

The End of Literature; or, What Purposes Does It Continue to Serve?

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Abstract This article proposes to acknowledge the decline, roughly since the 1950s, in the role of literature as a major mechanism of life models, whether conservative or innovatory, and consequently to reevaluate the rationale of continuing literary studies as they are practiced today. This alleged decline does not mean that nonpractical texts, whether written or oral, have lost their various and often indispensable functions for socialization, developing skills, or emotional intelligence. It essentially means that the centrality of the sociopolitical role fulfilled by such texts — and not less significantly by its producers and promoters — has now shifted to other industries. At the same time, in

For Antón Figueroa Lorenzana, a great scholar and a dear friend.

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the context of intergroup competition for status based on the possession of symbolic goods, literature seems to have preserved its prestige value.

Keywords culture research, decline of literature, future of literary studies, social function

This article proposes to decisively acknowledge the decline, roughly since the 1950s, in the role of literature as a major mechanism of life models, whether conservative or innovatory, and consequently to reevaluate the rationale of continuing literary studies as they are practiced today. Those interested in investigating the dynamics of culture repertoires—that is, the processes through which a society handles its life via culture—may draw the conclusion that since literature is no longer a central mechanism for such dynamics it no longer makes sense to go on studying it as if it were one. On the other hand, if we are interested in understanding human culture since the dawn of history, we cannot ignore the major role of textuality at large and poetry and narration in particular in its evolution. Such a recognition may support continued interest in studying literature, though a distinction must be made between the study of the specifics of the literary system and disciplinary approaches that address the relative position of literature within culture as a whole. Since the social role of literature has changed, the discipline of literary studies needs to be reconceived accordingly as an expanded field to take into account the relations between literature and other cultural activities and the struggles for hegemony between them. Given our observation in this article that at least the branded components of literature, such as canonized texts and their producers, often still keep their value in the global stock exchange of symbolic goods, we do not call for the subject *literature* to be eliminated from the academic, scholarly, or intellectual agendas, though we believe that it might be more adequate to make it part of a larger framework, where it can be better accounted for.

Success and Decline of Literature

The production of nonpractical texts, including sayings and songs, has been an integral and at some moments a highly crucial factor in human history as a mechanism for maintaining, creating, and diffusing life models, that is, options for handling life. In several periods but definitely since the late eighteenth century, the success of literature as an organized activity of text production reflected its position as an indispensable institution for society and an important component of the political entity in which it operated. At various

moments it even became a main instrument for the creation of that entity itself and persisted as an instrument for its maintenance. Movements for the creation of such political entities used text producers, predominantly poets, to set their agendas and legitimize their actions (Even-Zohar 1996). Whenever the creation of political entities succeeded, these producers were turned into what Marijan Dović and Jón Karl Helgason (2017: esp. 71–96) call “secular saints,” surviving not only as bits of verbal memory but often also in the form of material monuments.¹

The consequences of these institutionalization processes have been prodigious. On the one hand, political entities, at whatever stage, have benefited from the literary industry. On the other, this industry has profited greatly from having been established as a socially privileged activity. The central protagonists of this industry, generally known as *authors*, have transformed themselves from marginal individuals invisible to society into prominent people entitled to express their opinions, and effectively so, on any subject whatsoever (Sela-Sheffy 2013, 2017). Their effectiveness was manifested not only in their freedom of speech, which also included the freedom to express ideas not generally accepted, but also in the fact that they were treated as relevant and consequently were listened to. Beginning with Émile Zola,² *poetic license* was interpreted and implemented as a license to be not only an initiator of new ideas but also an activist for sociopolitical change. This entailed a change in habitus. It came to be accepted that a writer might take the liberty to be more than a professional text maker. Many writers not only participated in change movements but also became their leaders or members of their leading groups.

On the other hand, whenever the life models projected by the literary texts did not match the generally accepted ideas or the interests of those in power, the new importance attributed to writers made them dangerous for the latter and consequently often objects of persecution. In this respect, the means for silencing them have been as abundant in so-called democracies as in dictatorships. The very existence of reprisals of whatever kind is clear evidence of the importance attributed to literature. Censorship, prohibitions, destruction of books, deportation, imprisonment, and execution of writers are all reprisals that can only be understood if the producers of texts and their products are

1. Dović and Helgason (2017) comment that Thomas Carlyle (1841) had already called attention to this manipulation of writers as persons for the creation of myths of modern nationalism in his essays on the poet hero. Helgason's (2011) discussion of the sacralization of Jónas Hallgrímsson in the Icelandic national revival is illustrative of hundreds of such cases.

2. Zola can be considered the first not so much because he really was the first writer-activist but because France occupied a central position in the nineteenth-century world system.

effective, valued, and feared. Such cases are too abundant and globally known, like the one Roman Jakobson (1975) refers to in his unforgettable description of how the czar had Aleksandr Pushkin eliminated, an extreme case of this kind of treatment. However, from the point of view of the literary industry, reprisals are still preferable to indifference, because the latter reflects marginalization.

