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### The Anthropology of Literary Reading – Methodological Issues

#### What crazy people read

“The most serious cases come in for poetry,” explains the librarian during my participant observation in a Warsaw library. A moment ago a lady borrower has left, “that crazy woman I told you about” – around 60, garishly dressed, noisy, making controversial comments about ethnic minorities. Suddenly she asked for a volume of Wisława Szymborska’s poems. She was in fact the only person all day in this library looking for poetry, not counting a secondary-school pupil who had to read Jan Lechoń for class.

“Sick people, people with a problem, find an escape and calm in poetry,” says the librarian. The same goes for Dostoevsky, who “only crazy people read.” Interestingly, in other libraries too there was an increased interest in this author among a certain group: “I don’t know if I should talk about this, but perhaps I should,” a Nowa Huta librarian hesitates before speaking, “There are those who have problems with work, alcohol, that kind. And they also really do read. For them this book is truly precious. They very much like sensation, and they like the classics. They take Tolstoy, Dostoevsky...” As the head of a Krakow city centre library explains in a hushed voice, unemployed people have similar preferences: “This group is [here] quite often – the unemployed. And that’s a lot of readers...And it’s this kind of group, of young people, thirty-something. And they take so-called serious literature, that is psychological literature.” This is a phenomenon that links the reader’s life with his or her reading choices – a specific life situation results in needs for specific literary texts.

The aim of this brief anecdote was to demonstrate a certain thread linking anthropology with literary studies, one to which this text will be devoted. The an-

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

thropological approach differs from the remaining fields concerned with empirical reception – the psychology and the sociology of literature. The psychology of literature, concentrating on the individual and the process of reading, looks for certain cognitive universals isolated from the cultural context of reading. The sociology of literature, especially in the case of major survey-based research, places particular emphasis on attributing recipients to specific social groups, ignoring the context of daily life. The anthropological approach to reception helps to fill the gaps left by these two approaches. This is done on the one hand by stressing individual interpretation and use of texts, and on the other based on underlining the social and situational context of the reading.

Let us begin by defining what anthropology of literature is. The two disciplines usually meet in the context of the transfer of tools between them. Anthropology is then conceived in literary categories, and literature in anthropological ones.<sup>1</sup>

The first of these currents, which draws from interpretive anthropology in the style of Geertz and Clifford geared towards “thick description” and “reading” of culture, is based on the conviction in the literary nature of anthropology. The anthropologist is conceived as an author, a writer or a poet, and his work undergoes literarization or narrativization.<sup>2</sup> Anthropology seen in this way uses literary means of expression, recording “local knowledge” in a discursive and fragmentary forum that is closest to our way of perceiving the world.

In the latter case, bringing anthropological tools to literary studies results in literary anthropology, or anthropology of literature, a field first ploughed by Wolfgang Iser. As Michał Paweł Markowski notes,

Anthropology of literature – as a study of humanity – refers, thus, to a scientific discipline... which from the spheres of human activity chooses literature and investigates it...As the study of humanity, anthropology does not focus on the issues of marginal importance, it aims to capture the *essence of the human* by analyzing its creations.<sup>3</sup>

Anthropologists treat literature as a unique product that constitutes “the key for deciphering the processes taking place in culture.”<sup>4</sup> Markowski writes that “the anthropological character of literature comes from the fact that literature is a space where human nature reveals itself...through literature...the human being finds its essence.”<sup>5</sup> The human being, then, “uses literature as a tool to understand the world and to understand itself. Both writing and reading literature helps the human be-

<sup>1</sup> A. Łebkowska “Między antropologią literatury i antropologią literacką,” *Teksty Drugie* 2007 no. 6. 9-23.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 10-11.

<sup>3</sup> M.P. Markowski “Anthropology and Literature,” in this volume, 87.

<sup>4</sup> W. Iser “Czym jest antropologia literatury? Różnica między fikcjami wyjaśniającymi a odkrywającymi,” Polish trans. A. Kowalcz-Pawlik, *Teksty Drugie*. 2006 no. 5, p. 24 [“What is Literary Anthropology? The Difference between Explanatory and Exploratory Functions,” in: *Revenge of the Aesthetic: The Place of Literature in Theory Today*, ed. Michael P. Clark, University of California Press, Berkeley 2000.

<sup>5</sup> M.P. Markowski “Anthropology and literature”, 88.

ing in solving some sort of problem it has with itself and the surrounding world.”<sup>6</sup> Literature viewed in this way, then, is a kind of anthropological document that tells us about human existence. Literature which, again citing Markowski, “tells us simply what the human being is.”<sup>7</sup>

Such a perspective assumes an interpretation of culture by expert scholars analyzing humans through their literary works. In this essay I would like to suggest a slightly different approach, also located at the join between these two disciplines, but concentrating on the ordinary recipient. To simplify greatly, this entails transferring the hypotheses mentioned above into the empirical sphere, testing what use people have from their works and in what way they recognize themselves in their contact with literature. This therefore means not so much using anthropology for literary studies (or rather indirectly using) as examining the ways in which literature functions in culture, what readers use it for and what they read in it.

Such a perspective may raise a few doubts: after all, the profession of literary scholar assumes the analysis of books, and not their “uses.” I intend to prove over the course of the paper that despite these reservations, some of the issues presented should be within literary scholars’ perspective. Yet every analysis of the role of texts in culture seems incomplete without consideration of the role they play in the lives of ordinary readers. Such information says a great deal not only about the recipients, but also about the texts themselves and the cultural conditions in which they come about.

I therefore propose to examine a discipline for which we can use the working title of anthropology of literary reading. This name on the one hand draws from the methodological tradition of Geertz and other anthropologists, and on the other, in certain respects, matches up to the anthropology of literature described above. I will begin the presentation of this approach by placing anthropology of literary reading among the other fields that deal with the empirical recipient. A systematic description of the subject of the recipient in literary theory would require not a short article, but bulky tomes. I am therefore leaving aside topics that are based strictly on literary theory, concentrating on the virtual recipient incorporated in a text, and thus non-empirical. The following review will therefore show the way in which an empirical recipient is interested in psychology, sociology, and anthropology. The article will aim to demonstrate the merits and flaws of these approaches and present the possibilities that literary anthropology gives us in terms of analysis of reception.

## The psychology of literary reading

Studying reception has always been a peripheral interest of literary psychology. Martin Lindauer, outlining the state of research in this area in the 1970s, noted that “An interest in the reactions of the audience or reader is also part of general aesthetic

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 88.

