

The Circulation of Knowledge in Humanities: A Case Study from the Perspective of Actor–Network Theory

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Abstract

There are many case studies showing the benefits of the conceptual framework of Actor–Network Theory (ANT). It is enough to mention the classic texts by Bruno Latour on the Amazon forest and Michel Callon on scallop fishing. However, there are not many case studies discussing the circulation of knowledge in the humanities with the use of vocabulary taken from ANT. This text tries to partially fill the gap, analyzing a case encompassing the areas of both literary studies and philosophy. The main topic of the paper is the circulation of Jacques Derrida’s views – or the views attributed to Derrida – as exemplified by one of his theses. The purpose of the text is not to reflect on the value of Derrida’s reflections, but only to show how the knowledge of his thought spread from France, through the USA, to Poland, from the 1960s to the beginning of the 21st century. Besides proving that the ANT vocabulary is suitable for studying the phenomenon of the circulation of knowledge in the humanities, the case study also shows that this vocabulary should be enriched. The author of the text proposes the concept of symbolization to better understand how Derrida and the ideas attributed to him have been perceived in various texts.

Keywords: Latour; Derrida; Callon; black box; Actor–Network Theory; actor; literary studies.

1. Introduction

In 2013, Edward Balcerzan, one of the best-known Polish literary theorists, published a book titled *The Literariness*. There is a passage in the book that, at first glance, may seem only moderately interesting, as it is just a part of a broader argument. That very passage, however, will be the departure point from which we will start a theoretical and historical

journey from Poland to France via the USA, from the 2010s back to the earlier decades. During this journey, we will study a specific case that will serve us as a pretext to analyze a wider phenomenon of the circulation of knowledge in the humanities, and particularly in literary theory, from the perspective of Actor-Network Theory (ANT).

This article is thus a case study which aims to achieve two main objectives. One is to elucidate a particular aspect in the development of a certain philosophical conception. The other is to demonstrate the application of Actor-Network Theory's framework with its key concepts of translation, actor, black box, and modulation. I will also present some suggestions on how the theoretical vocabulary of ANT can be enriched in a way that would deepen our understanding of the circulation of knowledge in human sciences, or at least in literary theory.

Although there are many case studies within the ANT framework, including classic texts on the domestication of scallops (Callon, 1986) and the Amazon forest (Latour, 2000), we still lack similar works in the field of literary studies and literary theory. This should not be taken to mean that nobody is interested in incorporating ANT into these disciplines or areas of knowledge, since, for example, Rita Felski did it successfully in *The Limits of Critique* (2015) and Latour came up with his own proposals in *An Inquiry Into Modes of Existence: an Anthropology of the Moderns* (2013). Nonetheless, case studies employing ANT are still rare.

Why literary theory? Let us start by saying that the discipline may seem strange and frustrating even to literary theorists, not to mention outsiders (especially those accustomed to the standards of sciences such as physics). There exist a variety of schools and currents in literary theory, which cropped up one after another, each one being touted as a revolution. After the Second World War, the structuralists called for scientific literary studies, yet, as early as the 1970s, the poststructuralists began to suggest that literary studies should not have much in common with science. Immediately afterwards, the representatives of cultural studies, postcolonialism, feminism and new historicism came onto the stage, each with their own revolution, vocabulary and assumptions. It is not my intention to judge whether such a variety of perspectives is good or bad, justified or unjustified. What is important is that this multiplicity is a clear manifestation of a more general characteristic of humanities, i.e. the fact that the standards of consensus-building and verifiability are usually not as precise as, for example, in physics, chemistry or biology. I do not mean that such standards do not exist at all. What I want to state is only that such fields as literary studies and literary theory are not as strict in this respect as, say, astrophysics.

The question is to what extent the ANT's approach can cope with the specificity of the circulation of knowledge in literary theory and, more generally, in the humanities. In what follows I prove that it is possible; however, the ANT conceptual apparatus needs some changes. To illustrate this point, I have selected certain facts from the history of popularizing the views of Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher who, for better or worse (it is not important for me here), had a great influence on literary theory. This might seem to be a

typical story of creating a black box, i.e. reaching a consensus on a given issue and forgetting that it was once the subject of debate and controversy. Such is not the case, however, for reasons that I discuss in more detail later in this article. Therefore, in order to understand this story, we will have to become acquainted with symbolization, a new concept, which I will also explain on the following pages.

