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THE *CRITICAL* RESISTANCE OF LITERATURE (THEORETICAL ISSUES AND LATIN AMERICA DISCUSSIONS)

LA RESISTENCIA CRÍTICA DE LA LITERATURA
(CUESTIONES TEÓRICAS Y DEBATES LATINOAMERICANOS)

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Abstract:

Literature and theory are writings of resistance with drastic *critical* effects: language blockages that put us before the absolutely other, obstructions of the impossible inscription of the real. Between the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, the post-theoretical field and the condemnation of the cultural devices of domination generated in Latin American academic criticism a sustained refutation of “literature” that denied *any critical value* to any practice describable as literature. These efforts were certainly very productive in critical and political terms, no matter how much one agrees with their theses. However, both the growing multiplicity of social modes of reading and the *philosophical* impulse of recent theory seem not to have been greatly affected by the academic policies of “the resistance to literature”.

Keywords: Literary Theory; Resistance; Latin American Criticism; Reading; Philosophy and Literature.

Resumen:

La literatura y la teoría son escrituras de resistencia con drásticos efectos *críticos*: bloqueos del lenguaje que nos posicionan ante el otro absoluto, obstrucciones de la imposible inscripción en lo real. Entre la década de los 90 y la primera década del siglo XXI, el campo post-teórico y la condena de los dispositivos culturales de dominación generaron en la crítica académica latinoamericana una sostenida refutación de la “literatura” que negaba cualquier *valor crítico* a toda práctica que pudiera considerarse literatura. Tales esfuerzos fueron ciertamente muy productivos a nivel crítico y político, independientemente de si se está de acuerdo o no con ellos. Sin embargo, tanto la creciente multiplicidad de modelos sociales de lectura como el impulso *filosófico* de la teoría reciente parecen no haberse visto afectados por las políticas académicas de “la resistencia a la literatura”.

Keywords: Teoría Literaria; Resistencia; Crítica Latinoamericana; Lectura; Filosofía y Literatura.

1.

Suffice it to mention two of the most recognized theorists —Jonathan Culler and Terry Eagleton— to notice that the supposed end of literary theory —linked, of course, to the old issue of the end of literature— has been one of the themes of theory for over twenty years. Although it is possible to go back and trace it in Eagleton’s university long seller, *Literary Theory. An Introduction* (1983), the interest in the assumed decline of literary theory or the end of a theory *era* seems to have increased since the early 2000s (Eagleton’s *After theory* was published in 2003). Nevertheless, it is reasonable to surmise that the “very short” book by Culler from 1997 —published in Spanish in 2000 and republished in 2004, already translated into more than twenty languages, republished in France in 2016—marked a turn distancing itself from the headlines giving literary theory up for dead (either regretting or not), something I would like to think of as a friendly and strategic dissident cunning: Culler underlined the interest in replacing “literary theory” with “theory,” and from the very first pages he accurately characterized and described what we should understand by that more or less new attributeless denomination: *sheer* “theory.” Culler’s stand is central if the issue, as is the case here, turns around the *critical* abilities or powers of literature, since Culler—without any doubt, in a selective and particular way—took up and updated, using a particularly friendly prose, what we can recognize as one of Paul de Man’s main propositions: the one that claims that “theory” and “literature” are, to a great extent, interchangeable signifiers that we use to speak about writings characterized by an acute and unceasing resistance to naturalizations of common sense, preconceptions, preconceived ideas, and acritical

passwords legitimized by social and cultural repetition, and even more: resistance to the tiniest or most provisional fixing of phrases or relationships between phrases and thoughts, resistance of literature to literature, and of theory to theory, in short, the permanent self-resistance of language from its inside.

In 2011, Culler insisted: after pointing out that theory is already institutionalized, established as knowledge and as a university discipline, he noted, however, that:

[...] since theory is thinking about thinking, it calls us to question any disciplinary—or even nondisciplinary—framing of questions, asking whether there are not other, better ways to proceed and what we would mean by “better.” From this perspective, “Theory Now” is an oxymoron, since theory always tries to be outside itself, before or after, but never simply with itself in a “now.” This is no doubt especially the case since theory has taught us to question the stakes of an appeal to a moment of presence or self-evidence. (“Afterword” 224).

