

On Literature as a Teachable Object of Academic Knowledge

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To Bill's teaching

An important implication of the expansion of open and distance learning (ODL) methods in higher education has been the enhancement of the idea that educational relations at the level of university studies are in need of systematic reconsideration – that there is, in other words, a pressing issue of academic pedagogy. This issue cannot be effectively addressed independently of its historical and theoretical dimensions: we need to investigate changes that have marked the university institution as a whole in its recent history and examine how these changes have affected the nature of pedagogy in specific academic fields.

This paper intends to discuss problems concerning the teaching of literature as an object of university studies. I will first consider the significance that was attributed to different forms of teaching in earlier phases of the development of the modern university, as compared to more recent developments. I will then examine how literature, as an object of university studies, has been changing along with the institution of the university. I will finally turn to particular challenges that literature presents to academic teaching today, especially when ODL is at issue.

Tracing the history of the contemporary university institution, Bill Readings (1996) invites us to go back to debates that took place in early 19th century Germany concerning the Prussian system of higher education and, more specifically, the status and function of the University of Berlin¹. Eminent representatives of a largely idealist intelligentsia, indistinguishably philosophical and philological in its intellectual profile, formulated and discussed, at the time, general notions and specific recommendations that have since outlined the overall "idea" of the university as a core institution of Western modernity. This idea, according to Readings, has been the one of the modern "University of Culture". The term *culture* implies, of course, a reference to the European humanist tradition. It also refers us, however, to the notion

¹ A selection of texts from this debate has been published and translated in French by Luc Ferry, J.-P. Pesron and Alain Renaut (1979). Citations of texts by Fichte and Schleiermacher in my paper are from this edition, translated into English by myself.

of national culture – a culture evolving in history and culminating in the political order of the nation-state and in the educational institutions that have shaped the modern political subject.

We could also view this modern idea of the university as correlated to the historical era of the post-medieval "culture of literacy" that Wlad Godzich (1994) has critically discussed. This would be the era in which the written – and printed – word acquired a particular significance: languages, in and through their written forms, were unified and institutionalised *qua* national languages and functioned as universal mediators allowing for the establishment and consolidation of state-national communities. This is of particular interest to us, not only because it sheds light on the role of literary studies that we will shortly discuss in more detail, but also because, as Godzich explains, it directly concerns, on a more rudimentary level, educational material and practices:

Literate culture is based on mediated as opposed to direct experience, and as such it holds the potential for a gain in efficiency [...]: the textbook or the manual, early prototypes of expert-systems, take the place of personal apprenticeship with a master, and present the advantage of containing the distillate of the experience of several masters. In addition, just as in the industrial production of which it is the enabling cultural condition, the culture of literacy fostered greater uniformity and control over output. [...] Training people through the mediation of the written word is much more efficient than doing so through personal contact. Once that lesson was absorbed, it was inevitable that we would see additional investment in mediation. (10)

The idea of distance learning, far from being a recent invention, can thus be seen as closely connected to technologies and economies of reproduction and dissemination of knowledge that are inherent to the cultural premises of Western modernity. What appears, under this light, to be in need of explanation is the fact that unmediated forms of teaching, such as lectures and seminars, not only have been proven to be extremely tenacious practices but have also persistently retained a quasi-emblematic position in modern academic life. The debate on the German university is very enlightening with respect to this question.

There must have been practical reasons for the persistence of oral forms of teaching, reasons related to the economy of book production: as long as educational books were relatively scarce compared to the growing needs of university students, the system of professorial lecturing and student note-taking was the simplest solution. This scarcity, however, was no longer the case by the beginning of the 19th century. As Fichte remarks, writing in 1807:

Thanks to the invention of printing, books have become an extremely common commodity and the expansion of their commerce has made it much easier for anyone to communicate his thought in writing than through oral courses, while there remains no branch of learning for which there is no plethora of books. And yet we still find it necessary to present for a second time, in universities, the content of all those books, and to have it repetitively recited by professors, even though it is already there, printed, in front of everyone's eyes. (1979: 167)

