

PICKING UP THE FRAGMENTS: LITERARY THEORY
AND THE TEACHING OF LITERATURE
IN ENGLISH IN A "LETRAS" COURSE

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The teaching of literature in English at the University is a problematic issue. Complaints from both teachers and students seem to be much more frequent than expressions of enjoyment of the process of teaching and studying literature. Moreover, during departmental meetings, colleagues discuss the relevance of each other's disciplines, acting out something like a battle for a rise in the number of hours allocated for them in the curricula. During such meetings, teachers of other disciplines question the relevance of teaching literature in English to undergraduates. They say basically that the students do not have a minimum knowledge of the English language when they enter the Course and, besides, as future teachers in secondary schools they will not teach what they have learned in the University. So, more time should be devoted to the study of language and of more basic disciplines, like linguistics and literary theory.

Aiming at a more systematic view of the situation, I interviewed the four English Literature teachers of a Letras course, as well as eight students in their last year at the University.¹ In the interviews, conducted in April and May 1997, the teachers pointed out some problems in the

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teaching of English literature, confirming some points discussed in the departmental meetings and informally in the corridors. The first problem seems to be the students' low level of language proficiency, followed by their lack of knowledge about the culture and history of the English-speaking countries and of literary theory.² As a follow up to the research conducted before, I decided to interview the literary theory teachers of the same Department to try to detect possible reasons for the reputedly faulty application of the subjects discussed in their disciplines to the subsequent ones. So, I asked them, basically, about their objectives and the significance of their discipline to the Letras Course as a whole.³

Analysing the interviews, we can perceive that discussions that have been conducted since the ancient Greeks are still up to date in our universities, like the definition of literature and its purpose. Apparently, there are no contradictory definitions for literature among the teachers. Literature can be defined, summarising the concepts of the seven teachers, as an expression of life, transformed into art according to the views of the writer, inserted into a specific context. Most of the teachers point out the lack of objectivity in the definition of literature, since the concept is constantly in movement according to the changes society goes through. Two teachers stress the aesthetic aspect of literature, and one of them relates it to its representational aspect, leading to a humanising function, not in a moralising way, he adds, but moral and religion are present in literature, which also represents the constant human search for origins. As an aesthetic and symbolic way of expression, literature is eternal and atemporal, and has the faculty of making men (sic) find themselves, become friendlier persons, and learn how to live better. For another teacher, literature is not education: it is art, free and accessible to all, and as such it humanises by itself: the writer transmits to the reader his/her conception of reality, transformed into fiction.

Most teachers define their objectives in relation to what is determined in the program of the disciplines: to provide the students

with means for a literary analysis, formalising the study of the literary text based on theoretical concepts, according to the different critical trends, leading the student to produce scientific analytical-interpretive texts. Each teacher, then, connects the objectives of the discipline to her/his definition of literature. For one of them, the discipline should help the students to recognise the literariness in the texts according to its different concepts, transforming the text into a problematic object. For another one, the disciplines should develop the aesthetic perception in the students, calling their attention to the "soul" more than to the "corpse" of literature. Four teachers mention their preoccupation with contributing to the formation of readers. All of them have in mind the profile of the student who enters the Letras course: frequently, someone who does not like reading, and does not read literature as a habit. So, for one of the teachers, the disciplines should simply provide the students with the opportunity to read the main works of universal literature, developing their literary taste and the pleasure of reading. For another teacher, the student, with the help of the disciplines, has to be able to read and interpret the literary text. In other words, s/he has to be able to think about the text, to see beyond the story, recognising traces of ideologies, the context of the production and reception of the text. This would be a critical view, defined as the interpretation of the text. For the third teacher, the student should be able, firstly, to analyse the text in its structural aspects, according to the basic literary concepts that do not change with time: time, space, character, for example. This analysis, though, identifies structures, which is necessary, but does not provide thought about them in terms of their relationship in a specific literary text, creating sense and meaning. For that, the disciplines should also prepare the students for an interpretive analysis. The fourth teacher believes that semiotics can help the students in their perception of themselves as active readers, as participants in the process, filling the unsaid in the text.

