Literary Studies in the 21st Century:
The recent past, the crisis and the next future

> More so than any other subject, literature lends itself to powerful teaching.
>
> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Politics, Professionalism, and the Pleasure of Reading" (2005)

The longer version of this paper begins by referring to two small books that came out not so long ago, one by Terry Eagleton (*How to Read a Poem*, 2006) and the other by Tzvetan Todorov (*La Littérature en péril*, 2007), which, despite starting from diametrically opposed premises, converge towards similar conclusions: both call for the need to re-establish a balance between so-called formal approaches to the literary text and contextually informed readings. I shall not spend time talking about them here, but shall instead focus upon what is the common denominator that has brought us together here today: the idea of the crisis.

Positions such as those of Eagleton and Todorov, adopted by theoreticians who, in the second half of the 20th century, were leading figures in the conflicts that raged within the field of literary studies and almost compromised the respective disciplinary project, seemed to me to be an elucidatory starting point for drawing attention to something that, throughout this last century, characterised the university scene with regard to the study of literature: the successive adoption of antagonistic and frequently ferociously held positions, with consequences for the very re-ordering of the institutional framework and the repositioning of the place of literary studies. This subject has been referred to by those who reflect upon the university from the point of view of the discipline of literary studies as the "crisis" of literature, a "critical" situation that, by having been with us for so long, has become, in the words of one scholar, "a way of life"[1].

[1] The expression is used by G. G. Harpham, in his article "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'", where, in generalising the critical situation to the area of the Humanities, he states: "Once considered an affliction, crisis [in the Humanities] has become a way of life.". G. G. Harpham, "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'", *New Literary History*, vol. 36, No. 1, 2005, pp. 21-36, consulted at: http://muse.jhu.edu/demo/new_literary_history/v036/36.1harpham01.html (accessed on 22 August, 2006).

Why crisis?[2] Precisely because the successive theoretical and critical orientations that we witnessed throughout the last century were accompanied, in many cases, by confrontations that marked academic life in the field of the Humanities, particularly in the last few decades, and which are not unrelated to the different positions adopted and the disciplinary and curricular configurations that have appeared in the meantime. Amongst other consequences, these conflicts led the study of literature into a crisis situation[3], at the same time as its practitioners became dispersed, aligning with certain theoretical and ideological positions and/or at a range of different institutional addresses[4].

The "battles" waged over the canon[5] and the "culture wars"[6], as they have become known, are expressions that clearly show to what extent the academic world has become an arena for agonizing combats, frequently fought in the name of a political cause. However painful and tiring they may have been for those involved, the results seem to me, in many cases, to be positive: the revision of the canon (in the sense of its including authors who had been ignored or marginalised for reasons of gender, sexuality or race, legitimising previously undervalued literary forms such as autobiography[7] and reconsidering the so-called "popular culture") and the historicising impetus[8] have, to a certain extent, become salutary for correcting predominantly "formalist"[9] tendencies in

[2] On the idea of the crisis in literary studies, see, for example: Robert Scholes, *The Rise and Fall of English: Reconstructing English as a Discipline*, New Haven, Yale UP, 1998; Hillis Miller, "Literary Studies Among the Ruins", *Diacritics*, vol. 31, No. 3, Autumn, 2001, pp. 57-66; and the already quoted Harpham, "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'", *op. cit.*, amongst others.

[3] Much of my following line of argument formed part of the report that I presented under the scope of my examination for admittance to the title of "Professora Agregada", in December, 2006. As this report has not yet been published, I considered this an opportune moment to disseminate and discuss its subject-matter, with some minor adjustments and updates.

[4] Many of those engaged in literary studies have, in the last few decades, been the instigators of migratory movements into the fields of Literary Theory, Comparative Studies, Artistic Studies, Translation Studies and even Media Studies.

[5] *The Great Canon Controversy: The Battle of the Books in Higher Education*, William Casement (New Brunswick, NJ, Transaction Publishers, 1996) is the significant title of one of the works dealing with the controversy about, and opposition to, the traditional canonical formations.

