

Literary Education and the Ethics of Expansion: Principles, Processes and Examples

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Abstract: This contribution is rooted in my vision of literary education as a humanistic practice devoted to expanding the students' ideological and imaginative horizons. My efforts as a lecturer have always been aimed at exemplifying what, from my point of view, could be considered one of the main beliefs articulating ethical literary criticism: the power of literature to bring about meaningful social changes by empowering readers to extend their cosmivision beyond reductionist macro-discourses. This potential of literature can be activated by fostering a teaching practice based on some ethical principles, the anatomy of which will be modestly examined in this essay out of my personal experience and exemplified with references to the works by some writers. From a theoretical point of view, this contribution also drinks from Jüri Talvet's "call for cultural symbiosis" (2005) between 'self' and 'other' as a way of overcoming interested separations and impoverishing mutilations. Likewise, and following Yuri M. Lotman's cultural semiotics, my approach sees the literature classroom as a space where the valuable tensions between 'centre' and 'periphery' within a given semiosphere can be analysed and seen as opportunities for the generation and addition of new meanings and ideas.

Keywords: literary education; ethics of expansion; performativity; permeability; symbiosis; appropriation; stories of possibilization; textuality of intensity; semiotic dynamism

This essay stems from a desire to share some of my beliefs concerning the role of literature nowadays and also some of my experiences while working with literary texts in the classroom, experiences which are permeated by the aforementioned set of beliefs. This contribution is written from a triple perspective: from the perspective of someone who loves literature and its physical materialization in books, from the perspective of someone who has the privilege to teach it, and also, from the perspective of someone who is also a politician who blindly believes that, like politics, literature has the power to change society by positively influencing the individuals who are part of it. The experience of literature expands the readers' ideological and imaginative horizons. When the practice of literary education is inspired by this 'expansionist' desire, it becomes a powerful antidote against totalitarian systems which, in their socio-political

materialization, make people feel both depressed and oppressed. These systems, and the macro-theories that they generate to validate themselves, normally work by edifying borders and enlarging separations where interconnectedness, transnational communication, and the unexpected creative associations engendered out of the openness towards different artistic manifestations, beliefs and ideas would be desirable so as to advance towards a fairer social order and a more enriched cultural community.

In my view, it is futile to find a valid definition for literature, because its potential and its effects are inextinguishable and, therefore, cannot be subsumed under a definitive label or set of properties. As Terry Eagleton has convincingly argued, “there is no such thing as an exact definition of literature. All such attempts at exclusive definition are vulnerable to a triumphant ‘But what about...?’” (2013: 32). In his view, “[...] to use the word ‘literature’ normatively rather than descriptively leads to needless muddle, along with a fair number of self-satisfied prejudgements” (*ibid.* 90). With Eagleton, I believe that non-prescriptive, highly personalized approaches to the definition of literature do more justice to the irreducible condition of literature itself. Mine is articulated around the idea that literature, in all its manifestations, is primarily engendered out of an intense desire to share a vital experience, a feeling or a story which, due to that intensity, someone could not keep inside himself, inside herself. Literary manifestations are also born out of a generous willingness to share a worldview so that it can embrace others and generate either symbiosis or rejection, but always meaningful semiotic processes. One of the most appealing features of literary texts is the impossibility of safely containing or ‘fossilizing’ their potential in a given ‘here and now’, in the limits of a specific context. As Eagleton puts it, literary texts are characterised by their “restless refusal of closure” (*ibid.* 65). When writers desire to touch readers with their particular way of apprehending the world, they either explicitly, or even unconsciously, communicate a special property of literary texts: their perpetual openness, their intrinsic capability to be always updated and (re)appropriated. I see as the most special property of literary texts their intrinsic and indomitable dynamism, a magic quality which might even lead their messages, once issued and disseminated in different spatial and temporal contexts, to communicate something which, for example, might function in an entirely different way from that projected in the original intention. Their literariness claims for continuous rebirth and for the vivifying contact with plurality. With Eagleton, I agree that literary texts “[...] are events or semiotic acts irreducible to the codes which generate them” (*ibid.* 191). Other critics, such as Jessica R. Dreistadt, have lyrically argued that

