

THE END OF LITERATURE, OR: WHAT PURPOSES DOES IT CONTINUE TO SERVE?¹

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For Antón Figuerola Lorenzana, a great scholar and a dear friend

Abstract

This paper proposes to acknowledge the decline that has taken place, roughly since the 1950s, in the role of literature as a major mechanism of life models, whether conservative or innovatory, and consequently to re-evaluate the rationale of continuing literary studies as they are practiced today. This alleged decline does not mean that the use of non-practical texts, whether written or oral, has lost its various and often indispensable functions for socialization, developing skills or emotional intelligence. It essentially means that the centrality of the socio-political role fulfilled by such texts – and not less significantly by its producers and promoters – has now shifted to other industries. At the same time, within the context of intergroup competition for status based on the possession of symbolic goods, literature seems to have preserved its prestige value.

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Introduction

This paper proposes to decisively acknowledge the decline that has taken place, roughly since the 1950s, in the role of literature as a major mechanism of life models, whether conservative or innovatory, and consequently to re-evaluate the rationale of continuing literary studies as they are practiced today. Those interested in investigating the dynamics of culture repertoires – that is, the processes through which a society handles its life via culture – may draw the conclusion that since literature is no longer a central mechanism for such dynamics it no longer makes sense to go on studying it as if it were one. On the other hand, if we are interested in understanding human culture since the dawn of history, we cannot ignore the major role of textuality at large, and poetry and narration in particular, in its evolution. Such a recognition may support continued interest in studying literature, though a distinction must be made between the study of the specifics of the literary system and disciplinary approaches that address the relative position of literature within culture as a whole. Since the social role of literature has changed, the discipline of literary studies needs to be reconceived accordingly as an expanded field, to take into account the relations between literature and other cultural activities and the struggles for hegemony between them. Given our observation in this paper that at least the branded components of literature, such as canonized texts and their producers, often still keep their value in the global stock-exchange of symbolic goods, we do not call for the subject “literature” to be eliminated from the academic, scholarly or intellectual agenda, though we believe that it might be more adequate to make it part of a larger framework, where it can be better accounted for.

Success and decline of literature

The production of non-practical texts, including sayings and songs, has been an integral and, at some moments, a highly crucial factor in human history as a mechanism for maintaining, creating and diffusing life models, that is, options for

handling life. In several periods, but definitely since the late eighteenth century, the success of literature as an organized activity of text-production was reflected in its having become an indispensable institution for society, and an important component of the political entity in which it operated. At various moments, it even became a main instrument for the creation of that entity itself, afterwards persisting as an instrument for its maintenance. Movements for the creation of such political entities used text producers, predominantly poets, to set their agendas and legitimize their actions (Even-Zohar 1996). Whenever the creation of political entities succeeded, these producers were turned into what Dović and Helgason (2017, esp. pp. 71-96) call “secular saints,” surviving not only as bits of verbal memory but often also in the form of material monuments.²

The consequences of these institutionalization processes have been prodigious. On the one hand, political entities, at whatever stage, have benefited from the literary industry; on the other, this industry has profited greatly from having been established as a socially privileged activity. The central protagonists of this industry, generally known as *authors*, have been able to transform themselves from marginal individuals, invisible to society, into prominent people entitled to express their opinions, and effectively so, on any subject whatsoever (Sela-Sheffy 2013 and 2017). Their effectiveness manifested itself not only in their freedom of speech, which also included the freedom to express ideas not generally accepted, but rather in the fact that they were treated as relevant and consequently were listened to. Beginning with Émile Zola,³ *poetic license* was interpreted and implemented as a license to be not only an initiator of new ideas, but also an activist for socio-political change. This entailed a change in *habitus*: it came to be accepted that a writer might take the liberty to be more than a professional text-maker. There are many examples of writers who not only participated in change movements, but also became their leaders, or at least members of their leading group.

² Dović & Helgason (2017) comment that Thomas Carlyle had already called attention in his essays on the *Poet Hero* (Carlyle 1841) to this manipulation of the writers-as-persons for the creation of myths of modern nationalism. Helgason’s discussion (2011) of the sacralization of Jónas Hallgrímsson in the Icelandic national revival is illustrative of hundreds of such cases.

³ Zola can be considered “the first” not so much because he really was the first writer-activist, but rather because France occupied a central position in the nineteenth-century world system.

On the other hand, whenever the life-models projected by the literary texts did not match the generally accepted ideas or the interests of those in power, the new importance attributed to writers made them dangerous for the latter, and consequently often objects of persecution. In this respect, the means for silencing them have been as abundant in both so-called democracies as in dictatorships. The very existence of reprisals of whatever kind is clear evidence of the importance attributed to literature. Censorship, prohibitions, destruction of books, deportation, imprisonment and execution of writers are all reprisals that can only be understood if the producers of texts and their products are effective, valued and feared. Such cases are too abundant and globally known, like the one Jakobson (1975) refers to in his unforgettable description of how Pushkin was eliminated by the Czar, an extreme case of this kind of treatment. However, from the point of view of the literary industry, reprisals are still preferable to indifference, because the latter reflects marginalization.

The 2016 Case List of the PEN International Writers in Prison Committee identified 224 individuals suffering persecution and repression all over the world, including 142 writers, 32 poets and 28 singer-songwriters. The highlighted imprisonments that year were from Honduras, Turkey, China, Egypt and Israel;⁴ there were writers killed in Syria, Russia, Cambodia, Bangladesh and Jordan, and also attacks on freedom of expression in Italy and Spain. In Iran, author Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee was sentenced to six years in prison for a short story, not yet published, about the cruel practice of stoning. All these examples point to the need to distinguish between general trends and the specific circumstances in different political contexts.

