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LITERARY THEORY AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT

1. The «death of theory» has been a flag periodically bandied about by various adversaries of literary theory to the extent that it has often been connected with the decadence of literature itself. Since at least the 1980s, some of the history of literary theory has not infrequently been a history of resistance to the theory of resistance to theory. At the beginning of the third millennium, both the melancholic (owing to fatigue) and the anxious (due to ignorance) proclamations about the death of theory ended up by being inscribed in what time finally rendered as the *theory of the death of theory*.¹ The most curious thing regarding this furore about the theory of the death of theory (although it also cherishes respective hopes about vanquishing new theoretical and critical worlds), lies in discerning a centre of turmoil that basically seems to be located in the English-speaking countries. This reaction was implicitly shared by the editorial committee of the prestigious US magazine *Critical Inquiry* when they decided to invite a group of North American intellectuals to Chicago in 2003. According to a secure source, the editor W.J.T. Mitchell had delivered the meeting's opening statement saying «We want to be the *Starship Enterprise* of criticism and theory» (cited by Megan Lisagor, 2004).

The English academic Terry Eagleton was one of the scholars who most regularly helped to stir troubled waters. Having started by «burying» literary theory at the end of his book disseminating this very theory (Eagleton 1983: 204), twenty years later, this herald of bad tidings about literary theory an-

¹ In a chapter entitled precisely «The end of literary theory? », I had the chance of critically raising the issue of the *memetic rivalry* with literary theory uncovered by certain anti-theory declarations. These end up showing that they themselves have a theoretical nature (Martins, 2003: 42-51).

nounced to the English-speaking academic world that we were already living in a «post-theory» stage of existence (Eagleton, 2003). Thomas Docherty had arrived much before, at least in title, the post-theory finishing line in this apocalyptic race (Docherty, 1990). Without a doubt, however, the influence exerted by Eagleton's negativist method in the field of literary theory has gained wider publicity. In the same year that Eagleton published his proclamation, the writer Gayatri C. Spivak also «killed-off» theory, mainly as far as acknowledging the failure of literary studies to make a contribution towards social justice and/or change (Spivak, 2003).

For what they are worth, these declarations have detained me long enough to perceive that they have done very little in the way of advancing knowledge about the literary process as a whole. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see that, generally speaking, almost all these authors have «killed» theory not because they bear an intrinsic grudge against theory, but rather, because of *political disillusionment* with the field of work in which the study of literature has found itself. Thomas Docherty himself said the following in 1990: «While writing the book, my abiding concern was the apparent inefficacy of the theoretical intellectual in terms of social and political practice» (Docherty, 1990: 1). This is indubitably an important argument owing to everything that is involved in the contemporary era's relationship with the literary.

There is also an understanding that, by (erroneously) connecting the configuration of literary theory with the initial forms of Derrida's deconstruction and French structuralism, theory is seen to inwardly carry a sort of original sin without any possibility of redemption. As Bryan Boyd says: «If Theory is at least dying now, it is not because of blows from outside but only from its own terminal internal tedium» (Bryan Boyd, 2006: 290).

This tiresome letting off steam is always less informed and less intelligent than the arguments put forward by writers such as Eagleton and Spivak. However, it has the advantage of revealing another important aspect, which hinges on the discomfort we feel when dealing with the dynamic involving the *suspension of ontological certainties* about any literary work that theory demands of us. Bryan Boyd's statement is again useful here:

The consequences of theory have been disastrous (...). It has produced derivative, predictable, repetitive, homogenizing criticism. It has seriously corrupted intellectual standards in literature departments by devaluing truth, evidence, and the idea of a pluralistic openness of inquiry (...) (Boyd, id: 294).

2. The way I perceive the process leading to knowledge about literature and criticism, is only and precisely with literary theory (and not against it) that we may delineate a «pluralistic openness of inquiry», to use Boyd's words, in the domain of literary studies. Indeed, the pluralist notion whereby the truth of the literary text contains a world of possibilities, and not a world of

certainties, ends up by inserting the critical strategy into an epistemological dynamic whose reach goes far beyond the multifaceted nature of the fictional truth. In fact, that dynamic even promotes a deeper existential suggestion that the truth is an asset too precious to be claimed by only a few. Therefore, *literature as much as literary criticism end up by revealing themselves to be extremely valuable instruments in learning to coexist with what is different and multiple.*

If we base our understanding of theory on the pluralist dynamic, we are better able to avoid the negativist traps set by the so-called «death of theory». Repentant theoreticians have every right to condemn academic and intellectual endeavours in theory that displease them most. But whatever the known examples are of intellectual negligence or ill-practice when comprehending literature, only ignorance and bad faith are responsible for throwing the whole of theory out in the process of condemning such practices.