If what we call literature and theory match that description (in which it is not hard to see what has always been identified as the philosophical impulse), it seems preferable to make two provisional assumptions: that the presumed end of literature and theory *never end not occurring*¹; and that there is no doubt that one and another are nothing but writing practices characterized by drastic *critical* effects. In order to specify what I mean by this, I suggest using as *amodel* a well-known phrase by Jacques Lacan which undoubtedly harmonizes with Culler’s perspective: if “Le réel ne saurait s’inscrire que d’une impasse de la formalisation” (1975, 85), we may say that we call literature that language obstruction, that blockage of formalization which is the impossible inscription of the real (unlike that other thing which is so different and makes the cultural imperative of communication potentially possible, which needs to *discourse*, that is to say: to assume what is said to be said and understood, and what is thought to be thought, and thus move forward and towards the end, instead of rethinking what is given—instead of retheorizing it—once and again)². In this line, we call theory writings like those described by that phrase by Lacan or the variant we have just suggested, that is, we call theory a way, a moment, or modulation of literature itself (its explanatory *orformalizing*, argumentative, or reasoned modulation—*critical*, we would say if de Man had not warned us about the possible tropological—literary—nature of the expla-

1. I would like to note here that Culler’s perspective avoids something which Eagleton’s does not: that a consideration on the issue of the validity or end of theory remains more or less inadvertently linked to a chronological historicism, according to which there should have been a theory era, a more or less datable “before and after.” Of course, Eagleton rather refers to theory as a genre and corpus of writings whose historicity can be established, but it is precisely this restriction which distracts our attention to theory as a kind of frame of mind of subjectivity related to written reasoning, reflection, and reflection on reflection.

2. This phrase appears on Seminar XX, *Encore*, 1975. It should be understood here that the only way in which the real can be inscribed is by means of an impasse of formalization (blockage, obstruction, or blind alley); this impasse is the inscription of the real, although—inasmuch as it is of the real—it is an impossible inscription as such. I am grateful to Juan Ritvo for his expert supervision in the detailed examination of Lacan’s text.

nation and of poetry)³. If we adopt this perspective (widely supported by a slanted but vast and prestigious theoretical literature), it seems preferable not to focus or limit the sense of “value” to an estimation or description derived from a judgment (esthetic, truth-functional, moral, or other), nor to restrict the meanings of “critical” to a reasoned explanation or a decidable interpretation communicating perceptible experiences, states, or realities that literature would enlighten because ideology makes them opaque, conceals or distorts them (ideology or common sense, conventions, etc.). What I mean is that, in order to theorize about what literature does, can do, or may do, it does not seem convenient to maintain boundaries within the territory we used to identify as modernist “critical theory,” a territory to where words like “value” and “critical” inevitably take us⁴. Without taking the attribution of this kind of *critical values* away from literature—values of *clarification*, vision, unveiling, and even of protest and condemnation—we would rather put the emphasis on the disturbance, vacillation, and strangeness effects that literature generates in formalizations and, therefore, in subjectivities, that is to say, blockages in the imaginable and storable. These are points of an insurmountable resistance to what is appreciated, valued, or valid. Maurice Blanchot insisted on contrasting literature with culture and critics, those “grands réducteurs” in charge of assimilating everything to values: while for the “maîtres de la culture, écrire c’est toujours [...] faire le bien, reconnaître le bien, fût-ce dans le mal, faire accord avec le monde des valeurs” (57), poetry is between certain “points de résistance” (55) which do not give in to cultural reduction and put us before “l’absolument autre” (56). Precisely, a theory that, at some point of what culture labels as “literature,” notices the blockage where the real finds its only instance of inscription in a contingent, uncalculated way (or better: where the real finds the contingent instance of its impossible inscription).

To continue taking advantage of Culler’s ideas, it appears that we may establish that theory, which “always tries to be outside itself,” reached its characteristic *critical/potency*—i.e., the critical potency that theory acknowledges and questions in literature—when it stopped being “*literary theory*,” that is to say—and oversynthesizing—when its concerns no longer turned around *literariness*. This moment or step coincides—as it is known—with the gradual retreat (although never complete) of the “linguistic model,” and therefore—and in turn—of semiotics, the formalist and structuralist impulse, and the scientific aspirations of literary studies. But what or who occupied that vacancy left by literary *specificity*? If we look at the authors, only a few theorists initially identified with the practice of literary criticism,

3. De Man’s approach (where theory and literature are equally characterized, qualified, and theorized) can, without much difficulty, be paired with the romantic conception of the theoretical nature of literature (then, in turn, the literary nature of theory), as described by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe in their study of early German Romanticism. Here we adopt that point of view.

