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JURIJ LOTMAN'S SYSTEM
AND RONALD LANGACKER'S COGNITIVE GRAMMAR:
POINTS IN COMMON

This short article contains a concise presentation of connections that exist between two seemingly different and unrelated theories: Jurij Lotman's semiotic system in its application to literature (mainly poetry) and Ronald Langacker's cognitive grammar. The first of these two theories was propounded by Lotman in the early 1970s in his two works: *The Structure of the Artistic Text*¹ (1970) and *The Analysis of the Poetic Text* (1972). In this article I will make references only to the first of these two books since in it all the basic tenets of Lotman's system are presented in sufficient detail to make a comparison with Ronald Langacker's theory. This second theory is a theory of language structure which Langacker has been developing since mid-1970s, and which found a detailed expression in his 1987 book entitled *Foundations of Cognitive Grammar*. However, in this brief sketch I will refer only to Langacker's *Overview of Cognitive Grammar*² (1988) which may serve as a basic introduction to the concept of cognitive grammar as propounded by Langacker. Again, this article is very short, and it makes references only to two books dealing with the problems under discussion, but its aim is only to provide some basic and most general insights.

¹ J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, transl. from the Russian by R. Vroon, "Michigan Slavic Contributions" 1977, No. 7.

² R. W. Langacker, *Overview of Cognitive Grammar*, [in:] B. Rudzka-Ostyn (ed.), *Topics in Cognitive Linguistics*, Amsterdam-Philadelphia 1988, Current Issues in Linguistic Theory, vol. 50.

It should also be pointed out that Langacker and Lotman conduct their analyses on totally different material: Lotman works within the concept of the artistic language while Langacker bases his analyses on the natural language. It is, however, interesting to see how similar the concepts developed in these two different fields of research may be, and how similar principles may become applicable for the analysis of both the natural and the artistic language. Finally, it will be noticed that both the above-mentioned theories fall within an even greater framework of thought developed in the 18th and the 19th centuries-organicist philosophy. Other references to this point will, however, be made in further parts of this article.

Let me therefore start the investigation of similarities and differences between these two theories from the most general assumption that they both contain (Langacker's theory even in its name), namely the assumption that man's behaviour and his principles of understanding and interaction with the world (which are primarily based on linguistic structure, as language is the oldest and the most efficient means of communication) have cognitive character.

In everyday life man is confronted with different situations that require communication with the use of natural language. All these uses of language and the meanings that they carry are, in Langacker's view, equated with conceptualization. The semantic structure that comes into being in this way is wholly subjective in character: each situation may be conceived in different, alternate ways. All this is strictly connected with another assumption-that grammar of a language is "intrinsically symbolic"³ and does not exist separately from semantic and phonological structures, and that it is "describable by means of symbolic units alone, with lexicon, morphology, and syntax forming a continuum of symbolic structures"⁴. Furthermore, Langacker postulates that language should be analysed together with other cognitive systems, sensory, emotive, kinesthetic sensations, as well as

³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

with "a person's awareness of the physical, social, and linguistic context of speech events"⁵. In other words, language must be analysed as a part of "overall psychological organization"⁶. Once more, then, language described in such terms is the basic element in human communication - it reflects human cognition.

If we now turn to Lotman's theory (system), we can see that he introduces very similar assumptions in relation to art - also to verbal art, that is literature. He views art in general as a form of cognition - a desire for knowledge on the side of man - something that is indispensable for the proper functioning of societies. For Lotman, just as for Langacker, every person's life contains interaction with the surrounding world. Lotman views this interaction as a constant reception and deciphering of information. The information may, in turn, be expressed in several different ways. We can use natural languages, like Polish, English, etc. There are also languages of different sciences, e.g. of physics or chemistry (they should properly be called "metalanguages"), and, finally, there is art, which Lotman views as a secondary language or - to use his own term - a secondary modelling system, that is a communication structure created as a superstructure "upon a natural linguistic plane"⁷. From all this we can easily infer that if art is viewed as a form of communication and human cognition, it should have qualities and features ascribed to natural languages in their cognitive interpretation. This seems to be the point of view represented by Lotman.

