

## Relational Poetics: Towards A Reevaluation of The Literary Within Cultural Studies<sup>1</sup>

Aukje van Rooden  
Utrecht University  
[a.vanrooden@uu.nl](mailto:a.vanrooden@uu.nl)

One of the main reasons for embedding literary studies within the broader field of Cultural Studies was the wish for contextualization. A growing awareness of social, political, and cultural power structures at play in literary texts and their interpretation urged scholars to investigate the literary text in relation to its context instead of conceiving it as an independent, isolated entity. However, in attempting to contextualize literary texts one runs the risk of artificially maintaining binary oppositions like text/context, autonomous/heteronomous, internal/external. Drawing on the notion ‘relational aesthetics’ coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, I would like to investigate the possibility of understanding the literary work not in relation to its contextual factors, but as being itself a relational space.

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is the non copy-edited draft of a paper presented at the 2011 ACSIS conference ‘Current Issues in European Cultural Studies’, Norrköping, 15-17 June 2011 within the session ‘Revisiting the Literary Within Cultural Studies’.

## RELATIONAL POETICS: TOWARDS A REEVALUATION OF THE LITERACY WITHIN CULTURAL STUDIES

One of the main reasons for embedding Literary Studies within the broader field of Cultural Studies, as from its international breakthrough during the 1980s, was the general wish for contextualization. Several critical theories, including Marxist, feminist, and deconstructive theory, drew attention to the political and cultural power structures at play within cultural products like literary texts. Literary texts, one came to realize, are, maybe *par excellence*, places where these structures interact and converge. Consequently, these theories passed severe criticism on the view on literature dominant around the 1950 and 1960s: New Criticism's focus on the literary text as a closed universe whose meaning was supposed to result solely from the internal structure of the text. Whereas the representatives of this view did their utmost to exclude historical and cultural contexts, as well as other contextual factors like the reader's response and the author's intention, Cultural Studies provided a way to understand a literary text not as an isolated whole but as interplay of several discourses and processes.

Embedding the study of literature within Cultural Studies was, however, not without risk. Inevitably the price paid by Literary Studies was a wandering off from what might be called the 'literariness' of literature. After all, how to distinguish literary texts from other cultural products, like a newspaper article or an autobiography, when they should all be conceived as interplays of social, political and cultural processes? More than that, literature's embedding within Cultural Studies raised the more fundamental question whether there is something *essentially* literary in the first place. Is a literary text in essence different from a newspaper article? And if so, what's the decisive difference? About three decades after the international breakthrough of Cultural Studies, the time seems ripe for revisiting the literariness of literary texts, not as a way to purify their sense and meaning, but as a way to understand their instigating function within the dynamic interplay of structures and functions laid bare by Cultural Studies. Under the denominator 'Revisiting the Literary Within Cultural Studies', the contributors to this session have tried to pinpoint this literariness, thereby focusing, in addition to systematic reflection, on several genres of literary texts, i.e. the novel and the poem, as well as on hybrid forms like the essay and pop lyrics.<sup>2</sup>

This paper aims at sketching some first lines of a new paradigm that might enable to better revisit the literary within Cultural Studies. By the notion of *relational poetics* I will, more specifically, open up a theoretical perspective that may serve as an alternative way to seize literature's specific functioning within the world. But let me first characterize the present paradigm. Notwithstanding crucial differences, I would like to claim that literary scholars during the last four or five decades generally followed one dominant paradigm, which I will call the *text-context paradigm*. One of the clearest and most wide spread manifestations of this paradigm is the version provided by M.H. Abrams in his 1953 book *The Mirror and the Lamp*.<sup>3</sup> When one deduces the essence from all existing theories of literature, he states, the following neutral basic definition of literature emerges:

