




The danger of Literature

O perigo da Literatura

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ABSTRACT

This essay aims to unveil the work “Literature in Danger”, by Tzvetan Todorov, reflecting on the main points raised by the Bulgarian theorist about the function and position in which Literature finds itself in society. In our perspective, we will invert the concept enunciated by the author and invite our reader to an understanding that highlights the power that Literature provokes and exercises in humanity, highlighting its importance in the process of humanization and awareness of the self. Therefore, with this proposal, we aim to think of literature beyond its aesthetic effect and analyze it as a social apparatus capable of representing the desires of a population. To mediate this work, we used the statements of Holanda (2021), Borges (2019), Cabral (2003) and other authors who think about the proposed theme.

RESUMO

Este ensaio visa descortinar a obra *A Literatura em Perigo*, de Tzvetan Todorov, refletindo sobre os principais pontos levantados pelo teórico búlgaro sobre a função e a posição em que se encontra a Literatura na sociedade. Em nossa perspectiva, inverteremos o conceito enunciado pelo autor e convidaremos o nosso leitor a uma compreensão que destaque o poder que a Literatura provoca e exerce na humanidade, destacando a sua importância no processo de humanização e conscientização do eu. Portanto, com esta proposta, objetivamos pensar a Literatura para além do seu efeito estético e analisá-la como um aparato social capaz de representar os anseios de uma população. Para intermediar este trabalho, recorreremos às falas de Holanda (2021), Borges (2019), Cabral (2003) e outros autores que pensam sobre o tema proposto.

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Introduction

I was once invited to join a Book Club, whose subtitle was: “Because literature”. Immediately, I was intrigued by that phrase, which did not come in interrogative form, but in affirmative form. So I started thinking: “But why literature?” In the absence of answers, I found Todorov (2020, p. 23): “Because it helps me to live”. As I illuminated my reasoning, I realized how much that statement placed literature as an extension of human existence, something perishable to our subsistence. To me, literature is that. It’s this place of spiritual retreat where the subject, all filled with gaps, will reflect, will strip naked. It will, following the maxims of Candido (2004), become humanized.

In this way, I saw that, more than a statement, that sentence contained a call to come out of oneself and look at oneself from the outside. A becoming; an exercise in humanity. For this reason, I chose Todorov's book to tread the paths of this critical conversation. Borrowing other voices from literature, such as Cabral, Borges, Barthes, Holanda and so many others who touch me with the power of their languages. So let's start at the beginning. And as I go along, I will return to the maxim of this discussion: the power of literature.

Todorov, like these great masters of the knowledge of language, begins his *Literature in Danger* (2020) with a return to his memories, especially those linked to reading. It’s interesting to note how the author chooses language as a path of emancipation. At this point, we come to an intermittent discussion in literary studies: after all, is it the author who makes the reader or vice versa? I will allow myself to open a discursive rift and return to Todorov's text next.

The Reader

First of all, we are readers. And I would still dare to go further: First of all, the artist is a great reader. For it’s only from what he accesses, as material of knowledge, that he can materialize his experiences in the space of art, whether through the field of verbal or non-verbal.

João Cabral de Melo Neto, one of the greatest agents of poetic art, says, in the documentary “Recife x Seville” (2003), of the pity it was to be blind, because that, for him, made it impossible for him to be what he liked most: A reader. What stands out most in this speech is how Cabral does not put himself as a writer. For him, nothing is more important than reading. It’s from her that he is formed, it’s through her that he communicates and in her that he translates himself as a citizen of the world. Cabral's example, as singular as it’s beautiful, is just one example of what we have signaled before.

Let's use another example, now from another guy who had a lot of intimacy with poetic language: Jorge Luís Borges. In “This Office of Verse”, the Argentine, when reflecting on the

creed of a poet, says that what he has read is much more important than what he has written, and highlights: “For one reads what one likes - but does not write what one would like to write, but what one is capable of writing”. (BORGES, 2019, p. 95).

As noted, a writer is nothing more than a reader. Thus, we enter another stage of critical reflection: If the writer is a reader, then does this imply that the writer depends on the reader to be or be an artist of language? This is an old and at the same time current discussion, because the way in which societies evolve these issues have gained other connotations. In other words, these themes feed back as new readings emerge, as in an infinite critique.