In the English-speaking world, that is also the mindset of intellectuals such as John M. Ellis, he himself an active contributor to the wave of scrutiny disparaging the contemporary theoretical scene. An important author for his keen intelligence and fine critical astuteness, Ellis spared no effort, at least since the end of the 1980s (see Ellis, 1989), to launch sharp attacks against movements defending deconstruction, political correctness, and academia's obsession with questions to do with race, gender, political activism, etc. His critical dismantling of such controversial positions stands as one of the most intelligent and sensitive attitudes still available within the academia, particularly in the English-speaking countries' sphere of influence

Apart from his combative role as editor of the magazine *Heterodoxy*, a publication devoted to fighting against the politically correct, John M. Ellis is also the author of a recent book significantly entitled *The Breakdown of Higher Education: How It Happened, the Damage it Does, and What Can Be Done* (2020). The book contains one of the most valuable examinations of the contemporary academic scene, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon countries. I should like to continue writing about it, but as I need to get back to literary theory, it is from a previous book by the same author that I quote the following wise principle:

Many people blame theory for the present malaise in literary studies, and there is some empirical support for this view: the now predominance race-gender-class criticism is generally laden with theoretical jargon, and the critics seem less interested in considering what literary works have to say to us than in applying a particular theory to them. But it would be wrong to deduce from this that theory is the source of the problem. What is wrong here is not theory but *bad* theory (Ellis, 1998: 181, author's emphasis)

Contradicting the designs of would-be witnesses of the apocalypse of theory, the wealth of important compilations published at the end of the 1990s demonstrated that, upon entering the new millennium, the theory of literature

made its appearance as a *memoir*, a *narrative*, a *systematic manner* that was undeniably a sign of its maturity as a discipline. Its vitality evinced a well-established independent field of study within the humanities, regardless of the prophets of doom, who, for various reasons, continued to augur its demise.

We may still believe that a certain intellectualised impressionism would entail some pedagogical and critical virtues. But in fact, without the help of effective theoretical knowledge, reading a literary text would always be very limited in its range of propositions to heighten the understanding, explanation and the interpretation of the said text. On the other hand, the endorsement of literary theory as an academic discipline may have exhausted its transforming power as a theory, but it surely must have compelled it to enhance its own legitimising power over all the institutional, social and cultural practices related to literature.

This intellectual naturalisation of literary theory may appear to be stagnant or at an impasse in the opinion of some scholars (of various nationalities), and their beating of breasts is even acceptable and admissible. Nevertheless, I think such bewailing rests on the illusion that literary theory is (or rather, should be) in itself a constant cleavage, a permanent movement, a perpetual criticism. Such writers forget that on the one hand, theory does not exist outside the dialectic of operative ideas in society at different moments of its existence. Consequently, on the other hand, theory like any other cultural phenomenon needs a timespan (more or less lengthy, it hardly matters) in which to *stabilise truths*, in other words, to *configure conventions*, so that it may thus climb to new levels of questioning these truths, building alternatives and subsequently formulating new conventions.

It is mainly owing to the dynamics of the history of mentalities, with its complex transactions of dominant ideas, that literary theory will inexorably have its destiny mapped out. As inexorably as the destiny of literature. To a great extent, the «crisis» of one means the «crisis» of the other, and both have ended up by being perceived today through the more general «crisis» in humanities, mainly with reference to higher education. Next, I shall be referring to a few situations related to the Portuguese academic domain.

3. The present Portuguese academic framework has not severed its ties with the discipline of literary theory, at least not entirely. At any rate, doing so would have been an unacceptable scientific loss. Indeed, true scientific capacities that were steadily being conferred on literary theory throughout the 20th century played a pivotal role in modernising literary studies in Portugal, particularly as from the 1970s, hence having acted as a fundamental lever allowing much of the work undertaken at universities to reach the international scene.

Despite the time that has elapsed since then, I believe that it is still too early to make any in-depth assessment of the outcomes as regards the new places occupied by literary theory in the curricula. Be that as it may, the long experience I gained in teaching literary theory in the previous curricula at the

University of Lisbon's School of Arts and Humanities (Faculty of Letters) makes me certain that this is precisely one of the subjects which best helps towards forming an awareness that we should be open to a *constant intellectual adaptation to new situations* and, as a result, to the various facets of so-called *life-long learning*.

