

**'Sire, The People Are Hungry!'
'Let Them Have Symbols!'
Literary and Linguistic Studies in
the 20th and 21st Centuries**

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This title is playful, of course. It is designed merely to attract curiosity and attention . . . It dates back to a childhood game of which I have forgotten both rules and stakes. An imaginary sovereign was roused from his indifference and responded with an approximate repetition of Marie-Antoinette's suggestion that if the people were hungry, food should be thrown to them. I took such caricatures of kings as anti-models, replacing bread with symbols. Now we are all too disturbed, individually and collectively, by the economic discomfort which is a generalized hunger and, in too many parts of the world and – not only in the third world – by actual famines, not to be aware, on a daily basis, of the responsibility it is to cultivate and transmit to others substance which is purely symbolic. Certain statistics, which now form part of our daily life, are capable of discrediting definitively the ivory tower which our universities are accused of representing, or of having represented in the past. In my own country, Canada, one child in five lives in poverty. The economic worth of the poorest forty-eight countries in the world is equal to the combined wealth of the ten richest individuals. There were twenty million refugees in 1997. One billion two hundred million human beings are short of fresh water this year, etc. This type of figure is, sadly, all too familiar. And it is a case of preaching to the converted to assert the extent to which culture, education and all their constituent disciplines are nourishment of a different order to physical food, because intellectual work is genuine work, providing a living for those who work at it professionally, and above all also those who benefit from its immediate and continuing fruits – i.e. ideally, the whole of society, and in all countries. In this respect – and this is implicit, but through depending habitually on what is implicit nothing is ever sufficiently explicit – it is generally acknowledged (thanks to UNESCO in particular) to what extent the development of economic resources is linked with the advancement and communication of knowledge, on a scale which is regional as well as national, within cities, rural communities, families.

It would require a completely different discussion to legitimise again the more specifically human sciences, and demonstrate the close and vigorous connection that binds them to the sciences known as exact, to which the human sciences have always initially posed their founding questions. But the objects of the human sciences are often perceived by the general public as being *only* symbolic. In this respect, it has been incumbent on teachers and researchers in the human sciences in the twentieth century, as it will be

incumbent upon them still more in the twenty-first century, to continue demonstrating the extent to which the symbolic is nourishment.

Surely the great identity crises of our *fin de siècle* have been sufficient to prove that, for millions and millions of human beings, the culture which attaches them to their roots is truly as precious as material wealth? To such an extent indeed that all too often these gut loyalties are exploited ideologically to foster inter-cultural conflict rather than their mutual exploration. And here we are touching on the great axiological, ethical, epistemological questions which keep our human sciences alive in a continual process of *aggiornamento* and direct contact with economic reality. If I link very closely the in-depth pursuit of knowledge and of daily bread I do not think that anyone will object. Moreover, symbols, let us not forget, are symbols precisely because of the way in which they conjoin the concrete and the abstract, and render the latter comprehensible to all. Symbols are more than ever central to what is human.

This is clearly true in the global village which we make up together. It happens that the first symbol that we encounter is that of the Tower of Babel. Linguistic diversity divides humanity in one way, that is to the extent that each nation, each linguistic community, is rooted in its language precisely because language is a cultural bond *par excellence* and, for the same reason, it is an obstacle for those who live outside a specific culture, or share in it only marginally.

In another sense, linguistic diversity is a connecting link between the less widely used languages and those in the course of, or in danger of, disappearing, because they are interdependent with and/or dominated by major languages. What contribution have our disciplines brought to the preservation, development and diffusion of the linguistic heritage? Over-generalising, one might say that in some respects the study of languages in the twentieth century has made considerable advances, and that in other respects it has changed considerably in a more negative way.

In the West, at all levels of education, we have seen the study of ancient languages diminish, replaced at best, in many nations, by studies known as 'Classical Civilization'. Conservative opinion regarding teaching syllabus material deeply regrets this reduction in the return to the roots of our languages and literatures. One might respond that the exact sciences as well as computer science are also sources of intellectual discipline – different, of course, from Latin and Greek, but of an equivalent nature. Modern languages should profit extensively from the decrease in the study of classical languages, but do they in fact? Certainly, methods of teaching and learning languages have evolved considerably during the twentieth century. They have, in particular, been able to make use of the gains in applied linguistics, which adapt linguistic theory to the needs of a given idiom and are much more concerned than traditional methods with the reception, and conditions of reception, by the student of the language to be acquired.

