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The Theory of Fictional Worlds, Aesthetic Function, and the Future of Literary History

From the point of view of literary history, theoretical systems have importance only if they become a necessary part of a cognitive model. Within this model's framework the systems can be used as analytic or synthetic tools that correspond to the possibilities and requirements of the widest set of a particular material. Literary history is a multileveled system that expresses various connections on various levels. On the most general level, development of a literary historical model is fundamentally connected with philosophy when questioning bases, possibilities, and limits of basic cognitive strategies. On the macro-framework level, issues connected with ways of choice and selection and thus—inevitably, from the point of view of hermeneutics—also issues connected with preestablished valuation and hierarchy of material seem to be crucial; on the micro level, issues dealing with a method of interpretation of particular phenomena and also with the way we view poetics of texts are of fundamental importance. With regard to these levels, vitally important are not only the general character of a cognitive model but also the concrete form of the whole set of terms we use. The set of terms itself is, by nature, also a mere construct, and thus it not only expresses but also, in an essential way, codetermines our view of history as a whole and also its particular phenomena. The preceding list clearly does not have to and cannot cover the whole issue of the creation and function of a literary historical model. Its aim is only to point out the fact that no individual theory is, on its own, able to offer answers to all the interconnected questions and become a satisfactory source for a solution to all theoretical and practical historiographic problems. What has to be considered is a concrete function of a particular method and its domain in the realm of a literary historical model as a whole.

In the following study I will set aside the fundamental question of whether literary history is at all possible in the context of modern thinking; today this issue already has its own extensive bibliography and I have tried to touch on it elsewhere (Papoušek and Tureček). Let us just stipulate that literary texts are anchored in a concrete historical context and thereby open the possibility of considering them in a literary historical context. (On the other hand, equally legitimate, of course, is the possibility that these historical contexts can be totally omitted and a text be handed over to an open interpretive game of a subject.) Let us state also that a literary historical model is by nature discursive and semiotic and thus has the character of a construct. An inevitable part of this construct is the hermeneutic

pre-understanding of the searching subject, even when he or she is trying to be ultimately objective. In the following discussion, I will concentrate on examining possibilities for the construction and practical functioning of a sufficient literary historical model, one that Lubomír Doležel offers in his theory of fictional worlds and that was specifically developed for literary fiction. At the same time, as Doležel himself said, "it should be borne in mind . . . that a mechanical transfer of the possible-worlds idiom into literary theory would just add more metaphors to a metalanguage already overstocked with these dubious terms" (*Heterocosmica* 15–16).[1] Doležel himself, however, indirectly calls for further elaboration of his own concept of literary historical methodology when he stipulates: "The history of fictional worlds of literature is the history of an art" (19); and elsewhere he explicitly asks to "reconstruct a certain period of historical development of fictional worlds in Czech literature" ("O možných sěvtech" 251).

The theory of possible literary worlds, originally developed by Doležel especially for narrative texts, and thus enriching the field of naratology, has recently also been successfully applied to the genre of lyric poetry (ervenka). Thus the scope of this theory's validity has been considerably documented, and the possibility of considering the theory in the context of literature as a whole has been opened. At the same time, from the point of view of literary history, the fundamental contribution of the theory to literary theoretical investigation becomes obvious even on the most common level of questioning the general character of literature (Beardsley). At this point another element, fictionality, can be added to the two defining elements (language and aesthetic function) of the classical demarcation of literariness. At least Doležel's definition combines these three elements: "Fictional worlds of literature . . . are a special kind of possible world; they are aesthetic artifacts constructed, preserved, and circulating in the medium of fictional texts" (*Heterocosmica* 16).

At the same time Doležel, in his theory, defines the character and mode of existence of a fictional text as a "small" and by its own nature incomplete modelling construct. In this construct no mechanisms used for truth-valuation, control, and evaluation that appeal to an analogy with the actual world can, by nature, be valid. Stressing this feature of the text's autonomy and suppressing the idea of the construct's necessary mimetic character result in an emphasis on immanent contexts, especially on intertextuality as a whole—from particular allusions to typological and genealogical contexts (see in particular Loriggio and also the final chapter of *Heterocosmica*). As we can see, the developed notion of a structure being considered a system in which a literary text is more fundamentally connected with other literary texts than with extraliterary reality,[2] originally introduced by Jan Mukařovský and Felix Vodička, has been followed and supported in this conception.