The 2016 Case List of the PEN International Writers in Prison Committee identified 224 individuals suffering persecution and repression all over the world, including 32 poets, 28 singer-songwriters, and 142 other writers (PEN International 2016: 7). The highlighted imprisonments that year were from Honduras, Turkey, China, Egypt, and Israel.³ Writers were killed in Syria, Russia, Cambodia, Bangladesh, and Jordan, and freedom of expression was attacked in Italy and Spain. In Iran the author Golrokh Ebrahimi Iraee was sentenced to six years in prison for a short story, not yet published, about the cruel practice of stoning. All these examples point to the need to distinguish between general trends and the specific circumstances in different political contexts.

After nearly two centuries of success, there are now clear indications that the process is beginning to shift into reverse, namely, that the historical status of literature is declining. However, it is not quite clear how this presumed decline is manifested in concrete terms. As is well known, the literary industry does not consist only of producers, texts, and readers. Rather, it comprises a wider network of factors which also includes institutions and markets where various agents act as promoters. It also plays a role in the creative industries economy, occupying a relevant position in the life of the so-called creative classes.⁴ The aim of the agents of this industry, producers and promoters alike, has always been to endow literature with the capacity to be more than a pastime or an amusement, making it an enterprise capable of proposing means of understanding life and, more crucially, models of how to act. Itamar Even-Zohar (1999, 2002) has suggested calling this operational mode “literature as tools.” When operating “as tools,” literature is a major factor in

3. Arab-language writers, both Israeli citizens and Palestinians from the occupied territories, have been imprisoned in Israeli jails. The state’s charge against them has been “incitement to violence and terrorism, and support for a terrorist organization” (Snir 2017: 125). This treatment of Arab-language writers is clear evidence of what one might call hysterical overestimation of the power of the written word. However, the state has not taken such drastic measures against Hebrew-language writers, who have been reprimanded instead by symbolic and financial means.

4. See Bergua Amores et al. 2016; Brouillette 2014; Florida 2014; Henry and De Bruin 2011 for discussions of the creative industries and classes. According to some scholars, the creative industries currently occupy about 30 percent of the total economy in Western societies.

creating and diffusing *social resources*, *social capital*, and *social energy*.⁵ This means that it functions as a major instrument in shaping behaviors, beliefs, world-views, and activities.

In addition to operating as tools, like any other activity or institution in culture, literature also operates on a different level, namely, as *a set of goods*. When operating “as goods” (Even-Zohar 1999, 2002), all of the components of literature draw their importance from being valuable possessions. On the individual level, this means that the owners can show to other members in their groups that they own these goods and therefore are entitled to claim status for them. “Owning” begins with a material possession. Private libraries are set up, and books get costly bindings to make an impressive visual display. It then extends to connoisseurship, which makes knowledgeable people into “an elite group that holds disproportionate political, economic, and cultural power” (Griswold 2008: 2). On the collective level, the intergroup space displays a given group’s ownership of these goods and its subsequent claims to be recognized as equal or superior to others who may also own them. An intergroup market of such valuable goods has been decisive since antiquity in hierarchizing the various ethnic and political groups vis-à-vis each other, allowing some to have more say than others in the world system. When a group had no literary goods to show or when its literary property failed to be recognized as valuable in this market, the entire group could suffer prejudice that put it in a disadvantageous position. Peripheral groups have always tended to be almost automatically pushed into such a position and naturally have been more aware of their disempowerment.⁶

During the high tide of success for literature at large, most forcefully during the last two hundred years, both operational modes of literature have been strong and active. It might be helpful, then, to explore whether the alleged decline of the status of literature in recent decades is primarily on the instrumental (tools) or the symbolic (goods) level.

Is Reading Declining? Is Reading a Valid Indicator?

One of the frequently mentioned indicators for the deteriorating status of literature is the alleged decline of reading. For some time we have been

5. *Social energy* denotes the ability of a group to generate solutions for changing life circumstances. See Even-Zohar 2016 for a detailed discussion.

6. The popular contemporary Ukrainian writer Oksana Zabuzhko (2007) poignantly expressed the awareness of being underprivileged because of an alleged lack of recognized literary assets: “If Kotsiubynsky and Lesya Ukrainka had been known to the world at the level of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, our country would not have had to give up its nuclear weapons.” Zabuzhko’s claims may sound naive, but her belief that this kind of capital is beneficial in terms of symbolic and material gains represents a widely accepted conviction.

bombarded with claims about the end of the book and the disappearance of reading. Agents in the literary field tend to complain that people, particularly the young, no longer read books. Such evaluations are indeed supported by some hard facts. In the United States, for example, “the 2002 census shows that literary reading is down 10.2% from the 1982 census, which equates to the loss of 20 million potential readers. Even more striking is the numbers reported for young adults. In 1982, 60% of young adults engaged in literary reading, while in 2002, only 43% do” (Krashen 2005: 1). However, any measurement of a decline in reading needs to ask compared to when? Are we making short-term or long-term comparisons? It is likely that in absolute figures the number of readers is higher today than at most other periods in history. A different issue is what they read and what the social status and role of literature is at a time of high competition between different media.

