Communication and Argumentation in the Public Sphere **ISSN 1843 - 7893**
(2007) Year I Issue 3
Galati University Press
Editors: Anca Gâță & Adela Drăgan
Proceedings of the Conference *Public Space* vs *Private Space*, THIRD VOLUME
April 12th-14th, 2007 – "Dunărea de Jos" University, Galați Romania
pp. 456-463

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Media(ted) Discourse. Literary Representations

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Introduction

Communication has been defined along the years in various ways. Worth retaining are: communication as symbol, discourse, language; as understanding; as interaction or relation; as the reduction of uncertainty; as process, transfer, transmission; as link, union; as common features; as channel, bearer, route; as memory, stock; as discriminating answer; as power; as stimulus, intention, moment and situation (in Dance1970: 201-210). More recently, and in strict connection with many, if not all the terms mentioned above, one speaks of literature as an act of communication. Public in form and private in essence, literature presupposes a number of communication facilitators and communication distorters, whose interplay constitutes itself into the politics of fiction, reflective of the fictions of politics.

In short, the present paper starts from the following axioms: 1. Literature is an act of communication; 2. Communication involves influence; 3. Influence is characteristic of politics; 4. Politics is also observable at the level of language; 5. Language sometimes functions as a barrier in communication. It then raises the questions of *what* literature communicates or, more importantly, *how* literature communicates, to finally consider a particular case, the actual literary text at work.

1. The Language of Literature

Problematic, vague and plural in meaning, the term *discourse* cannot however be avoided when a cultural aspect or event (and literature, if anything, is one) is under focus. Traditionally, it refers to a serious discussion or piece of writing on a particular subject. It is also used in connection with the language used in particular kinds of speech or writing. Furthermore, it has come to denote any self-contained body of ideas, opinions, approaches, methods with a language of its own. In literary studies, discourse has many different meanings, from that of *voice*, to that of *text*, with the obvious emphasis on artistry or craftsmanship. In other words, literature on the whole may be defined as discourse or as a sum of discourses, an illustration / special use of discursive patterns.

The planned unplanned discourses of literature are oriented towards successfully reproducing verbal spontaneity, the following aspects being foregrounded (in Lombardo & al. 1999: 264-268):

- In everyday conversation, language remains banal and formulaic in nature. In literature, this is used as an intriguing starting point, in the sense that it is preserved as such, the absences being sooner allowed to present positions rather than actual words serving the purpose.
- Actual conversation is usually garbled, with other speakers joining in, with false starts occurring, with half-sentences left floating in mid-air. Literary texts need to keep

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things separate and, eventually, vertically juxtapose a series of dialogues instead of horizontally tracking the lot.

- In real life, phatic devices are omnipresent in interpersonal communication. Literature generally attempts to preserve this characteristic, but this comes to the disadvantage of the factual component.
- Real life role play is also meant to be illustrated, but the limitations (or imposed selections) of a literary text cannot encompass the whole range of lifetime experiences except through allusions to it.
- Conversation in the real world usually asks of its participants to quickly adjust to a series of spontaneously-derived subtopics; the literary aim is to capture this spontaneity, without the reader's losing hold of the intended message.
- Pauses in actual conversation are brief, whereas in literary terms, dramatic pauses (rendered by means of blanks, dotted spaces etc) become a must so as to build tension and amplify the significance of utterances and situations.
- Creative language, occurring in real dialogue as well, is developed fully inside the literary text to justify its literariness.
- Meanings are almost never expressed through one channel only; in literary discourse, structure and form function as non-verbal elements, others being simply suggested by means of word-descriptions.

Successfully, though artificially, reproducing genuine language, literature remains indebted to the tenets of realism (with its accentuating the necessity of verisimilitude), despite the fashionable modernist claims of literature separating itself from the real and revealing its artistic scaffolding in order to bear less and less resemblance to the historical (that is coherent) description of reality.

The language of literature is also characterised by a specific *grammar* which serves to delineate the common ground of all literary texts and practices and, as a result, to set the norms for communication on literary issues. Narrative practice in particular, as mirrored by the literary text, is the object of narratology, which formulates a literary grammar presupposing familiar categories like *tense*, *mood* and *voice* – used to interpret *how* narrative is constructed. [1] The order or succession of events, their speed and frequency, the zero, internal or external focalization of narrative, its diegetic levels (the complexity of the literary discourse) ask for careful consideration if the goal is understanding the mediation of linguistic, ideological and behavioural realities.

