TRANSPERSONAL PSYCHOLOGY IN LITERARY STUDIES

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Abstract

The paper examines the dead end reached by literary theory at the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. A previously suggested solution, that of using Viktor Frankl's Existential Analysis, is expanded to include the rest of Transpersonal Psychology. The contribution of Ken Wilber to the field of Transpersonal Psychology is underlined due to its enormous unifying potential and wide range. It is seen as the best starting point for an integral literary theory.

Keywords: transpersonal psychology, literary theory, Viktor Frankl, existential analysis, Ken Wilber

In a previous article, we have pointed out the necessity of introducing Existential Analysis or Logotherapy—the scientific approach pioneered by Viktor Frankl and developed by such prominent scientists as Alfried Längle—in order to bring together and make sense of virtually mutually exclusive interpretations and approaches that exist today on the literary market (Sfâriac, 2006: 174-181).

This article intends to expand the scope and range of Existential Analysis. Since the latter belongs to the field of Transpersonal Psychology—Frankl is actually considered as one of its founders—it would be beneficial to include in our approach the contribution of other major figures of Transpersonal Psychology, such as William James, Carl Jung, Abraham Maslow, Roberto Assagioli, Michael Washburn and especially Ken Wilber.

Before showing the advantages of using Transpersonal Psychology in Literary Studies, let us have a look at the approaches currently employed by literary critics. Deconstruction, to take the first critical theory that comes to mind, emphasizes the fact that meaning depends upon context, on the one hand, and that contexts are infinite, on the other hand. Therefore, writers, critics and readers, generally speaking, are in no position of controlling meaning. The impossibility of reaching a final, stable and valid meaning or at least a partial meaning that can be seen by the critical community as genuine and useful in building upon has led to a dead end. Mutually exclusive interpretations compete on the literary market, none being able to get the upper hand as they all lack the prestige and reliability of Truth and readily dismiss each other. As a consequence, the critic is well equipped to tear down, to annihilate any "grand narrative," actually any previous interpretation of a work of literature since it is easy to uncover yet

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another context that was overlooked by the other critics. At the same time, however, our Terminator critic finds herself unable to build, to create and follow a perspective, to finally reach and observe a system of values. Without the latter, we are left with one value and one religion: the Self. The pursuit of narcissistic self-centeredness in art, criticism and everywhere else, for that matter (culture at large, politics, social and economic life), is not going to lead us to anything but nihilism, chaos and the famous fragmentation and fracture of Postmodernism.

Things are hardly different with other critical approaches. Marxist critics—such as Terry Eagleton or Fredric Jameson—seem to be haunted by the tormenting suspicion that every context, heavily informed by its political-economic background as it necessarily is, contains the seeds of oppression; the critic's job is to uncover the more or less subtle ways in which exploitation and repression, inherent in the capitalist system, become represented in a work of art. The latter becomes more or less a political instrument whose aims are, at best, ambiguous: apparently, they attempt to restore the dignity and freedom of human beings by pointing out the economic and political constraints upon them; on the other hand, however, they overemphasize the role of material conditions and downplay the importance of the spiritual side, of the various levels of the spectrum of consciousness. This only leads to nihilism, dissolution of all values and even anti-social behavior since Marxists portray capitalist society as sick, diseased, characterized by repressive institutions and practices—a nest of destruction and overkill that stands stubbornly between humans and the accomplishment of their most legitimate and dear dreams. The dead end is obvious as no solution is offered and all other societies—including Marxist regimes—are also heavily criticized. Moreover, Marxist critics seem to enjoy to the fullest the advantages of the capitalist system.

Many other critical approaches share this tormenting suspicion: feminist criticism, post-colonial criticism, queer theory and others point their finger at how authors, consciously or unconsciously, reveal in their work the inherent oppression of the capitalist system, in terms of: racism, imperialism, sexism, phallocentrism, logocentrism, etc. At first glance, they all seem to protect the self, especially the self of marginalized minorities of all kinds, from numberless repressive contexts; in reality they construct the self in negative terms ("I am not that"). The problem arising is insoluble: although everybody knows what the self is *not*, no one seems to understand what the self actually *is*. To use the words of Erich Fromm, they search for a freedom "from," instead of a freedom "for" (Fromm, 1947). The end result is more ambiguity, more chaos, more fragmentation, more narcissistic display.