The new university environment created when the so-called Bologna Process was adopted, has given rise to numerous and varied situations where a definitive balance is still far from being made. As it stands at the moment, and taking into account the first 3-year cycle, or *Licentiate* degree, connected with Literature, the curricular restructuring at the School of Arts and Humanities eliminated the compulsory subject of Literary Theory from the syllabus; it continued to keep the Introduction to the Study of Literature although cutting it down by one semester. Removing this semester is not all that relevant however, as what is important is the time reserved for classroom contact with the students in the form of lectures on the material and the interactive quality of this contact.

For their part, whether in the form of a Master's degree or as a Specialisation Course, what is now called the second cycle plays a determining role in the students' higher qualifications. Therefore, I believe that the research work that underpins this cycle's progress, leading as it does to writing a dissertation for a Master's degree, demands scientific consistency and an intellectual range that varies according to whether or not the student has had any experience in working in-depth in the field of literary theory. In today's conditions governing post-graduations, particularly with regard to the *philosophy of transversality* guiding such degrees, the same may be said for the third cycle or PhD level, which also enjoys great elasticity at this stage. It is here, at post-graduate level, that in my opinion we should concentrate our main effort upon education in the domain of Theory of Literature as an inter-relational discipline that is open to world and societal discourses.

In this context, and mindful of the above statement, the provision laid down in the University of Lisbon's current Post-Graduate Studies Rules is worth mentioning in terms of the conditions governing applications for post-graduation courses. The Rules state that applicants wanting to do any post-graduation course must have a *licentiate* degree or its lawful equivalent, although they need not have a *licenciatura* in the specific area of the Master's degree they wish to sit. I should also point out the very broad provision in the Rules enabling PhD candidates to apply providing they possess a relevant "school, scientific or professional curriculum". Both these criteria allow for an enhancement of the framework in which the seminars work because the different trainings and backgrounds of the students are unquestionably a pedagogical added value.

Moreover, that was my gratifying experience as a teacher and the head of the Master's and PhD Programme in Culture and Communication for ten years, and which I only gave up due to retirement. In both cases, most of

the students in the courses came from colleges (and still do) outside Lisbon University's School of Arts and Humanities (and very often, from outside Portugal) and had very diverse degrees (Psychology, Law, Communication Sciences, Journalism, Design, Sociology, History, Fine Arts, etc.). Perhaps this situation is not disconnected from the reasons leading to (the still recent) adoption of English version of its Portuguese name, *Faculdade de Letras de Lisboa*. Instead of being translated as 'Faculty of Letters', it was internationally publicised as the School of Arts and Humanities. However, what I am more interested in stressing is that, in the Culture and Communication Programme, which I taught for a decade, the theory of literature was functionally active in the form of a seminar called Regimes of Literary Culture. I lectured the seminar, but this fact is neither here nor there, as any other lecturer with similar skills could have done the job. What was important was keeping literature and its respective theoretical knowledge on the curricular horizon of a broadly transdisciplinary Programme. The summary of my seminar is given below, and emphasises this fact: Calling upon literature through the memory of culture, this seminar [Regimes of Literary Culture] is fundamentally based on the public relevance of literature. We shall be studying the interdependent relationships, which by virtue of literature are established among different cultural units (from technology to politics, from economic formations to the products of the so-called cultural industry, from social trends to religion, etc.). Knowing about the distinctive character of literary expression is, at the same time, equated with knowing about the production and consumption of literary works, as well as about the many aspects emerging in the dynamics of building identities.

4. The situation I have just described wherein literary theory has its functional existence, suggests *four horizons* that interlock the discipline with new areas of cultural experience as well as with the respective needs emerging when studying them. It is important to separate them.

Firstly, I think we should uphold the idea that, generally speaking, theory is, above all, *a very special asset that is shared within culture*. Accordingly, theory is more an arousal of intelligence than it is an appeal to emotion. As attested by Hans-Georg Gadamer's elegant formula:

"Theoria is not a solitary instantaneous act but an attitude, a position and a state in which we keep ourselves. It is 'being there' in the wonderful double sense; it means not only the presence but also that the presence is 'fully there'. (...) 'Theory' is not (...) first and foremost some behaviour whereby we possess an object or make it available by means of an explanation. It has to do with another kind of asset" (Gadamer, 2001: 36-37; my translation from the Portuguese).

Secondly, and more in particular, we need to take into account the acquisition of *professional skills connected with the production, circulation and consumption of literature* (in all its formats). They nowadays demand a

very special negotiation with the theoretical knowledge of literature, namely choosing the features we wish to single out and generating a *relational study* of the cultural objects that are socially identified as being literary works.