2. Circulation of Derrida

The fragment of Balcerzan's book that will serve us a departure point for our investigations reads as follows: "Since philosophizing resembles poetry, maybe there are systematic similarities between them? And who knows, maybe we should agree with Derrida's statement that philosophy is a kind of writing, and writing is a kind of philosophy?" (Balcerzan, 2013, p. 311). Let us take a closer look at that last line: "we should agree with Derrida's statement that philosophy is a kind of writing, and writing is a kind of philosophy." It contradicts Derrida's own opinion on the topic as expressed in one of his interviews: „no indeed, philosophy is not simply a 'kind of writing': philosophy has a very rigorous specificity which has to be respected, and it is a very hard discipline with its own requirements, its own autonomy, so that you cannot simply mix philosophy with literature, with painting, with architecture" (Derrida, 1989, p. 75).

This is a good moment to make an important remark. Throughout this article, we will observe this kind of "displacements of meaning." I will elaborate on the meaning of this term later, referring to ANT and the concepts of translation and the black box. For now, it should suffice to state that the term refers to the situation where the views of a given person—in our case, Derrida's take on the relationship between philosophy and literature—are presented differently in different texts. Of course, it is only natural to ask about the causes of such displacements of meaning. One possible answer is that they are the result of "misinterpretation of the author's intentions." Balcerzan may simply fail to understand Derrida's intentions properly. We may also ascribe such disparities to „an obscure formulation of the original statement." It is a well-known fact that Derrida was frequently accused of using a fussy style (Searle, 1994). There are other possible explanations; we may for example invoke "the impossibility of keeping the original meaning of some, or indeed any, statements." I will not focus on any such explanations. They are important and worth considering, but they constitute a separate problem as they concern interpretation, authorial intentions, and so on. My aim is to (1) analyze a particular example of meaning displacement, (2) demonstrate where such displacements occur, and (3) describe their consequences. I am not interested in studying specific causes of the analyzed displacement. By the same token, I will not focus on the question of the merits of Derrida's works. The question of whether he was a great philosopher or a fraud does not bear any significance for the purposes of this paper.

Let us go back to Balcerzan's statement. When we juxtapose it with the comment made by Derrida himself, it becomes obvious that what we are dealing with is a case of meaning displacement. To better understand the circumstances in which the displacement occurred, it is worth looking at the footnote to Balcerzan's observation. What we learn from it is that Balcerzan did not refer directly to any of Derrida's texts, but to a book written by another famous Polish literary theorist, Ryszard Nycz. To be more specific, he referred to page 30 of *Textual World* by Nycz, published in 1993. In the book, we do indeed find a remark about philosophy as a kind of writing. Nycz (1993) writes: "As Richard Rorty noted—one of few supporters of deconstruction among philosophers—the amazing impact of Derrida's projects is a consequence of re-thinking a simple statement: philosophy is a kind of writing" (p. 30).

Let us note that Nycz, unlike Balcerzan, does not write directly about Derrida's views. He uses Rorty as a mediator,¹ and the relevant footnote that we can find in Nycz's book refers to a famous paper by Rorty titled *Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An essay on Derrida*, originally published in 1978. It is all too easy to forget that Rorty does not attempt to faithfully explain the views of the French philosopher. His aim is rather to set them in a broader context of a certain philosophical tradition he himself supports. The statement that philosophy is a kind of writing is Rorty's own thesis, and not a statement made by Derrida. Let us take a closer look at the context in which it appears for the first time in his text: "Philosophy is best seen as a kind of writing. It is delimited, as is any literary genre, not by form or matter, but by tradition—a family romance involving, e.g., Father Parmenides, honest old Uncle Kant, and bad brother Derrida" (Rorty, 1982, p. 92). Elsewhere in the paper we read: "Consider Derrida as trying, in such passages as this, to create a new for writing to be about—not the world, but texts. Books tell the truth about things. Texts comment on other texts, and we should stop trying to test texts for accuracy of representation" (p. 95).

It is worth noting that, although the second quote refers directly to Derrida's views, it does not begin with "As Derrida says...", but with "Consider Derrida as...". Rorty was usually very clear about the fact that he did not propose a faithful explanation of Derrida's texts, but rather presented one of the many ways of using them.² It was a deliberate and open attempt to adjust Derrida's views to his own attitude towards philosophy. And Rorty believed that we should not treat philosophy as a privileged way of talking about reality. Even though, since the times of ancient Greece (that is from its beginnings), philosophy has attempted to discover the ultimate nature of the truth and reality, it actually resembles literature, as it broadens our imagination and provides us with new and useful techniques of dealing with

¹ It is worth keeping in mind the distinction between mediators and intermediaries, because it is crucial for ANT. An intermediary is "what transports meaning or force without transformation: defining its inputs is enough to define its outputs." On the other hand, mediators "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry" (Latour, 2005, p. 39).

