

The Distance of Literature and the Space of the Aesthetic: Literary Theory in the Open

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Let me begin my intervention by pointing out two essential lines of questioning I am *not* concerned here with. I will not attempt to offer new or old insights about material or tools required by the teaching of literature in an Open and Distance Learning setting in its specificity and opposition to other possible settings; neither will I focus on methods or practices new or old that may make teaching in this particular setting more efficient. Both issues will be or have been covered by colleagues with more qualifications and experience than myself. What I *will* try to discuss, is some ways in which the subject taught, i.e. literature, is understood, determined or transformed by the very setting that houses it. My talk has a double perspective, a historical-theoretical one and a critical-interpretive one. What I will tell you is largely known; my contribution, if at all, consists in highlighting some aspects of the problem that usually remain unexamined and that I believe are worth discussing.

As teachers of literature we are faced with an object with a double specificity, a historical and a theoretical one. A historical one, because as an object of study in its modern form, it is born around the 18th century, in very different contexts than ours and with different meanings and functions. A theoretical one, because, three centuries later, the content of the term, indeed, our object of teaching, is far from fixed. Knowledge and analysis of different factors and various dimensions associated with the term may help us understand its birth, developments and mutations; we may place the object, approach it, teach it, but have not managed to define it. Even more so, it seems that, the more aware we are of the conditions that brought literature into existence, the less capable we are of limiting the elusiveness of its meaning. In a recent issue of the *PMLA* (January 2006), Peter D. McDonald (2006) writes that: “the literary [...] is never restricted to what might conventionally be called literature [...]”; in addition, “[literature] is always disturbing or overturning traditional ideas of the literary” (216). Derrida’s by now famous *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*¹ sums up literature’s peculiar nature. For Derrida, “to be literature, a text must, as a necessary condition, display certain signs of literature, but the display is itself conditional on these signs’ already being recognized, in some sense, as literature,” McDonald explains (221).

¹ “There is no outside-the-text” (Derrida 1992: 102, 1997: 158).

Yet, literature as we understand it, or not, today, came into being somewhere in the 19th century, when it became a field, to use Bourdieu's term (1993: 181). Literature constituted a crucial part of what, paraphrasing Lyotard, we could name our "modern condition," when it became associated with grand or meta-narratives of language, national identity, the nation-state and its organization. In short, literature became institutionalized, among other reasons because it was needed in order to reinforce conceptions of belonging in communities,² whether more or less imagined, such as national ones, or more or less real, such as linguistic ones.

Such belongings were in need of self-legitimacy. In their attempt to found it, such communities clearly understood the necessity of literature, considered hitherto more as a project than as an essence. This project was perfectly inscribed into the scheme of the epistemological revolutions of the 19th century, which saw the emergence of the humanities and social science disciplines many of which are alive and kicking even today: history, first of all, but also linguistics, psychology, anthropology, sociology and political economy, to name a few. The newly organized collective identity in the form of nation-state needed the disciplines that would legitimize it, represent it and reinforce it. As far as we are concerned, literary history came into being both as a project and as a discipline.

Let me start with the first point, by mentioning some defining aspects of the process by which the project of literary history came to life. A common language and a common cultural identity, among other things, have traditionally constituted critical factors in reaffirming belonging to a national community (even in the case of nation-states that are not monolingual – in these cases the dialectic relationship between language and cultural identity is more complex, but explainable). Equally critical has been the necessity to attribute a historical basis to this belonging; and historical basis means the need to demonstrate historical continuity, which has generally been the project of the national grand historical narratives of the 19th century to which literature, as one important expression of cultural identity, was called to contribute.

The epistemological presuppositions that govern the project of literary history have been variously analyzed by numerous scholars.³ In its effort to organize the literary past, literary history must enact a series of moves, of different orders, but which are closely

² Cf. Anderson (1991).

³ Cf., for example, Béhar and Fayolle (1990), Compagnon (1983), Delègue and Fraisse (1996), Dubois (1978), Escarpit (1978), Fraisse (2000, 2002), Febvre (1953), Guillory (1993), Jauss (1970), Lanson (1965), Lukács (1974), Perkins (1992), White (1987). Cf. also, very recently, Piper (2006). For a critical overview, cf. Kargiotis (2004).

interwoven. It needs to define this past; it needs to select the corpus that will constitute the object of history. In doing so, it combines explicitly aesthetic and implicitly historical, political or other considerations. The answers to what constitutes literature in a given frame of reference range from intrinsic approaches which put the accent on literariness to extrinsic ones that are plainly ideological; the possibilities in between have been numerous. At the same time, the process of corpus constitution is governed by the mythology of the “complete works”, that is, the totality of the production, whatever that may mean, of the project’s central actor, the author.