It seems a paradox that the historical peak of literature as a resource of options spanned a century and a half (roughly between 1800 and 1950) and during this time the vast majority of people could neither read nor write, especially since texts were often written in a language they did not speak or had difficulties with. In contrast, at this moment in time, when in Western countries’ literacy rates have reached almost 100 percent and those languages that were once only used for writing have successfully become spoken tongues (e.g., in France, Italy, Spain, Scandinavia, and Germany), the reading of literary works and above all the community relevance of literary works seems to be in retreat.⁷

Even setting aside the question of how widespread book reading really was in the past, various recent statistics show that assertions about the decline of book reading in the present might be quite unsubstantiated, at least as far as text production is concerned. For example, production rates in Europe are presently holding steady or even increasing, although a certain drift toward stagnation might be detectable (Federation of European Publishers 2015). However, in emerging economies book production is steadily growing (Bazán Babczonok and Steward 2016). With this in mind, we need to take a more global view when it comes to making generalizations based on reading indexes. The NOP World Culture Score Index (NOP World 2005) indicates that India, Thailand, China, the Philippines, Egypt, the Czech Republic, Russia, Sweden, France, Hungary, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, and Poland are above the average in their reading rates. This may well imply the significant vitality of literature in these countries, of which the first five are non-Western. Nevertheless, these indexes should be treated with caution, since

7. In 1870 more than three-quarters of the world’s population had never had the chance to go to school, and probably only 19 percent could read.

these five countries also have very high illiteracy rates. Moreover, book production rates per se may not be valuable indicators for reading rates, since books are often purchased as gifts instead of for consumption.⁸ Some countries show an increase in the publication of literature for children and youths (International Publishers Association 2013). In the United States the Association of American Publishers underscored in a recent report that “trends this year included significant growth in the children and young adult category, ongoing growth of eBooks, and the growing popularity of audio books” (Bluestone 2015).

The claim that young people do not read, with negative consequences for the fate of reading in general (especially of literature), exempts adults, who are the ones who make these claims and express these concerns. In any case, the claim is false. Pertinent data indicate an increase in children’s and young adult book sales. It is apparently in adulthood that we find less reading, while it is adults, rather than children or young people, who lament this “catastrophe.” Adults are the very people who could read but do not and who could ensure some relevance for literature but do not. They are the ones who would like people to read when they do not themselves and who would like reading to serve political ends of national cohesion, identity, education, and so forth rather than the purposes they used to acclaim (such as pleasure or knowledge). Actually, as can be deduced from best-seller lists (International Literary Association 2015), young people simply do not read what adults want them to (and many adults simply do not read what other adults want them to either).

The current state of reading does not justify drawing any conclusions suggesting decline, nor does it support the supposed continued instrumental function of literary texts, because this issue needs to be addressed using different parameters. We do not contend that literature is on the wane either as a social presence or as a consumer goods industry or that this decline implies total and general deactivation of its important role for the sociocultural and political cohesion of a community. It is difficult to dispute, nonetheless, that literature has lost its hegemonic role as a provider of models and resources for making sense of human experience. Audiovisual media and the internet have greatly reduced the influence of literature on the social imaginary. However, a nonhegemonic position in the current highly complex cultural environment does not preclude the possibility that literary texts still preserve their function

8. “Books were among the very first commercial Christmas presents. Not only that, but they were integral to the development of a modern Christmas holiday primarily organized around familial gift exchange. . . . Books — along with sewing machines, pianos, and furniture — were among the very first items that people purchased with the aid of a resource newly extended to them toward the end of the nineteenth century, namely, consumer credit” (Striphas 2009: 7–8).

as tools in some countries more than in others because of the political context or in some sectors of society for specific purposes. For example, social groups with limited or no access to hegemonic channels of self-representation still find in literature an alternative vehicle to make their voices heard. Attention to the diversity of contexts is thus a requirement for any diagnosis of literature's continuing function.

In fact certain texts, whether old or new, highbrow or popular, often used as or transformed into rites, still may play a major role in the production or transmission of ideas and feelings and the willingness to initiate or participate in actions. To the well-known persistent effectiveness of certain religious texts we can add other classes of so-called artistic composition, for instance, narrative, music, rhythm, rhyme, wordplay, metaphor, sayings or proverbs, folk or popular songs, and everything that is made to be (re)cited and that can be a device or slogan amounting almost to a directive for action. Overall, however, reading, book production, and book purchases for accumulation of valued goods or for gift exchange may all point at the continued status of texts as goods but not necessarily as tools, that is, as powerful instruments for social management and change. The latter capacity has been diminished in most societies and can only be said to continue operating if we redefine what we understand by *literature*.