² Here are more examples showing how he usually writes about his attitude to Derrida: "I should like to think of Derrida as..." (Rorty, 1991, p. 128); "I suggest that we read Derrida's later writings as..." (p. 125).

the world. Rorty says that we should adopt a Darwinian perspective in our approach to philosophy, treating language as a tool which helps us to interact with reality, but which does not represent the intrinsic nature of reality.

To sum up, we have three texts, and each of them mentions Derrida. These are: Balcerzan's text from 2013 referring to Nycz, Nycz's text from 1993 referring to Rorty, and Rorty's text from 1978 referring to Derrida, but with the caveat that he does not try to present a faithful explanation of Derrida's views. Although all the texts mention the same claim i.e. that philosophy is a kind of writing, each of them ascribes a different meaning to this statement. It is time we took a closer look at these displacements.

3. Displacements

Balcerzan mentions Derrida mainly to dispute with him. He asks if Derrida is right in his belief that philosophy is a kind of writing and answers: "Yes and no" (Balcerzan, 2013, p. 311). He then focuses on the "no." What is particularly important here is how exactly Balcerzan understands the claim to which he refers. It seems that in Balcerzan's opinion Derrida proposed to blur a distinction between the language of poetry and the language of philosophy and he wanted to introduce to philosophy as many poetic tools as it is possible. In Balcerzan's view Derrida does not care about the truth, focusing his interest on linguistic experiments. Nycz does not want to dispute the claim ascribed to Derrida. His goal is to present Derrida as part of a broader theoretical current: the linguistic and textual turn in the humanities, often termed "the poststructuralist turn." Balcerzan and Nycz understand the thesis about philosophy as a kind of writing in slightly different ways. For Nycz, it does not necessarily mean that philosophy is equal to poetry, but it rather draws our attention to the fact that every philosophical thought is subjected to linguistic and textual rules. These two interpretations are not contradictory, but they emphasize two different aspects of "Derrida's" statement. Rorty, as we mentioned earlier, refers to Derrida in order to support his own view, claiming that philosophy is not a privileged way of describing reality. Philosophy can be a better instrument serving to achieve certain objectives, for example to introduce useful distinctions, but "achieving certain objectives" is not tantamount to "giving the only proper description of the world." For Rorty it is not about poetic language at all, but about the relationship between philosophy and the rest of our culture.

It is also clear that each of the three texts was written in different historical conditions. The oldest one is Rorty's paper from 1978. It presents Derrida as a solitary hero, someone who offers new insights that deserve the attention of a wider world. Basically, Rorty wanted to acquaint American philosophers with the French thinker. Derrida was not an obscure philosopher at the time—a decade earlier he attracted the attention of philosophical circles in Baltimore at the famous conference "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man" (Peeters, 2013, pp. 166–169; Cusset, 2008, pp. 29–32)—but he was still far from achieving the status of an academic star he was later to become. Rorty introduces him neither as a father of the deconstructionist movement, nor as a prominent poststructuralist. The noun

“deconstruction” appears in Rorty’s text only once and indicates a way of philosophizing rather than a theoretical current or a school (Rorty, 1982, p. 98). The paper does not mention the word “poststructuralism” even once. It is all about Derrida. There are no references to other works on his philosophy, only several passages from *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomenon and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*.

This may partly be due to Rorty’s style of writing, but it is also a reflection of the circumstances in which his text was published. In 1978 Derrida was still more of “an interesting French philosopher” than “the academic star and a proponent of a famous school of thought that conquered departments of comparative literature in USA and has acquired a status of a pet hate of analytic philosophers.” An infamous argument between Derrida and Searle, and more generally between deconstruction and analytic philosophy, was still in its initial stages.³ Alan Sokal did not start scientific wars yet, and the majority of American professors lived in blessed ignorance of Derrida’s very existence. To be sure, Derrida had already visited Yale University for three years in a row, on invitation from Paul de Man and John H. Miller (Peeters, 2013, p. 272), but it was just the beginning of his carrier on American campuses. It was also the time when the first main translations of his most important books were published in USA. *Of Grammatology* (translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) appeared in 1976, and *Writing and Difference* (translated by Alan Bas) was published in 1978, the same year when Rorty’s paper came out.

