

PROFESSIONALISM AT UNIVERSITY: THE DANGER OF A LITERARY CONSUMERISM

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Abstract

There seems to be a deliberate distinction between a high theory and a mere theory of teaching among scholars. Teaching a theory, then, appears to embody a *consumerist* spirit that necessarily disdains the genius of this same theory. Besides, the urge towards *professionalism* at universities has contributed to spoil the uniqueness of individual responses to literary texts. In this respect, the present paper, first, points out the limitation of Reader-Response theory as the latter has gained educational settings in general and university practice in particular. Second, it aims at unveiling the reasons behind the ill implementation of this same theory. Finally, it puts the emphasis on the danger of perpetuating canonical literary texts.

ملخص:

يبدو أنه هناك تمييز متعمد بين نظرية عالية المضمون ونظرية التدريس بين العلماء. ويظهر ذلك بعد تجسيد روح الاستهلاكية التي حتميا تزدرى من عبقرية نفس هذه النظرية. فضلا عن ذلك ساهمت الرغبة نحو الاحتراف في الجامعات إلى إتلاف تميز الردود الفردية نحو النصوص الأدبية. في هذا الصدد هذا البحث يشير أولا إلى تحديد نقائص نظرية استجابة القارئ التي كسبت مؤخرا السياق التربوي عامة والممارسة الجامعية خاصة. ثانيا يهدف البحث أيضا إلى كشف الدوافع وراء سوء تطبيق نفس النظرية. وأخيرا يركز البحث على خطر تكريس النصوص الأدبية المقننة.

Introduction:

What is meant by professing literature? And is it possible to make of literature a professional field? The point of departure is linked, I think, to the time when there was a necessity to teach literature at universities. Up to that time (19th), literature was merely appreciated, enjoyed, and experienced, hardly, aimed at being transmitted. Unconsciously, literature has been seen to be deprived of

its primary goal; that of appreciation ¹ to a more achieving goal that of being transmitted inside an academic frame, i.e., taught.

Teaching at university level is premised on continual reforms at the level of curriculum, each time offering new insights on what is most appropriately adequate. Similarly, the literature subject has undergone a series of serious reforms all along the preceding eras, unfortunately, rarely accompanied with suitable programmes for continuing education for those who represent the professionals in the teaching of literature. Although literature was made professional, it did not benefit of the required equipment or training. Teachers of literature have often relied on their own interest in the field and the meagre undergraduate education they have received as sole components of a literary background, responsible for enhancing the love of literature in students, thus a new kind of teachers called *professionals* of literature was born.

It is my contention, then, that the decline of the reader-response theory has to do with the professionalism that has characterized literature in general and the theory in particular. I will start by showing how professionalism is *incontournable* yet unsatisfactory, then I will point out the powerlessness of reader-response theory as wrongly handled by teachers. Finally, I will attempt to shed some light on the canon formation.

1. Professionalism and Professionals of Literature

Actually, I am not blaming professionals of literature, for, I am one of them and I am quite conscious that I do contribute to the professionalism that is prevailing in the literary field. I also recognize that no one can blame the professionals for their seriousness while considering the issue of teaching literature, but I am of the opinion that it takes part of a whole process of fashion that aims at giving a framed and serious aspect to all fields, regardless of their nature,

The important thing is that professions are socially made categories, and processes. A group that is doing a particular kind of work organizes itself in professional association; appropriates, shares, and develops a body of knowledge as its own; discredits other practitioners performing similar work; establishes definite routes of admission; including but not limited to academic study; controls access; and gets recognition as the only group allowed to perform that kind of work, ideally with state power backing its monopoly. (in Harkin, 2005:420)

Professionalism in literary studies is inevitable then, since it is socially bound, yet, it does not dictate the state of “dictatorship” those

professionals are exercising inside their classrooms. Professing literature has become the property of certain teachers assuming they are untouchable in the field. The crisis, to my sense and which has nothing to do with the crisis literature had in certain moments of history, has to do with the competence, performance, and most importantly the too much self assurance those professionals use in teaching literature. Professionalism has proved to contribute to a social failure leading to an authentic crisis lived and perceived even in our universities².