Elaborating an analogous argument, Schleiermacher sounds very much as if anticipating, in 1808, educational practices of distance learning:

The professor who repeats and recopies incessantly the contents of a single notebook, written once and for all, reminds us most unfortunately of the times when printing did not yet exist and it was extremely important that a scholar reads his manuscript aloud, since oral presentation took the place of reading. But one no longer understands why the state should be paying, as it does today, people who do no more than enjoy the privilege of being in a position to ignore the benefits of printing – or how such people impose on others the trouble of having to move from one place to another, instead of selling to them, quite simply, as it is very feasible, printed knowledge based, as is the case anyhow, on writings already dead. Since it would be quite ridiculous to talk, with respect to such works, of the marvellous effects of the living voice. (1979: 285)

Neither Fichte nor Schleiermacher, however, suggest the abolition of unmediated university teaching, to the precise degree that transmission of knowledge is not the sole, and perhaps not even the primal objective of their ideal university. The German university, situated in-between regular educational institutions and academies of pure research, would aim at teaching, as Fichte puts it, in characteristically Kantian overtones, the "scholarly use of one's faculty of judgement", thus educating "artists of

the art of learning" (1979: 171). This is how we could also understand Schleiermacher when he insists that *ex cathedra* lecturing responds to the very essence of the university:

Few understand the significance of the course *ex cathedra*. In spite of the fact that most of the teachers have practised it with little if any success, this form of teaching has, surprisingly enough, been preserved. Which clearly proves that it is the very essence of the university that requires it and that we still need to preserve its institution today, even if only for the sake of those very few that can put it in good use. We could even affirm that the real value of a university professor directly depends on how good he is in this art (1979: 282).

Putting *ex cathedra* lecturing in good use would mean displaying for imitation by prospective peers what the written text cannot help blurring – namely, intellect at work:

Instead of reciting his knowledge, [the professor in front of his audience] must reproduce his proper mode of learning, the very act of it, so that students will not rest content with continuous accumulation of knowledge but will instead immediately perceive the very activity of reason and thus be able to imitate it. (1979: 283-284)

Lectures would thus acquire the essential characteristics, if not the form, of what German idealism understands as antique dialogicity:

Ex cathedra lectures, the primary function of which is to allow the disclosure of ideas, must certainly have the nature of antique dialogue, even if they do not have its external form; they must strive to reveal clearly, on the one hand, the communal sense of the audience, since its members do not possess, except unconsciously only, the idea that needs to be aroused, and, on the other side, the sentiment of the sense of the teacher, who does possess the idea, the power of which is actualised through him. (1979: 283)

The disclosure of ideas that would already be, consciously or unconsciously, present in or even constitutive of the spirit of both students and teachers, presupposes that the intellect of both teachers and students is tentatively uniform. This is a central

assumption, and a very important one for the "University of Culture". Intellectual homogeneity, constantly reinstated in class, entails academic cohesion and community bonds. The "academic community" is what allows the university to function as an institution of cultural and intellectual integration while enjoying a considerable degree of autonomy with respect to state authorities. The notion of mutual intellectual disclosure, along with the figure of "antique dialogue" are also present in Fichte's discourse as he pleads for forms of teaching more clearly dialogical, closer to what we know as tutorials and seminars:

Not only the professor but also the student must constantly express himself and communicate his thoughts, so that pedagogical reciprocity would form an uninterrupted intercourse: every word of the professor should constitute an answer to a question raised by a student with respect to what has been said and should, by the same token, present to the student the formulation of a new question, to which the student would in turn respond by continuing to express himself. The professor would thus address his discourse not to a subject completely unknown to him, but to someone who is revealing himself to him to the point of complete transparency. [...]. On such grounds scholarly teaching passes from the form of a simple continuous discourse – which also exists in written guise – to a dialogical form; and a true Academia may be founded, in the sense of a Socratic school, the memory of which we intend to kindle through the use of the word. (1979: 173)

The memory of Socratic dialogue exposes a basic cultural premise much older than modernity. Along with the functional predominance of the written word, there persists, in our culture of literacy, a mistrust of the authority of writing, triggering strategies and practices that resist or undermine it – the mistrust that Plato has very tellingly expressed in the last part of his *Phaidros*. The ensuing tense connection between reading and listening, writing and talking – or between mediated study and immediate interaction, intellectual autonomy and dialogue – could, indeed, be considered as largely constitutive of the modern idea of the university, but also prior to it and liable to survive it.

