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THE MUFFLED VOICE
ON THE CONVENTIONAL CHARACTER OF LITERATURE

What is literature capable of expressing? It is impossible not to ask this question while reflecting on the intriguing title of the conference “The Omitted, Silenced, Suppressed, Blurred in the Narratives of the 20th Century.”¹ The title implies following certain controversial trends of postmodern thought that there are themes, contents and probably also forms with the expression and use of which literature has always had considerable difficulties. When questioning the rationality and possibilities of human cognition, postmodernism in fact called into question the effectiveness of language and every statement formulated in it, thus also including literature, as tools for reaching out to and commenting on rational knowledge. Whether or not one accepts postmodern thought, one has to agree with the above implication of the troubles and ineffectiveness of literature. If we assume that literature or a literary work in a certain way echoes reality or expresses human consciousness, feelings and experiences, we must also admit that it rarely does so—even if it meets the prerequisite of true art—effectively and credibly. More often than not, it usually does so in a limited, flawed and imperfect way.

There are many reasons, and we need not necessarily refer to postmodern thought, why what literature speaks about, and what and how it expresses it, may be incomplete and far from perfect. These reasons can be identified either in phenomena located outside literature or in those intrinsic to it.

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Naturally, as to external phenomena, various political, social and moral conditions may be treated as determining and restraining for literature. The most telling example of such a factor is the functioning of censorship in a totalitarian state and the discriminatory publishing policy and control of book publishing practised by the authorities of such a state. However, censorship is not only an institution of the totalitarian state. It is also a non-institutionalised, customary phenomenon which can emerge in any type of state due to social pressure or even expectations, which prevent publication and distribution of texts whose content is deemed unacceptable by the general public or a particular group or organisation of the society. Literary works with the aim of expressing content that is difficult, controversial or unacceptable to the state or society can therefore be the subject of special control, constraints, pressure and restrictions on the part of censorship. It can—as an external phenomenon of literature—influence the content of literary works and the way they are expressed.²

However, as evidenced by the past and as documented by literary history, even in the most totalitarian countries and restrictive societies with exceptionally strict and extensive censorship, literature, indeed the politically engaged literature, one critical of totalitarianism and fighting against the enslavement of the human being, has been created, flourished and has been able, despite persecution, to oppose censorship quite effectively and express content prohibited by the oppressive authorities.³ Literature is a great danger and a threat to such an authority, especially when writers turn their works into a forum for free thought, social protest and political disobedience. They can reach for a tactical weapon and successfully oppose a regime through a variety of artistic and non-artistic means, ranging from the use of persuasive writing techniques and strategies of “bypassing” censorship bans,⁴ through the application and perfection of Aesopian language and other tools of literary

² As regards censorship, and especially the relation of literature to it, see, for example, the entries in: *Censorship: A World Encyclopedia*, ed. Derek Jones (London–Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2001); *New Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, ed. M. Cline Horowitz, vol. 1 (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2005); *Słownik terminów literackich*, ed. Janusz Sławiński (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 2000).

³ These issues in Polish literature have recently been addressed by a number of publications. Cf. e.g. *Literatura źle obecna. (Rekonesans)* (Kraków: X, 1986); *Literatura i władza*, ed. Bożena Wojnowska (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IBL, 1996); *Autor, tekst, cenzura*, eds. Janusz Pelc, Marek Prejs (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego, 1998); *Granice wolności słowa*, ed. Grzegorz Miernik (Kielce: Presspublica, 1999); Joanna HOBOT, *Gra z cenzurą w poezji Nowej Fali (1968-1976)* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2000).

⁴ *Ibidem*, 51, 53 ff.

expression, to finally the use in the publication process of underground or émigré publishing houses. The same or very similar means, especially artistic ones, can be used by authors of literary texts to address moral issues. It would be hard to imagine otherwise; literature, being not only an aesthetic but also a humane statement, in a natural way—with the exception, of course, of primitive works of propaganda employed in the service of ideology and authority—opposes oppression, be it in the realm of politics or morals. If, however, literature often does so imperfectly and defectively, it is caused, as it seems, not so much by the actions of censorship or other political, social and moral realities of literature, but rather by the phenomena and problems that lie more strictly within it.

