

## Professing Literature: Teacher-response Criticism

What is at stake when we talk about *professing literature* today? Academic literary studies in Portugal do not have a history different from other countries: it was not until the establishment of language and literature departments in the last quarter of the nineteenth-century that we can speak of professionalism in literature, though we can recall ancient times when literary texts had been used to teach national languages. The point today is to wonder if literature can or should be taught rather than purely enjoyed. I will not speculate in this paper if you can or cannot teach literature.<sup>[1]</sup> I prefer to think over the kind of professionalism we have achieved by the end of the twentieth-century in our universities and the consequences of our decisions in curriculum development to those who teach literature outside the university.

In the last decades, Portugal has done several restructurings in the study of Portuguese literature in the national curriculum at secondary level (1945, 1979, 1991, 1997) and at the higher level (a reform of the faculties of arts in 1979 led to the foundation of the major course in Modern Languages and Literature, up until today the most important course for the study of literature and foreign languages, offered in every Portuguese university and polytechnic). These new trends were never completed with serious programmes for continuing education of those whose profession is the teaching of literature. We have always counted on our undergraduate education as a strong and timeless literary background. Many teachers of literature have brought reading and writing about literary texts to a dead end. The last time they have written about a literary text were at the undergraduation exams, in spite of that they are all professionals and have been teaching literature for the last decades or so.

No one will accept that what we do is not *professional*, that is, we are all taking seriously the teaching of literature. And if to be *professional* is also to serve in a skilled and responsible manner, then no one again will accept that we are nothing but true professionals. It is my contention that this issue has to be approached regardless the assurances of those who profess literature assuming they are untouchable in their classrooms. Professionalism in literary studies has little to do with the crisis of literature in a certain moment of history. We have witnessed too many crises in this field ever since Horace has written his *Ars poetica*. When we do not know how to explain the problems inside critical practice it has been a peculiar fascination to those who write about literary

history to call that difficulty a crisis. Professionalism has more to do with performance and competence using a certain methodology to teach literature than with a social failure leading to a crisis.

The history of the professional teaching of literature in Portugal has to cope with a serious handicap if we are to compare the teaching of the our national curriculum with other examples from those countries as the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, German or Russia, where you can find leading thinkers of the literary phenomenon. We have never produced an international lead thinker and, therefore, we have to depend on imported theories and practices. It has been so since the decade of 1960, when our lecturers started to travel to France in a regular basis. The professional teacher of literature learnt then everything about French structuralism, but later paid little attention to post-structuralism. We failed Barthes' revolution in 1970 with his *S/Z*, not because we did not read the book but because we tried to apply every single book from Barthes, Greimas, Genette, Todorov, etc. to our critical practice and from there we took our formal readings to the classroom and passed them to younger generations. Cohorts of teachers of literature learned how to read a literary text from this perspective, but, inevitably, they completely forgot how to think from a personal and imaginative point of view the literary text. No one were to risk a single creative reading about those Portuguese classics like *The Lusíads* or *The Maias*, when the interpretative community had already everything done by a few leading readers who ruled the university study of literary studies. At the same time, economic globalization hits the academic publishers who promote an infamous boom of secondary bibliography about Portuguese Literature mainly. From the decade of 1980 until today, the typical professional of literature prefers to read and use this kind of bibliography than reading the latest monographs or major theories and essays. I have been calling these titles self-aid literature. They are a kind of first aid for teachers of literature, in the tradition of the Cliff Notes for almost everything. Unfortunately, our teachers of literature, particularly in the secondary level, have been counting on these study guides more than they should. And we are not talking about those good examples of literary notes as Bloom's Notes and Reviews about English literature, for example. At the same time, textbooks have been governing our classes as well. For decades, even before democracy days have been restored (1974), the textbook for the major discipline of Portuguese in every level of education rules every reading practice. There is no critical thinking at all about the literary text. And, worst of all, the same textbook can be a best-seller for years and will not change its methods of reading even when the

national curriculum changes and invites to the rethinking of our practical criticism.

In the first place there are those professionals who assume they have special knowledge and proficiencies, as opposed to mere skills, and that is exactly what makes them *professionals* in the business. Will it be the case of Portuguese teachers of literature? A possible diagnosis of the Portuguese different levels of education will conclude as follows:

1. In the basic levels of education (first nine years), the teacher of literary subject matters is usually typecast, that is to say, like an actor, he is assigned repeatedly to the same type of role, always following faithfully a script from a textbook and/or respecting the curriculum agenda with little reworked readings of the texts he is supposed to teach. The teacher of literature in this first level has a *modus faciendi* which tends to reduce every reading of the literary text to the same standard: every year he will give the same answer to the question *What does this text mean?* and will give the students the same rules to be learnt about the form of the text. Creative writing, critical close reading, reader-response criticism outside the textbook guidelines are normally elapsd. The professional of literature in this level does not believe he is also a creative reader, and, even worse, he believes that he has no obligation to go beyond what the textbook and the curriculum tell him to do. He is, in fact, a kind of the guardian of the curriculum or the goalkeeper of the textbook before any attack from the creative reader.

