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LITERARY STUDIES UNDER DISPUTE.

THE LITERATURE AFTER THE „DEATH OF LITERATURE”

Abstract

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Abstract:

The paper starts from the remark of a proliferation of discourses on the death / crisis of literature in the French intellectual space of the last two decades, observing at the same time a clear and already crystallized tendency of the redefinition of both literary studies and literature itself, as a result of these debates. This phenomenon organizes, as it appears from the title, two components of the doctoral thesis: the literary studies under dispute and the production of a type of literature that feeds on the feeling that it has become a “post-literature”.

Assuming that these issues are recurrent in the history of literature, but choosing to focus on the French literary space, the paper follows the evolution of the idea of the death of literature from 2000 to the present. It then looks for the contextual nuances that gave specificity to this extended discourse, especially after 2007, when it started to monopolize the literary debates and even pervade public scene. Thus, the first chapter is organized around the rhetorical question “How many times has literature actually died?”. An axis of farewell statements after 2000 cannot ignore a number of contexts that determined the phenomenon.

On the one hand, the beginning of the millennium favored philosophical reflections on the characteristics of contemporaneity, pursued here in line with the theories of Lionel Ruffel or Luc Lang. On the other hand, the 2007-2011 explosion of texts on the function of literature (Yves Citton, Jacques Rancière, J.-M. Schaeffer, Vincent Jouve etc.) can be read as a response to an external attack caused by the public questioning by Nicolas Sarkozy of the usefulness of funding classical literary studies. From this point on, the death of literature becomes recurrent in discourses if not as a literary genre in itself (Olivier Cadiot, Richard Millet, for example), at least as an attitude of repositioning literary production on different bases (in Alexandre Gefen, Johan Faeber, Jean Bessière et al.). That is why the discourse of the crisis must be seen on the one hand as a discourse with different biases and on the other hand as a discourse of legitimation and / or reinvention of the field.

Examining contexts, the possible reasons for proclaiming the death of literature are diverse: from a canonical battle for the accreditation of a new genre (autofiction) in William Marx in 2005 or

“the critique of methodological terrorism” in Tzvetan Todorov in 2007, to the loss of the social status of the reported theory by Antoine Compagnon in 2006. The positions of the three figures of authority are dealt with in detail in Chapter one, as their public interventions are partly responsible for the proliferation of the death of literature discourse and its instrumentalization in the election campaign. A notable feature of this moment was the overcoming of the boundaries of the literary field, which became a valid debate in the public space. In fact, when Compagnon proposes an ethical turn as a remedy for the current crisis, his intention is to restore literature its public utility; in turn, Todorov focuses his entire approach on reconsidering the teaching of literature in schools. These “declinologists”, as they were ironically called by Alexandre Gefen, brought to the surface a type of discourse already existing in latent forms in the French cultural space, that of voices strongly opposing the new literary directions, such as Richard Millet (who in 2005 had proclaimed already the idea of the last writer), Dominique Mainqueneau (who places the end of literature in 2006, through the total divorce from modernism), Jean-Philippe Domecq, Jean Bessière, Frédéric Badré and others.

The second chapter is designed to pursue possible external motivations for a crisis in the field. Theories on the wider mutations of current epistemology show that literary studies undergo a process of reconstruction at the beginning of the millennium, visible in the reorganization of the fields of knowledge. A transition from the *two cultures model* to the *three cultures model*, as theorized and described by Jerome Kagan, shows that at the beginning of the new millennium even the structure of knowledge is based on defining features of communities of specialists – who lend to each other attitudes towards knowledge. The thesis maintains that one possible specificity of the recent crisis resides in the diversity of external attacks on literature and literary studies. This “end” often proclaimed in high tones is directly related to the external context, resistant to high literature: the cultural environment no longer places the book at its center, creative authority is declining and, last but not least, the configuration of university education in philology is in a state of perpetual crisis.

However, the paper maintains that, as diverse as the attacks and proclamations of the “death” of the literary may be, the projects to revitalize the field are also worth taking into account. Therefore, the third chapter investigates the directions of redefining literary studies by its collaboration with the real sciences or the social sciences. Literary disciplines had historically

legitimized themselves through differentiation and delimitation, while the specificity of this recent stage seems to be the tendency to incorporate the instruments of other disciplines. On the one hand, literary studies seek methodologies within the hard sciences through new disciplines such as “distant reading” or quantitative studies. On the other hand, humanities’ traditional intersections with the social sciences are associated with the need to re-legitimize them in the public space, as a common good. Following disciplinary constellations such as Digital Humanities, literature and cognitivism, literature and law, the thesis questions the theories and practices of interdisciplinarity and trans-disciplinarity adopted by literary studies.