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

theory but to a lesser degree than an interest in the author.”<sup>8</sup> Literature has been treated by psychologists mostly as material for psychological analysis.<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, even today psychologists use texts in order to analyse the author’s mental states or present their thoughts on the secrets of the individual and collective psyche.<sup>10</sup>

Literary psychology, we must accept, was never especially interested in the reader. Lindauer notes certain attempts in the diagnostic field – with reactions to a text supposed to be evidence of a person’s psychological constitution.<sup>11</sup> Only with the increased interest in a person’s cognitive processes (the development of cognitive science) came research on the psychology of reception. In Poland, empirical verification of the psychological circumstances of reception is yet to meet with scholarly interest. In the following, abbreviated, discussion I will therefore restrict myself to the works of foreign scholars.

## Empirical studies of the reading process

These experimental studies can be divided into two categories: (1) “online,” meaning studies of primary reception (the mechanisms of attention and emotions which appear during reading, and therefore, during reception of certain data “as it happens”), and (2) “post-processing,” i.e., a focus on secondary reception (mechanisms associated with reproduction of already received information, that is, for example, the creation of situational models). With the group of primary reception, such techniques as measurement of reading time, underlining words, or even studying the electrical activity of the brain during reading are employed.<sup>12</sup> Studies of secondary reception concentrate above all on examining memory and the forms of representation of data in the mind. The techniques that are used are especially recalling from the memory and exercises involving recognition of extracts of the read text.

A good example of research on primary reception is analysis of readers’ reaction to the linguistic means used in a text, which attract attention thanks to the peculiarity of the style and deviation of normal language use. Language is suddenly thrust into the foreground.

The term “foregrounding” derives from the Prague school.<sup>13</sup> Jan Mukařovský wrote that the “function of poetic language is about maximum foregrounding of

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<sup>8</sup> M. Lindauer *The Psychological Study of Literature*, Nelson-Hall Co, Chicago 1974. 37.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 107.

<sup>10</sup> E.g. *Psychologia literatury. Zaproszenie do interpretacji*, ed. J. Karpowicz, Wydawnictwo Psychologii i Kultury, Warszawa 1999.

<sup>11</sup> M. Lindauer *The Psychological Study of Literature*. 165.

<sup>12</sup> D.I. Hanauer “What we Know about Reading Poetry. Theoretical Positions and Empirical Research,” in: *The Psychology and Sociology of Literature*, eds. D. Shram, G. Steen, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 2001, 102; D.S. Miall “An Evolutionary Framework for Literary Reading,” in: *The Psychology and Sociology of Literature*, 2001. 417.

<sup>13</sup> W. van Peer *Stylistics and Psychology. Investigations of Foregrounding*, Croom Helm, London 1986. 5.

use.”<sup>14</sup> According to Jakobson’s definition of poetic function, putting something in the foreground is the same as “moving from the axis of choice to the axis of combination,” and therefore, as a certain language deviation resulting in emphasizing a device. The “foreground” is therefore anything distinguished from the “background.”

Willie van Peer distinguishes two kinds of foregrounding – deviation and parallelism.<sup>15</sup> Deviation is divided into: (1) internal (differing from the norm established by the text itself), (2) external (differing from outer linguistic norms), (3) statistical (use of correct but rarely encountered linguistic means). Parallelism, meanwhile, means emphasizing normal linguistic means using the “pattern of equivalences and/or contrasts.”<sup>16</sup>

Foreground elements appear at various levels of the text – phonological, syntactical, and semantic. Their importance for the text depends on their cohesion and density. The former refer to the “horizontal” presence of these elements in the space of the text: i.e., their appearance in the whole sequence of the narrative structure. Density, meanwhile, refers to the presence of foreground elements at all levels of the text: phonological, syntactic, and semantic.<sup>17</sup>

In the 1980s, van Peer carried out research which aimed to verify empirically the formalistic hypothesis on foregrounding. He gave students cards with poems written by various authors (from Emily Dickinson to Dylan Thomas and E.E. Cummings), asking them, among other things, to underline the excerpts which to them seemed striking, particularly interesting, or worth discussing in class. After reading, the subjects were asked to perform exercises such as filling gaps in a text or pointing in a set of sentences to those excerpts which they had just read. The responses were compared with detailed analyses of these same texts. The results confirmed the hypothesis that recipients read just as the formalists suspected – taking note of the foreground parts of a text, which are in some way emphasized, different from the others. The Canadian scholars Miall and Kuiken perfected this methodology, and later repeated the study.<sup>18</sup>

This kind of approach to textual questions means that we can answer in the affirmative to the question of whether there is a text in these classes. In spite of

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<sup>14</sup> D.I. Hanauer *What we Know about Reading Poetry*, 201-212. The term “foregrounding” is awkward. I deliberately quote Mukařovský second-hand in order to refer to the Anglo-Saxon terminological tradition. Polish translations use the term *aktualizacja*, meaning highlighting, moving to the foreground, provoking “a bias to the word” (por. J. Mukařovský *O języku poetyckim*, ed. R. Mayenowa, Warszawa 1966, 35; J. Sławiński “Wstęp” [Introduction to:] J. Mukařovský *Wśród znaków i struktur. Wybór szkiców*, ed. J. Sławiński, PIW, Warszawa 1970, 7). The term “foregrounding” seems particularly justified when we bear in mind the important role played by the fine arts in Mukařovský’s theories.

<sup>15</sup> W. van Peer *Stylistics and Psychology*. 22-24.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> D.S. Miall, D. Kuiken “The Form of Reading. Empirical Studies of Literariness,” *Poetics* 1984 no. 25.

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

the extreme constructivists who attribute the act of concretization to the reader's cognitive acts alone, cognitivism underlines the role of a text in invoking and guiding these acts. As van Peer writes,

On the one hand, the material presence of certain foregrounding devices will guide the reader in his interpretation and evaluation of the text; on the other hand the reader will look for such devices in order to satisfy his aesthetic needs in reading a literary text.<sup>19</sup>

Van Peer's research heralded a series of similar experiments on poetic means. In the studies of Zwaan (1991) and Hoffstaedter (1987) readers were to assess whether the texts presented to them (from poems to extracts from an encyclopaedia) were literature. The results of the experiment show that readers recognize literature regardless of the context, led entirely by reasons contained in the text.