An Expanded Field in a Peripheral Position?

Literature has ceased to enjoy a privileged position as a source for tools to interpret reality and interact with our environment, and it has particularly lost its historical usefulness for states in the process of nation building. Nevertheless, we can still find instances in which under certain circumstances literary texts maintain their capacity to function as tools and particularly as vehicles of political resistance. George Orwell's *1984*, for example, benefited from an unexpected surge in readership in the wake of the 2016 US presidential election. In the days after Kellyanne Conway, an adviser to Donald Trump, referred to "alternative facts" in an interview to justify a false claim by the White House press secretary, *1984* sold out on Amazon and rose to the top of its best-seller list, a 9,500 percent increase in sales in five days (de Freytas-Tamura 2017). Orwell provided readers with a meaningful background against which to reflect critically on current events.

On a different scale, in an antagonistic political regime, Bandi (a pseudonym) is a North Korean author whose collection of short stories, *The Accusation* (2017), is a powerful denunciation of everyday life under the Communist dictatorship. Writers without access to mainstream media and no freedom of expression resort to literature and the easily available technology of writing

to make their voices heard. In very much the same way, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn presented the experience of the Soviet gulag in the sixties. Testimonial literature, whether in the form of memoir or fiction, remains an irreplaceable tool for making sense of human experience. It can channel the expression of political dissidence, supply role models for self-identification, or allow a glimpse into the lives of others unlike us: the excluded, the oppressed, the deviant, the transgressor. Literature can be a more effective and accessible instrument of empowerment for those on the margins of a society than film or television. Production and distribution in film or television are only available to those with financial resources and institutional connections, and in many states political controls and censorship impose restrictions on mass media. So in a sense literature's lost status as an auxiliary to power has transformed into a resource for the powerless.

Texts can also work outwardly as the image of a community or a country in situations where writers are the best-known (and sometimes the only) representatives of the community recognized by foreign audiences. In such cases literary texts are instruments their receivers use to *understand* or know (something about) that country or community. This is the situation in Mozambique, whose cultural systems are mainly viewed from outside through Mía Couto and his works.⁹ In some cases, although a community or country is also known through other figures or factors, some cultural producers become basic elements of *understanding*. In all these cases texts operate as goods.

In Cuba this role is fulfilled by Silvio Rodríguez and Pablo Milanés,¹⁰ whose sung poems reach millions of people. These authors take positions and make claims about their country in public statements, making them also intellectual agents.

From a systemic viewpoint, we should acknowledge that much of what circulates in the mainstream media and offers audiences tools for life is in fact literature, even though it is not consumed in the form of books. The novels of Jane Austen, who remains a feminist icon, are still sold and read. However, it is unquestionable that her more widespread influence comes from the adaptation of those novels into films and television series. Her message that women who struggle for their integrity have a chance of being rewarded

9. Mía Couto (born in Beira in 1955) is considered one of the most relevant Portuguese-language writers. His works have been published in more than twenty countries and in various languages. An international jury at the Zimbabwe International Book Fair named his first novel, *Terra sonâmbula*, one of the twelve best African books of the twentieth century. For more information, see his website, www.miacouto.org.

10. Silvio Rodríguez (born in San Antonio de los Baños, Cuba, in 1946) and Pablo Milanés (born in Bayamo, Cuba, in 1943) are founders and historic leaders of the Nueva Trova Cubana and two of Latin America's best-known singers. For more information, see their websites, www.zurrondelaprendiz.cult.cu and www.milanespablo.com, respectively.

with a happy ending is relevant today. People easily update the anachronistic details in their imaginations, and of course several audiovisual adaptations do the updating for the audience. Although these stories are still valued for their life options, some are not available in many societies.

Azar Nafisi's *Reading "Lolita" in Tehran* (2004) demonstrates the enduring capacity of literature to offer guidance and create spaces of resistance, however modest, in the face of oppression. By inviting seven women, her former students, to meet regularly at her home to discuss literary works, Nafisi transgressed accepted social norms to open a small haven of freedom, using the texts as critical compasses to navigate the women's suffocating conditions. In a country where child marriage is legal, they read Vladimir Nabokov's novel from the point of view of the victim. Even though the immediate reach of Nafisi's scheme was very limited, it constituted a collective undertaking that resorted to "literature as tools" and, through the success of her own book, became an emancipatory proposition for other women.

Moreover, if we stop thinking of literature in terms of printed books, we will recognize its presence under a variety of disguises. Written texts have been the preferred medium for the transmission of literature only during a relatively short period in the history of humanity. Before them were oral literature, both poetry and narrative, and eventually theater. Nowadays we are witnessing another technological paradigm switch, as literature is supported by new formats and devices. We encounter it in the cinema and in television series, in spoken word contests and festivals that represent a return to oral transmission, and in social networks and blogs that take advantage of multimedia technology. For poets, the internet has become a godsend allowing them to skip printing to reach a larger audience than ever before with minimal cost and to interact with their readers in a virtual community.