This is not the place to expand on the ways different forms of literary canons are constituted; I would like instead to mention another, equally important characteristic inherent in the project of literary history: that is, an epistemology of narrative representation. Literary history, as its name suggests, must create a historical narrative, governed by the laws of the genre: linear temporality and causality, teleology as well as the principle of evolution as its underlying law. Governed by the principle of *post hoc, ergo propter hoc*, literary history is organized through specific temporal cuts, categories such as currents, movements and generations, as well as evaluations that majorize or minorize its actors, all in an organicist conception of evolution that transforms time into space in view of creating a coherent narrative, recently named “cultural capital”,⁴ which is in turn transmitted, put into question, modified and, most importantly, taught.

A parenthesis in order to somehow complete my narrative: the project of creating a coherent narrative of a history of national literature must not be understood in opposition to the very well known attempts to surpass it. I am referring to the birth and rise of the idea of cosmopolitanism, an idea contemporary to that of national literature in the 19th century, as well as to more modern discussions about global or world literature and the new canon.⁵ Such projects may take on different contents, but both in their theoretical bases and in their political implications they share the same presuppositions with the larger attempt to create what we can call the space of literature.

I said earlier that the idea of literary history came about as both a project and a discipline. I would like now to focus on this second point. The formation and constitution of a discipline is a complex process and is governed by dialectic relationships. A discipline defines a branch of knowledge and this branch of knowledge will be continuously put into question by the very discipline that defined it while, however, at the same time, putting into

⁴ Cf. John Guillory’s book *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*.

⁵ Cf. for example, Bermann and Wood (2005), Casanova (1999), Damrosch (2003), Prendergast (2004).

question the very discipline itself. This dialectical relationship between the discipline and the object that corresponds to it creates theoretical spaces, fields, or epistemologies, which are transmitted through specific mechanisms, institutions and practices. For this reason, the defining factor in this process is consensus; consensus reproduces the discipline's legitimacy, eventually justifies its power and ultimately guarantees transmission.

At the same time, the concept of discipline has traditionally had a second series of meanings. It is not necessary to recall Foucault's and Bourdieu's work⁶ on that. We must, however, bear in mind, that discipline in the sense of coercive mechanisms whose purpose is to build and reproduce consensus in view of the grand narrative of forming a normal and normalized subject cannot and, indeed, must not be separated from discipline in the sense of an epistemic division that handles symbolic, cultural or scientific capital which governs the production, legitimacy and application of knowledge within a variety of structures, academic, cultural, political or economic ones. "Is it surprising that prisons resemble factories, schools, barracks, hospitals, which all resemble prisons?" Foucault (1977: 228) wonders and explains: "'Discipline' may be identified neither with an institution nor with an apparatus; it is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, targets; it is a 'physics' or an 'anatomy' of power, a technology" (215).

Foucault is mainly interested in analyzing the disciplinary coercive mechanisms that aim at forming normalized subjects. Nevertheless, insofar as both senses of the term discipline are interwoven, we can retain some characteristics his analyses bring to light that are common to what interests us here, namely discipline as partitioned knowledge, in order to move to questions specific to the discipline of literature. First, discipline has a spatial dimension: it has its "functional sites" (143), specific, enclosed places that organize spaces and reflect functionalities and hierarchies. Second, discipline has a temporal dimension: it divides time into segments (157), it organizes it by means of "seriation" (160) which is achieved through time tables, rhythms and circles of repetitions (149-151). Spatial and temporal organization is articulated like a machine and in view of a pedagogical practice (159) which is governed by the ideal of progress (160). To this end, periodical examination (158) which aims to control the activity will result in gratification or punishment (180). The whole organization of the institution, controlled by and in the panopticon (195ff.) is ritualized and aims at observing hierarchy and at producing normalizing judgment (184).

⁶ Cf., for example, Bourdieu (2004) and Foucault (1977).

I do not think it takes effort to recognize that every form of modern institution, and more specifically educational institutions such as the university, is thus conceived and functions in similar ways. Knowledge is produced and transmitted within structures of space, organizations of time and the panoptical control of the teacher, elements that are equally important as the epistemic object they frame, if not more. It would not be inexact to say that knowledge is produced and transmitted within this framework as much as by it. Once the object of knowledge has corresponded to the discipline that represents it, the discipline produces, reproduces and alters it by means of this specific governmentality,⁷ to use another Foucauldian term, an organization apparatus where power and knowledge are intrinsically related.