It is in this framework that, today, I think we make theory not only when we confront literature as a problem (which is the classical approach, so to speak), but also when we view texts as places that raise difficulties. Those difficulties are defined by the structures and processes that make the literary system relate to the more general environment of culture and society.

Resuscitating Yuri Lotman's terminology and his semiotic theoretical framework (lying inexcusably dormant these past few decades), what we are talking about here is the *semiosphere* by virtue of which the system of literary signs is connected with the different environments (or *Umwelten*) with which it interacts.² This aspect is decisive in order to validate teaching literature (and the theory of literature) when it goes beyond the strict limits of our understanding of literature as the art of language, thus counteracting the current academic decline witnessed in literary studies.

It may be distressing to recognise the fact, but at the end of the 20th century, the university ended up by following many of the theoretical and critical principles of the various vanguard's trends, which in the name of self-sufficient linguistic reason, enshrouded the literary text within the rigid limits of its own literary system.

One of the consequences of this process was, without a doubt, the increasing opaqueness of the texts, removing them from common experience. Literature as a space wherein imagination blossomed became debilitated, inevitably widening the gap between readers with and without a literary education. Diminishing numbers of potential candidates enrolling in traditional Literary Studies, as well as the increasing intellectual importance and status of Cultural Studies, should also be looked at in connection with this aspect of culture over the last fifty years.

If we link the above situation to the attraction of digital entertainment, it is clear that what we need to do today is give literature back its public relevance as much as we are able. In order to do so, it is necessary to redirect the perception of literature to the space occupied by political, technological and economic manifestations and of all the discourses operating in social life.

In recalling the arguments given above, today, the need to perceive literature lies in identifying the references pertaining to the respective environments suggested by the texts. In so doing, we redirect the path along which literary studies may find a paradigm which is eminently founded on *interpretative configurations*. And such configurations will, perforce, open up the text being studied to the multiple discourses of the world and life, as well as

² Although I am not referring to the proposals set forth by Niklas Luhmann, it is worth recalling that this sociologist put forward a similar approach when he referred to an environment (*Umwelt*) in order to perceive (in a given system) some functions as an element and other functions as a relationship among elements (Luhmann, 2006).

to the interplay of the powers that shape them and endow them with meaning. This will not only enable the projection of different ideas and knowledge, but will also make the text itself (whatever it is) richer and more interesting.

Thirdly, and in addition to the above considerations, I continue to uphold the profound conviction that knowledge opened up by the disciplinary field of the Theory of Literature, no matter its programmed contents, is decisive for our students to *make a more qualified investigation into literature and other cultural objects that literature interacts with in social life*. If we follow this principle, it will certainly help our (European and world) citizens graduating from reputable universities to *undertake their professional duties more competently*. However, the role of getting to know literature is not limited to a profession in this field, because literature, more so than philosophy, may be an extremely valuable tool in learning about humankind and the respective contradictions and drives which interact in the different professions directly or indirectly connected with the humanities.

Fourthly and finally, I believe that the new academic and cultural outlook that I have just described demands a reassessment of the *method* of teaching/learning, not only with regard to literary theory, but also to the humanities in general. That is a decisive aspect worth developing at this stage.

5. To start with, I think it is worth stressing the importance of getting *the student to play an active role* as the operative re-shaper of the lecturer's discourse. *Always allow the other his/her space*, even if it means listening to criticism and protest. This is the *ethical frame of mind* that I understand to be the overall link in the didactics of any academic subject. Actually, the same is true in any intellectual discussion that we would like to be truly stimulating, producing more research work and more critical endeavour. In general, although this topic has not been studied enough in the sphere of higher education (and put into practice even less), it has kindled some interest on the part of researchers into humanities, namely as regards what I shall be dealing with next.

In an essay unfortunately lost in the commotion of electronic communication and vested academic interests (perhaps because its immediate goal focused on Latin), already in 1997, the Portuguese researcher Maria Manuela Alvelos referred to the need to reflect upon and completely overhaul models of teaching/learning. In order to do so, she called for the adoption of a set of four 'schemes' put forward by the Canadian academic Milton Petruk that was based on the access to and the circulation of information between the teacher and the student. The third scheme is particularly relevant at a time when access to information is being made increasingly easier thanks to the Internet.

