth century largely abandoned such transcendental aesthetics and approached literature from a more technical point of view, taking it as one of the subjects worth studying at universities. If such study were to be scientific, its object was supposed to be objectifiable and susceptible to a proper methodology of research. In the Anglophone cultural milieu, the earliest signs of this approach could be seen in the gradual dissatisfaction with the Victorian modes of writing, noticed especially in T. S. Eliot’s critical and theoretical articles. But it was not only Eliot. There were also authors like I. A. Richards and his *Principles of Literary Criticism* (2001) and *Practical Criticism* (2009) as well as others.
Of course, in non-Anglophone literary theory one cannot forget to mention perhaps the real initiators of the scientific approach to literary studies, the Russian Formalists. Their revolutionary ideas were later followed by Czech and French structuralists as well as American New Critics. Then came many other approaches, all very serious in analysing the phenomenon called literature, usually performed by academics at respected universities. The increasing professionalization (if compared with the nineteenth century’s role of literary critics as primarily public figures expressing their opinion about many matters of general cultural interest) coincided with trends towards literature’s independence, and, at the same time, dependence on the linguistic nature of literary meaning.

In the late twentieth and the early twenty-first century, however, literary studies lost its seriousness and produced much of what de Man had called “delusion”. According to some, such scientifically clothed delusions caused a large-scale decrease in the popularity of literary education. In the 2009 article published in The American Scholar and entitled “The Decline of the English Department” William Chace, for example, claims that “During the last four decades, a well-publicized shift in what undergraduate students prefer to study has taken place in American higher education. The number of young men and women majoring in English has dropped dramatically; the same is true of philosophy, foreign languages, art history, and kindred fields, including history” (2009). Such situation, noticed in other countries as well, made it possible to agree with Suzanne S. Choo who also maintains that “literature education has now lost its place of prominence” (Choo, 2013, pp. 251-252). What Choo considers particularly worrying is the fact that literature education is becoming marginal in the most developed countries where it is supplanted by technological education. However, the impact of technology cannot be the cause of the decline. It would rather be the “failure of departments of English across the country to champion, with passion, the books they teach and to make a strong case to undergraduates that the knowledge of those books and the tradition in which they exist is a human good in and of itself. What departments have done instead is dismember the curriculum, drift away from the notion that historical chronology is important, and substitute for the books themselves a scattered array of secondary considerations (identity studies, abstruse theory, sexuality, film and popular culture). In so doing, they have distanced themselves from the young people interested in good books” (Chace, 2009).

The concept of the “good” is systematically taken up as one of the crucial purposes of reading and teaching literature in Choo’s Reading the World, the Globe, and the Cosmos: Approaches to Teaching Literature for the Twenty-first Century (2013). She divided the purposes for teaching literature into nationalistic, world, global, and cosmopolitan ones, each of them emerging as a response to social and political phenomena over individual historical periods. While in the first period, the nationalistic one, the “good” was manifested in the use of literature by nation-states as a medium to educate “nationalistic citizen”, the goal of literary education in the
second one was the “world citizen”. The other two stages, global and cosmopolitan, are the result of the intensification of the movement from the particularity of the nation-state to the ultimate universality of humanity as a kind, living on the planet and sharing its values.

It seems that in the present world, among the violent struggles of various cultural and religious extremes, there cannot be a better “good” than such a “universalistic” approach to literary education, irrespective of the fact that it would immediately provoke protests of the adherents of culture-based as well as multicultural approaches to art who, upon the mention of the word “universal,” would automatically associate it with “Eurocentric”, which is, of course, a misinterpretation and an abuse of the concept. The universal is the human, something which transcends narrow confines of particularities of a culture and addresses that which all cultures share - the ontological in the aesthetic phenomena (for more on the humanistic approach to literature see, for example, Pokrivčák – Pokrivčáková, 2006, or Pokrivčák – Pokrivčáková – Buda, 2016).