[6] This was the name given to certain contradictory positions in the academic world, arising from the publication of Gerald Graff's *Beyond the Culture Wars: How Teaching the Conflicts Can Revitalize American Education*, New York, W. W. Norton, 1992.

[7] Cf. Marianne DeKoven, "The Literary as Activity in Postmodernity", Elizabeth Beaumont Bissell (ed.) *The Question of Literature: The Place of the Literary in Contemporary Theory*, Angelaki Humanities, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002, pp. 105-125, 109.

[8] Embodied in Frederic Jameson's famous exhortation: "Always historicise!". Cf. Jameson, *Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Symbolic Act*, Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 1981.

[9] I use this term to describe those approaches to the literary text that have laid emphasis on its linguistic and stylistic characteristics, neglecting considerations of a contextual nature, as was predominantly the case in the first half of the 20th century.

the approach to literary works and for reintroducing an ethical and political dimension that has its own particular pertinence, provided that it is appropriately implemented.

In practice, however, as is so often the case in movements of a reactive nature and as Terry Eagleton observes in his book, what was to be noted was a completely opposite trend: a reduction of the texts to a study of their context and a tendency to forget or obliterate their "formal" dimension. The prevalence of a historicist orientation, evident in such approaches as "new historicism", "cultural studies", postcolonial studies, women's and gender studies, for example, resulted in a focus on "contentist" readings, with the literary text tending to be interpreted in the light of the themes that were dealt with in it, the representation of identity groups (and/or minority groups, such as colonised peoples, women and homosexuals) and the relationship between these subjects and contextual historical phenomena, completely, or almost completely, obscuring the linguistic and formal aspects – what was/is read is the message, with scant attention being paid to its structure and texture as language, ignoring the fact that such factors shape and convey it, determining its repercussions on its recipient[10].

Purely internal and ahistorical readings, characteristic of the first half of the 20th century, such as those practised, for example, by the New Criticism, which closed the text in on itself, even making it absolute, were, in this context, naturally viewed with suspicion, rejected and denounced as an escape from or a concealment of determinations of a political and/or ideological nature. Literary studies, as understood by this form of criticism, were to find themselves definitively reformulated by these new emphases, which tended to give greater value to the realities represented in the works and that were susceptible to being considered as extra-literary causes.

The problem with some of these recent practices has to do with the somewhat naive or hasty way in which certain assumptions were projected into literary texts, and the way in which greater importance was given to the act of literary representation, frequently regarded as a process of direct and transparent transposition, as if such an act could be reduced to the dimension of mechanical reproduction, frequently forgetting the fracture or refraction between the real object and the represented object[11]. This

[10] It is this type of attitude that Eagleton's text seeks to respond to, in a gesture that allegedly attempts to redress the balance.

[11] On the complexity of the concept of representation, see W. J. T. Mitchell, "Representation", in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (eds.), *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1990, pp. 11-22, in particular, p. 21. See also Jean Bessière, "Literatura e Representação", in Marc Angenot *et alii* (eds.), *Teoria Literária*, translated by Ana Luísa Faria and Miguel Serras Pereira, Lisbon, Publicações Dom Quixote, 1995, pp. 377-396. More recently, see the issue

elimination of the processes of codification inherent in the representation gives rise to discursive practices that tend to ignore the text in its significant materiality, promote a deterministic understanding of it and treat it just like any other type of discourse. Furthermore, as Pierre Bourdieu stresses, they ignore the reality of the autonomous space for the production of the symbolic goods that literary works are, a relational space in which each agent and each institution has to be considered in terms of their objective relationship with all the others[12].

Demonstrations of dissatisfaction have made themselves heard in relation to what has become known as the "cultural turn" and, at least in terms of their time frame, have coincided with the need to rethink the university itself[13]. I believe that we find ourselves at a decisive moment of institutional and epistemological questioning and that we are still in time to rethink the disciplines that are taught and their organisation. Rethinking literature and its teaching, in the present-day context, may help us to rethink the university itself. This is what I shall now attempt to do.