2. In the secondary level (years 10 to 12), the situation is not much different. Teaching Portuguese means teaching Portuguese literature and the teacher is convinced that he is no longer a language teacher or that language and literature are two different and uncommunicative levels in the same discipline. Since these teachers are now discovering that their students have some specific problems in linguistic matters, many believe today that literature should be blamed for this lack of linguistic competence. The result seems to be a restructuring of the curriculum, already planned, to separate the teaching of literature and the teaching of language in this level. This is, indeed, a "tragically wasteful mistake", if I may use the exact same words E. D. Hirsch Jr. employed in 1987 in his widely-discussed book *Cultural Literacy*, when the United States have tried a similar restructuring of the curriculum. If the teacher of literature in this secondary level today, in a general view, has the possibility to renew his readings of the literary texts of the canon defined by the curriculum, when he

puts these readings into practice he tends more and more to perform what I would call the fallacy of reproductive reading. I mean, for this teacher it is always easier to adopt a prevailing reading of the text he is studying, it is always much more reassuring to repeat the reading of the textbook guidelines — themselves a reproduction of winning readings — than to reassess new standards for the interpretation affair. This goes together with the absolute confidence in the bibliography already published, but seldom reviewed and updated. Accurate teacher-response criticism is, indeed, a myth in this secondary level.

3. In the university, the teaching of literature is also a puzzle: there are the problem of curriculum design, which is the exclusive responsibility of teachers, the resistance to further theory, the attachment to theories out-of-date, the submission to career requisites of many research projects far from the true needs and appeals of the teaching of literature, the autocracy of some professors in the ethics of reading literary texts, the blind respect to hidden agendas of some departments of literature, the difficult of teachers of literature in publishing their works in book, etc.

These problems of Portuguese literary professionalism are far from original. By 1950, the American New Criticism trend dominates the teaching of literature in the university. Literary criticism and the humanities in general are indebted to the New Critics since a new reputation has been gained to the profession. Several departments of English were created everywhere, the demand for the professional study of literature increased, and programmes for teacher training were developed. Although there was this well-known rule that everyone should follow — *publish or perish*. As a result, everyone was impelled to write at any cost, as much as possible but not with the best quality. Those professionals invented by New Criticism were far from being consumed with issues of open literary interpretation and reader-response criticism queries, the gathering of published papers and books being the one and only thing that mattered to them. This is our legacy in the profession today in Europe.

I would put forward a following situation in Portugal today (but also elsewhere): those scholars who publish in a regular basis declare that we have to many publications; those who seldom publish — maybe this is the most common case — declare themselves defeated and only in a few cases there is someone who tries to publish his work. At the same time, if you are indeed committed to publish your work in a regular basis, there is always a publisher who thinks differently. Outside the university, polytechnics included, we have

reached a period of anti-criticism procedure where professionals of literature will rather reproduce already published material than creating their own set of guidelines and doctrine. Outside the university, you still must take into account the fact that many teachers of literature have never written a single paper in their lives. In and outside the university there is this galaxy of guardians of an essence called *literature*, as Terry Eagleton would put it, not to be interpreted in the sense of teachers of a fact called *literature*, immediately transmittable, but in the sense of teachers who are professionals, well-informed readers, I would rather say, capable of understanding the very unsteady nature of the literature: "Literary theorists, critics and teachers, then, are not so much purveyors of doctrine as custodians of a discourse. Their task is to preserve this discourse, extend and elaborate it as necessary, defend it from other forms of discourse, initiate newcomers into it and determine whether or not they have successfully mastered it. The discourse has no definite signified, which is not to say that it embodies no assumptions: it is rather a network of signifiers able to envelop a whole field of meanings, objects and practices."<sup>[2]</sup> We can conclude this issue in several identical ways: either we say with Roland Barthes and Terry Eagleton that literature is not a "definite signified", therefore cannot be taught as a fixed and finite object of knowledge, or we say with Sebastião da Gama, a Portuguese poet and language teacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that the class language just *happens* — it is not entirely pre-determined —, what can be said of literature, which is not only what is happening when we read the literary text but also what is happening when the literary text is conceived.