To this end, applied linguistics can appropriately establish relationships between two languages as they are spoken, as opposed to traditional philological purity; along with pragmatics, it encourages us to take into account the actual conditions of enunciation. It is obvious that one reaps what one sows, i.e., to begin with at least, a 'non-academic' language. On the other hand, however, psychological and sometimes physiological barriers, at the level of phonology, diminish or disappear. Much credit was given at one time to the method of the Bulgarian scholar Losanov, which makes the acquisition of languages irresistible by endowing it with a particularly pleasing atmosphere.

The rise of linguistics applied to language teaching has been accompanied by intensive use of the full range of audio-visual equipment; in particular, the language laboratory intensified the learner's personal participation, and the material being taught can be programmed very precisely. Another proof that language teaching has become part of practical daily life: the introduction of the teaching of specialist languages such as scientific German or legal French. There are also the multiple networks of exchanges, both private and official, which enable young people to spend a holiday period or even a year in a foreign country in order to study a language in the setting in which it is spoken.

Does this mean that we have vanquished the Tower of Babel, and that we are communicating with each other more and more? By no means. To give only one example of the less favourable aspects of this area – but a very significant example – let us say that general globalization brings with it a linguistic globalization, and consequently a power game in which university disciplines are far from being in control and in particular a domination by the English language in scientific domains, which requires scientists to publish in English if they want their work to be quickly known. The demarcation line is between English as the omnipresent and neutral *lingua franca* and English as a means of cultural if not economic penetration is a very thin one. As an example we can mention the reaction of certain Quebec researchers and organizations which undertake to develop French-language journals in all scientific domains rather than submit to the generalized use of English as the language of scientific communication. On the other hand, the English-speaking, French-speaking, Spanish-speaking, Portuguese-speaking world also establish blocs of their own, augmenting the possibilities of communication, yet at the same time the dangers of linguistic chauvinism.

One of the areas which the great need for communication has expanded extraordinarily is that of translation. Not only have translation studies and schools of translation developed, and the great UNESCO enterprise of the *Index translationum* (now overtaken by the vast potential of databases), but equally the theoretical aspect of translation has expanded. This latter brings us to the heart of the problem of language-borne communication. To translate, in fact, is not only to transfer the meaning of an utterance from one language to another, but from one context to another, from one speaker to another, with all that this implies for attention to the response of the receiver, more particularly so in the case of a literary text, reputed to be more polysemous than others (we will not pause, for the moment, to discuss the problematics of literariness, the difference between literary discourse and non-literary discourse). We should emphasise the parallelism between the history of translation and that of literary theory where attention is increasingly concerned with the sociolect and the culture of the receiver, and the overall conditions of reception. Does this mean that the translated text is distorted? Only if one considers the original text as an absolutely fixed entity, extracted, as time passes, from its original context. Yet the new text will tend to introduce a fresh socio-cultural integration; to pass, in fact, from one system to another. According to Annie Brisset, translation 'is *par excellence* a locus of obstacle and tension. By nature, it creates difference. This is why it offers a sphere of privileged observation to the investigation of discursive phenomena and their institutional foundation. The norms of social discourse, the discourse which is the raw material of literature, are exposed in the *shift* invisible in translated works. By definition these norms are observable by virtue of their frequency and their systematic nature, their statistical character. For it is the regularity of certain choices which makes it possible to

identify certain constitutive elements of the literary institution that are those of the target setting. The norms which regulate the strategies of translation intervene before the transfer as well as during it. They operate to varying degrees, but they are largely determined by the function that the texts to be translated are required to fulfil in the polysystem of the literature of destination . . .'¹

Our very brief excursion into translation has thus shown it as an example of several trends which have asserted themselves during the twentieth century: increasingly sustained attention to those who will receive a text and interpret it, which brings into question the fixity of meaning. The transfer of meaning is far from being operative regardless of circumstance, for certain mechanisms will determine its new incarnation, and these mechanisms are cognisable and recognisable. This is the point of view of a certain socio-critique and of the theory of the polysystem; their approaches by no means occupy the whole scene within our linguistic and literary disciplines, but they are particularly thought-provoking. In any case they reflect several aspects which are common to all our disciplines: relativization of the meaning of texts, and, paradoxically, the will to attain scientificity in investigating the laws which regulate (or which perhaps regulate) the movement of meaning from one language, one culture, one period, to another. There has also been much meta-discursive research into these laws, or at least into these recurrences, by dint of which the disciplines both linguistic and literary in the twentieth century have vast areas in common; and how could it be otherwise? We live in and through interdisciplinarity, and our most profound problem is perhaps that we plunge too deeply into this interdisciplinarity, as if literature were not an entity defensible for its own sake.