After nearly two centuries of success, there are now clear indications that the process is beginning to shift into reverse, namely, that the historical status of literature is declining. However, it is not quite clear how this presumed decline manifests itself in concrete terms. As is well known, the literary industry does not consist only of producers, texts, and readers. Rather, it comprises a wider network of factors, which also includes institutions and markets where various agents act

⁴ Those imprisoned in Israeli jails have been Arab-language writers, both Israeli citizens and Palestinians from the occupied territories. The state's charge against them was "incitement to violence and terrorism, and support for a terrorist organization" (Snir 2017: 125). This treatment of Arab-language writers is clear evidence of what one might call hysteric overestimation of the power of the written word. However, the state has not taken such drastic measures against Hebrew-language writers, who have been reprimanded instead by symbolic and financial means.

as promoters. It also plays a role in the creative-industries economy, occupying a relevant position in the life of the so-called creative classes.⁵ The aim of the agents of this industry, producers and promoters alike, has always been to endow literature with the capacity to be more than a pastime or amusement, making it an enterprise capable of proposing models that offer means of understanding life, and more crucially, models of how to act. Even-Zohar (1999; 2002) has suggested calling this operational mode “literature as tools.” When operating “as tools,” literature functions as a major factor in creating and diffusing *social resources*, *social capital*, and *social energy*.⁶ This means that it functions as a major instrument in shaping behavior, beliefs, world-views and activities.

In addition to operating as “tools,” like any other activity or institution in culture, literature also operates on a different level, namely as *a set of goods*. When operating “as goods” (ibid.), all of the components of literature draw their importance from being valuable possessions. On the individual level, this means that the owners can show to other members in their group that they own these goods, and therefore are entitled to claim status for it. “Owning” begins with a material possession: private libraries are set up, and books get costly bindings in order to make an impressive visual display. It then extends to connoisseurship, which makes knowledgeable people into “an elite group that holds disproportionate political, economic, and cultural power” (Griswold 2008: 2). On the collective level, what is displayed in the intergroup space is a given group’s ownership of these goods, and its subsequent claims to be recognized as equal or superior to others who may also own them. An intergroup market of such valuable goods has been decisive since antiquity in hierarchizing the various ethnic and political groups vis-à-vis each other, allowing some to have more say than others in the world system. When a group had no literary goods to show, or when its literary property failed to be recognized as valuable on this market, the entire group could suffer prejudice that put it in a disadvantageous position. Peripheral

⁵ See Florida 2014, Ray & Romano 2013, Henry & De Bruin 2011, Brouillette 2014, Bergua Amores et al. 2016 for discussions of the creative industries and classes. According to some of these students of the creative industries, they currently occupy about 30% of the total economy in Western societies.

⁶ “Social energy” denotes the ability of a group to generate solutions for changing life circumstances. See Even-Zohar 2016 for a detailed discussion.

groups have always tended to be almost automatically pushed into such a position, and naturally have been more aware of their disempowerment.⁷

During the high tide of success for literature at large, most forcefully during the last two hundred years, both operational modes of literature have been strong and active. It might then be helpful to explore whether the alleged decline of the status of literature in recent decades is primarily on the instrumental (“tools”) or the symbolic (“goods”) level.

Is reading declining? Is reading a valid indicator?

One of the frequently mentioned indicators for the deteriorating status of literature is the alleged decline of reading. For some time we have been bombarded with claims about “the end of the book” and “the disappearance of reading.” Agents in the literary field tend to complain that people, particularly the young, “no longer read books.” Such evaluations are indeed supported by some hard facts. In the United States, for example, “The 2002 census shows that literary reading is down 10.2% from the 1982 census, which equates to the loss of 20 million potential readers. Even more striking is the numbers reported for young adults. In 1982, 60% of young adults engaged in literary reading, while in 2002, only 43% do” (Krashen 2005: 1). However, any measurement of a decline in reading needs to ask, compared to when? Are we making short-term or long-term comparisons? It is likely that in absolute figures the number of readers today is higher than at most other periods in history. A different issue is what they read and what the social status and role of literature is at a time of high competition between different media.

It seems a paradox, but the historical peak of literature as a resource of options spanned over a century and a half (roughly between 1800 and 1950), and during this time the vast majority of people could neither read nor write, especially since texts were often written in a language they did not speak, or that they had difficulties with. In contrast, at this moment in time, when in Western countries literacy rates have reached almost 100%, and those languages that were

⁷ Testimony to the awareness of being underprivileged because of an alleged lack of recognized literary assets was poignantly expressed by the popular contemporary Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko: “if Kotsiubynsky and Lesya Ukrainka had been known to the world at the level of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, our country would not have had to give up its nuclear weapons” (Zabuzhko 2007). Zabuzhko’s claims may sound naïve, but her belief that this kind of capital is beneficial in terms of symbolic and material gains represents a widely accepted conviction.

once only used for writing have successfully become spoken tongues (e.g., in France, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia, Germany, etc.), the reading of literary works, and above all the community relevance of literary works, seems to be in retreat.⁸

Even setting aside the question of how widespread book reading really was in the past, various recent statistics show that assertions about the decline of book reading in the present might be quite unsubstantiated, at least as far as text production is concerned. For example, production rates in Europe are presently holding steady or even increasing,⁹ although a certain drift towards stagnation might be detectable. However, in emerging economies book production is steadily growing (Bazán Babczonek & Steward 2016). With this in mind, we need to take a more global view when it comes to making generalizations based on reading indexes. The *NOP World Culture Score Index* (NOP World 2005) indicates that countries above the average in their reading rates are India, Thailand, China, the Philippines, Egypt, Czech Republic, Russia, Sweden, France, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong and Poland. This may well imply the significant vitality of literature in these countries, of which the first five are non-Western. Nevertheless, these indexes should be treated with caution, since these five countries also have very high illiteracy rates. Moreover, book production rates *per se* may not be valuable indicators for reading rates, since books are often purchased as gifts instead of for consumption by reading.¹⁰ In the case of the publication of literature for children and youth, indicators in some countries show an increase.¹¹ In the United States, the AAP (*American Association of Publishers*) underscored in its most recent report (2014) that “Trends this year included significant growth in the

⁸ In 1870 more than three-quarters of the world's population had never had the chance to go to school, and probably only 19% of them were able to read.