4. I suggested a critical characterization of a certain modernist theory of literature in my analysis of Beatriz Sarlo’s reading of Juan José Saer’s works (Dalmaroni 2018).

poetics, or literature history —from the late Roland Barthes to Edward Said— and, on the other hand, mainly philosophers —Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze— but, overall, people determined to always think of theory *outside itself*: from Jacques Lacan to Judith Butler, and including Maurice Blanchot. Of course, and although it is not our aim to group diverse authors in any kind of configuration, Walter Benjamin is the character with intermittent but long duration prevalence which prevents us from forgetting about that sort of philosophical condition which came to be told theory⁵.

To introduce his theory on theory, in 1997, Culler himself started with two examples of this kind, i.e., coming from philosophy more than from philology: Foucault's history of sexuality and Derrida's deconstruction of Rousseau's narrative of the self. As a second movement of that turn to *unspecific* territories, Eagleton suggested in 2012 that also things such as semiotics, post-structuralism, Marxism, or psychoanalysis already "have been nudged aside by a quartet of preoccupations: postcolonialism, ethnicity, sexuality and cultural studies" (ix). However, as we were reminded some months ago by the call for papers of this publication, in 2007 both Culler and Eagleton had already warned us against the consequences of taking the post-disciplinary expansion of theory to the extreme of suppressing the study of *literature as such* (the theoretical study but also the *technical* study of "literature" or —at least— the study of what appears in those writings we call "literature" with an intensity, a density, and a frequency that we do not identify in other types of writing). Those warnings pointed out that what could be underestimated or even lost with the exit of literature from the field of theoretical interests was the critical value of literature. In the preface to *How to Read Literature* (2013), Eagleton begins by stating his purpose of recovering "the art of analysing works of literature," what "Nietzsche called 'slow reading'" and that it "is in danger of sinking without trace"; he also notes that a book of that kind is not oblivious to the interests of "a literary theorist and political critic", because "one cannot raise political or theoretical questions about literary texts without a degree of sensitivity to their language" (ix). As for Culler, after noting that *after the end of theory* what would remain of theory in historical, social, and cultural studies would be precisely the literary, had suggested the following variant of the self-resistance hypothesis: "It seems to me quite possible that a *return to ground the literary* in literature might have a *critical edge*, since one of the things we know about the literary works in that they have *the ability to resist* or to outplay what they are supposed to be saying" (2007, 42; emphasis is ours).

5. I certainly do not ignore the prolonged and more or less radicalized subaltern criticism applied to "philosophy" (including the so-called "antiphilosophy"), as Eurocentric epistemological disciplining. The benefit of the political effects of that criticism has been undeniable for a long time, in a way that it should no longer prevent us from returning to "philosophy" to make use of its more or less simple and modest descriptive advantages.

2.

In this context, I suggest reviewing here some more or less recent situations which present very different theories on the critical value of literature. I will refer mainly to the post-theoretical attacks on literature between 1990 and 2010, in the context of Latin American literary studies. I will also outline some notes on the theorizations on literature in recent philosophical interventions, such as those of Agamben, Badiou, and Rancière. Certain *critical* dimensions of literature are denied in the first case; in the latter case, on the other hand, they are theorized again.

In 1998, from the pages of the influential journal *Punto de vista*, published in Buenos Aires and edited by Beatriz Sarlo, María Teresa Gramuglio, member of the board of directors of the journal and professor at Universidad de Buenos Aires, pointed out that:

[...] uno de los cambios más polémicos que han ocurrido en el campo de la crítica literaria contemporánea es el que va de una concepción de la literatura como práctica potencialmente crítica y liberadora, a una crítica de la literatura como institución de control. En otras palabras, con la transformación actual de los estudios literarios y su creciente acercamiento a los estudios culturales, estaríamos asistiendo no tanto o no sólo a un debilitamiento de la exigencia de un arte y una literatura críticos, sino a una especie de juicio a la literatura y a la crítica literaria tradicionales (y aquí por tradicionales debe entenderse sobre todo la crítica y la literatura culta modernas o modernistas) a las que se considera en muchos casos verdaderas encarnaciones elitistas y represivas de los dispositivos de dominación social (4).