At the beginning of the 21st century, literary studies, as an area of knowledge, is seen as a field in which various disciplines intersect and one which is still marked by heterogeneous, and sometimes conflicting, approaches and interests, ranging from the already-mentioned "cultural studies" to deconstruction, from women's and gender studies to postcolonial studies, and from ecocriticism to ethical criticism, to mention but a few[14]. Such a proliferation and pluralism have been seen by many, as I have already said, as configuring a "crisis" situation, although the explanation of what is understood by the term crisis is not always consensual and often points to different interpretations

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of *Symbolism: An International Annual of Critical Aesthetics* 6, (Autumn/Winter, 2006), specially dedicated to the theme of "Representation".

[12] Cf. Bourdieu, *Razões práticas: Sobre a teoria da acção*, translated by Miguel Serras Pereira, Oeiras, Celta Editora, 1997, p. 42, for example.

[13] See the positions adopted by Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Politics, Professionalism, and the Pleasures of Reading", *Daedalus*, vol. 134, No. 3, 2005, pp. 68-75 (available online at: http://www.amacad.org/publications/summer2005/Harpham.pdf − accessed on 15 August 2006) or, by the same author, "Returning to Philology: The Past and Future of Literary Study", in Koen Hilberdink (ed.), *New Prospects in Literary Research*, Amsterdam, Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005, pp. 9-26 (also available online at: http://www.knaw.nl/publicaties/pdf/20051060.pdf − accessed on 15 August 2006). Also worth consulting are the special issue of the periodical *Poetics Today*, vol. 24, No. 4, Winter, 2003, entitled "Between Text and Theory; or the Reflective Turn", particularly the introductory article by James A. Knapp and Jeffrey Pence (pp. 641-671), and the text by Krzysztof Ziarek and Seamus Deane, "Introduction", Ziarek and Deane (eds.), *Future Crossings: Literature between Philosophy and Cultural Studies*, Evanston, IL, Northwestern University Press, 2000, pp. 1-23, amongst others.

[14] Cf. Ziarek 1. For a more pessimistic view upon the subject, see also Louis Menand on what he terms "postdisciplinarity". Louis Menand's essay, "The Marketplace of Ideas", *American Council of Learned Societies Occasional Paper*, No. 49, 2001, http://acls.org/op49.htm, is commented upon by Harpham in "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'", *op. cit.*

and diagnoses of what is in fact in question. Some authors refer to the crisis in literary studies as a crisis affecting this specific disciplinary field[15]; others, going beyond the walls of academia, anticipate the end of literature as it has been understood since the mid-18th century[16]; while yet others restrict the problem to the question of defining the canon[17].

In any case, even though the questions implied by the various understandings of the crisis are complex by nature, they all point towards precariousness, uncertainty and the problematic status of the discipline within the university environment. As Peggy Kamuf recognised, in 2002:

> In the last decade or so […] it appears that the discipline of literary studies has begun to negotiate a transition or a displacement into the almost unlimited domain of cultural studies, media studies, communications, and so forth. This development may well indicate that a growing number of practitioners in this domain has renounced the project of taking literature seriously, at least under that name. In any case, it signals some displacement there that affects literature as the name of something to be taken seriously, in a disciplined manner.[18]

Furthermore, according to Kamuf, this situation is the result of a contradiction or ambiguity that has long existed between the university, with a project that aims towards the acquisition of knowledge, and literature, about which no essential knowledge is possible. The inclusion of the discipline in the divisions of knowledge has always been ambiguous and precarious[19].

On the one hand, institutional conformity required that it should be treated like any other area and that it should assume as its objective to go beyond the amateur literary culture in the sense of methodologically informed, objective knowledge. On the other hand, the need to mark out the discipline from the other curricular areas called for

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[15] See, for example, Timothy Clark, "Literary Force, Institutional Value", in *The Question of Literature*, pp. 91-104, as well as the two articles by Harpham already mentioned: "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'", *op. cit.*, and "Politics, Professionalism, and the Pleasures of Reading", *op. cit.*

[16] Cf. Hillis Miller, "Literary Studies Among the Ruins", *op. cit.*

[17] See Anthony Easthope, *Literary into Cultural Studies*, London and New York, Routledge, 1991; J. Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation*, Chicago and London, The University of Chicago Press, 1993; Peter Widdowson, *Literature*, London and New York, Routledge, 1999; and Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Books and the School of the Ages*, Basingstoke, Macmillan, 1994.