2. Media(tion)

Besides the traditional awareness of literary language, practices and techniques being embedded at the level of the text, contemporary culture has brought about an acute awareness of genre and media crossovers. Readers today not only accept, but increasingly expect epic to be processed into lyric, dramatic monologue or stage drama, poems to be used in physical theatre, drama to be turned into film poems, novels to become cinematic translations, all to be televised etc. – in an attempt at translating, actually and figuratively, cultures for the benefit of an ever larger audience (Hardwick 2000: 113).

Literary discourse, implying more than linguistic encoding, carries an artistic, cultural component whose role is, on the one hand, to reflect on the complexity of the world that is and, on the other hand, to construct a discursively kaleidoscopic world which stirs imagination and invites at playing the literary game. A cultural medium, literature is steadily losing ground in favour of more accessible forms of mass communication, television holding first place in this respect. On the contemporary stage, the mediating media has contaminated all aspects of everyday life. Its immediate success is due to its rapid transmission of data, its simplification of

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content, its simultaneity or the capacity of creating an impression of plurality of experience. In contrast, literary texts seem unending, elitist and artificial or far-fetched. In our media culture, where the intensity of living has been replaced by mediated surrogates, it is not surprising therefore that the novel has abandoned high-modernist experimental practices and techniques, and has returned to the more stable values of the literary past, to realism in essence. Unfortunately however, the reality it mirrors is that of the dominance of the media, which it cannot but process at the level of its text. It turns out, in the end, that literature itself mediates the mediation, complicating things even further and moving away from any foreseeable victory against the mass media.

Mass media (a paradoxical term which actually refers to a unilateral mass phenomenon) is public only in as far as the emission/encoding of the message is concerned; when it comes to its reception/decoding, that usually takes place in a private environment denying any possibility of retort. The literature of today, especially the novel, takes up this silencing of personal voices and the impact of the public media upon private spaces, advertising its own, better role in opening up to the world and having that world assumed in terms which satisfy individual hopes and wishes.

Benefiting from the cover of fictionality, the realistic novel, among the other modes of writing, can openly tackle taboo, that which social norm or prejudice does not allow to express. An art form, it is constructed in ideology as much as it is in language, being an act of (political) communication inside which the referential truth value of the text is conceived of as being potentially irrelevant. And it is specifically this feature that creates multiple vistas for approaching the text, observing the web at the heart of its textuality, listening to the voices that reflect on the social, political, philosophical, historical and psychological dimensions – all re-writable because already re-written.

Literary texts may be intended by an author and read by readers as *descriptions* of social, political or psychological reality, because the reader is able (and the text presents no obstacle) to match the semantic structure of the text with the cognitive structure of his knowledge about reality. Some believe that fictional statements are subsumed to the class of *counterfactual statements*, a convention which regulates literary communication as a system of norms by blocking up the direct reference between fictive worlds and the normative actual one. (Van Dijk 1972: 337) Others (Marxist critics like Lukacs, Adorno, Benjamin [2]) regard the world of literature as a more or less true and politically accentuated description of state affairs in the world outside at a certain time, as acting within that reality and as opened to politics.

What remains a universally accepted truth is that literature has always presupposed, besides a transcription of the present, either a re-writing of the past or a pre-visioning of the future. Its capacity to melt chronology into fluid subjectivity has led to its functioning as a 'mystic writing pad' which helps the text gain in depth and carry the traces of other worlds, other discourses. If one agrees that politics shapes history and that history is revisited in fiction, one can easily argue that, aside from its own politics, literature cannot avoid the political substratum – model for literary representations of ideology, power structures, verbal and non-verbal manipulation strategies, totalitarian and democratic patterns of expression.

When approaching a literary text from the perspective of communicational attributes, one needs to relate it also to the broader context of literary communication and evaluate it as potentially autonomous, a work of art which can only be adequately received if and when the reader obeys the rule of fictional discourse/communication according to which literary texts do not deal with facts, but constitute possible worlds similar to the one that is, yet altered/distorted with a view to passing the intended judgement. It is therefore interesting to observe the way in

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which a global history-making event becomes his-story or a story of his own making (as events always do and as literature means to represent).