It is in the light of such frameworks that the new discipline of literary history came to light. It was, and still is, organized within the necessary reconfigurations that the humanistic tradition and its site *par excellence*, the university, had to undergo, and it had, and to an extent still has, specific aims directed towards the formation of the citizen as an informed individual belonging to a particular community. The power meta-narrative of a linear, causal and teleological past was, and still is, taught through specific spatial, temporal and power structures, which have not been essentially transformed even as the ways to approach the object itself have undergone paradigmatic shifts. The central organizing principle of the author and the approaches it enabled and imposed (psychologism, biographism, genetic criticism), gave way eventually to the discovery of the text, a term whose semantic expansion gave rise to a variety of approaches ranging from formalisms to structuralisms and deconstruction, to name a few. At the same time, considering the text in its different dimensions enabled contextual, historicist or sociological approaches before we realized that a significant dimension in the space of literature was occupied by the reader, and so the field developed methods that would respond to the emergence of this new function (reader response and aesthetic response theories, literary anthropology). Despite the real possibilities for new, original and interesting interpretations that ever-changing methods have enabled and will undoubtedly continue to do so, the institutional framework that has brought them to light has to a large extent remained unchanged.

In many ways, the creation of programs of study in Open and Distance Learning settings and the new educational possibilities they opened up did not essentially put into question the disciplinary structures, in both senses of the term, already in place at

⁷ Foucault (1991).

conventional institutions. This may be due to a variety of reasons, which are not of the present. But it would be more or less accurate to claim, I think, that the very disciplinary object in question has not been, and perhaps could not have been, reconfigured; on the contrary, the new institutional setting demanded novel ways of approaching what has been considered to be the “object,” and since these ways had more to do with the disciplinary structure of the distance than with the structure of the object, they focused on tools, material, methods, or practices that would bring it closer.

One could hold that with the advent of the information era and the generalized use of technology new possibilities opened up that have already redefined the object of study. Reading has been radically transformed by hypertext and what was once conceived of as the canon has acquired a paratext whose proportions can be explosive. However, this is valid for both conventional and ODL frameworks, since technology is equally available to both; what’s more, the new possibilities of organizing and approaching literature have not essentially altered, I believe, either the object of study, or hierarchies or priorities concerning it: we may enhance our knowledge of literature when we are able to contextualize it through all sorts of material, this material, however, aims at better elucidating, and therefore reconfirming, the epistemic primacy and the epistemological priority of the object itself. In the end, the question that needs to be addressed, but which I am not sure I can answer, is very simple. It is the following: does a student who has studied a given disciplinary literary field in a conventional setting have, in retrospect (that is, after completing the curriculum), a conception of the object studied comparable to that of an ODL program graduate? If yes, why? If no, why not?

I do not wish to discuss what “comparable” means. In a sense, no actual student has a comparable conception in any setting. My student is obviously heuristic; she is a theoretical construct, a pure function. Paraphrasing Iser, I could call her “the implied student.” Because what I am trying to understand is how comparable disciplinary institutions that teach comparable disciplinary objects may or may not arrive at forming subjects with comparable metanarratives about these objects.

As I understand it, inherent to such an inquiry is a double specificity of which we must be aware. First, the problem posed is of a phenomenological order, since our interpretation is concerned with the space created out of the interaction between the object of study and the consciousness of the subject that approaches it. What complicates things is the specificity of our object. Contrary to other disciplinary domains, literature’s cognitive claims, if at all, arise from its aesthetic ones; the textual world is extratextually conditioned at the

same time as it is potentially more expanded and infinitely more dynamic. How can we analyze, then, the imagined or presumed mental operations that construct literary historical metanarratives in a given setting?

I can only present some propositions here, and I will go back to the first part of my paper because I think it can suggest an interpretive framework that will make more understandable what I am trying to show. With its spatial organizations and its temporal and institutional regulations the conventional university attributes an a priori legitimacy to the discipline and a foreknowledge of the disciplinary object to be studied. To use Husserlian and Wittgensteinian terms, by bracketing the discipline it already creates a preknowledge of it. While progressively familiarizing herself with numerous possibilities to approach the literary tradition, the conventional student will always, I think, posit herself as the subject facing an object to be studied, an object whose specificity is that it is already constituted as such in her consciousness because it is framed by the disciplinary procedures of the institution to which she belongs. In this respect, the fundamental categories of literary theory such as author, text, context, reader may fulfill different functions: they may constitute organization principles around which knowledge will be produced or enhanced; they may offer anchorage points that enable or demand diverse interpretive strategies; but they will always be subsumed to the metanarratives of literary tradition, literary canon, literary history. The question about the “paradoxical” nature of literature that consists, according to Barthes (1993), in that “the work is, at the same time, a sign of history and a resistance to this history” and that, as such, “it cannot be pinned down [...],” since “it is something other than its own history, or the sum of its sources, its influences, its models” (1990), in short, the tension between the cognitive and the aesthetic qualities of the work, is ultimately either resolved or left unexamined in the work’s historicist inscription in the literary past.