[18] Cf. Kamuf, "'Fiction' and the Experience of the Other", *The Question of Literature*, p. 156.

[19] Cf. Bissell, *ibidem*, p. 157.

the definition and delimitation of the concept of literature and literary value, in order to prevent it slipping into transdisciplinary areas, at the first signs of pressure[20].

It is for this reason that all the debates about the literary canon, the nature of literary interpretation and the importance of tradition, etc., that have enlivened and, in part, undermined the academic world are insoluble if we limit ourselves to the scope of the disciplinary area itself, contrary to what happens when, for example, one discusses the nature of a specific chemical element, within the bounds of chemistry as a discipline. And this happens because, as Timothy Clark recognised, many of the main questions that are raised in literary studies involve other disciplinary fields, such as history, philosophy or sociology, pass through an understanding of the role of the humanities and converge inevitably upon the very idea of the university itself[21].

It is therefore worth resorting, in what will be here necessarily brief and succinct terms, to what we understand to have been the various ideas underlying the academic institutionalisation of literary studies at a university level, availing ourselves, for this purpose, of the framework made available by Bill Readings, in his work, *The University in Ruins*, dating from 1996. According to Readings, two powerful pillars that, for roughly two centuries, sustained the idea of the university were the "university of reason", in keeping with the Kantian model proposed in *The Conflict of the Faculties* (1798), and the "university of culture", emerging from the founding project of the University of Berlin developed by Wilhelm von Humboldt. In the first case, Kant proposed a model for the university based on the autonomy of reason: it was a question of endowing the university with conditions of independence that could transform it into a space in which reason dictated its own laws. Although the university was sovereign in matters of knowledge, it remained subordinated to the power of the State, but the latter, in turn, was under an obligation to protect the former from any interference in its rational project, thereby ensuring that reason would prevail in the public sphere[22]. This emphasis on rational knowledge, in turn, dictated the need to compartmentalise knowledge or areas of knowledge, each of which had its own objectives and methodologies. This gesture of marking out disciplinary boundaries favoured a certain self-absorption in each area and excluded the possibility of self-reflexive considerations.

[20] Cf. Kamuf, *The Division of Literature: Or the University in Deconstruction*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1997, pp. 95-96.
[21] Cf. Bissell, *ibidem*, p. 91. In the exposition that I develop below, I shall adopt a type of argument that closely follows that of Clark in "Literary Force, Institutional Value", *op. cit.*
[22] Cf. Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins*, (1st edition 1996), Cambridge, MA, and London, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 58.

The seriousness of academic work presupposes that there will be a focus on questions that emerge within the particular area of speciality and it does not contemplate the interferences or contaminations that may occur in relation to other adjacent areas. The freedom that is granted to academics in the disciplined exercise of reason is the one that is granted to them by their degree of specialisation in their respective area of study, which, in turn, only their respective peers are in a position to recognise and ratify.

This confinement within disciplinary boundaries enters into conflict with the very porous nature of literary studies, which quintessentially challenges the boundaries between different forms of knowledge. If we accept that literature, as an art of language, consists in the verbal representation of human thought and action according to certain principles of codification, some of which are inherent in its raw material, the literary work may consistently be approached from the point of view of any of the humanistic disciplines – history, philosophy, psychology, linguistics, sociology, aesthetics, etc. It might even be argued that the difficulty is to be found in the attempt to study literature "in itself"[23] and that literary studies will always be a parasite upon other forms of knowledge, requiring the methodological contribution of other disciplines for a definition of its focus, the marking out of the boundaries for its objectives and the selection of criteria and examples[24].