Our attention is thus primarily focused on the central point of literature, on a text,[3] and consequently a basis for literary history is not found outside of its own subject, for example in the reality of a sociological, ideological, or physiological nature; thereby the existence of literary science as an independent research discipline is justified—literary science cannot function any more as a mere servant-like tool

of other sciences that actually use literary material only to prove their own premises. With regards to this topic Doležel states: "The need for semiotic mediation in the readers' contacts with fictional worlds explains why fictional semantics has to resist all attempts at 'decentering,' 'alienating,' or bypassing the literary text" (*Heterocosmica* 21).

The autonomous, independent nature of a literary text consists in its fictionality, that is, in a specific method of its construction and perception, which must be focused only on revealing rules and ways of forming fiction. Emphasizing this specific nature of literary texts stresses the communicative character of the text and thus the need for negotiating its meaning in the interpretive activity of the reader. The reader's primary task is to reveal principles of construction of a particular fictional world and to establish his or her own idea of global rules of understanding. Only afterwards, on this basis, can the reader come from an interpretive hypothesis, formulated during his or her act of reading, to any interpretive results; thus the importance of interpretation as an elementary tool for explanation must be emphasized. The explanation lies primarily in the essence of a particular phenomenon, that is, in a particular text, as well as in the level of intertextual contexts; only by using this level as a basis can the explanation involve the relationship of a particular text and other factors of culture and history. In this respect the theory of fictional worlds meets Miroslav Červenka's and Milan Jankovič's elaboration of the dynamic construction of literary artworlds, as well as the reception theory of the Constance and Nitra Schools,[4] and also attempts to bypass extra- and intratextual methods by viewing texts as products and parts of human communication. The theory of literary fictional worlds forms a framework in which, using other methods concentrating on the text, we can solve questions connected with "the inner functioning of literary history," such as questions about the character and function of lyrics or about meaning construction.

Such a general "internal-text" point of view appears not to differ from the classical structuralist idea of immanence and of the priority of "a developing aesthetic line" to lines of a different nature, as Mukařovský already formulated in the 1930s. The introduction of a new element, fictionality, to the other elements defining the literary work or literariness (language and aesthetic function) opens up the question of their relation to one another and to their mutual product. Červenka recently reflected on the "positive correlation between aesthetic function, meaning consistency, and a fictional world's constitution" (17). He substantially modified Mukařovský's classical conception of immanence and strictly rejected binary classification of phenomena, especially the strict way they are demarcated along an "external" border between literariness and nonliterariness, a border that is only seemingly clear and solid: "instead of speaking about literary/nonliterary discourse it is better to speak about degrees of literariness or intensity of literariness" (19; with a reference to Beardsley). Červenka explains: "The intensity of the aesthetic function is not controlled only by the work itself but also by highly variable intentions and by approaches of the work's perceivers, which the intension determines.

The only theoretically obvious point of the boundary line between literariness and nonliterariness is placed on the boundary line between the dominance of aesthetic function and its subordination to another function" (20). At the same time fictionality is considered a possibly integrating category: "From a strategical point of view it is profitable to submit all the kinds of the transition under the name of fictionality" (22).

Nevertheless, in the framework of relations of individual constitutive elements, Červenka gave preference to aesthetic function—wholly according to the tradition of the Prague School's structuralist thought:

> We consider artistic literature to be primarily marked by aesthetic function. However, there can be no closer relationship between aesthetic function and fictionality: Fictionality seems to be one of the results of aesthetic functioning, namely of its isolation effect; this effect extorts feelings and actions assigned in a work from primary contexts and thus creates conditions for placing them in a different world, in a fictional one. It would be equally fair also to connect other signs of literariness, especially meaning consistency, with aesthetic function."   (16)

In this conception, fictionality becomes a mere "secondary sign" of aesthetic function, formulated by Červenka in a clear metaphor: "A fictional world is a tool in a fictional game" (74). Doležel evaluates the relation between aesthetic function and fictionality in the same way, as already noted above. In his view, fictional worlds are "*aesthetic artifacts* constructed, preserved, and circulating in the *medium* of fictional texts" (*Heterocosmica* 16; my emphasis). As we can see, all three components are inseparably connected and hierarchically ordered. However, we have to ask a question: Is this actually the only possible hierarchy or is it an obligatory one? Doležel's later view of this issue seems to be much less strict:

> Literature is a phenomenon of high historical variability and as such it cannot be described just by one generally valid definition. Restricting ourselves to modern artistic literature, many of us are satisfied or were satisfied with explaining its specific mode of being by aesthetic function. But a deeper analysis reveals that this solution just begs a question: the notion of the aesthetic function is as problematic as the notion of literature, which it was supposed to explain"   ("O možných sěvtech" 249).

It seems that the notion of aesthetic function is not problematic on its own, at least not in its general form developed by Mukařovský; however, it can become problematic as soon as it is used as an organizing and evaluative *a priori* matrix of the whole set of the potential material. A rethinking of the mutual relationship between aesthetic function and fictionality is highly important. In what follows, I will focus on only two fundamental aspects of this problem.

Our everyday experience assures us that in the field of words it is possible to consider fictional worlds without any aesthetic function. But can aesthetic function be realized in the realm of words outside a fictional world framework? A supposedly positive answer to this question can be suggested by the presence of transparent features of this function in some texts of a nonfictional nature—for example of metaphors, poetic parables, and originally literary ways of expressing emotions (i.e., through features that are common in lyrics) in private love letters. It is questionable, however, whether these transparent and obvious poetic devices actually bear aesthetic function; it seems more likely that they are catalysts or tools of a different

function that is truly practical. The difference between presence of identical "poetic elements" in a private letter and in a poem by the same author is demonstrable: a letter, in spite of its whole poetic and subjective nature, is not supposed to create a fictional world. The letter refers to the actual world, although the message the letter carries can be highly subjective and even though the message it carries refers only to the purely subjective point of view of the writer. In this case it is still possible (and common) to subject all particular statements to truth-valuation, verify them by reality, and subsequently declare the letter's statements as inadequate and false and thus clearly prove the nonfictional character of correspondence as a specific type of the text. Comparing the poem and the letter reveals that they represent two quite different types of communication, two specific discourses; nevertheless, the features distinguishing these two types of texts are not external, formal features of aesthetic function but a specific character of a literary fictional world that provides all the formal features with a universe of adequate aesthetic existence.[5]

There is another question to be asked: Can language phenomena reach the aesthetic function only secondarily and spontaneously, by elimination or fading away of the practical function, as stipulated by Mukařovský? It is needless to emphasize that it was Mukařovský who proved this hypothesis in the area of material culture by giving an example of a flail hanging from a farmhouse wall and spontaneously turning from a piece of old rubbish into a valuable antique. This algorithm seems to function in the area of worlds as well: old menus, old theatre posters and tickets found in attics or in museums can be considered beautiful. Nevertheless, in this case, what is the source of aesthetic experience? Is it an external, material aspect (papers, scripts, graphic settings, and pale colors) or an evocative power that refers to a declined but still real world (today already nonexistent but evidently once real meals, inns, playhouses, and railways)? Those particulars, though isolated, can still become sources of historical information, about, for example, the history of catering and railway services. However, in the case of literature these particulars can become valid only once they are "inscribed" into a literary text and become an integral part of a fictional world. Being essentially reshaped by this transition into fictional entities, these particulars participate in meaning consistency of a "small" (and, according to Doležel's thesis, self-sufficient and also self-limiting) model of a world, a man, and their mutual relationship: only then can these particulars reach an aesthetic effect in a literary sense. Thus, fictionality and meaning consistency, with regard to the two above-mentioned questions, seem to be rather a condition sine qua non of aesthetic function than its derivative sign.[6] Nevertheless, at the same time let us bear in mind Červenka's thesis according to which "meaning construction is not necessarily to be restricted only to a fictional world and the meanings of forms often refer to the work's meaning and even co-form this meaning; the forms, however, do not participate in the fictional world's construction although they are factors of fictionality."[7]