First, Lotman states that if art is viewed as a language, then every work of art must be looked upon as a text in this language. Its status is therefore comparable to the status of a single utterance in a natural language. Secondly, both Lotman and Langacker introduce into their theories the scheme based on the bonds between sender and receiver. The existence of this scheme in Langacker's theory is clearly implied by placing lan-

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 4.

⁷ J. Lotman, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

guage within the overall psychological organization and by pointing out the importance of "usage events"⁸. It is also implied by the very nature of grammar as understood by Langacker, which is treated as "an inventory of symbolic resources"⁹. Grammar is thus not a self-contained and limited system: Langacker leaves it up to the language user to make use of its symbolic resources, and states that in doing so the speaker must draw on all of his knowledge and cognitive ability. The speaker may thus activate his own "array of symbolic units"¹⁰, and the addressee does the same when he receives the speaker's message. Finally, the usage event is not equivalent to what Langacker calls "compositional value"¹¹. It is either a "specialization"¹² or an "extension"¹³, and the role played by extragrammatical factors is very important here. In Lotman's theory, artist - as a creator of a given work of art - must be identified with a sender, and the reader, that is the person to whom a work of art is addressed, must be the receiver. At this point it would be apposite to mention the fact that all this remains in agreement with the cybernetic model of communication (not only because Lotman uses cybernetic terminology in his discussions of art). Hence the presence of the term "code" in Lotman's analyses. This means that when a work of art is created by its author, it is at the same time put into a special artistic code. The artistic message is thus encoded, and it is presented to a receiver (an addressee) in this form. What follows is the process of reception. This process, however, is very complex, and it must be considered here in greater detail.

It might be called "decoding" (vs. "coding"). It is, however, better and safer to use the term "reconstruction"¹⁴, since it

⁸ R. W. Langacker, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 14.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 15.

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ B. Lewandowska-Tomaszczyk, *On Semantic Change in a Dynamic Model of Language*, [in:] J. Fisiak [ed.], *Historical Semantics - Historical Word-Formation*, Berlin-New York-Amsterdam 1985, p. 319.

more accurately describes the actual process that takes place when the addressee receives the encoded message. This is because there is never the full (100%) understanding of the message that is advanced. The knowledge and the cognitive abilities that the speaker and the receiver draw upon in any single act of communication do not exactly overlap. Actually, the speaker and the addressee may activate different sets of symbolic units. The crucial point is, then, that there is always a gap or a difference between the message advanced and the message received. This whole communicative situation, again, has to be analysed with reference to art and to the use of natural language in everyday situations. Here we encounter certain important differences.

In everyday communication, even though there is always a gap between the message advanced and the message received, it is in most cases possible to reconstruct the speaker's message to an extent that allows for human interaction. In other words, the gap—even though it exists—does not make successful communication impossible, and the addressee is able to pick up the amount of information that allows him to understand the message in a degree sufficient for interaction.

If we now turn to art, we can see that the situation here is different, and that it is also connected with the status of art. Here full understanding of the message is of crucial importance. This is because artistic language has much greater "semantic saturation"¹⁵ than language used in everyday situations. This "semantic saturation" is reflected in the tendency (also mentioned by Lotman) to treat all the elements of an artistic text as meaningful. In a text written in artistic language, unlike in a text written in natural language, it is no longer possible to make a clear distinction of semantic elements. What takes place here is an interweaving of semantic and syntactic elements, and hence Lotman's contention that "What is syntagmatic on one level of the hierarchy of an artistic text proves to be semantic on another"¹⁶. Thus, in the language of art everything, or

¹⁵ J. Lotman, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

almost everything, is meaningful - hence Lotman's principle of "minimum redundancy" in the language of art. Hence also the need to analyse and interpret all linguistic devices that go into the making of any given work of art (a poem) because they all contribute to the creation of meaning. However, just as in situations involving the use of natural language, full understanding is not possible - for the same reasons that make it impossible in the natural language situations, and which are ultimately connected with extralinguistic factors that accompany any single act of communication (Langacker mentions general knowledge of the world, the immediate context, communicative objectives, aesthetic judgements). In the case of art these factors are even more important because they may also include the distance in time, which makes the artistic communication a very specific form of communication, as well as the whole set of values which may be very different for the writer and the reader (even though the links, of course, exist), and which may ultimately be connected with the differences between two traditions.

