ON ETHICS AND ITS TRANSLATION INTO THE LANGUAGE OF LITERATURE

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In literature the ethical act manifests itself as a conflict with the limits of the discursivity of language or with the possibilities that language offers in the process of verbalizing reality. Possibility requires choice, and for the subject of the creative verbal process the choice is the act of verbalization. The specifics of its occurrence have especially been described by the "hard" literary studies of the 20th century. Rather than the meta-ethical "translation" of theoretical and philosophical conceptions in the language of literature, it is therefore possible to speak of the independent ethical choice of being in the word. Literature has shown the path to the ethics of verbalizing reality much more than other categories of the humanities.

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> Today everyone is a bit of a hermit in the Egyptian desert and has a choice: whether to ascend, or whether to slip into some sort of *skotstvo*.[1]
>
> *Czesław Miłosz*

Looking at the development and achievements of literary studies, it can be seen that in the 20th century the knowledge of literature changed its approach to the empirical material of research, although it did not completely abandon its fusion with the categories that it also wished to critically surpass. In numerous variants in the 20th century, the methodology of literary studies was able to successfully redirect and enrich the "surpassed" idealistic or metaphysical thought on literature characteristic of the 19th century, but despite this the bases of the "Hegelian" categories of literature retained precedence as a point of departure: namely, literary studies replaced the

definition of the *esthetic* function with a transition to a "strictly" rigorous descriptive theory, and especially in the second half of the century the *cognitive* elements of literature were strengthened in the direction of hermeneutics, semiotics, and cultural studies. Literature therefore continued to be represented as a place for thinking about the "old" question of how and in what manner an artistic text can affect us emotionally and rationally and what it can offer us for better recognition of ourselves and the world around us. It is possible to discover a difference from previous approaches to literary criticism in the changing search for a *definition* of the basis upon which literature should rest, whereas, at least for the time being, the appropriateness of questions about the search for this basis itself or the possibility of its eventual cancellation, does not appear as a leading theme in literary studies (and it should be hoped that it will not for a long time to come, because this would mean that the observation of literature is superfluous and unnecessary for anyone; this last surmise is not far-fetched if we think about certain general trends in modern society).

Precisely because of standing by the "basics" of literature, which for the time being we do not wish to renounce, this in itself offers us the opportunity to reflect on the fact that, alongside various crossings and reorientations, the potential "heritage" of a third Hegelian category, or the question of the *ethical* function of literature, almost completely remained outside literary studies. In contrast to the esthetic and cognitive functions, which despite the methods of modern literary theory have not disappeared from the horizon of literary studies, in the 20th century the neglected presence of the ethical question in observing literature has in many respects been delineated as an unavoidable consequence of more recent approaches to the study of the word and the limit and possibilities of the (in)describability of the world itself. Here I am primarily thinking of the exceptional richness of the post-Saussurian development of scholarly knowledge of language and the "phenomenological turn" in contemporary philosophy.

From a scholarly perspective, the word, including the artistic word, is only an object of observation and description; it is a phenomenon that as such need not be subjected to categories of moral judgment. After more than a century's practice of observation, today it is possible to assert with some degree of convincingness that the word manifests itself *at multiple differentiated levels*, and modern linguistic science has learned to register, define, and describe these levels. This knowledge, which is still being developed, has significantly influenced the possibility of further defining the "ethicalness" of the artistic word. In contrast to the "pre-scientific" approach to language, which relied almost exclusively on the function focused on the message in dealing with ethics, knowledge of the differentiated levels at which a word manifests itself has opened a series of questions that it was not even possible to conceive of earlier because of the lack of suitable instruments. If we define these levels, especially with an emphasis on the difference between the act of communication of the addresser and the addressee, as an attempt to describe the "complete authenticity" of a word, we can then assert that at least until the first third of the 20th