The awarding of the 2016 Nobel Prize in Literature to Bob Dylan, aside from the debate on his merits or the opportunism of the committee, indicates an official willingness to accept what has been fairly evident for quite some time: that song is a popular vehicle for poetry, much as it was before the age of the book. Whether it is Dylan or hip-hop or Leonard Cohen adapting Federico García Lorca or Konstantinos Kavafis, poetry transcends its minority readership and marginal position and reaches the mainstream thanks to the resources and marketability of mass-culture media. It is literature under a different label, and to the extent that these products offer consumers recipes for life, narratives about love, or political protest, they function as cultural tools.

The paradox may be that literature has managed to spread its influence by diluting its distinct identity. It no longer holds a hegemonic position as a

provider of tools. It seems to have moved from the center to the periphery of the cultural field, but at the same time its own field has expanded, branching into a variety of media and amplifying its resonance to the point that it forces us to redefine the disciplinary approaches with which to engage this much more fluid object of study. The study of the new functions of authors and texts will require incorporating fieldwork and empirical research to move beyond entrenched perceptions and elicit demonstrable results.

Cognitive and Emotional Development

On a different level, reading literary texts may remain a universal and useful tool for human development. Powerful corroboration comes from two areas: (1) the function of literary texts in cognitive and emotional development in light of their simulation of reality, though very little is yet known about the relationship between brain and feelings (Frazzetto 2013), and (2) the use of this type of text to get to know a given subject matter, place, community, or individual (in particular a writer). However, it should be noted that this perspective applies to literature as a tool on the individual rather than on the collective or social level, which lies at the core of our argument.

Indeed, some nascent research in cognitive psychology and neuroscience suggests some kind of relationship between fiction (and its potential for simulating) and certain emotional or psychological effects, mainly in the processes of empathy (Oatley 2012; Fong et al. 2013; Mar and Rain 2015), even from the earliest years of life (Mar et al. 2010). Other studies have found relations between fiction and developing brain areas relating to language (e.g., Cunningham and Stanovich 2001) and visualization (Hutton et al. 2015).

David Comer Kidd and Emanuele Castano (2013) and Maja Djikic and Keith Oatley (2014) propose a psychological conception of literature that encompasses changes in personality that literary reading might encourage. Along the same lines, other relevant studies (e.g., Mar et al. 2011) recommend examining whether many of the effects found in film and television are extendable to literary fiction to analyze the links between emotion and reading. They reflect on the possible improvement of social skills and personality changes and on the educational and therapeutic potential of such effects.

The relationship between literary reading and ethics has also been explored. In 2000 Jèmeljan Hakemulder, reviewing the existing literature on the subject, concluded in his pioneering *Moral Laboratory* that reading can affect norms and values and that literature-based programs can significantly increase the natural development of moral judgment. According to Hakemulder (2000: 37), in the domain of self-esteem, above all with respect to sexual roles, there seems to be a broad consensus that reading can affect

performance in relation to gender, beliefs about natural differences between men and women, and actual behavior. Hakemulder concludes, based on empirical evidence, that reading stories affects social perception (155). In 2011 Hakemulder published another book focusing on the processes of literary experience, the functions of literature and their motivations (such as lexical acquisition, sociability, and knowledge about oneself and others with regard to emotions, thoughts, and reasons and their implications for pedagogy and education).

Research in the fields of cognitive psychology and neuroscience has also focused on literature and reading. Isabel Jaén and Julien Jacques Simon's *Cognitive Literary Studies* (2012) highlights what literary analysis can offer to cognitive science and the role of narrative as a mechanism for social adaptation. Similarly, the first issue of the *Scientific Study of Literature*, "The Future of Scientific Studies in Literature" (see Dixon and Bortolussi 2011), makes a programmatic and revisionist intervention in the field of cognitive processing, the study of emotional reactions aroused by literary texts, and the interaction between them and the reader. Further research along these lines may offer more consistent results.

Cultural Tourism

The power of literary texts and authors in the production and transmission of ideas is evident in the case of so-called cultural tourism. Abundant case studies have addressed this subject (a recent synthesis is Quinteiro and Baleiro 2014). Texts are sometimes an important stimulus for touristic activities and the tourism industry, literary museums, and the identities of communities, and they also trigger the creation of professional associations (Hendrix 2014: 19).¹¹ As Harald Hendrix notes, writers' homes that serve as museums are important, sometimes crucial, for the host communities and their visitors, who identify communal reality through them. Among the best-known "literaturized" spaces are James Joyce's Dublin and Dracula's Transylvania, the latter exemplifying the power of repeated exposure to a piece of work, a character, an author, and so forth through moving-image media. Other phenomena have an even more decisive impact for communities. For instance, Aracataca, Colombia, the birthplace of the Nobel Prize laureate Gabriel García Márquez, has experienced enormous economic changes because of the volume of visitors. The town even came close to changing its name to

11. The Fédération des Maisons d'Écrivains et des Patrimoines Littéraires published a review of these associations in its "Panorama européen des lieux littéraires: An overview of literary places in Europe." Accessed April 10, 2018.

