

Is Literature Dangerous? Or, the Teacher's Anguish

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Talking about teaching modern literature is also a way of talking about the relationship between literature and society, such an old topic that there is now scarcely any desire to deal with it. But when the teacher in a school or university classroom opens a novel, a poetry collection, or most often an anthology or classic with its attendant notes, and starts reading, trying as hard as possible to grab the attention of twenty or a hundred students, at that moment something crucial happens that has to do with the relationship between literature and society.

We have to admit that things do not always go swimmingly. Often the factors in play (teacher, students, book) manage to come together only via boredom and a consciously applied sense of duty. The biochemical and cultural reactions that ought to be aroused when a literary work comes into contact with an audience of readers at school or university occur only by chance or by a miracle. If the catalyst (which should be the teacher) does not work, does not manage to perform its role, instead of facilitating and fostering the encounter between a text and a group of readers, it will go off at half cock. In this way the message in the bottle, which could be *War and Peace* or *The Trial*, remains shut up inside and floats desolately on into the unknown.

But is it really like that? Is that the duty, the aim, the reality of teaching? Does the encounter between modern literature and readers really happen, or can it happen, through teaching? Is it there that the free, authentic contact, with no limits, prejudices or prior aims, between works of modern literature and young students is realized?

Yes and no, because on the one hand universities and schools are cultural utopias, places where there is a freedom that would be even more unlikely elsewhere, but on the other they are alienating institutions, cages and prisons from which escape is imperative, even if they are run and supervised by warders who promise the marvels that culture brings, though they seem to lack them more than most.

So, in an institution that seldom resembles a cultural utopia, a caste of civil servants and bureaucrats, primarily interested in reproducing themselves, encounters a group of users for whom authors and books are obstacles to be surmounted in their progress, which in any case is an unhappy one, towards academic achievement.

If a large number of us are still concerned by the problems of teaching it is precisely in order to repair the damage inflicted by the institution where we have spent years and years of our lives, first as students and then as teachers. It is the memory of the frustration that spurs us on. In my own case, I still cannot forgive educational institutions for suffocating that potential within themselves for cultural utopia, intense free communication, and those promises of intellectual satisfaction that should in fact provide their very *raison d'être*.

Before resigning from the university I taught modern and contemporary literature for about 20 years. I was quite passionate about my work. This was not because I liked the lecturer's role in general (having people call me 'professor' still gives me a shiver of embarrassment: I think of Uncle Vanya's sarcastic contempt when he calls his brother-in-law 'Herr Professor'). My passion was sporadic but it took hold of me each time I went into the classroom at the appointed time. Even if a short time beforehand I felt sluggish and not up to it, just the sight of those students ready to listen to anything I might read and analyse with them immediately mobilized all my energy. I could not deceive them, I could not leave them with their expectations unsatisfied. Neither could I insult the authors I was going to read, rendering them boring and uninteresting because of my teaching methods – that would be unforgivable.

I have always thought that boring (and even torturing) students – young human beings going through the most vital, but also the most vulnerable, period of their lives – with masterpieces from literature, philosophy or art is a crime against culture that ought to be prosecuted in the courts. It is like disfiguring a painting or damaging a statue in a museum. When an author is read, analysed and interpreted in class I would ask the teacher to carry out a brief but fundamental exercise in imagination: that is to say, to visualize the author being present in flesh and blood, alive and attentive, sitting in a corner at the back of the lecture theatre or next to the lectern. This vision that brings alive, this imaginary evocation of writers viewed as really present where their works are being taught, is not at all like a hallucination.

When I open Leopardi, Tolstoy, Svevo, they are truly there: they guide me, judge me, support me, keep me company. I cannot abuse either their writing or their patience. I cannot distort them, use them irrelevantly, crush them or make them obscure out of vanity in order to provide proof of my authoritative position as a civil servant. As a lecturer I am a place people pass through, a transit point. I am a medium. I lend authors my voice and my interpretative ability. If they have written so well, with so much care, talent, effort, technique, it is probably because they did not want to be treated lightly or misunderstood. They wanted to be read, reread, understood and absorbed in the same way as happens when people are in love: by imitation, identification, infection.

Classical authors wrote for an audience of readers, not for an exclusive group of scholars. And this is even truer of modern writers. It ought to be easier to identify with them. They write about things that still affect us intimately. And it is also more

natural to 'visualize' their physical presence in the place where we use them to teach our class. (In fact the class should be used to make them come to life in our midst.)