The term “poststructuralism,” which would be later used as a collective term to describe many different thinkers such as Derrida, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, and Deleuze, was not well known yet. As I mentioned, we will not find it in Rorty’s paper from 1978, it was used neither by Spivak in her 100-page-long preface to *Of Grammatology*, nor by Bas in his introduction to *Writing and Difference*. Each of these three texts played a vital role in introducing Derrida to American readers, and each of them treated Derrida’s thought as a single, unique phenomenon. All of them described “Derrida as Derrida,” as opposed to “Derrida as a poststructuralist” or “a postmodernist” (the word “postmodernism” does not appear in those texts either).

In 1993, when Nycz’s book was published, the philosophical landscape had already changed. Nycz uses the term “poststructuralism” in the subtitle of his book and it appears throughout the entire text. He presents Derrida as a member of a broader current which includes such thinkers as Foucault and Barthes. Instead of being the result of Nycz’s own ideas or the specificity of Polish reception, the approach is the reflection of the changes that took place between 1978 and 1993. Both words, “poststructuralism” and “postmodernism,” became the main points of reference for discussions on Derrida. The process started in the early 1980s. For example, we can find the word “poststructuralism” in 1983 *On Deconstruction* by Jonathan Culler and in the first edition of Terry Eagleton’s *Literary Theory* from the same year.

³ Searle’s response to Derrida’s paper on Austin was published in 1977.

Another significant thing about Nycz's book is that it can tell us a lot about the reception of Derrida's ideas. One such important piece of information is the very fact that Nycz is a literary theorist. After all, Derrida was a philosopher and his first publications were philosophical regardless of how they are perceived and evaluated. In the USA, however, from the very beginning, literary scholars looked at Derrida more favorably than philosophers. As it has already been mentioned, he was invited to Yale by de Man and Miller, both of whom are literary theorists. One could devote a separate paper to explain this phenomenon. Here, I will limit myself to noticing that American philosophy, dominated by analytic philosophers, was not a good place for someone inspired by Husserl, Heidegger, Nietzsche and structuralism.⁴ The philosophical landscape in Poland was different, but even here Derrida's popularity was limited to the circle of literary theorists, with just a few exceptions. There can be no doubt that American reception of Derrida's works played a vital a role in the way he was perceived in Poland.

There is another important aspect of the book by Nycz and the one by Balcerzan. Although in Nycz's book Derrida is presented as a famous philosopher (literary scholars in Poland were well aware of global trends), most of his papers had not been translated into Polish at the time. *Philosophical Writings*, a collection of selected texts written by Derrida, was published just one year earlier. *Of Grammatology* was translated in 1999, *Margins of Philosophy* in 2002, and *Writing and Difference* in 2004. This is why Nycz did not assume that everybody was well-acquainted with Derrida's thought and he carefully explained the basics of his philosophy. Balcerzan's book from 2013 is significantly different in this respect. Balcerzan does not explain Derrida's views or his links to poststructuralism and postmodernism, as he seems to deem this kind of "background knowledge" obvious. He is right in that, at least to a certain extent, given that in the 20 years that lapsed from the time Nycz's book had been published, there appeared hundreds of Polish texts on Derrida, and his papers acquired the status of compulsory reading at many literary theory courses.

4. Paris 1967

Before we apply the instruments offered by Actor-Network Theory to analyze the data presented above, we should see the last—or the first, if we look at it chronologically—act of the story, i.e. *Of Grammatology* itself, published in Paris in 1967. First and foremost, it must be said that the phrase "philosophy is a kind of writing" is nowhere to be found in the book. There is no close equivalent of that statement in *Of Grammatology*. The book is strongly anchored in the context of Parisian intellectual life. It tackles many topics and refers to many thinkers that were popular in France at the time. It contains references to de Saussure, Levi-Strauss and structuralism, to Husserl and phenomenology, to Heidegger and Nietzsche. And although *Of Grammatology* is seen as a radical and shocking work, in

⁴ It was humorously and briefly described by Rorty in his text about philosophy in America: "I have heard analytic philosophers get furious at comparative literature departments for trespassing on philosophical turf by teaching Nietzsche and Derrida, and doubly furious at the suggestion that they might teach it themselves" (Rorty, 1982, p. 225).

fact it does not feature many strong statements that could be easily converted into catchy and outrageous phrases. The main part of the book is devoted to the detailed analysis of papers selected by Derrida, mainly the ones written by de Saussure, Rousseau and Levi-Strauss. Even the most famous line from the book, “there is nothing outside the text,” fails to make a big impression when it appears for the first time, as its exact wording is “there is no outside-text” (*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*; Derrida, 1976, p. 158; 1967, p. 227).