Together and separately, literary and linguistic studies have experimented with a certain questioning of historicity, and then a return to the value of historicity. Russian formalism and Czech structuralism had already opened the way to the denial of historic determinism, and to concentration on the form of the literary text. 'Nouvelle critique' and *New Criticism* operated in this direction, and the critical system of my compatriot Northrop Frye did much to detach the specificity of literary discourse from history.

Structural linguistics was added to historical linguistics, and even substituted for it: moreover, as Piaget has shown, all sciences, including those known as 'exact', have availed themselves of the relational epistemological idea which is that of structure. In particular, cultural anthropology also passed from the evolutionary study of societies to relationally synchronic studies of time sections which can be compared one with another. The structural analysis of myths by Lévi-Strauss and of tales by Propp became models for literary analysis, and are working tools today; but they are means, rather than ends in themselves. Literary studies were stirred up from outside by these developments, all offering models which rejected genetic explanations. This gave rise to a process of highly critical re-examination of traditional literary history, of its conception of the fact, of causality, of temporality, of periodization; of the tendency to explain literary phenomena by means of political or biographical antecedents, always contextual rather than textual. In many ways, structuralism did no better with respect to bolstering the identity of the text, since it privileged a quest for socially or psychologically revealing structures. It is true that many critics soon gave up seeking traces of the author in textual structures, and thus of the genesis of the text, viewing it instead, semiotically, as a group of signifiers capable of adopting different signifieds. I consider that the discovery of the arbitrary nature of the sign, and its consequences, have liberated literary research by showing how meaning

may remain open throughout the evolution of literary systems and may invite different interpretations.

Before returning to historicity once more, we should mention the trends which concentrated primordially on knowing the text as a distinct, if not closed-off, universe; for is it not true that the poem offers a new meaning, its own meaning, to the words which it contains? The *Werkimmanente Interpretation* which expresses so well its will to plumb the interiority of the work; phenomenology with its emphasis on the intentionality of consciousness, and on the experience shared between author and reader (for Ingarden any reading was a new concretization); and the hermeneutic approaches of a Gadamer or a Ricoeur, which follow the reader's journey in its deciphering and its appropriation of the text as an experience of the Other. This simple and incomplete enumeration shows the extent to which the literary text has become a place of encounter; but it can only be so because the text is porous, and because meaning is elusive. In other respects, have we abandoned the historical? By no means. The condemnation of a certain traditional literary history made up of superficial inferences has born fruit. It has not killed off literary history, it has revitalized it. Early in the 1970s, Hans Robert Jauss launched a periodical, *New Literary History*, which has fulfilled its function consistently. Many western countries have produced new histories of their literature, which bear traces of the criticisms and questionings of which we have spoken, and of others as well. They extend the canon to include genres, voices and aspects of social discourse that were hitherto excluded. They are more broadly cultural. They welcome – more or less fully – immigrant literatures, and those of minorities; and do not accept works written in exile except when political conditions have changed in their favour. China, where literary history was not a traditional discipline, is in the course of developing it. Any culture demands historical representation, to itself and to others so as to confirm, to expand, to constitute itself in its own eyes, but it is also to interpret itself to other cultures and thereby to stimulate inter-literary dialogue.

Primary, secondary and university teaching continue to use literary history, if only for background purposes; it is the teacher's responsibility to use it as document rather than as monument, to read it and make others read it with a critical approach, tracking down preconceptions in matters of exclusion, inclusion, stylistic effects, paratext, etc.

In the case of postcolonial or emerging literatures, criteria which are genuinely their own are beginning to take shape, whether there is an original literature in the same language – such as in Brazil vis-à-vis Portugal, or Québec vis-à-vis France, or in the case of the English spoken in Nigeria vis-à-vis the language spoken in Great Britain; or whether the literature of the colonizing nations initially supplied models which turned out to be inadequate, if only through ignorance, for example, of the richness of oral tradition. Indeed, the history of literatures lives today in an era of self-aware and creative difference, rendered the more vigorous perhaps by the tension pointed out by David Perkins between an anthological model and an encyclopaedic model. Difference is not only a postmodern drug; it is the catalyst of change, which continually forces us to renew our theorising on history.