Roland Barthes, one of the exponents of critical thinking in the reader/writer discussion, points out, in *The Death of the Author* (2004, p. 4), that: “The birth of the reader has to be paid for with the death of the Author”. How so? Apparently, Barthes realized that it’s through the experience of the reader that the writer will exist as an agent of language, because it’s he who will fill the gaps of the text with his interpretations, as Iser says in “*The fictitious and the imaginary*”, 2013. So, is it only in the death of the writer that the reader is born? That’s the big question Barthes raises.

Thus, one might think that the writer is nothing more than an emissary of art: A spokesman for language. However, the writer does not have control of the subjective experience of each reading made of his text. He only conveys what he feels from what he has read, as Borges (2019) pointed out. That is, it seems, reading is the space of spiritual enlightenment of the writer. And writing, that’s where he’s going to verbalize his emotions. In short, yes, Barthes is right. It’s only in the death of the writer that the reader is born. Moreover, the reader only exists because of writing. And who creates it, is the writer. Therefore, both are parts of the same coin and fruits of the same root: language.

So far, it’s noted how significant the reading experience is in the reception process. And the image created, from the reading, drives the sensory elements of the reader; expanding the signs transposed into the language. Which, in this process, plays the role of catalyst of the sensitive. And by losing some of the threads that connect him with the imaginary network of language, the reader enters a sensory abyss, for he cannot, to some extent, perceive the covert. Seeing life imitating art or vice versa.

For this reason, perhaps, Borges and Cabral were so sorry to have lost their sight, since it prevented them from exploring the captivity of the sensitive. Leaving them adrift and in the darkness of their own existence. Therefore, as “awakened readers” (PIGLIA, 2006, p. 21), they needed to re-educate themselves to the senses and reconnect with the images of the world. Becoming readers by essence: those who use reading not only as a practice, but as a way of living and cataloguing their poetic images. Still in this perspective, let us observe what Foucault brings:

The role of writing is to constitute, with all that reading has constituted, a 'body'. And it's necessary to understand this body not as a body of doctrine, but rather - according to the metaphor of digestion, so often evoked - as the very body of the one who, transcribing his readings, appropriated them and made their truth his own: writing transforms the thing seen or heard into strength and blood. (FOUCAULT, 2004, p. 152).

From this reading, we can make the following comparison: a plant can exist by itself, but for it to carry out its photosynthesis, it will need light, just as the writer will need the reader. For its light, as an instance of signification, comes from reading, it comes from the other: it comes from language.

In one of the classes of Literary Criticism (*Crítica Literária*), taught in 2021 at the Graduate Program in Letters of the Federal University of Pernambuco (*Universidade Federal de Pernambuco - UFPE*), Lourival Holanda stated that: "Language is a possibility of thought". I will dare once again: In addition to a possibility of thought, language is a light that illuminates the darkness of reason, often conditioned by external agents. Like, for example, public policies that do not contemplate critical thinking in education. Thus, through this speech of Holland, we return to Todorov and raise the following question: If language is a possibility of thought, why is literature reduced to absurdity?

The absurdity

I corroborate Todorov's anguish in observing that the school formalizes the study of literature to understandings and definitions that engender critical thinking. Nullifying the enjoyment of words and experience, since as Holland also uttered in class: "Every definition is a negation". To this, in my view, it would be pertinent and transformative to teach literature by a bias of otherness, as a contact with oneself. Or as Fernando Pessoa would say in *The Book of Disquiet* (1999), as a family relationship: Where various visions will approach or move away from the object of contemplation of art. That here, is a way of feeling the other. Still according to Pessoa, it's necessary to say with simplicity and uniqueness, after all: "Art is to make the other feel what we feel, to free them from themselves, proposing to them our personality for special liberation" (p. 03).

Lacan (1998) already understood the boundaries of language as a process that generates enunciative subjects, which will be pierced by interpersonal contact. In other words, the French psychoanalyst recognized otherness as a founding foundation of human language, which by extension signals the interference of the Other, the latter with the capital letter "O" to emphasize his position as mediator of human manifestations. Feeling the other is, therefore, a game of internal learning by the external of oneself, because as Rimbaud (2009) announces: "Je est un autre" (I is an other)

But it's worth mentioning that, in this essayistic exercise, we propose a confluence between these philosophical paths of Nihilism and Solipsism. That is, we seek to understand the internal experience from the external. For we recognize that these understandings, if generalized, can become detached from the experience of perceiving the world through ourselves.

