

## On the Aspects of Reference

Gabriela Ratulea  
Transylvania University of Brasov

Alina Silvana Felea, *Aspects of Reference in Literary Theory. Poetics, Rhetoric and Literary History*, Frankfurt am Main, Peter Lang Edition, 2017, 166 p.

**Keywords:** reference, interpretation, poetics, rhetoric, literary history

Alina Felea's work which came out in the Literary and Cultural Theory Collection at Peter Lang deals with the problem of reference in the study of literature and literary theory, tackling three areas of investigation: poetics, rhetoric and literary history. The author aimed at a propaedeutic meant to serve even a less informed public, hence the abundance of historical information. The three chapters of the book define the object of study for these disciplines and provide a historical perspective on their evolution so as to reach certain conclusions on how reference works in literary language.

Approaching the problems of poetics from the perspective mentioned above, in the first chapter of the book the author expands on the idea that "the major aim of this discipline has always been that of observing and studying literature in its specificity [...] it attempts to delimit and analyze the defining criteria of literary language in order to reveal the functioning of the art of words from that perspective" (p. 15). To properly explain these statements, the author draws on the significant moments in the developments of poetics, from the Plato's objection to poetry to mathematical poetics. The essential point of reference is definitely Aristotle's *Poetics* despite the fact that we only received a part of the original treaty. Giving up on the idea of the supernatural character of

poetry proclaimed by ancient Greek poets (Pippidi 1998, pp. 36-37), Aristotle looked for the *causes* that contributed to the birth of poetry. These are “imitation [...] as also the sense of harmony and rhythm” (Aristotle 1991b, 1448 b-20); *Poetics* is reputed for its treatment of *mimesis*, an essential feature for the rise of the derived and secondary character of language as “sign of actual things” (Aristotle 1991a, 16a4-16a9). A special discussion on *mimesis* and *catharsis* in tragedy completes the list of mandatory terms that post-Aristotelian poetics will develop. Felea then reviews the developments of poetics in the Latin milieu (Horace, [Anonymous] *Treaty On the Sublime*) and in Renaissance (Boccaccio). Aristotle’s rediscovery in *quattrocento* bears the mark of the tension between poetry and the *Scripture* or between *mimesis* and normativity which laid the groundwork for the baroque “ever since theorists were no longer afraid to replace the *mimesis* with the miraculous” (p. 37). Eighteenth century theories are defined by the opposition between *mimesis* and *poiesis* (Bodmer, Breitinger) and the solving of this opposition in the organic model (Goethe); afterwards romantic poetics (Wordsworth, Coleridge, Hugo, etc.) rise in opposition to the ideal of normativity and open a path to modern poetics through the concern of how something new is possible.

An important place in the architecture of the chapter on poetics is not only held by the social transformations – the reference plan –, but also the transformations at the level of values and literary, philosophical, aesthetic theories, etc. “Language became the main concern in all issues connected with philosophy and was even considered essential to the structuring of the world. The innovations [...] of poetics were chiefly due to linguistics [...]” (p. 48) If, until the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the study of literature included biographical, social, historical, psychological, moral, ideological considerations and other, this would change with Russian formalism and also with *new criticism*, structuralism and semiotics. The concern of poetics will be from now on „the internal logic of the literary work, its organization and the structural connections that define it.” (p. 48). The stress will no longer fall on *what* is communicated, but on *how* it is communicated. The tradition of scientific research in literature

was initiated by Russian formalism which established the autonomy of literature and poetic language in relation to any external element, social and historical context or psychological factors. The notion of *close reading* pertaining to New Criticism has its phonetic, syntactic or lexical aspects, as well, yet it does not reach the type of formalisation promoted by the Russian school; all in all, its theoretical premise (the concept of “organic form”) is an aesthetic, not a linguistic one.

Further on Felea shows that Russian formalism exerted a major influence on structuralism. The first literary structuralism occurred in the Prague linguistic circle at the half of the second decade of last century. However, their ideas may seem simplistic today, but “at that moment they were new, especially with regard to their manner of systematization; thus, poetic language was understood as a whole whose component parts interact, (actually a multitude of levels among which reciprocal connections were established) because poetry was considered the only manner in which language as creative energy was highlighted, and which fully capitalized on its potentiality.” (p. 59) In the 60s, during the rise of structuralism, ambitions for scientific rigour rose. The main concept was that of structure, understood as system of relations for all objects and processes. The understanding of an object results from the comparison with other objects and the consideration of its position in a system of reciprocal relations. If psychology was marked by behaviourism and sociology by functionalism, linguistics was marked by semantics. Poetics followed the general movement in linguistics and semiotics adopting structuralist methods, yet it reached a dead end as “individual literary creations are *sui generis* phenomena, autonomous and autotelic objects that abide by their own laws and are endowed with their own inner goals” (p. 49).