Moreover, the return of the historic goes far beyond a swing back of the pendulum of literary history. It is anchored not only in the negotiations (as often institutional as theoretical) between our different university sub-disciplines, but also in the literary genres themselves, with the flowering of the individual and the unique in matters of biography,

autobiography, the elimination of frontiers between the so-called imaginary and the so-called real, as in magic realism; it is in the 'new historicism' with its stress on the contextual, and on the subjective liberated in contrast to Cartesian thought; it is also in the search for power underlying texts, as exemplified by the Frankfurt school. This hold of the historic also accounts (provided the notion is kept free from any 'philosophy of history' in the Hegelian sense) for the post-structuralist and deconstructive project. Derrida perceived in structuralism, as others have perceived in the prevalent constructions of literary history, a form of philosophical totalitarianism, of attempts to explain the whole of a phenomenon by its reduction to a formula which explains it *totally*. 'Derrida submits the violent, totalitarian structural project to the counterviolence of solicitation, which derives from the Latin *sollicitare*, meaning to shake the totality [. . .] every totality, he shows, can be totally shaken, that is, can be shown to be founded on that which it excludes, that which would be in excess for a reductive analysis of any kind.'²

We return via this angle to what appears to be a consensus in our studies concerning the identity of the literary text: namely, that it is a place of author/reader encounter rather than of a crystallization of meaning. No doubt this is the reason for which Jonathan Cullers, in his work on deconstruction, has given feminist reading as the reason, both philosophical and historic, for the development of this movement; not primarily to support the feminist cause but to discover otherness and difference as they originate at the level of reception of a text, for many other atypical and non-traditional readings can be explained in this way, whether at the level of sexual difference, including homosexuality, the ethnic level – we can think of the aesthetic of black reception – or even at a level which engages the future of our studies, that of age difference.

In many respects this future depends on juvenile reading and the way in which we manage to transmit to the adults of tomorrow this world of the written word in interaction with the world of technology. According to two historians of the Renaissance, Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari, feminist reading as an example of differential reading is based on a 'double vision' which unseats any automatic and simple polarization: 'By re-examining the polarizations that have served to structure much of Renaissance discourse in the past and to define it unilaterally ('high' versus 'low' discourse, culture vs nature, great art versus non art, power and strength vs virtue and beauty, masculine vs feminine), a double-visioned practice does more than reverse the opposite terms; it requires a fundamental dislodging of the opposition as such, which relinquishes valuing one term against another and instead promotes a questioning of the entire system of terms. By acknowledging the structuring role of contradictions and conflicts it refuses to precipitate interpretive closure.'³ Here is something to bring us close in spirit to both the *opera aperta* according to Umberto Eco and the conciliatory rhetoric of Chaim Perelman and his successors.

Such *rapprochements* bring me in conclusion to a particularly pertinent point: the current *rapprochement* of literary discourse and philosophical discourse, one of the processes of dialogical osmosis that we observe and in which we occasionally participate. For it seems that this time the literary discourse is not the poor relation. One may think of Gianni Vattimo, whose postmodernism sees western thought as weakened because it is less systematic and less dogmatic than it had long been, in the tradition of Descartes; and which considers poetry better fitted to grasp truth. Martha Nussbaum comes to mind, who in *Poetic Justice* suggests to jurists and economists, to politicians and philosophers,

the use of literary texts and in particular of the realist novel, not despite their appeal to the imagination and the emotions but because of that appeal. The literary imagination cannot in fact replace, according to Nussbaum, but it can enrich, stimulate, diversify the moral reasoning which should preside over consideration of public affairs.

The category of the ethical could in fact be, and I think it possible to state that it is, the link – very new and at the same time very old – among all our various humanist preoccupations on the threshold of the twenty-first century.

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(translated from the French by Helen McPhail)

Notes

1. Annie Brisset, *Sociocritique de la traduction. Théâtre et altérité au Québec (1968–88)* (Quebec, Le Préambule 1990), pp. 28–9.
2. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, introduction and notes by Alan Bass (Chicago University Press, 1978), p. XVI.
3. Marilyn Migiel and Juliana Schiesari, *Refiguring Woman. Perspectives on Gender and the Italian Renaissance* (Cornell UP, 1991), p.14.