Books are appeals for ideas to be discovered. They never passively sit on a shelf; books yearn to be found, opened, and unfolded. Like books, we, too, are vessels filled with stories to tell and thoughts to liberate. But unlike our speech and actions, which disintegrate over time into misty memories, the printed word remains to be read over and over again, each time with a unique sense of understanding and a new opportunity for negotiation. The motion of words once recorded and shared represents infinite possibilities. Printed words interact with other words through our imagination and dialogue. [...] Books incite, inspire, proclaim, provoke, enrich, and enliven. They are both formed by, and inform, human action. Through reading and writing, we transform ourselves, each other, and our community of ideas. (Dreistadt 2012: 127–128)

An enthusiastic critical catalogue illustrating the delicious mutability of the literary text could be inserted in this humble essay. Yuri M. Lotman has argued that

a text, like a grain of wheat which contains within itself the programme of its future development, is not something given once and for all and never changing. The inner and as yet unfinalised determinacy of its structure provides a reservoir of dynamism when influenced by contacts with new contexts. (Lotman 2001: 19)

Jean-Luc Nancy has metaphorically described a book as a “Möbius strip”, “in itself [...] finite and infinite, infinitely finite on all sides, opening a new margin on each page, each margin becoming wider, with a greater capacity for sense [...]” (2009: 15). He has also compared it with “a meteor that breaks up into thousands of meteorites whose random courses provoke collisions, strokes of genius, sudden crystallizations of new books [...], an immense interstellar circulation” (*ibid.* 44).

As might be the case with other arts, I see literary creativity as generosity in the act of sharing, as rebelliousness against closure and as guided by a willingness to embrace otherness and expand the readers’ horizons. This essay is about expansion. That is the key word. From my point of view, the ethical duty of committed literary scholars (mainly of those who are also lecturers at universities all over the world) is to practice the same generosity which is at the root of literature, and foster the expansion of the readers’ ideological, imaginative and creative horizons. They should avoid imposing anxiously prescriptive theories on how to approach and enjoy the experience of literature because prescription does not do any justice to the perpetual incompleteness of its messages, to the full-of-possibilities semiotic worlds that it generates.

The literature classroom should be a fruitful microcosm, a space facilitating the generation of new meanings and ideas. As Gonçalves Matos claims, it is necessary to work in the classroom “[...] within a reader-response framework”, because “as the reader participates in making the text real, s/he lives through the texts, finds a voice through them and moves towards appropriation of the text” (2005: 62, 68). It is my belief that this appropriation of a text, which might entail a uniquely personalized verbalization of its ‘wonderfully-*in-suspense*’ message, constitutes “an irreplaceable addition” (Hillis Miller 2002: 18) to the cultural treasures of a given community.

Working within the frame of a teaching practice guided by an ethics of expansion is, from my point of view, highly desirable, because it finds correspondence with the openness of literary texts and with the generosity inspiring their creation and dissemination. An ethics of expansion is guided by a non-prescriptive amalgam of principles, the application of which pursues the equal development of the intellectual, emotional, philosophical, imaginative and creative dimensions of human beings. This ethics is articulated around the idea that this conciliation can be meaningfully encouraged by working with literary texts, which is possible when we let the text flow and embrace the personality and the circumstances of every reader without imposing any fossilizing label on its potential effects. Conciliation leads to self-fulfilment, the primary psychological condition for instilling new, meaningful contributions into the dynamics of a given culture.

In the same way as it is impossible to find a uniquely valid definition for literature, so it is to claim the validity of the set of principles which, in my view, could integrate this ethics of expansion. My list is just a humble addition to a continuum of ideas about how to approach and exploit the greatness of literature. Borrowing the words that Richard Booker Brandt has used in a different context, “perhaps [I am] stating what is only true for [me]”, because no set of principles “[...] can be made to serve, like a telephone directory, as a source of clear-cut answers” (1959: 296). With Eagleton, I can only highlight “the scepticism of the normative that marks the literary ethics I am examining [...]” (2013: 99).

This brief description of the anatomy of the principles integrating an ethics of expansion, and of the culturally healthy processes that are activated after their application in the classroom, is permeated by some concise references to a corpus of literary texts which, somehow, have contributed to enriching my personal cosmivision in a significant way and have also been used in my classroom. Transcending their historical contextualization, and in line with the inexhaustibility that characterises literary texts, it is my belief that they will always be significantly functional. These thoughts mainly revolve around the

idea of expanding spaces for critical and creative habits which, due to several constraints, are normally neglected in the literature classroom.

