Literary Theory and the "Teaching" of Literature in School

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Résumé: *La situation de la littérature en général, et de la théorie littéraire en particulier, dans le système de l'enseignement scolaire, pose quelques problèmes de principe. Traitées initialement, pendant l'Antiquité et le Moyen Age, à part égale parmi les autres disciplines apparentées (rhétorique, grammaire, étymologie, etc.), toutes confondues dans le cadre commun de l'étude philologique, les belles lettres se détachent, à partir du Romantisme, comme porteuses d'une subjectivité qui se laisse difficilement saisie aujourd'hui, vue la définition moderne de la littérature, par le système collectif et impersonnel qu'est celui de l'école. De plus, l'instruction scolaire, poursuivant des buts divers et sociaux, s'empare souvent de la littérature d'une manière en quelque sorte abusive, pour la charger des tâches extra-esthétiques, tout aussi importantes d'ailleurs, mais qui risquent de faire submerger le littéraire dans une attitude culturelle générale, convenable à l'intérêt éducatif de l'école.*

Keywords: *"teaching" literature in school, the subjectivity of the work* vs. *the collective character of school approach, text analysis*

Faced with the controversial status of literature, hard to be governed by strict rules, school is obviously in an uncomfortable position when it comes to literature as a didactic discipline. Some questions come to mind right away: can literature be taught in class? How much of the author's subjectivity, deposited in the text, and which is, according to R. Barthes's formula, a "matter with no evidence", can cross the threshold between the creator of the work and the group of school receptors? Isn't literature in school taken more as a pretext to develop, at its outskirts, many other comments centred on extra-aesthetic values, which, we have to admit, the student needs so much? "Teaching" literature managed to be a useful pedagogical activity, at peace with itself, undertaken with no controversy as to its status or method, as long as literature was an equal partner within the larger group of humanistic disciplines (alongside with history, philosophy, theology, the study of languages, etc.), as was the case in Antiquity or the Middle Ages. In Antiquity, *grammatica*, a widely integrating activity, involved not only retracing the etymology and explaining the words, or studying grammatical forms, but also discussing and understanding *classical* poets and philosophers ("classical", i.e. chosen to be taught in school). "All 'critical' notions are initially didactic. All the operations deemed 'critical' are but differentiations and ever more complex specialisations of the act of 'sending' and 'acquiring' knowledge through *letters*" (Marino 394). This link carries on through the Middle Ages, when "*the grammarian* implicitly becomes *the critic*, while *ars grammatica*

gradually turns into *ars critica*, one of the liberal arts. Grammar signifies, broadly speaking, the entirety of literary studies" (Marino 394). Although grammar, rhetoric and poetics were highly specialised activities, they dealt with various texts on an equal footing, favouring their content values over their expressive values. With respect to fictional texts, the comments highlighted the correspondences with reality (traditional *mimesis*) and sanctioned the too daring bursts of imagination. However, once the *belles lettres* and sentimental poetry separated themselves, starting from the 17th and the 18th century, from the general humanistic body, the attitude towards literature became more complicated. The Modern Age, ever more permissive, grants greater and greater freedom to the poet's fantasy, which becomes, at its utmost, "dictatorial", to the point of proclaiming, as was the case of the Avant-garde's all-out revolt, the abolition of the meaning or its arbitrary invention (like in Dadaism or Surrealism), namely the cancelled transitivity of the literary text and the failure of communication with the receiver.

Back to the school context, for instance, the question – dramatic through its possible consequences – arises about how today's literature might work in class with a definition such as that provided by G. Călinescu – granted, following the analysis of modern poets – at the end of his *Course* on poetry in 1937: "Poetry is a ceremonial, inefficient way to communicate the irrational, it is *the empty form of intellectual activity*. To be understood, poets play and, just like fools, they mimic communication, without actually communicating anything but the fundamental need of the human soul to capture the meaning of the world" (72-73). Most likely, the reaction at hand would be that teachers should ignore, before the students, this description of the nature of poetry, so that they could carry on "teaching" literature. And, as a matter of fact, that is exactly what they do...