⁹ Federation of European Publishers: European Book Publishing Statistics 2014 (<http://www.fep-fee.eu/European-Book-Publishing-741>).

¹⁰ “[B]ooks were among the very first commercial Christmas presents. Not only that, but they were integral to the development of a modern Christmas holiday primarily organized around familial gift exchange. ...Books – along with sewing machines, pianos, and furniture – were among the very first items that people purchased with the aid of a resource newly extended to them toward the end of the nineteenth century, namely, consumer credit” (Striphos 2009: 7 and 8).

¹¹ <http://www.internationalpublishers.org/market-insights/data-and-statistics/128-data-and-statistics>

children and young adult category, ongoing growth of eBooks, and the growing popularity of audio books.”¹²

The claim that young people do not read, with negative consequences for the fate of reading in general (especially of literature) exempts adults, who are the ones who make these claims and express these concerns. In any case, the claim is false. Pertinent data indicate an increase in children's and young adult book sales. Rather, it is apparently in adulthood that we find less reading, while it is the adults, rather than children or young people, who lament this “catastrophe.” Adults are the very people who could read but do not, and who could ensure some relevance for literature, but do not. They are the ones who would like people to read when they do not themselves, and who would like reading to serve political ends of national cohesion, identity, education, etc., rather than the purposes they used to acclaim (such as pleasure or knowledge). Actually, as can be deduced from bestseller lists,¹³ young people simply do not read what adults want them to (and many adults simply do not read what other adults want them to, either).

The current state of reading does not justify drawing any conclusions suggesting decline, nor does it support the supposed continued instrumental function of literary texts because this issue needs to be addressed using different parameters. We do not contend that literature is on the wane either as a social presence or as a consumer-goods industry. Nor do we say that this decline implies total and general deactivation of its important role for the socio-cultural and political cohesion of a community. It is difficult to dispute, nonetheless, that literature has lost its hegemonic role as a provider of models and resources for making sense of human experience. The competition of audiovisual media and the internet has greatly reduced the influence of literature on the social imaginary. However, a non-hegemonic position in the current highly complex cultural environment does not preclude the possibility that literary texts still preserve their function as tools in some countries more than in others, because of the political context, or in some sectors of society for specific purposes. For example, social groups with limited or no access to hegemonic channels of self-representation still

¹²<http://publishers.org/news/us-publishing-industry%E2%80%99s-annual-survey-reveals-28-billion-revenue-2014>

¹³<http://www.literacyworldwide.org/docs/default-source/reading-lists/young-adults-choices/young-adults-choices-reading-list-2015.pdf?sfvrsn=4>

find in literature an alternative vehicle to make their voice heard. Attention to the diversity of contexts is thus a requirement for any diagnosis of the function it continues to serve.

In fact, certain texts, whether old or new, highbrow or popular, often used as or transformed into rites, still may play a major role in the production or transmission of ideas, feelings and the willingness to initiate or participate in actions. To the well-known persistent effectiveness of certain religious texts we can add other classes of so-called artistic composition, for instance, narratives, music, rhythm, rhyme, wordplay, and metaphors, as well as sayings or proverbs, folk or popular songs, or everything that is made to be (re)cited and that can serve as a device or slogan, amounting almost to a directive for action. Overall, however, reading, book production and book purchases for accumulating valued goods or for gift exchange may all point at the continued status of texts as goods, but not necessarily as tools, that is, as powerful instruments for social management and change. The latter capacity has been diminished in most societies and can only be said to continue operating if we redefine what we understand by literature.

An expanded field in a peripheral position?

Literature has ceased to enjoy a privileged position as a source for tools for interpreting reality and interacting with our environment, and it has particularly lost its historical usefulness for states in the process of nation-building.

Nevertheless, we can still find instances in which, under certain circumstances, literary texts seem to maintain their capacity to function as tools, and particularly as vehicles of political resistance. George Orwell's *1984*, for example, benefited from an unexpected surge in readership in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election. In the days after Kellyanne Conway, an adviser to Donald Trump, referred to "alternative facts" in an interview to justify a false claim by the White House press secretary, *1984* sold out in Amazon and rose to the top of its best-seller list, a 9,500% increase in sales in five days.¹⁴ Orwell provided readers with a meaningful background against which to reflect critically on current events.

¹⁴ Kimiko de Freytas-Tamura, "George Orwell's '1984' Is Suddenly a Best-seller", *The New York Times*, January 25, 2017.