Another example of research on primary reception is studies on cognitive poetics, which is interested in the relations between literary texts and their effects on the recipient.<sup>20</sup> An example of such an approach might be the investigations of Elena Semino, who shows empirically that metaphors reflect the cognitive mechanisms that we use.<sup>21</sup>

Studying secondary reception is concentrated on the question of the way in which the reader makes use of his own experience during reading. It is worth emphasizing that this group cannot easily be detached from questions of primary reception. In the act of concretization we observe positive feedback: our experience dictates to us that we take on a certain reading strategy, which then determines the information that we take on while reading.

An example of this relationship is research on perspective in reading.<sup>22</sup> The way in which we establish the situational model of the presented space is instrumental in deciding the information that we will view as being more interesting. A good example here might be the experiment of Katina Dijkstra, who attempted to determine the influence of experience on the reading process, comparing the interpretations of older and younger readers. The subjects were asked to comment aloud on the passages of a poem they were reading. Dijkstra established that older readers more often made use of their personal experience during reading, while their younger counterparts concentrated on the letter of the text.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> W. van Peer *Stylistics and Psychology*. 33.

<sup>20</sup> R. Tsur "Aspects of Cognitive Poetics," in: *Cognitive Stylistics. Language and Cognition in Text Analysis*, eds. E. Semino, J. Culpeper, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 2002.

<sup>21</sup> E. Semino "A Cognitive Stylistic Approach to Mind Style in Narrative Fiction," in *Cognitive Stylistics*.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. A. Nünning "On the Perspective Structure of Narrative Text. Steps toward a Constructivist Narratology," in: *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*; cf. D.S. Miall, Don Kuiken "Shifting Perspectives. Readers. Feelings and Literary Response," in: *New Perspectives on Narrative Perspective*, eds. W. Van Peer, S. Chatman, State University of New York Press, Albany 2001.

<sup>23</sup> K. Dijkstra "Old Readers or Expert Readers?," in: *The Psychology and Sociology of Literature*.

Another type of research on secondary reception is investigations on attribution: i.e., readers attributing specific traits to the presented characters based on their own experiences in relations with real people. Dixon and Bortolussi's (2001) study demonstrates a majority of dispositional attributions among readers. This means that we discern the origins of characters' actions in their personalities, not the situations in which they find themselves.

I also include in this group studies on the cultural conditioning of reading, such as the experiment in which Steen Larsen, János László, and Uffe Seilman (1989) studied the reception of stories about the Second World War among Danish and Hungarian school pupils. Although the title was deleted, the Hungarian pupils had a better understanding of what the text was about, using their cultural experience. The conclusions of Cay Dollerup's (1989) research, which established types of associations during reading – cultural, individual and literary – had a similar tone.

### Problems of psychological studies of reception

In many studies,<sup>24</sup> literary psychologists compare the interpretations of professional and beginner readers in order to reach certain reading universals. In simplified terms, the assumption is as follows: a beginner reader is a “pure” reader, uninfected by the methodology of literary research, and thus his or her reception reflects actual human reading habits.

Let us examine now the questions that appear in empirical studies on reception. Subjects are asked, for example, to underline passages which they see as poetic,<sup>25</sup> “striking,”<sup>26</sup> or worth discussing in class,<sup>27</sup> or to think about different interpretations of a given work.<sup>28</sup> All these questions rather concern professional competences – skills possessed by an interpreter of literature.

The techniques used to compile a questionnaire are another important matter. Literary texts are presented to experts (professors of literary studies), who analyze them in terms of the presence of poetic properties and assess individual verses. The indications of subjects are then compared with these “canonical” analyses of texts. Experiments therefore resemble a kind of class test, in which the degree to which those examined fulfil experts' expectations is assessed – a class test in literary competence.

Empirical studies also face the problem of defining the non-professional reader. Which “average” readers should participate in the studies: students of techni-

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<sup>24</sup> M.H. Dorfman “Evaluating the Interpretive Community: Evidence from Expert and Novice Readers,” *Poetics*. 1996 no. 23.

<sup>25</sup> P. Hoffstaedter “Poetic Text Processing and its Empirical Investigation,” *Poetics* 1987 no. 16.

<sup>26</sup> D.S. Miall, D. Kuiken *The Form of Reading*.

<sup>27</sup> W. van Peer *Stylistics and Psychology*.

<sup>28</sup> M.H. Dorfman *Evaluating the Interpretive Community*.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

cal universities,<sup>29</sup> novice literature students,<sup>30</sup> IT students,<sup>31</sup> novice psychology students<sup>32</sup> The fundamental problem here is students of various subjects being considered lay people. After all, the fact that somebody is studying a scientific subject does not mean that he or she has never had to interpret texts, or even more never had anything to do with literature.

The cognitivist model of the reading process assumes the existence of certain processes whose provenance is not always fully defined, thus leading to certain fears of universalistic shortcomings. This caution is put fairly emphatically by Adler and Gross in their article “Adjusting the Frame: Comments on Cognitivism and Literature” (2002), which provoked a wave of debate in the journal *Poetics Today*:

cognitivism currently makes strongly universalist assumptions about the human cognitive system, focusing on “universal mental structures,” “cognitive universals,” and “universal rules of cognitive processing.” Yet recent findings in experimental psychology suggest that culture affects cognitive processes at an unexpectedly basic level.<sup>33</sup>

Indeed, some scholars seem to fall victim to their contemplations on the universal properties of reading, or at least lose sight of the cultural perspective. This is the direction followed by, for example, David Miall, according to whom “the literary significance of foregrounding is to be found in genetic studies, which suggest that a sensitivity to such verbal device must be inborn.”<sup>34</sup> He gives as an example the research of Ellen Dissanayake, who studied recordings of mothers’ conversations with eight-week-old babies. In these interactions, untypical use of words attracted the babies’ attention.

Is it possible, though, in the style of Chomsky, to speak of a primal generative grammar which sensitizes to foregrounding, or is this merely an example of how a child learns communication in a complex and fathomless process of socialization? After all, it is difficult to speak of an inborn sensitivity to rhythm or rhyme when we compare the predilections of various cultures. I would tend to favor the position that culture sensitizes us to certain properties, and teaches us to attach some value to them.

In summary of this brief review, although psychological studies of literary reading emphasize the individual act of reception, they miss the social aspect. As we shall see in the next section, with the sociology of literature the precise opposite is true.

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<sup>29</sup> P. Hoffstaedter *Poetic Text Processing*.

<sup>30</sup> D. Hanauer “Integrations of Phonetic and Graphic Features in Poetic Text Categorization Judgements,” *Poetics* 1996 no. 23.

<sup>31</sup> M.H. Dorfman *Evaluating the Interpretive Community*.

<sup>32</sup> D.S. Miall, D. Kuiken *The Form of Reading*.