The way school curriculum deals with literature still works on the old Horatian phrase, according to which the poet combines in his art *the useful* and *the agreeable*, with a focus, more often than not, on the useful side of the discipline. In the first half of the 19th century, for instance, when Romanian education was making its first steps, G. Barițiu wrote (in *Foaie pentru minte, inimă şi literatură* [*The Paper for Mind, Soul and Literature*], no. 1/1839) about *a useful* type of reading *and an agreeable* reading. His recommendation, an expression of the aesthetic consciousness of the time, but mainly of the pragmatic thinking of the Transylvanian School followers, showed but little appreciation of fictional products. His choice definitely went for the *useful* reading, as the *agreeable* one "pleases only the senses", and offers neither "marrow", nor "food for the soul"; we, "as Romanians, are by all means in need to learn, and must make sure not to lose our precious free time with trivia from others who jotted down their dreams not to forget them and then called them 'romance' so that they could sell them" (Ivaşcu 283). This mixture of values, grafted on the trunk of literature, has ever since been a specific feature of the mission of literature in school. It is difficult to say whether this sui-generis syncretism, which dates back to Antiquity and has proven its stamina to this day, is a beneficial or a pernicious combination for school education. From the point of view of an ever richer education, social, historical, patriotic, moral, religious, psychological values, and so on have an unbeatable significance; the question is whether literature is the most adequate

"discipline" to carry this load, given the fact that this burden may stifle the aesthetic being of the literary work, leading to the agony or even the demise of the idea of specific value such a class claims to promote in the first place. Quite a few texts from the school curricula, which many of us still remember (such as "Pasha Hassan" by G. Coşbuc, "The Chick" by Ioan Al. Brătescu-Voineşti, or, more recently, "The Apple Tree Beside the Road" by M. Beniuc), expressed great feelings, (the love for the national past, the grieving for the lost loved one, selflessness), but unfortunately cast in mediocre literary frames, which only goes to show that school curricula only takes a secondary interest in the aesthetic quality of chosen texts. Obviously, the literary work contains naturally aggregated values and goals, due to its connection with the world, but which are all, like in some magic alchemy, subordinated to the aesthetic value. We may quote, in this sense, other texts also carrying major themes and values ("The Desire" by M. Eminescu – love; "The Holm" by L. Blaga – time, death; "The Psalms" by T. Arghezi – faith; "The Third Satire" by M. Eminescu – national history; "Here came long ago..." by I. Pillat – love, time; "A Lost Letter" by I. L. Caragiale – the lust for politics, and many more), which bring the same educational utility, pursued in classes, but derived from genuine literary values. A basic principle of literary theory teaches us that value should be taken into consideration, at least implicitly, when a literary work is studied. This principle should also be closely observed when establishing the school curricula, which tends to be too permissive in this regard. Literature, as an art of the word, may easily be trapped into these pitfalls when taught in school. Using language, the most complex means of communication, literature, out of all arts, gets the most attention in school, and, at the same time, has the most difficult mission: that of supporting a variegated education, often exceeding the limits of its own nature. The long journey of literature, especially of poetry, from ancient times until today has been marked by the continuous effort of literary *art* (stretched up to moments of crisis, in the case of poetry, once it made its way into modernity) to gain the recognition of a relatively fragile specificity, hard to assert as it implies a big dose of gratuity society is not willing to accept easily. For this reason, school keeps a significant distance from modern literature, opting for classical literature, which better suits the various goals of school education.