The first principle is to leave room in the classroom for much explicit talk about the humanistic benefits derived from exploring and exploiting literature. Beyond the discussion and analysis of a specific corpus of texts, wonderfully 'generalist' talks like this are necessary. This principle is connected with the students' personal growth, and can be partially materialized in the process of encouraging their unmediated dialogue with the literary text beyond the impoverishing limits of interpretative closure. Students should become aware of the fact that they have the power to instil new life into something that they probably considered static and immutable. In its transposition to what happens outside the classroom, to the students' examination of the complexity of life, the encouragement of this process of unmediated dialogue nurtures critical thought and may also enable the emergence of personalized visions and, consequently, of freshly-new solutions to contemporary problems. This simple methodology can be described as pure resistance against the habit of subjecting our mind to the comfortable homogenization represented by those ready-made messages and ideas which, nowadays, have also found an appealing means of dissemination through technology. The serene process of reading and bringing out what the text causes in us is a rebellious act against the empire of monologism. An ethics of expansion fosters unbounded curiosity and deprecates the excesses of specialization which reign everywhere, with their materialization in the rebirth of radicalized nationalisms, in the strength gained by that capitalist individualism which believes in frontiers and is highly ignorant of the otherness that is suffering oppression, in the terror of fundamentalisms, in the simplification of the faculties of philology (about to turn into school of languages in most countries) and even in the impossibility of conciliating research, teaching, social activism and political action at Universities.¹ As Jean-Luc Nancy has noted, books "[...] are what make up entry into the [unbounded] commerce of thinking" (2009: 29).

As a powerful metafictional acknowledgment of the desire of the literary text to be always replenished and (re)appropriated, I used to exhibit in my lessons the blank pages inserted in Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759–1767), material symbols of this non-conventional eighteenth-century writer's wish to establish inalienable connections between his worldview and that of his readers. Out of this enriching mixture, of what Terry Eagleton has described as "the powerfully transformative process by which the world enters the text" (2013:

¹ Jordi Llovet (2011) provides meaningful insight on this distressing situation.

194), a meaningful chain of resistance against “petrified significations” (Talvet 2004: 140) is generated.

In intimate connection with this principle, a second one, almost indistinguishable from the first, emerges in this simple anatomy that I am delineating. We must intensely show our students that “literature is performative utterance” (Hillis Miller 2002: 37). This performativity may function, first, at a microcosmic level by, for example, strengthening one’s uniqueness through interwoven remnants of personally digested messages, passages, verses and stories which are incorporated to our worldview, significantly enriching it. Second, it may also function at a macrocosmic level: by contributing to changing society through the communication of what could be termed ‘stories of possibilization’ that, out of their intensity, may serve, for many others, as inspiration to pulverize passivity and to alter the *status quo*. Those texts containing especially intense hints of possibilization should constitute part of the medullary core of our literature programmes at University. I have always recommended my students to read a wonderful array of texts which, as Jeremy Sabella notes, demonstrate, for example, that the writer “[...] supplies the linguistic and symbolic tools which enable people to imagine and convey their interconnectedness to the universe and their fellows” (2012: 111). In this respect, I used to speak to my students about Aphra Behn, sympathetically embracing otherness in *Oroonoko* (1688), a novel written to defy the politics of imperialism which encapsulates her willingness to overcome aseptic separations and make a subtle humanistic call for symbiosis. We have also revisited the contributions of the sentimental writers of the eighteenth century, those who denounced the excesses of the cult of cold reason and advocated the equal development of all human faculties so as to reach self-fulfilment. I have always traced in my lessons a chronology of rebellious, dissenting voices, highlighting the importance of little semiotic miracles, like that embodied by Delarivier Manley’s Islamic heroines in her tragedies *The Royal Mischief* (1696) and *Almyna: or the Arabian Vow* (1707), women who, through a powerful strategy of displacement, consisting in deconstructing the validity of the binary opposition ‘Western women free *versus* Eastern women subjected’, used the latter as the unexpected vehicles for the construction of a powerful transnational feminist discourse.² On occasions across history, the potential of these stories of possibilization has actually caused social change, which must also be explicitly mentioned in our lessons. On many others, it has remained, and still remains, wonderfully *in suspensa*, but never exhausted. It is always waiting for multifarious ways of completion. And every reader may be the

² The contents of this transnational feminist discourse have been analyzed in Caballero Aceituno 2011.

vehicle for the accomplishment of its goal, for its possibilization. That is one of the areas where the democratising empowerment afforded by literature resides and, regrettably, we do not speak as much as we should about this in our lessons.