It is therefore necessary to talk about the aesthetic laws of literature, especially those laws that are misunderstood, neglected or ignored by the postmodern reflection on literature, and the laws which are dictated and determined by the convention and literary tradition. It should be emphasized that it is they, more than the political, social or moral causes, that in the natural process of literature creation and development contribute to the fact that what literature says and how it expresses it can be imperfect, flawed and limited.⁵ We should add that the laws of convention and literary tradition define every statement, every single voice of literature, be it complete or muffled, overt or subdued, free or oppressed.

At least a general reminder should be made here of the observations made by the school of formalism and structuralism about the issues discussed here. Some of them seem to be particularly important for the problem of the conventionality of literature. The formalist-structuralist school made some main findings as to the process of literary history and evolution, literary communication, and literary sociology. These findings have to date been indispensable for the understanding of convention as such and its role for the emergence and functioning of a literary work of art.⁶ We should therefore

⁵ Definitions stipulate that these limitations of literature are one of the staple elements of convention. Cf. e.g. Harry LEVIN, “Notes on Convention,” in: *Perspectives of Criticism*, ed. W. Jackson Bate [et al.] (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), 55–83.

⁶ Cf. a selection of fundamental texts by Polish authors: Michał GŁOWIŃSKI, Aleksandra OKOPIEŃ-SŁAWIŃSKA, Janusz SŁAWIŃSKI, *Zarys teorii literatury* (Warszawa: PZWS 1962), (esp. chapters “Dzieło literackie jako fakt socjalny” and “Charakter prawidłowości rządzących ewolucją literacką”); Michał GŁOWIŃSKI, “Gatunek literacki i problemy poetyki historycznej,” in: *Proces historyczny w literaturze i sztuce*, ed. Maria Janion, Anna Piorunowa (Warszawa: PIW 1967), 31–60; Janusz SŁAWIŃSKI, “Synchronia i diachronia w procesie historycznoliterackim, IDEM, 8–30; IDEM, “Socjologia literatury i poetyka historyczna, in: *Problemy socjologii literatury*, ed. Janusz Sławiński

invoke observations about the way in which a literary work is dependent on already existing standards, systems and patterns shaped by the previous development and functioning of literature. It is impossible to ignore such basic concepts developed by the formalist school as the automatization of literary forms, their estrangement and deviation from the standard. These concepts define the mechanisms of literature's functioning and refer to the literary convention and its subversion, the phenomena under discussion here. Similarly, we should remember about "literary dynamics," which the Formalists addressed to develop their concept of the history of literature, understood as an evolution of genres and styles, as a shift from old forms to new ones, as an influence of one work on another, and as an interaction between elements of tradition and innovation.⁷

Therefore, in order for a new literary work to come into being, it must respond to the norms, patterns and models shaped by tradition, it must take them into account and submit to them.⁸ They determine its origin and development. They define each element of the work and determine its construction methods, genre features, style, form, aesthetic categories, etc. They also determine the subject matter of the work and the meanings that emerge from it. A work must integrate the specific codes and principles established by tradition that govern both its internal structure and the meanings generated by this structure in relation to the external world of the work. Moreover, a matter of equal significance, ignoring or failing to understand these codes and rules results in the literary work of art being illegible; the knowledge and understanding of the codes and rules is required not only of the writer,

(Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1971), 29–52; Aleksandra OKOPIEŃ-SŁAWIŃSKA, "Rola konwencji w procesie historycznoliterackim," in: *Proces historyczny w literaturze*, 61–80.

⁷ See Victor ERLICH, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), (esp. Chapter XIV: "Literary Dynamics"). Among the numerous texts by the school of Russian formalism on the topic of the evolution of literary forms, see esp.: J. TYNIANOW, *Fakt literacki*, selection Ewa Korpała-Kirszak, trans. Elżbieta Feliksiak et al. (Warszawa: PIW, 1978); W. SZKŁOWSKI, *O prozie. Rozważania i analizy*, trans. S. Pollak (Warszawa: PIW, 1964). Polish formalist scholars addressing the evolution of literary history include, for example, Kazimierz Wóycicki (*Historia literatury i poetyka*, Warszawa: Towarzystwo Naukowe Warszawskie, 1914).