Apparently the teachers share the same objectives with their disciplines, as established in the program they are supposed to follow.

The terminology used to refer to some concepts in literature is the same, but the assumptions beyond the concepts vary from teacher to teacher. The preoccupation with the scientific orientation of the work the students will develop in order to be accepted by the academia is one of them, formally expressed in the objectives of the discipline. For that, it is necessary to help the students to acquire metalanguage to communicate in the academic world, exposing and proving their points of view, even if most teachers acknowledge the unstable character of literature. The search for the literariness in the text seems to be a useful tool in this process of “scientificizing” literature: finding and analysing the specific characteristics that make a text literary we, as teachers, students and literary critics, may justify our work and do something that the laypersons are not able to do, i.e., analysing literature. We are not naive readers, we are able to regard our object of research scientifically, and thus can be differentiated from the millions of literate people that can read but have not been exposed to a Letras Course, so cannot *analyse* literature, which frequently includes judging what is minor and what is great literature, what is literary and what is not.

The Russian Formalism seems to be the trend teachers most value for making literary studies scientific. Terry Eagleton (1983: 5-6)⁴ says that the Formalists saw the literary work as a “more or less arbitrary assemblage of ‘devices’”, and later saw these devices as “interrelated elements or ‘functions’ within a total textual system”. The ‘devices’ included “sound, imagery, rhythm, syntax, metre, rhyme, narrative techniques”, the formal literary elements, which had in common their “defamiliarizing effect”. In other words, this is linguistics applied to the literary studies. That is exactly what the English literature teachers interviewed say they would like the students to recognise in their readings of literary texts, but they do not seem to be able to do that. The theory teachers, though, affirm that it is what they teach the students: recognising the “literariness” in the text, defined by the Formalists as “a function of the *differential* relations between one sort of discourse and another” (1983: 5; italics in the original).

Literary theory, according to Paul De Man (1996)⁵, came into being when the approach to literary texts was no longer based on non-linguistic considerations, or “when the object of discussion is no longer the meaning or the value but the modalities of production and reception of meaning and of value prior to their establishment” (202). For that, literary theory established the metalanguage about literature based on the terminology of linguistics, taking into account the referential function of language. The linguists were not originally concerned with literature, De Man continues, but an interest in semiology shows the natural attraction of literature to a theory of language as a system of linguistic signs and of signification rather than as an established pattern of meanings, suspending the traditional barriers between literary and non-literary uses of language (203). The linguistics of semiology and the linguistics of literature apparently have something in common that only their shared perspective can detect, often referred to as literariness, which has become the object of literary theory.

The teachers interviewed clearly show their preoccupation with recognising the literariness in the texts, something apparently related to differentiating literary from non-literary texts through an aesthetic appreciation. The representational aspect of literature is also stressed, in the way it transforms reality into fiction. De Man, though, calls our attention to the fact that literariness is often misunderstood, confused with aesthetic response and with mimesis. Words such as style, stylistics, form and “poetry” (as in the “poetry” of grammar), often related to literariness, and with aesthetic connotations, help in the confusion. Analysing Barthes and Jakobson, De Man says that they seem to invite a purely aesthetic reading, yet part of their statement goes in the opposite direction: the convergence of sound and meaning is also considered to be a mere effect which language can achieve, but bears no substantial relationship to anything beyond that particular effect. It is a rhetorical rather than an aesthetic function of the language, an identifiable trope that operates at the level of the signifier, with no responsible pronouncement on the nature of the world. The link between

the word and the thing is conventional, and it is this conventionality that gives language freedom from referential restraint, but makes it epistemologically suspect and volatile since its use can no longer be said to be determined by considerations of truth or falsehood, good or evil, beauty or ugliness, pleasure or pain. Whenever this autonomous potential of language can be revealed by analysis, De Man concludes, we are talking about literariness, and literature is the place where this negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterances is made available, involving the voiding, rather than the affirmation, of aesthetic categories (204-05).