Speaking about medullary cores and university programmes leads us to a third important principle. An ethics of expansion should also be an ethics of permeability, an 'ethics of frontier' structured around the idea of making our students understand the benefits that might be derived from being ideologically positioned in what Yuri M. Lotman has described as the "boundary" of a given semiosphere,³ which he defines "as the outer limit of a first-person pronoun. This space is 'ours', 'my own', it is 'cultured', 'safe', 'harmoniously organized', and so on. By contrast, 'their space' is 'other', 'hostile', 'dangerous', 'chaotic'" (2001: 131). At first sight, this border can be interpreted as a locus of separation. However, Lotman, who highlights its value for cultural progress, prefers to see the boundary as a "place of incessant dialogue" (*ibid.* 142), as a zone of intense epistemological dynamism. From that abstract frontier, the students can contemplate the 'comfort' afforded by rejecting the contact with unknown otherness and remaining in the realm of safe normalities. Yet, as teaching is or, at least should be, a materialization of an enterprise guided by generosity we, lecturers, must be generous, advocate adventurous expansion and train our students to [experience the potential of the boundary as "[...] a mechanism for translating texts of an alien semiotics into 'our' language", as "the place where what is 'external' is transformed into what is 'internal'" (Lotman 2001: 136), and where "a sharp and hostile definition of 'us' and 'them'" (McRobie 2013: 22) is transcended. I have always wanted my students to be 'frontier students' because, as Lotman claims, the boundary is "the hottest spot [...] for semioticizing processes" (2001: 136), a space where we also allow the literary text to generate new messages that may be meaningfully and uniquely related to the students' position in the world and added to that miraculous chain of significations that keeps literature alive beyond asepsis and closure.

This principle of permeability is materialized in the process of working with a 'hospitable' corpus of literary texts which may transcend the separations imposed by binary oppositions and the interested distinctions between 'central' and 'peripheral' productions. We have to activate processes such as supplying the specificity of the study of the literature of a given nation or

³ As defined by Lotman, the semiosphere is "the whole semiotic space of the culture in question. [...] The semiosphere is the result and condition for the development of culture. [...] We justify our term by analogy with the biosphere [...] namely the totality and the organic whole of living matter and also the condition for the continuation of life" (2001: 125).

period with transitions to world literature and comparative studies. We must also make an effort at making visible the literary contributions of neglected or silenced voices. Those wonderful spaces where literature embraces other arts should also be explored. We should foster, in sum, our students' willingness to abandon 'epistemological comfort zones' and experience the otherness beyond the boundary, while making them see that it is their ethical duty to find channels to enrich their known, habitual spaces with the findings of their own exploration of 'the unknown'. Thus, an ethos of unbounded curiosity should be intellectually and emotionally validated in the classroom. In my view, one of the most important roles of both the lecturer and the literary scholar is to illuminate the possibility of deconstructing the exclusive validity of the safely contained dictates of what Lotman has termed the "nuclear structures" (2005: 211) of a given semiosphere. As Jüri Talvet has noted, "the new symbiotic literary and art philosophy should unite what has been violently and arbitrarily separated. We need both diachrony and synchrony, form and content, body and soul" (2005: 84). And we also need feelings, I would add.

In this essay, I am advocating nothing but self-fulfilment through the humanistic enrichment that the unbounded exploration of literary universes may cause. I am writing about activating mental processes that can validate an ethos of desire for wholeness which rejects interested mutilations. So far, I have mainly concentrated on the *episteme*: the fourth principle articulating this ethics of expansion is, by contrast, about feelings. In *Ethical Theory*, Richard Booker Brandt asserted that "[...] the simplest and historically most influential" of all ethical principles is "that one and only one thing is intrinsically worthwhile, and that this is pleasure or enjoyment" (1959: 296). Maybe, that was the reason why Laurence Sterne asserted in *Tristram Shandy* that his novel was written "against the spleen" (2003: 270): far away from the cold dictates of eighteenth-century Augustan moralists, Sterne was making a claim against the pessimism that limits human action.