⁸ Commenting on the relationship between a literary work and tradition and defining the literary standard as an elementary unit of tradition, Sławiński pointed out, among other things, that the specific uniqueness of a work "makes the existence of standards present" and that "numerous sets of standards are intertwined" in the work. He also stated: "A single work is [...] an exponent of compromise between different sets of norms, which within this single work enter into specific relationships, make their claims and 'deform' each other, which results in a state of dynamic balance" ("Synchronia i diachronia," 17, 20, 19).

but also of the reader. And it is indeed difficult to imagine a work standing above or beside the basic principles indicated here, as they concern such fundamental issues as literary communication and social reception of literature.⁹

Therefore, in order to express anything, be it the consciousness, beliefs, feelings or experiences of a human being or to reflect in some way the surrounding reality, a literary work is forced to comply with the standards, rules and patterns established by tradition and to refer to other literary works, styles, currents, and forms. They exert pressure on the work, contribute to creating its structure and allow it to come into existence.¹⁰ They are the work's opportunity; convention, or an imitation of recurring patterns, enables and facilitates the creation of the work. The work is not doomed to exist in a vacuum (which would be impossible); the author employs previously used patterns and established norms, which provide him with tools, enforce themselves on him, offer artistic solutions and may even be his inspiration. But—and here is a different quality—everything that allows the work to exist, all the norms, standards, patterns and codes established by the convention also impose major limitations and constraints on the work. These are the processes that can, for example, expose the work to the danger of automatization; they can make it a cliché-like creation and the work may succumb to conventionalization. They pose a risk that the work will not be able to show individuality and originality.

Specific limitations, restrictions and risks are already present at the level of language signs and the system of general language, not quite susceptible to change, which a literary work has to use. The literary language, uniquely developed by tradition, in an even more complicated way than the general language, imposes rules and constraints.¹¹ It is the raw material of the work and entangles it into its structures, makes it adapt and be present in the likeness to other statements and discourses of literature, forces it to become a statement among other literary texts. The work becomes comprehensible against them and in relation to them. Of course, it may try to break free, resist, stand out, and aspire to be different. However, its capacity to oppose and distinguish itself is very limited. As Okopień-Sławińska observes, "Any failure to respect linguistic conventions entails immediate sanctions in the

⁹ Cf. Aleksandra OKOPIEŃ-SŁAWIŃSKA, "Rola konwencji," esp. 72–73.

¹⁰ Cf. Janusz SŁAWIŃSKI, "Synchronia i diachronia," 28.

¹¹ Cf. *ibidem*, 14–15.

form of limitations of the communicative efficiency of the text.”¹² A literary work has to choose either to conform to the limitations of conventional discourses and automatized texts of literature, to respect them and to come into being, or, by subverting them, to reject them and thus condemn itself to non-existence. Failure to adapt to the limitations and patterns of literary convention, i.e. to be a literary text among other texts, works, styles or literary forms, to use the structures of literary language and to become a statement among other statements means narrowing down the communicative value of literature. It is commensurate with the negation of literature and location outside of it. A work that does not comply with the limitations of conventions and standards of tradition cannot become a work of literature and cannot exist within its framework. By rejecting limitations and conventions, it thus becomes incomprehensible and illegible, a statement that cannot be read as literature.

Of course, this is an extreme situation, one-sidedly presented at that. It is commonly known that every exceptional, innovative and original work of literature, especially every masterpiece, is what it is among others for the very reason that when trying to express human beliefs, feelings and experiences, it effectively resists limitations and overcomes what has been ossified and become systematized and conventionalized in literature. By doing so, a masterpiece contributes to the changes in convention, modifies its forms and pushes its boundaries forward. As Sławiński has it, it simply makes a large gap in the established system of literature.¹³ Thus, by establishing its originality, a masterpiece departs from the standards and transcends the limits that other works are unable to cross. It does so by using its own innovative artistic means, especially through an approach transforming and renewing ossified literary forms, an approach that the formalists defined as estrangement. A masterpiece makes use of the existing forms and patterns through their absorption, transformation and adaptation to its own artistic needs, aims and solutions. By resisting the convention and at the same time using it constructively, a masterpiece legitimates its originality, acquires a unique ability to exert an aesthetic effect, and above all achieves the highest standards of artistry, which place it above other works of art.