Another phenomenon arising from the idea of the "university of reason" was the professionalisation of academic life that was presupposed by the division of knowledge into separate areas and by the regimentation of specialists that had such profound repercussions on the understanding of and approach to literature. From the outset, this determined the need for the specification of an autonomous object that was capable of establishing a self-contained disciplinary space for itself. It was essential to define the specificity of the object of study, endowing it with its own characteristics that were susceptible of being analysed and described.

This is how one may regard the different ventures that, in the first half of the 20th century, were dedicated to the institutionalisation of literary studies in the

[23] We should remember the warning issued by Jorge de Sena, in his *Dialécticas da Literatura*: "In art as in life, there are no *in themselves*, except as 'working hypotheses'". And he adds: "and this is the principal error of a great deal of criticism that imagines itself to be 'ontological' or 'phenomenological'". Cf. Sena, *Dialécticas da Literatura*, Lisbon, Edições 70, 1973, p. 113.

[24] Cf. Harpham, "Politics...", *op. cit.* Summarising the past and referring to the present, Harpham states: "Over the years, philosophy, linguistics, psychoanalysis, and history have been remarkably effective in providing such support, but the dominant discipline informing literary study today is the weak form of anthropology known as cultural studies, which is, by comparison with these others, theoretically and methodologically undefined" (p. 7 in the online version).

academic world. Underlying them all was a project that could be metonymically suggested by the inaugural gesture of the Russian Formalists in their attempt to isolate literariness – that allegedly distinctive characteristic of literary language that, in this way, was set up as a privileged object of systematic study and attention. Attitudes of this type, which, in the case of the Russian Formalists, and later of the Structuralists, sought to establish a Literary Science, were geared towards finding *in* the literary text its distinctive subject-matter and the almost exclusive basis for its interpretation[25].

The second model of the university explored by Readings, the "university of culture" is ideologically distinct from the first model, although, in practice, they both co-exist together. In necessarily very general terms, it can be said that it was based on the indissociability of teaching and research, and, in more philosophical terms, on the idea that knowledge is not a static set of information, but a cumulative organic process. This organic nature of knowledge in turn justifies a gradual process of learning that is progressively more identified with disciplinary demands. Now the emphasis is placed on an ideal of culture – *Bildung*, as a purpose that defines the role of the university. Rational inquiry becomes associated with the interest in the traditions and ways of life of a nation, in a synthesis in which reason and history are joined together. The university institution is simultaneously regarded as an archive or repository and as an agent that promotes development, at both the individual and the community level.

In precisely similar terms, in the English-speaking world, Cardinal Newman defended the project of the university as a privileged space for gaining a liberal education, as a place for providing the broader training and formation of "the whole person"[26]. At the heart of this conception, and in the very particular case of English and American universities, literatures were to gain central importance, claiming for themselves the right to be regarded as the privileged place for the realisation of the liberal humanist project[27]. This new leading role for literature corresponded to the

[25] I could add to the example of the Russian Formalists that of Stylistics, with its emphasis on the notion of literary language as a deviation from a norm, and that of the New Critics, who created the notion of "verbal icon" (proposed by W. K. Wimsatt). In all of these cases, what is most notable is the aim of finding formulas for distinguishing literary language.

[26] Cf. J. Newman, *The Idea of the University, Defined and Illustrated, in Nine Discourses Delivered to the Catholics of Dublin in Occasional Lectures and Essays Addressed to the Members of the Catholic University*, Martin Svaglic (ed.), New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962.

[27] On the relative disregard for philology at English-speaking universities, in contrast with the prevailing model in continental Europe, see Luísa Leal de Faria, Examination Lesson – "Do 'Conflito das Faculdades' às 'Guerras de Cultura'" (Examination for the Title of Professora Agregada, University of Lisbon, 28 April 2004), pp. 10-11. My thanks to the author, who kindly provided me with the chance to use the typed text of her lesson.

peculiar English version of the German concept of *Bildung*. Understood more as a form of unique knowledge than as an object of knowledge in itself, literature was to be regarded, in spite of this (or precisely because of this) as the quintessential discipline, under the driving force of a man such as F. R. Leavis. Seen as a practice of imaginative writing, mobilising human values that could be opposed to the Benthamite utilitarianism and the imperatives of political economy, national literature(s) (in this particular case, English Literature) was (were) now recentred and understood not so much as a specialised sector within a global project of research at the University, but more as a centre that simultaneously drew together and irradiated the humanising value that crossed through the whole of the disciplinary edifice[28] – a unit of a "supra-disciplinary" nature[29].