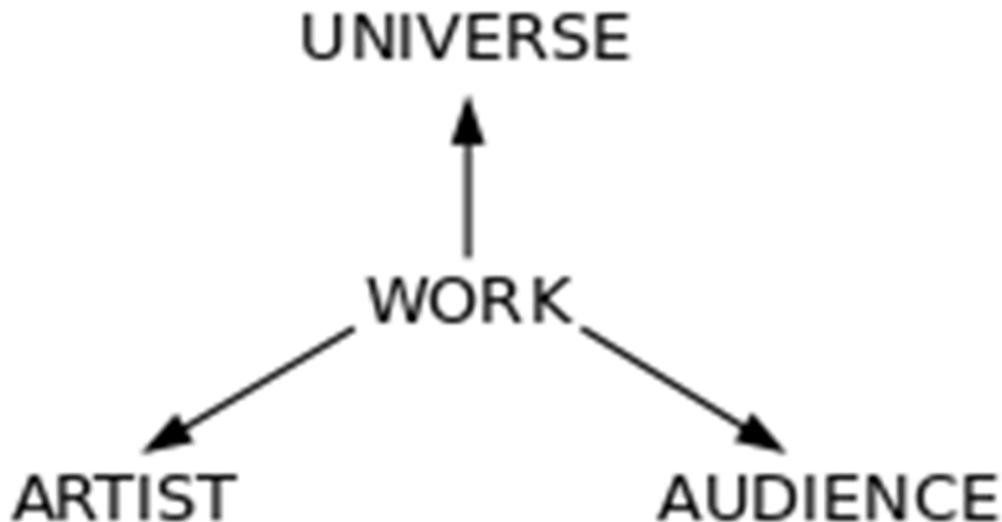
---

<sup>2</sup> The session 'Revisiting the Literary Within Cultural Studies' is one of the outcomes of the research project 'The Power of Autonomous Literature' based at Utrecht University, The Netherlands. In the context of the 2011 ACSIS conference it included contributions of Geert Buelens (Utrecht University), Laurens Ham (Utrecht University), Anders Høg Hansen (Malmö University), Aukje van Rooden (Utrecht University), Frans Ruiter (Utrecht University), Daan Rutten (Utrecht University), Wilbert Smulders (Utrecht University), and Adam Wickberg Månsson (Stockholm University).

<sup>3</sup> M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp. Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971 [1953]).

A *poem* is produced by a *poet*, is related in its subject matter to the *universe* of human beings, things and events, and is addressed to, or made available to, an *audience* of hearers or readers<sup>4</sup>

Although this definition is expressed in terms of poetry, it can – and should according to Abrams – be extrapolated to literature as such. Moreover, the italics used in this definition suggest that literary practice as such should be understood according to a certain configuration of four coordinates, combined in the following well-known scheme:



M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, page 6.

In spite of the four-bladed image, the dominant paradigm expressed by it is, in my view, a *dualistic* one. The reason for this lies in the fact that the conceptualization of all four coordinates as well as their interrelations ultimately boils down to a prior conceptualization of the *work* in relation to its *context*. It is only at a later stage that the work's context is specified as being chiefly related to the author ('artist'), the reader ('audience'), or to reality ('universe'). In the exemplary case of Abrams' conceptualization, this results in a subdivision between, subsequently, objective, expressive, pragmatic, and mimetic poetic theories. Whereas objective theories focus solely on the literary text, in expressive, pragmatic, and mimetic theories attention is for instance paid to the cultural or autobiographical background of the author, to the alleged effects of literary works on readers, or to topical events in everyday reality.