It is not at all simple to give a definition of modern literature and define its boundaries. We could say that literature that represents, traces and analyses modern society's birth and development is modern: capitalism, liberalism, socialism and mass democracy. Thus we should be starting from the origin of critical, anti-dogmatic, anti-authoritarian, rational, empirical thought, from Machiavelli, Montaigne and Descartes at the earliest up to the Encyclopedists and the great 19th-century authors.

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It is a literature that has rather paradoxical qualities when compared with modernity. But as can be imagined, our present-day reality also conceals many aspects that lend much older works a contemporary significance. As regards the description of urban society and the political battle, some Latin writers (Catullus, Horace, Juvenal, Martial, Sallust, Seneca, Tacitus) are more 'modern' than most classical Italian authors. And when we turn to the universe, *De rerum natura* and the *Georgics* are poems that can always help us rid ourselves of the ideological superstition which would have us believe that because human history is the most interesting subject it comes before everything else. After all, the life of nature, animals, plants, phenomena in the atmosphere and in the earth, as well as the movements of the stars govern us and make our self-importance as historical creatures look ridiculous.

But I think modern literature's most paradoxical and dramatic characteristic, and the one that arouses the most conflict, a characteristic that appears in teaching in particular, is that the majority of great modern authors, especially after the optimistic Enlightenment phase, take up a stance opposing modernity. It is something the eternal prophets and fetishists of Progress-Development do not see, and accept even less.

In the creation of western modernity the expansion of the state and its functions, for example, can be identified, a growth of institutions that tend to reabsorb, replace and dominate all kinds of individual and social activity. In addition, the market expands, and production for the market. The whole of culture even becomes more and more an institution and an administrative body: it is destined to be a managed (and bureaucratized) sector of public life, or else a branch of the market with a more specialized type of product.

Now it can in fact happen that the teacher of modern literature constantly stumbles on books and pages where all this (the institutionalization of culture and its transformation into a commodity) is criticized. So much so that 'modern writer' could be more or less synonymous with 'anti-modern writer': critical of the idea of progress, of the bourgeoisie and the middle class, critical of historicism, critical of instrumental and utilitarian rationality, of cultural democracy and the spirit of the Enlightenment of which they are the children and heirs, critical of bureaucracy and mass society.

This could mean, as the most timid progressives have noticed, that given its head, implicit or explicit social criticism in modern literature is 'right-wing' criticism that makes the mistake of espousing a reactionary utopianism, is individualistic and

aristocratic, suffers from anti-community phobias, foresees apocalypse and catastrophe, and tends towards anarchy and conservatism. Finally, faced with the constant innovations that capitalist development offers and imposes, a good proportion of modern literature nearly always ends up liking and yearning for what is disappearing, what is becoming 'old-fashioned': it feels nostalgic, preserves a strong sense of the past or quite simply sees that innovation offers us nothing without taking away something else in exchange.

From the outset marxism, which presented itself as the most coherent and radical theoretical form of criticism of capitalism (and the most optimistic regarding the future), used all kinds of negative, accusing, defamatory labels to show that it was the sole guarantee against such an ill-assorted bunch of errors made by those individualists, the anti-bourgeois bourgeois writers.

In fact, and quite the opposite, one of the most valuable gifts offered by the study of modern literature, to the chagrin not only of marxism but of any other theory, is precisely the variety of critical viewpoints and arguments. Instead of offering us an all-encompassing theory of the modern world, writers speak to us about their limited but personal experiences, and thus draw arguments from them that are all the more valid because they are concrete and contextualized. They hardly ever give us a coherent philosophy of history, but give rather their unease about philosophies and generalizations, abstractly universalist language in which individual experiences are submerged and depreciated. Furthermore (and this is another serious political and moral defect, but one that seems to me to be a strength) modern writers do not tell us 'what we have to do', neither do they show us the way out. What seems crucial to them is rather to set out the problem in a truthful way.

All the same, just because today we need to ensure that desperate derisive voices are heard inside classrooms or institutions, recalcitrant and clearly anti-social individuals, our teaching of modern literature makes us an object of scandal: the most aware teachers find themselves ill at ease and in a contradictory position. A teacher is an educator who should provide rules and show the way. But *for what purpose does modern literature educate?* One always suspects there are two possibilities:

(a) Do not take too seriously and literally the authors studied. In that case we are educating with a certain duplicity and more or less subtle hypocrisy, as if the basic message of our teaching were: this is how Baudelaire thought and Dostoyevsky wrote. Naturally (and by common agreement) we think they are geniuses, but this is the very reason why their words will not be taken seriously or literally. Times were different. They were miserable and their lives were a disaster. But there is no reason to be alarmed for we are beyond all that, *in a safe place*, and literature is a beautiful sickness that cannot infect our health. In short, they are objects of study.