Even though this phrase is the closest equivalent of the claim that “philosophy is a kind of writing,” it does not mean that it is a close one. We must remember about two things. First of all, in *Of Grammatology* the notion of text has a very broad meaning which is by no means confined to writing in the common sense of the word. For Derrida, the statement that “there is no outside-text” serves as a metaphor which says that we do not have any access to the “transcendental signified,” that is—speaking in general terms—to the ultimate, complete sense or the full presence of meaning which exists beyond the interplay of differences and supplements. The phrase itself is introduced in the context of the analysis of Rousseau’s work and it means, roughly speaking, that it is impossible to arrive at final answers to the interpretative questions the texts raise. Secondly, the phrase is neither the most important part of the book, nor does Derrida seem to attach to it any special significance.

If this is the case, why has it become so popular and why is it still quoted as a reason to attribute to Derrida the claim that everything is textual, that we are imprisoned in language, and that philosophy is a kind of writing? Sean Gaston proposes an interesting explanation. He claims that such an interpretation of Derrida’s philosophy was popularized by Michel Foucault and Edward Said in the 1970s and 1980s (Gaston, 2011, p. XXI). Gaston mentions Said’s paper from 1978, published in “Critical Inquiry,” which reads:

Finally—and I am depressingly aware these prefatory comments are far too schematic—I will discuss Derrida’s *mise en abîme* and Foucault’s *mise en discours* as typifying the contrast between the criticism claiming that *il n’y a pas d’hors texte* and the one discussing textuality as having to do with a plurality of texts, and with history, power, knowledge, and society. (Said, 1978, p. 673)

Gaston is right to emphasize that Said was inspired by Foucault’s remarks from 1972. In his own paper, Foucault writes that Derrida’s work is “a pedagogy which teaches the student that there is nothing outside of the text” (Foucault, 2006, p. 573). It is worth adding that we can find similar remarks on Derrida in Said’s text *Criticism Between Culture and System* from 1983, where he explicitly refers to Foucault:

Let me start by indicating a highly schematic divergence, dramatized by the polemical conflict between Derrida and Foucault. Their critical attitudes are opposed on a number of grounds. The one specially singled out in Foucault’s attack on Derrida seems appropriate to consider first: Derrida is concerned only with reading a text, and that a text is nothing more than what is in it for the reader. For if the text is important to Derrida because its real situation is literally a textual element with no ground in actuality [...] then for Foucault the text is important because it inhabits an element of power (*pouvoir*) with a decisive claim on actuality, even though that power is invisible or implied. Derrida’s criticism moves us into the text, Foucault’s in and out. (Said, 1983, p. 183)

It would be an exaggeration to claim that the statement “there is nothing outside the text” and its specific interpretation have gained such popularity solely thanks to Said and Foucault, but the two did play an important role in the process whose implications are to be found 30 years later in Balcerzan’s book.

5. Translating Derrida

I wrote at the outset about “meaning displacements” in the context of Derrida’s views. On the basis of the above reconstruction, we can see that this kind of displacement is an effect of at least three different displacements. First of all, there is the displacement of Derrida himself. The French philosopher is one person in Rorty’s paper (a solitary hero, an interesting thinker), and quite another in the works of Nycz and Balcerzan (a member or even one of the originators of poststructuralism). Secondly, there is the displacement of the authorship of “philosophy is a kind of writing” thesis. In Balcerzan’s book, it is presented as a claim made by Derrida himself, while Rorty presents it as his own interpretation of Derrida’s philosophy. Furthermore, the very meaning of this claim differs in both texts. The third kind of displacement is the one of contexts, as the institutional circumstances in the USA in 1978 were different than the ones in Poland in 1993 and 2013.

Actor-Network Theory offers a term that can help us take into account and explain all these displacements. The term is “translation.”⁵ Scholars such as Bruno Latour and Michel Callon refer to translations to analyze the phenomena of movement in science, that is changes in time and space, such as transitions from 1967 to 2013, transitions from France to Poland, etc. ANT emphasizes that scientific activity cannot be reduced to timeless and universal laws or theories and that we need to consider continual transitions between different places. The more successful these transitions are, the more stable our theories become. To better understand what translation is precisely and how this movement of science takes place we need to ask: who is responsible for it? The answer is: actors. To be an actor means to act, to make a difference. And it does not matter who or what an actor is. It can be an atom, a tree, a researcher, a book. An actor is the one who can transform, that is translate, another actor. As Callon (1986) puts it: “A translates B. To say this is to say that A defines B. It does not matter whether B is human or non-human, a collectivity or an individual” (p. 143). Latour (1987) makes a very similar remark: “I will call translation the interpretation given by the fact-builders of their interests and that of the people they enroll” (p. 109).