Arising from these two conceptions of the university are ways that until quite recently represented the prevailing fashion for understanding "literature" as an object of study[30]. The Kantian ideal of disciplinary autonomy gave rise to the attitude that tends to isolate literature, disconnecting it from contextual links and treating it as "literature", seeking to establish and describe the specificity of its language. From the basic idea of the university as an educational space and a focal point for the irradiation of culture, we inherited a notion, filtered through studies about English literature, that regarded it as the centre of the process of liberal education and that showed itself to be hostile, at least for several decades, to each and every form of theorising.

Neither the demand for a disciplinary autonomy for literature rooted in the alleged specificity of its language, nor its claim for a supra-disciplinary and formative status can today be evoked as non-problematical formulas for the legitimisation of literary studies. The crisis in English studies, for example, such as Readings sees it, is a constituent of a much broader crisis that affects the very concept of the university as a whole. For many of those who work there, the way out would seem to be to claim for their work an anti-institutional dimension (in terms that I shall make explicit later on), which leads us to the latest model proposed by Readings: the "university of excellence". In the words of Luísa Leal de Faria, this is the result of the "erosion of the association

[28] Cf. Leavis, *Education and the University: A Sketch for an English School*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1943, in which he uses the adjective "humane" to distinguish what he calls the "humane tradition" from the "humanist tradition".
[29] The term "supra-disciplinary" is used by Clark to characterise Leavis' model (cf. Bissell, *ibidem*, p. 96).
[30] On these interpretations and their recent bankruptcy, see Bissell, "Introduction", *Questions of Literature*, pp. 1-18, especially pp. 5-10.

between university, culture and nation"[31] that gave rise to a "transnational corporation" guided by a concept – that of excellence – devoid of contents and references, which leads to the purely administrative and bureaucratic functioning of the university, seeking to perpetuate itself at a minimum cost. This new space has internalised an entrepreneurial logic in which, and again I quote Leal de Faria: "cost-benefit analysis, performance indicators, the ranking of universities, the niches of excellence that make them more competitive in a market in which knowledge has become transformed into a commodity, all clearly point to the trend for the University to be transformed into a bureaucratic system and to cease to be, as Althusser said, an Ideological Apparatus of the State."[32]

Regardless of whether we may or may not completely agree with Readings' diagnosis, the truth is that nowadays it has become easy to recognise the predominantly economistic logic that is put into practice worldwide in the governance of higher education institutions, giving rise to well-grounded fears about the effects that its blind application may have, especially in the field of the humanities.

What can the humanistic disciplines and, in particular, literary studies do about this? If we once again resort to Readings' diagnosis in our answer to this question, we shall see how, for him, what is imperative is a revitalisation of our way of thinking, without any illusions as to the possibility of promoting any general agreement. In fact, quite the opposite, for, in his view, it is all a question of disagreement and this presupposes a relativisation or dilution of the very logic of the discipline, making it possible to call into question the compartmentalisation and neutralising professionalism that are characteristic of the "university of excellence". It therefore all boils down to a kind of "responsible anti-professionalist" procedure (in Timothy Clark's words) that would consist of pushing to the limits of its incapacity the specific competence nurtured in a particular discipline, calling for discussion with colleagues in other disciplines and even with other figures from outside the academy[33]. In this way, even if indirectly, we would be promoting reflection upon disciplinary interdependence and the very notion of the university as a whole[34].