century the dynamic extension of the (literary) word had been overlooked, and that the question of its possible ethicalness had already been curtailed in its formation. In the "artistic text–reader" relationship, *asymmetry* is an essential category of the communication process, and if only one pole of communication is taken into account the question of the ethics of literature is applied almost exclusively at the level of reception, and much less, if at all, at the level of the element in communication that produces the message; that is, the difference in receiving meanings. In other words: the utterance and the message produced overlapped unsuitably. Because the reader or the receiver of the communicative process was the only actual measure for the supposed "ethicalness" of literature, aside from some significant exceptions, determining this depended on the dominant cultural model or on the moral norms fused with it. In the natural dissonance between the producer and user of a literary sign, the last word generally went to the latter (and due to changed or outdated moral norms this has also happened along with the revaluation of formerly ethically unacceptable and rejected literature). In a somewhat simplified form, it is possible to assert that for a good third of the 20th century consideration of the ethical function of literature did not substantially move away from consideration of the need for the benevolent influence that literature was supposed to have on the receiver. All of this continues to recall Aristotle's cathartic model of the moral release experienced by those watching tragedy or listening to music, which literary studies appears not to have significantly moved away from since the beginning of the 20th century. The difference from the historically defined Aristotelian model could still be rediscovered in the *content* of that moral release, which also changed accordingly in line with the time and place that it appeared.

In the second half of the 20th century, literary studies did not continue along similar monosemously planned directions and it temporarily abandoned the question of critical surpassing or the reestablishment of the traditionally treated ethical function of literature. In addition to the successful, and sometimes even fashionable, "hard" scientific approach to literature, which – as befits every empirical science – left the question of ethics outside the scope of observation, the reason for this decision was also the increasing philosophical and anthropological consciousness of a variety of worlds. According to this line of thought, it is possible to condense this modern consciousness in Deleuze's statement that Adam, the sinner, no longer exists, there is only the world where Adam sinned.[2] The establishment of "difference" as a predominant category of thought and the recognition of the possibility of alignment of worlds as non-absolute and therefore non-mutually exclusive products of culture had a significant influence on basic thinking about ethics: in every possible world the dominant cultural model may be realized as the moral norm, but this cannot be equated with the foundation that forms the basis for establishing an absolute definition of ethics as a universal category. From here onwards the step to abandoning thinking about ethics was a short one: if it is *impossible to establish* ethics, then it is *not possible* and *not necessary* to deal with it. From Husserl on-

wards and from the "phenomenological turn" that followed him some decades later, philosophy did not abandon thinking about ethics (consider only the principle of "responsibility," which increasingly appears among the leading themes of philosophical thought), and in line with the latest scholarly findings regarding the *phenomenon* of the word literary studies *was unable not to abandon* ethics as a possible object of observation. Ignoring occasional and momentarily intrusive attempts to reestablish categories relating to the philosophy of life, morality and religion, and recently even "civilizations" in the evaluation of literature and art in general that appear here and there in the (militant) press, we should note that with the rejection of the ethical question in the treatment of literature modern literary studies has consistently followed the path of *positively oriented* thought that European culture developed in the 20th century, not without difficulties and not without tragedies. From this perspective, literary studies has not lagged behind anyone, but on the contrary it has liberated the artistic text from the extra-literary categories that a priori defined the limits and possibilities of its existence. Exactly because we have already walked this path and the first step is already far behind us, now is perhaps the time to attempt a return to the question of ethics in literature.

If it is not possible and not necessary to establish ethics as a universal category, this still does not mean that we must also abandon observation and describing the limits and possibilities offered to people when they decide for what "our" culture still defines as an *ethically relevant act*. In the absence of a concrete "act" that cannot otherwise be observed outside its boundedness in the limits and possibilities allowed by time, space, and the situation itself (outside the world in which it is actually registered) any discussion about ethics is meaningless. A productive stimulus on the path to further thinking may be the general orientation of that branch of analytical philosophy (not that it is also necessary to follow this methodologically) that has replaced traditional thought about ethics with observation of its self-representation:[3] to what end should one unsuccessfully occupy oneself with this – what is "right" and what is not, what is "good" and what is not – when we can be satisfied at a more modest and more manageable level by attempting to answer the question of *how ethics is actually manifested*. In short: for "meta-ethics" the observation and description of the ethical "principle" can successfully be replaced with observation and description of the specific "language" used by ethics in order to narrate its presence in differentiated areas.