When we think of ODL as a field of distinct educational practices we very often define its specificity by comparing it to an idea of the university quite close to the one outlined above. We thus tend to disregard the fact that the reality of the university institution not only has never quite complied to this idea, but has also been

changing quite radically, at least since the 1950's and even more intensively so since the 1970's and 80's. A lot of characteristics that we often consider as peculiar to ODL institutions are actually broader tendencies marking the overall field of higher education. Larger and even mass student and teacher bodies have been concomitant, for the university at large, with intellectual and cultural heterogeneity, and this has been radically affecting connections between teachers and students, but also amongst students or teachers themselves. The community bonds that the modern university fostered or postulated are no longer securely obtained, as the social hierarchies and structures on which they depended have been loosened or abolished. Learning conditions and teaching methods have been changing accordingly in many respects, often in the direction of a heavier reliance on new communication technologies. New curricula have been replacing older ones, often entailing the restructuring of old fields of study or the emergence of new ones.

Godzich (1994) underscores the significance, in this respect, of trends such as the expansion in the US, since the 1980's, of university programs aiming at the development of writing and reading skills for specialised vocational purposes, parallel to regular curricula in the humanities and social sciences. He suggests that this is symptomatic not only of a "new vocationalism" marking the orientation of university studies, but also of a widespread "epochal shift" (11) in cultural practices. New populations of university students – and, I would add, of teachers as well – would be marked by a new *kind* of educational or cultural experience, often mistaken for a simply *lower* intellectual level. At stake would be the very mode of literacy that characterised modern culture. Language still functions, of course, as the main universal mediator but in ways or through processes that have been drastically altered. This has important socio-ideological implications within the new political order of the "post-literate state" (11):

In effect, the teaching of the New Vocationalist literacy meant that the educational system was turning its back upon the values of classical literacy, that it renounced the ideal of a sphere of communicative interaction where all the able wielders of the language, in their capacity as citizens, would overcome the heterogeneity of specialised linguistic practices in order to inquire into, and determine, their collective destiny. (12)

Readings (1996), on his part, directs our attention to various instances of policy and discourse that have been implying or aiming at the re-definition of the function and status of the university institution, especially since the 1990's. He suggests that we have been experiencing the demise of the modern idea of the "University of Culture", and even of the very assumption that the university could or should comply to some general idea pertaining to a social mission, other than the one of professional training. The modern university, along with its idea of "Culture", would be receding in favour of a different type of higher educational authority, distinctly bureaucratic, based on a postmodern idea of "Excellence" in specific intellectual and technical aptitudes (21 ff.). This would be part of more general political changes involving the weakening or fading of the nation-state and of its educational and cultural order.

Such are the ruins to which the title of Readings' work refers – and his study is in quest of strategies or modes of critically "dwelling in" those ruins (166 ff.). Clearly, new forms of educational relations inevitably emerge and need to be elaborated in the university, and this presupposes new ways of understanding the corresponding tasks – ways of acknowledging their general social implications as well as their specifically pedagogical nature. It should be noted that, according to the modern idea of the university, the very notion of a university "pedagogy" may sound as a contradiction in terms, since the academic community is supposed to guarantee its cohesion and efficacy on the grounds of the autonomous workings of scholarly intellects. Within the postmodern setting of higher education, however, teachers and students can no longer be considered as subjects akin to each other and shaped so as to communicate intellectually under a perspective of assumed mutual transparency. Readings suggests that educational relations under such conditions present us with challenges that, along with their political and intellectual dimensions – or perhaps because of the way in which they combine indistinguishably political and intellectual concerns – acquire largely ethical dimensions:

My aim, then, is an anti-modernist rephrasing of teaching and learning as sites of *obligation*, as loci of *ethical practices*, rather than as means for the transmission of scientific knowledge. Teaching thus becomes answerable to *the question of justice*, rather than to the criteria of truth. We must seek to do justice to teaching rather than to know what it is. A belief that we know what teaching is or should be is actually a

major impediment to just teaching. [...] My turn to the pedagogical scene of address, with all its ethical weight, is thus a way of developing an accountability that is at odds with accounting. (1996: 154, author's italics)

One may very well object to the notion of "ethics" and its use with respect to academic pedagogy. The problem, however, which Readings indicates here, is, I think, a very real and urgent one. The subjects of academic teaching and learning, the teacher and the student, relate to each other in ways and forms that are quite novel or even unpredictable and that need to be acknowledged as such. The obligation to respect the precariousness of this relationship while attempting to probe its character runs through specific teaching methods or processes and it transforms them into open questions in need of continuous trial. Such should be the case, for instance, of the degrees or modes in which unmediated forms of teaching may persist along with new types of educational material. The fact that Schleiermacher's dialectics or Fichte's dialogism can now be seen as largely speculative does not at all imply that lectures or seminars are simply dispensable along with other emblems of the old university order. At stake are the very grounds on which different forms of teaching, mediated as well as unmediated, will be configured and evaluated anew.²

Questions such as the above very much depend, of course, on the discipline concerned – on the exact way in which an academic field has been affected by changes in the institution of the university.

Literature as an object of teachable knowledge owes a lot to the evolution of the university from the modern idea of its cultural mission to the postmodern one of vocational excellence. An important phase of initial development for academic departments of modern literary studies occurred, in Europe and the US, in the second half of the 19th century. These departments connected the study of literature to the study of a specific language and were delimited on the basis of historical relations between languages and modern nation-states – that is, according to national-linguistic criteria. Literary studies, under these conditions, have been highly valued. A national literature is, indeed, configured not only as the continuation of the humanist tradition but also, and perhaps more importantly, as the most elaborate expression of the

² All the more so if we connect, as Readings does, ethical problematics to the desideratum of a certain kind of "Thought" as the very object of today's university pedagogy (1996: 159 ff.) – a crucial point that we unfortunately cannot discuss further here.

language and culture that basic state education aims at reproducing and promulgating – and does so with teachers trained by university departments of language and literature. Literary studies have thus acquired a fundamental educational significance for the modern nation-state and, consequently, for its idea of the university. Readings (1996) describes how, since the second half of the 19th and throughout the greatest part of the 20th century, the institution of the university has gradually transposed its centre from philosophy, where German idealism had set it, to literary culture. One can recall, in this respect, F. R. Leavis redefining the «Idea» of the university in 1943: "What then might be done towards making a School of English a real humane focus in a university, pre-eminently representative of the Idea, and capable of discharging the function of the university in the manner of liberal education?" (1979: 32).

This institutional burden has not been without implications for literary studies. It is certainly related to the distinct emphasis with which the difference of perspective between teaching and scholarship – between pedagogical concerns and academic interests – has marked the development of academic fields of literature. This difference, which is a rather commonplace fact for most disciplines, has worked, in the case of literary studies, as a basic polarity running through the history of their development. We could grossly identify two extremes in this respect. At any given historical moment, we have, on the one hand, modes of understanding literature that are established as functional with respect to current pedagogical standards and as legitimate with respect to consecrated traditions of national and humanist culture. From this point of view, literature is quite intensively but also somewhat casually taught since it appears to be perfectly teachable, if not to be teaching itself: its cultural value goes almost without saying, its canon is rather unquestionable, its reading and interpretation require no particularly intricate tools. On the other hand, new trends of literary scholarship enter the scene, often marked as of strictly academic interest. From their point of view the function of literature should be reassessed, the canon should be revised and questions of method or theory should acquire prime importance, in ways often disdainful of established common literary sense and at the risk of great difficulties from the point of view of teaching. Tensions between these two extremes have largely taken a wave-like form. Vanguard trends merge into older established ones and partly displace them, only in order to become, in turn, the object of criticism on the part of newer forms of scholarly originality – or of older ones returning in novel guise.