In the second chapter of the work dedicated to rhetoric, Felea follows the same structure as in the previous chapter aiming at a historical outline of the discipline and its developments. At the beginning, rhetoric rose in philosophical schools. In ancient Greece sophists considered it a form of knowledge and virtue: Isocrates and Demostene believed that rhetoric was the foundation of education and Aristotle granted

rhetoric equal and complementary status to philosophy because both were accessible to all mankind to a reasonable extent. Systematising rhetoric with the distinction between *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* represents a key contribution to the development of the discipline even if these concepts would be relativized later on. Rhetoric also achieves significant development during the Roman period by means of Cicero and Quintilian. “For Cicero, beauty, the compulsory privilege of every discourse, means force, kindness, pathos, Attic transparency and Asiatic deployment. [He] knew how to unify different principles belonging to different schools. He mastered the art of creating in his discourses the most diverse emotions [...]” (p. 93)

Once democracies in Greece disappeared and the Roman republic fell, rhetoric declined losing its social usefulness. Although it was maintained as a discipline of study for a while, grammar shortly assimilated it. In the modern era rhetoric fell into the philosophers’ disgrace who considered it useless. Descartes rejects it because it is incapable of providing indubitable truths, whereas Kant despises it due to its capacity of manipulation. Beyond its conflict with philosophy (as science) in the modern pragmatic world, rhetoric seems to be an obsolete discipline. However, it is precisely the pragmatic viewpoint that will lead to the revival of rhetoric in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is because the formation and fixation of opinions in the modern social (democratic) environment cannot be conceived without a persuasive discourse and in the lack of an art of conviction. “The notion of ethos is easily linked to that of utterance (an act through which the speaker mobilizes [the resources of the] language). Therefore studies have been conducted on subjectivity, on the modality of the speaker to be part of the discourse.” (Burbea 2014, 8). This explains why there is a comeback of rhetoric in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century along with an increase in interest for communication and discourse. “The prestige of rhetoric was due to the fact that it knew how to explore the resources of the language and to transform them into an efficient and persuasive means of communication, but also into a possibility for knowledge.” (p. 115) Felea accounts for the main directions of reformation in rhetoric in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: philosophical neo-rhetoric (Perelman and

Olbrechts-Tyteca), argumentation theories, linguistic new rhetoric, the Liège group. At the end of the chapter the author draws attention to several points of significance for rhetoric in the literary phenomenon. Rhetoric analysis is not a prevailing method of textual analysis, it is rather an adjacent one; “it is a type of interpretation” (p. 142).

The third chapter focuses on literary history, a discipline that aims at studying the evolution of literature in time: „it is interested in the individuality of the writings that make up a literature and also refers to the literary system, a concept included in the very idea of history.” (p.121) Literary history as discipline emerged in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century along with literature itself as autonomous field. The field of literary history consists of literary works, on the one hand and the theoretical context (theories, concepts, principles), on the other hand. The scientific spirit that influenced the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century inevitably left its mark on literary history. The view of literary work as the result of a combination between social, political and economic factors lead literary history to adopt a historical-sociological method of positivist inspiration and to limit itself to it: “Sainte-Beuve, for example, the creator of “the portrayal” in criticism, paid crucial importance to biographical study” (p. 123), and positivists (Scherer, Lanson) claimed that biography and a writer’s personality were strongly influenced by heredity, environment and culture. This vision was strongly criticised by main directions of literary studies in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Russian formalism (Jakobson), German philology (Curtius, Auerbach) and structuralism. For structuralists, the literary historian needs to describe narrative techniques, poetical structures, rhetorical codes (Genette) or the functions of literature (Roland Barthes). In fact, structuralism is a „categorical denial [...] of the very status of literary history”. (p. 126)

To face this challenge, Felea overviews and assesses the main methodological issues of literary history: the opposition between extrinsic and intrinsic (the role of context in the research of the literary phenomenon), classification as method, the model of continuity (“national” literature, philosophy of history in the study of literature, the coherence principle), the antinomy between synchrony and diachrony or the problem of

relativism in value judgement. Moreover, the author reviews several attempts to revise literary history: the narrative paradigm (Ricoeur), archaeology of discourse (Foucault) and topographic historiography (Valdés).

Finally the author reaches a general conclusion: given the plurality of approaches in the study of literature, the plurality of disciplines, the plurality of paradigms, the plurality of theories and concepts, the problem of reference will be considered starting from the concept of dynamic reference. Obviously, the issue has major consequences on interpretation: the literary text is not only subject to multiple interpretations – it has always been this way, but every interpretation will also find its *place* starting from the conscience of its fallibility and ephemerality.

## REFERENCES

Aristotle. 1991a. “De interpretatione”. Transl. J. L. Ackrill. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, volume 2, pp. 36-61. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Aristotle. 1991b. “Poetics”. Transl. I. Bywater. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, edited by Jonathan Barnes, volume 2, 1442-1481. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Burbea, Georgiana. 2014. „L'ethos ou la construction de l'identité dans le discours”. *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Brasov, Series IV: Philology and Cultural Studies* 7(2): 7-18.

Pippidi, D. M. 1998. „Introducere”. In *Poetica*, transl. by D. M. Pippidi. București: IRI.

### Address:

Gabriela Ratulea  
Transilvania University of Brasov  
Faculty of Sociology and Communication  
Bulevardul Eroilor no. 29  
500030 Brasov, Romania  
E-mail: [gratulea@unitbv.ro](mailto:gratulea@unitbv.ro)