And this is exactly what we have seen on the example of the circulation of Derrida’s views. All we need to do is to take Callon’s definition—A translates B = A defines B—and substitute Rorty, Nycz or Balcerzan for A, and Derrida for B. Each one of these scholars defines Derrida in a slightly different way. In compliance with Latour’s words,

⁵ This is, of course, a simplification, but for the purposes of this text we do not need to delve into details. A more detailed and elaborated vision of establishing the science can be found in Latour, 2005.

these definitions are influenced by their interests. The word “interest” should not be interpreted in a negative way. Here, it simply indicates different goals: to dispute, to summarize, to consider someone as an ally, and so on.

Of course, there are many kinds of translation, depending on what we are talking about: sampling the soil in the Amazon forest (Latour, 2000, pp. 24–79), catching scallops (Callon, 1986), making war (Harman, 2009, p. 15), or contributing to a circulation of philosophical beliefs. Therefore, for the sake of clarity, we should specify the features of this particular translation. Before that, however, I would like to emphasize one general feature that can be called “the basic principle of translation.” On the one hand, translations are necessary for any actor to move on, to avoid getting stuck. On the other hand, every translation changes the actor. Derrida would have never made a name for himself, if scholars like Rorty, Nycz or Balcerzan had not translated him as an actor. But at the same time this means that Derrida needs to be changed as a scholar, that he will never be the same actor he was at the time of writing *Of Grammatology*. The book itself becomes a different actor. For example, its theses are always read in the context of Rorty’s interpretation, in the context of poststructuralism, or in the context of Searle’s polemic. It does not mean that the book loses its original identity completely; Latour and other members of ANT are far from claiming that “interpretation is the only game in town” (Latour, 2013). The point is that its function, its role, its reception in an academic world, and, more generally, in social world is changing.

Now we can be more specific. When an actor translates another actor, it can establish a very close connection between the two of them. When a third actor carries out his own translation, that actor is forced to take into account both of them. This is exactly what happened to Rorty and his translation of Derrida. Rorty’s phrase, “philosophy is a kind of writing,” became so strongly attached to Derrida that it is often used as a summary of his views. Furthermore, certain people use this phrase without mentioning Rorty anymore. Nycz, in his book from 1993, does point out that the phrase came from Rorty, but Balcerzan’s book from 2013 traces it back directly to Derrida.⁶ From ANT perspective, this is not a surprise. Derrida-actor was changed by Rorty in such a way that he became a slightly different actor.

But is this account right? It seems that it simply cannot be. It would be absurd to state that Derrida must always be interpreted as someone who claims that philosophy is a kind of writing. Anyone can object, claiming that this phrase does not reflect Derrida’s views correctly (as I mentioned before, Derrida stated it himself in one of his interviews). So does it really make sense to claim that Derrida-actor was changed by Rorty-actor? And what about all the situations where Derrida speaks for himself? These are valid questions. In order to answer them properly, we need to introduce two notions. One comes from ANT (black boxes), the other (symbolization) is my own proposal.

⁶ Balcerzan’s claim is, of course, an example of a positive modality. “We will call positive modalities those sentences that lead a statement away from its conditions of production, making it solid enough to render some other consequences necessary” (Latour, 1987, p. 23).

6. Symbolization and Black Boxes

Let us start with the latter. I will explain it on the example of the poetry by Zbigniew Herbert, one of the best-known Polish writers. Herbert's poems often feature figures of philosophers. They perform different functions in the poems and require different competences from readers. Sometimes a given philosopher represents himself. This is the case with the poem about Spinoza who meets God. The views of this particular philosopher, for example his pantheism, play a vital role for the interpretation of the poem and Herbert could not have replaced him with some other philosopher without changing its meaning. I propose to refer to this situation as zero-degree symbolization. At other times, a given philosopher is treated as a symbol of a specific philosophical current, one example of which is Plato, whom Herbert included in his poems as a symbol of idealism. This time, the philosopher could easily be replaced in a poem by another idealist. This situation can be termed first-degree symbolization, because a chosen philosopher becomes a symbol of one of the philosophical trends. Then there are those poems where a philosopher represents a general, stereotypical feature of philosophy, for example its detachment from mundane problems. Such a role could have been fulfilled by almost every philosopher, not only the one who actually appears in a given poem. Let us call it second-degree symbolization.