Meta-ethics observes the discourses that should be manifested in a language as the realization of ethical principles and in a synchronic or diachronic cross-section of a specific speech event as a space of manifestation itself. To a different extent, this manifestation is also present in literature, although such an approach seems somewhat reductive to us as an attempt at the renewed establishment of ethics as a possible object of observation in literary theory. Namely, if the verbal event can (although it need not) delineate itself as a space for a different, hidden, implicit, or unconscious manifestation of "translation" of ethical principles in ethical discourse, this

still does not mean that it is also possible to define it as an *ethical act* (as a matter of fact, at the level of the standard use of language it often happens in a completely opposite manner). If we wish to reenter ethics into the scope of literary studies and accept the premise that it is not possible to talk about ethics without a concrete "act," then we must once more return to the old question: where should one seek the "ethical act" in literature and how does this act manifest itself? Despite certain current (postmodern) trends, the answer likely lies in a return to the *subject of the verbal creative process* – today neglected or even written off – and therefore to a concrete "act" that as such also defines it (there simply is no ethical act without a subject). From the perspective of an impulse, wish, desire, or even "duty" (Bakhtin uses the felicitous diction of a "duty to the non-alibi" in being: cf. Bakhtin 113–114, 124), its act does not otherwise differ from those that appear as various manifestations of man's possible "ethical" presence in the world; what does distinguish it are the *specifics* of its manifestation in being. Even at the minimal level of observation it is possible to assert that the general motion of an ethical act is the "non-indifference" of man to his own being and to the world that surrounds him and, in contrast to others, the manifestation of "non-indifference" appears in the subject of the verbal creative process exclusively as a *reflected act of verbalization* or as an act that "translates" reality into word and through the written word fixes and temporarily defines (like everything else, what we define as reality may also record in itself an explicitly or implicitly verbalized ethical principle). The act of verbalization is a manifestation of *active presence* in the world ("passive absence" is not a category that it is possible to observe from the perspective of ethics except when it appears as a conscious act of declining, silence, a blank sheet) and cannot be imagined outside the relation that the subject of the verbal creative process has to language: namely, with every "translation" language offers itself as a *space of open possibility*. Language is, so to speak, the only actual space of our being, where these possibilities are always and without exception present (this is also the case when its message is forcibly suppressed): the "indifferent" being in a word does not want to, cannot, or does not know how to be aware of these possibilities and thus manifest itself as a *passively non-reflected givenness* of language. Where there is possibility, there is also choice: language constantly offers itself to us as a givenness appropriate to time and space that defines us in being and, at the same time, contains in itself everything, at multiple levels of differentiated manifestation, that is necessary to surpass this givenness. Through its act of verbalization, the subject of the creative process cannot avoid a *conflict with the limits of the discursivity of language* and in this unavoidable conflict, which *demands a choice*, an ethical act specific to literature is manifested: namely, the subject is constituted in the repetition and confirmation of these limits (for example, this choice is significant for myth, for medieval religious literature, for so-called "ideas-oriented literature," for work that requires a pattern or normative primacy of the status of Literature itself and actually for those forms of verbalization that are already entered in advance in the horizon of the reader's expectation) and

may also decide on the *activation* of all possible valences that language offers as a choice each time it is manifested (*insight* into these valences is, so to speak, the only actual privilege of the verbal creator). As an ethical act, the act of verbalization always takes place on the border between two "duty bound" equivalent, although conflicting, decisions: in literature the choice between givenness and a possibility of language is a dividing line that on the one hand is marked by a reflected decision to preserve and confirm semantic coordinates of reality, and on the other hand the reflected establishment of that process that with every verbalization opens the path to an "increase" in reality and man in it (as this process is conceived by contemporary hermeneutics).[4] Borrowing a thought from Paul Ricoeur, we should then note that the subject of the verbal creative process is manifested as the act of a "capable person" that marks his ethical "non-indifference" in being through a decision among the possibilities that language offers to him on the path to continually transitional (non)truth about our existence (cf. Iannotta 13–15; Verč, "Dialoške" 326–328).