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[31] Faria, *ibidem*, p. 30.
[32] Faria, *ibidem*, p. 26
[33] Cf. Bissell, *ibidem*, p. 103.
[34] This is also the sense in which we should understand the so-called "area studies" that, by giving special emphasis, as a common denominator in various disciplines, to the object of study that concerns them (a geographical and cultural area), actively promote complementarity between them. On this question, see, for example: Hans Kuijper, "Area Studies versus Disciplines. Towards an Interdisciplinary, Systemic

In such a scenario, what does someone who is situated in the field of literary studies have to offer? A privileged place for reflection and practice. And why? Precisely because, as has already been said, literature, because of its porous, versatile, composite, complex, undefined and indefinable nature, has always resisted its rigid inclusion in a clearly marked out disciplinary territory and the ontological definition of its subject-matter. This institutional impertinence, highlighted by the confrontations that we have witnessed, has produced an effect of unbearable instability and decentring in the object of literary studies, hampering its respective insertion in the academic space, transforming literary studies into the prime arena for the accusatory denunciation of the bankruptcy of the ideals of the university inherited from earlier centuries. Basically, there will always be an irresolvable tension between the force of literature and institutional values, as Timothy Clark recognised:

> Cross-disciplinarity crosses, defines, and constitutes the object 'literature' in such a way that any discipline of literary study cannot but be in a state of continual crisis as to its relation to other disciplines, to the university as a whole, and to the question of criticism's relation to the university's outside. Such cross-disciplinarity has always functioned in literary study, whether openly or covertly, and has been one reason for its vitality or, if you prefer, for its continuing crisis.[35]

Opposing institutional values with the force of literature is something that can, however, only be achieved if we become aware of this and live inside that "strange institution" called literature[36]. In other words, if we are capable of drawing the appropriate lessons from the crisis that I have referred to, and simultaneously revitalising the multiple dimensions of the phenomenon that concerns us, while also, as teachers, believing in the potentialities of its teaching.

In an interesting essay on the current situation of literary studies, its place in university syllabuses and the prospects for its future application and development, John Frow maintains that:

Country Approach". Consulted online at: http://www.asvj91.dsl.pipex.com/Hans_KUIJPER/ (accessed on 15 July 2009).

[35] Cf. Bissell, *ibidem*, p. 103.

[36] "This Strange Institution Called Literature" is the title of an interview with Jacques Derrida, conducted by Derek Attridge and published in Derek Attridge (ed.), *Acts of Literature*, New York and London, Routledge, 1992, pp. 33-75. In it, Derrida defends the idea that literature is a "strange institution" because, despite its being a historical institution with its own conventions, rules, etc., it is anti-institutional by nature, making it possible for everything to be said in it and therefore: "it is an institution which tends to overflow the institution", p. 36.

> At a mundane level, the most important questions for literary studies – the questions that go to the heart of its connection to the world – have to do not with research and the higher reaches of disciplinary development but with undergraduate teaching and the question of what might count as *useful knowledge for a literary propaedeutics*. The answer to that question is, I believe*, less the imparting of systematic information than the teaching of a practice – of 'reading' in the broadest sense* – which would meet three conditions: it must be at once continuous with and richer than untutored practice; it must have a theoretical foundation which can be generalised; and it must be able to be extrapolated from 'literary' texts to other discursive kinds. It would be at once *a practice of intense scrutiny and intense connection*, and it would be integrated with directly rhetorical skills of writing and arguing.[37]

Agreeing entirely with the importance of a literary propaedeutics as it is understood here, I consider that what we must promote in our literature classes (at least at an introductory level) is what Derek Attridge defines as literary reading and which he distinguishes from other types of reading of an instrumental nature[38]. This task includes: raising student awareness of the singular nature of the experience of reading literary works, in terms of what it has that is unique and irreplaceable, as a moment that increases the potential for a complex and mostly quite demanding exchange, evoking emotions, knowledge and values that the forms of life thus represented call for. Yet, at the same time, it is necessary to recognise the linguistic dimension of the text that is communicated to us as a language game that cannot be dissociated from those "forms of experience"[39].