Reflections on the nature of a masterpiece or artworks in general rightly emphasize the interrelations yet also contrast between the notions of con-

¹² Aleksandra OKOPIEŃ-SŁAWIŃSKA, “Rola konwencji”, 70.

¹³ “Odbiór i odbiorca w procesie historycznoliterackim,” in: Janusz SŁAWIŃSKI, *Próby teoretycznoliterackie* (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo PEN, 1992), 78.

vention and artistic originality.¹⁴ According to Okopień-Sławińska, “Even the most innovative literary work derives as to its component parts from forms in existence earlier, in another area and in other configurations.”¹⁵ Moreover, as the critic claims, “No work is as secondary to be reduced in all its components and their arrangements to the established rules and no work so innovative as to be fully liberated from them.”¹⁶ In turn, Arnold Hauser observed that “Artistic originality shows itself both in opposition and in submission to the conventions, and can show itself only within the bounds of established conventions.”¹⁷ Due to, among other things, the potential of recognising a literary work as a masterpiece, equally justifiably such reflections refer a masterpiece to external phenomena, such as the criteria and values outside of it, in the system of literature, “in analogous properties of other works [or] [...] in the realm of effects which the work was envisaged to achieve.”¹⁸

As a result of its special position vis-à-vis external phenomena and thanks to its flexibility, which consists in overcoming what is schematized while at the same time adapting to established norms, a masterpiece (i.e. a work with the highest degree of artistry) becomes a special voice in literature: a new and pure voice, resounding more fully than others, one that is unlimited and quite possibly perfect. It must be regarded as a voice capable of saying more and, above all, expressing those convictions, feelings and experiences of the human being that average or secondary works either do not address, or speak about only with a defective and subdued voice.¹⁹

¹⁴ See Harry LEVIN, “Notes on Convention.”

¹⁵ Aleksandra OKOPIEŃ-SŁAWIŃSKA, “Rola konwencji,” 69; cf. also the authors note about a single literary work as a “state of tense compromise between the conventional and the original” (ibidem, 75).

¹⁶ EADEM, “Dyskusja,” in: *Proces historyczny w literaturze*, 112.

¹⁷ Arnold HAUSER, *The Philosophy of Art History* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 253.

¹⁸ Ryszard HANDKE, “Arcydzieło w horyzoncie oczekiwań odbiorcy,” *Ruch Literacki* 4 (91) (1975): 255; cf. also: Janusz SŁAWIŃSKI, “Odbiór i odbiorca,” Eugenia BASARA-LIPIEC, *Arcydzieło. Teoria i rzeczywistość* (Warszawa: Instytut Kultury, 1997); Walter CAHN, *Masterpieces: Chapters on the History of an Idea* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

¹⁹ The property of a masterpiece as an unrestricted voice which is capable of expressing more can also be elucidated within the framework of various art theories. An example can be the aesthetics of reception or reception theory, so important for the formation and operation of a masterpiece. Based on this theory and from the perspective of the indicated property, the questions of transforming the horizon of the reader’s consciousness are especially interesting. Handke (“Arcydzieło”) writes about “an especially enlightening illumination which is the intention of a masterpiece, where one can see a unique manifestation of this unlimited voice.”

Poems by Tadeusz Różewicz, for example, can be used as an excellent illustration of masterpieces. In an attempt to express the most extreme and difficult human experiences, they resisted the limitations of the literary convention and broke free from all the regular schematic patterns and determinants of poetry. It was not easy after the poetic avant-garde revolutions and after innovative artistic solutions of more traditional poetry of the first half of the 20th century. Różewicz's poetry, however, was able to make use of them for its own purposes. Namely, opposing or even destroying their rhythmic patterns, elements of verse repetitiveness and the existing types of metaphors and genre, it accepted only some of their elements and furnished what was so original and characteristic of it: the elementary language applied to search for the most fundamental meanings, its austerity, economy, and prosaic and antipoetic nature. Effective opposition to the limitations of literary convention—which also takes place in this poetry by manifesting the lack of coherency of the text, transcending the genres and styles—makes it possible to hear in it an exceptional, full and unmuffled voice, one that is absent in mediocre works, those that do not have masterpiece status.