At this stage we must return to the status of art. We must remember that apart from some very modern instances¹⁷, it is a form of communication which is not compulsory or necessary for a member of a given society. It is fully optional. Therefore, the results of a communication event involving art - even if they are very different from the author's intent (which itself may be impossible to discover) - do not affect human interaction in the way that similar results in communication event involving natural language would. Indeed, it could be argued (cf. Lotman in the work referred to in the present article) that it is in the very nature of art that it is able to generate so many diverse messages. Thus the attempts to measure "the magnitude of entropy in author's and reader's artistic languages"¹⁸ in Lotman's system and the elaborate notion of the "usage event" in Langacker's theory account for very similar problems. I think that the two notions could be treated as roughly synonymous - at least

¹⁷ E.g. art connected with totalitarian systems.

¹⁸ J. Lotman, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

as long as they point out to the same process - the creation of meaning in the process of communication.

In one of the previous paragraphs I indicated that the scheme of communication involving the sender, the receiver, and the code should be interpreted in the specifically cognitive way - even though its introduction to linguistics was not due to anything like the modern cognitive linguistics. We owe the whole scheme to the Russian linguist Roman Jakobson¹⁹. It is a part of communication theory which provides an extensive analysis of speech events. Jakobson says that both in everyday (NL) situations and in literature we always have a message, a sender, and a receiver, and he treats these elements as basic factors in communication (in any communication event). The remaining elements are physical or psychological contact, code, and context. Further on Jakobson says, however, that message is only a verbal form, and that it is organically connected with the other above-mentioned elements whenever meaning is conveyed. "The message is not the meaning"²⁰ - to use Robert Scholes's phrase. "Meaning lies at the end of the entire speech event, which gives the verbal formula of the message its life and color"²¹. For the sake of clarity it would be good to draw here the diagram which Jakobson provides in order to illustrate his theory of communication²²:

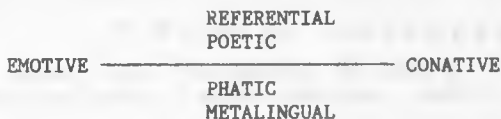


¹⁹ R. Jakobson, *Poetyka w świetle językoznawstwa*, transl. by K. Pomorska, [in:] *idem, W poszukiwaniu istoty języka*, sel. by M. R. Mayenowa, vol. II, Warszawa 1989, p. 81.

²⁰ R. Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature. An Introduction*, New Haven-London 1974, p. 24.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 24.

²² *Ibidem*. Jakobson provides a similar diagram for the message itself:



Jakobson's scheme thus looks forward to the scheme introduced by Langacker, and also to the one used by Lotman. The interpretation of this scheme through the cognitive perspective as defined by Ronald Langacker brings even certain more complex implications due to which this scheme remains in an especially close agreement with Lotman's scheme and his views concerning communication and interaction involving art (verbal art).

When Langacker says that in the cognitive interpretation of language meaning is equated with conceptualization, this leads directly to another assumption - that semantic structure is subjective in character. This "subjectivity" lies simply in the way we can think of any given situation or - to use Langacker's own term - mentally construe it. Further on Langacker states that "in choosing a particular expression or construction a speaker construes the conceived situation in a certain way, i.e. he selects one particular image (from a range of alternatives) to structure its conceptual content for expressive purposes"²³. To prove this assumption Langacker offers simple examples and shows that even expressions that are true under the same conditions will contrast in meaning just because they represent "alternate ways of mentally construing the same objective circumstances"²⁴. For instance, the pairs:

- a) "Russia invaded Afghanistan"²⁵
- b) "Afghanistan was invaded by Russia"²⁶

deal with the same objective circumstances - the invasion of Afghanistan by Russia - but, because each of them is a different "image", their semantic value is also different. Again, then, these two expressions are two different instances of conceptualization or mental experience, and they produce two different cognitive routines - ultimately, two different models of reality. Linguistic structure seen in such cognitive terms is intrinsically symbolic - grammar, to say that again, does not exist