The ontological is not just an identification of the philosophical concept of being in the text from the point of view of its transcendental inclination, but also the forms through which this primarily transcendental, constitutive aspect of being affects the thematic and semantic level of the text. Černík in his monograph K pojmů bytí [On the Concept of Being] claims that „A person acquires his/her being not only through thought forms (categories), but through forms of experiencing as well; there is no doubt that one, for example, cares for being, has fear of being, will to being, fear of non-being, courage to be, etc. Moreover, one acquires being also through developed forms of imagination. Art can sometimes ‘indirectly through beauty’ express, sooner and better than philosophy or science, the essence” (Černík, 2000, p. 36, translated into English by A.P.). It is thus necessary to turn critical attention to those modes of the thematization of being which are directly associated with the individual human living and become a substantial element of a work’s meaning. Although the analysis of being in a literary work means more than just the identification of what “is” with regard to what “is not”, i.e. to nothingness, it is necessary to be constantly aware of its metaphysical extensions, since they are the last determining power of imagination, that is of art. Such relation of art and transcendence has also been emphasised by Steiner: “The meaning, the existential modes of art, music and literature are functional within the experience of our meeting with the other. All aesthetics, all critical and hermeneutic discourse, is an attempt to clarify the paradox and opaqueness of that meeting as well as its felicities” (1989, p. 138).

The other, otherness, is manifested in the meeting of human mode of being with the mode of “being” of things, in the meeting of the subjective with the objective reality, existence with essence, fiction with reality. Human being is thus the Cartesian cogito, while things stand against it, against us as those who are conscious of being. The sign nature of the literary work allows it to participate in both modes. On one
hand it is, undeniably, a thing, manifested in the materiality of its compositional elements, on the other one the materiality itself is just one of its two constitutive qualities. The second one is the manifestation of meaning in the consciousness of the author or recipient – the fact of its reception (Miko, 1989, p. 130). If it is claimed that the work does not exist without its making meaning in the consciousness or exists only in an imperfect and untrue form outside of it, we should not forget to emphasise also the other side of the coin, namely, that a work cannot exist without its material, expressive or formal part either. Any effort to overcome this formality and phenomenality of art is just an illusion.

Such illusion is typical especially for the so-called Eastern wisdom, or rather for the attempts of some Western theorists to appropriate the experiential wisdom of the Eastern systems – claiming to be able to penetrate to the conditioning field of semiosis, that is, to a field where there are not yet any signs, or form, since it is a field which is just a condition for everything that is present as well as that which is not present, and to transform them to the conceptual language of Western human sciences (Plesník, 2001). Even though it is possible to agree with Plesník that there are certain “communicational synapses” between the Eastern wisdom and Western philosophy, it has to be added, at the same time, that there are significant differences as well. While for the Western science and art the insight into “that in which semiosis takes place, and which itself is neither such or other, without any quality, form, difference” (Plesník, 2001, p. 71, translated into English by A.P.) is only an intuited, never achieved light in a twilight of our semiotic existence, Eastern wisdom acknowledges a real possibility of insight into this light through, according to Plesník, the so-called “homogenisation of consciousness”. The mentioned illusion of Eastern systems lies exactly in this “homogenisation of consciousness”. Whether in the West or East, consciousness is always a function of difference, of the Derridean “diferänce,” which is “Older’ than Being itself” (quoted according to Derrida, 1997, p. xxi). The disappearance of difference is followed by the disappearance of consciousness. The intuitive states of the assumed homogenisation can thus be achieved (even in the case of Eastern sages) only on the basis of the previous, rational or irrational, experience of the “non-homogenised consciousness”. The fullness can be understood only as a contradiction of emptiness, darkness as opposed to light, happiness as opposed to unhappiness – otherwise it does not make any sense.