A literary theory topic, occupying an important place in the school curricula, covers the treatment of the aesthetic value in "teaching" literature. Aside from the syncretism of goals we mentioned above and the difficulty of the work to promote, in this context, its specificity, at stake here is the relation between the supposedly individual nature (according to most aestheticians) of artistic reception and the group approach to literary work in class. This assumed inconsistence combines with the idea of *learning* literature, which implies showing and enforcing a value model, didactically, therefore underlining its exemplary character. Their underdeveloped taste, lack of artistic judgment and insufficient culture render it difficult that school pupils be granted the right to artistic choice or the possibility to argue such an option, although, when it comes to artistic stimulus, aesthetics teaches us that the individual response plays a crucial role. As a matter of fact, in school, children should learn how to get in touch with art – how to know it (information), and also how to cherish it (the education of the taste), and that is why the quality of any

comments made about the respective work (the teacher, the handbook) really matters, not to speak of the selected artistic works in the curricula. The lesson of the beautiful is also taught, ultimately, in art school, while the individual example aims to illustrate the aesthetic norm, i.e. to back up a value-centred canon instrumental to this kind of education. The question is how we integrate this rule into didactic practice.

Due to the group approach to literature in school and as a consequence of the relative depersonalisation of the contact with artistic value, the role of *criticism* as an individual act weakens to a certain extent against this didactic background. The value of the texts to be studied is decided by the selection provided in the school curricula. What matters from the substance of the critical act, given this situation, is how the teacher-"critic" approaches the text, namely how he examines and comments upon the poem or the given fragment in prose, in an attempt to justify the value announced. The didactic use of text analysis is, undoubtedly, many-sided. Besides the exercise of rationalising artistic impression by making it explicit, an analytical technique is acquired and developed, bringing along a certain methodological rigorousness needed in school and mainly practiced from the Formalists and Structuralists onwards. The theoretical grounds for such an "applied reading" are the perception of the work as a complex formation (the poem's layers, the canvass of narrative micro-sequences, etc.), a belief that boosts the analytical endeavour. Furthermore, always underlining the fact, often overlooked, that language is literature's material, textual analysis does a better job at bringing to the fore the work's expressive qualities, somehow counterbalancing the excesses of the content approach ("the ideatic content" of the work), an approach which is all too pervasive in school-type analyses.

Which of the traditional disciplines of literary study might seem better suited for the specific conditions of the approach used in school? Most likely, *literary history* should be best represented, since it seems closest to the idea of "learning" literature. In fact, literary history undergoes major changes in school as compared to its usual avatars. Călinescu's well-known opinion, for instance, according to which there is no history but only historians, the accent falling on the subject (*the formative mind, the structuring consciousness*), is fully contradicted by the general, cultural and impersonal character of "teaching" the subject matter "literature" in school. This statement brings together several didactic commonplaces, some unavoidable in this context, others probably amendable, but which school perpetuates, handing them down from one generation to another, like some tradition hard to reform. Therefore, the work's extrinsic approach prevails, at the expense of the specifically aesthetic one, so as to provide pupils, through literature, with a broader cultural education (certainly useful in an absolute way). The creative subject's voice – the lyric self, to use the common terminology – hardly penetrates through the layers of objective, depersonalised information the didactic comment brings to the fore from the work under study. This is seen, in principle, more as a reflex of the objective world (Aristotle's old *mimesis* proves to hold the test of time because it seems commonsensical) than a symptom of the author's reflexivity, expressed in the work. It is hard to persuade the average reader – including the school reader – that L. Rebreanu's *Uprising*, for instance, is not exactly the 1907 uprising, but first and foremost the writer's *personal outlook* on that

dramatic event. The temptation to go back from the fictional space to the reality from which the fictional world just emerged is somehow logical for the common perception. Unfortunately, instead of fixing it, school encourages it more often than not, mainly emphasizing the work's ideatic content, its correspondences with the world and the general meanings carried within the work's natural syncretism.

Literary history seems to follow to this day, in its school version, the traditional vision established in the late 19th century and early 20th century, in Sorbonne, by Lanson's model. Lanson believed in the scientific study of history and literature, which meant, among other things, the portrayal of general deeds, the examination of the authors' biographies, the explanation of the background of the works, with a view to discovering the genesis of the texts in the world around them, turning the exact determination of the assumed external causes of literature into a highly important scientific scruple. Thence the thinking automatism by which, whenever a writer is introduced in school with the pair of terms "the life and work", a phrase showing in fact the hidden belief in a causal relation between the two components. Meanwhile, in order to find the origins of the work, modern literary theory has developed a much more complicated and cautious approach, summed up in Bachelard's formula according to which creative imagination is more deforming than analogous. However, if such a relation between "life and work" were postulated, then the certainties induced by school explanations would be greatly weakened...