The limitlessness of the discursivity of language is a phenomenon that as such is ethically irrelevant; what is ethically relevant is the *act of choice* in the practice of the manifestation of being itself in language. Literary discourse is not a space that can be defined once and for all, and conflict with the limits of discursivity appears in it, as happens with each and every discourse, in line with its more or less "historically" defined dimension. Namely, literature can also be told as a story about the realization of the relationship between the potential limitless discursivity of language that has been offered to the subject of the verbal creative process "from time immemorial" and its dimension in time and space (cf. Verč, "Subjekt"). If today we are once more guessing what literature is and we are speaking about intermediary, hybrid, or semi-literary genres, this means that this dimension has expanded still further (which is actually a constant of literary discourse). The limitless discursivity of language does not allow us to form premature conclusions about the truncation, breaking up, end, lack of recognition, or non-sense of any sort of discourse, let alone literary: precisely because from the very beginning the practice of conflicts with the limits of the discursivity of language has been maximally realized in it (reconciliation has also been recorded with these a number of times), and literary discourse has appeared as the most fertile area for the inexhaustible manifestation of human existence in the word. If we ignore a few exceptions, which following Juvan can be combined in the formula "thinking before poetry" (Juvan 12), then the *ethical act of the verbalized choice* of the subject of the creative process – of the privileged actor in this manifestation of being – is not entered in literature as a declared maxim and also not as its meta-ethical "translation," but instead as a *generator of the creative process* that defines the further engendering of the text and triggers the (trans)formation of its eventual meaning. This generator operates *at all differentiated levels of language* and is realized with changing intensity, from zero to maximal,[5] as a constant interaction between them. The act of choice defines all transitions and connections that lead to the realization of verbalization and leads

(not necessarily in the suggested order) from sound to meaning, from ety-mon to morpheme, from morpheme to lexeme and syntagm, from syntagm to clause, from clause to story, and from story to its composition. At the end of the entire process, the fixed verbalization (literature) appears as a relic of the exploited and unexploited possibilities of choice.

Literary studies has built the observation and description of literature on these relics. From classical antiquity onwards, the conflict with the limits of discursivity was "translated" into a series of expressions that tried to answer the following question in various ways: what is *language* capable of and what can *I* do in it? (Translation: in language there are *always more possibilities* than those that I will concretely realize through my choice.) In the initial phase of thinking in literary theory, the poetics of classical antiquity answered the question posed through the designation of rhetorical figures. In the definition of possible choices that the capacity of language offers the subject, it achieved such a degree of perfection that it was even possible to derive from it the illusion of the possible reproducibility of liter-ary discourse. This illusion was historically realized in the normative poet-ics of classicism, and in its broader meaning in all of those forms of art that we have defined as the (canonical?) pattern. When, because of the nature of language itself, the standard wears out and the limits of its discursivity expand further, the possibilities and options also increase in a new conflict with them. From the historical perspective, somewhere from the romantic period onwards literary studies can only follow the literary event and, in its trend of explaining or understanding the artistic text, alongside the growing concretely realized choices, it attempted to answer the old question about the relationship between the capacity of language and the capacity of the subject with ever new definitions.[6] If, in the 19th century, these definitions were still tied to a greater or lesser (il)legitimacy of the verbalization of var-ious worlds that literature was to merely "reproduce" through the broaden-ing of the discursivity of language (cf. the debates on "realism"), then in the 20th century literary studies – within the limits of a more rational approach to the object of observation, introduced a series of constant "scientific" categories (in formalism, structuralism, and semiotics) and alongside these, through the description of various single "poetics" – tried to keep up with and at least temporarily fix the exponentially growing size of the relation between language and the subject. In one way or another, literary studies knew how to describe the continually new manifestations of conflict with the limits of the discursivity of language and sometimes even categorized them, although because of the limitlessness of the object of observation it could not – and also cannot, as befits every branch of knowledge – get to the bottom of the matter. The very fact that in the end literary studies came to rest in a limitless centrifugal force of its own meta-language is evidence that the path that had been chosen was, despite all deficiencies, correct. Alongside the concrete, gradual, and at first glance "tedious" analysis of literary text, with the description of various manifestations of the word (at all the differentiated levels that they define), it also described the only ac-tual space in which it is possible to discover the ethical act of the subject of