At the risk of oversimplification, one can recall the following characteristic moments in the history of literary studies since the second half of the 19th century³. Mathew Arnold's emphasis on the connection between literature and cultural tradition is very characteristic of a way in which modern literature was initially formed into an object of scholarly knowledge and criticism, if not of purely academic scholarship. Early advocates of the academic status of literary studies, however, must have had a hard time convincing the university establishment over the legitimacy of their field as it compared unfavourably, from the point of view of scholarly codes, to better structured disciplines of the humanist tradition, such as classics or linguistics. The problem was solved with the expansion and development of methods of philology, passing from the study of antiquity to that of modernity and eventually predominating over generalist approaches to modern literature. Distantly echoing the spirit of romantic historicism but still relatively novel in the second half of the 19th century, philological methods turned modern literary texts into objects of historical inquiry and criticism. Historicism was eventually questioned by tendencies we could qualify as formalist, akin to literary modernism and to the New Criticism, which have somewhat displaced the authority of philological erudition, especially since the 1950's. These tendencies eventually proved to be quite teachable within the setting of changing university structures that opened to larger masses of students, often culturally marginal, if not alienated, with respect to historical models of cultural integration. Subsequent political tensions were connected to scholarly tendencies that have been developed since the 1970's and have expressed more poignantly than ever before the claim of theoretical or philosophical perspectives, drawing on fields such as psycho-analysis, structural linguistics, Marxism and phenomenology.

Currently, literary studies include all of the above tendencies in a state of a precarious equilibrium. At the same time, as modes of post-literate culture conflict with or displace traditions of state-national culture, a crucial change marks the position of literature and its status as an object of academic knowledge. Literature continues, of course, to occupy an important position in the realm of cultural industries, but it does so without unquestionably assuming the function of a primary national educator. Its aura persists but can no longer safely rest on the premises that

³ The trends I am discussing here have been analysed in great detail by Gerald Graff (1987) whose study concerns, more particularly, the case of USA.

had been attributing to it a key role in processes of cultural development, political integration or social emancipation.

Literature re-emerges, in other words, in a condition that could be considered as quite becoming to it: as discourse that persists almost inexplicably, if not unjustifiably, since it does not clearly meet given criteria of educational value – or any criteria of value, for that matter, whether cognitive, moral or even purely aesthetic. This may be good news for literature itself, but it is also a new and quite singular predicament for its teaching. It exposes the teacher to intense uncertainties concerning what there is to know about literary works or writers, what one needs to say about literary texts or why such texts should be taught at all, to begin with. I could mention, more specifically, the following domains of pedagogical uncertainty with respect to literary studies today.

(1) Uncertainty over the very value of literature, as compared to other modes of discourse or cultural artefacts. This is a basic and most general problem that teaching faces prior to and through all specific educational issues. It concerns the grounds on which the interest for literature could be effectively maintained or postulated – grounds that can no longer be taken for granted.

(2) Uncertainty as to the field itself, to the degree that the connection between literature and national languages or cultures can no longer be considered as exhaustive. Various approaches or domains of study breaking with national-linguistic categories may entail a re-mapping of literary studies, undoing older epistemic and institutional settings. One could recall, in this respect, the study of post-colonial or otherwise emergent literatures that do not fit in taxonomies based on the identification of languages with historically predominant national cultures; or the new research areas and problematics affiliated to what we know as “cultural studies”, often questioning traditional literary studies by exposing their ideological or political premises and by claiming alternative theoretical perspectives; or, finally, the importance attributed to translation and to translated texts which, within the traditional division of literary labour, have been very characteristically excluded from systematic study.