(b) Dismantle the self-defensive barriers that separate us from those 'objects' and set them up as objects. But it is when identification occurs (which in any case is necessary for understanding) that the infection starts to take effect. The despair and revolt that are endemic among modern writers become part of the real experience we have of ourselves and our environment. Beyond time and the diversity of contexts these voices sound strangely fraternal and disturbing. The story they tell us is wholly or partly our story. So examining in detail literary structures and styles rather than protecting ourselves from the message brings that literature nearer. Inter-

pretation of texts opens a dialogue, allows an *osmosis*. Whereas in the first case literature is neutralized by the teaching practice, its methods and rituals, in the second, through the teaching of literature, we run the risk of producing not only critical intellectuals but anti-social, pessimistic, ill-adapted, awkward customers who will tend to come into conflict with their environment or at least make life more difficult for themselves.

Modern literature is indeed dangerous. It is scarcely ever edifying and seems ill-suited to the practice of teaching.

It is not even hard to find examples. I shall quote one, a particularly shocking and explicit one. I found it in Kierkegaard's *Journal*. When I happened, almost by chance, to read these few lines to my students, who were amused but speechless, I understood that something had snapped inside me and these sentences Kierkegaard was sending me from the other world were taking me, as it were, to a *point of no return*. They were breaking the stable relationship of institutional confidence which the students had begun to build within themselves, and in which I played an essential part as the teacher. Faced with this passage the moral walls of the educational institution appeared to crumble. I had the precise impression that in fact modern literature, like certain religious texts, cannot just be taught, unless it is according to the aseptic modern notion of teaching, functional, utilitarian and efficient.

We approach modern literature through participation, in a magical sense: mimetic and emotional. It is not really an object of study because it is an experience that, like any other, involves risks that are impossible to calculate in advance.

However, here is the passage:

I love the common man, whereas teachers repel me.

It is precisely the category 'teachers' that has demoralized humanity. If we left the world in the state it is in, the few who serve ideas or who, higher still, serve God, and then the common people, everything would be just fine.

But there is the evil of those scoundrels who infiltrate themselves between the noble people and the common people, that gang of bandits who, by persuading people that they also serve ideas, betray their real servants and turn people's heads, and all that in order to obtain a few miserable advantages here on earth.

If hell did not exist, one would have to be created on purpose for teachers, for a crime of that enormity cannot easily be punished in this world.¹

As well as on several occasions attacking the Church of Denmark for its modern bourgeois hypocrisy, for killing off Christianity with the most effective weapon, while pretending to practise it without even understanding it, Kierkegaard turns his alarmed and disgusted criticism on every type of modern intellectual acting as a *mediator*: priests, teachers, journalists, those who slip into all the nooks and crannies of social life in order to manipulate, distort and corrupt the relationship each of us might have with the truth of lived existence.

Having read this passage where Kierkegaard violently lets rip, and doing so with obvious conviction and commitment but almost without realizing what that implied, then seeing my students looking confused, I went further and said: 'What? Do you think I'm a teacher? No, I'm not.'

Was my manner in fact the most sincere kind of hypocrisy, or an apparently

hypocritical expedient in order to tell the truth? I found myself in a paradoxical situation and getting out of it was neither simple nor, in all probability, painless. Four possibilities suggested themselves at that moment:

1. Putting Kierkegaard in the wrong by saying that his argument was over the top and misleading, that it was just an emotional outburst to be interpreted as a symptom of the Danish philosopher's personal difficulties, but with no objective value. He might hate teachers but this did not mean that those teachers were really so hateful that they deserved his scorn. In this way the author would have been put back in his place in history and psychoanalysed from afar, becoming a historical and analytical object, while the guild of teachers remained secure.

2. Another possibility was to say that Kierkegaard was right, his hatred was an instrument of knowledge, a critical weapon for each person's individuality, that could help us see the negative function of a caste of mediators, to which I myself clearly belonged. In this way I would have declared myself worthy of the contempt with which Kierkegaard, across a century and a half, attacked me. But if I shared that hatred, I should have hated myself and what I was doing. Then there are the two other possibilities that offered themselves at that moment:

3. Accept the contradiction and carry on playing a part that I now thought deceitful and deplorable: a contradiction that eventually would have lost its painful authenticity or else, if it had preserved it, could have undermined my health and my psychic balance.