Literary history should represent most accurately the idea of literary tradition within a culture. The dialectic relation between synchrony and diachrony, focusing on the viewpoint expressed by the present, which keeps the past alive and permanently reconsiders it, to make room for novelty (in keeping with the model described by T. S. Eliot), seems to be too complicated a mechanism to successfully apply to the way literary history is taught in school. In the academic version of literary history, the works and the writers are aligned in a string of brief monographs, while the operation of distinguishing between literary periods can but overlook the living continuity of the phenomena, and creates the illusion that literary theory can command a mutable matter through seemingly accurate measurements. These issues, peculiar to the act of knowledge, are normally raised by any literary history, since they deal with the basic relation between subject and object, between present and past. However, the study of literature in school, by emphasizing its normative and impersonal character, accrues these contradictions inherent to this field of study.

Confronted with the curricular demands, literary theory takes two fundamental forms. The most important one comes from the way literature is approached in school and refers to the code of norms and principles governing the didactic status of this "subject matter". This implies reaching a certain understanding of the subject, and also establishing an exact goal, which lends direction to school study, turning an art of individual expression into a tool for knowledge and general education.

Secondly, in school, literary theory is viewed as an inventory of technical procedures, such as prosodic patterns, describing the verse structure (meters, rhythm, rhyme, types of stanzas, etc.), or teaching us the parts that make up a work or the characteristic features of literary genres, etc. This chapter of literary history, albeit more accurate, does not tackle

the fundamental issues related to comprehension, and only deals with the outer, formal side of the work, more easily to grasp by school practice.

To get a better grasp of the way literature is studied in school, in what follows, we shall make an analogy with the study of language, which, admittedly, offered many important suggestions to literary research in the 20th century, mainly through its rigorous methods set as models (for instance, R. Jakobson placed poetics under the umbrella of general linguistics). In this line, we could liken the material of literary history (writers, works, magazines, literary events in general) to the words which make up the vocabulary of a language, written down in a general dictionary. In keeping with this analogy, literary theory would have, in its turn, the role of a grammar describing the rules for combining words, in order to build up the text, i.e. the verbal fabric of any communication. In school, literary theory, normative and rigorous as any grammar, teaches us what literary works are, how we should use them and what benefit we can derive from them. Finally, literary criticism, representing in this comparison the individual element, equivalent to a personal, rational, but also sensitive way of receiving the message the literary artefact sends out to the world, would correspond, linguistically, to a personal, individually coloured use of the language system (just like in the functional relation between Saussure's terms: *langue-parole*), which would be a theoretical abstraction if it were not put into verbal and writing practice by numberless users. It can be seen now, with more clarity, why school prefers to focus, from the triple offer of research disciplines, mainly on literary history and theory: because of their broader character and the higher degree of impersonal approach, which meet school exigencies, dealing only with groups and not with individuals. Criticism, taking on a more personal relation to the work, proves to be uncomfortable and inoperative in class. Whose critical view should be taken into consideration? The teacher's? The opinion of all the students attending the class or just one opinion, more receptive to the aesthetic signal sent by the work? Such individual reactions are always possible, and even welcome, in literature classes, but they are more likely mere exceptions, automatic personal responses swallowed up by the gregarious character of literary reception in school. Therefore, we can *teach* – and solicit the students' response related to – the general (cultural) information, the writers' biographies, the ideatic content of the work (forcing it to exist even where it has no place being, like in lyrical poetry) or the technical rules for verse or prose composition. As we move closer to the modern age, school reception has to overcome greater difficulties because of the ever more numerous signs of the author's subjectivity informing the work. It becomes more difficult for us to make sense of a metaphor; we provide inaccurate descriptions, using some prosaic paraphrase, for a feeling of love, death or communion with nature, which was better captured by the poetical form. At stake here is the personal critical relation between work and receiver, which is hard to be communicated and checked in class (except maybe in the form of a mark at a test or oral examination!) and which, generally speaking, poses management difficulties to the teacher and the pupils alike.

