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**WHITHER THEORY?  
OÙ VA LA THÉORIE ?**



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# Literariness, Consensus, or "Something Else"?

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## 1. The Specificity of Literature

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One of my premises is that the recognition of the specificity of the literary experience is not only an interesting epistemic issue, but also a political necessity today, since current global liberalism is promoting vocational and purely professional goals, even in higher education at university level. This global political choice is clearly suspicious of the philosophical, aesthetic, and ethical potential of literature, and threatens its cultural relevance by suggesting that it is either a self-referential exercise for the very few, or an escapist pastime for most people. Far from advocating a narrow (i.e. purely instrumental) or élitist view, I propose to see literature as a specific discourse, among the many available in each and every culture, and I wish to foreground some of its "special effects", which seem to me to be related to the epistemic import of formal elements, but also to literature's social "status", in most cultures, at least up to the present time.

"Literariness" and "The Canon" seem to be unavoidable issues when beginning to discuss the specificity of literature. By introducing the concept of *Literaturnost*, i.e., of literariness, classical Russian formalism explains why and how literature is a "special" discourse, set apart from others, and yet is in relation with them (folklore, history,

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science, etc.). However, formalism downplays (I do not believe it entirely ignores), some relevant dimensions of literature in libidinal and political terms. Cultural Studies certainly highlight the libidinal and political dimensions of literature, but entirely assimilate it to any other of the many discourses and aspects of culture. This interpretative perspective does not (want to) sufficiently recognize or valorize literary specificity. Antoine Compagnon (1999: 46) has even suggested that Cultural Studies have delegitimized literary studies, by focusing on cultural practices in general.

While “literariness” focuses primarily on the metalinguistic dimension of literature in order to determine what “the literary” is, the recent issue of “The Canon” moves in another direction, i.e. in the direction of consensus. However, both the mutability of the canon, and the degree of abstraction implicit in “literariness”, seem to indicate that literature cannot be fully defined by either one of these critical perspectives. In fact, literature is a dynamic universe, epistemologically and historically more complex and varied than any mapping of linguistic devices or genres can be, and also more complex and varied than any inventory of “literary” works, no matter how representative or authoritative such an inventory may be, *pace* Harold Bloom (1994).

This is where the “something else” of my title enters into my discussion. I believe that in any critical practice, theories (the plural is a must) and literature, mutually provide their own “dialogical” definitions. Each theory, in a certain sense, “creates” its own literature, but no theory can saturate the meaning of literature. On the other hand literature has promoted the existence of various “theories”, which found their *raison d'être* in the complexity of literary discourse. Freud would agree: he recognized and praised the knowledge of the poets, and even attributed to them the invention of the unconscious. Shoshanna Felman (1977 and 1987) has suggested that literature is the unconscious of psychoanalysis. Incidentally, let me add that the complexity of literary discourse, and its “insaturability” are responsible for the pleasure literature gives its different readers, and for the fact that its appeal crosses chronological, spatial, and even cultural boundaries. The fact that the border between literature and theory has

become fuzzy is one more evidence of their mutual implication in a variety of ways.

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## **2. Literariness and The Canon**

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Vladimir Alexandrov has recently pointed out that the canon debate reflects a widespread “non essentialist” persuasion, expressed, among others, in the works of E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Terry Eagleton, and Stanley Fish :

*E.D. Hirsch, Jr. claims it is “a mistake to assume that poetry is a special substance whose essential attributes can be found throughout all those texts that we call poetry. These essential attributes have never been (and never will be) defined in a way that compels general acceptance”; [...]. Similarly, Terry Eagleton insists that “there is no ‘essence’ of literature whatsoever”, and that “literature” is “constituted” by “value-judgments” that are “historically variable” and that “have a close relation to social ideologies”. And Stanley Fish makes a related argument: “It is not that the presence of poetic qualities compels a certain kind of attention but that the paying of a certain kind of attention results in the emergence of poetic qualities.” (Alexandrov 2003: 42)*

Several theorists today undoubtedly perceive literature as a matter of social consensus, rather than as a matter of certain formal attributes. Maria Carmela Coco Davani was already debating the issue in these terms in 1990 :

*Literature is not considered literature outside certain aesthetic, stylistic and social conventions. Conventions “authorize” certain types of textual production, they provide the indispensable support to the “recognition” of a certain text as literature. Genres effectively embody such conventions, but they change [...]. Conventions are established and/or appropriated by writers and schools, but they are accepted, by readers, critics, and publishers. (Coco Davani 1990: 23 translation my own).*

If we agree that literature is what is historically and locally recognized as such (because in an non-essentialist perspective we have

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no final or universally acceptable parameters to pronounce a text “literature”), we should accept the fact that what is excluded from the canon is not literature (for the moment, I am obviously thinking of the canon as the expression of consensus). However, we also know that what is excluded today may be included tomorrow, and *viceversa*; and that what is included in the canon by a specific cultural community could be synchronically excluded by another (this is, of course, a crucial aspect of the ongoing discussion on the shortcomings of a eurocentric, bourgeois, male canon).