What I wish to suggest is that this ultimately historicist framework, created by subjective or mental senses of progression and progress and objective disciplinary regulations, as is the case in a conventional educational system, inevitable though it may be, is somewhat transfigured in the context of an individual, open and distant educational setting. Riffaterre’s “superreader,” Fish’s “informed reader,” or in a more satisfactory version, in my view, Iser’s “implied reader” arise and operate in a different way when traditional or historical disciplinary structures become looser. A theoretical concept, once more, the “implied reader” is defined by Iser (1978) as “a construct... [that is] in no way to be identified with any real reader”, “a concept that has [its] roots firmly planted in the structure of the text,” “a textual structure anticipating the presence of a recipient without necessarily

defining him” (34). How does this “implied reader” operate? “[T]he reader’s role is prestructured by three basic components: different perspectives represented in the text, the vantage point from which he joins them together, and the meeting place where they converge” (36). In this operation meaning is created, “but since this meaning is neither a given external reality nor a copy of an intended reader’s own world, it is something that has to be ideated by the mind of the reader” (38).

Does this reader (and by extension, text interpretations, author considerations and positionings and contextual understanding) operate differently in new settings such as ODL? I believe that she does; and I will close my intervention by trying to show how this happens as well as by a positive and a negative consequence of this operation.

Let me start with the positive one: the ODL student, deprived of, or liberated from, the burden of discipline, approaches the text in a way which is at once less suspicious and more accurate. I borrow the term from Nathalie Sarraute’s “era of suspicion” and by “less suspicious” I allude to a student who has a more immediate, less informed (and thus less deformed) relationship to the text, who is able to approach the text as such, first and foremost as an aesthetic object, in ways that may call to mind the project of the various formalisms of almost a century earlier.

I also call such an approach more accurate, because it is in an eclectic, naïve way (in Schiller’s sense, in a positive way), that reading literature takes place in the actual, non-academic, real world. Free from the burdens of disciplinary tradition, ODL can claim a return to the good old days when things were less complicated. By asking whether “there is a text in this class,” Fish (1980: 2) “challenged the self-sufficiency of the text by pointing out that its (apparently) spatial form belied the temporal dimension in which its meanings were actualized, and [he] argued that it was the developing shape of this actualization, rather than the static shape of the printed page, that should be the object of critical description”. At the time (in the seventies) Fish had in mind perhaps neither the distant student and certainly not the present state of literary theoretical affairs dominated by the discussion about “after theory,”⁸ yet the question he posed is still pertinent today: “How to recognize a poem when you see one?” ODL students may give fresher and more interesting answers to this.

Let me finish with the negative point: is it possible, in our postmodern condition, to claim a return to a supposed era of innocence? Furthermore, is this something to be wished? In its disciplinary constitution, conventional literary history remained within modernity’s

⁸ Cf., for example, Cunningham (2002), Docherty (1990), Eagleton (2004), Kastan (1999), McDonald (2006), Payne and Schad (2003).

defining mode, that of representation; postmodern conceptions of literary history, and the actual efforts to produce such, attempt to move beyond this order into new modes of seeing, of which the hypertext is only one example. Does the move from reference to performance really mean that we have escaped our disciplinary past, that we have been liberated from the Bildungsroman of history, that the good old Kantian time, space and the categories are what we need to wipe out? “Has the advent of the screen made it harder to take the page for granted” as Leah Price (2006: 9) claims? “Does “the death of the book mean the birth of its history” as Karen J. Winkler (1993) proclaims?⁹ Or is it that a postmodern literary history, in its effort to do away with the modern one, in the end needs it, or even more so, in the beginning presupposes it? What if the hypertext needs the text? The answers are not easy to give, but they might be not in the direction towards which self-congratulating proponents of what they wish to think of as innovation wish to lead them. And if this is so, “just as our word processing interfaces now depend on verbal metaphors (the “desktop”) and visual allusions (the paper-clipped attachment)” (Price 2006: 15) as well as on real life referents (such as the blackboard or the forum), the ODL implied reader, in her effort to narrate the world, history, or literature, will have perhaps to go back to concepts that the conventional discipline has used, questioned and abandoned long ago: the authority of authors, the compass of political history for literary history, as well as a naïve (I mean it now in a negative way) evolutionism; in other words, a much more conservative framework than that to which we critically reacted in the first place. After all, Foucault wrote that “from such [disciplinary] trifles, no doubt, modern humanism was born” (1977: 141). In the absence of critical positioning towards and against the ways we came to think what we think, what we “think” may actually be not only obsolete, or even irrelevant; it may be dangerous.

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⁹ Cited in Price (2006: 9).

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