<sup>33</sup> H. Adler, S. Gross “Adjusting the Frame: Comments on Cognitivism and Literature,” *Poetics Today* 2002 no. 23. 211.

<sup>34</sup> D. Miall *An Evolutionary Framework for Literary Reading*. 411.

## Sociology of literature

The links between sociology and literature are diverse, and result in various methods of analysis. In one of the latest publications on this subject, the cultural sociologist Paweł Ćwikła presents a synthetic conception of various approaches concerning “literature as one of the possible sources of inspiration for sociological analysis.”<sup>35</sup> Ćwikła distinguishes the following levels of analysis: literary communication, the literary work as a source of sociological research, literature as a form of cognition of social reality, the societal framework of literature, and the role of literature in creating models (“the sociological hero”).<sup>36</sup> The study of “empirical readers” – i.e., the question to which this article is devoted – is one with which the sociology of literary communication is concerned.

The scholar’s fundamental premise is an attempt to describe culture through analysis of literary behaviors. “Literature is a fragment of culture through which one must and can see more” – this was how the media studies scholar Maryla Hopfinger summarized the thesis of one of the main theoreticians of the sociology of communication, semiotician and literary studies scholar, Stefan Żółkiewski.<sup>37</sup> Research therefore aims at “analysis...of the regularities of the functioning and changes of literature, treating them as a kind of general-cultural regularities.”<sup>38</sup>

One of the main concepts of literary sociology is literary culture, seen as a “system of orientation” permitting participation in the process of literary communication. Literary culture comprises knowledge (“the ability to understand and pass judgement works on held in a given culture to be important and precious”); taste (“the sum of likings for a specific type of sources”); and literary competence (“knowledge of literature, permitting understanding and judgement of new reading experiences”).<sup>39</sup> Analysis of literary culture makes it possible to define the social framework of reading – the way in which texts are interpreted in a particular culture.<sup>40</sup>

Interest in literary culture can be divided into two levels – literary-studies-based and sociological. As noted by Janusz Lalewicz, the author of numerous studies in literary sociology, the emphasis on sociological aspects results in reading behaviors being viewed as a process of consumption of books.<sup>41</sup> Yet concentration on the literary studies side leads to an analysis of the “encounter of a certain text with a certain

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<sup>35</sup> P. Ćwikła Kilka uwag o związku socjologii z literaturą [Some remarks on the link between sociology and literature], *Studia Socjologiczne*. 2006 no. 2 (181). 127.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> M. Hopfinger “Stefan Żółkiewski – teoretyk kultury” [Stefan Żółkiewski – cultural theoretician], in: *Sporne i bezsporne postaci literatury. Krytycy*, eds. A. Brodzka-Wald, T. Żukowski, Wydawnictwo IBL PAN, Warszawa 2003. 95.

<sup>38</sup> S. Żółkiewski *Kultura. Socjologia. Semiotyka literacka. Studia*, PIW, Warszawa 1979. V.

<sup>39</sup> J. Lalewicz *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej. Problemy rozporozszczenia i odbioru literatury*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1985. 62.

<sup>40</sup> W. Bolecki *Poetycki model prozy w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym*, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1982. 245.

<sup>41</sup> J. Lalewicz *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej*. 94.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

system of rules and interpretations,<sup>42</sup> without attaching great importance to the motivation, aims and context of the reading.<sup>43</sup> According to Lalewicz, the reader is therefore treated as “a machine decoding in accordance with a certain system of rules.”<sup>44</sup> An example of the “literary studies” sociology of literature is provided by the works of sociologists of reception, concentrating on “experts” knowledge about reading, suggesting that “only a literary historian can speak about this.”<sup>45</sup> We can also include in this group such concepts as styles of reception<sup>46</sup>, types of reception,<sup>47</sup> and reading norms.<sup>48</sup> Since we are interested here in studying empirical readers, I will not go into detail in discussing this current of research, instead focusing on the more “sociological” literary sociology. This approach treats the reader as a being already established in the social context, who “reads in a certain situation, at a certain moment of his biography that is, with certain experience (including as a reader) behind him, and at the same time with some plans, undertaking some actions, participating in some collective ventures etc.”<sup>49</sup>

According to Lalewicz, reading is therefore a certain form of social activity which for the reader has a situational and functional sense that is anchored deep in the reality of society: “it is an escape from something or a way of participating in some community.”<sup>50</sup> This view of literary communication has the form of a universal examination of reading as a form of participation in culture. Literary communication, then, is a “complicated, multi-staged process in which numerous people, communities and institutions take part, whose survival and social reach requires the perspective of a description of social processes, and which can only be conceived as a whole in such a perspective.”<sup>51</sup>

At the basis of this assumption lies the conviction that “the meaning of various communicational phenomena depends on their place and function in the entirety of social life.”<sup>52</sup> It is the objective of literary communication to “inform or persuade of some community, and not individual recipients.”<sup>53</sup>

The recipient is thus conceptualized as the literary audience in the broadest terms: i.e., “all participants in literary communication.”<sup>54</sup> Analysis of the audience entails defining the “type[s] of reader behaviors of specific groups of recipients.”<sup>55</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 94.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 64.

<sup>45</sup> W. Bolecki *Poetycki model prozy*. 247.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. M. Głowiński *Style odbioru. Szkice o komunikacji literackiej*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1977.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. W. Bolecki *Poetycki model prozy*.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. J. Sławiński “O dzisiejszych normach czytania (znawców),” *Teksty* 1973 no. 3.

<sup>49</sup> J. Lalewicz *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej*. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 21.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 235.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

The difference between the individual and the social aspect of reading is shown well by the following comment from Lalewicz:

Factors designating an interpretation are given as concrete circumstances in the individual *act of reading*. However, if we want to grasp some regularities in interpretation and reinterpretation, literary facts must be considered at the level of social groups (specific audiences).<sup>56</sup>

Analysis of the audience is preceded by distinguishing their levels – as Żółkiewski writes, “the literary audience is that which as a social whole at the same time functions in the fashion of readers in various social circulations...distinct as a result of the social functions of the given circulation.”<sup>57</sup> A circulation is defined according to sociological factors: the social role of the speaker, the semiotics and subject function of the book and the sociological type of the literary audience.<sup>58</sup>

Furthermore, circulations differ in terms of models of reading (e.g., canonical, involved ludic); communicational situations (e.g. as a game); codes of interpretation of texts (e.g., autotelic, generic); institutions (e.g., institutions of literary life, entertainment institutions), etc.<sup>59</sup> The recipient is thus considered as a participant in one of the literary circulations.

