THE DISCOURSE OF LITERATURE - BETWEEN IMPRESSION AND REFLECTION

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Abstract: *The paper aims to survey the literary phenomenon from the end of the nineteenth century to the contemporary period, trying to demonstrate that both modernist and postmodernist, as well as contemporary fiction represent a form of knowledge, of self and other, either through impression, by plunging in depth, or through reflection, by mirroring, and thus help us reflect upon the condition of the individual as part of a cultural context.*

Keywords: *impression, reflection, literary discourse.*

As a person having taught literature for several decades, I have been less concerned with finding an answer to "Literature where from?" than to "Literature where to?" It is the latter question that has prompted this paper, in which I shall attempt to survey the literary phenomenon from the end of the nineteenth century to the contemporary period starting from an assumption formulated at the beginning of the twentieth century by a modernist writer much interested in the fate and future of literature.

> It is doubtful whether in the course of the centuries, though we have learnt much about making machines, we have learnt anything about making literature. We do not come to write better; all that we can be said to do is to keep moving, now a little in this direction, now in that, but with a circular tendency should the whole course of the track be viewed from a sufficiently lofty pinnacle." (Woolf, 1984: 157)

I am particularly interested in seeing how modernist, postmodernist or contemporary literature constitute themselves into a form of knowledge, of self and other, either through impression, by plunging in depth, or through reflection, by mirroring, and thus help us reflect upon and understand the condition of the individual in a cultural context.

When studying literature, we are tempted to focus on literary texts by investigating the meaning creation techniques employed in their making. More often than not we tend to disregard the fact that all these techniques are part of more elaborate discursive strategies and that "'[d]iscourse', as opposed to text, is language in use. Its meaning exists and becomes relevant in context for the language users, who perceive it as purposeful, meaningful, and connected, in other words as coherent." (Dobrinescu, 2001: 48) I thus claim that literature can still prove its indispensability as a cultural product if it is approached as a form of communication, as one of the most efficient and powerful types of discourse, whose specificity resides in the "fact that it takes place in a larger cultural system" (Dobrinescu, 2001: 43).

"Impression" represents a turning point in the history of Western culture. It first imposed itself as a concept in visual arts, when a group of young artists decided to reject the canon imposed by the French salon and initiated a form of art

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capable of revealing what had been previously invisible. Impression is central to that art that strives to become a form of knowledge, of access to the essential meaning of things, beyond the visible. "[E]rasing the line between superficial appearances and deep knowledge, the impression brings richer connections." (Matz, 2004: 17)

Writers soon embraced impression as defining of the new aesthetics of modernism, which tried to "fuse the transcendent subjectivity of romanticism and the omniscient objectivity of realism toward a kind of Utopian compensation for modern alienation" (Matz, 2004: 13).

In the Preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Conrad offers one of the best accounts of how impression functions, although he does not name it specifically.

> My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, make you feel - it is before all, to make you see. That, and no more, and it is everything. If I succeed, you shall find there according to your deserts: encouragement, consolation, fear, charm - all you demand - and, perhaps, also that glimpse of truth for which you have forgotten to ask. (Conrad)

What is interesting from the point of view of the one interested in seeing literature as discourse is that for Conrad impression connects the sensorial and the essential, while at the same time connecting the writer and the reader in the process of meaning creation.

For Henry James the novel is an impression, which also means subjectivity of view rendered in the most objective manner.

> A novel is in its broadest definition a personal, direct impression of life; that, to begin with, constitutes its value, which is greater or less according to the intensity of the impression. But there will be no intensity at all, and therefore no value, unless there is freedom to feel and say. (James)

Impression is also central to Woolf's approach to literature. It is through impression that the modernist novel breaks with the tradition of realism by foregrounding the inner self to the detriment of the external one. It is far more important how the self subjectively responds to the external stimuli, which gives our uniqueness, rather than what roles the self plays in a social environment.

> Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this.' Examine for a moment an ordinary mind on an ordinary day. The mind receives a myriad impressions - trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old. (Woolf, 2004: 160)

The modernist paradigm is constructed starting from a number of questions which definitely account for the epistemological dimension of literature.

> What is there to be known?; Who knows it?; How do they know it, and with what degree of certainty?; How is knowledge transmitted from one knower to another, and with what degree of reliability?; How does the object of knowledge change as it passes from knower to knower?; What are the limits of the knowable?" (McHale, 1987: 9)

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Driven by the desire to reveal the innermost motions of the individual, the modernists probed deep into the realms of consciousness, seldom, if ever, explored before. They used literary discourse as a form of knowing the darkest recesses of the self, plunging as deep as the unconscious. With each experiment, the modernists got closer to the limits of the knowable, until they eventually reached the bottom line of meaningfulness. Incessant searchers for meaning, they eventually exhausted most possibilities of "making it new." This was clearly expressed by Woolf in *The Waves*, some time before the advent of postmodernism. Woolf signals the exhaustion of the paradigms and the inability of the discourse of literature to refresh existing schemata. (Cook in Dobrinescu, 2001: 49-50)