Therefore, literary theory finds a more suitable place in the economy of the literature class, because the lessons it has to teach us are tailored to the specificity of literature in

a way that literary criticism isn't. Although artistic reception is mainly a matter of taste, manageable primarily within the critical act, nonetheless, in real life, individual diversity does not lead to an atomisation of opinions. According to Lovinescu's theory of reception, opinions converge as a result of the *saeculum*, the atmosphere common to the individual receivers at a given time. For R. Wellek, the idea of a possible consensus in this area is well illustrated by the way in which literature is treated in school, where the normative attitude – which determines, for instance, which authors go into the academic canons centred on value – is naturally assigned its rightful place, despite a certain reluctance to forcibly assert that this domain too is governed by truths and rules: "Our teaching of literature is actually also based on aesthetic imperatives, even if we feel less definitely bound by them and seem more hesitant to bring these assumptions out in the open. The disaster of the 'humanities' as far as they are concerned with the arts and literature is due to their timidity in making the very same claims which are made in regard to law and truth. Actually, we do make these claims when we teach *Hamlet* or *Paradise Lost* rather than Grace Metalious or, to name contemporaries of Shakespeare and Milton, Henry Glapthorne or Richard Blackmore. But we do so shamefacedly, apologetically, hesitatingly. There is, contrary to frequent assertions, a very wide agreement on the great classics: the main canon of literature" (17-18).

There are opinions granting literary theory a higher status than to its sister disciplines, because of its advancement on the path of knowledge, which moves, in art as well, from the particular and the sensitive to the general and the abstract. Such an intellectualised initial impression is seen by A. Marino, for instance, as a necessary evolution through which the soul takes hold of and deepens, by the power to understand and conceptualise, the artistic offer of the work: "The rationalisation of sensibility starts from the need to change obscure, unstable, indistinct, 'ineffable' literary emotions and perceptions into intelligible, stable, noticeable, analysable data [...] At the same time, the strive towards knowledge, in its clarifying effort, makes recourse to concepts and ideas. Intellection becomes the natural follow-up of the striving towards the intelligible. Emotions are attributed definitions, abstract contents. [...] When we want to understand a poet's work, we begin by translating it into an abstract language, giving it a mental paraphrase. [...] 'Feeling' tends to change into 'science', *con-feeling* into *con-science*, within an accepted universal language. [...] In this way, the critic's consciousness is ever more overflown by ideas, which turn, as is the case with art, into criteria, principles, predominantly aesthetic systems" (232-233). R. Wellek adopts the very same line of reasoning when he sees literary theory as an integrating discipline, which integrates line of reasoning the material provided by literary criticism and history: "We must return to the task of building a literary theory, a system of principles, a theory of values which will necessarily draw on the criticism of concrete works of art and will constantly invoke the assistance of literary history" (20).

Although it often gets side-tracked from the orthodox definition of literature, and implicitly, from the practice of literature, as recommended by specialists (deviations due to the didactic and the collective character of school activity), the "teaching" of literature will continue to be an indispensable practice for the pupils' general education.

Given the possibilities and depending to a great extent on the teachers' personal talent, it could also touch upon a more daring project of aesthetic education. For most of the pupils, this encounter with literature, conducted in a somewhat systematic way in school, is the only opportunity to acquire a minimum artistic experience. It is true that art is learnt in school, from the masters, but a good art school is hard to put into practice, and a recipe to guarantee its success is almost illusory. Therefore, we shall continue to "teach" literature in school, for better or worse, always bearing in mind I. Creangă's saying: "What's bad is bad, but it may get worse without it..."

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