In summary, “the circulation of books in society is considered above all in quantitative terms, estimating in absolute numbers and percentages how many people read books, and therefore participate in this circulation.”<sup>60</sup> In this way, the individual accent escapes sociological reception theory, as the examples of empirical studies will show even more clearly.

## Empirical studies of literary communication

Studies of literary communication have an empirical dimension. I will leave aside here the historical analyses of Żółkiewski<sup>61</sup> and other scholars from this field, concentrating instead on something closer to this paper, an empirical analysis of readership conducted by the Books and Readers Institute (BRI) of the Polish National Library. These studies aim to map out the circulation of a book in a given community. The mechanisms of reading are consigned to the background here, and individual circumstances are replaced by social ones, resulting from the influence of the group and community. An approximation of these studies shows certain blank spaces in the network of theoretical interests, which can be filled by the research methods proposed by anthropology of reception.

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 73.

<sup>57</sup> S. Żółkiewski “Wiedza o kulturze literackiej,” *Wiedza Powszechna*, Warszawa 1980. 245-246.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 247; cf. also: J. Lalewicz *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej*. 158.

<sup>59</sup> J. Lalewicz *Socjologia komunikacji literackiej*. 159.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 141.

<sup>61</sup> S. Żółkiewski *Kultura literacka 1918-1932*, Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, Wrocław 1973.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

I use the example of two major research projects on the readership of the whole Polish population<sup>62</sup> and an analysis of a group of young people in Warsaw secondary schools.<sup>63</sup> It is worth stressing that both these projects are cyclical. The study “The social reach of books in Poland” has been taking place since the 1970s, and systematically every two years since 1992.<sup>64</sup> The second research programme, “The search for elites,” meanwhile, is divided into three stages: the first encompassed secondary-school pupils starting school, the second final-year pupils, and the third graduates of the schools.<sup>65</sup>

The nationwide studies of readership are carried out on a representative sample of Poles aged at least 15. Questions are on “reading and buying books in the year encompassed by the research, intensiveness of reading and purchases (measured by the number of books read and acquired in this time) and reading and purchasing preferences, defined by the titles, authors or types of these publications.”<sup>66</sup>

The BRI studies do not differentiate between fiction and non-fiction. The focus is “books” as a whole,<sup>67</sup> supposed to represent a source of information about the world, as well as a tool for development and participation in culture. Books help with rational management of knowledge,<sup>68</sup> reading is treated as intellectual training,<sup>69</sup> and functional literacy correlates with success in life.<sup>70</sup>

It is an important aspect of the research to indicate the “reading universals” of a given community, seen as “works that are in a certain sense also canonical, as they are recommended by participants in Polish national or community readership studies.”<sup>71</sup> Combining reading universals with personal data allows diverse circulations of literature to be calculated. In this approach literature is used as a gauge for forming conclusions on a given community. Readership here is an element that constructs a society, and by defining the functions that literary texts have in it we can draw conclusions about its activity.<sup>72</sup> Social determinants (e.g., access to books) and reading preferences allow types of readers to be constructed.<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> G. Straus, K. Wolff, S. Wierny *Książka na początku wieku. Społeczny zasięg książki w Polsce*, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warszawa 2004.

<sup>63</sup> G. Straus *Modelowi sukcesorzy, indywidualiści, eklektycy*, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warszawa 2005.

<sup>64</sup> G. Straus, K. Wolff, S. Wierny *Książka na początku wieku*. 7.

<sup>65</sup> G. Straus *Modelowi sukcesorzy*. 7. In this paper I am using the study concerning the second stage of the research (final-year pupils).

<sup>66</sup> G. Straus, K. Wolff, S. Wierny *Książka na początku wieku*. 7.

<sup>67</sup> In 2002 questions were added on reading the press and magazines, which was treated as participation in print culture (G. Straus, K. Wolff, S. Wierny *Książka na początku wieku*. 7)

<sup>68</sup> G. Straus, K. Wolff, S. Wierny *Książka na początku wieku*. 11-12.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 57.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 25.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 80.

<sup>72</sup> G. Straus *Modelowi sukcesorzy*. 72.

<sup>73</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

Literature is conceived as an important tool of participation in culture: a given group's set of "reading universals" and its accordance with the canon are a gauge of social stratification. An example might be a study of the adaptability of readers of final-year classes to the constructed model of intellectuals, assuming defined reading models.<sup>74</sup>

Research framed in such a way is not immune to axiological judgements. The very name of the research project "The search for elites" suggests a certain judgement of both the choice of reading and the form of reading itself. As Grażyna Straus writes in the report on the research on secondary-school pupils,

I took note of the reading that goes beyond consumption coming down to simple entertainment or practical use, becoming – as Kłoskowska put it – an autotelic action resembling the aforementioned art of reading.<sup>75</sup>

Participation in a highly artistic literary circulation is therefore an indicator of belonging to the elite. Yet the phenomenon of so-called "ludic literature" is underestimated, since it does not realize the fundamental social functions which a given community attributes to books.

### Sociological problems of research on reception

The broad scope of research on the reading population allows us to identify certain literary circulations and the values which a community attributes to reading books. As Elżbieta Wnuk-Lipińska and Edmund Wnuk-Lipiński note, an undoubted merit of this type of research is the "standardization of analysed populations owing to several variables."<sup>76</sup> These impressive studies indeed permit extremely complex statistical operations to be completed, making it possible to draw conclusions on the distribution of the variables in question in the population in question.<sup>77</sup>

However, readership studies are also encumbered by all the shortcomings with which quantitative sociology, along with any studies concerning realization of cultural norms, must struggle. Some of these problems are to do with the general methodological differences between quantitative and qualitative research, i.e., the difficulty with attaining exclusively quantitative data, which – as Wnuk-Lipińska and Wnuk-Lipińska note – although burdened with a lower risk of error, are cognitively worse.<sup>78</sup> The crucial problem here is asking questions about the activity

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<sup>74</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.* 23.

<sup>76</sup> E. Wnuk-Lipińska and E. Wnuk-Lipiński *Problematyka kształtowania się potrzeb czytelniczych*, Biblioteka Narodowa, Warszawa 1975. 32-33.

<sup>77</sup> G. Straus *Modelowi sukcesorzy...* – 1008 people; G. Straus, K. Wolff, S. Wierny *Książka na początku wieku* – 1381 people; E. Wnuk-Lipińska and E. Wnuk-Lipiński *Problematyka kształtowania się...* – 26 500 people.