Richard Levin, in his book *New Readings vs. Old Plays* (1979), has tried to denounce the kind of professionalism attained by American New Criticism, which, as an example, concentrated in very specific areas as it is the case of Renaissance drama. If in the United States this led young teachers to writing extensively about well-known books inducing them to say something very uncanny and scribbled about the subject matter of those literary texts, because what counted was the publish or perish rule, in Portugal and elsewhere we are still facing the case of those young teachers who assume that they have no obligation whatsoever to write about the books they are suppose to teach. And when they try to write something they certainly must be consistent with the theories of their masters.

Gerald Graff passed judgment on literary professionalism because it led to the foundation of self-secluded groups of experts who thought they had nothing to learn from other theoretical proposals, especially if those proposals came from defiant groups. The role of literary criticism within the American

university is discussed in the collective book *Criticism in the University* (1985), edited by Gerald Graff and Reginald Gibbons. Graff will publish two years later an institutional history of the teaching of literature in the USA: *Professing Literature - an Institutional History* (1987). I would call your attention to this last book and its "Introduction: The Humanist Myth", which concludes that we should think of "literary education as part of a larger cultural history that includes the other humanities as well as the sciences even while acknowledging that terms like 'humanities', 'science', 'culture', and 'history' are contested."<sup>[3]</sup> The European *statu quo* in the teaching of literature has now changed since the eighties, especially because we must today pay close attention to new technologies applied to teaching. In a certain sense, the humanities have not cleared out the ethical and epistemological problems scrutinized by Graff in the eighties. We still have to cope with several forms of authoritarianism: private affairs and interests lead to the shielded study of works and authors under the auspices of an illuminated master-of-all-literary-arts; teachers of all levels seldom open their classes to discussion with other colleagues in the profession; departments of literature dispute with each other the jurisdiction and influence of their ideology even in the same faculty; governments end up with new curriculum trends and laws without proper public debate; publishers do not dare changing the whole methodology of their textbooks, which they have been best-selling for many years, just because teachers will not change their own methodology.

There is here a major problem: once a young teacher dominates a certain methodology for the study of a literary text, he/she assumes that it will be useful for every other text he/she will have to teach in the future. The classics, which they have to teach in four years, seem to have always final readings not because of their nature of a classic genre, not because they are texts of great quality and everlasting meaning, but because no one will challenge what it is already said in critical terms about those texts. This is so because only a few teachers of literature are aware that they are also teachers of literary theory. It is already a common place in literary theory today to assume that every teacher of literature is also a theorist, if by this we mean a professional who can read beyond classical readings, who can read the text with his students and start new questions about meaning, content, contextualisation and cultural cross-references, who can raise new doubts about old meanings, who can defend an argument in scientific and technical terms, who is willing to monitor new publications in several fields of knowledge.

When you think of the problem of the resistance to new reader-response criticism outside the university, you always face the question of the divorce

between research and teaching. If in the university none will ever concede that he can forget research and concentrate only in teaching and a few administrative tasks, outside the university there is this myth of the teacher of literature who is not committed to research and publishing activities, something viewed as a kind of restricted prerogative of university teachers. I still believe we are not yet prepared to rub out this myth. We need to convince immediately the teacher of literature outside the university that he is also a researcher and an *author* of literature. I have been witnessing a common grievance about the time these teachers have to spend in administrative tasks as if nobody else in the university has ever done anything but teaching and researching. Professionalism in literature should start right here in the awareness of what we can all do in teaching literature further than performing administrative tasks which will always exist in the profession.

Teacher-response criticism is often constructed upon the results of literary classical debates and conclusions. Many teachers believe that their students cannot be submitted to disputes between distinguished theorists, critics or other teachers. Professional disputes are not a proper subject matter for the curriculum, since it is alleged that only the characters participating in the debate should have the prerogative to continue the quarrelling. How much is it lost when a teacher of literature is always waiting for results? In an interpretive community, we do not expect that every interpreter (critics, teachers, and students, public ...) will make an impact just because of his defiance of the authority of the masters, but it is also true that complete conformity will never start a process of dialectical reading. In practice, when you open a textbook of Portuguese Literature, you will probably find, for instance, a set of guiding principles for the understanding of modernism, but seldom will you find selections of the original texts that might have initiated the movement(s), selections of critical counter-offensives on the idea of modernism, arguments for and against the established chronology of Portuguese modernism, recent trends to relate modernism with post-modernism, etc. The teacher of literature must be aware of all these possibilities, even if the textbook forgets most of them, but many prefer to think that giving the student a series of preconceived tips is reasonable enough to teach the whole thing.