We have to learn how to enjoy literary texts in our contemporary world, at a time in which hurries and stress govern all human transactions. As Heather K. McRobie notes,

this commodification of reality, through its duplication by the culture industry, leads, among other things, to a death of the imagination, that which conceives alternative modes of being. It thus reinforces the status quo, fulfilling only the false needs that the culture industry has taught people to want, rather than fulfilling their true human needs [...]: creativity, happiness and freedom. (McRobie 2013: 33)

Working with literary texts under such contemporary constraints should be a practice aimed at facilitating the fulfillment of these “true human needs”. Thus, the lecturer should encourage an attitude of rebellious serenity and impart an increasingly humanized rhythm to literature lessons, as when Laurence Sterne wonderfully detained the narrative thread of his *A Sentimental Journey through France and Italy* (1768) to meticulously describe how he felt the pulse of a young woman, “[...] counting the throbs of it, one by one [...]” (1984: 53). This may be considered an almost utopian enterprise, somehow in contradiction with tight schedules and almost-impossible-to-fulfill chronograms, but no bureaucratic requirement can rule out the possibility of expanding those spaces where an intimate dialogue between the world of the text and that of the reader, between its emotional texture and the feelings of a human being, takes place. In this respect, for example, I strongly believe that we must fly away from turning stylistic analysis into a prosaic practice that coldly treats texts as objects to be formally dissected. From subjecting our students to the dictates of an aesthetical philosophy keen on discussing isolated rhetorical effects, we must encourage them to discover and discuss an ‘aesthetics of affections’ that may reveal the intensity with which a human being held tight to the power of language to communicate a message. It is through the analysis and discussion of this anatomy of formally represented emotions that stylistic analysis can still make sense in contemporary society as a useful humanistic practice, useful even beyond the specialized realm of philology. As I see it, stylistic analysis should be a guide to enjoy and devour intensity and to discover and learn to decipher uniquely singularized codes of meaning production in this age of non-observation. Enjoyment can also be inserted in our literature programmes by means of an appealing thematic selection. Let me briefly exemplify, with a reference to a fruitful teaching experience, how I exploited the intersection between a textuality of intensity and a thematic area that led to endless discussion and enjoyment in the classroom.

Three years ago my lessons at the University of Jaén (Spain) were taught in the context of a fourth-year compulsory subject called *Literary Texts in English*, which revolved around the critical analysis of a corpus of short stories. My students concluded that the search for an identity, as represented in these texts, was one of the most attractive topics to be discussed. In fact, I do believe that the desire for an authenticity which could transcend the macrocosm of social masks, alienating normalities and ‘civilized’ behaviour, can be described as a timeless issue that defeats exhaustion, brings us together as human beings and has always haunted the imagination of writers. One of the most interesting aspects is that the description of the process of looking for an identity cannot be subjected to any prescriptive typology: rather, the discovery of its irreducibility, of its

unclassifiable specificity as materialized in literary texts, fosters the students' emotional and intellectual attachment to their messages. We analyzed the specificity of some representations of the drama of identity in two short stories by Katherine Mansfield and Doris Lessing – “Bliss” (1918) and “To Room Nineteen” (1958), respectively– delineating their anatomy by pointing out at one conspicuous feature shared by both narratives: the intensity of their discourses of identity, the textualization of which not only permeated the construction of these spaces in which we would normally expect them to be located (such as internal monologues or explicit ideological declarations) but also transcended the boundaries of these habitual *loci* to greedily embrace, for example, the realm of ‘prosaic’, everyday objects, the significance of which became meaningfully defamiliarized.