Following the distinction between text and context underlying this subdivision, this text-context paradigm leads to a specific kind of research questions, which I will call *chiastic*. The main assumption of these research questions is that there is a (real or theoretical) gap between the literary work and the world and that this gap has to be bridged in order to understand literature's role within the world. Following this basic distinction between text and context, these research questions generally depart from an equally real or theoretical gap between, for instance, fiction and reality, intrinsic and extrinsic value, form and message, autonomy and

<sup>4</sup> In this concise form, the above definition does not appear in *The Mirror and the Lamp* but in the encyclopedic entry in *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* extracted by Abrams from his 1953 book. Cf. M.H. Abrams, 'Theories of (Western) Poetry', *The New Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 639.

heteronomy, etcetera. Examples of such chiasmic research questions are: 'Given the fact that literary texts, as from the Romantics, are considered autonomous, self-regulating entities, how do we have to understand the fact that they may also be regulated by external laws like that of politics or commerce?' Or: 'Given the fact that literary texts inscribe themselves into the domain of fiction or fantasy, how do we have to understand the fact that they can nevertheless contain a certain truth or are effective in reality?' Although these research questions are interesting and may lead to insightful conclusions concerning the complexity of our research object, they also evoke an opposition that is, upon closer consideration, rather artificial: that between text and context.

I therefore suggest to conceive of the literary text not as an entity functioning within a context, but as a phenomenon in which text and context emerge together, are co-existent and mutually constitute each-other. Instead of conceiving literature's role within society by means of an analysis of texts within their context, I therefore suggest a more Heideggerian analysis of what might be called 'literature-in-the-world'. As we can read in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, being (*Dasein*) is always *being-in-the-world*, that is to say that it is always in a constitutive relation with the world and other beings within the world. Such a being can therefore impossibly be conceived of as an isolated entity that may or may not be related to its context. Or to be more precise; it can only be conceived as an isolated entity at the cost of losing what is most essential to it: its relationally.<sup>5</sup> Applying Heideggerian ontology to Literary Studies, this leads to a paradigm that we could call the *text-as-relation paradigm*. Within this paradigm, a literary text is not conceived of as an entity that may or may not establish a relation to its context, as the text-context paradigm has it, but is understood as being a relation itself. A literary text, in other words, is not an entity located at the margins or at a distance from the word, as many literary theories have it, but is a form of entering into relation with the world, is itself a worldly relation.

Such a *relational* view is offered, amongst others, by the French art critic and curator Nicolas Bourriaud in his 2000 [1998] book *Relational Aesthetics*. Here we find the following definition of artworks:

'Unlike an object that is closed in on itself by the intervention of a style and a signature, present-day art shows that [art] only exists in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise'.<sup>6</sup>

As we can deduce from Bourriaud's far-reaching thesis, a relational artwork is not artistic from the outset (because of its form, its style, the signature of its maker), that is before it enters the public sphere. Artworks have instead what one could call an 'open' identity. It is the dynamic encounter within the public sphere that *makes* them artistic works, or rather makes that they have an artistic *working*.

In *Relational Aesthetics* Bourriaud is limiting himself to visual art and more specifically to the so-called performance or installation artists of the 1990s. One of his examples is the French performance artist Sophie Calle. Particularly interesting in its exemplarity is the latter's decorated phone booth:

---

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Blackwell 1962 [1927]).

<sup>6</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Dijon: Les presses du réel 2000) 21.



Sophie Calle, Detail, Gotham Handbook, 1994/2000

At the junction between Greenwich and Harrison Street in Manhattan, Calle decorated this phone booth and let the phone ring to invite passers by to have a conversation with her. Following Bourriaud, we could say that this is an example of relational art because it is not the decorated phone booth itself that is the artwork, but the dynamic encounter evoked by it, its confrontation with the undecorated phone booth at the left, with the passing and halting passers by, etcetera. Calle's work is therefore never a finished work of art, but, as Bourriaud states, 'a bundle of relations with the world, giving rise to other relations, and so on and so forth, ad infinitum.'<sup>7</sup> In contradistinction to the text-context paradigm, which, as we saw, presupposes a gap between an artwork and its context, a relational paradigm thus enables us to understand the artwork as fundamentally – that is: ontologically – contextual, situated, and embedded.