(3) Uncertainty concerning the relations and connections between the different modes of scholarly reading and interpretation of literature which coexist today: philological inquiry on the historical formation and position of texts; close reading concentrating on old and new modes of rhetorical analysis; and, finally, theory as

systematic and often standardised reflection projected at levels of conceptual abstraction and, eventually, of socio-political or cultural critique.

There are, of course, various available options for shaping the object of literature in teachable ways that allow both the teacher and the student to neutralise or cut through the uncertainties I have been discussing⁴. The point I want to make, however, is that the academic teaching of literature needs to acknowledge and work *with* these uncertainties, not against them. It may have to start, in fact, from the unlearning of what one already knows or thinks one knows – which very often consists in misplaced commonplaces of humanist rhetoric arguing for the inherent value of literature. I would like to insist on how literary theory may persist in raising its distinctive pedagogical challenge.

There are, of course, ways in which literary theory also can accommodate teachability concerns. For instance, it can give way to arrays of codified "theoretical models" or "critical viewpoints" alternatively applicable to literary texts or provide the possibility of eclectically combining elements of different "approaches". However legitimate and useful they may be, such pedagogical strategies codify theory into teachable moulds in ways that risk entailing the abandonment of the task that Godzich has configured in terms almost political as "struggle for theory" (1994: 15). The task involves, amongst other things, confrontation with philosophical problems linked to the experience and the critique of literary reading.

Paul de Man (1986) insisted on the difficult connection between theory and teaching, when he demonstrated and discussed the inescapable tendency of literary studies to resist their own theory. The reason for this in-built "resistance to theory" would lie in the very nature and implications of literary reading. The reading of literature, de Man says, drives attention to the workings of language in ways that expose unresolved and non-resolvable tensions – culminating in antinomies that govern the relations between the rhetorical and the logico-grammatical dimensions of language (17 ff.). This tends to undermine the authority of all statements concerning what has been read – statements about its meaning, its practical significance or even its pure form. Which means that theory of literature, to the degree that it regards the truth of its object, risks undoing the entire methodological apparatus used to approach

⁴ There is, for example, the possibility of concentrating on categories of indistinguishably historical and aesthetic status – romanticism, realism, modernism, postmodernism and the like – that turn taxonomy into a central issue allowing for the elaboration of sustained scholarly and student commentary.

this truth and disqualifying anything that may be said about it, thus driving one to silence. Silence, however, denies teaching as we know it. In other words, the theory of literature, in the strong sense of the term, may simply be unteachable by definition – in the sense both of what cannot and what should not be taught. Yet the acute interest of literary studies may lie precisely in the fact that they contend with current criteria of pedagogical success without abandoning the pedagogical task. This is how I understand the typically demanian riddle over the teaching of literary theory and the prospect of its failure: "it is better to fail in teaching what should not be taught than to succeed in teaching what is not true" (1986: 4). In other words, the teacher of literature should view the uncertainties that run through literary studies as largely aporetic and make the aporia part of the task of teaching. Poignant theoretical insights may thus be allowed to affect the task of teaching and alter the very notion of teachability – instead of being domesticated in accordance with given pedagogical standards.

Such are the challenges that pass on to ODL together with literary studies. In fact, these challenges acquire an even broader potential to the degree that "openness" addresses a new kind of demand for higher education, strong yet somewhat disjointed or inchoate, which the conventional university persistently disregards – while "distance" raises the issue of novel forms and rhythms of educational practices, including those that may involve emergent modes of closeness. ODL thus allows a more acute quest for alternatives to the exhausted idea of the modern "University of Culture". In the case of literature, this also means, however, a more acute confrontation with tendencies that risk reducing literary studies to training programs responding to market demands for "New Vocationalist" literacy. ODL literary studies may thus become a field of intense academic criticism and experimentation, questioning stereotyped ideas of both literature and pedagogy.

As far as educational material is concerned, one may very well, of course, venture to apply strict guidelines concerning pedagogically functional structures for textbooks. Learning also presupposes, however, the experience of unsafe, and even erratic reading of a variety of theoretical or critical discourses on literature, equivalent to the notorious unpredictability, in this respect, of literature itself. Textbooks could very well experiment with a wide range of stylistic modes including provocatively estranging ones.