Despite the logical and sensual impossibility to identify the pure, non-differentiated consciousness, there are frequent attempts in art to express such pre-semiotic states. They occur especially in poetry – perhaps because out of all arts poetry seems to have the most immediate relation to the essential areas of every individual being. And any discussion of poetry as an attempt to express being in its totality would be incomplete without mentioning a classical American poet, Walt Whitman, the poet who approached it most directly and openly, though, it must also be added, with some grand successes as well as failures.
In spite of being considered a manifestation of American nationalism and democracy, Whitman’s poetry, especially his most celebrated poem from the first edition of *Leaves of Grass*, “Song of Myself” (Whitman, pp. 25-86), is also ontological, for it allows the poet to express what it means “to be” an American, as well as, and this is very important and frequently forgotten, also what it means to be human. The robustness and heterogeneity of imagination in “Song of Myself” which pushes him more to ideological contexts and makes him a national poet, a source of inspiration for the generations of American poets who drew on his democratic impulses (for example, Ginsberg’s *Howl*, to name at least one of the most important poems of the twentieth century American poetry, shows clear indebtedness to Whitman), works perfectly well with “the system of doctrine suggested by the poem [which] is more Eastern than Western, [and which] includes notions like metempsychosis and karma” (Cowley, p. xii). The source of Whitman’s mystic notions must have been “a mystical experience in the proper sense of the term” (p. xii). As Cowley further refers to one of Whitman’s disciples, the experience may have taken place in 1853 or in 1854, and “it was essentially the same as the illuminations or ecstasies of earlier bards and prophets. Such ecstasies consist in a rapt feeling of union or identity with God (or the Soul, or Mankind, or the Cosmos), a sense of ineffable joy leading to the conviction that the seer has been released from the limitations of space and time and has been granted a direct vision of truths impossible to express” (pp. xii-xiii).

Therefore Cowley’s suggestion that “Song of Myself” “is hardly at all concerned with American nationalism, political democracy, contemporary progress, or other social themes that are commonly associated with Whitman’s work” (p. iv), must be refuted, for it is, of course, impossible to separate the discussion of the poet from these issues, at least because in Whitman’s introduction to the first edition of *Leaves of Grass* he directly confronts them, saying that “The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem” (p. 5), that America “is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations” (p. 5), that the great variability of common America, with its “deathless attachment to freedom” (p. 6) is itself an embodiment of “unrhymed poetry” (p. 6). Neither one can oversee the origin of *Leaves of Grass* in the context of American attempts at “cultural independence from Europe”, seeking for a great national poem, novel, and so on. Upon the publication of *Leaves of Grass* Whitman was even greeted by the great Emerson himself (see Emerson’s Letter to Whitman).

But again, in spite of these clearly recognisable connections to his “Americaness”, Whitman was, as suggested above, a poet of universal appeal, attempting to grasp all cultures, all minorities, all political or ideological contexts, in a grand move of respecting the contradictions: “Do I contradict myself? Very well then…. I contradict myself; / I am large…. I contain multitudes” (p. 85). His
subjectivity, his Americanness was also his universality, one not cancelling out, but complementing, the other: “In all people I see myself, none more and not one a barleycorn less, / And the good or bad I say of myself I say of them” (p. 43). His existence is his being, differentiated as well as undifferentiated: “I exist as I am, that is enough” (p. 44), “I am the poet of the body, / And I am the poet of the soul” (p. 44), “I am the poet of the woman the same as the man, / And I say it is as great to be a woman as to be a man” (p. 44), “I am integral with you…. I too am of one phase and of all phases” (p. 46), “One time as good as another time … here or henceforward it is all the same to me” (p. 47). His creed is all creeds: “Sermons and creeds and theology…. but the human brain, and what is called reason, and what is called love, and what is called life? / I do not despise you priests; / My faith is the greatest of faiths and the least of faiths, / Enclosing all worship ancient and modern, and all between ancient and modern” (pp. 74-75).

To conclude, the delusions Paul de Man mentioned in his “The Resistance to Theory” cannot be met with when discussing the poetry of Walt Whitman. Although his first, and strongest, poetic expression dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, the messages it brought are still surprisingly modern even in postmodern times, perhaps maybe especially in the deluded postmodern times. And, of course, they are universal. What else is literature good for if not to teach us that we are all human beings and deserve undivided, universal respect?

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**Contact**

Anton Pokrivčák, prof.

Wydział Filologiczno-Pedagogiczny

Uniwersytet Technologiczno-Humanistyczny im. Kazimierza Pułaskiego

w Radomiu

ul. Chrobrego 31, 26-600 Radom

Poland

apokrivcak@gmail.com