Gramuglio also noted that current diverse theories were part of “una derivación *algo inesperada* de los trabajos pioneros de Raymond Williams” (5, emphasis is ours). The truth is, however, that at least since 1977, Williams —one of the theorists that *Punto de vista* and Gramuglio herself had studied and spread when in Argentina his work was known by just a few English literature teachers— had laid the foundations of the *radical* criticism of “literature.” In *Marxism and Literature*, Williams denaturalizes and historicizes the modern ideas of “literature and criticism,” which he describes as “forms of a class specialization and control of a general practice” (49). In turn, he reproaches Marxist literary studies for having been “more successful, in ordinary terms, when they have worked within the received category of ‘literature,’ which they may have extended or even revalued, but never *radically questioned or opposed*” (53, emphasis is ours). As we know, Williams always maintained, with some hesitation, a complex dialectic approach to the most appreciated works classified as literature by the elites, in which he always preferred to point out —at the same time— their functional aspects as well as their dislocation and gaps regarding ideology. His sympathies could lie with Dicken’s views on the popular and his research focus could shift to the common culture of the working classes or to television, but he did not renounce looking in Jane Austen or Joseph Conrad for configurations of conflictive disconformity to the naturalized

impositions of domination in historical subjects. And nevertheless, it can be stated that from Williams' historical criticism, among other interventions, the post-theoretical and post-disciplinary field —which coincides with the denomination “cultural studies” and gained ground since the early 1990s— discouraged and put the critical values of literature under serious suspicion. It could be said, in that sense, that in 1998 Gramuglio was exaggerating but, above all, she was obliquely noting that she was doing it: that the current criticism of literature derived from Williams could sound “unexpected” to some ears, but not completely —just “somewhat” unexpected.

Indeed, in North American and Latin American criticism and cultural theory circles, literature was not only displaced from the field of interests and agendas, but also, in wide debate networks, it was taken its critical role away. Often adopting interventions such as William's and also selective readings of French theory, what had been taking shape was nothing but a political refutation of “literature,” almost always supported by historical arguments. Such refutation was not limited to denying that the most appreciated literature lacked any sort of critical value; it did not just imply putting the “Western canon” under the suspicion of a severe historical-ideological criticism, nor did it include just those writings labeled as “literature” by the central or peripheral cultures from the global, white, and heteronormative West. The impulse was far-reaching and suggested describing literature as a cultural device of social domination, i.e., condemning the notion of “literature” itself as part of a compartmentalization of language serving the purposes of cultural inequalities, imperialist goals, and class, race, or gender oppression. The idea was certainly not new. The novel aspects were the degree of radicalization and the scope of the suggestion, and also the mainly academic—university—nature of this *policy*⁶.

As we know, it is not that postcolonial, subaltern, or feminist theories now denied critical value to any text labeled as “literature” by the judges of bourgeoisie taste. On the one hand, the canon was replaced by a corpus mainly composed of libertarian, anti-imperialist, revolutionary, or popular texts, more or less repressed or consigned to oblivion. On the other hand, there was the attempt to attribute some critical value to a dissident and incorruptible way of reading the canon —rather, rereading it *against the grain*— in order to deconstruct the more or less sophisticated codifications whose main function inside plays, poems, or novels was to legitimize and naturalize the ideas of oppressive groups. Of course, this prolonged rereading endeavor brought about texts that not only are models

6. In the history of Argentine literary criticism, and before the so-called era of theory, one of the major twists and landmarks of the discipline was brought about by David Viñas' work, particularly since his book *Literatura argentina y realidad política*, published in 1964. It should be noted that Viñas' book is a critical work of literature, i.e., criticism of textual, imaginary, and ideological devices designed by the dominant classes (the “oligarchy,” or “la ciudad señorial”) in writings of very different nature, either legitimized as “literature,” “letters,” or in other ways by those elites.

of theoretical and critical work, but also documents of major formal, rhetorical, narratological, and historiographical, findings: we learn a lot about Jane Austen and how to read the nineteenth-century English novel if we study the analysis of *Mansfield Park* developed by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) but, most importantly, we confirm one of Said's main theses, i.e., that "In the main, though, the nineteenth-century European novel is a cultural form consolidating but also refining and articulating the authority of the *status quo*" (77). Thus, Austen's work would contain little or no *critical value* (i.e., in Said's terms, little or no anti-imperialist content), but Said's reading of Austen and his findings, in contrast, are eminently critical.