On a different scale and within an antagonistic political regime is the case of Bandi, the pseudonym of a North-Korean author whose collection of short stories, *The Accusation*, offers a powerful denunciation of everyday life under the communist dictatorship. Writers without access to mainstream media and no freedom of expression resort to literature and the easily available technology of writing as a means to make their voices heard, in very much the same way Aleksandr Solzhenitzyn was able to represent the experience of the Soviet Gulag in the sixties. Testimonial literature, whether in the form of memoirs or of fiction, continues to be an irreplaceable tool for making sense of human experience. It can serve to channel the expression of political dissidence, supply role models for self-identification, or allow us a glimpse into the lives of others unlike us: the excluded, the oppressed, the deviant, the transgressor. Literature can work as a more effective and accessible instrument of empowerment for those on the margins of a society than film or television. Production and distribution in these media is only available to those with financial resources and institutional connections, in addition to the restrictions imposed on mass media by political control and censorship in many states. So, in a sense, the status literature has lost as an auxiliary to power has transformed it into a resource of the powerless.

There are also texts that work outwardly as the image of a community or a country in situations where writers are the best known (and sometimes the only) representatives of the community recognized by foreign audiences. In such cases, literary texts work as instruments that their receivers use to *understand* or know (something about) that country or community. This is the situation of cultural systems and countries such as Mozambique, mainly viewed outside through Mia Couto and his works¹⁵. Or in cases in which, although that community or country is also known through other figures or factors, some cultural producers become basic elements of that *understanding*; in addition to continuing to operate, in both cases, also, as goods

¹⁵ Mia Couto (Beira, 1955) is considered one of the most relevant Portuguese-language writers; his works have been published in more than 20 countries and in various languages. An international jury at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair named his first novel, *Terra Sonâmbula* one of the best 12 African books of the 20th century. For more information, cf. his website: <https://www.miacouto.org>.

In the case of Cuba, this role is fulfilled by Silvio Rodríguez or Pablo Milanés,¹⁶ whose sung poems reach millions of people. In both cases, these authors take positions and make claims about their country in public statements, which also makes them agents in the intellectual field.

From a systemic viewpoint, we should acknowledge that much of what circulates in the mainstream media and continues to offer audiences tools for life is in fact literature, even though it is not consumed in the form of books. Jane Austen continues to be recognized as a feminist icon, and her novels are still sold and read. However, it is unquestionable that her more widespread influence comes from the adaptation of those novels into films or television series. Her message that women who struggle for their integrity have a chance of being rewarded with a happy ending is still relevant today for many people who easily update the anachronistic details in their imagination, and of course there are several audiovisual adaptations that do the updating for the audience. These stories are still valued as offering life options, some of them not yet available for women in many societies.

Azar Nafisi's *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2004) demonstrates the enduring capacity of literature to offer guidance and create spaces of resistance, however modest, in the face of oppression. By inviting seven women, former students of hers, to meet regularly at her home to discuss literary works, Nafisi transgressed accepted social norms to open up a small haven of freedom, using the texts as critical compasses for navigating the women's suffocating conditions. They read Nabokov's novel from the point of view of the victim, in a country where child marriage is legal. Even though the immediate reach of Nafisi's scheme was very limited, it constituted a collective undertaking that resorted to "literature as tools" and, through the success of her own book, became an emancipatory proposition for other women.

Moreover, if we stop thinking of literature in terms of printed books, we will recognize its presence under a variety of disguises. Written texts have been the preferred medium for the transmission of literature only during a relatively

¹⁶ Silvio Rodríguez (San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba 1946) and Pablo Milanés (Bayamo, Cuba, 1943) are founders and historic leaders of the Nueva Trova Cubana and two of Latin America's best-known singers. For more information, see their official websites: <http://www.zurrodelaprendiz.cult.cu>, and <http://www.milanespablo.com>.

short period in the history of humanity. Before them, there was oral literature, both poetry and narrative, and eventually theatre. Nowadays, we are witnessing another switch of technological paradigm: literature is supported by new formats and devices. We encounter it in the cinema and in television series, in spoken-word contests and festivals that represent a return to oral transmission, and in social networks and blogs that take advantage of multimedia technology. For poets, the internet has become a godsend, allowing them to skip printing, reach a larger audience than ever before with minimal cost, and interact with their readers in a virtual community.

The awarding of the 2016 Nobel Prize for Literature to Bob Dylan, aside from the debate on his merits, or the opportunism of the committee, indicates an official willingness to accept what has been fairly evident for quite some time: that song is a popular vehicle for poetry, much as it was before the age of the book. Whether it is Dylan or hip-hop or Leonard Cohen adapting García Lorca or Kavafis, poetry transcends its minority readership and marginal position and reaches the mainstream thanks to the resources and marketability of mass-culture media. It is literature under a different label, and to the extent that these products offer consumers recipes for life, narratives about love or political protest, they function as cultural tools.

The paradox may be that literature has managed to spread its influence by diluting its distinct identity. It no longer holds a hegemonic position as a provider of tools, it seems to have moved from the center to the periphery of the cultural field, but at the same time its own field has expanded, branching out to a variety of media and amplifying its resonance, to the point that it forces us to redefine the disciplinary approaches with which to engage this much more fluid object of study. In many cases, the study of the new functions of authors and texts will require incorporating field and empirical work to move beyond the realm of entrenched perceptions and elicit demonstrable results.

Cognitive and emotional development

On a different level, the reading of literary texts may remain a universal and useful tool for human development. Powerful corroboration comes from two areas: (1) the function of literary texts in cognitive and emotional development, in light of their character as a simulation of reality (though very little is yet known

about the relationship between brain and feelings; Frazzetto 2013) and, (2) the use of this type of text as a way of getting to know a given subject-matter, place, community or individual (in particular a writer). It should however be noted that this perspective applies to literature as a tool on the individual rather than on the collective or social level, which lies at the core of our argument.