Mimesis, for De Man, is a trope, language choosing to imitate a non-verbal entity. Semiology and the linguistically oriented theories do not deny the referential function of language, but its authority as a model for a natural or phenomenal cognition is questioned. Literature is fiction, De Man continues, because “it is not *a priori* certain that language functions according to principles which are those, or which are *like* those, of the phenomenal world” (205; italics in the original). So, it is not a reliable source of information about anything but its own language. The linguistics of literariness, then, would be a “powerful and indispensable” tool in the unmasking of ideological aberration (206).

The literary theory teachers, as well as the English literature ones, although acknowledging the unstable definition of literature, seem secure about the assumption that literature can be taught—a much discussed issue—and should be learned and remembered. For that, a commonly shared terminology is necessary, transforming the object of studies into something touchable. The problem is that, for each teacher, some concepts seem obvious and clear enough to be successfully taught, as the already mentioned aesthetic and representational characters of literature. Although the teachers are aware that such concepts change according to the literary theory trends they adopt, or that is being discussed at the moment with their students, they identify themselves with a specific one, presented to the students as the best, or the correct

one. How, then, can the study of literature be made scientific, if the “scientists” do not agree fully about their object of analysis? Although literary theory is perfectly able to analyse literature, perhaps one of its strongest contributions is to show how unstable truths are, as we may conclude from De Man’s discussion about literariness.

But then one may ask if science is always perfectly sure about its object of study, and if scientists always agree with each other’s findings. After Einstein nobody would affirm that, but the will to achieve truth, in Foucault’s terms, is beyond question in the scientific discourse. The grand or metanarratives that legitimise science, as discussed by Lyotard, — grand narrative of emancipation (everyone has a “right” to science, and life will be better with it) and the speculative narrative (the “truth” of science and the unity of knowledge) — are still strong enough to motivate the academia for scientific literary studies. Science equals reliability, something that we cannot irrefutably link to literature, though.

If scientificism in literature is questionable, perhaps its humanising function is not. Literature, as language, may not have a precise correspondent in the natural, scientifically describable world, but it involves essentially human sensations and may help people to deal with them, as suggested by most of the teachers. Antonio Candido (1989:114-18)⁶, a constant reference for Brazilian literary theory teachers, believes that the function of literature is connected to the complexity of its nature, which explains its contradictory but humanising role. Literature is a construction of autonomous objects, like structure and meaning; it is a way of expression, and it is also a means of knowledge. The simultaneous action of the three aspects provides the effect of the literary production. The first one — literature as a construction — would be the one which decides whether a certain kind of communication is literary or not. He believes literature proposes a model of coherence through the organized word, enabling us to order our own minds and feelings, and consequently, the world view we have. That is the first humanizing level of literature. But the organized words always communicate something — the second aspect discussed

here. This content, however, only acts because of the form, humanizing due to the mental coherence that presupposes and suggests. The original chaos becomes order, and every literary work is the supposition of the chaos, determined by a special combination of the words and proposing some meaning, satisfying the basic human needs. Candido defines, then, humanization as

the process that confirms in man (sic) those characteristics that we regard as essential, as the exercise of reflection, the acquisition of knowledge, the good disposition with our fellowbeings, the refinement of emotions, the capacity to perceive the problems of life, the sense of beauty, the perception of the complexity of the world and of beings, the cultivation of humour. Literature develops in us the share of humanity to the extent that it makes us more understanding and open to nature, society, and our fellowbeings. (117)

It is difficult to state precisely whether literature really acts in the humanizing way proposed by Candido. Organization of chaos may be one of the possible effects of literature on the readers, but it may also *expose* the chaos, and the reader may not perceive any suggestion for organizing it. Can textual organization by the writer always lead to mental organization of human feelings by the reader? Moreover, the word *humanization* implies a positive connotation, which is not always true. Characteristics viewed as negative by our society, like dishonesty, greedy, evil, are also part of human nature and are present in literature. Nobody can take for granted that the reader will choose the *good* side to organize her/his chaos.