What I am attempting to emphasise in this way is not so much the stability of the literary object and the insularity of the literary phenomenon, but rather its instability, dynamism and multiple dependences: its dependence on the context of its production and on the context of its reception, on the relationship with other texts (earlier, contemporary and later ones, literary and non-literary), on the relationship of its producer with other past and/or contemporary producers, on a meaning that is forever postponed and makes all interpretations provisional – factors that do prevent us from conceiving of literary studies as an epistemological project that can be likened to those

[37] Cf. Bissell, *ibidem*, pp. 152-153 (my emphasis).
[38] On the difference between literary reading and instrumental reading, see Attridge, *ibidem*, p. 7 and pp. 118-119.
[39] Genette uses "form of expression" and "form of experience" to refer to the two indissociable sides of the "literary sign" (which, in the second-degree system that literature is, replicates the linguistic sign) that is at the basis of a "style. Cf. Gérard Genette, "Raisons de la critique pure", *Les Chemins actuels de la critique*, Georges Poulet (ed.), Paris, 10/18, 1968, pp. 137-138.

that govern other areas of knowledge and its object as something that is susceptible to consolidation and a stable and definitive description.

If, in this way, I distance myself critically from the possibility of a direct and acritical application of the Kantian rational model to the field of literary study, I neither reject nor repudiate the need for a disciplinary rigour that is, in this concrete case, necessarily undisciplined, in the sense in which it continuously challenges the boundaries marking out a field that, by its very nature, it insistently transgresses. But this inherent cross-disciplinarity does not, in my view, dispense with the need for disciplinary rigour. In fact, quite the opposite. As Harpham maintained in a recent debate about the humanities:

> Postdisciplinarity is clearly not the most productive response to a crisis in traditional disciplinarity, since what is needed today is more not less discipline, and stronger not weaker disciplines. Scholars in the humanities must not confuse a hospitality to innovation and reconfiguration with an indifference to rigor and accuracy.[40]

The competence that is presupposed by any interdisciplinary undertaking involving literary studies requires the scholars from this field to call upon the knowledge and the practices that have been developed in their discipline over the decades and which make it possible to welcome, register and give substance to the complexity that literary discourse instils as an overlapping and a mixture of a symbolic system and a social system[41]. It also requires them to bear in mind everything that the successive theories and debates taking place within the discipline have brought with them as a further addition to the theoretical and critical awareness of its practitioners and as a contribution to the questioning and development of their practice.

On the other hand, even though I hesitate to confidently claim for literary studies any formative project in the terms in which this was done by the defenders of the "university of culture", I shall not cease to underline the ethical dimension that is inherent in the notion of reading. This dimension cannot be interpreted as anything other than a moment of opening up and going deeper: opening up to the "other" that is the text, which communicates itself to me when I read and which I must be capable of

[40] Cf. Harpham, "Beneath and Beyond the 'Crisis in the Humanities'", *op. cit.*, p. 35.
[41] In this particular regard, I follow Ansgar Nünning's reasoning when he states: "literary scholars who are interested in historical and cultural issues are faced with the task of having to gain insights into literature as a social system with the help of sophisticated methods of textual analysis and by examining the symbol systems of individual cultures," p. 36.

welcoming attentively. It is not a question of claiming a reforming role for literature: a good reader is not necessarily a good person. It is only a question of recognising that what is acquired through reading is "[a] disposition, a habit, a way of being in the world of words"[42], which may correspond to a liberating gesture (for the other and for oneself), since, for its sake, an attitude is summoned up in which attention is paid to the letter of the text that establishes a singular creative interchange with the otherness that is present in it.

Literary studies can and must promote these processes of opening up, receptiveness and (self-)questioning, this capacity of response, unpredictable and non-programmable at the outset, and they do this through a reading practice that I have designated here as literary. This will seem like a modest contribution, in the context of the crisis to which I have alluded, but it is, in my opinion, the only one that realistically, as literature teachers, we can and must offer, if we accept that the study of literature also constitutes, in the words of Iris Murdoch: "an education in how to picture and understand human situations"[43].

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[42] Cf. Attridge, *Singularity*, p. 130.
[43] Cf. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good*, (1st edition 1970), London, Routledge, 2004, p. 33.