Literature on its own

Dragos Avadanei

"Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University, Iasi

Abstract: *In the past half-century or so, the form, structure, status and conception of literature have been subjected to al sorts of pressures, a quite a number of changes occurred at various levels, adding up to something that might be called a literary (or cultural, rather) paradigm shift, which, in our view, may be only a superficial one.*

Key words: *critical reading, critical thinking, literature*

Beginning in the early 1960s, thinkers and scholars from both sides of the Atlantic authoritatively proclaimed such things as the death of the author (Roland Barthes), *Waiting for the End* and the ominous What Was Literature (Leslie Fiedler), *Against Interpretation (*Susan Sontag), *Criticism in the Wilderness* (Gerald Graff), *Literature Against Itself* (Geoffrey Hartman), *The Closing of the American (*Allan Bloom), *Killing the Spirit* (Page Smith) or *Illiberal Education* (Dinesh D'Sousa), following in the not very distant tradition of Hegel's *The End of Ideology,* Friedrich Nietzsche's *Death of God,* F. F. Fukuyama's *The End of History,* John Horgan's *The End of Science,* and culminating, for our particular purposes here, in Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*(1990); and Kernan believes that literature has become a type of discourse endlessly self-conscious about the problematics of reading, interpretation, and making meaning, frequently making these very questions its central subject. Thus thinking about literature has become thinking in literature about itself.

As a consequence, new definitions of literature in general, and of poetry in particular have been proposed. These definitions tend sometimes to back up or away from any formal characterizations: "Poetry is the orphan of silence: the words never quite equal the experience behind them…" An endless problem with poetry, which also raises the question of what is inside the language and what is completely outside the language and what is both inside and outside of the language; because once reality - whatever that may mean (Barth:"reality is a nice place to visit, provided you do not remain too long there") - gets absorbed, by some kind of feedforward, into the language of a text, then there is a feedback from the text into the reality, such that the latter becomes itself some kind of text. Consequently, on a second reading, reality is no longer the same, the first one - it is reality semiotically charged.

This very concept of charging may have brought about a series of other definitions regarding literature as an energetic construct. As far back as 1911, philosopher George Santayana regarded minds as "storage batteries for energy"; if this energy gets transferred into language, and that language becomes a text, we can see why some critics and theorists might speak of textual insufficiency - the battery is not charged enough - , or of excess of meaning - too much energy for the volume of the text. Books in a library are as many storage batteries standing on the shelves and awaiting to be plugged in by one mind or another in order to release their energy - maybe, sometimes, even explode or blast off. But, of course, the conservation and transformation of textual energy as it moves between minds is something that deserves more that this passing commentary, as some books represent accumulations of energy - original, then conjoined by later charges of critical effort, century after century very often, translation after translation (in the most general meaning of the term) - that turn them into Mogul diamonds (Coleridge) and invaluable crystalline compositions. Creative thinking is superimposed, enriched and complicated by layers upon layers of literary critical thinking, until one may not be sure as to which is which and in what ways both have modified the initial critical thinking (one of our permanent preoccupations, here and elsewhere). Let it also

be said that their energy is both static and dynamic and that it can be storaged, transported, lost or gained and amplifies depending on as many factors and conditions.

Time, language, and the mind of man in literature is one of the most challenging and complex intellectual problems of mankind; when the great mind (creative thinking) of the great literary creator confronts, in time, mystery by means of language, the result is a great sense of failure (literary critical thinking), and literature may therefore be defined in terms of this supreme joy and wisdom at discovering yourself as a failure (see F. Scott Fitzgerald); writers are heroes who confronted time, language, the world, and God, and their own minds and failed, and their great poems are the stories and poems of these failures. Homer, Dante, Shakespeare, Cervantes, Goethe, Dickinson, Dostoevsky, or Faulkner have all, in pack it up in their partial expressions of partial understandings: literature as man's modality of tampering with mystery; literature as that highly varied - though classifiable -, multitude of texts through which a linguistic community confronts, historically, its own despairs, and uncertainties: "Here we shall find /this community's/

> conversation with itself,
> its inner thoughts and
> its outer experience,
> its private editations and
> its public utterances." (Pat Rogers , "Preface" to *Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature*)

The university classroom or lecture hall has had, all this time, a central role, as more and more of the *difficult* literary pieces came to be confined to the academic world, and the battle for the *canon* or against it got various types of impulses, not only from inside the literature departments, but from outside as well - from politics, sociology, race-ethnicity-religious studies, etc.

