

## METHODOLOGICAL NIGHTMARE – GENERAL OPENING OF BOUNDARIES IN LITERATURE AND CULTURE STUDIES

UDC 82.09:502/504

**Jelica Tošić**

Faculty of Occupational Safety, Niš

**Abstract.** *Problems in preserving the natural resources and the wildlife on Earth have prompted the twenty-first century man to start thinking seriously about environmental protection. Man has proved to be the only living creature endangering all other species. The destructive part of man's nature has turned into self-destructiveness as a result of his destruction of the resources that sustain him. Realizing the urgency of the situation because of the possible self-extinction, man decided to make an effort to do something about his and the planet's survival. Action has become imperative so that even the fields of literature and language have become the battlefields for environmental protection. Some of the concepts of ecology can be found in the discussions about literature and language. A new kind of literary criticism, eco-criticism, has emerged. Its field is obviously interdisciplinary. Inter- and multi-disciplinary orientation prevail in modern man's thinking but here the problem of the methodology applied to the overlapping area opens up. This consideration gave rise to the exploration of what was happening in the twentieth century compared to the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the new situation the scholars dealing with the overlapping disciplines have to work at the intellectual margins of their disciplines. Their step in this direction, however, can often be practically motivated. In the case of eco-criticism there is an attempt to involve both literature and literary criticism in the general movement for the survival of the planet.*

**Key words:** *eco-criticism, interdisciplinary orientation, removal of boundaries, neologisms*

The emergence of eco-criticism was the reason for undertaking the following analysis. When it appeared in the 1990s, it reflected the increasing concern about the state of the whole planet on which we live. Its interdisciplinary character is a sign of the removal of the boundaries enclosing clearly defined scientific areas. In terms of methodology, most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to have been characterized by the narrowing of the scope of examinations within the chosen area of study so that the subject could be thoroughly explored. Things, however, seem to be changing. The twenty-first century or its begin-

ning at least has embraced interdisciplinary approaches which means that the scholar can no longer afford to stay within the relatively fixed boundaries of one scientific area – he should rather work simultaneously within two or more disciplines. It is necessary though to bear in mind that this is only a rough generalization made for analytic purposes only because no period is homogenous. Apart from the dominant trends, there are always some minor ones. Their distribution is also erratic; the dominant trends in one place need not be dominant somewhere else.

The distinction between the phenomena characterizing the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century can be expressed as the distinction between the retaining and erasing of limits or boundaries. The following table is a general representation of some of the characteristics of these two periods. Although phenomena and processes are impossible to be strictly temporally determined because they merge, overlap and unnoticeably appear and disappear, for reasons of analyzing them these periods are useful tools.

Table 1. Some differences between the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries

20 <sup>th</sup> century	21 <sup>st</sup> century
centralization	decentralization
close reading	deconstructive reading
communication	communication smothered
in	beyond
academism	praxis
conscious	unconscious-subconscious
anthropocentric	biocentric
economic development	sustainable development
ecology	deep ecology
aesthetics	ethics

Generally, the twentieth century is characterized by centralization or the narrowing of the study scope so that the phenomena under examination can be explained better and the scientific fields defined. In literary criticism and interpretation, the twentieth century means focusing on literature and the piece of writing and not on the ideas to which it can be reduced. Contrary to that, the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by decentralization or the broadening of the study scope so that the phenomena under examination are explained from an interdisciplinary or even multidisciplinary perspective. Scholars are therefore discouraged from delving deep, they rather stay at the intellectual margins of the overlapping or intermixing disciplines. This is the trend governing both the philosophical and social phenomena, and natural and technical sciences, but this analysis is primarily concerned with the areas of literature and language.