At university level ³, the teaching of literature⁴ is another and more complicated bargain, since this final stage of education represents the most sensitive stage that helps create critical minds responsible for building a balanced society. Unfortunately, it is in this stage that the failure is more perceived because once more it is teacher made. Problems of curriculum design, the attachment to theories out-of-date, the submission of career requisites of various projects far from the true needs and appeals of the teaching of literature, the blind respect to hidden agendas of some departments, and the difficulty teachers of literature meet in publishing their works appear all hampering the transmission of literature.

Surprisingly, the problems of literary professionalism are the same everywhere regardless of the literature's origin. Perhaps, these problems are more persistent for the founders of the literary theories and major trends before the other minor literatures, for, the latter suffice themselves in a mere process of imitation and do not pretend at innovation.⁵ There was an urge to cope with the requirements of a thirsty audience whose sole objective was: a literary *consumerism*.⁶ As a result, everyone wrote and at any cost, regardless of the quality of writing. Those professionals then were motivated by personal objectives; to collect a maximum of publications and forgot about genuine literary interpretation and reader-response criticism, so were they really professionals? In addition, those professionals of literature writings' are in general reproduced or revisited papers of already published works. Thus, there seems to be an implication to the fact that the unsteady world of literature does not belong to those teachers who call themselves professionals, on the contrary, be it inside or outside university, only few ones could pretend at that professionalism!

Apparently, because it is not a fixed and finite object of knowledge, literature cannot be taught in the way it is currently taught. Its actual transmission fails drastically in translating what

happens when we read literary texts and favours instead a mere dissection of language mechanisms.

The dangers of the *publish or perish* rule go further and narrow the scopes of young teachers who have just come across the puzzle of teaching literature. Many critics devoted their interest to denounce the kind of professionalism which concentrated on very specific areas of literary studies. They condemn the motif of such kind of writings and wonder on their impact on the new generations of professionals. These self made experts appear to consider literature as a self enclosed entity and omit to regard it,

...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', and 'history' are contested.
(Graff, 1987:15)

In fact, if we consider the introduction of the new technologies in the teaching of literature, we could understand the necessity behind regarding literary education within a larger cultural history.

Graff's view concerning professing literature offers genuine insights about the teaching of literature; yet, the problems encountered in practice are ones that do not appear to have room in his ethical and epistemological vision. More down to earth problems are facing the professionals,

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.(Ceia, 2001: 6)

and therefore making them turn towards trivialities rather than what represents the essence of the academy.

As previously stated, reader response-theory has gained the institution of teaching at the expense of its status in the "High Theory", and that thanks to its pedagogical worth. Nevertheless, the fact that the theory was made teachable does not disqualify it from the "high theory". Let me first explain what in Fish' word is meant by

disqualifying? I have succeeded to understand Fish's view only when I came across professionalism in literary studies. At first sight, the relationship appears too far fetched, but when having a deeper look, I noticed the flagrant divorce between research and teaching at university. While they are supposed to complete each other, research and teaching appear to be victims of a system of professionalism which deliberately lead the teacher to concentrate only on teaching and a few administrative tasks and forget about research which is in the view of the teachers the prerogative of theorists. With the assumption that professionalism should start right from the association **teacher researcher** and **author** of literature, new perspectives may occur. If teachers of literature understand that they have got the duty to undertake research as well as manage to produce a work of their property, they will succeed to overcome the predominant myth over the community of literary studies. Once more, I share the opinion that reader-response theory declined because a whole system was and is still ruled by non academic values.

Since reader response theory has been found to facilitate the engagement with literature, it has had a positive effect on the classroom. More interestingly, this same theory has been much credited for its ability to validate the individuality of the learner. By decentring the work and the author as locus of meaning, it makes the experience of the individual central to the reading experience. Thus, what is the individual reader supposed to do inside the classroom, where more than one individual reading of the same text interacts? While by reader, I necessarily refer to students who are supposed to reinforce their personal experience of reading often by balancing or altering it in accordance with the dominant classroom interpretation, the "personalist" dangers of reading should not be neglected, however. Such kind of readings, for instance, are ones that involve identification of oneself in the text with what one understands or rejection of what one finds simply because boring, frustrating or not worth reading.