However, maybe this is not the problem of teaching literary theory. The teachers interviewed agree that teaching literature is not preaching. One of them even says that the relationship between literature and schools is very dangerous: the schools tend to use literature for moralizing, and this is not its function. The function of literature is not

to teach in a pedagogical acceptation, she says, but to fulfil the human need for fiction and fantasy. For that, it does not need a teacher. Good and evil are present in literature, and the reader may know the world and his/her own self through it, but there should be no censorship in its teaching: teaching literature is not making asepsis of the world. I do agree with this teacher in the point she makes here. Moreover, the kind of society we live in admits good and bad sides of almost everything, from human actions and feelings to the judgement of good or bad literature. The criteria for the label, however, is not frequently discussed by the members of organizations, like universities. So, could not the study of literature be regarded as an interesting opportunity for discussing the changeable character of good and evil? Besides aiming at scientific truths, literary theory classes seem to aim at the beauty of human refinement. How does literature react to such constraints, though? How teachable is all that? These are not concepts easily transmitted to the students in the traditional assumption of scholarship. Assessment, for example, with grades indicating that the student is able to be promoted to the next level of apprenticeship, is extremely complex when the object of studies does not lend itself to right/wrong, good/bad labels.

Anyway, all these concepts are, according to one view or another, discussed with the students, but it seems that they cannot apply them to their further literary studies. The theory teachers seem aware of the situation. As for the significance of literary theory to the course as a whole, especially in relation to the specific literatures (Brazilian, Portuguese, French and English), three teachers say in the interviews that they do not know how the link is made by the other teachers, but they hope the students can use the concepts they have learned in the two first years of the course in their further literary analyses. Three other teachers say that, unfortunately, the students treat the disciplines as separate things, and do not apply the concepts learned in one of them to the others. For one of the teachers, the gap between descriptive and interpretive analysis is one of the reasons for that. The student

does not see why s/he has learned literary concepts, a result of the lack of communication between the literary theory teachers and the specific literature ones. Many teachers, according to him, consider the knowledge about theory as something minor, not necessary for the literary analysis. Moreover, he adds, the teacher needs a more empirical and systemic view of teaching: the students' needs, how they have entered the course, how the teacher can contribute to her/his students' academic growth. The structure of the departments is fragmented: there is no interdisciplinary dialogue, not even dialogue between the different teachers of a same discipline. The second teacher shares some of the opinions manifested by her colleague. For her, the students have no notion of sequence and interdisciplinarity for lack of methodological uniformity. She considers methodology—the teacher's action and the objectives s/he wants to achieve with her/his didactical process—as more important than the strategies—the way the teacher is going to achieve such objectives. The third teacher says that the students mix different theoretical trends and critical approaches. The reasons, she adds, are results of problems with the students, the teachers and the curriculum. The students are immature, not prepared for the university, they do not know why they are studying. The literary theory teachers see theory as a means in itself and forget about the literary text. As an extension of the problems with the teachers, the curriculum does not provide the students with literary experience before dealing with theory. As a result, they do not develop a solid basis in theory. For her, each departmental area is thought only in terms of the number of hours allocated for its disciplines, and does not consider the students' formation as a whole in the Course.

It seems that the teachers' lack of objectives in common is a great issue in the unsuccessful continuation of their students' literary analysis. Some of the teachers have affirmed that they do not know how the students link the disciplines, but they point at instrumentalizing the students for further analysis as their main objective. Even the English literature teachers say that they do not know how their colleagues

develop the work they consider basic for their own classes. We cannot deny that establishing aims in common among teachers and researchers in a specific university department is very complicated. Meetings are conducted and criteria are settled, written down and signed by all its members, but nobody can assure that they are put into practice. Most of the times each teacher thinks about her/his own discipline as if it were a single course, and not part of a whole preparation of the students, although s/he formally agrees that there should be some unity in the formation of the future professionals. In the same way that many teachers do not bridge the gap between descriptive and interpretive analysis, as suggested by one of the teachers, they do not seem to cross the bridges that connect the several fragments of a department. Curiously, professionals that deal with language, and try to make it as scientific as possible, are trapped by its complexities.