The purpose of previous reasoning was of course not to develop a purposeless scholastic dispute and in no way to assign the position of a structural dominant to

fictionality rather than to aesthetic function. What is going on here is more likely to be a search for a character of literariness that could be used as a basis for historical interpretation of literature.[8] Fictionality in this context seems to be an open but, at the same time, firmer framework for grasping literary historical issues. To confirm the thesis let us emphasize three arguments:

First, a literary text can lose its aesthetic effect whereas it cannot lose its ability to found a fictional world. [9] Of course there is one thought we could use as a counterargument to this statement: because the text itself does not change and thus elements of its communication with the reader, which are codified in the text and which lead to aesthetic effect, do not change either, the only matter that changes is the reader's ability to recognize particular parts of the text as distinguishing features of aesthetic function, and thus the reader's understanding of aesthetic codes and norms decreases. But this example can help to implement a border between a "common user's" reading and a literary historian's reading; the latter one is supposed, using knowledge of historical contexts, to reconstruct the model reader out of the text; that is, it is supposed to describe which historically determined cultural competencies the text demands to be understood, the competencies that the text opens up, and the ones that the text marginalizes or excludes. The perception of an aesthetic effect requires specific competencies, whereas the reception of the fictional nature of literary worlds is led only by the comparison with the reader's world, which includes not only material reality but also contents of collective and individual consciousness. In this area what is not verified as a reference to the actual world is automatically declared as fictional; thus it seems that fictionality expresses the same "potentially expansive character" when occupying "given up territories" as expresses, according to the structuralist theory, aesthetic function. Nevertheless, if we tried to take advantage of the Reception School, and also view literary history from the reader's point of view,[10] our investigation of the relationship between aesthetics and fictionality as cooperative factors of a literary discourse would become very productive, indeed.

Second, aesthetic norms and codes change—often very quickly and in the case of modern art even at breakneck speed—and the impulse triggering the change can be a simple mechanism of negation that was described by structuralists as conventionalization and innovation of aesthetic norms. Because change within the realm of aesthetics represents a variable, we need constants that enable us to recognize that we are still in the same field, in the area of the same discourse. From this point of view genre conventions have a longer period of validity, and fictionality itself appears as the most general and most durable literary quality. On the one hand, fictional worlds are, according to Doležel, formed by historically variable factors such as artistic aims, norms of literary types and genres, and historical and individual styles; on the other hand, these factors do not and cannot influence the fictional basis of fictional worlds.[11] Nevertheless, even this fact does not guarantee that fictionality is the dominant of a literary artwork and does not justify separating fictionality from cooperation of all the work's components that participate in

developing a specific historical form of literary discourse, or dismantling it.

Third, in terms of literariness, the preference of an aesthetic point of view to any other could lead us to the idea that the organization of literary material is preestablished, forming a hierarchical canon grouped around a core formed by "masterpieces" and marginalizing other levels of literary production. In terms of fiction we do not have to be afraid of such results because realistic novels are no "less fictional" than a Dadaistic poem or a love romance, although the last mentioned genre is of a lesser aesthetic value. In all the three types of literature, fictionality is constructed in different ways and in different contexts, and the nature of fictional worlds demands different ways of understanding; as Doležel says: "Dickens' London [is] no more actual than Carroll's Wonderland"(*Heterocosmica* 18). In this context the theory of possible worlds represents a suitable framework for anchoring the methodology of interpretation—obviously the methodology could in no way be replaced or edged out by the theory. On the contrary, the theory claims the activity of interpretation to be an inevitable part of understanding and focuses this activity primarily on a text; at the same time the text is viewed as a criterion for validity for results of interpretation.[12]

I hope it is now possible to consider fictionality as one of the crucial categories of literary history and to follow the ways of its historical concretizations through the background that shows us the changes in the mutual relationship of the various cooperative components of literariness: fictionality, aesthetic function, meaning consistency, and language. Of course the relation between these defining elements of literariness is in no way firmly given in advance—neither from a synchronic nor from a diachronic point of view. Particular cases (regardless whether they are texts or genres, historical trends, etc.) are characteristic of a specific, historically determined realization of the mutual connection of these elements, and this connection must be reconstructed and assigned by literary historians.

One the one hand, the path for investigation of the discourse character of the changes of literary facts becomes open; on the other hand, no particular tool of this investigation is emphasized for an essential rather than instrumental character.