4. Or, on the other hand, try for coherence by making my behaviour compatible with my convictions: decide that for me it would be more healthy and honest not to pursue any longer a profession I disapproved of, my authors disapproved of, and so leave my job by resigning from the university. Three years later that was indeed my choice; but at the moment when I read that passage from Kierkegaard I did not imagine such an ending to the story.

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With these thoughts I do not seek to make the position of teachers of modern literature more dramatic or more comic. But it is impossible for me to discuss this topic without a brief autobiographical reference.

In fact it is modern literature that encourages me to do so. In modernity the great systems of thought, the metaphysics and the all-embracing theories of reality are in crisis. Since Kierkegaard, philosophies of existence and lived experience have gained ground and credibility, and thanks to the novel too. The only things we know, we know through personal experience, and our truest knowledge is knowledge of life. The philosophical tradition was broken at a particular moment (except for the recent versions, which are more verbal in nature) through basing itself on literature, assuming the form of the journal and going through those precise personal experiences that each individual has. This is what Nietzsche, Freud, Proust, Kafka, Simone Weil, Canetti, Gramsci, Camus, Adorno and so many others teach us.

Teaching modern literature (if such a thing can be done) means establishing a noisy, jarring, combative contact between an institution, which tends towards the social integration and training of a ruling class, and a collection of authors and works

that, from their other-world of literature, are constantly sending us messages of condemnation, aggressive ill-feeling, impossible reconciliation and revolt.

If we remember that the first classic of modern poetry, *Les Fleurs du Mal*, opens with the word '*sottise*' (foolishness) and that one of Flaubert's most obsessive themes is '*bêtise*' (stupidity), that ought to tell us something. According to modern literature one of the most common epidemics in modern societies is a very modern and very organized form of a dumbing-down process of which teaching itself is a part.

We must stress once again that the modernity of modern writers is anti-modern. If we wish to understand this there is no other solution: we must stop being *hypocrites lecteurs* always looking for escape routes in order to avoid identifying with authors, in order not to take literally what they tell us, not to step onto the minefield that is the real non-institutional life of modern literature.

Immediately we mention pedagogy, we have to refer to a typically professional and professorial manner of keeping our distance from modern literature's messages, which may cause offence. This is a real cult of *methodology* and *theory*.

The two things are not exactly the same; rather they are two sides of the same phenomenon. Around the middle of the 20th century the hypocrisy (or *foolishness*) of teachers became extremely clever and developed a defensive weapon of rare technological power.

It was obviously urgent to solve the problem. Modern literature was becoming too cumbersome and heavy to bear. It was disturbing people, it had to be put away and relegated to the world of the dead. It was a *fabula* whose anxiety-making events must not affect us any more. We were entering into Postmodernism, an era when institutions were to grow gigantic and incomparably more important than was intended when they were founded. Throughout a period that has only just ended, literary critics were members of the same cultural family as writers and shared their troubles, pleasures, adventures and life-styles. Critics had now become experts in the methodology of literary study and the all-round theoreticians of a phantasm called *literature*.

Modern literature, like ancient literature, was turning into a body ready for vivisection that aimed to study its anatomy. Instead of being read by interested readers, it was an object of analysis by disinterested scholars mad about general theories of *literariness* (a sort of literary *quidditas*) and methodologies that could be applied without fail to any text.

The teachers detested by Kierkegaard were taking over power completely with their overweening self-importance. It was now even their business to write novels, and they were in their image, *narratological* novels in a student vein, that were amusing or for seminars, and sold so well that they were bound to outshine the glory of the classics of modernity, which were classics of misanthropy and dissatisfaction.

In the most advanced cultural centres all this has lasted 30-odd years, as we know. But in the backward areas, the outlying universities and provincial schools, the encounter with modern literature will continue to be hindered by bureau-technocratic and methodological barriers of every kind.

The immortal headmaster, Thomas Gradgrind, whom Dickens shows us at the beginning of *Hard Times*, will continue putting on updating classes. With his head and big square hands putting up a barrier, he will do everything in his power to turn

the greatest and most exciting books ever written into positive 'textual facts', unloading them onto students' heads like so much sand.

Anyone who manages to turn only one teacher and one student into readers able to identify with what they are reading will have taken a step towards minimizing the destructive nature of the ecological catastrophe that is already unfolding: the elimination of modern literature from our lives carried out by the methodologically sound work of an army of specialists.

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Notes

1. Søren Kierkegaard, *Journal* (free translation). See his *Oeuvres complètes*, 20 volumes (Paris: Éditions de l'Orante, 1966–86), or *Journal* (extracts), Vols 1–5 (Paris: Gallimard, 1941–60).