<sup>78</sup> E. Wnuk-Lipińska and E. Wnuk-Lipiński *Problematyka kształtowania się...* 32. Some quantitative studies are deepened by qualitative research techniques. E.g. Grażyna Straus's study of secondary-school pupils included in-depth interviews on plans for the future (2005).

# Anthropology in Literary Studies

of high cultural value that is reading of books. According to Wnuk-Lipińska and Wnuk-Lipiński:

people engaged in reading in particular owing to [recognized – MM] extraverted motivations will have the tendency to increase their level of reading and declare motives for reading closely oriented to the standards dominant in the reference group.<sup>79</sup>

This issue seems even more problematic – we should remember that we are asking respondents about realization of a cultural norm that is rather well founded in our society, both in the socialization process and through numerous campaigns promoting reading. Regardless of his or her motivation, then, the subject will want to present him/herself in a more beneficial light.

Also a problem here is the fundamental difficulty of quantitative sociology, the so-called “verbalization barrier” – “certain motifs have a non-aware character, or to be precise non-verbalized.”<sup>80</sup> By forcing a respondent to verbalize an answer, we cannot be certain that the response reflects the actual state of affairs. Additionally, some questions might be awkward, such as the main question in these studies: “How many books have you read over the last year?” Such questions force people to give an approximate answer (even if the action has been performed sporadically).<sup>81</sup> Essentially, the only relatively credible information is an indication of whether the respondent did any reading at all in the past year.

Debatable too seems to be the differentiation into sporadic recipients, “as the BRI research has come to see people managing no more than six books per year, and true readers, who surpass this threshold.”<sup>82</sup> It is not just the arbitrary nature of this threshold that is dubious (as I understand it, a true reader reads a book more often than once every two months). It is also hard to say whether an incomplete book can be understood as a read book. Furthermore, reading a car instruction manual, a cook book, an atlas of birds, a tourist guide and Gombrowicz’s *Ferdynand* all count for the same. The above data tell us much about print culture, but this seems to be rather superficial data.

In summary of this brief overview of literary sociology, it is worth underlining the main trend of these studies – namely, the acquisition of knowledge about the structure of a community through analysis of its reading behaviors.

## Anthropological literary reading

The anthropological interest in literary reception is linked with the ethnographic turn in media studies research that took place in the late 1970s, when “new ways of

<sup>79</sup> E. Wnuk-Lipińska and E. Wnuk-Lipiński *Problematyka kształtowania się...* 27.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> I assume that, irrespective of the type of activity in question, it is difficult to recall how many times it was performed over a year, whether the question refers to reading books, going to the cinema or theatre, quantity of coffee drunk, visiting friends, walks in the park, singing in the shower etc.

<sup>82</sup> G. Straus, K. Wolff, S. Wierny *Książka na początku wieku*. 67.

investigating and interpreting audiences...emerged – attempts to chart the sense that media consumers make of the texts and technologies they encounter in everyday life.”<sup>83</sup> This turning point mostly concerned research on television audiences. A major influence was held by the research work of the so-called Birmingham school focused at the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) of the University of Birmingham. The studies on reception of television conducted since the 1970s by Stuart Hall and David Morley have shown that the reception of the same message can differ greatly within a specific social group. A further significant inspiration was the works of such anthropologists as Geertz and Clifford.

The first attempts to apply ethnographic methods in studies on literary reception took place beginning in the mid-1980s,<sup>84</sup> and involved analysis of the “use” of a text, putting reader behaviors in the context of the individual’s daily life.

The turning point in the approach to reception was the change in the conceptualization of the idea of “audience,” which involved a break from the image developed by the critical school of the passive consumer falling prey to the media who carry out ideological indoctrination. The passive consumer, a product of sociological surveys, is a construct that is useful in marketing research (e.g., providing advertizers with a specific “target”), but in no way does he exhaust the issues of reception.<sup>85</sup> A good example of this change is Ien Ang’s book *Desperately Seeking the Audience*<sup>86</sup> (1991), whose author makes a clear differentiation between the “television audience” – as a social construct – and the social world of actual audiences.<sup>87</sup>

A similar tone is taken by Janice Radway, author of *Reading the Romance*, the first ethnographic study of audiences, devoted to readers of romances. Radway stresses that we do not understand the role played by romantic novels in the lives of women if we concentrate exclusively on textual analysis. She criticizes the presentation of readers in passive categories: “Readers are presented in this theory as passive, purely receptive individuals who can only consume the meanings embodied within cultural texts, they are understood to be powerless in the face of ideology.”<sup>88</sup> Radway criticizes this approach as a reification of human activities, ignoring the complexities of semiotic processes and conceiving the interactive social process that reading is in categories of two separate objects (the reader and the text).<sup>89</sup> She contrasts this position with a vision of literature as an active process: “comprehension is actually a process of making meaning, a process of sign production where

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<sup>83</sup> S. Moores *Interpreting Audiences. The Ethnography of Media Consumption*, Sage Publications, London 1993. 1.

<sup>84</sup> J. Radway *Reading the Romance. Women, Patriarchy and Popular Literature*, North Carolina University Press, Chapel Hill 1984.

<sup>85</sup> S. Moores *Interpreting Audiences*. 3.

<sup>86</sup> I. Ang *Desperately Seeking the Audience*, Routledge, London 1991.

<sup>87</sup> S. Moores *Interpreting Audiences*. 2.

<sup>88</sup> J. Radway *Reading the Romance*. 6.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

the reader actively attributes significance to signifiers on the basis of previously learned cultural codes.”<sup>90</sup>

Even this introductory description allows us to conclude that the anthropology of reception is found somewhere between an individualizing psychological approach and getting caught up in the community known from the sociology of reception. The anthropological approach takes into account the individual’s social base, at the same time not underestimating individual aspects of the reader’s biography.