The same year in which *Culture and Imperialism* was published, John Beverley, a member of "The Latin American Subaltern Studies Group" who Javier Lasarte Valcárcel would call "one of the 'founders' of the resistance to literature" (5), published a book with the plain title *Against Literature*, where he emphasizes the functional role played by literature for the imperialist oppression since the Renaissance. In an article from 2001 included in a compilation edited by Lasarte Valcárcel, Vicente Lecuna (from the Universidad Central de Venezuela at that time) resorted to the image of the "collapse" of criticism, and declared the definitive decline in the "confianza en los poderes liberadores y detonantes de la literatura" (101-105). Until not that long ago, in Latin America, literature was read as a form of elucidation of social conflicts and expression of critical energies, and between the 1960s and 1970s the protagonist of the debates on literature had been the figure of the "revolutionary writer" and its variants (Gilman). Among the most consolidated assumptions in culture circles there was without any doubt that of a *literary criticism of society*: literature provided a dissident view of the world. But shortly after, in 1984, what Gramuglio would much later describe as a shift from literary criticism to criticism of literature would make its way in the skeptical character of *La ciudad letrada*, the influential book where Ángel Rama no longer describes practices with rebellious or critical effects, but rather "un dispositivo jerárquico de control del saber y de negociación con el poder" (Colombi 2). In this sense, this posthumous work by Rama has been considered a program which was "precursor de las tendencias críticas que ocuparán a los estudios latinoamericanos en los años siguientes, entre otros, los estudios culturales y postcoloniales" (Colombi 1). It was Jean Franco, another of the most prominent authors of Latin American critical studies, who in 2002 almost destroyed the last remains of the critical or transforming potential that could still characterize Latin American literature. In *The Decline and Fall of the Lettered City*, Franco did a retrospective work in which the Latin American literature of the Cold War years was described as either expressing the fantasies of the avant-garde and the political and social utopias in a way that was much more innocent than critical, almost propagandistic and irresponsibly naïve and self-congratulatory; or

imagining fables of the failure and collapse of development, modernizing, or communitarian illusions. In that sense, it is not necessary to overinterpret Franco's arguments to notice that Latin American literature very rarely escaped the limitations of the other cultural and political uses of language, precisely at the time in which it was believed to be intensifying its critical dimension as never before.

In the group of works discussed above (barely a selection of examples and cases among those most read and quoted), we should also include Josefina Ludmer's work, who taught for some years at Yale and was one of the most prominent and influential professors of literary theory in Argentine universities and played a decisive role in revitalizing the discipline during the last quarter of the 20th century. Her interest in the operations performed by Latin American learned actors and elites to appropriate subaltern voices, and the insistence that literature did not show more *critical* values than other "conversations of culture" were some of the driving forces of her works between 1999 and 2010⁷. Although words like "value" or expressions like "critical value" had become nearly forbidden for her, Ludmer was not very interested in denying that literature might have effects of conflict against the status quo, but at the same level that in any other form of social discourse (therefore, there would be no *critical value* in particular in something that may occur in any speech act, be it written or not).

In the same line as Gramuglio's warnings, in 2008, Andrés Avellaneda (University of Florida) suggested a critical review of Latin American studies in the United States, which can be read in accordance with the cases we have just described. Avellaneda pointed out that precisely between the outcomes of the "creciente importancia de la teoría en la universidad norteamericana" and its "pseudopolitización académica," there was the "rechazo de los conceptos de *valor* estético y de calidad literaria por su condición elitista," in addition to the questioning of the "concepto mismo de estudio literario" (203-204, emphasis is ours).