In literary theory and criticism, for example, the 20<sup>th</sup> century is characterized by the *close reading* of the literary text as defined by structuralism. By reading closely the reader (or the critic as the most competent reader) focuses on the piece of writing trying to find out a) what is important in it and b) what the meaning of the parts is, or, generally, to find out the relationships between the parts of the whole. The concept of the whole is crucial in any structuralist theory. There are different signs within that whole and they are all explained by one another within that whole. Namely, a sign in a system acquires the meaning or identity only by being related or juxtaposed to all the other signs in that system. The piece of writing is therefore in the centre of attention and it is examined as a structure. The essential fact about the literary work of art is obviously its semantic and

structural complexity. By close reading, however, one should go a step further and make a transition towards the emotional and reflective interpretation of the forms recognized in the text (Hristić 1973: 14). It is not enough to stay on the surface or the mere identification of the signs. Looking for meaning is what makes reading meaningful. Owing to structuralism then, the communicative potential of the piece of writing is increased. On the other hand, with the *deconstructive reading* that superseded structuralism, the meanings and the sign system are constantly being questioned and destabilized so that the communicative potential of the piece of writing remains smothered or hidden because in this case the process of perception is blurred (Petrović 2004 : 10). Indeed, post-structuralism is characterized by interdisciplinary approaches in which the boundaries that had been set by structuralism get erased or moved to some other discipline. Eco-criticism is an illustrative example.

The word *eco-criticism* is a sort of semi-neologism (Buell 1999 : 1091). *Eco* is short for *ecology*, which is concerned with the relationships between living organisms in their natural environment as well as their relationships with that environment. By analogy,

eco-criticism is concerned with the relationships between literature and environment or how man's relationships with his physical environment are reflected in literature. These are obviously interdisciplinary studies, unusual as a combination of a natural science and a humanistic discipline. This unusual combination of the physical and the spiritual can be seen in some of the terms used in eco-criticism. The terms formerly reserved for ecology only as inherent to it appear in the works of eco-critics, notably Lawrence Buell. For this analysis they have been grouped into three groups. The first one contains the terms that refer to how the physical environment shapes imagination (*environmental imagination*, or more specifically, *urban imagination* or *island imagination*). The terms belonging to the second group speak for the unity of everything and the ultimate broadening of one's cultures (*global environmentalist culture*, *environmental unconscious* or *eco-cultural habitat*). And finally, the terms *toxic discourse*, *literary hazards* and *language pollution* clearly show that there is something wrong in our life and attitudes. *Toxic*, *hazards*, *pollution* are the terms frequently used in environmental protection sciences. They have now moved to the fields formerly incompatible with these words, to literary criticism and linguistics.

Somewhat more than half a century ago, reacting to different positivistic, biographical, sociological etc. interpretations, New Criticism emphasized that the text itself is what is important. Eco-criticism would have been unimaginable or dismissed as quasi-interpretation since the text is explained from the outside and not by what is immanent to it. It must be acknowledged, however, that interdisciplinary interpretations are in a way complicated interpretations because two or more disciplines are involved in lending their categories and terms. Understanding them is a demanding and daunting task. On the other hand, Lena Petrović is right in stating that although interdisciplinary approaches "produce new, provocative interpretations of literary texts", they also produce "insensitive readings" (Petrović 2004 : 10) because by going wide, you cannot go deep *into* the text. In structuralistic interpretations, the reader dips into the text trying to analyze both the whole and its parts. Interdisciplinary approaches call for a step *out* or *beyond*. This step beyond the literary text is made in order for it to be a basis for reaching some other ends. In eco-criticism, for example, this move is a sign of man's endeavour to step outside himself, to transcend or surpass his individual assumptions and values and achieve *Earth wisdom* and identification with the non-human world as stated in the principles of *deep ecology*. Earth wisdom teaches us that anthropocentric attitudes have to be changed into

biocentric attitudes, which are centred around any life on Earth. All life and knowledge exist only as part of a holistic scheme. This statement brings us closer to the contemporary scene in which boundaries tend to be erased, the scope of study broadened and moved from the structuralist closed system towards synergistic intermixing and overlapping. This ultimately involves broadening of man's intellect and sensibility.