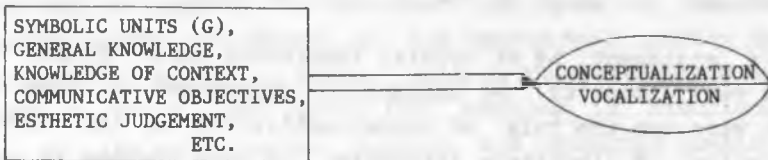
²³ R. W. Langacker, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

²⁴ *Ibidem.*

²⁵ *Ibidem.*

²⁶ *Ibidem.*

separately from semantic and phonological structures, and lexicon morphology, and syntax form "a continuum of symbolic structures"²⁷. The assumption about "a continuum of symbolic structures" is especially important here; on this basis it is possible to make another assumption - that any change in a symbolic continuum of any single expression should affect the "image" or the conceptualization that this continuum represents and thus change its meaning. And so, once an expression and a concept have been formed, all their elements organically contribute to the meaning that is thus conveyed. And - because we have to do with a continuum - it is possible to assume that the idea (concept) of meaning cannot be separated from the structure in which it is expressed. All this can be additionally supported by the diagram that Langacker draws in order to illustrate these assumptions²⁸:



The above diagram does not indicate directly the presence of the addressee, but it is clear that the bipolar usage event (conceptualization + vocalization) must involve both the speaker and the addressee, only in each case the poles of the usage event follow in a different order (conceptualization + vocalization in the case of the speaker and the other way round in the case of the addressee). Returning now to Lotman's interpretation of verbal art, we find the same assumptions about its character. Lotman views poetic structure as a structure of great complexity. This complexity is connected with the volume of information²⁹ that artistic speech conveys, which - according to Lotman - is far greater than in the case of natural language (if it were not so,

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Cf. Lotman's remark that "information is beauty". Quoted by T. Eagleton, *Literary Theory. An Introduction*, Oxford 1983, p. 101.

he says, artistic language could not exist at all). All the elements which belong to artistic structure are vital for the information that it conveys, and this is why Lotman points out "the inseparability of the poetic idea from the particular structure of the text corresponding to it"³⁰. It is interesting and at the same time very important that in order to support this statement Lotman introduces the following quotation from Alexandr Blok's notebooks (July, 1917):

It is a lie that thoughts are repeated. Each thought is new because the new surrounds it and molds it. "Čtob on, voskresnuv, vstat' ne mog" (my own line), and "Čtob vstat' on iz groba ne mog" (Lermontov - I just now recall) are two completely different thoughts. What is common to them is "content", which only demonstrates once again that formless content does not exist in itself and does not carry any weight³¹.

Blok's statement is of crucial importance here - simply because it is very close to the assumptions propounded by Langacker. It again stresses the role of conceptualization in the process of perception of linguistic structure. If each thought is new, then - using Langacker's own term - it is also a new concept, and a particular image is selected and used to express it. At this stage, however, a more detailed explanation must follow.

Blok says that each thought is new, but it does not mean that it is new in the sense that it has never been created or expressed before. On the contrary, it may have been expressed an unknown number of times before, only the resources used to express it may have been different in individual instances. Any thought may thus have its prototype which is more or less equivalent to its content as it existed in a number of instances, when it was expressed, but every such instance may be semantically distinct (in spite of the content similarities) because different resources may be employed for its structuring and expression.

Returning now to Blok's statement as quoted by Lotman, we can see that it contains an example contrasting two thoughts

³⁰ J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, p. 10.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

that - in Blok's words - are completely different. It is stated that they have a common "content", but this statement is immediately followed by a vital qualification that "content" cannot, in fact, exist separately from the form in which it is expressed. This, in turn, suits Langacker's assumption that despite the objective equivalence or the same reference two expressions may be distinct in meaning just because they employ "alternate ways of mentally construing the same objective circumstances"³².