It is not only this individual biography that makes the reader active. Also significant are collective aspects of reception. As anthropologists saw, reading does not take place in isolation from the group to which the individual belongs. The American sociologist Elizabeth Long notes that the construct of the “solitary reader” (1993), the individual recipient detached from the direct social context, is a fiction. Reading a text is dependent on the group context – Long stresses the fact that we often read books recommended to us, and also read them in order to discuss them with others. It is in these interactions that our understanding of the text is formed.<sup>91</sup>

Long goes on to argue that everyday reception of literature is not about receiving a message, but in weaving the read text into the web of everyday social relationships. She notes that collective reading, and thus reading in relations with other people, assumes a collective interpretation of the text, while the book becomes just a pretext for conversation with the “authorial other” and further members of the discussion.<sup>92</sup>

As the media studies scholar Shaun Moore explains, in the anthropological approach the ethnographer “conceptualizes media audiencehood as lived experience and approaches his or her object with very different sorts of interests” from a quantitative researcher.<sup>93</sup> The objective here is “speaking that which is unspoken in the ratings discourse. This means attending to the media’s multiple significances in varied contexts of reception as opposed to focusing on quantification through measurement.”<sup>94</sup> This is because anthropological studies have “greater potential for engaging with the production of meaning in everyday life.”<sup>95</sup>

Among the main interests here are questions of the context of reception of literature, which on the one hand is dependent on the reader’s individual biography, and on the other is determined by the social situation and group within which the text is consumed and interpreted.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>91</sup> E. Long “Textual Interpretation as Collective Action,” in: *The Ethnography of Reading*, ed. J. Long Boyarin, University of California Press, Berkeley 1993. 205.

<sup>92</sup> Cf. E. Long *Book Clubs. Women and the Uses of Reading in Everyday Life*, Chicago University Press, Chicago 2002.

<sup>93</sup> S. Moores *Interpreting Audiences*. 3.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

## Testing the context of literary reading

The anthropological approach is based on the premise that a text, as a semiotic creation, is formed in a dialogical encounter with the recipient who decodes it. The source is therefore not defined as a message, only as a “text” – “a complex and structured arrangement of signs rather than an empty vehicle for the transmission of information or opinion.”<sup>96</sup> In her research described in *Reading the Romance*, Janice Radway focuses on the “actual construction of texts by real women who inhabit a particular social world.”<sup>97</sup> The meaning of the text here is therefore conceived in the perspective of Fish’s constructivism – it is not concealed in the text, but is actively produced by the reader during the reading process.<sup>98</sup>

Radway’s research was based on conversations with female customers of a bookshop specializing in romances in Smithton, Illinois. The material she collected threw up various ways of using literature in the dynamic of everyday life. On the basis of her analysis, the following functions of literature can be identified: (1) a departure from daily life, (2) pretend experiences, (3) emotional compensation, and (4) gaining a new experience. I will discuss these functions one by one.

Literature delivers to readers an escape from everyday existence, and this is according to Radway one of the main aims of reading romances.<sup>99</sup> The readers with whom she spoke “believe romance reading enables them to relieve tensions, to diffuse resentment, and to indulge in a fantasy that provides them with good feelings that seem to endure after they return to their roles as wives and mothers.<sup>100</sup> Here at least, this departure provides a form of escape: “Reading, in this sense, connotes a free space where they feel liberated from the need to perform duties that they otherwise willingly accept as their own.”<sup>101</sup> Readers “pretend” to experience various stories – “by carefully choosing stories that make them feel particularly happy, they escape figuratively into a fairy tale where a heroine’s similar needs are adequately met.”<sup>102</sup> This example clearly shows the difference between the psychological and the anthropological approach. Psychologists analyze the sense of detachment from reality as “transport” to a fictional world, or getting “lost in a book,”<sup>103</sup> concentrating on the essence of the mechanism. An anthropologist, like Radway, focuses on the function of this mechanism in the recipient’s everyday life.

According to Radway, the objective of an escape to a fictional world is compensation for the events of everyday life. Firstly, this provides “vicarious emotional nurturance” thanks to the reader’s identification with the heroine, whose “identity

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>97</sup> J. Radway *Reading the Romance*. 12.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. 11.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. 88.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. 95.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. 93.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> V. Nell *Lost in a Book: Psychology of Reading for Pleasure*, Yale University Press, New Haven 1988.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

as a woman is always confirmed by the romantic and sexual attentions of an ideal male."<sup>104</sup> Secondly, the romance "fills a woman's mental world with the varied details of simulated travel and permits her to converse imaginatively with adults from a broad spectrum of social space."<sup>105</sup> Literature, then, is used by women in their daily lives as an important tool of emotional stimulation, directly connected to the individual context of the reader's life. Here, in turn, we see a difference between the sociological and anthropological approaches: a sociologist analyzes the ways in which a certain group reads, while an anthropologist looks at the way in which individual interpretations are formed within the group.

Radway is sceptical when it comes to interpretations themselves, and acquisition of new knowledge in the act of reading. The readers she spoke to "believe very strongly that romance reading is worthwhile because the stories provide pleasure while the activity of reading challenges them to learn new words and information about a world they find intriguing and all too distant."<sup>106</sup>

This type of statement is seen by Radway as rationalization which comes from the ideology that prefers high literature, and demands acts of practical justification from everybody. The cognitive function here is then a screen to conceal the shame evoked by reading texts seen in cultural terms as bland and unimportant.

During the fieldwork which I carried out in 2007, I spoke to librarians about the role of literature in readers' daily lives.<sup>107</sup> Based on analysis of these statements we can reach the conclusion that popular literature still fulfils certain information functions in the broad terms of the context of a reader's biography. Therefore, the individual determinants and needs that form readers' scheme of reference influence both the choice of reading and the construction of the message in the act of reception.

As the phenomenological sociologist Alfred Schütz notes, the experiences gained by an actor at various levels are preserved "in the form of 'knowledge at hand' [and] function as a scheme of reference"<sup>108</sup> when assessing new situations. Following the rule of similarity in perception, we transfer certain features to a given object when we deem it to be typical.<sup>109</sup> Knowledge acquired during reading therefore enriches the scheme of reference and is used in assessing a situation of daily life. But this mechanism also works in reverse – the scheme of reference also influences the reading process, directing the reader's cognition to specific areas.

In this respect, reading fulfils two important functions: cognitive and "working through." In the former case, readers add the events from the unfamiliar presented world to their store of knowledge, guided by cognitive motifs. In the latter, reading

<sup>104</sup> J. Radway *Reading the Romance*. 113.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid. 116.

<sup>107</sup> M. Maryl "The Apology of Popular Fiction. Everyday Uses of Literature in Poland," in: *Directions in Empirical Literary Studies*, eds. S. Zyngier, M. Bortolussi, A. Chesnokova, J. Auracher, John Benjamins, Amsterdam 2008.

<sup>108</sup> A. Schütz "Common-Sense and Scientific Interpretation of Human Action," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, vol. 14, no. 1 (Sep. 1953). 7.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

a book about a familiar situation enables the reader to work through certain problems and compare the actions of the characters with his or her own. Reading can also be connected with the aforementioned issue of regulation of emotions. Readers might desire to recognize themselves in an idealized situation, in which the recipes for their problems can be applied. Just as often, they use literature to look for models of how to behave in situations which they have never before come up against.