Communication, including the literary one, presupposes influence. Influencing, a mediation phenomenon, is what lies at the basis of ultimately any text, by means of which we communicate and are communicated in ways which, most often, escape our capacity to control the image of ourselves that we project onto the outer world and the receivers in it. This is also due to the fact that, in any communication situation, factors other than the verbal ones also contribute to transmitting information. In other words, we communicate even when we say nothing, discourses becoming thus all the more appealing as a consequence of the gaps, the breaks, the fissures (the slippery ground) they contain.

Influencing techniques like persuasion, propaganda and manipulation – inherent to communication and politics – are also characteristic of literary discourse, shaped in keeping with intentions of various kinds which are recognised as long as shared, though arbitrary, systems of signs are operative. Like political discourse, the literary one is constructed in keeping with the norms and processes of linguistic tradition, but is mainly oriented towards attaining a pre-established, well thought out goal. As Françoise Thom puts it, *we do not talk to say something, but to obtain an effect*. (1993: 35) Thus, language-as-communication – derived from the necessities of social contact and able to strengthen social relations – may also serve to negate its specific finality and have negative effects culminating in the dissolution of genuine social contact and the distrust in words, in communication. Frequently, political discourse functions as a discursive repetition of semantically empty syntagms, being a strategy for distorting communication, one which does not ask for the interlocutor/listener's right to retort or to intervene in the message, therefore similar to the mediatic/mediating phenomenon.

3. A Case in Point

The novel chosen to illustrate literary media(tion) is Iain Banks's *Dead Air*. Misleadingly, the book's title and the cover image reiterated inside the book (a two chimney old factory against a bleak sky on which a plane can be seen flying) communicate in the direction of urban pollution and desolation. The first lines however provide an oblique clue, being centred on failing hi-tech communication:

'You're breaking up.'
'—orry?'
'Never mind.'
'—at?'
'See you later.' I folded the phone.

(Banks 2003: 3)

Still in difficulty (whether aware of it or not), the reader plunges into the text, intimately interacting with it and discovering the central character at a wedding party, throwing things from a balcony just for fun and being joined by most of the guests present until, rather abruptly, she is told about more phones ringing at once, as if *for some bizarre reason everybody [here] had something urgent they had set alarms for, a little after two o'clock on a Tuesday in September*. (op. cit: 24) Incoherent news is making its way to the forefront of the novel text, indicating synchronicity and historicity all at once:

'What?'
'New York?'
'The what?'
'Where?'

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'The World Trade Center?' Isn't that—?'

'A plane? What, a big plane, like a Jumbo or something?'

'You mean, like, the two big, um, skyscrapers?'

(24)

At this point, public knowledge helps decode the message encrypted and the literary text starts functioning as a filter half way between the reader and the representation of someone else's reality. The title starts connoting death, the cover symbolising and supporting it.

Few pages after, the text makes another sudden move and rounds itself up against the definition of *dead air*: *[it] is the terrifically technical term us radio boffins use for silence.* (Banks 2003: 31-32) From here on, language stops functioning as a vehicle for communication and begins playing its disturbing role as a barrier between people trapped in society. Silence speaks incredibly faster and more appropriately about the unnameable, inviting at reading in between the lines rather than considering the obvious. Additionally, radio waves, being 'on air' offers fresh perspectives on the communication phenomenon, with the protagonist, Ken Nott or *can/not* (working for Capital Live!, a local London radio), engaging in conversations on a wide range of topics with an even wider range of listeners.

Cowardly avoiding face-to-face confrontation (probably the reason why he chose to work for the radio in the first place), but proud of his professional accomplishments, Ken (the first person narrator) describes himself as being

paid to be controversial or just plain rude. I'm a shock jock. The Shock Jock, Jock the Shock, if you prefer your definitions in tabloid form.

(88)

His work place, full of *screens, buttons and keyboards*, *CD-players, e-mail screens and the callers' details screen*, resembles a commodities market that only the presence of the microphone might save from being mistaken for one (*idem:* 29). It is this radio studio and, similarly, television studios or film sets, highly developed, but artificial, de-humanised environments that the business (or illness?) of living is transferred to, that replaces actual experiences or conversations, that blurs the frontier separating the real from the illusory so that it becomes more and more difficult to tell them apart.

In Jean Baudrillard's terms [3], it could be said that, what Iain Banks's novel concentrates on is a critique of technology in the era of media reproduction, the loss of the real and the emergence of the culture of hyperreality, in which artificially constructed models determine the real and undermine it at the same time, allowing for mutual interference. In the depthless world of simulacra, reality is banned in favour of appearance, the real being now defined in terms of the media in which it evolves.