A common solution in teacher-response criticism in the classroom is standard contextualisation, that is, the teacher of literature believes that the best way to introduce a student in a new subject is to reduce contextualisation to the minimum. Following the same example, beginning the study of Fernando Pessoa, the most significant Portuguese poet of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, implies

instructing the students with a few truisms about modernism, followed by the reading of Pessoa's poems to check where those truisms are placed (they must be there, or the whole process of (mis)reading will be undermined). In other words, what is at stake is the teaching of the cultural text — Robert Scholes' *Textual Power* insists in this predicament but it is almost evidence —, which cannot be diminished to pre-arranged recipes. To teach contextualisation is not to adopt a few standards of description of societies and all forms of aggregation. The cultural questions to be raised should be, as an example and not as a rule: 1) Does the canon reflect national identity in a positive way? Is the canon biased in any way? Are the teachers of literature really conscious of their literary tenets? Do teachers of literature understand (or know at all) the new debates in literary theory? Do they want to participate in any debate? Do students know what literature can teach them? Do they expect literature to teach them anything at all? What can teachers and students add to the literary text as active readers? What do we know about the reception of the text we are teaching and/or reading? These are all issues that belong to the sphere of the literary text as much as they belong to any cultural debate.

John Crowe Ransom's "Criticism Inc." is one of the first manifestos to call attention to the necessity of the literary community to become more self-consciously professional. According to Ransom, "criticism must become more scientific, or precise and systematic, and this means that it must be developed by the collective and sustained effort of learned persons — which means that its proper seat is the universities."<sup>[4]</sup> Stanley Fish condemned this view of raw professionalism because it disdains everyone who is not in the academic province, because it is a world not accessible to any individual outside the university. Of course we do not want a kind of top secret professionalism for literary criticism, if we know Ransom and the New Critics were only interested in poetical techniques and disregarded the cultural text. If we approve a literary criticism confined to the university professionals, we will read literature only to a few illuminated people and, eventually, only to ourselves. "The result, says Stanley Fish of that viewpoint, is a professionalism that is divided against it. (...) The literary community teaches its members a contradictory lesson: literary criticism is a profession — it is not something that anyone can do — but it is not professional — it is not done in response to marketplace or political pressures."<sup>[5]</sup> However, Fish never explains why teachers of literature still insist in a critical practice tied to professional standards, especially in those cases of scholars who do nothing but fulfil career requirements, producing literary criticism at the same time as they have a degree or a professional position to

conquer. Fish does not mention the fact that many American critics have published a great assortment of literary interpretations only motivated by professional disputes, which can be seen as another version of "professionalism that is divided against itself" if we accept that literary criticism should be assessed only in itself. In the Portuguese tradition, there is not this case of critical prolixity but a tedious attitude towards novelty and a standardisation of procedures and reading principles that have led to unchanging responses in the classroom.

To act in response to this unconstructive drift of professionalism, we should adopt a positive anti-professionalism attitude, something close to Nietzsche's philosophy, which challenges us not only to communicate personal judgements but also to think dialectically. Martin Heidegger followed the same anti-professionalism mode, and both German philosophers are quoted by Jacques Derrida in an important essay, "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of Its Pupils", where he reviews the state of affairs of the American university. Derrida stipulates here a suitable *politics of knowledge*.

The key problem with professionalism today seems to be the oversimplification of culture thinking, the adoption of a literary culture based on unchanging and predetermined values and rules, and the oversight of a true culture of permanent thinking. Today teachers of literature have a tendency to support their subjectivity and/or the subjectivity of renowned readers, but they forget that literary reading should begin with the criticism (or deconstruction, if you want) of subjectivity itself as this dimension is overlooked; students seldom discuss the viewpoint their teacher is bringing into the reading class. In the worst scenarios, there are some teachers who will only pass their students if they are proficient in rebating what they have heard in the classroom. If literary reading is to become a song that everyone can sing along easily, there is no literary criticism at all. For the professional teacher who wants to found a true culture of philosophical thinking in the class of literature in the university, there is also another blockage: most students who are preparing themselves to become teachers of literature in the future do not appreciate a philosophical teacher, one that demands critical thinking about the terms, the principles, the theories, the readings, the beliefs and so on, which are the core of literary studies. Instead, they will exact us to teach them exactly what they will need to teach in the future, in the exact mode, with the exact methodology, and, worst of all, with the very same literary readings that they will hand out to their future students. This is the most terrible expression of professionalism in the literary world, yet one so much desired.

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[1] See my inquiry on this subject: *A Literatura Ensina-se? — Estudos de Teoria Literária*, Edições Colibri, Lisboa, 2000.

[2] Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: an Introduction*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1990, p.201.

[3] *Professing Literature - An Institutional History*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 1987, p.15.

[4] John Crowe Ransom, *The World's Body*, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1938, p.329.

[5] Stanley Fish, "No Bias, No Merit: The Case against Blind Submission", in *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric, and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989, pp.173-174.

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