> My book, stuffed with phrases, has dropped to the floor. It lies under the table, to be swept up by the charwoman when she comes wearily at dawn looking for scraps of paper, old tram tickets, and here and there a note screwed into a ball and left with the litter to be swept up. What is the phrase for the moon? And the phrase for love? By what name do we call death? (Woolf, 1992: 226)

Consequently, the solution Woolf proposes has to do with what later on would be seen as a shift from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic. (Hassan, 1982: 267-268)

> I need a little language such as lovers use, words of one syllable such as children speak when they come into the room and find their mother sewing and pick up some scraps of bright wool, a feather, or a shred of chintz. I need a howl; a cry. When the storm crosses the marsh and sweeps over me where I lie in the ditch unregarded I need no words. Nothing neat. Nothing that comes down with all its feet on the floor. None of those resonances and lovely echoes that break and chime from nerve to nerve in our breasts, making wild music, false phrases. I have done with phrases. (Woolf, 1992: 226-227)

While sensing the dead end of modernism, Woolf seems to be offering a postmodernist solution to the crisis of meaning and thus go beyond the apocalyptic scenario of the death of the novel. It so happened, however, that "[f]or several decades after the end of the Second World War, the novel appeared to be dead. As a vehicle for literary experimentation […], it had been taken to the limits by modernists like Joyce, Woolf and Beckett." (Morrison, 2003: 3)

The questions modernist literary discourse had tried to offer answers to gave way to new ones that define the ontological dominant of postmodernist fiction.

> Other typical postmodernist questions bear either on the ontology of the literary text itself or on the ontology of the world which it projects, for instance: What is a world?; What kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; What happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; What is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; How is a projected world structured?" (McHale, 1987: 10)

The literary text is then no longer conceived as a means of investigating the meaning of the world, be it seen as the sum total of external, visible aspects or as the subjective response to the visible, as a journey to the essence of things, as it used to be in modernism. With the death of the author heralded by Roland Barthes,

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we start seeing the text as "a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash." (Barthes 146)

The literary work starts functioning as a locus of reflection rather than impression. Without mentioning it explicitly, modernist T. S. Eliot, probably aware, like Woolf, of the epistemological impasse modernism had reached, referred in "Tradition and the Individual Talent" to the movement of meaning from depth to surface, and consequently, to the reflexive quality of the work. (see Haberer 60-61)

> No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical, criticism. (Eliot 215)

Julia Kristeva's concept of intertextuality could be seen as being associated with T. S Eliot's system of tradition defined by the historical sense understood as both chronology and simultaneity. (see Haberer)

> [T]he historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not only with his own generation in his bones, but with the feeling that the whole literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order. The historical sense, which is the sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. (Eliot 215)

If impression had perfectly served the purpose of modernist fiction, reflection, interpreted as the quality of texts to refer to other texts offered fiction a way out of the impasse of meaninglessness. The shift from the paradigmatic to the syntagmatic followed Barthes' death of the author as

> [the writer's] only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to express himself, he ought at least to know that the inner "thing" he thinks to "translate" is itself a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely (Barthes 146).

The work of art stops being seen as a finished product, but rather as a process, the reader becoming involved in the process of meaning creation.

> The order of the sign being radically different from that of the referent, the sign itself being split into signifier and signified, the very notion of meaning as something fixed and stable, even though it sometimes had to be deciphered, was lost and replaced by that of the sliding, shifting, floating signified. Meaning could no longer be viewed as a finished product, it was now caught in a process of production. (Haberer 56)

Impression was replaced by textual reflection alongside the disappearance of the centred structure. Despite the formal experiment of modernism, impression is indicative of the fact that the modernist creators continued to believe that there was a meaning underlying all things and it was in search of it that they created their work. The structural quality of the modernist work was given by the solidity of a centre seen as presence, in Derrida's terms.

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> The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix [...] is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of this word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated the constant of a presence - eidos, arché, telos, energeia, ousia (essence, existence, substance, subject) aletheia, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida 2)

The scepticism about a pre-existing, transcendental meaning that the modernists first expressed was the result of decentring, the loss of the structurality of structure.

> There was no centre, that the centre would not be thought in the form of a being-present, that the centre had no natural locus, that it was not a fixed locus but a function, a sort of non-locus in which an infinite number of sign-substitutions came into play. This moment was that in which language invaded the universal problematic; that in which, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse - provided we can agree on this word - that is to say, when everything became a system where the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum." (Derrida 2)

And for the several decades in which postmodernism reached its heyday, the literary discourse was mainly constructed through interplay, by a necessary encounter and negotiation between producer and the receiver of the text in the process of meaning creation. Absolute, transcendental capitalized Meaning, be it called Man, Truth, or God, gives way to numberless provisional meanings individually created in a certain given context. Fiction becomes a playground. Meanings multiply endlessly, none valid and yet all true. The seriousness of the modernist impression is replaced by the playfulness of the postmodernist intertext.