2. Teachers/Students' Roles: Some Misunderstandings

It is assumed that the role of the teacher, who in addition of facilitating personal textual exploration of the text, is to manage a more urgent mission. In fact, he is first supposed to make the student develop a critical consciousness about texts that give voice to the dominant or operative forces of one's culture i.e., the reader, thanks to the teacher, would challenge the already established understandings of the major works that *gain the mandate* (Johnston, 2000). From this

view of things, one of the major problems with reader-response teaching lies in the fact that reader response tends to assume that the act of reading involves an “*immediately measurable, meaningful, and productive “event”*.”(p.2). We are just but reminded of the *consumerism* of Horton (1989) and which in fact reduces the above claimed individuality of the reader highlighted by this same theory,

Reader response criticism, which arrived in the early 1970s with a liberating “power to the people/readers” whiff about it, can in retrospect more easily be seen as a subtle version of consumerism. The inevitable result of the application of the Fish-ian question “What does that X do?” is not primarily a description or affirmation of some personal emotion or psychological response to work of art so much as it is the enactment of one of the economic principles of a late-capitalist society: If it does not do anything, it’s not worth anything. Or to push a bit harder, “my” response becomes an enactment by one member of a privatised society carefully taught both inside and outside the academy that a private anything, including response, is the only kind of thing worth having (p.281)

Horton insightful commentary offers interesting points of discussion. At first, there is an explicit comparison between literature and capital at such an extent that she speaks about a “consumerist education”. Reader response becomes for Horton the “*intellectual ‘fast food’ easily digested and passed from hand to hand*”(1989:281). Thus, we are confronted to new values gained by literary reading, as they were a productive force, a privatised ownership, and something viable. In the light of reader response, the literary work becomes immediately able to generate response in the audience it addresses, and thus again the individuality of the response seems to find no room in this shared stock of potential meanings that one can compare and measure according to the valued readings of a peer reader, the teacher then.

Admittedly, inside the classroom, private readings are monitored by classroom discussion and by the teachers’ evaluation of the students’ interpretation of the work or of the students’ participation. Added to the ‘cultural capital’ notion of literature as advanced by Horton, we can but confirm Shafer’s view about interpretation of the literary text as emerging from “*the personal and political currents of the setting in which it is read*.”(1997:66) From this view of things, it could be advanced that the limitations of reader response are seen in its aim toward the standardization of acceptable meanings in literature, not because these meanings are proper

to the work, but because the works are approached in the institutionalised atmosphere of the school environment.

In his critical comments as presented in his essay “Is there a text in this class?”, Fish argues in favour of the view that meanings exist in “institutional nesting” (Fish, 1986: 627). Put another way, Fish reinforces his idea of the necessity of having a shared basis of agreement responsible in guiding interpretation or at least deciding among the different interpretations.

Once more we are but reminded of the crucial role the institution plays to manipulate the theory according to its needs and requirements. Professionalism is again responsible for this decline since instead of calling attention to the necessity to become more self-consciously professional, it simply perpetuates the same mistakes,

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. (in Ceia, 2001:8)

Put differently, 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. It is true that teachers of literature tend to support their subjectivity or the subjectivity of their readers, yet they seem to forget that literary reading should start first by criticism of these individual readings rather than imposing a dominant viewpoint that does not permit discussion or questioning. Metaphorically, Ceia compares literary criticism to a song that everyone can sing and as such denies the existence of literary criticism. (2001: 9)

Most amazingly is the role students of literature have in shaping the same image of professionalism. I have been blaming the institution and the teacher as first responsible for altering what should be actually meant by professionalism in literature, while I have not considered the unconscious contribution of the student of literature as well. Most of the young students of literature of today’s university appear incompatible with the idea of shaping a critical thinking. A teacher who asks his student to fulfil a philosophical exercise amenable to develop in them a critical thinking is not appreciated and even considered as alien. I don’t know whether these are the demands of an age, but I see that even these students, who prepare themselves to become future teachers of literature, ask to be formed as to master the methodology and the appropriate mode of teaching. They do

not want to bother themselves with a reconsideration of terms, principles and worst of all theories. Not surprisingly, professionalism for them means to hand out to their future students what, in fact, has been hand out to them by their teachers.