All this means that basic assumptions of Langacker's grammar are very much like those of Lotman's system since the insistence on the inseparability of poetic idea from its particular structure must necessarily lead to the known statement that lexicon, morphology, and syntax form - also, or rather primarily, in artistic language - a continuum of symbolic structures. This is why Lotman introduces in his system very complex and detailed analyses of poetic texts - both on the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic levels - and proves that meaning is simultaneously created on the phonological, lexical, and syntactic levels. Everything is thus meaningful, and even a deviation appearing on any of the above - mentioned levels will contribute to the creation of meaning.

Of course, Lotman clearly states that an artistic text - by virtue of its nature and its complex internal structures - conveys more information than a text in natural language, but the methods and principles that he proposes for its analysis are much like those proposed later by Ronald Langacker for the analysis of natural language - especially that Langacker takes into account also novel conceptions, and these are, in turn, very frequent in the language of verbal art.

Semantization is a crucial concept in both theories. Lotman admits that in natural language syntagmatic elements form the boundaries of the signs and "divide the text into semantic units"³³. He says, however, that in an artistic text we have to

³² R. W. Langacker, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³³ J. Lotman, *The Structure of the Artistic Text*, p. 22.

do with semantization of syntagmatic elements - "What is syntagmatic on one level of the hierarchy of an artistic text proves to be semantic on another"³⁴. In this way the opposition "semantics vs. syntax"³⁵ is removed, and this, in turn, leads to what Lotman calls "the erosion of the boundaries of the sign"³⁶. Again, then, in an artistic text everything is semantic and meaningful.

This concept of semantization is also widely present in Langacker's view of language. Indeed, it is the crucial assumption of his cognitive theory of language that there does not exist a division between syntax and semantics, and that grammar is intrinsically symbolic. It is described as forming a continuum of symbolic structures including lexicon, morphology, and syntax. Such an assumption blurs or even makes the "syntax vs. semantics" division impossible. Whether this would lead to "the erosion of the boundaries of the sign"³⁷ is disputable since in the light of Langacker's theory it is still possible to differentiate the semantic units in natural language. Something like that is not possible, in Lotman's view, in an artistic text because this text is so integrated that it may become one sign or one semantic unit in its totality. What is important is that Langacker gets rid of the "semantics vs. syntax" division, and that both he and Lotman say that syntax does not exist as an autonomous system. In both authors' view syntax essentially contributes to the creation of meaning³⁸ (cf. Langacker's notion of mental construal), and it is interesting to see how the same methods and principles hold good for the analysis of two very different kinds of language.

In conclusion of this section of the discussion it would be apposite to draw two diagrams that will fully illustrate Langacker's and Lotman's assumptions.

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 21.

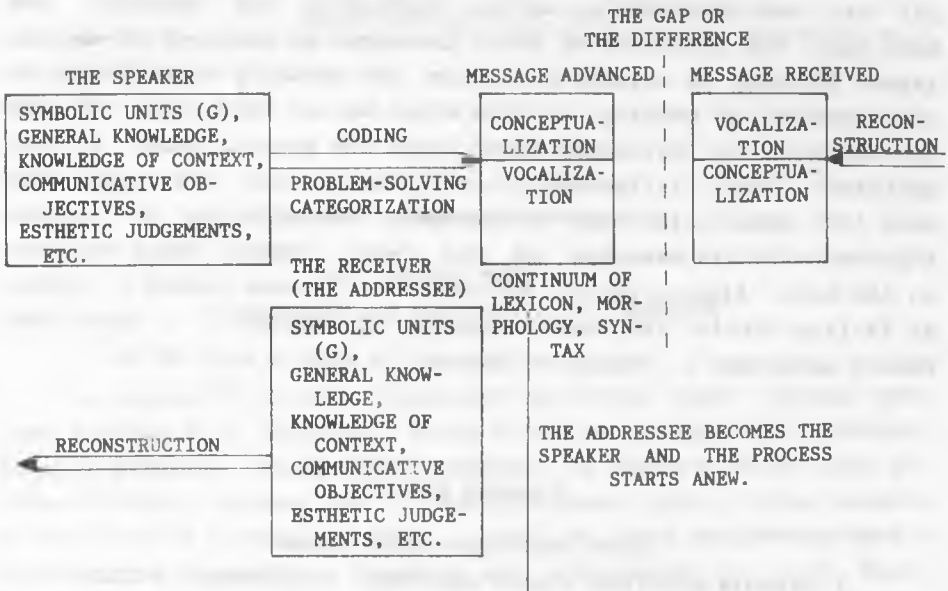
³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 22.