Indeed, there is some nascent research in the field of cognitive psychology and neuroscience that suggests some kind of relationship between fiction (and its potential for simulating) and certain emotional or psychological effects, mainly in the processes of empathy (Oatley 2012; Fong, Mullin and Mar 2013; Mar and Rain 2015), even from the earliest years of life (Mar, Tackett and Moore 2010). Other studies have found relations between fiction and developing brain areas relating to language (e.g., Cunningham and Stanovich 2001) and visualization (Hutton et al. 2015).

Kidd and Castano (2013) and Djikic and Oatley (2014) propose a psychological conception of literature that encompasses changes in personality that literary reading might encourage. Along the same lines, there are other relevant studies – for instance, Mar, Oatley and Djikic 2011 – which recommend examining whether many of the effects found in film and television are extendable to literary fiction, analyzing the links between emotion and reading. They reflect on the possible improvement of social skills and on personality changes, as well as on the educational and therapeutic potential of such effects.

The relationship between literary reading and ethics has also been explored. In 2000, Hakemulder, reviewing the existing literature on the subject, concluded in his book *The Moral Laboratory* that reading can affect norms and values, and that literature-based programs can significantly increase the natural development of moral judgment. According to Hakemulder, in the domain of self-esteem, above all with respect to sexual roles, there seems to be a broad consensus that reading can affect performance in relation to gender, beliefs about natural differences between men and women, and actual behavior (2000: 37). Hakemulder (ibid.: 155) concludes, based on empirical evidence, that reading stories affects social perception. Since that pioneering book, Hakemulder has published others (2011) focusing on the processes of literary experience, the functions of literature and their motivations (such as lexical acquisition,

sociability and knowledge about oneself and others with regard to emotions, thoughts and reasons and their implications for pedagogy and education).

Research on literature and reading can be found as well in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience. The volume *Cognitive Literary Studies* (Jaén and Simon 2012) highlights what literary analysis can offer to cognitive science and the role of narratives as a mechanism for social adaptation. Similarly, the first issue of *The Scientific Study of Literature*, dedicated to “The Future of Scientific Studies in Literature” (Dixon and Bortolussi 2011), makes a programmatic and revisionist intervention in the field of cognitive processing, the study of emotional reactions aroused by literary texts, and the interaction between them and the reader. Further developments along these lines of research may offer more consistent results.

Cultural tourism

The power of literary texts and authors in the production and transmission of ideas is evident in the case of so-called “cultural tourism.” There are abundant case studies on this subject (a recent synthesis can be found in Baleiro and Quinteiro 2014). Texts sometimes constitute an important stimulus for touristic activities and the industry of tourism, literary museums and the identity of communities, and they also trigger the creation of professional associations (Hendrix 2014: 19).¹⁷ As noted by Hendrix (*ibid.*), writers’ homes that serve as museums are important, sometimes crucial, for the host communities and their visitors, who identify communal reality through them. Among the best-known “literaturized” spaces are Joyce’s Dublin and Dracula’s Transylvania, the latter exemplifying the power of repeated exposure to a piece of work, a character, an author, etc., through moving-image media. Other phenomena have an even more decisive impact for communities, as in the case of the Colombian town of Aracataca, birthplace of the Nobel-Prize laureate Gabriel Garcia Marquez, which has experienced enormous economic changes because of the volume of its visitors. The town even came close to changing its name to Aracataca-Macondo (the mythical village in *Hundred Years of Solitude*) after a referendum promoted

¹⁷ A review of these associations was published by the *Fédération des maisons d’écrivain et des patrimoines littéraires* in its “Panorama européen des lieux littéraires/ An overview of literary places in Europe”: <http://www.litterature-lieux.com/multimedia/File/publications/bulletineurope.pdf>.

by the mayor.¹⁸ Another example would be *O Diário de um Mago* by Paulo Coelho (1987, significantly translated as *The Pilgrimage*), one of the most accessible discourses on the *Camino de Santiago* (apart from those by the Catholic Church and UNESCO), which undoubtedly contributed to the boom in pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela and the creation of similar routes imitating it in Brazil, Coelho's home country (cf. Torres Feijó 2014). Here, once again, the symbolic and social values of texts and authors intersect with their instrumental value, manifesting their double nature as goods and subsequently as tools, but also the permeable border between these two modes.

The persistence of literature as goods

Naturally, literature as tools must be closely linked to the capacity of literature to operate in a society. As discussed above, many have maintained that reading and literacy are necessary conditions for consuming literature and, consequently, for literature to be influential. We contend that this is only partially correct. To satisfy the parameter of "literature as goods," on the other hand, reading is no more necessary than is playing football, or even watching it on TV, for it to be considered a collective good. Furthermore, "literature as goods" has prospered throughout history without most people being able to read.

While literacy, at least initially, can certainly make literary texts more accessible, it is by itself neither cause nor evidence of the consumption or effectiveness of literature. The attitudes, images and ideas provided by literature were able to reach wider social circles through a number of channels apart from individual literacy. One of these was reading groups, where individuals able to read texts used to communicate them to others in the group by summarizing them or reading them aloud. There are testimonies to such activities, although we do not know their extent or prevalence at different times and in different societies.

Certain festivities, such as the *Floral Games*, celebrated since the last decades of the nineteenth century in France, Catalonia and Galicia, or the *Eisteddfod*, revived in 1865 in Wales, also belong to the aforementioned tradition. In all of these events, the most important feature was the reading aloud of texts

¹⁸ The case of Illiers, in France, is similarly well-known. In 1971, the local authorities changed the name of the town to Illiers-Combray, to reflect the name that Marcel Proust used in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

written in non-official, alternative languages, in opposition to the contemporary state's attempts to impose linguistic and cultural homogeneity. It is through these and other methods that texts could be shared, producing reactions, changes of attitude and even action. A well-known example is the reading (including in groups) of the American novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which gave a great boost to the abolitionist cause in the United States before the Civil War.