The theory of possible worlds, by nature, avoids the risk of employing a static point of view, and it also rebels against developing a system of understanding centered around just one specific element and emphasizes instead its focus on "synoptic," intertwining changes. The theory of possible worlds in Doležel's application to literature thus offers an external framework that is both solid as well as certain enough, on the one hand, and also, on the other hand, open and flexible enough to enable further investigation of both the form as well as the method of literary history.[13] Thus the next step we should make is to attempt to apply Doležel's theory to a concrete material and at the same time to formulate and answer questions that, out of necessity, emerge from the process of such an application. By doing this, we can also explore the scope of opportunities the method offers us for literary historical investigation as well as reveal specific problems the application brings.

Notes

[1] I do not use the notion of fiction in its most general and widest sense; I use it, in accordance with Doležel, to express the specific nature of literary fictional worlds.

[2] From this point of view even genres of a mimetic nature, for example the realistic novel of the second half of the nineteenth century, are not exceptional; from the point of view of historical changes of literature as a whole, it is obvious that the mimetic genres represent only one of the developmental lines, one that in many periods is weak or disappears. Even genres are first of all products of selection and stylization of seemingly objective motifs from the actual world; all the motifs automatically gain purely fictional qualities in the realm of fictional worlds.

[3] I use the term *text* here in a very specific and narrow sense. It is obvious that the term has a much wider sense and that today especially it gains metaphorical qualities—for example when we speak about the texture of a city. Nevertheless, I avoid the term *literary work*; I thus want to emphasize the priority of texture to a construct that is a by-product of an interpretive activity. Even the classical structuralist term *aesthetic artefact* seems to be less suitable because this term focuses our attention on aesthetic function and thus a priori puts in the system and its elements specific hierarchization.

[4] Doležel's explicit scepticism with regard to reception aesthetics of the Constance School does not make any difference (see Doležel, "O možných sěvtech" 243).

[5] This way even a letter can become a part of a literary fictional world, as we can see for example in the case of a novel in letters. We cannot assign any truth-valuation to Tatiana's letter to Onegin or for Werther's letters and thus open them for "additional" contextual functioning of the sort common in our actual world; thus for example the question of the ink and the paper of Onegin's letters seems to be pointless if the answer is not a part of the text itself.

[6] As already stipulated, this thesis cannot be questioned from the point of view of the fallacy of realistic literature, which pretends that fictionality is necessary in the realm of literature.

[7] I am grateful to Červenka for these formulations, who in a letter of 22 May 2005 made comments on the first version of this study.

[8] I also owe gratitude to Červenka for this formulation that from my point of view seems happy as well as charming.

[9] This rule cannot be broken even by seemingly absolute mimetic genres of realistic literature; neither descriptive natural lyrics nor a realistic novel can surpass the restriction of the fact that all seemingly realistic motifs (like a blossoming tree) are only "incomplete" in the realm of a text and restricted to the context given by a texture; as such, the motifs cannot offer answers to any questions that are, in the actual world, logically interconnected but not given by the texture (e.g., Is the tree potted or not, is it idle or tree-fruit, how much fruit does it produce?). Another striking example of the absolute fictional nature of literature is provided by political lyrics, which seem absolutely actual but become fictional as soon as political situations change.

[10] At this point what is going on is not the history or sociology of reading but, first of all, discussion of the changes of textual strategies aimed at the reader in the form of a game for his attitudes, feelings, expectation, and valuation.

[11] See Doležel's quotation from Dorrit Cohn: "fiction, in short, is not a matter of degree but of kind" (*Heterocosmica* 25).

[12] This point of view is very close to Umberto Eco's thesis about "the limits of interpretation," when he distinguishes between "intentio autoris, operis and lectoris" and emphasizes the difference between interpreting and using a text.

[13] What is of primary importance is Doležel's "bordering function," which separates phenomena belonging to different types of discourse. Sometimes it seems to be possible and even necessary to involve facts of an extraliterary nature in the interpretation; some texts, such as political poetry, can directly demand this attitude. On the other hand, the difference between literary works and factual literature becomes explicit and obvious. If we put those kinds next to each other, as is done in some concepts of literary biography but also in the New Historicism inspired by Stephen Greenblatt, we should be aware that we make this comparison within a nonhomogenous set.

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