the creative verbal process. Although perhaps literary studies has not acted entirely willfully and has preferred to publicly declare its disengagement from the ethical question, it has not renounced it: in more than a century's worth of exceptionally rich material that it continues to offer us as heritage and for consideration, lies the language with which ethics narrates its presence in the specific area that we call literature. The old "Hegelian" ethical category of literature, unserviceable from today's point of view, has never truly disappeared from the horizon of literary studies, only the language that describes it has changed, exactly as the language for describing the esthetic and cognitive category of literature has changed.

In this "hard," "unfashionable," and now (unfortunately) almost abandoned language of scholarship, which perhaps touched only fleetingly on the object of description (as happens with every attempt at verbalization), there are still many "unexploited" possibilities for considering the presence of ethics in literature. Despite the fact that the object observed by literary studies is the (uncontrollable) area of the endless possibilities preserved by language by its nature, descriptive models of literary theory in the 20th century are much more than simply a cold, rational, "aseptic" or academically "elevated" enumeration of "mechanisms" for defining possible processes of verbalization that are never completely reproducible to their ends. Today it is these very descriptions, although they are still partial, that tell us the story about how literature – *much more* than other categories of thought and being in the word (the object of observation of various disciplines in the humanities) – was capable of realizing the ethical relationship to man and to the world around him, not through the pronouncement of maxims or their meta-ethical "translations" into the discourse of literature, but with the concrete *act* of verbalization. Here, *in the act of utterance* itself, lies the difference that literature defines as the essential space for all forms of ethics that appear as the manifestation of the word. It is fitting to enumerate only a few of the generally known definitions that literary studies shaped in the 20th century: the inability to perceive the "givenness" of a language is realized as a passive acceptance of the world, for which they have defined "givenness" without us, although the Russian formalists had already called attention to possibility of other choices on our being in the word, and in their observation of literature they introduced the category of "defamiliarization;" the possibility of surpassing the automatism of the cause-and-effect principle that is delineated as a persistent stagnation of our unchangeable horizon of expectation is described in different variants of literary studies as "minus devices" that operate at multiple levels in the artistic text (sound, lexical, compositional); today, with a point of departure in the very grammatical structure of language, the almost inalienable principle of the variety of languages as a variety of possible truths about the world that language describes has been described by semiotics as a change in the author's or narrator's "point of view;" a more modern ethical proposition that states that "everyone himself can only personally realize his independence" and that "nobody can replace the other in conduct concerning himself" (Tugendhat 138) was established in the 1920s by Bakhtin

as the necessity of the "other's word" and he discovered this in Dostoevsky. In (good) literature none of these ethical propositions appears as an incontestable (*apodictic*) assertion and none of them is possible to abstract from the story of possible "ethical" conduct of a literary hero. In literature the ethical proposition has been shaped and is offered to us in reading as a choice between various *possibilities* of verbalization, and (especially) the "hard" methodologies of literary studies of the 20th century allowed us to recognize the *realization* of the ethical choice.

Meta-language cannot be defined because "infinity" knows no predicates, it is a "dead end" in which "language suffocates and pants for breath" (Brodsky 5), and at the end the conviction prevails that the object of the description can be substituted for by the description itself. This is the present time, which is running through the vicious circle of the representation of representation and offers it to us as the truth about reality. Language is not the only infinity that defines our being; the universe is also (probably) infinite, but physics does not despair because of this (unlike literary studies, which is stewing in its own crisis). Perhaps this is because physics is still a "hard" science that is aware of its limits and demands for itself only a modest primacy of partial and transitory truths. Last of all, it is also possible to view this difference as yet another of the possible manifestations of ethics.