Average works, and these, as is well known, make up the vast majority of literature, do not attempt to transcend convention, and if they do, these attempts are unsuccessful. Their authors, consciously or otherwise, usually accept the established norms and patterns of literary expression and continue them, because they are unable to oppose them, use them creatively or reach for innovative artistic solutions. And the mere acceptance of the existing forms and rules or the use, even more: the imitation, of the recurrent literary patterns, is not enough to speak with an authentic, full and unmuffled voice. For this voice to be heard, one needs novel, unconventional means, new patterns and ways of expression that would contradict the existing statements and their artistic solutions. When these new ways of expression cannot be devised, the discussion of the themes which are difficult for literature, the attempts to reflect reality accurately or the efforts to convey the intricacies of human beliefs, feelings and experiences do not achieve a successful outcome. This failure is a distinguishing mark of average literary works.

In the history of literature there are many works which, due to the issues they raise, could have been groundbreaking and could have achieved the status of masterpieces, yet were unable to break the convention and overcome the established patterns of literary expression. As a rule, these works are only artistically “proper” and most often ideologically controversial; invariably, they have been conventionalized already at the moment of appearing

on the literary scene. Almost paradoxically, these include borderline” cases, literary works which are socially and ideologically engaged, most recently inspired by postmodern thought, dealing with sensitive topics, as well as representing various groups of extreme social, political and moral persuasion. These are texts intended to be the voice of the disadvantaged and the oppressed, the marginalised, and of minority groups.²⁰ In their sole concern for the neglected and marginalised ideological content and in their subordination to the needs of an ideology that they adopt in advance, be it colonialism, racism, feminism, homosexuality, or multiculturalism, these literary works use only the already established forms of literary expression. At times they employ pastiche, collage, paraphrase, quotation, and excessively, as if for fear of being misunderstood by the readership, they rely on the existing literary patterns and standards. Of course, even without their heavy reliance on the above, these works are subject to the universal laws of literary development. Since they aspire to be called literature, they must naturally submit to the existing principles, structures and rules established by literary convention and tradition. However, the inadequacy of these works lies in the fact that they are unable to break their entanglement in and dependence on them. They cannot overcome the strict patterns of convention and change their form. They are not in a position to go beyond the second rank and an act of imitating, even when through the subjects discussed they try to challenge stereotypes of social behaviour or to dispel preconceived notions concerning representatives of various minority groups. By subordinating themselves to the forms of expression of ideology and propaganda and by engaging themselves socially without any subtleties, as in the past the literature of socialist realism, these works cannot find their own original artistic concepts. They disregard the aesthetic value, depart from art and become kitsch. In extreme cases, the works referred to here are able to take forms that may remind many readers of propaganda art, and even—in the most extreme instance—totalitarian art. There is no doubt that submission to forms of expression of ideology and propaganda along with excessive dependence on convention limits and muffles the voice these works try to resound with.

²⁰ Certainly, these are texts which are in very close relation to the literature of socialist realism promoted in the 20th century in the communist countries, or in general to the kind of literature which deals with the broadly understood issues of revolution and so-called social progress. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that the comments made here—made, admittedly, in a simplified way may suggest that there are no outstanding or artistically successful works among those that are written to be the voice of the oppressed or the underprivileged.