3. The Canon

In this frame, the canons' role may complicate things further. Literary canons are widely read, respected, included in university syllabuses and thought as invincible. They are the ones which dominate the history of literature and enjoy power over the new texts which have not become canons yet. However, it goes without saying that comparing one text to another is nonsensical, as there is no acknowledged standard to measure art. One cannot say Austen's novel is better than Woolf's novel or vice versa. Yet, it actually happens, consciously or deliberately, we don't know! For instance, Shakespeare is never omitted from any syllabus of English studies, as if Shakespeare may convey universal truths throughout ages and nations and even among different cultures! And most surprisingly, canons of the same kinds and for the same reasons are included in syllabuses despite their inaccessibility for readers of today, who consider them as obsolete in their use of language, among other oddities. In fact, while assumed that language has become "modern" only recently, reading metaphysical poetry, for instance, is hardly understood by the today reader. Bakhtin explains:

Canonization is a process towards which all literary genres have a tendency, in which temporary norms and conventions become hardened into universal ones so that evaluations too are considered to reflect universal rather than culture-or time-bound values. (in Shaifur, 2008:2)

These sorts of canons do not exist in English literature only, but they are common to other literatures in other languages around the world. This leads us to wonder whether such representations of texts are built around the literary qualities inherent to the text or other factors far from the literary academy⁷. Most strikingly, is that even readers, whatever their literary background, prefer to carry on dealing with canonical texts because the latter have gained the fame and prestige of the "people-in-the-culture," Shavit advances the following:

The dominant institution gains the mandate, which has nothing what-so-ever to do with 'poetic justice' nor with the question of the value of the texts....A text gains a high status not because it is

valuable, but becausesomeone has the political-cultural power to grant the text the status they believe it deserves. (p.233)

This, in turn represents a danger, in that, texts which are qualified as canonical are the result of theorists and critics' views, and even other non-professional practitioners, at a particular moment of time and in a particular place. The canonisation process appears, then, to be the repository of many fields but literature, leading once more to a lack of, I would venture, literary innocence.

Conclusion

The discussion so far has attempted to show that in spite of making of the individual reader her central focus, reader response theory has suffered from external factors that prevented its suitable implementation. The shadow of professionalism succeeded to spoil the magic of literary appreciation and that was achieved at the expense of the emergence of dominant social groups acting as models of leadership. The so-called professional teacher of literature has failed to fulfil his mission because impeded by his own interests and also because of his struggle to maintain the survival of *timeless* texts in unfitting contexts most of the time. Students, on the other hand, did not contribute to promote a positive change. Both agents of education embarked upon a professional adventure grounded in mere arbitrariness.

Notes

1. "*it is impossible to teach or learn literature: what one teaches or learns is criticism.*" Northrop Frye, (in Miall,1996:463)
2. Carlos Ceia has made analogous findings about the teaching of literature in his country Portugal and concluded that professionalism in literary studies is chiefly responsible of the failure of the teaching of literature.
3. As my discussion has to do with readers of literature at university level, I do not see the necessity to discuss the kind of professionalism that might exist at the primary and secondary level, which in fact is not to be dismissed, since it contributes to the shaping of professional teachers at university level.
4. At this point of the discussion I do not dissociate the teaching of native literature from non native one.
5. For instance, by 1950, the American New Criticism trend dominated the teaching of literature at university. Literary

criticism, then, was indebted to the New Critics since their reputation had 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.

6. The idea has been promoted by G.C.Spivak, see (Martin, 1997)
7. See Foucault's notion of 'power'

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