What literary studies now need is a theory that leaves behind postmodern nihilism and narcissism and empty struggles for power and restores a true meaning to art and criticism. A theory that is able to establish a dialogue among different, even opposed approaches and restore the work of art to its deserved and desirable position: that of a source of harmony and meaning in society.

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The best candidate for such a demanding task can only be, it appears, transpersonal psychology. Also known as the Fourth Force in psychology (the other three forces being psychoanalysis, behaviorism and humanistic psychology), it began with the impossibility of the latter to account satisfactorily for peak experiences and metavalues, for the yearning for transcendence and spiritual fulfillment. One of its founders, Abraham Maslow, underscored this change towards a transpersonal approach by adding a new level to his already famous pyramid of basic human needs to show that self-actualization and personal growth are not the ultimate goal of human existence but steps toward the ultimate human need and goal: self-transcendence. He noted that transpersonal experiences are likely to produce long-lasting changes in the individual, such as the adherence to metavalues that are perceived as intrinsically real: wholeness, perfection, completion, justice, aliveness, richness, simplicity, beauty, goodness, uniqueness, effortlessness, playfulness, truth, and self-sufficiency. Maslow convincingly demonstrated that they are as necessary to psychic health as vitamins are to physical health. Needless to say, they are universal, not depending upon sex, religion, age, race, etc. Hence, they may represent a cohesive, unitive force, able to counteract the self-centeredness and nihilism to be found both in 21st century Western society and literary theory. Their influence can truly gain universal appreciation as they take advantage of the latest developments in science (quantum physics, biology, etc), bridge the gap between science, art and religion, and are informed by all major spiritual traditions, Eastern and Western.

Other major theorists (and practitioners) of transpersonal psychology are Stanislav Grof, Roberto Assagioli, Viktor Frankl, Stephen LaBerge, Michael Washburn and, last but not least, Ken Wilber. Indeed, Wilber is the most influential voice dealing with the issue of consciousness and of its evolution. In his view, major sciences, on the one hand, and spiritual traditions, on the other, paint a picture of the evolution of consciousness throughout human history.

According to Wilber all things, animate and inanimate evolve. The entire Universe is in a process of evolution as it is interconnected at all levels and represents the workings of Spirit, through matter, biological life, and mind. Thus, humans stand for a higher level of this process as evolution is for the first time conscious of itself. But by no means have they achieved a final destination—evolution continues, through humans, towards ever higher degrees of consciousness until all duality, all dichotomy is gone, including the difference between Self and Awareness.

Wilber's most important contribution—in terms of our concern for literary theory—remains his holistic philosophy. The latter includes everything, even the knowing Self and its struggle to achieve an ever higher degree of consciousness through the realization of universal connectedness of all things and beings. As we live in a world of holons, of elements that are at the same time both parts (of more complex elements) and wholes, the work of art is yet another holon and so is the critical act. All theories of literature—representational, intentional, formalist, reception and response, symptomatic—are correct within their own context. Their problem consists in their

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appreciation of their context as the only valid or primordial. This leads to mutually exclusive claims in literary theory. In Wilber's own words:

But the holonic nature of reality - contexts within contexts forever – means that each of these theories is part of a nested series of truths. Each is true when highlighting its own context, but false when it tries to deny reality or significance to other existing contexts. And an integral art and literary theory - covering the nature, meaning, and interpretation of art - will of necessity be a holonic theory: concentric circles of nested truths and interpretations. The study of holons is the study of nested truths.[…] An integral theory of art and literary interpretation is thus the multidimensional analysis of the various contexts in which - and by which - art exists and speaks to us: in the artist, the artwork, the viewer, and the world at large. Privileging no single context, it invites us to be unendingly open to ever-new horizons, which broaden our own horizons in the process, liberating us from the narrow straits of our favorite ideology and the prison of our isolated selves. (Wilber, 1997: 87-126)

Thus, Wilber admits that meaning is context-bound and that contexts are infinite. Each context adds new meaning but this new interpretation should not be seen as a denial of a previous context or of its importance. On the contrary, it enriches previous contexts and contributes to the multidimensional analysis envisaged by Wilber. It is precisely this quality, the ability to use apparently contradictory and mutually exclusive interpretations provided by different contexts that turns transpersonal psychology into a valuable tool for literary criticism.

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