Bertha Young and Susan Rawlings, the main characters of Mansfield’s “Bliss” and Lessing’s “To Room Nineteen”, are women oppressed by an androcentric construct that has determined their socially desirable image. Confined to their domestic spaces and living in denial of their authentic inner selves, Bertha and Susan are the depositories of a stability which, though highly artificial, is necessary to maintain both social acceptance and the unity of their families. Initially, this androcentric construct seems to be accepted by both women. However, the narratives present them as becoming increasingly ‘estranged’ from its dictates and contemplating life from that *lotmanian* boundary that separates their ‘acceptable’ role from their ‘unexpected’ dreams of emancipation. Within the confines of this boundary, intense mental and emotional processes take place. These processes entail the progressive estrangement from their depersonalized selves, the exploration of life at the other side of the frontier, and the failed attempt at symbiotically conciliating what they are and what they want to be. The conjunction of these factors accounts for the stylistic presentation of the drama of identity as an ‘imperialist’ construct which invades and permeates the whole textuality of both short stories. We explored in our lessons, for example, how these women metaphorically transposed the complex architecture of the revolution that was going on in their minds onto the totality of the physical architecture of the domestic spaces where they were confined. We also discussed the symbolic construction of simple everyday objects, describing how their denotative meanings were overpowered by a creative vision which made them appear as subversive symbols. The conjunction in only a few pages of the ideological, psychological and emotional dimensions of the drama of unattainable identity and its imperialist textualization betrays an intensity which my students deemed perpetually translatable to different spatial and temporal contexts. In the same way as we need to incorporate in our lessons

texts containing stories of possibilization, an ethics of expansion also welcomes the analysis of 'textualities of intensity'.

The last principle articulating this ethics of expansion revolves around encouraging a transition from the students' silent appropriation of the text to the verbalization (and, hopefully, to the dissemination) of the ways in which that appropriation has taken place, highlighting the effects it has caused in them as human beings. A cultural community is enriched when the socio-political structures ruling it welcome the functional insertion of a constellation of different voices within its system and facilitate the dissemination of their contributions. In the same way, our literature classroom, which I see as a powerful microcosm generating new ideas within that community, must also cherish hospitality towards different voices. An ethics of expansion is, primarily, an ethics of resistance against the semiotic stagnation represented by monologism. The process of giving voice to our students' experience of literature also entails making them realize that, once shared, their contributions will become part of a wonderful continuum of endless dialogue with the text that keeps literature alive. The spaces for reflecting about the humanistic benefits derived from practicing personalized appropriations of the literary text must be expanded in the classroom. With varying degrees of awareness, our students may disseminate these reflections outside the classroom and thus contribute to incorporating more talk about literature outside academic spaces, expanding and democratizing its goodness in front of audiences that have traditionally thought that discussing and exploiting the potential of literature was something aseptically confined to the academia. Considering the literary text both an essential accompaniment of our lives and a "working model of human freedom" (Eagleton 2013: 60) will also contribute to fighting against "adaptive preferences" (McRobie 2013: 14), *i.e.*, those that constrain human action to certain limitations sanctioned as valid, and will also reinforce the application of "the capabilities approach" (*ibid.* 13) in the classroom.⁴

Terry Eagleton has argued that "one of the paradoxes of the literary work is that it is 'structure' in the sense of being unalterable and self-complete, yet 'event' in the sense that this self-completion is perpetually in motion, realized as it is only

⁴ As McRobie notes, the capabilities approach "[...] is an outcome-oriented theory of justice, which measures the justice of any social arrangement or state by the extent to which it secures for each individual a list of central 'capabilities', although these capabilities are also interdependent. [...] It is a positive liberty approach inasmuch as it predicates the concept of freedom on the idea of meaningful choice, and seeks to enable all individuals to have as wide a choice as possible, seeking to mitigate against what economics have identified as 'adaptive preferences'" (2013: 13–14).

in the act of reading” (2013: 201). With him, we agree on the idea that literary texts are events which endlessly generate more events. Some of these events (either the original or those whose birth is stimulated by the initial creative action) will be wonderfully inspiring, will communicate outside themselves and will even find a materialization in social change, in the establishment of new literary fashions or in the delineation of new personalities. They will still keep generating new meanings across spaces and cultures. Others will not be so alluring and will probably fall into mediocrity and oblivion, but even in this last case they will always be part of a timeless chain of significations providing evidence for the irreducible dynamism of literary texts, the potential of which can keep a culture alive beyond the coldness of closure. It is my belief that what happens in our literature lessons matters much more than we imagine, and to find mechanisms to show this is our strength, our wonderful duty and our huge responsibility as both scholars and lecturers in charge of literary education.

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