An example might be the popularity of fictionalized stories about the Middle East, in which a representative of the culture of the West goes with her Arab husband to his native country. This is a form of becoming acquainted with a culture from within, through the eyes of someone with a similar cultural background. In this case the motif of the reading might be the political situation (the desire to get to know the culture about which much has been said of late) or personal – e.g., a situation mentioned by one of the Warsaw librarians – “a girl has met an Arab and her parents are scared.” They want to use reading to acquire experience in interpersonal relations.

A key question is therefore the context of the reception, which determines the interpretation. This context can be looked at both through a prism of individual biographies and in reference to the social group to which the recipient belongs. As Moores notes, Radway’s research not only showed what the readers do with the source, but also demonstrated “how the reception of those fictions is implicated in the dynamics of family life.”<sup>110</sup> Radway described the reading act in the lives of these women as “an important, if limited, bid for independence,” which allowed a “temporary escape from the physical and emotional demands of domestic labor.”<sup>111</sup> Reading behaviors have thus become here a tool helping us to understand the wider context of the world of recipients’ daily lives.

For many years, Elizabeth Long researched book clubs in Houston – informal discussion groups where literary texts are read and then talked about at meetings.<sup>112</sup> She conducted participant observations during meetings and carried out in-depth interviews with participants. Long stresses that the groups use discussion about books as a “life kit” – during it, they analyze situations which are more likely to be of use in their daily lives than in their work.<sup>113</sup> Participants in the meetings faced up to the books’ characters and analyzed their choices, something which for Long is very important for creating the identity of social actors – to understand themselves and their own place in the social structure. As Long writes in the report on her research, “as they read and talk, they are supporting each other in a collective working-out of their relationship to the collective historical moment and the particular social conditions that characterize it.”<sup>114</sup>

For Long, then, literature is a catalyst of cultural and social transformations, but in an entirely different respect from with the traditional transmitter-recipient model.

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<sup>110</sup> S. Moores *Interpreting Audiences*. 8.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>112</sup> Cf. E. Long, *Book Clubs*.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.* 199.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.* 22.

## Anthropology in Literary Studies

She emphasizes the collective aspect of reading – working out a position towards the text as a group. As Long notes, analysis of such reading groups over the centuries (incidentally the subject of *Book Clubs*) “enables the analyst to generate a newly complex and gender-balanced picture of the cultural shifts of early modernity”<sup>115</sup> than does the solitary reader.

Radway takes a similar stance when looking at reading of romances, a typically female genre, as an opposition to ideology. Romances are on the one hand bearers of the ideology of domination, putting their female readers in a specific place in the social structure, but Radway points out that at the same time reading romances can lead women to experience increased dissatisfaction with their current situation, and it is this that constitutes the main reason for choosing this genre, thus leading to gradual social change.<sup>116</sup>

### Problems of anthropological research on reception

Anthropology of literary reading is concerned with a wide range of popular thought – what recipients do with literature, what it is good for, the influence it has on daily lives, its social position etc. How can the value and usefulness of results acquired in this way for literary studies be assessed? By definition, the field of popular thought often defies claims coming from scientific research. Whether we believe Copernicus or not, I still see that the sun goes down over the horizon. But what of this?

Studying empirical readers’ self-knowledge can be useful for science in two ways. Firstly, it broadens the scope of our understanding of culture and human behaviors. Secondly, it opens another chapter of reflection on literature, and more specifically provides information about what readers most value in it, what good it is for them and in what way it catalyses cultural transformations. This knowledge, meanwhile, can be significant when considering literature’s cultural context.

The main charge that can be levelled at these studies is their “lack of representativeness” – that the results do not translate to the whole population. Quantitative research is always valued more highly, owing to the large samples, assumed measurability of numbers and complex statistical processes, which permit researchers to claim that “this is the way it is.” Qualitative anthropological studies, based on interviews and analyses of respondents’ statements, not only do not lead to such conclusions, but do not even look for them. The essence of qualitative studies is the analysis of certain mechanisms in culture that are not detected by quantitative measurements.

Rather than research on large samples, which is restricted to certain aspects (with the intention of making conclusions on how things are in the whole population), qualitative studies involve in-depth studies in small samples. Greater emphasis is placed on understanding a certain phenomenon than on measurability of data

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid. 194.

<sup>116</sup> J. Radway *Reading the Romance*. 18-19.

(the issue of measurability in quantitative research is a separate matter which will not touch on here). Qualitative studies eschew a deductive orientation in favor of induction: the researcher does not so much check hypotheses as search for them from a specific angle. This is highlighted by Moores, who stresses that the researcher him/herself might be surprised as to what he or she finds out during fieldwork.<sup>117</sup>

What, then, is the status of conclusions from qualitative research? They certainly have a weaker rhetorical power than quantitative tables, although they enable certain trends to be identified, and permit a kind of holistic reconnaissance. The main value of this approach is the thorough, “thick” description of a given phenomenon which might escape the rigid framework of quantitative research.

## Conclusion

In this paper I outlined the anthropological approach to reception of literature, distinguishing it from the psychology and sociology of literature. To conclude, it is worth posing the key question of what benefits anthropology of reception brings to literary studies.

Literary anthropology studies literature as a product of humanity, in order to find out something more about it. Anthropology of literary reading, meanwhile, examines the ways in which people interact with their products, and studies what use they have of them and what they find in them. The anthropological context allows the literary scholar to see his subject in an entirely different context – as an experience taking place between people in the reality of everyday life. Anthropology attempts to appreciate that which we usually dismiss as “over-interpretation” or “use” of a text. Anthropology brings to literary studies the awareness that a text exists in interaction not just with other texts and culture, but also with empirical recipients. This approach therefore shows not only the significance of such “non-canonical” interpretations, but also their inevitability in our culture.

Yet can such an approach replace other more psychological or sociological areas of research on reception? It certainly has no such ambitions, in accordance with Geertz’s conviction of the “locality” of all knowledge: i.e., the applicability of results only in specific conditions. It seems that the anthropological approach introduces to research on reception the same thing as, for example, Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology brought to sociology – a supplement to formal analysis, the “something more” that no other method could capture, the “something more” that we learn about the culture in which we live. In other words, anthropology of literary reading helps us to answer the question of why “the most serious cases” read Dostoevsky.

*Translation: Benjamin Koschalka*

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<sup>117</sup> S. Moores *Interpreting Audiences*. 48.