On the other hand, the professors themselves started appearing as accumulators of so much systematic knowledge about literature (literary critical thinking) that novels or poems (creative/poetic thinking) tended to be written with such readers in mind. Not only that, but the professors also became writers in their own right, so that literary philosophy and theory entered their texts, turning these into post-modern metaliterature. No wonder some might claim that the teaching of literature has undermined literature itself. We may know, from someone like Peter Porter or Susan Sontag, that "the essence of art is to engage faculties that transcend the analytic," (creative thinking is all too often outside the reach of literary critical thinking), but classes of creative writing sprang up almost in all American universities, the novelists and poets turned writers in residence, the dons got preoccupied with the teaching of literature *per se* rather than the teaching about literature, and a number of trespassers came in from linguistics, semiotics, mathematics even, theology, history, philosophy, and, to top it all, cultural studies were invented or came into being.

So, our questions become obsessions: What does really happen in the literature classroom? What do we think about the whole thing? (critical thinking confronting both creative thinking and literary critical thinking). If any personal experience (of one writer or another) has a wholly subjective character, then nobody from the outside (no critic or reader) can repeat that experience, not even hypothetically. Turning such and experience into language with a view to having it communicated so that somebody else might appropriate it and thus, possibly, repeat it, is in itself - this linguistic transformation - another subjective experience, a new intellectual-emotive event. Consequently, the sense or significance of the first experience undergoes a change through linguistic encoding - whether oral or textual -, which may be followed by decoding and the attempt of the receiver to represent that experience, which means that there are three subjective experiences at this end: linguistic reception, decoding or understanding and re-experiencing. Between the first subjective

experience - let us take it to be the reading of a poem - and the final subjective experience, i. e. reconstructing the experience communicated by the first reader - four other intellectual-affective moments come in.

But if both subjects have - each his or her own way - a certain response to the reading of that poem and they communicate nothing (they cannot, will not, find no reason why), what can one say about the two experiences? That they are responses to the same linguistic composition; then that, since they are speakers of the same language, they may have processed about the same meanings from the text and their responses, their subjective experiences might be comparable. If each of them expresses in writing this experience and a third reads the three texts - the poem and the two essays - what we have is a moment of critical teaching; and the endlessness of teaching is rooted in the fact that the two or three responses have never been, will never be, and cannot be identical.

In other words, one can say, together with Van Wyck Brooks, that "the teaching of literature stimulates the creative faculty, but it also and far more effectually thwarts it, so that the professor turns against himself. He passively plays into the hands that underfeed his imaginative life and permits the whole weight of his meticulous knowledge of the past to tip the beam against the living present. He gradually comes to fulfill himself in the vicarious world of the dead and returns to the actual world of struggling and miseducated mortals in the majestic raiment of borrowed immortalities. And he pours out upon that world his own contempt for the starveling poet in himself." (p.95) Many contemporary professors-poets-critics would certainly disagree; no type of thinking denies another or other types.

So, if the writer speaks with the authority of failure (our Fitzgerald example again), the professor is a double failure himself, and that very fact folds him in a majestic raiment, which, of course, most students will mistake for a beggar's outfit. As literature moved from the writer to critic to professor to student, the perception of literature may have move from willing suspension of disbelief, to willful suspension of belief, to unwilling suspension of belief in postmodernism. As the professor and the student become writers rather than (just) readers, when expectation and surprise change places, letters are replaced by beams of light, imagination and reality are one and the text is hypertext (or hyperfiction, or cyberfiction, or reactive literature, or nonsequential literature). The creation of literary meaning becomes everybody's possibility in communicating in alienation. Space and time combine in ways that would surprise even an Einstein, texts become tri-dimensional and are made up of lexias and hypertrophies arranged in some kind of a menu, the syntax becomes plurivocal, memory acquitters collective definitions, combinatory games are being played in a universe of hypersigns, i.e. letters, words, textual blocks, fixed or moving images, and the literary work becomes an endless happening. Literature has turned out to be one among innumerable options, as the consequences of an act told in one narrative become part of someone else's story and so on. One could even say that this is one version of the contemporary fairy tale - *One Thousand and One Nights* written and re-written all over again for the pleasure of one reading it an re-writing it at the same time. Roland Barthes - death of the author, Umberto Eco - the semiotics of indecision, Jacques Derrida - discontinuity, decentering, deconstruction, and Michael Bakhtin - dialogism and the reader as producer of the text - have all come together and have one name - MOUSE. The educational power game - the critic's reading the professor's reading plus the student's reading is replaced, fortunately or unfortunately, by web democracy. With the author dead - or unimportant - and with all of these more or less recent developments, the man-in-the-crowd or a simple consumer so far comes to occupy both front-stage and center-stage as a producer of the text, so much so that no only does he become a valued addressee, but an addresser, a sender as well, as he comes to write the literature he reads. And thus the distinctions we have had in mind - critical thinking, creative thinking, literary critical thinking, poetic thinking - seem to have melted into one another, though