Published on March 20, 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 10,000 copies within the first week and 300,000 by the end of the first year. ... The contract that Harriet and Calvin had agreed to gave them 10 percent of the sales—not an unusual agreement for the time and one that netted \$10,000 in the first three months of sales—"the largest sum of money ever received by any author, either American or European, from the sale of a single work in so short a period of time," the press noted. (Hedrick 1994: 223)

Legend has it that Abraham Lincoln, greeting Harriet Beecher Stowe in 1862 (that is, during the war), said, "So you're the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war" (Sachsman et al. 2007: 8 n.1).¹⁹ Stowe successfully capitalized on her literary success to spread her ideas about abolition through further non-literary publications and public appearances. Few American writers have ever reached this status in a country where literature early on chose to give up playing a socio-political role (cf. Hochman 2011).

In contrast to the relative decline of "literature as tools," the function of "literature as goods" seems generally to persist. The competition for status in the stock exchange of symbolic goods on the global or local levels continues much as it did during the previous two centuries. It is still important to participate in international book fairs or to be nominated for a Nobel Prize – as important as competing for a medal at the Olympics, not only for the participants, but for the whole community they represent. For minorities or groups that feel marginalized or discriminated against, asserting and demonstrating their capacity to produce literature and win prizes is still an important part of their struggle to improve their status. Although a number of university departments of literary studies have been

¹⁹ Cindy Weinstein commented: "Even if we grant Lincoln's statement its obvious degree of ironic intention, he, nevertheless, makes quite a claim for the impact of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* on American history. One glance at virtually any of Lincoln's speeches reveals that he, like Stowe, believed that the power of words could alter the minds and hearts of individuals" (Weinstein 2004: 1).

closed or scaled back, literature is still taught in schools, even if the subject is not as robust or prestigious as it once used to be.

In societies where the figure of the public intellectual persists and such people continue to have a bully pulpit in the press and the media, being recognized as a literary author is one of the main criteria of accreditation. It gives one the right to speak and be heard on a variety of issues that have nothing to do with literature and for which the author may have no other qualification.²⁰ The symbolism and the importance of literature as a good that increases the symbolic capital of the writer allows him or her to be received as a supplier of tools outside the literary field (in the intellectual field, fundamentally). Sometimes, it affords the writer impact, audience and *auctoritas* in the intellectual field by virtue of the capital accumulated and transferred from the literary field.

The demand that an educated person be able to display knowledge about texts and writers persists, provoking certain intellectuals to advocate resistance to such elitist terror in the name of liberating the underprivileged. Pierre Bayard, “born into a milieu where reading was rare, deriving little pleasure from the activity, and lacking in any case the time to devote myself to it” (Bayard 2007: xiii), describes a situation where everyone acquires the habit of speaking about books that they have not read. Bayard’s experience is based, however, on the circumstances in his own French culture, where the link between literary connoisseurship and social status may still be strong, generating the kind of socio-cultural tyranny that oppresses the masses. Whether the same demands are still as strong in other cultures remains to be investigated.

There are moments, however, when teaching and preserving literature suddenly become a major issue of concern for a society, as the following cases illustrate. In Italy, in 1988, a committee known as the “Commissione Brocca” was appointed by the Ministry of Education to propose new curricula and new teaching programs for the upper secondary schools. The media gave extensive coverage to heated discussions about the committee’s alleged intention to eliminate Manzoni’s novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) from the compulsory curriculum. Although the Ministry publicly denied the allegation, the controversy raged for quite a number of years. In 2010, during the presentation of his book *La*

²⁰ Sánchez-Cuenca (2016), as a political scientist, criticizes what he considers the abusive interference of Spanish writers in political debates.

storia dei Promessi sposi raccontata da Umberto Eco [*The Story of The Betrothed Told by Umberto Eco*], which was meant to save the book from oblivion and make it more accessible, the late Umberto Eco admitted that “the reading of the novel, as obligatory, is considered boring by the majority of the Italians” (*Il Fatto Quotidiano* 2015). That probably encouraged the then Prime Minister, Matteo Renzi, to declare on that very day, in a speech before a group of students at the *Luiss School of Government* in Rome, “I agree with Umberto Eco: The reading of *The Betrothed* at school should be prohibited by law, because making it obligatory has made it despicable, and instead that would return the charm to a masterpiece.” The students “loudly applauded him” (*Il Tempo* 2015).

What makes this and similar examples²¹ significant for our topic is the involvement of politics. What stands out is the fact that a country’s Prime Minister considered expressing opinions on a literary text a matter of national importance. His speech gave rise to a series of reactions from various people, both educated and uneducated, who submitted thousands of comments to the digital editions of newspapers. This is clear evidence of the continuing function of literature as “community goods and symbols.” Although *I promessi sposi* was for most Italians “boring and hard to read,” it was evidently unacceptable for them to think that it could be eliminated from the world’s literary canon, where it coexisted with famous French, English, German, Russian, and Spanish texts.

In March 2015, a similar case occurred amid the fervor of the Israeli elections, although this time it originated from negative attitudes and fear. The right-wing Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had unexpectedly also become Minister of Education following the original minister’s resignation, decided to disqualify a writer who had been nominated for that year’s Annual State Prize, as well as two professors of literary studies. This violent meddling in matters in which a minister had never felt free to interfere before was widely censured. Many members of the Award Committees resigned, causing the 2015

²¹ When in 2001, the left-wing Minister of Education of Portugal announced reforms in the education system, including the removal of Camões’s *Os Lusíadas* and other works from the compulsory curriculum, both right- and left-wing politicians raised their voices in protest. Vasco Graça Moura and David Justino, spokespersons of the Partido Social Democrata for culture and education respectively, attributed the demotion of *The Lusíadas* to “a deplorable complex of a retrograde Left, who are ashamed of Portugal’s past.” They concluded that for all these reasons, the curriculum revisions and the new programs should be suspended (Leiria 2002).