On the other hand, if we do not wish to ignore the consensus of any reading community, we have to face the possibility of expanding the canon *ad libitum*, a hermeneutical move which ultimately implies the dissolution of the object in its specificity ( i.e., anything can be “art” or “literature”).

Let me take Coco Davani’s argument one step further: if we perceive conventions as the “rules of the literary game”, whether established or appropriated by critics, writers, and readers, we must conclude that failing to recognize conventions, involves changing or quitting the game itself. In other words, with no such conventions, we would not be able to recognize whether a text is a newspaper article, a diagnosis, a piece of propaganda, a business letter, a legal report, or even any of the above within a novel, rather than in the “real” world. We would also have some problems in determining if a text is a satire, a sermon, or a parody.

In short, a totally “non-essentialist” view of literature would not be of much use, but – at the same time – a totally essentialist one would be questionable.

Russian Formalists have underlined the uniquely self-referential dimension of literature, and have identified “literariness”, as a quality that is proper to the literary text, and that enables us to distinguish it from “ordinary communication”. In this sense, they have insisted on the role of specific “poetic devices”. However, such devices are also present in ordinary communication, and hence a purely linguistic and rhetorical definition of literature is bound to be fraught with contradictions. I propose therefore to seek the specificity of literature at other levels: for example in the degree and use of “poetic devices”, and

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above all in their cognitive value, and their effects in different messages and communicative contexts, rather than exclusively in the linguistic and rhetorical features *per se*. In this respect, I believe that, since we are no longer tempted by the illusory scientific claims of structuralism, we are ready for a critical reassessment of the effect of literary defamiliarization (*ostranienie*). Such reassessment would make a difference in our perception of the specificity of literature, while keeping the formal, the ethical, the cognitive, the political, and the libidinal dimension of literature in view.

The concept of defamiliarization is apt to manifest some of its original nuances more clearly, once we recall that Russian Formalists have never ceased to point out that literature disrupts stock responses, and thus provides a fresh point of view on the extra-literary world. This means coming to perceive literary defamiliarization in terms of epistemic energy, more than just as a matter of formal artifacts and “technical” manipulation (its reductive and often prevalent definition in Western readings). The epistemic potential of poetic devices becomes evident, for instance, once we become aware of the correlation of rhetorical figures and psychic mechanisms (metaphor and condensation, litotes and negation, metonymy and displacement or splitting can be just mentioned here as cursory examples). The intense, and sometimes conflicted, but certainly fruitful relationship of semiotics with psychoanalysis, after Jacques Lacan and Julia Kristeva, is there to show the potential of (and still invite) the mutual exploration of language, literature and the psyche.

The question of the autonomy of the literary text, which for some critics was held to be a central feature of “literariness”, seems to take on new meanings if we relate it to a renewed and less naïve sense of literary referentiality and of mimetic fantasy. The debate over literary autonomy *versus* heteronomy saw Marxist critics bitterly confronting Structuralists for much of the Sixties and Seventies. This debate now seems less oppositional than it seemed then, for various reasons, some of which will become clear in the following pages, the main one being the fact that both Marxist Theory and Structuralism have disrupted and renewed their traditional paradigms. For the moment, let’s consider that both Michail Bakhtin and Vladimir Propp were already seriously

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questioning the absolute autonomy of the literary text in the 1920s, by relating the “artistic series” to “non-artistic phenomena” (Lucid 1977:2), but this aspect was not fully recognized, and even less voiced by many of the Western Structuralists and Formalists.

As I have said, *literaturnost* speaks of literature as a discourse endowed with only a certain degree of autonomy from the plane of referentiality, and primarily marked by what Roman Jakobson (1963, 1990) has called “the metalinguistic function”. The Tartu Conference of 1970, probably the official date of birth of what still goes under the name of “Semiotics of Culture”, was also significantly devoted to the relations of sign systems to external realities, and to the functional correlations of different sign systems. It forcefully called attention to the contextual and pragmatic elements of literary discourse and mimetic representation.