looking at them separately might have some sense. J. L. Borges's "garden of the forking paths" is transformed into the supreme metaphor and the mouse performs the whole operation when the cat is obviously not at home, or possibly extinct.

This way, almost paradoxically, literature gets to be more alive than ever, more alive than it was in the beginnings, when great literature controlled the destinies and minds of all men, in forms whose poetry we cannot miss after thousands of years: "At the beginning of God's creating of the heaven and the earth, when the earth was wild and waste, darkness over the face of the Ocean, rushing spirit of God hovering over the face of the waters - God said: Let there be light! And there was light. God saw the light: that it was good. God separated the light from the darkness. God called the light: Day! And the darkness he called: Night! There was setting, there was dawning, one day."

In the beginning, therefore, was literature, and literature was in words, and these word were literature. And literature, we can now safely say, is very much present in the age of supertechnology, when the computer has already turned many readers into writers and pretty soon reading, writing, and the teaching/sharing of literature will be one thing. If Shakespeare was the man of the second millennium, Jesus the man of the first millennium and Homer, possibly, the man of the millennium before that, then we can anticipate that the man-or woman - of the third millennium will be the reader-writer-critic-professor-computer wizard; or Google - Google as God; or a digital immigrant; if literature is dead, then long live literature!

Computer wizard? Well, yes, and that computer wizard can take all or most of the knowledge about literature (literary critical thinking) or about fiction accumulated so far, share it with his friend BRUTUS (computer program) and ask him to write a story - appropriately enough - about betrayal, which BRUTUS challengingly titles "Betrayal in Self-Deception": "David Striver loved the university. He loved its ivy-colored clock towers, its ancient and sturdy brick, and its sun-splashed verdant greens and eager youth. He also loved the fact that the university is free of the stark unforgiving trials of the business world; only this *isn't* a fact: academia has its own tests, and some are as merciless as any in the market place. A prime example is the dissertation defense: to earn the PhD, to become a doctor, one must pass an oral examination on one's dissertation. This was a test Professor Edward Hart enjoyed giving.

Dave wanted desperately to be a doctor. But he needed the signatures of three professors on the first page of his dissertation, the priceless inscriptions which, together, would certify that he passed his defense. One of the signatures had to come from Professor Hart, and Hart had often said to others and to himself that he was honored to help Dave secure his well-earned dream.

Well before the defense, Striver gave Hart a penultimate copy of his thesis. Hart read it and told Dave that it was absolutely first-rate, and that he would gladly sign it at the defense. They even shook hands in Hart's book-lined office. Dave noticed that Hart's eyes were bright and trustful and his bearing paternal.

At the defense, Dave thought that he eloquently summarized Chapter 3 of his dissertation. There were two questions, one from Professor Rodman and one from Dr. Teer; Dave answered both, apparently to everyone's satisfaction. There were no further objections. Professor Rodman signed. He slid the tome to Teer; she too signed, and then slid it in front of Hart. Hart didn't move. 'Ed?' Rodman said. Hart sat motionless. Dave felt slightly dizzy. Later, Hart sat alone in his office, in his big leather chair, saddened by Dave's failure. He tried to think of ways he could help Dave achieve his dream."