Literature beyond the walls of the school

Through this critical signaling, it's understood that the study of literature needs to be in school, a bridge and not an abyss. And their theories should be discussed, structurally, at the university. In basic education, as the nomenclature itself proposes, one must learn the essential, that which will condition a simple and unique way of reading, feeling and understanding life.

Let me give you another example, again of a personal nature. A few years ago I taught in a public school in the county where I live, here in Alagoas. There, I taught reinforcement classes in Portuguese. My pedagogical practice was guided by a curricular matrix that valued the good understanding and comprehension of texts. So, as a teaching didactic, I sought to evaluate the students with textual productions of a free character. Where they, in their space of expression, would manifest their impressions and inquiries of the texts presented. Some students liked it. Others, not so much. One of these once asked me why I only took a test "in the business of writing poems". Immediately, I was left with no reaction. But gradually, I organized a reasoning and tried to argue: "You have no idea, but when you're producing a text, you're creating it. And this process, if it were not carried out by someone else, would never exist. So in the end, you're existing through these poems".

I honestly don't know if my reflection touched that boy, coming from a reality of "trampled innocence" (*inocência pisada*¹). What I do know is that this is how I was transformed by literature; that I left the position of spectator and became narrator of my own existence. And this is what Todorov defines as necessary to go beyond the walls of school and life: It's to make literature felt as a passion and not as a disciplinary obligation.

For this fact it's necessary that readers, writers and teachers see it, also, as a philosophy of life, a religion. For if, in my opinion, we seek in gods spiritual welcome to endure the sorrows of existence and the imminence of finitude and death, we can likewise find in literature answers or cuddles to the doubts that surround us. Going, therefore, beyond the walls of being.

¹Term used by Clarice Lispector during an interview with TV Cultura in 1977. At the time, Lispector commented on the character who would come to star in the still unpublished "The Hour of the Star", Macabéa, and its fateful reality and "trampled innocence".

Today's Alert: Dangers of Forever

Opening another discursive rift, I would like to reflect, briefly, on the current moment, as unhealthy as it's dangerous. I am referring to the liquidity of human relations, so markedly reaped by the urgency of being. Notice that the concern is not to be being, it's to be to have; to access the pleasures created by modernity.

We live in an era where experience has been lost and language has become obsolete. Giving way to algorithms, whose only function is to deconfigure our biological rationality. Indeed, it's not surprising that, in the century of the uberization of existence, education is veiled from its social commitment. After all, who cares if we know how to read our own present? To politicians? The big corporations? The church? None of the options, because these are the instances that hold the economic and rhetorical monopoly of society and use it as a strategy of alienation, segregation and extermination of the critical sense. And these are, in my view, one of the dwellings of the usual dangers.

What can literature, then?

For Ezra Pound (2014), the function of literature is to nourish impulses. Such a perception gives me the support to answer Todorov's question: what can literature?

- Nourishing impulses.

Which will give strength to print the verb, materialize statements and generate meanings. And since the act of meaning, according to Bosi (1977), represented for the ancient Hebrews to give names to things, I extend my comment to literature. Possibly that's the answer. In fact, this is my answer: The response of a subject who finds himself obtuse in the midst of the lexicology of life and has found, only in language, a space of transformation. Perhaps, to ratify, this is Todorov's maxim: To make literature be seen as more than an aesthetic artifact, but as a (trans)forming vehicle. And because of this lack of understanding, it, literature, is in danger. After all, this hinders its advancement as a matter of humanization. What, then, can literature?

For me, it can change the world from a backyard, from a village. It can bring cultures closer together, enable social and economic advances. It can also destroy empires, dictatorships, systems of oppression. Since, as Lourival Holanda pointed out in another Literary Criticism class: "The writer is both an architect and an anarchist". For at the same time that it creates its structure of language, it subverts the social order. Therefore, literature can finally give voice to those who have been muzzled by systemic silencing, take us out of the fabianesque condition and give us foundations of life and encouragement to the dangers of living.

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