“Semiotics of Culture”, undoubtedly a radically different critical project from the Structuralism to which it has hastily and inaccurately been assimilated for years, has indeed largely contributed, and is still contributing, to a widespread critical awareness of ideology, while remaining cognizant of the discursive features and formal elements of literature. “Center” and “periphery” are the spatial metaphors that Yuri M. Lotman (1990) uses in order to explore cultural communication (including literature). These metaphors and their relationship, seem to me to correspond, to some extent, at least, to what Cultural Studies, after Antonio Gramsci, call “dominant” and “subaltern” ideologies. Both Semiotics of Culture, and Cultural Studies, but obviously also Marxist Criticism, especially after Althusser’s studies since 1970 and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1992), demonstrate that literature is not separable from interest and ideology, and that it can either endorse or challenge both of them. It follows that, rather than focusing on formal elements in order to promote a politically “aseptic” view of literature, as was the case with most New Critics, we can focus on these elements in order to detect and even deconstruct the ideology of literary texts, while acknowledging some of the epistemic differences between literary texts and those of the human sciences (economics, sociology, psychology etc.).

New Critical practice and its a-political emphasis on “the poem itself” has unduly reduced the space of sociological, “extra-literary”

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meanings for a number of years. However, since the Seventies, a major shift has been taking place in American Universities, and the political dimension has energetically come forward, with the rise of Feminist and Afro-American Studies, New Historicism, and Reader-Response Theory. Eventually, these “critical theories” made a strong and enduring impact on the European scene, especially in English studies. The traditional humanistic curriculum has indeed been found insufficiently representative in a multicultural world, and the debate on the formation and significance of the canon has been pervasive. Some of the leading American contributions to this heated discussion are familiar. Among the many, let me just recall, in chronological order, the works of Gerald Graff (1987), Paul Lauter (1991), Stephen Greenblatt and Giles Gunn (1992), Charles Altieri (1994), Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1994), John Alberti’s (1995).

These authors deal with the canon along three major lines, in terms of:

- writers who are either ignored, or marginalized, but should be taught in schools;
- writers who stand up to the “test of time”;
- contemporary writers who have high visibility.

William J. Savage, Jr. (1995) sums up the identification of several “canons”:

1. the “potential”, which corresponds to whatever can be defined as literature.
2. the “accessible”, which corresponds to whatever is available to readers in a given place at a given time.
3. the “selective”, which corresponds to specific reading lists or anthologies.
4. the “critical” canon, i.e., the one referring to works that have been extensively discussed by critics.
5. the “official” canon, which is a combination of the accessible, selective and critical canons.
6. the “personal”, which is the canon of a given individual.



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Taxonomies of this kind were abundant in the Eighties and Nineties, but their critical usefulness seems secondary to me, because different questions come to mind instead, as more pressing issues today. For example, the following questions: “To what extent, if any, is the canon shaped by market imperatives? To what extent by ethical and political concerns? What role do materialities of production, consumption, and distribution play in creating the very meaning(s) of literature, and in shaping consensus in contemporary reading communities? What factors and strategies determine the status of literary texts?”.

The meaning of literature and the value attributed to it are socio-historical variables. Political contexts and the institutions responsible for literature are closely “implicated” with one another, and this is the ground on which any academic dispute over the canon must self-consciously take place, bearing in mind that the canon is just one of the aspects of the more complex question concerning the relationship between literature and society.

Part of my argument is that the canon as consensus does not clearly define what literature is, but it implies and shows ideological assumptions and pedagogical choices in literary studies, and in society at large. Both its value and limit are ethical and political. The political agenda of the extended canon has promoted the expression of social minorities and marginal identities, and its strength resides in having made representation and/as voice a crucial literary issue.

To this effect, Ronald Shusterman (2002) has argued that the question of value is paramount in shaping any canon. He recalls the controversy on “the problem of belief” between T.S. Eliot *versus* I.A. Richards, and suggests that literary works probably cannot be judged and appreciated without any consideration for the ideas they convey and defend. This was, of course the “classical” parameter for the definition of the first famous canon, i.e. the Biblical canon of Christianity, in the fourth century A.D. Today this position, i.e. the idea that selection depends on some kind of orthodoxy, which is obviously different for different communities, implies the possibility of different canons for different social groups, but also recalls Pierre Bourdieu’s (1992) idea of “canonicity” as the effect of historically and politically

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specific conflicts. Bourdieu emphasizes the role of interest and power in canon inclusion and exclusion.

Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2003) views the dynamic relationship of inclusion *versus* exclusion in the canon as an ideological “fight” that academics *in primis* are called to enter (it is worth noticing how often war metaphors recur in the canon debate). Lecercle posits a distinction between a “*canon contingent*”, (i.e., the one produced at a specific historical moment by academics, publishers and teachers), and a “*canon spirituel*” (a long lasting canon, created by the writers who have contributed to the very existence of any language and its literature). In this perspective, permanent canonization seems to depend not so much on the ideology of the works, as on their literary value which, after Marx, Lecercle links directly to aesthetic pleasure, and to the fact that some works are capable of being enjoyed in historical contexts far removed from those of their original production.

While dealing with the canon and “literary greatness” critics mostly seem to be debating two options: 1) the cultural prestige actually bestowed upon a text by various socio-cultural forces *versus* 2) the value of intrinsic textual features that give aesthetic pleasure in historically different situations. I do not believe that either of these options necessarily excludes the other. In fact, I have argued that:

*“great” works of literature differ from lesser works because they resist being saturated even by the most intelligent and sophisticated interpretations, while endlessly invoking and provoking them (see, for instance Hamlet or Edgar Allan Poe’s Purloined Letter). Lesser works are easily and soon dismissed. The amount of critical or public attention conferred upon a certain work may certainly increase, or decrease its prestige, and may influence, or sometimes even determine, our perception of the “value” of a novel or film, but it does not fully coincide with it. Do you remember Love Story? Who is still buying/reading it? [...] What would you discuss about it besides its documentary value in a seminar on The Seventies, or its exemplary nature in a Seminar on The Popular Novel? You can certainly enjoy and discuss Hamlet far beyond Jacobean Politics or its exemplary nature in a Seminar on Revenge Tragedy. (Locatelli 2003)*

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In other words, the literature which is able to sustain and revive critical perusal, and to absorb and delight a high number of readers, is more seductive, and ultimately has greater cultural prestige than the literature which fails to do so. In this sense I wish to emphasize the role of culturally specific reader-response in both canon formation and in the creation of literary meanings. (It goes without saying that reception is always produced in specific social climates, rather than in a vacuum). Marcello Pagnini (1987) has discussed literature as a message *in absentia*, and he has suggested that, precisely because of this pragmatic feature, literature can be read and re-read in countless culturally different contexts. I believe that re-contextualization applies to literature in general, and not just to the “great works”. Enjoyment and prestige, however, are not the same for all texts, and here is where I agree with Lecercle’s argument. “Great” literature, to borrow Ezra Pound’s expression, is indeed “the news that stays new”. Speaking of re-contextualization, I would like to add that how we read, even the most canonical author, is just as important as what we read, because some, but not all, ways of reading can be in line with the highest political and ethical aims of canon revision and expansion. I believe that if we just expand the canon, but ignore the theoretical aspects of reading that make reading a perpetual questioning, a de-familiarizing enjoyment, and indeed a critical activity, we risk losing sight of the many ways in which literature “makes sense” to different readers, and we also risk reducing literature to a one-sided discourse, politically correct at best, but doctrinaire. More importantly, by focusing only on thematic concerns, and perhaps on a single theme (for example, marginal identities), we risk a reductive definition of both literature and subjectivity.

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### **3. Literature as "more than one thing"**

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It is now time to return to the “something else” of my title and, somehow provocatively, to one of the most canonical writers in English Literature: Shakespeare. A great deal of time and energy have been devoted to demonstrating that Shakespeare, whoever or whatever he was, was misogynous, and that he supported tyrants; equal time and

energy have been spent showing that he problematized patriarchy and undermined authority. This gives Shakespearean drama a special flavor, i.e. the impression that his plays “give with one hand what they take away with the other.” In my readings of *The Taming of the Shrew*, *Julius Caesar*, and *The Merchant of Venice* (Locatelli 1989, 1999) I have called this special flavor “double enunciation”, and I believe it is one of the most interesting features of literature, when compared to the discourses of hard sciences, and even human sciences.