As for new technologies, we still need to better understand their differences with respect to older ones in order to grasp the full implications of their expanding use as educational tools. Very often, categories or figures applied to describe these differences and implications are inaccurate or obsolete⁵. Also, it is often on rather simplistic premises that we assess the specificity of new technologies for the production, reproduction or processing of linguistic material – especially when we see them as particularly favouring or even as exemplifying specific theoretical models of textuality and reading⁶.

Perplexities at the level of educational material such as the ones that I have rather hastily outlined above, create new needs for unmediated forms of teaching. We should take into consideration, in this respect, that the ethical dimensions of educational relations, which Readings has investigated for the new university at large, are more poignantly present under conditions of distance and openness – conditions in which the very fact of studying on a higher educational level involves dimensions and aspects that are practically unmapped territory. ODL practices constantly have to check the exact functions and significance that unmediated forms of teaching may assume, as uncertainties concerning the status of the student, as well as the one of the teacher, couple uncertainties inherent to the object of studies. Performance of academic intellect at work are still needed, but the kind of intellectual processes that will thus be presented to the student may be quite novel, having very little in common with old *ex cathedra* lecturing. Dialogue is also needed, but its structure and workings may be unclear or fuzzy, compared to the exhaustive dialectical type that we identify with the Socratic figure.

Teaching also involves the largely political issue of authority. Distance, especially when symbolised by or objectified in mechanisms and products of high technological expertise, may have a propensity to enhance the weight of educational and intellectual authority and to discourage or disallow its critical debunking. Which means that the old Platonic mistrust of the written word has good reasons to persist,

⁵ Inaccurate, for example, is the notion of "linearity" when applied to traditional modes and channels of communication. Obsolete, on the other hand, are notions drawing on the idea of "interactivity" which describe the advantages of advanced technologies in terms borrowed from old models stereotypically opposing oral communication to writing.

⁶ One should ponder, for instance, on the paradoxical relation of hypertext to literary theory. On the one hand, hypertextual form somewhat deconstructs the conventional text while exposing it as an intertextual field open to a multiplicity of approaches and insights. On the other hand, the commentary

all the more so when the power of writing is not only diffused through technological virtuality but also adorned with the aura of literary strangeness. The unmediated presence of the teacher can trigger and sustain standpoints that counterbalance unchecked institutional authority, putting into intellectual motion what the educational material tends to stabilise or momentarily grasping what technology tends to present as somewhat inaccessible or even sublime.

None of the above implies that pedagogical relations are configured in psychological terms. The difficulties that students as well as teachers encounter within the setting of their undecided relationships, inextricably related to literature as the object at stake, acquire a relevance that I would rather qualify as primarily epistemological. We may recall, once again, de Man (1986: 4):

Overfacile opinion notwithstanding, teaching is not primarily an intersubjective relationship between people but a cognitive process in which self and other are only tendentially and contiguously involved. The only teaching worth of the name is scholarly, not personal; analogies between teaching and various aspects of business or guidance counselling are more often than not excuses for having abdicated the task..

Scholarly teaching, in this sense, accepts, as we have seen, failure to teach the unteachable as a legitimate pedagogical option, in spite of the heavy current stress on measurable educational results. And this could be very close, indeed, to Reading's notion of an ethical "accountability at odds with accounting".

Readings (1996) further underscores the importance of two positions or perspectives with respect to our present condition of university ruins:

First, an awareness of the complexity and historically marked status of the spaces that we cannot inhabit, from which we are alienated, so that neither nostalgia nor revived organicism is a viable option. Second, a refusal to believe that some new rationale will allow us to reduce that complexity, to forget present complexity in the name of future simplicity. (129)

We should indeed face the complexity of our pedagogical predicament, instead of circumventing it in the name of any ready-made notion of efficiency. Since it is very

that we are often driven to when using hypertextual material is very much reminiscent not so much of

important, indeed, not to be nostalgic of the old university order – but also not to comply either with the constraints or with the appeal of the new one.

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