The incredible 9/11 event, at once real and virtual makes Ken go on air, managing to dodge censure, by saying

'As it stands, what happened last week wasn't an attack on democracy; if it was, they'd have crashed a plane into Al Gore's house. That's all for today. Talk to you tomorrow, if I'm still here. News next after these vital pieces of consumerist propaganda.'

(32)

As to other responses, symptomatic might be the following:

'It's Pearl Harbour II,' we said. 'They'll fucking nuke Baghdad.' 'I can't believe this. I just can't believe I'm seeing this.' 'Where's Superman? Where's Batman? Where's Spiderman?' 'Where's Bruce Willis, or Tom Cruise, or Arnie, or Stallone?' 'The barbarians have seized the narrative.'

(33)

What Banks' characters seem to be doing is summarising (maybe not accidentally) the contemporary cultural situation with its MacDonaldising quality,

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observable at all levels of society: from the superficial one of the behaviour of consumers, to deeper ones of changes in beliefs. (Ritzer 1993). Within it, values and practices – noticeable in symbols, heroes and rituals – interact to communicate on the media(ted) global village [4]. Symbols are, in short, semiotic signs which characterise a particular group (words, gestures, objects, dress etc), their function being that of communicating meaning(s); they remain superficial since, like fashion, they are subject to change. Heroes are generally defined as cultural role models constructed with the aid of the cinema and television screens; they contaminate local cultures everywhere; American (Superman, Terminator) or Americanised European (Pinocchio, Dracula even), they have colonised our virtual, simulated reality. Rituals are context-dependent culturally appropriate patterns of interaction; superfluous in reaching desired aims, they remain essential from the social point of view, being visible in verbal and non-verbal communication (ice-breaking techniques, mode of address etc.) (Katan 2004)

Symbols, heroes and rituals (cultural identity in short) have always been constructed, deconstructed or reconstructed in the novel. The literary representations of the three (as pan-cultural practices) governs the present day culture, *Dead Air* being no exception, only approaching the issue from a parodic, acid standpoint.

The way in which a historical reality like the 9/11 terrorist attack on the New York Twin Towers turns into fiction(s) becomes, as cynical as it might seem, a metafictional space containing a self-reflective textual commentary on the nature of the world as one made up of story-tellers and their story-tellings, appropriate for literary translation. The political implications of the mentioned topic (with its myth-making and myth-breaking powers) may, in the context of literature, be considered in connection with the latter's own inner politics, observable at the level of its 'grammar' (a structure, therefore a centre, hence authoritarian). In narratological (literary-grammatical) terms, the excerpt serves to anticipate the suggested reading pattern, its proleptic force overshadowing every other social or political nuance the novel text breathes of – and there are numerous such cases: Czechoslovakia during the Second World War (238), the Nazi regime (89), the Holocaust and its denial (138), UN resolutions ignored by Israel (280), the invasion of Afghanistan (76), the supporting of Saddam Hussein (77), The New Missile Defence (77) etc.

Made to fit the *Breaking News* format or develop into talk show debate, these and other sensitive issues are trapped inside the narrative, protected only by the text's defining itself as fiction (in a manner further emphasised by the reference to *barbarians having seized it*, which spells out Salman Rushdie's by now world famous 'case' [5]). The untrue (untruthful) versions of the world captured by art/literature are indicated as such by numerous other, oblique it is true, details like the discussion Ken Nott has with Craig, a friend of his, on Stanley Kubrick's 1968 film *2001: A Space Odyssey* [6]:

> 'Take Science Fiction. What, according to you, is the only technically credible SF film?'
>
> '2001'
>
> Craig sighed. 'Why?'
>
> 'Because Kubrick doesn't allow noises in space. And because he was a genius, he knew how to use the no-sound thing, so you get the brilliant bit where what's-his-name blows himself out of the wee excursion pod thing and into the airlock and bounces around inside the open airlock until he hits the door-close and air-in controls and it's only then you get the sound feeding in; magnificent.'
>
> (322)

Speaking of silence (!) and the death of God, Kubrick's text (inside Banks') is resonant of Orwell's [7] in the sense that it foresees a shuddering future as if it were possible for fiction to dictate reality rather than the other way around. At this point, Orwell's name brings to mind the famous motto introducing the essay entitled