Very briefly, let us ask: “Is Cordelia’s unresponsive shrinking from her father’s ‘incestuous’ and senile claims more ‘unnatural’ than his expectations?” Is Hippolyta’s deceit in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* an immoral response to the behavior of someone who “woo’d her with the sword” and “won her love doing her injuries”? A similar situation is magnified, of course, for Lady Anne in *Richard III*: can her protestations of love for the murderous king be true? Jessica creates a hermeneutical “double bind” for the critical reader-spectator; significantly, her virtues are faults in Shylock’s eyes. Many critics have “solved” the Shakespearean dilemmas simply by not paying sufficient attention to the complexity of dramatic enunciation, which, while making its appeal to culturally mainstream responses, was also undermining them, and forcing readers to ask questions on ethics and character that may have been both disturbing and liberating.

Shakespeare’s mastery of rhetoric, far from being a mere formal device, has relevant cognitive and ethical implications in the plays. Rhetoric has taken Shakespeare far beyond “plain talk” (a favorite mode of speech among doctrinaires), and beyond the reductive logic of either/or. This is yet another one of literature’s unique and valuable contributions to human knowledge, together with the power of creating empathy (Nussbaum 1995), while, I would add, not necessarily reducing empathy to total identification with (an)other. Literature gives a sense of other, and a sense of self (as other), at the same time.

The controversy over just about any issue, of race, gender, religion, and politics found in the Shakespearean canon can, and hopefully will, continue, because the essence of the literary is to promote debate, while the essence of the doctrinaire is to kill it. Despite its hyper-canoncity, this seems one of the main reasons for including

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Shakespeare in academic curricula, together with non-canonical marginal works, formula fiction, popular novels that “*le canon contingent*” is proposing to our critical and pedagogical attention. In a controversial world like ours, where intercultural exchange must be a priority, we can draw from the centuries-long literary tradition built on the practice of arguing *in utramque partem*, in order to understand positions different from our own. On the other hand, some of the literature that the expanded canon urges us to include in our curricula is so immediately *à thèse*, and so obviously well-meaning that it sounds too easy and even doctrinaire.

I believe that many popular novels, highly marketable and often, but not always, politically correct, remain at the gates of the literature of *utramque partem*. They seem, instead, to belong to a literature of “gratifying predictability”, and to neglect the literature of “complexity” (Barthes’ distinction between *texts lisibles* and *texts scriptibles* here comes to mind). Readers of predictable literature are gratified: they expect and recognize their own political thesis (T.S. Eliot here “wins” over I.A. Richards); some of them even detect the *clichés* and all the devices of fiction: they feel intelligent, are therefore rewarded, but they are not challenged. A question is then inevitable: is the subject who enjoys and produces predictable literature a predictable subject? Perhaps, not surprisingly, the patented, post-human subject is the most predictable we have seen so far. Marketable, and therefore manageable, it is a subject *à la carte*. Finance imperatives are the post-human conscious and unconscious. Procedures and closely defined protocols, more than imaginative associations of ideas, are determining whole ways of thinking and behaving, from intercultural social research to medical therapy. Literature is still “holding the mirror up to nature” after all.

Precisely because of this reductive ambivalence, popular novels should be discussed by academics at university level, in order to question cultural responses. Literature is a discourse which resists predictable procedures, and even when it reproduces them, it invites a critique, rather than their implementation. The imaginative dimension of literature takes us, as I have said, beyond the reductive logic of either/or. Literature is plurivocal and dialogical (Bakhtin 1981), and

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therefore precious in its refusal of cognitive dichotomies. This is one of its recently recognized charms, over traditional philosophy.

Far from accepting the notion that literature is to be defended today because it can be ancillary to the social sciences, I believe that the specificity of literature must be defended because literature enables us to represent and/or signify what other discourses cannot. The literary subject always signals complex con-figurations and is ready for new ones, within and beyond single and specific interpellations.

I have suggested that the critical gaze “creates” its own object of study, it follows that literature as the object of various critical disciplines is a necessarily variable object. Post-kantian aesthetics, formalism, (post)-marxism, semiotics, cultural studies, feminism, psychoanalysis, and deconstruction, each have their own literature, but none of them, I believe, can claim to appropriate literature in full. Literature always holds “something else”. If we grant that literature is the object of a virtually interminable number of critical theories, we must conclude that literature is also an “indeterminable object”. “In(de)terminable” (and this is, again, the “something else” of my title) does not, however, mean undefinable; on the contrary, it seems to mean “polymorphic” in a strict etymological sense, and, interminably, in many others.

**LOCATELLI, Angela**  
**Università degli Studi di Bergamo**

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