Although much can be said in favor of an extension of Bourriaud's relational aesthetics from the performance arts of the 1990s to the plastic or visual arts in general<sup>8</sup>, it is less evident to extrapolate this aesthetics to the domain of literature. In contradistinction to visual artworks and especially to artistic performances, literature is generally produced, received and enjoyed in isolation. Although, in the case of literature, there is undoubtedly question of communication or contact between writer and reader, this seems by definition *not* to be an immediate form of relationally. Nevertheless, it is in my view exactly such an extrapolation of relational aesthetics to literary practice that could enable us to understand literature's functioning within the world beyond the dominant text-context paradigm.

<sup>7</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* 22.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. for instance P. Gielen, 'Mapping Community Art', in: P. De Bruyne & P. Gielen (eds.), *Community Art. The Politics of Trespassing* (Amsterdam: Valiz 2011) 17.

But what would such a ‘relational poetics’ boil down to? The timeframe of this paper allows me to do little more than to give some preliminary remarks. A first important observation would be that a relational poetics concerns, as in the case of the text-context paradigm, a *meta-poetics*. In other words, it provides not a ready-to-use set of analytical instruments, but a conceptual framework that determines the way literature can be understood. What is more, relational poetics provides a framework that stresses the fact that every work of literature exists, *as* literature, in a unique set of relations. The extreme non-essentialist definition of the literary following from the text-as-relation paradigm, implies that what is literary is again and again the result of these relations, or better still: *is* again and again a new relation. The literariness evoked by the relationally of a specific work has thus to be determined again and again anew.

As a consequence, the research angle prescribed by relational poetics can no longer be chiasmic, as it is within the text-context paradigm, but should be *holistic*. That is, although ‘the total situation of a work of art’<sup>9</sup> consists of several components that can be investigated in relative isolation, from the viewpoint of relational poetics one only gets to grips with the *literariness* of literature when this situation is conceived in its totality. This boils down to a view on literature as being fundamentally *social*, which is not to say, however, that this requires a sociological approach like Pierre Bourdieu’s.<sup>10</sup> Relational poetics does not so much aim at highlighting the societal structures at play within the literary field, but rather stresses the fact that the existence of literary texts as literary text is always already – that is on an ontological level – a form of *co-existence*. In conceptualizing this social dimension, the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, for instance, is more useful than that of Bourdieu. ‘Literature’, as Nancy has it, ‘means the being-in-common of what has no common origin.’<sup>11</sup> Literariness, in other words, is something that is not already there, but comes into being each time anew in a community, how small and momentous this community may be.

From the viewpoint of relational poetics it is impossible and even ridiculous to think of literature that does *not* refer to social reality, that does not intrinsically imply an author, readers, or a certain temporal and local embodiment. From the holistic point of view the idea of a gap between text and ‘context’ is as unthinkable as the notion of a private language or the idea of a ‘purified’ non-referential text.<sup>12</sup> This may even be one of the biggest misunderstandings concerning the so-called *l’art-pour l’art*-movement, a misunderstanding that most likely results from a false – and highly problematic – extrapolation of visual to literary aesthetics. Moreover, it is precisely because language is the way humans connect to the word that the linguistic art of literature cannot but be a form of being-in-the-world. Instead of a gap there is thus always question of a mutual constitution or interdependence of what can hardly be called ‘text’ and ‘context’ anymore. It remains to be seen whether the decisive oppositions resulting from the text-context paradigm – like fiction/reality, intrinsic/extrinsic, autonomy/heteronomy, and even literature/non-literature) can be redefined within the paradigm of relational poetics. Like literariness itself, these will have, in any case, to be considered as non-essential, that is not as the starting point of our approach to literature’s functioning within the world but as the result of the relational phenomenon that literature is.

---

<sup>9</sup> M. H. Abrams. *The Mirror and the Lamp*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *Les Règles de l’art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire* (Paris: Seuil 1992).

<sup>11</sup> J.-L. Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press 2000 [1992]) 90.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. also Cassange, *La théorie de l’art pour l’art en France chez les derniers romantiques et les premiers realists* (Seysssel: Champ Vallon 1997 [1906]).