Aracataca-Macondo, the mythical village in García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, in a referendum the mayor promoted.¹² *O diário de um mago* (significantly translated as *The Pilgrimage*) by Paulo Coelho, one of the most accessible discourses on the Camino de Santiago (apart from those by the Catholic Church and UNESCO), undoubtedly contributed to the boom in pilgrimages to Santiago de Compostela and the creation of similar routes imitating it in Brazil, Coelho's home country (see Torres Feijó 2014). The symbolic and social values of texts and authors intersect here, too, with their instrumental value, manifesting their double nature as goods and subsequently as tools but also the permeable border between these two modes.

The Persistence of "Literature as Goods"

Naturally, "literature as tools" must be closely linked to the capacity of literature to operate in a society. As discussed above, many have maintained that reading and literacy are necessary conditions for consuming literature and consequently for literature to be influential. We contend that this is only partially correct. To satisfy the parameter of "literature as goods," on the other hand, reading is no more necessary than is playing football or even watching it on TV for it to be considered a collective good. Furthermore, "literature as goods" has prospered throughout history without most people being able to read.

While literacy, at least initially, can certainly make literary texts more accessible, it is by itself neither cause nor evidence of the consumption or effectiveness of literature. The attitudes, images, and ideas literature provided reached wider social circles through a number of channels apart from individual literacy. One of these was reading groups, where individuals who were able to read texts communicated them to others in the group by summarizing them or reading them aloud. There are testimonies to such activities, although we do not know their extent or prevalence at different times and in different societies.

Certain festivities, such as the Floral Games, celebrated since the last decades of the nineteenth century in France, Catalonia, and Galicia, or the Eisteddfod, revived in 1865 in Wales, also belong to the aforementioned tradition. In all of these events, the most important feature was the reading aloud of texts written in nonofficial, alternative languages in opposition to the contemporary state's attempts to impose linguistic and cultural homogeneity.

12. The case of Illiers, France, is similarly well known. In 1971 the local authorities changed the name of the town to Illiers-Combray to reflect the name Marcel Proust used in *À la recherche du temps perdu*.

Through these and other methods texts could be shared, producing reactions, changes of attitudes, and even actions. A well-known example is the reading (including in groups) of the American novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe, which greatly boosted the abolitionist cause in the United States before the Civil War.

Published on March 20, 1852, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* sold 10,000 copies within the first week and 300,000 by the end of the first year. . . . The contract that Harriet and Calvin had agreed to gave them 10 percent of the sales—not an unusual agreement for the time and one that netted \$10,000 in the first three months of sales—“the largest sum of money ever received by any author, either American or European, from the sale of a single work in so short a period of time,” the press noted. (Hedrick 1994: 223)

Legend has it that Abraham Lincoln, greeting Stowe in 1862 (that is, during the war), said, “So you’re the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war” (Sachsman et al. 2007: 8n1).¹³ Stowe successfully capitalized on her literary success to spread her ideas about abolition through further nonliterary publications and public appearances. Few American writers have reached this status in a country where literature early on abandoned its sociopolitical role (Hochman 2011).

In contrast to the relative decline of “literature as tools,” the function of “literature as goods” seems generally to persist. The competition for status in the stock exchange of symbolic goods on the global and local levels continues much as it did during the previous two centuries. It is still important to participate in international book fairs or to be nominated for a Nobel Prize—as important as competing for a medal at the Olympics—not only for the participants but for the communities they represent. For minorities or groups that feel marginalized or discriminated against, asserting and demonstrating their capacity to produce literature and win prizes is still an important part of their struggle to improve their status. Although a number of university departments of literary studies have been closed or scaled back, literature is still taught in schools, even if the subject is not as robust or prestigious as it once used to be.

In societies where the figure of the public intellectual persists and such people continue to have a bully pulpit in the press and the media, being recognized as a literary author is one of the main criteria of accreditation. It gives one the right to speak and be heard on a variety of issues that have

13. Cindy Weinstein (2004: 1) comments: “Even if we grant Lincoln’s statement its obvious degree of ironic intention, he, nevertheless, makes quite a claim for the impact of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* on American history. One glance at virtually any of Lincoln’s speeches reveals that he, like Stowe, believed that the power of words could alter the minds and hearts of individuals.”

nothing to do with literature and for which the author may have no other qualification.¹⁴ Because of the symbolism and the importance of literature as a good that increases the symbolic capital of the writer, he or she is received as a supplier of tools outside the literary field (in the intellectual field, fundamentally). Sometimes it affords the writer impact, audience, and *auctoritas* in the intellectual field by virtue of the capital accumulated and transferred from the literary field.