When we compare Rorty's text from 1978 to Balcerzan's text from 2013, we see that in the case of the former we deal with zero-degree symbolization of Derrida, and in the latter with symbolization of the first degree. In Rorty's paper Derrida appears "as Derrida." If Rorty had written about Foucault, his text would have had to be significantly altered, if only in such a banal way that quotes from Derrida's book would have had to be replaced with quotes from Foucault. The situation in Balcerzan's book is completely different. It is no coincidence that the Polish literary scholar does not refer to Derrida's text at all. It is not necessary since, in his book, Derrida is simply "one of those philosophers who blurred the difference between literature and poetry." Balcerzan could have replaced him with a different philosopher of similar reputation and his argument would remain the same. He writes about Derrida, because he is one of the best-known people who are widely believed to be involved in the blurring of the distinction that Balcerzan is interested in. Thus, the word "Derrida" refers to two different things in Rorty's and Balcerzan's texts—in the former to the French philosopher, in the latter to the philosophical trend represented by this philosopher. Of course, what Derrida represents in a text does not depend on the philosopher only. In other words, his identity depends on other actors, such as Rorty, Said or Nycz, who summarized Derrida's views in a certain way and eventually depicted him as a representative of poststructuralism, postmodernism or, more generally, a central figure among those who "blur the difference between philosophy and literature."

Obviously, we will not benefit much from the notion of symbolization, if we understand it in a simplified way, by assuming that a given text may feature only zero-degree symbolization or only first-degree symbolization. In fact, in a given text, different degrees of symbolization can appear alongside each other. One sentence may be a zero-degree symbolization, another sentence a first-degree symbolization. In addition, we should distinguish different

types of symbolization. For example, there are explicit symbolizations and implicit symbolizations. If we read: “Derrida, like other members of poststructuralism, says that ...” we are dealing with a case of an explicit symbolization, because the author directly states that she treats Derrida as a representative of a wider current. On the other hand, when someone, like Balcerzan, writes “Derrida claimed that ...”, and he is not talking about Derrida, but about a common idea present in a certain school of thought, it is an example of an implicit symbolization. In order for the concept of symbolization to be really useful, it must be supplemented with such distinctions. In this text, I present only its general form.

The concept of symbolization makes it a little easier to understand how it is possible that, on the one hand, the Rorty-actor transforms the Derrida-actor, and on the other hand, it is still possible to refer to Derrida bypassing Rorty’s interpretation. The point is that Derrida-actor can function in different versions, for example as zero-degree and first-degree symbolization. In addition, there is always the possibility of a researcher claiming that Derrida has been symbolized in a wrong way, that he should not be seen as a symbol of postmodernism but, for example, of enlightenment, to cite Norris’s opinion (Norris, 2000). Thus, we get another variant of the Derrida-actor. Needless to say, all these variants have a common denominator (hence the term variants). For example, they are all somehow related to Jacques Derrida, a French philosopher born in Algeria in 1930. They can function in the humanities in parallel, depending on a given interpretative community. If a person who is not familiar with philosophy asked an analytical philosopher and a poststructuralist who Derrida was, she could hear about two different Derridas, two versions of the Derrida-actor: on the one hand, a dangerous postmodernist, a man who did not even deserve to be called a philosopher, a fraud who rejected the truth and reason; on the other, a follower of the Kantian tradition and one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century. In a word, Derrida may become a subject of (at least) two different kinds of first-degree symbolization. I do not claim that they are equally valid. I just want to point to the simple fact that they both actually function in academic world.

All of this has to do with the specific nature of the humanities. Latour and other proponents of Actor-Network Theory use the concept of a black box while describing scientific activity. The term black box refers to everything that used to be controversial, but has become a generally accepted truth in a given discipline.⁷ As it is not controversial anymore, it can be used as a non-problematic building material for the construction of, for example, a theory. It might seem that, in Balcerzan’s text from 2013, Derrida’s function is precisely that of a black box. This is why Balcerzan does not have to explain Derrida’s views, and he does not have to refer to any of his texts. Balcerzan talks about something that might have once been unclear and controversial, but is now treated by literary scholars as obvious. Having read Rorty, Said, or Nycz (among others), everyone knows that Derrida was a poststructuralist, that he focused on the act of writing, that he blurred the differences between literature and philosophy, etc. And this, indeed, is true to a certain extent. There