A story *generated* or *engineered* by a computer program, not *authored* by BRUTUS. But we can listen to those who authored BRUTUS, Selmer Bringsjord of Rensleer Polytechnic Institute, New York, and David Ferrucci of T. J. Watson Research Center, IBM,

New York: "BRUTUS didn't *originate* the story. He is incapable of generating it because two humans spent years figuring out how to formalize a generative capacity sufficient to produce this and other stories, and then they are able to implement part of this formalization so as to have a computer produce such prose. The engineering method followed here is known as *reverse engineering*." A story generator is firmly based on theoretical investigations of narrative (literary critical thinking) and computation (critical thinking? engineering critical thinking?)

Then Bringsjord and Ferrucci acknowledge their indebtedness to Roger Shank, who as far back as 1979 believed that what makes a story interesting can be captured in computable schemes; therefore, Bringsjord and Ferrucci work on the assumption that interestingness is computable, that a narrative has to trigger certain readerly imaginings, and thus they produce a list of heuristics for how to produce the desired reader response. In their 2000 book *AI and Literary Creativity. Inside the Mind of BRUTUS, A Story-Telling Machine* they also discuss the issue of point of view, informing us that, in order for BRUTUS to write interesting stories, he/it must carry the reader in a landscape of consciousness, and there seem to be certain determinate ways to enable this. A number of technicalities and formulae follow - which we, as literary people, cannot struggle with - but what remains is a story about betrayal (other "lofty literary themes" are unrequited love, evil, power, sex, money, destruction, chaos, romance, disease…) and how to receive it.

This author's own reception of it is that most of us will soon be left out of the literary game or experience (with stories generated rather than told, with themes captured in logical parameters rather than subtly suggested, with interestingness formalized rather than carefully worked out or fallen upon, with narrative contracts implemented rather than intuited, envisioned and originally developed with literature communicating to itself rather than to a third party), and before long we will have computers reading literature written by computers and thus the human mind will have moved to the end of its tether through this postmodern concentration on itself (the three types of thinking mentioned before coming full circle again). And thus we are back to Kernan's observation about the endless self-consciousness of literature concerning the problematics of reading, interpretation and making meaning. Literature will, however, go on being written - and read, presumably - but outside the realm of human experience; as man vanishes, literature survives. And this does not make much sense to a literary mind trying to encompass the four thousand year gap between Bringsjord with his interestingness computed and Khakheperresenb, an Egyptian scribe of cca 2000 BC, also frustrated by the impossibility of being original:

> "Would I had phrases
> that are not known
> utterances
> that are strange
> in new language that has
> not been used,
> free from repetition,
> not an utterance
> which has grown stale,
> which men of old
> have spoken."

If the scribe would rather avoid stale utterances spoken by men of old in 2000 BC, then BRUTUS can only be interesting by repetition; the criticism and literary theory (literary critical thinking) BRUTUS was given to storage and digest only to spit out in the form of a story that had constituted the starting point of the theory and criticism in the first place is only the result of interesting repetition on top of interesting repetition of the Egyptian's lament.

Narrative intelligence consists in the art of hiding the obvious for the purpose of revealing the obvious again and again; when it remains on its own - without writers and readers - the obvious will no longer have a name.

These and other considerations could become better articulated for one who has in mind the much larger project of following the interrelationships between and among the four types of thinking suggested in various places all along: critical thinking, creative thinking, poetic thinking, and literary critical thinking, all of which, hopefully, have been part and parcel of what we intended to point out. Centuries-long accumulations of critical thinking behind creative thinking, or the many different ways in which literary critical thinking and poetic thinking determine, influence, undermine or complete each other have all resulted in leaving with literary thinking encompassing all of them, to which critical reading has to be naturally added.

References

The Bible, *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures,* Watchtower Bible and Tract Society of Pennsylvania, 1961

Bringsjord, Selmer & David A. Ferrucci, *Artificial Intelligence and Literary Creativity,* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Mahwah, New Jersey, London, 2000

Brooks, Van Wyck, *Makers and Finders: A History of the Writer in America 1800-1915,* Dutton, Everyman's Library, 1950

Kernan, Alvin B., *The Death of Literature*, Yale University Press, 1992

Khakheperresenb, quoted in *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970) by Walker Jackson Bate

Rogers, Pat (ed.), *Oxford Illustrated History of English Literature*, Oxford University Press, 1987

Santayana, George, *Marginalia: A Critical Selection* (ed. Kristine W. Frost), 1911

Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays,* Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966