Translated by Donald F. Reindl

NOTES

[1] Here Czesław Miłosz uses the Russian word *skotstvo* (Miłosz 238), which to him especially means "coarseness, crudeness, brutishness, lack of refinement."

[2] According to Deleuze, God "does not create Adam first in order to give him the possibility of sin… God first creates the world in which Adam sins and also enters every individual into it that this world expresses" (Deleuze, *Le Pli* 90–91). Deleuze spoke about the "contradiction" between a possible Adam as non-sinner and the existing world in the 1980s in lectures at University of Paris VIII: Vincennes – Saint Denis (cf. the web page: Deleuze, *Cours*).

[3] If we speak about the general orientation of meta-ethics, then we must also establish a difference from it in our approach to the problem. Meta-ethics primarily focuses on discovering and defining standard speech events that contain ethical principles in one way or another and are expressed in words that encompass the semantic notions "good, correct, duty bound." It is not necessary that the speech event also explicitly announce these principles; it already directly contains them and "translates" them with the use of language itself as a means of its logical and cognitive expression. In addition to an analysis of everyday speech, the meta-ethical approach can be expanded to specific areas of myth, national cultures, and the constitution of language in general as a process of implicit storage of various ethical principles (otherwise always in line with the specifics of cultural time and space). Although meta-ethics more rarely deals with artistic text, its analytical approach is similar: an artistic text contains ethical principles that are realized in language.

Thus, for example, by observing the language of Raskolnikov and Porfiry Petrovich in Dostoevsky's novel *Crime and Punishment* it is possible to discover "two parallel ethics" of the main character (absolute good and evil; the limits of moral and legal rules) that ought to lead both to the Christian (ethical) value of the "will to suffer" (Ragozina 315, 318). A similar approach in the discovery of the "religious and ethical problem" can also be found in an analysis of Pushkin's sonnet "Madona" (Percov 399). In contrast to the type of analysis that discovers a specific ethical principle in the use of language itself (in ethical *discourse*), in this article I defend the assertion that the use of artistic language itself is an indispensable space for the automatic opening of every kind of discourse and therefore also for the automatic surpassing of the ethical principles that *language as such* explicitly (as an assertion) or implicitly (as its "translation") contains. From the perspective of our approach to "meta-ethics," extending the *limit of the discursivity* of language is one of the most important characteristics of the artistic text. This means that in literature language, at least potentially, is delineated as a space that by its own nature does not allow the explicit or implicit presence of an ethical principle to appear as ethical discourse of a category "given in advance" and therefore verbalized and laid out "elsewhere."

4 »Der im Spiel der Darstellung erscheiende Welt steht nicht wie ein Abbild neben der wirklichen Welt, sondern ist diese selbst der gesteigerten Wahrheit ihres Seins.« (Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke* 142) [The world that manifests itself in the game of representation cannot be made parallel to the real world as its copy; it is the same real world in the more intense truth of its being].

5 Here we are thinking on the basis of the process of literary expression, in which the potential alternation between the referential-denotative and formal-linguistic valence of the artistic word appears as a condition for surpassing every givenness of language, for constituting the subject of the creative process in the process of seeking his own word about himself and the world and, consequently, for continually giving new meaning to reality. This process is present both in poetry as well as in prose, although it is realized with varying intensity, especially through various interaction among the constituent elements of a word (cf. Smirnov, Kovács).

6 The paradox of literary history is precisely in that it was constituted as an attempt to define literary discourse in the moment when literature was already firmly beyond the possibility of definition. Namely, if normative classicism cultivated the illusion of the reproducibility of literary discourse, realism cultivated the illusion of the reproducibility of the world or the possibility of equating the "authenticity" of reality with the word that describes reality. Despite the illusion of the reproducibility of the world "as it is," realism has opened a Pandora's box of endless possibilities for its verbalization and thus (un)truth about it and therefore it has historically shaped itself as a *literature of difference* that by its nature resists all definition. Even in its setup, realism contained all of the contradictions of the verbalizing process that later fostered the attempts to surpass it (cf. Verč, "Osservazioni").

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