In some of the resounding interventions typical of Latin American criticism that we have mentioned here, there is a recurring reasoning that is essential to carefully locate in its political and institutional contexts of enunciation, so that it does not seem plainly clumsy in political terms, and not just that: not very politically ambitious, not *radical* at all, and rather *negotiating* and *resigned* to —precisely— a status quo defined by severe inequalities. Although it appears with other figures or notions, this reasoning is directly linked to the controversies regarding the acknowledgment or denial of some kind of critical value of literature. Works with different emphases and tones, such as those by Said, Beverly, or Ludmer —and many others that followed between the 1990s and the first decade of this century— insist on the idea that the literary texts regarded as *high* literature, i.e., texts written and

⁷ We refer here to *El cuerpo del delito* (1999) and *Aquí América Latina* (2010).

authorized by diverse strata of learned elites, generate and strengthen a severe discursive inequality aimed at naturalizing and reinforcing class, race, and gender inequalities. How do these texts achieve such an *a-critical* effect? Mainly by the adoption and reproduction of a solid network of idiomatic, linguistic, narrative, rhetorical, and semantic complexities which one may have access to only if one has the skills and knowledge given by a minority-targeted education; a network that, therefore, is legitimized as a discursive discipline stick for exclusion. Declaring itself as a supporter of the battles of the oppressed, an international —although tending to be monolingual— community of academics who, of course, have gone through an education like that, contest and denounce what, in the same gesture, they seem to consider irreversible: that the narrative by Joseph Conrad or Borges hinders, obstructs, restricts, and eventually prevents the access of uneducated, subaltern, and illiterate people to the culture that is most appreciated by the dominant class. With the most laudable and honest political purposes, a corporation of learned people who have read, for instance, Shakespeare in English or Baudelaire in French, suggest that the oppressed should not do so and that it is preferable that they use their listening or reading energy for Rigoberta Menchú's testimonies or those of another popular leader who uses the *local* languages of their community. Since the moment they choose not to recite verses for the uneducated but to write poems and publish them in books; choosing, in addition, to make up poetic variants of Spanish full of intertextual references that are not always discernible and which have traits that come from a copious library where European white male authors prevail, the *complex* poetry of a libertarian activist such as César Vallejo or revolutionaries like Roque Dalton or Juan Gelman reproduces the same cultural devices of domination as any other literary work from the canon. I exaggerate the simplification of the example not only for explanatory purposes, but also because I believe that “the resistance to literature” and the obstinacy to minimize or deny its critical potential often led to reductions like these or nearly like these. Would not we be essentializing and dehistoricizing if we opted for a rigid and permanent identification between writing and imperialism, or between Spanish language itself and linguistic policies of violent imposition of identities and subjugation? (Or, the other way around, between orality and the exploited, between the languages of native peoples and emancipatory meanings.) Would it be the case that there are discursive and symbolic tools and materials always and solely—intrinsically—aimed at damaging the oppressed? This kind of controversies echo a typical mode of the 20th century political debate on culture and arts. I refer here to the passionate discussions about the Russian Revolution, around the alternative of eliminating even the slightest trace of bourgeoisie culture or using its resources in new compositions to make them functional for revolutionary purposes. But also subjectivities such as Vallejo, Dalton, or Gelman, could demand the academic policies

of theory that they do not confuse the killer with the metals he used to manufacture only certain weapons aimed at causing certain damages to the *wretched of the Earth*. It is certainly much more *radical* to suggest that all the modes of imagination and speech, all the knowledge, all the languages, are within the language and in the hands of everybody. At least, it is preferable that, instead of a minority of politically well-meaning academics, sub-alterns themselves decide how and to what extent they want to appropriate an open and mixed corpus from which written and oral texts from very different origins come and go, as well as the inherited or new, conventional or inventive, of reading and rewriting. Otherwise, we may fall to do what Said or Ángel Rama denounced regarding the roles played by writers-educators in the *lettered cities* of South America or the “East.”

In this sense, there may not have been enough insistence on the particular *location* of contestations over the “canon,” “literature,” and the attribution of critical values to them: those who have denounced those categories may have been granting the operations of symbolic violence performed by the dominant culture an exaggerated efficacy and, in particular, a too extended, regular, and constant efficacy; and in the case of the many experts who studied and worked in British and American institutions since the second half of the 20th century, it is likely that they have adopted and emphasized this approach as a result of an excessive extrapolation of the disciplinary efficacy that a certain *high* culture had on the education of the elites in the Northern hemisphere. The sometimes Manichean terms used in the academic struggle against “literature” often show an inversion of the canonization of the belles-lettres: now despising it, that canonization is adopted, however, as a given, even, and crystalized situation. Thus, a variety of processes that appear to have been less homogeneous tend to be simplified. If the actual cultural history of regions like Latin America (even in contexts very dependent on Eurocentric models, as is the case of metropolis like Buenos Aires, and even well into the 20th century) is analyzed using a less binary approach, we can see the extent to which the boundaries between “literature,” poetry, journalism, novel, sociological and philosophical essay writing, political speeches, ideological writing, narratives, or chronicles for the mass culture market, etc., are blurred; or we can notice the need for not overestimating the influence of *high* literature in the development of a wide social pedagogy nurtured by many other practices. In this sense, it may be historically erroneous to assume that —according to a certain conception of modernity that is too homogenous— the so European “esthetic education of man” has consistently been the iron law of cultural formations in general (for instance, it is a plain historical error to put on the same level —regarding education in humanities— what the education and school system did with the children of the Northern hemisphere elites and what it was able to do in whatever location of the Third World). For the same reason,