³⁶ *Ibidem*.

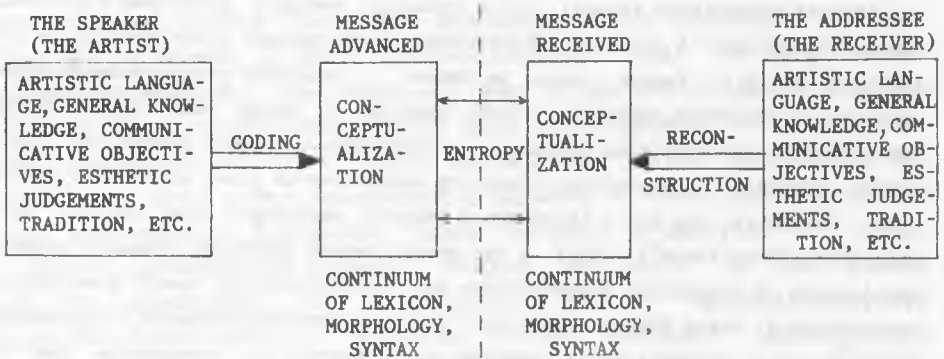
³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ This is also the view of Roman Jakobson who pointed out the relevance of grammatical forms for the creation of meaning in an artistic text.

I Act of communication (R. Langacker):



II Act of communication (J. Lotman) - verbal art:



Finally, it must be noted that although these two theories are concerned with two different kinds of language, they propose the same metaphors for their respective approaches to language structure. Both Lotman and Langacker refer to biological organism as providing a proper metaphor for the structure of their languages and methods of analysis of these languages. Both theories are

"subjectivist" in nature (cf. Lotman's notion of entropy in verbal art and Langacker's mental construals and imagery), and both view the structure of their languages as composed of several layers forming an organic continuum and mutually contributing to the creation of meaning. At this stage we are very close to the developments in philosophy known under the general label of "organicism". They influenced literary theory and criticism very much (cf. Romanticism and Coleridge's contribution to poetics together with his metaphor of the plant). Indeed, Terry Eagleton in his book *Literary Theory - An Introduction*³⁹ sees Lotman's system as falling within the same framework of thought. I think that Ronald Langacker's cognitive grammar is also a part of it.

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SYSTEM SEMIOTYCZNY JURIJA ŁOTMANA

I GRAMATYKA KOGNITYWNA RONALDA LANGACKERA: PODOBIENSTWA I RÓŻNICE

Artykuł przedstawia związki, które istnieją pomiędzy gramatyką kognitywną Ronalda Langackera a systemem semiotycznym Jurija Łotmana w odniesieniu do literatury (poezji). Pomimo faktu, że Łotman i Langacker przeprowadzają swoje analizy na odmiennym materiale (język poetycki i język naturalny) istnieje pomiędzy nimi wiele punktów stycznych i podobieństw. Zarówno Łotman jak i Langacker wskazują na organiczną strukturę analizowanych przez nich rodzajów języka. Przejawia się ona w traktowaniu leksyki, morfologii oraz składni jako ciągłości ("continuum"), która w ten sposób tworzy znaczenia. Ponadto założenia Łotmana i Langackera przedstawione są w odniesieniu do teorii komunikacji zaproponowanej przez Romana Jakobsona. W tym przypadku założenia te przedstawione są jako uzupełnienie i rozwinięcie tej teorii, co zobrazowane jest na odpowiednich wykresach. Ogólnie więc artykuł prezentuje podobieństwa pomiędzy językiem poetyckim a językiem naturalnym oraz sposobami ich analizy, które w systemie Łotmana i w teorii Langackera mają wiele cech wspólnych i które łączą szereg zasadniczych teoretycznych i metodologicznych zbieżności.

³⁹ T. Eagleton, *op. cit.*, p. 112.