According to Alvelos, the third scheme is organised upon the view that not only has information grown immeasurably in terms of quantity, but it has also expanded in all directions thanks to more varied technological means of propagation. In this sense, branches of knowledge tend to overlap to an

increasing degree and give rise to interdependent hybrids. Both teachers and students are able to obtain increasingly diverse and complex information on an equal footing, hence creating radically new pedagogical situations. On the one hand, the student receives information pertaining to his/her area without having to go through the teacher. On the other hand, the amount of available information is far too great and is developing far too quickly for the teacher to keep fully abreast of it all.

We therefore have to move on to Petruk's fourth scheme, which according to the Portuguese researcher's interpretation, involves (...) a structure in which hierarchy disappears in favour of a collective immersion in this sea of information. (...) Therefore, in returning to the pedagogical setting that is made out of the experience and information at the disposal of all the actors, knowledge is then shared and the student becomes the great questioner, allowing the teacher to occupy a more discreet although no less important place. The teacher's role shoulders increasingly more responsibility precisely because he/she has to consistently supervise and steer the students' discoveries and encourage their critical and creative spirit. More than transmitting information, the teacher now has the duty of overseeing the students' acquisition of experience. (Alvelos, 1997: 5-7, my translation).

Wise words although difficult to put into practice. Nevertheless, it is that pattern of autonomous learning, and the subsequent refusal of the idea of student dependence upon the master (the one who detains the knowledge in opposition to the ones who have to learn), that may allow the student to progress along the path leading to authentic intellectual emancipation. The lesson is an ancient one and, although it has not been followed enough, it had always underpinned the most progressive Western thought – namely the thinking of those anti-masters, to use Baptiste Morizot's designation, who ever since Socrates confirmed the following principle:

Le maître maintient sous la dépendance de sa vérité, l'anti-maître émancipe en enseignant comment défaire ce qu'il a lui-même élaboré. (Morizot, 2012: 11).

The outcomes of this belief (beneficial, so I believe) go beyond the strict confines of teaching/learning a subject in the humanities, to rub shoulders with the very core of civility, or the lives of citizens aware of the responsibility of their own social and political opinions and their subsequent decisions and acts in both of these domains. To become their own master, their own wise authority, that is a project to free individuals, although one that also condemns them to commit themselves to the communitarian nature of their freedom. Despite the fact that Baptiste Morizot designed an ideational route that tended to be guided mainly by the philosophical question of truth, he ends up by couching the problem in general terms with which I easily share. Morizot insists on a *democratic classroom practice* where teacher and student interact in a single space, critically fomenting learning and knowledge:

La démocratie commence avec l'abolition du privilege du maître: celui de proférer, seul, la verité. (Morizot, id: 11)

Bringing these reflections into the domain of literary theory, we may conclude that we always have to bear in mind the critical matrix that theory itself is fed as theory of an object (the text) where *humankind and their circumstances* are represented in (all) their possibilities. Keeping in mind this matrix is the equivalent to enhancing an understanding of literature according to a *dialogical method* that challenges experience, the world and life itself. In the way I perceive it, this dialogical method rests more on raising questions than on ready-made and/or ready-to-trot-out answers (due to fear, carelessness, professional opportunism or simple laziness).

This method is more productive not only as regards literary theory, but also in the domain of the humanities in general. Although the intellectual risk involved is greater than with any other method, this is the method which, when teaching literature - as a critical literary activity, according to the wise lesson given us by Northrop Frye (1970, 1974: 76) – *we draw near the truth that immediately leads us to consider other possibilities of truth itself.*

To sum up, this is the method that is worthy of underpinning the teaching/learning of a curricular subject called Theory of Literature. *Under this or any other name strategically chosen within the framework of the new cultural conditions*, it may either endure as a dying reality or as a fully vitalised reality according to the priorities which the theoretician/critic/teacher establishes in his/her relationship with contemporary intellectual life, and with the respective objects of artistic achievement and consumption.

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In the current intellectual framework of contemporary culture, it is my strong belief that we must always take into account the critical matrix from which literary theory feeds itself as a theory of an object in which man and his circumstances are represented in all their possibilities of affirmation. To take this matrix into account is equivalent to favouring an understanding of literature according to a *dialogical method* of questioning experience, the world and life. The dialogical method I have in mind is based more on questions than on uncritical answers ready to use (out of fear, neglect, professional opportunism or simple laziness). I believe it can be the most productive method in the field not only of literary theory, but also of the humanities in general, although also the one with the greatest intellectual risk. This essay will expand on these topics. The Portuguese case will be duly taken into account.

Keywords: Literary theory, cultural environment, method of teaching / learning, philosophy of transversality, the Portuguese case.