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England, Your England (1940): *As I write, highly civilised human beings are flying overhead trying to kill me* or the memorable statement in *Why I Write* (1946): *The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude* – both announcing, before their time, literary theoretical orientations that have become the norm after the publication of their works. [8]

Part of the huge global literary intertext, *Dead Air* is resonant of discourses whose variety signals the collision of worlds and world views, the collapse of civilisation and the headaching world wide web. Its linguistic mimesis and its narrative grammar make it pleasant reading, although it disconcerts through the issues raised, especially through the accusation of complacency ironically formulated in the last chapter, *The Scottish Verdict*:

> There is this verdict, which is unique, as far as I know, to the Scottish legal system, and remained distinct from the English one even for the three centuries of the full Union with the rest of the UK. It's called Not Proven.
>
> It means that the jury isn't going to go as far as pronouncing the defendant Not Guilty, but that the prosecuting authorities simply have not proved their case.
>
> (431)

The 9th of September 2001 has proved, however, its having become a global cultural sign/public space, shared and deeply inscribed in the collective consciousness, one that needs constant revisiting and reminding, through all media, literature included.

Final Remarks

Contemporary literature processes the cultural reality of today. It follows that it carries the traces of identity/politics, high technology, economy of reproduction, virtual reality and media capitalism – to name only a few of the present day features of global culture, being a powerful medium of communication, much like the other, consecrated media (TV, radio, newspapers). One may therefore justly say that, if a literary text focuses on the media(ting) phenomenon, its word mirrors the world on the one hand and sheds light on its own inner status in a metaliterary way on the other.

Literature is public and private, realistic and artistic; in it, experiences and discourses are mediated (filtered, subjective, limited), its referentiality allowing the constant slipping of the signifier under the signified; it has its own deliberate architecture, specific grammar, special use of language, specialised terminology which need looking into; it poses problems which it does not solve, advancing food for thought, it is… *not proven*.

Notes

[1] See Gérard Genette (*Narrative Discourse*), for instance, who speaks of the temporal relations between narrative and story as *tense*, of the modalities of narrative representation as *mood* and of the narrating as implicated in the narrative as *voice*.

[2] Whose theories are presented in Raman Selden and Peter Widdowson, *Contemporary Literary Theory* – 1993.

[3] In his *Simulations*, Baudrillard speaks of contemporary culture as lacking depth, exemplifying his theory by referring to television and its constructing fluid, credible worlds on the screen. More recently, he has made a thought provoking statement in support of this, describing the Gulf War as nothing but a media event.

[4] Various models of culture have been proposed by social anthropologists like Edward T. Hall (whose iceberg theory emphasises the visible or technical layer, on the one hand, and the invisible or formal and informal layers, on the other); Geert Hofstede (who underlines two

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cultural levels: that of values and that of practices – noticeable in symbols, heroes and rituals); Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner (who speak of the outer, middle and core layers, respectively presupposing: artefacts and products, norms and values, basic assumptions).

[5] 'The Rushdie Affair' is the label used to refer to a singular and disturbing accusation of blasphemy through fiction. On Salman Rushdie's publication, in 1988, of *The Satanic Verses*, extremist Muslims started formulating threats on his life and that of his family, on the basis of what they considered to be a direct insult addressed to the Quoran. Interesting for our discussion is Rushdie's self defence in court, one which he shaped into a subtle, elitist (useless consequently) attack against his attackers: he accused the latter of taking fiction for reality, of having poor reading skills and of having missed the central, artistic, core. His intention of rewriting history (or his-story), harmless in essence, has started too early it seems: with indications (also present in previous writings like *Midnight's Children* – 1981) of the possible errors which might have occurred in taking down The Prophesies.

[6] Highly disputed, the film remains a ground-breaking cultural event, whose three allegorical diegetic levels (inspired from Homer's *Odyssey*, Arthur C. Clarke's man-machine symbiosis and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus Spake Zarathustra*) foreground evolution: from ape to man and overman. The major barrier is God who, once fought and killed, can no longer prevent the emergence of the new, supreme being.

[7] In *Nineteen Eighty- Four* (1949).

[8] Deconstruction, among others, proclaims, through Derrida in *Of Grammatology*, the superiority of writing, which does not presuppose a presence as speech does and, for this reason, is disliked by philosophers who see the authority of truth undermined (as in THE word, emitted by God)

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