assuming that for any context “literature” must have always be reduced to more or less regular effects of cultural domination would lead to excluding from history a heterogenous and multiple set of practices, micro-stories, collective literary inventions, and cultural battles. Historicism —the actual course of reading and writing practices— always includes specific locations, unrepeated territorializations, and unpredictable deterritorializations, in other words, margins of possibility where subjectivities never fully foreseen develop initiatives and projects: precisely, the situations where consecrating impositions of exclusive canons or the naturalization of disciplinary traditions are not only resisted but also ignored, minimized, resignified. That is why I have insisted in previous works on the need of paying attention, in certain *regions*, not only to subaltern subjects, but especially to what I called *el sujeto secundario (the secondary subject)*: what students and teachers actually do in “literature” classrooms in primary and secondary schools in Latin America (Dalmaroni 2011), distorting and often ignoring reading, writing, and interpretation protocols naturalized by the academia or the market. In the same line, in the last decades there have been multiple and diverse experiences of groups and workshops devoted to reading, discussing, writing, publishing, staging, musicalizing, and carnivalizing narratives, children’s and juvenile literature, poetry, or autobiographic writings at schools, prisons, and “confinement contexts,” self-managed cultural centers, cooperatives, social organizations and movements, popular libraries, pediatric hospitals or neuropsychiatric institutions for poor populations, dining rooms in neighborhoods with critical socioeconomic conditions, streets and squares, city parks and playgrounds, and other public spaces in the subcontinent.⁸ Those of us who have been involved in some of those experiences or who have shown interest to know them first hand from their protagonists, *know* that in those settings “literature” often bursts in the form of a non-conformist, critical, rebellious, and *de-subjectivizing* event.

Academics devoted to literary and cultural criticism have imagined the literature we write about —as well as the critical or disciplinary effects it may cause— associated with a minority type of reader and reading context, a reader who meekly adopts the protocols of an *etiquette* that we take for universal or unique:the model —more or less unnoticed— is ourselves, professional literary critics, i.e., a recent variant of the bourgeoisie reader, “the man who reads alone in a room with his mouth closed, from a volume which he owns (Steiner 383). If we are not suspicious of that commonplace or discuss it by means of researching diverse readers, we will not be able to trust our judgments about the value or lack of value of reading poems, fiction writings, chronicles, or plays (and we are likely to reproduce, regarding the very diverse modes of social involvement with literature, the same

8. Some experiences of this kind have been described and analyzed by Gerbaudo and Tosti.

kind of reductive homogenization that Williams notices when historicizing the compartmentalization of the multiple act of writing that a learned class imposed during the emergence of capitalism).

3.

In his book *Politique de la littérature*, from 2007, Jacques Rancière provided a definition of “literature” which is particularly effective and economical. Rancière precisely points out the resistance of literature, what prevents, in turn, dissolving it and ignoring its *critical* nature: “La suppression de l'écart des mots et des choses est le rêve constitutif à l'ombre duquel se déploie le parcours interminable de l'intervalle qui les sépare” (164).

The theoretical, philosophical, poetic conviction according to which in certain texts that we acknowledge as “literature” there is an irreducible conflict between language and experience, a traumatic gap between words and the real, between what we say that happens and what actually happens, is a conviction about the critical nature of literature. It is not a new conviction, but it is not archeological either: far from having been shelved among historic ideas that are no longer ours, it continuously comes back in the form of new versions, new enterprises of the written thought, new dialects of criticism and theory.