Let us suppose, though, that the teachers can establish common goals and really work in the direction of them. How desirable would such a situation be? Would we not, once more, be trying to force literature into moulds that do not suit it? Here we come to scientificism and the unstable character of literature again. One of the teachers has pointed at the fragmented aspect of the Letras department. The word *fragment* has a negative connotation that does not necessarily fit it. Fragment may indicate diversity as well, plurality of meanings, something that we celebrate in literature, but not in the literature class. Education in general seeks totalization, the unity of all knowledge in the pursuit of truth. The university is taken as a perfect place for that, where the academics have the necessary freedom from the external constraints to acquire knowledge (Lyotard in Usher 1994:160-62). We repeat the classical situation in which teachers believe that students should always learn what they have taught them with no external interferences, in the same way that one person hands an object to another. The world we live in is formed by fragments, and the desire of unity does not seem possible to be accomplished. If we direct our goals to that, frustration will be inevitable. Unity will always mean privileging one side or the other,

and, regarding the literary studies in the Letras Course, nobody seems to be willing that. Then, it is easier to continue developing each one's fragment, but with the illusion of totality. Conflict is eliminated instead of being dealt with in a more open way.

Finally, we seem to undervalue our students' capacity of thinking. As it was pointed out by one of the teachers, the student is already a reader of the world s/he lives in. The conception of apprentices as *tabula rasa* is past. Exposing the feared fragments in the classes, dealing with differences in a more relaxed manner, may transform the classes into something more "touchable" for students and teachers than the exaggerated preoccupation with the scientific rigour of the literary appreciation.

Notes

- 1 I prefer not to identify the university where I developed my research for preserving the identity of the teachers. This university in particular offers three different options of Letras courses: Letras Vernáculas (Portuguese Language and Literature), Habilitação Dupla - Inglês (Portuguese and English Languages and Literatures) and Habilitação Dupla - Francês (Portuguese and French Languages and Literature). All of them are Licenciatura courses, so all the students will become teachers, although the pedagogical project of the course settles the aim of preparing the students for other professional fields, such as editing, for example. My focus of interest is the Habilitação Dupla - Inglês option, and all the references from now on will be to this option.
- 2 An article with the analysis of the interviews was presented at the XIV ENPULI, Encontro Nacional de Professores Universitários de Língua Inglesa, in Belo Horizonte, July 1997, in the pannel section "O Ensino Crítico de Literatura".
- 3 Seven Literary Theory teachers were interviewed in September 1997. Two of them are presently teaching the Habilitação Dupla - Inglês option. There are two disciplines regarding the teaching of literary theory and literary criticism in the Course. The first one, "Introdução aos Estudos Literários" (Introduction to Literary Studies) is taught in the first year, and its objective is to provide the students with means for the literary analysis, formalizing the study of the literary text based on theoretical concepts. The student should also produce analytical-interpretative

texts, according to the scientific discourse. The second discipline, taught in the second year, is "Teoria da Literatura" (Literary Theory), whose objective is to develop further and deeper the concepts studied in the first year, now according to the main critical trends, from Aristotle to the 20th century (Russian Formalism, Literature and Sociology and Reader Response Criticism). In the next three years of the Course, Anglo-American Literature will be taught: short stories in the third year, novel in the fourth, and poetry and drama in the fifth. Brazilian and Portuguese Literatures are also studied in the Course.

- 4 In *Literary Theory. An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1983.
- 5 In "The Resistance to Theory". Rice E., P., Waugh, P. (ed.). *Modern Literary Theory. A Reader*. 3ed. London: Arnold, 1996: 198-214.
- 6 In "Direitos Humanos e Literatura". Comissão de Justiça e Paz. *Direitos Humanos e ...* São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1989: 107-126.

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