The demand that an educated person be able to display knowledge about texts and writers persists, provoking certain intellectuals to advocate resistance to such elitist terror in the name of liberating the underprivileged. Pierre Bayard (2007: xiii), “born into a milieu where reading was rare, deriving little pleasure from the activity, and lacking in any case the time to devote myself to it,” describes a situation where everyone acquires the habit of speaking about books they have not read. Bayard’s experience is based, however, on the circumstances in his own French culture, where the link between literary connoisseurship and social status may still be strong, generating the kind of sociocultural tyranny that oppresses the masses. Whether the same demands are still as strong in other cultures remains to be investigated.

There are moments, however, when teaching and preserving literature suddenly become major issues of concern for a society, as the following cases illustrate. In Italy in 1988 the Ministry of Education appointed a committee known as the Commissione Brocca to propose new curricula and new teaching programs for the upper secondary schools. The media extensively covered the heated discussions about the committee’s alleged intention to eliminate Alessandro Manzoni’s novel *I promessi sposi* (*The Betrothed*) from the compulsory curriculum. Although the ministry publicly denied the allegation, the controversy raged for quite a number of years. In 2010, during the presentation of his book *La storia dei “Promessi sposi” raccontata da Umberto Eco* (*The Story of “The Betrothed” Told by Umberto Eco*), which was meant to save the book from oblivion and make it more accessible, the late Umberto Eco admitted that “the reading of the novel, as obligatory, is considered boring by the majority of the Italians” (*Il Fatto Quotidiano* 2015). That probably encouraged the then prime minister, Matteo Renzi, to declare on that very day, in a speech before a group of students at the Luiss School of Government in Rome, “I agree with Umberto Eco: The reading of *The Betrothed* at school should be prohibited by law, because making it obligatory has made it despicable, and instead that would return the charm to a masterpiece.” The students “loudly applauded him” (*Il Tempo* 2015).

14. Ignacio Sánchez-Cuenca (2016), a political scientist, criticizes what he considers the abusive interference of Spanish writers in political debates.

What makes this and similar examples¹⁵ significant for our topic is the involvement of politics. What stands out is the fact that a country's prime minister considered expressing opinions on a literary text a matter of national importance. His speech gave rise to a series of reactions from various people, both educated and uneducated, who submitted thousands of comments to the digital editions of newspapers. This is clear evidence of the continuing function of literature as community goods and symbols. Although *I promessi sposi* was for most Italians boring and hard to read, it was evidently unacceptable for them to think that it could be eliminated from the world's literary canon, where it coexisted with famous French, English, German, Russian, and Spanish texts.

In March 2015 a similar case occurred amid the fervor of the Israeli elections, although this time it originated from negative attitudes and fear. The right-wing prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who had unexpectedly also become minister of education following the original minister's resignation, decided to disqualify a writer and two professors of literary studies who had been nominated for that year's Israel Prize. This unprecedented interference by a minister was widely censured. Many members of the award committees resigned, and the 2015 Israel Prizes in those areas were annulled. Hostility of this kind from those in power is further evidence of the continuing function of "literature as goods" but also of an enduring perception of its potential as "literature as tools." By disqualifying them, the prime minister intended to silence the author and professors (something which in other circumstances would have been treated with indifference) but mostly to cater to his electorate, for whom modern literature represents liberal ideas and left-wing world-views. This signals that to some extent they view it as a source of ideologically influential tools.

The continuing role of "literature as goods" is sometimes notable in the fields of collective identities or cultural diplomacy and international relations, and it can express the political and professional interests of various parties or groups. A clear example is that sociolinguistic and cultural relations between countries and between the metropolis and former colonies derive from their relative economic, political, and military weights, among other things. In this

15. When in 2001 the left-wing minister of education of Portugal announced reforms in the education system, including the removal of Luis de Camões's *Os Lusíadas* (*The Lusíads*) and other works from the compulsory curriculum, both right- and left-wing politicians raised their voices in protest. Vasco Graça Moura and David Justino, spokespersons of the Partido Social Democrata for culture and education, respectively, attributed the demotion of *The Lusíads* to "a deplorable complex of a retrograde Left, who are ashamed of Portugal's past" (Leira 2002). They concluded that for all these reasons the curriculum revisions and the new programs should be suspended.

regard a controversy arose in Brazil in early 2016 over the presence of Portuguese literature in the national curriculum for nonuniversity education, the Base Nacional Curricular Comum. The issue at stake, considering the focus of the debates, was the removal of an element symbolic of the former metropolis. This was reported by the Portuguese and Brazilian presses (Bender Garcia and Ruy Lozano 2016), resulting in newspaper controversies, manifestos, and conflicting political reactions. In this controversy various intellectuals expressed strong dissent from the ideology of the ruling party, the Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers' Party), which justified the elimination of Portuguese literature from the curriculum.