We can however sense that this is a new dead end, a new stage of the literature of exhaustion. (Barth) And the question we are inclined to ask is literature where to?

Surprisingly or not, despite the much heralded death of the novel, we witness a rebirth of fiction over the past few decades, whose tenets however seem to differ both from those of modernism and those of the postmodernism of the sixties and seventies. Contemporary fiction is created against a new cultural background seriously affected by "the empire writes back" syndrome. (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffin) And it is precisely the ability to foreground the major cultural changes and explain the individual's position in the contemporary context that gives fiction its new energies.

> What is necessarily true of all contemporary fiction, like all literature, is that it needs to be read as a product of the cultural conditions from which it emerges. The past half century has been a period of massive, multi-dimensional cultural change. Major shifts and dislocations have occurred to older notions of racial and sexual identity. The fabric of history, collective memory and social time within which, a century ago, fiction could comfortably locate itself, has been subject to profound interrogation and transformation. (Morrison 7)

Modernist works had been too little sensitive to the importance of cultural influences. And this was mainly because, although the modernists developed an explicit interest in the individual consciousness, their works were created in a

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period in which the major assumption was that cultural spaces were homogeneous and monolithic. The other was seldom, if ever, allowed access and, if this occasionally happened, it was because of the sensationalism of their exotic nature. In search of the essential meaning of the real, the modernists tended to disregard difference and failed to reveal diversity, often indifferent to the individual as the place of convergence of various cultural influences. On the other hand, moving beyond the dead end of modernism, postmodernist writers were more inclined towards self-reflexivity and made the being of writing central to their endeavour, severing literature from the context in which it was created.

The linguistic experiment of both modernism and postmodernism, from impression to textual reflection, challenging as it was from an intellectual point of view, could have eventually jeopardized literature had it not been for the orientation of contemporary fiction towards the cultural context and the individual as a culturally defined entity. Created against a background of heterogeneity and hybridity "[c]ontemporary fictions are anything but homogeneous, [but they] are interesting precisely for their ability to locate themselves in the interstices – the spaces between national cultures, genders and histories." (Morrison 7)

Contemporary novels foreground the other and the effort of writers, both mainstream and immigrant, is directed towards making marginal voices audible. "It was the departure from the high modernism [and postmodernism] of the 1950s and early 1960s that caused literature to broaden out in new directions." (Mai 162)

Differently from both modernist and postmodernist writings, which presupposed themselves co-operation between the writer and the reader or between the producer of the text and the receiver, contemporary novels "are shaped as aesthetic fields of a complex interaction between the reader, the writer and the context" (Mai 161). They are also constructed through reflection, just that reflection has a new twofold acceptation, neither similar to the textual one at the core of the postmodernist enterprise of the sixties and seventies.

Reflection is now associated with knowing through mirroring, of self and other, in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, class or religion. Contemporary fiction also invites to reflection, this is pondering the world changes and the place and role of the in the new context, heterogeneous by cultural commingling, rather than unitary and homogeneous as it had been assumed to be in the heyday of modernism.

> Literary discourse still has its aesthetic specificity stemming from language experiments and artistic reflection. But unlike the more closed literary discourses of high modernism the discourses of today's foremost literature are marked by a concept of literature as an open interaction with the reader, the context, different art forms and the literary tradition. This literary interaction invites readers into a dialogue on both social and artistic values. (Mai 161)

By the way it has evolved over the past few decades we may see contemporary fiction as an efficient form of intercultural communication. Focusing on cultures "as a fluid, creative social force which binds different groupings and aspects of behaviour in different ways, both constructing and constructed by people in a piecemeal fashion to produce myriad combinations and configurations" (Holliday, Hyde and Kullman 3), novels enable a mutually beneficial reflection of the self and the other. At the same time, they allow diversity to become visible,

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inviting the reader to reflect on the cultural encounter and the condition of the individual as the result of various intersecting cultural forces.

The question "literature where to" is inevitably followed by "why read or study literature." "Among the most compelling reasons is [that] the most valuable product of the literary system is not texts as such but the cultural models from which texts are constructed, and which they in turn help to maintain and circulate." (McHale, 2011: 135)

Doubtless aware of the evolution of modernist and postmodernist art, McHale intimates that the future of literature is closely connected to it offering

> privileged access to a culture's models of reality, enabling reflection on culture's world-making and world-maintaining functions. Literary study allows us to glimpse how a culture organizes itself and the non-human world around it, and this applies not only to historically or geographically distant cultures, whose models of reality might be alien to us, but also to our own contemporary culture, whose models might pass unnoticed, taken-for-granted, pitched below the threshold of our attention, without the salience or foregrounding that literature imparts to them. (McHale 135)

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