These remarks on the aesthetic laws of literature, determined by convention and literary tradition, should be supplemented by a few additional observations on this subject made also by the school of formalism and structuralism, but also present in the phenomenology of literature or other related currents of literary research. It has been aptly observed that literature is the outcome of language manipulation and it is hard not to admit that it is more absorbed by language than by the possibilities of recreating reality or expressing the consciousness and experiences of the human being. We can also put it differently and say that while searching for effective ways of expression, literature by its very nature is absorbed in language and its manipulation. Hence, from this point of view, a literary work is best treated in the way postulated by the Formalists, i.e. we must not forget that one deals here with an artificially shaped creation, something invented and made up, whose author deliberately manipulates language, artistic measures, aesthetic norms, and patterns of literary expression.²¹ The author moreover manipulates the elements of the work connected to its subject matter, content, semantics, and cognitive functions. Writers do so even when they allegedly express their feelings. When such feelings really come to the fore and are verbalised, they are immediately generalized under the influence of language and convention and cease to be an expression of the author's single identity.²² The manipulation by the author is a game of conventions, their absorption, transformation, use for one's own purposes. When successful, these efforts produce a masterpiece; and also—the laying of the foundations for renewal, change and evolution in literature, which are processes indispensable for its existence and development.

Features of a literary work such as the artificiality of its organisation and the submission to manipulation, make us aware that one should not look for authenticity in the form of the writer's sincere confession, for truth in ex-

²¹ See Boris EICHENBAUM, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," in: *Gogol From the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*, ed. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 269–293. Viktor SHKLOVSKY, "The Making of *Don Quixote*," in: IDEM, *Theory of Prose*, trans. by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 72–100.

²² As Manfred Kridl observed, lyrical poets do not express their emotions but transform and generalize them, thus creating a conventional literary structure subjected to particular laws and requirements of poetry. Kridl would also ask: What does the poet's emotion transform into? He answered in the following manner: Into a sonnet, triolet, octave, sestina, rhythm, rhyme, and stanza. See Manfred KRIDL, "O elemencie fikcyjnym w liryce," in: *Prace ofiarowane Kazimierzowi Wóycickiemu*, eds. Manfred Kridl et al. (Wilno: Dom Książki Polskiej, 1937), 61, 66; cf. also: IDEM, *Wstęp do badań nad dziełem literackim* (Wilno: Dom Książki Polskiej, 1936), 106.

pressing his personality or for fidelity in the reflection of reality. Erlich succinctly put it when writing about the postulates and practice of the Formalists: literature should be treated “as a convention rather than as a confession.”²³ Likewise, one must exercise similar caution when searching for the authenticity of a voice that can be heard in a literary work. Because of the conventionality of literature, due to the artificiality of the work, this voice can approximate authenticity and be full and unmuffled only in exceptional circumstances and rare cases. It can be heard when a work—let us reiterate it—is able to resist the limitations imposed by literary convention and tradition, using and transforming them in a skilful and masterly way.

However, most works of literature are unable to overcome these limitations. Defined by convention, the strict laws of development and functioning of literary works cannot be easily circumvented or bent. Precisely for this reason, these laws, even more than political, social or moral considerations, are the cause why certain voices of literature cannot, perhaps, be fully heard. Meanwhile, postmodern thought, appealing for the voices which have hitherto been “suppressed,” “silent” and “oppressed” and seeking out reasons for their absence in the external conditions of literature, should include the concept of convention in the scope of its interests, take into account its proper meaning and thus appreciate the importance of the actual laws that govern literature.

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²³ Victor ERLICH, *Russian Formalism*, 190.

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THE MUFFLED VOICE
ON THE CONVENTIONAL CHARACTER OF LITERATURE

Summary

In the article a reflection is proposed on literature's inner problems concentrated around the concept of literary convention. It seems that in the postmodernist demands to give more attention to those voices in literature that up till now have been "muffled," "passed over" and "oppressed," the meaning of the concept of "convention" has been distorted. However, its proper understanding is as elementary for the existence and development of literature as treating a literary work as an artificially organized form, and not as the writer's confession. The author of the article, on the basis of the definitions formulated by the formalist-structuralist school, discusses the inner, aesthetic laws of literature dictated and defined by literary convention and tradition, and he indicates that it is them – more than political, social or moral causes—that in the natural process of creation and development of literature cause that some voices, perhaps, cannot be fully heard.

Key words: literary convention, literary tradition, conventional character of literature, formalist-structuralist school, masterpiece, literary work, postmodernism, expression in literature.

Translated by Marcin Turski



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