⁷ “A black box is any actant so firmly established that we are able to take its interior for granted” (Harman, 2009, p. 33).

is, however, one important objection. It is much more difficult to create a black box in the humanities, than in, for example, physics. Why? Because it is much easier to object to a given thesis, symbolization or interpretation. This does not mean that there are no black boxes in the humanities. “Plato was an idealist,” “Kant made a revolution in philosophy,” “Derrida had a huge impact on literary theory”—all of these are black boxes. Although presently almost no one objects to them, it has not always been the case. However, the statement “According to Derrida, philosophy is a kind of writing” is not a black box, at least not for every person, since we can easily find researchers ready to reject this symbolization. It can function as a black box in certain areas of the humanities, for example among traditional literature scholars who have never been particularly interested in Derrida, but certainly it is not a black box for all representatives of this discipline.

What makes symbolization such a useful term is the fact that it points to processes similar to a black box. In order for symbolization to become popular and acceptable, there needs to be at least a partial consensus about its content, but it does not mean that it is a black box in the full sense of the term. There may exist several symbolizations of Derrida at the same time, and thus none of them would really be a black box. And although, let me emphasize it again, it would be a mistake to claim that there are no black boxes in the humanities, they are probably less common than in sciences such as physics. Why this is the case is a separate question, but it is undoubtedly related to the fact that, in general, it is more difficult to arrive at a consensus and propose clear and unambiguous criteria of verification in the humanities compared to sciences. For the same reason, it is easier to find different versions of the actor-Derrida in the theory of literature than different versions of the actor-Einstein in physics.

7. Summary

The above considerations lead to three conclusions. The first one illustrates what I have earlier called “the basic principle of translation,” another two are related specifically to the case of Derrida, which itself shows the specificity of the circulation of knowledge in the humanities. First of all, according to the basic principle of translation, Derrida-actor must be in constant motion in order to get out of Paris and France. This points out the need for translation. The need, in turn, implies that Derrida-actor is not in full control of his own identity. His identity is subject to many influences exerted by other actors, some of whom can become attached to him, regardless of his own wishes. Secondly, it is worth complementing Actor-Network Theory with the concept of symbolization to better reflect what may happen to thinkers and their claims when they pass through a series of translations and are split into different versions. Thirdly, we need to take into account that when we come across the word “Derrida” in the text, we cannot be certain exactly who or what lies behind it. We know that the word is most likely related to the activity of a particular philosopher. We do not, however, know to what kind of symbolization Derrida is subjected in a given text and which of the many variants of symbolization we are dealing with.

Does it sound obvious? Maybe it comes down to the common intuition, best summed up as “different people talk about Derrida differently,” “Derrida would not have become famous, if others had not talked about him.” In a sense, yes, it is obvious. None of the processes described above is mysterious or shocking. The problem is that we often forget about it while discussing scientific texts. This is not due to our ignorance. The history of the philosophy of science shows that sometimes it is difficult to capture obvious problems by means of theoretical tools. It has long been clear that science is not just about combining theoretical claims into logically coherent sequences. It requires experiments, the use of trial and error methods, laboratory work and so on. However, for a long time, the philosophy of science has been neglecting these aspects. This has changed only in the last forty years, partially thanks to Science and Technology Studies.

How many texts do we know that highlight the fact that Derrida from 1967 and Derrida from 2013 were different actors (or different versions of Derrida-actor) and that the difference is there not because Derrida’s views were evolving, but because most of the categories used to interpret them, such as poststructuralism, did not exist in 1967? How many books do we know in which Derrida “as Derrida” would consistently be distinguished from Derrida as a first-degree symbolization? The way we think leans heavily towards unification. When we talk about Derrida, we treat him as a unity; we do not break him down into variants, depending on the symbolization or categories that evolved along with the development of his career. When we think, we employ concepts and words. If there are no words in our professional vocabulary that help us to think about knowledge in a way that draws attention to its circulation, constant movement and transformation, then we will not include these factors in our theories of science. Concepts such as translation or symbolization can help us avoid hasty unification of what is not uniform. They can help us approach scientific and academic texts in a way that matches the wisdom we apply in our everyday affairs. This is important not only for literary scholars or humanists looking for instruments that enable them to understand their own activities. It is also significant for people working within ANT and Science and Technology Studies. An attempt to apply the language of ANT to new fields exposes its limitations and, as a result, enriches it with new concepts such as symbolization.

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