Last but not least, under the influence of global changes specific to the new millennium, but also as a result of these disciplinary resettlements, contemporary French literature configures a new aesthetic. Chapter four of the paper inquires a direction of contemporary French prose by inventorying and analyzing a sum of labels applied to the new phenomenon, while advancing the conceptual proposal of “editorial literature”. Its lines of force can be defined by the emphasis on transitivity, by an implicit form of militancy and by the critical attitude towards the real. Given, on the one hand, the borrowing of social science instruments, a special type of commitment to transcribing the real and, last but not least, its increased media resonances, the “editorial prose” is built as a response to the new demands of post-crisis literary landscape.

Summary

Introduction	5
Chapter I. How many times has literature „died”? The axis of farewell declarations. Crisis discourse as a discourse of legitimacy and/or reinvention	10
1.1. „Friends with Death Benefits”?	10
1.2. Storytelling on the deathbed	15
1.3. The idea of literature – an intimate story of its death	19
1.4. From the pulpit, with added echo	22
1.5. „Literature in the singular”, interests in the plural	28
1.6. Death – a French affair, „Millet affair”	33
1.7. So who has the right to speak?	34
1.8. A tautological dance on the grave of the idea of literature	37
1.9. „Versions of a grave”	39
1.10. American-French epicenter	42
Chapter II. Literary studies under dispute. The post-2000 crisis, a systemic crisis? Rifts and congruences.	53
2.1. The crisis of literature, crisis of literary studies or of reading?	53
2.2. The crisis of knowledge and of the intellectual	57

2.2.1. The contemporary as hermeneutic instrument	58
2.2.2. The feeling of history, humanities, and democracy	61
2.2.3. Knowledge in the time of informational society and cognitive capitalism	63
2.2.4. The status of the intellectual in contemporary society	71
2.3 The crisis of the concept of the esthetic	74
2.4. The identity crisis of the competitive-democratic market of art and non-art	82
2.5. The crisis of legitimacy and self-esteem	89
2.6. A systemic crisis. From <i>Two Cultures Model</i> to <i>Three Cultures Model</i>	97
Chapter III. Literary studies and the technique of the chameleon. From legitimacy through differentiation and delineation to legitimacy through embedding	104
3.1. Disciplinary rifts and interdisciplinary	106
3.2. Literary studies and the hard sciences	114
3.2.1. Step 1. Legitimacy through the “hard” areas of social disciplines	114
3.2.2. Step 2. Legitimacy through exact sciences. Digital Humanities	121
3.3. Literary studies and social sciences	134
3.3.1. Literary studies and public policies	141
3.3.2. Literary studies as public good	145
3.3.3. Literary studies and health	152

3.3.4. Literary studies and their formative value	158
3.3.4.1. From poetics to politics of values	159
3.3.4.2. From the axiological value of text to direct formative value	167
3.3.4.3. The challenges of axiological reading in education	169
Case study. A reading through the lens of new directions. The triad of success in criticism, success in the scientific market and public success	175
Chapter IV. A death, multiple reincarnations. Contemporary literature in the plural.	186
4.1. The literatures of the present	195
4.1.1. “Post” vs “re”. The prefixes in competition	198
4.1.2. Literature in the negative: “neither-nor” and “without”	204
4.2. Levels of redefinition and possible critical instruments of contemporary literature	210
4.2.1. Redefinition in terms of borders	211
4.2.1.1. Literary discourse, journalistic discourse – competition over the event	214
4.2.1.2. Literature and document – event and documentary narration	215
4.2.1.3. Contextual literature	218
4.2.1.4. From fact to factual literature and scattered representations	220
4.2.1.5. „Factography”	222
4.2.1.6. From the frontiers to the limits of fiction	226

4.2.2. Under the mark of problematization. Possible critical instruments for reading the contemporary novel	229
4.3. Editorial prose. The fictionalization of experience as a means of engagement	235
4.3.1. The subject: current topics and update in public debates	245
4.3.2. From thesis to hypotheses	250
4.3.3. From engagement for a cause to engagement for the other	256
4.3.4. Author, narrator – public position	261
4.3.5. Publicity and marketing	267
Conclusion	271