State Prize in these areas to be annulled. Hostility of this kind from those in power is further evidence of the continuing function of “literature as goods,” but also of an enduring perception of its potential as tools. By disqualifying them, the Prime Minister intended not only to silence the author and professors (something which, in other circumstances, would have been treated with indifference), but mostly to cater to his electorate, for whom modern literature represents liberal ideas and left-wing worldviews, which signals that to some extent they view it as a source of ideologically influential tools.

The continuing role of “literature as goods” can sometimes be noted in the fields of collective identities or cultural diplomacy and international relations, and it can also express the political and professional interests of various parties or groups. A clear example is the way that sociolinguistic and cultural relations between different countries and between the metropolis and former colonies derive from their relative economic, political and military weight, among other things. In this regard, a controversy arose in Brazil in early 2016 over the presence of Portuguese literature in the national curriculum for non-university education (*Base Nacional Curricular Comum*, or NCCB). The issue at stake, considering the focus of the debates, was the removal of an element symbolic of the former metropolis. This was reported by the Portuguese and Brazilian press (Bender and Ruy Lozano Garcia 2016), resulting in newspaper controversies, manifestos, and conflicting political reactions. In this controversy, various intellectuals expressed strong dissent from the ideology of the ruling party, the *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (Workers’ Party), which justified the elimination of Portuguese literature from the curriculum.

The Brazilian case shows how “texts as goods” have occasionally become the cause of disagreement between different communities, whether they share the same territory or not, in their struggle to own those texts. This happens, for instance, when community agents are willing to appropriate texts and authors whose origin or function turns them into an object of dispute: writers who were born or lived in the colonizing country but whose work was important in the colonized territory in colonial times. It happens, too, when agents of a given community reject such texts, which are considered the result of the colonization of their community by another community, because they are not consistent with their definition of community (or nation). Here the arguments are often based on

different definitions of identity and nation/community, as well as on the utilization of texts or authors, emphasizing these texts' or authors' transformation, or their double nature as goods and tools. In short, what is at stake in cases such as the Brazilian one is, for some, the definition of local identity ("Brazilianness" in this case) and its explicit independence from some historical colonizing power (Portugal), opening up space for the marginalized others. For others, it is an acknowledgement that it is essential to understand their identity, demonstrating the functioning of literature as a tool, but also and mainly as a symbol.

Some tentative consequences: The future of literary studies

One inevitable consequence of our analysis is that literature's celebrated "autonomy" turns out to be questionable and relative at best. Obviously, as in every industry, there are rules of production and institutionalized activities that compete against each other in the field of model production and in the general repertoire of solutions. However, it would be wrong to maintain that these models can be handled independently of non-industrial factors. As noted by Anton Figuroa (2010), in many circumstances, including the Galician case, literature cannot be disconnected from politics.²² There are abundant reasons to understand literature as a heteronomous rather than an autonomous system. The successful attainment of symbolic capital by a large group cannot be understood without taking into account heteronomy in relation to socio-political factors. Moreover, when it comes to writers, their independence or alleged autonomy is often just an illusion, since they depend on power even more than the industry itself does. *L'art pour l'art* has been a strategy of the *litterati* to protect themselves from indifference, rather than a policy of separation from or a rupture with society. It is obvious that literary activity (particularly on the part of certain writers or in the case of popular texts) depends on the approval of the appropriate agents in power and on social recognition in order to achieve symbolic importance. This approval is originally imposed and later accepted as logical and "natural." In many cases, these processes are opposed to those of folk and/or mass literary activity.

²² Jaume Subirana's forthcoming book *Construir con palabras: Escritores, literatura e identitat en Catalunya (1859-2019)* argues that Catalan poets continue to play a central role, and are repeatedly invoked in the discourse about national identity.

The convergence between the decline of “literature as tools” and the persistence of “literature as goods” can be interpreted as the end of literature as we knew it. Here “end” could mean the termination of the role literature played in other historical periods, as a key, significant activity in society, although it persists in the form of the symbolic capital invested in pantheons and celebrated as “heritage,” as an entertainment and educational industry, as a repertoire of resources and models that maintains social relevance through its expanded circulation in other media, and in some societies as a potential space of political dissidence, with a level of influence as yet to be researched but that still sometimes warrants state persecution.

It may be far-fetched to state that literature has reached its limit in providing the necessary resources for humanity, and therefore it can be released from and relieved of this role, which will henceforth be played by other media. On the other hand, there is one aspect in which literature already made its contribution to socio-cultural organization and cannot be expected to offer new solutions: indisputably, at this point a unified language has been successfully imposed in most modern states (although provisionally in many cases), which, paradoxically, has contributed to the redundancy of literature’s functioning as a tool for that unification.²³

The fact that literature as an institution may be undergoing a process of marginalization has nothing to do with the daily production of narrative or poetry. It is true that literature has developed themes and techniques for narration and the expression of feelings, but the ability to tell and sing has been one of the most important foundations of culture since the beginning of human existence, long before recorded history. Some theories of cultural evolution have already accepted the hypothesis that the ability to tell was an important invention in history, as important as making fire or the ability to cook. Without it, humanity would not have been able to survive. Since they started to speak, and perhaps

²³ Nevertheless, literature still functions in some of these states as an auxiliary tool for improving language skills. For example, in 2010, the Italian Ministry of Education explained in its *Regulation Scheme*: “The reading of texts of literary value has also enriched students linguistically, particularly improving their vocabulary and semantics, their ability to adapt syntax when it comes to the construction of meaning and to adjust their register and tone for different topics, as well as their attention to stylistic effectiveness, which are presupposed in written competence” (*Schema di regolamento* 2010: 12).

earlier through sign language, humans have told stories “to mark a special occasion, give an example, make a warning, get food, or explain what seemed inexplicable” (Zipes 2012: 2). Even if literature disappeared completely all over the world, whether gradually or suddenly, the daily routines of telling and singing would remain as long as humanity exists.