Starting from *the conscious* or the conscious effort to merge different inputs in your brain, you get to the *unconscious* or *subconscious* attitude that can produce the aforementioned holistic or Earth wisdom which guarantees the replacement of anthropocentrism by biocentrism. In terms of creative writing, this means that the writer should consciously know what ends he should serve. By being conscious of that and by creating the piece of writing, he will create the unconscious or subconscious positive attitudes towards the environment in the reader's mind. The message he sends is that everything in the world, all the creatures and the physical environment, is part of every man who belongs to everything around him. Modern man has unfortunately forgotten that simple truth. In order to restore the idea of inseparable ties between man and his immediate or broader environment, modern times have produced the idea of *the green* or the renouncement of anthropocentrism. Those rare people living in tribes today live the holistic wisdom most people are only talking about. Those people are so closely tied to their environment that the concept of spirituality or art, not to mention green art is senseless to them.<sup>1</sup> Unlike them, modern people have drawn the line between themselves and their environment and one of the side-effects is the alarming state of the environment in which they live. This has given rise to the determination of modern man to wipe out that line. The 20<sup>th</sup> century was obsessed with *economic development* but since 1987 people have been talking about *sustainable development*. The latter term refers to the practice of positive or undestructive development. This goal is not easy to achieve but, in the present state of affairs, the effort must be conscious. Ethics (ecological ethics in particular) as a set of values accepted irrespective of the reality structure is a tool that helps reaching the ideal. At the time when man is so vitally threatened, normative ethics should delineate 1) *the values*, which can be good or bad, and 2) *the behaviour*, which can be right or wrong. In this way, ethics should be embedded in aesthetics. Uncommitted literature and disinterested structuralistic analysis favoured in the 20<sup>th</sup> century should give way to commitment. Eco-criticism is likewise practical. It is not inferior because of that. It does not either mean that an eco-critic is unaware of the other aspects of a piece of writing. He just *chooses* to analyze it from a narrow perspective for very pressing reasons: the Earth is seriously endangered.

On the other hand, such an approach represents the simplification and marginalization of literature. Interdisciplinary approaches are a complex hybridization or the association of incompatible disciplines (eco-criticism = humanistic discipline + natural science). Modern times seem to have got rid of the concept of incompatibility. Interdisciplinary approaches, however, raise the question that was crucial for the 20<sup>th</sup> century art and criticism, namely the question of the methodological foundations of literary and linguistic examinations. It seems impossible to talk about the full methodological foundation and consistency when inter- and multidisciplinary approaches are concerned.<sup>2</sup> Božo Milošević, for example, suggests the *transdisciplinary* approach as a solution that could transcend

<sup>1</sup> See Chapter 5, Towards a Green Aesthetic in J. Porritt and D. Winner, *The Coming of the Greens* (London: Fontana/Collins, 1988), pp.109-132.

<sup>2</sup> See Božo Milošević: *Saznajni dometi ekološke paradigme: Interdisciplinarnost na delu* (Zbornik radova Čovek i radna sredina, Niš, 2005) pp. 45-50.

the mere meeting of different disciplines (called semi-overlapping by L. Buell) in favour of the more desirable and real cognitive union. In this way, the boundaries between sciences would be erased and the outcome would be the classical concept of philosophy or the union of various kinds of knowledge.

It might also be useful to look at the dates when certain phenomena appeared. Post-structuralist interdisciplinarianism and moving or removing of the boundaries have taken place in both science and politics. Chronologically, the conference which is regarded as the beginning of post-structuralism took place in 1966. Soon after that, in 1973, the term *deep ecology* appeared. The next year, 1974, was the year when the Brandt Commission was formed by the politicians with the aim of reducing economic inequalities in the world and creating a New International Economic Order. Those were the pioneering efforts contributing to the union of the theoretical and the practical or removal of the formerly fixed boundaries. It took some time to put this union into effect. Although the idea of deep ecology appeared a long time ago and the term first appeared in 1973, it took ten years to formulate its principles (1984). Although the Brandt Commission was formed in 1974, its report appeared in 1980. The early 80s were the time when the ecological and political movements were gaining momentum. This was also the time when the process of globalization began. It is obvious that all these trends are characterized by the removal of the boundaries thus promoting a much greater tolerance and flexibility but insecurity as well.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century will probably be characterized by frequent removal of the boundaries. The centrifugal forces are producing a general decentralization. Just as political leaders strive for globalization and just as philosophers strive for pre-patriarchal holism, so do literature and language students strive for a tolerant cosmopolitanism. Although English as a language and English and American literature are still dominant in the world, the newer cultural trends tend towards *transnational* contact. It is increasingly becoming legitimate and desirable to study English and American literature from the African perspective, for example, or to be engaged in cultural studies, which involves the removal of the boundary between high-canon texts and texts dealing with popular culture and society, equal use of both official and informal language.

The beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is also characterized by a greater awareness of what unites all the people and by a greater willingness to get out of one's own realm. The roots of these phenomena can be traced to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They cannot only be attributed to the new millennium. Looking back, the 1980s seem to be the decade of problem diagnosing (environmental problems as well) and the 1990s were the time of the final sobering up after a steep economic development. It was the Earth protection decade. It was also then that eco-criticism appeared. Jerald L. Schnoor, editor of a water pollution control journal, believes that the key words of the 1990s were energy efficiency, recycling and reuse (Research Journal of the Water Pollution Control Federation 1990 : 743). Energy waste or overuse became proscribed because it was clear that natural energy sources were exhaustible and that nothing that had already been used had to be thrown away. Even here, the removal of the boundaries took place. The boundary between the old and the new was also removed. Anything old could and should become new. Man cannot afford any more waste. He has realized that everything in the world makes up one whole and that man should look up to *the here and now*. Everything passes through man, and everything wrong that he has done should be repaired and renovated.

Finally, a word about the words or terms that are presented in this paper. Prefix *re-* refers us back to the linguistic dimension of the problem. This prefix, as well as some other ones amply used today, supports the fact that borders or boundaries are being

erased. This prefix, considered from the ecological perspective, demonstrates that man cannot afford careless waste any longer. The boundaries between production and waste are erased. Like everything else, these two processes are closely related – in order to waste, you have to produce and, reversely, what you produce has to be wasted. *Recycling* is a must, and everyone must be engaged in promoting the course that ultimately keeps us alive. The other prefixes that are very popular nowadays (inter-, multi-, pluri-, trans-) also speak for the removal of the boundaries. Although all these neologisms are the contemporary age products, they are definitely the signs of something positive. Attitudes have definitely changed because of the changed reality.

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## METODOLOŠKI KOŠMAR: OPŠTE OTVARANJE GRANICA U STUDIJAMA KULTURE U KNJIŽEVNOSTI

Jelica Tošić

*Zbog velikih problema u očuvanju prirodnih resursa i živog sveta na zemlji čovek dvadeset prvog veka počinje ozbiljno da se bavi zaštitom životne sredine. Pokazalo se da od svih živih bića čovek jedini ugrožava sav živi svet. Taj destruktivni deo čovekove prirode pretvorio se u samodestruktivnost jer on uništava resurse koji i njega samog održavaju u životu. Shvativši urgentnost situacije, čovek je rešio da učini napor i uradi nešto u vezi sa sopstvenim opstankom i opstankom cele planete. Akcija postaje imperativ. O tome svedoče neki od pojmova ekologije čiji se odraz može videti i u raspravama o jeziku i književnosti. Najočigledniji primer veze sa ekologijom predstavlja pojava nove vrste književne interpretacije, ekokritika. Radi se očigledno o interdisciplinarnom spoju. Inter- i multidisciplinarnost postali su uopšte deo razmišljanja modernog čoveka tako da se otvorilo pitanje metodološke zasnovanosti određenih pristupa oblastima koje se međusobno preklapaju. Ovo je dalo povoda za utvrđivanje razlika između dvadesetog i početka dvadeset prvog veka. Danas, naučnici koji se bave disciplinama koje se stavljaju u međusobno prinudjeni su da rade na intelektualnim marginama svojih disciplina. Međutim, njihov korak u ovom pravcu ponekad ima i praktičnu svrhu. U slučaju eko kritike, na primer, nazire se pokušaj da se i književnost i književna kritika pridruže opštem pokretu za očuvanje planete Zemlje.*

**Ključne reči:** ekokritika, interdisciplinarnost, uklanjanje granica, neologizmi