As it is known, since *La parole muette*, published in 1998, Rancière has been one of the theorist with a philosophical origin who, during the past two decades, kept systematically inquiring into some of the classic issues of literary theory. In his 2014 book about the policy of modern fiction, he continues developing the thesis according to which there is a literature policy precisely because literature is not a territory to confirm dominant representations, but rather aimed at new political and social, emerging subjects. As for this last point, if we analyze the topics and issues studied and besieged by Rancière, we will see that all his work on literature consists, to a great extent, of the amplification and reconsideration of the fundamental theses of a classic of European literature criticism: Erich Auerbach's *Mimesis*. Rancière reworks those theses and reconceptualizes many of its aspects in the light of what we have been calling “theory” (from Hegel to Freud, from the Russian formalists to Barthes, from Benjamin to Deleuze). Therefore, it may be said that, for the field of literary theory, Rancière takes up again the study of literature as *political criticism*, the same idea that governed Auerbach's work.

Between 2015 and 2016, Alain Badiou (like Rancière, a former disciple of Althusser) added two other books on literary theory to his many essays on literature. These two volumes should certainly be included in a library containing the more recent theories on the *critical value* of literature. *A la recherche du réel perdu* (2015) is not a book about Proust, and the main theme it states to approach is the philosophical question about “the real,” but

almost the complete text deals in an anecdote in Molière's life (specifically, his death) and a poem by Pasolini. Badiou takes up his theory of literature as an event which, as such, withdraws from languages and representations available in an irreducible way. In *Que pense le poème?*, from 2016, Badiou compiles essays on this topic that he wrote between 1992 and 2014. In the preface, Badiou recalls that he has always given the poem an essential function in the development of philosophy and takes up the figuration of the poem as "un des bords de la langue disponible" (7) (the other boundary would be in mathematics). In the interview that closes the book, Badiou rephrases in his own terms a classic theory on the poem, "dévouée plutôt à capturer dans le langage la singularité de la présence du sensible et à faire ce qu'apparemment le langage est impuissant à faire: nommer non pas la catégorie de la chose, mais la chose elle-même, telle qu'elle se présente" (169); the poem, thus, consists of "tendre le langage vers la restitution de la singularité" (170). The drastic *critical* importance of a definition like that can be seen if we remember that in Badiou's philosophy, "singularité" is a term presented in the situation but not represented in the state of the situation, i.e., a *real* for which there is no language available, it lacks "la catégorie" (thus becoming unstatable). Therefore, if someone manages to *name* that unstatable situation, we witness the random emergence of that event which Badiou calls "poème".

By the way, it should be pointed out that in several of his essays from the last years, Giorgio Agamben has continued theorizing about poetry and the poet figure as a decisive chapter of a theory on subjectivity and de-subjectivization. For Agamben, the language of modern poetry is rather a field of tensions between the possibility of stating and the impossibility of doing so. Poetry remains in that space in between which, as an insuppressible lacuna, opens up between the unreachable name of the thing and the explanatory discourse which takes us apart from the real ("El torso órfico"). And nevertheless, in May 2017 Agamben took up the idea that the language of poetry is what remains because it resists destruction, given that it does not discourse or inform (it does not say something about something), but rather names and calls what is lost, destroyed, or forgotten ("*Che cosa resta?*"). Agamben does not claim that, when doing so, poetry achieves its purpose, what enables him to maintain his thesis that the poem is an exercise that always begins again, that always remains. Here, again, literature prevents totalization, complete closure, and understanding, and is unceasingly updated as *criticism* of what is given.

During the past few years —following the so-called *end of theory*— the texts by Rancière, Badiou, and Agamben have been an unavoidable part of the most read and translated theory, and most often included in university syllabuses. These three authors have actively entered the same libraries where we still find not only Lacan, Derrida, Blanchot, and Barthes, but also Homi Bhabha, Fredric Jameson, Jean-Luc Nancy, Nelly Rich-

ard, Judith Butler, Boris Groys, Julio Ramos, Gayatri Spivak, Renato Ortiz, George Didi-Huberman, and many others. Including here these few lines on the recent contribution of three philosophers like Rancière, Badiou, and Agamben is an invitation to keep inquiring into the main hypothesis of this paper: that literary theory resists and does not end because it writes less about canons and authorized assessments than about that critical disturbance of language that keeps occurring and which —in a defective, hesitant way— we still call poetry, narrative fiction, or even literature.

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