The heteronomous situation of literature is not exclusive to it. It would be more appropriate to acknowledge that heteronomy, i.e., the state of dynamically interlocking systems, is intrinsic to all social processes. The position of all activities of what might be called non-practical industries is very similar, and their success or diminution does not differ that much from what literature is undergoing. Accordingly, analyzing literature as if it were an independent phenomenon cannot be sustained unless one means for it to be the only object of interest. Elias Torres maintains that the diminished role of literature has caused literary studies to lose their former relevance; in his words “the old alliance between the State and the study of (national) literature via the school system has collapsed” (Torres Feijó 2012: 154). He advises against “wast[ing] time on melancholy, remembering those good old days in which to know literature, socially speaking, or to be a professor of literature, still had its Archimedean social weight” (ibid.: 156). Instead, it is time to leverage the situation and to design a discipline that could be more extensive than literary studies and more capable of dealing with the complexity of our cultural environment. Such a discipline could be more relevant to present-day life, and could also provide new generations with more relevant, adequate and convincing knowledge from the point of view of the postulates of research. Such a discipline already exists: “Culture Research (not to be confused with Cultural Studies)” (ibid.: 165). As far as academic practice is concerned, it is now urgent to acknowledge this situation and suggest some solutions before it is too late.

Moreover, without contradicting the previous argument, it is possible to come to the same conclusions by other means, based on the *inner logic* of literary studies. Over thirty years ago, in 1985, at a symposium at the University of Bayreuth, Even-Zohar voiced his doubts about the possibility of continuing with the concepts and accepted methods of literary studies. His arguments were related to the ongoing efforts at that time to develop a more appropriate discipline for the study of literature. He argued that it was necessary to reform the science of

literature, since it was impossible to investigate literature as an isolated phenomenon (Even-Zohar 1986: 5-6; see also Even-Zohar 1997: 16).

Such attitudes are not unique. Similar expressions of doubt and dissatisfaction have been voiced by a large number of literary scholars, whether on the basis of their understanding that there was no longer a strong rationale for studying literature as a hegemonic system, or on the basis of their dissatisfaction with the concentration on branded goods, namely on the texts and authors admitted to local and global pantheons. Moretti's advocacy of quantitative methods (Moretti 2005), which has triggered such a sense of unease in the community (see the collected critiques in Goodwin and Holbo 2011), or Ette's stimulating proposal (Asholt and Ette 2010, Ette 2015, Ette and Kutzinski 2010) for converting literary studies to "a life science" ("*Lebenswissenschaft*") – which would be roughly equivalent to what we understand by *Culture Research* – are just two conspicuous examples of this development.

Finally, all of these considerations unavoidably compel us to reflect about our role as academic researchers. Which are the questions that define the focus and scope of our discipline? One of the questions we should answer is to whom and to what we owe our intellectual and professional loyalty. The moment we acknowledge that the social relevance of literature has changed, it should be possible to distinguish between the study of the specificity of the literary system and its functioning, and a more ambitious enterprise that observes literature in relation to the larger framework of culture. Are we specialists in literary studies, understood as an independent discipline, or are we rather researchers of human behavior? If we are interested in literature as a component of human behavior – whatever its operating modes – the answer should be that we must be loyal to research on human behavior, and adapt literary studies to that goal. As Torres has put it, "Literary Studies should elaborate conceptual and methodological frameworks that allow for work with instruments for analyzing reality" (Torres Feijó 2012: 165; cf. Torres Feijó 2004). Today's research on culture, which involves the humanities, the social sciences and biology, will make it possible to study literature in connection with and in the context of other processes, instead of consigning it to an arcane fate. We are talking about a discipline that investigates the creation of resources that make life possible not only for human beings but for

a wide variety of animals. Only by studying this creation in its context can we tell how verbal and textual activities contribute to it. We think that we owe it not only to ourselves as scholars, but also to our future students, and certainly to society at large, to undertake this transition. The transition towards an ampler framework will allow us to replace a once-and-for-all object of study with a dynamic set of questions, which, if relevant to some phenomena that could be referred to as “literature,” will reveal its dynamics. The making and consumption of non-practical texts may never come to a real end, but the industry of “literature” and its producers as we have known them may possibly have reached the end of their road.

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that literature has lost, in most societies all over the globe, its role as a major source of ideas and directives for sociocultural activity and consciousness. This does not need much substantiation, as counter-examples are limited to specific communities and conditions. We emphasize, though, that other instrumental functions are still maintained by the industry, including entertainment, education, practical guides (for tourism), and even developing cognitive competencies like empathy and sociocultural interaction. At the same time, “literature” as symbolic goods in a competitive market of assets has not lost its prominent position, though sports and other so-called “cultural industries” may have already superseded it on a global level. We believe that these developments call for a change of perspectives and methods in literary studies. One way may be to pay attention to literature as part of the culture, when it is relevant to understand societies or collectives. While textual modes of expression have indeed been recognized as inherent features of humanity, the institutionalized bodies of texts and producers known as “literature” may have become more and more marginal.

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