The Brazilian case shows how “texts as goods” have occasionally become the cause of disagreement between communities, whether they share the same territory or not, in their struggle to own those texts. This happens, for instance, when community agents are willing to appropriate texts and authors whose origins or functions make them objects of dispute, such as writers who were born or lived in the colonizing country but whose work was important in the colonized territory in colonial times. It happens too when agents of a given community reject such texts, which are considered the result of the colonization of their community by another community, because they are not consistent with their definition of community (or nation). Here the arguments are often based on different definitions of identity and nation/community and on the utilization of texts or authors, emphasizing these texts' or authors' transformations or their double natures as goods and tools. In short, at stake in cases such as the Brazilian one is for some the definition of local identity (*Brazilianness* in this case) and its explicit independence from some historical colonizing power (Portugal), opening up space for the marginalized others. For others it is an acknowledgment that it is essential to understand identity, demonstrating the functioning of literature as a tool but mainly as a symbol.

Some Tentative Consequences: The Future of Literary Studies

One inevitable consequence of our analysis is that literature's celebrated “autonomy” turns out to be questionable and relative at best. Obviously, as in every industry, rules of production and institutionalized activities compete against each other in model production and in the general repertoire of solutions. However, it would be wrong to maintain that these models can be handled independently of nonindustrial factors. As Antón Figueroa (2010) notes, in many circumstances, including the Galician case, literature cannot

be disconnected from politics.¹⁶ Reasons to understand literature as a heteronomous rather than an autonomous system are abundant. The successful attainment of symbolic capital by a large group cannot be understood without taking into account heteronomy in relation to sociopolitical factors. Moreover, the independence or alleged autonomy of writers is often just an illusion, since they depend on power even more than the industry itself does. *L'art pour l'art* has been a strategy of the literati to protect themselves from indifference rather than a policy of separation from or a rupture with society. It is obvious that literary activity (particularly on the part of certain writers or in the case of popular texts) depends on the approval of the appropriate agents in power and on social recognition to achieve symbolic importance. This approval is originally imposed and later accepted as logical and “natural.” In many cases these processes are opposed to those of folk and/or mass literary activities.

The convergence between the decline of “literature as tools” and the persistence of “literature as goods” can be interpreted as the end of literature as we knew it. Here *end* could mean the termination of the role literature played in other historical periods as a key, significant activity in society, although it persists in the form of the symbolic capital invested in pantheons and celebrated as “heritage,” as an entertainment and educational industry, as a repertoire of resources and models that maintains social relevance through its expanded circulation in other media, and in some societies as a potential space of political dissidence with a level of influence yet to be researched but that still sometimes warrants state persecution.

It may be far-fetched to state that literature has reached its limit in providing the necessary resources for humanity and therefore can be released from and relieved of this role, which henceforth other media will play. On the other hand, there is one aspect in which literature has already made its contribution to sociocultural organization and cannot be expected to offer new solutions. Indisputably, at this point most modern states have successfully imposed a unified language (although provisionally in many cases), which, paradoxically, has contributed to the redundancy of literature’s functioning as a tool for that unification.¹⁷

16. Jaume Subirana (2018) argues that Catalan poets continue to play a central role and are repeatedly invoked in the discourse about national identity.

17. Nevertheless, literature still functions in some of these states as an auxiliary tool for improving language skills. For example, in 2010 the Italian Ministry of Education (2010: 12) explained in its *Schema di regolamento (Regulation Scheme)*, “The reading of texts of literary value has also enriched students linguistically, particularly improving their vocabulary and semantics, their ability to adapt syntax when it comes to the construction of meaning and to adjust their register and tone for different topics, as well as their attention to stylistic effectiveness, which are presupposed in written competence.”

The fact that literature as an institution may be undergoing a process of marginalization has nothing to do with the daily production of narrative or poetry. It is true that literature has developed themes and techniques for narration and expression of feelings, but the ability to tell and sing has been one of the most important foundations of culture since the beginning of human existence, long before recorded history. Some theories of cultural evolution have already accepted the hypothesis that the ability to tell was an important invention in history, as important as making fire or the ability to cook. Without it humanity would not have been able to survive. Since they started to speak, and perhaps earlier through sign language, humans have told stories “to mark a special occasion, give an example, make a warning, get food, or explain what seemed inexplicable” (Zipes 2012: 2). Even if literature disappeared completely all over the world, whether gradually or suddenly, the daily routines of telling and singing would remain as long as humanity exists.

The heteronomous situation of literature is not exclusive. It would be more appropriate to acknowledge that heteronomy, that is, the state of dynamically interlocking systems, is intrinsic to all social processes. All activities of what might be called nonpractical industries are in similar positions, and their successes or diminutions do not differ much from what literature is undergoing. Accordingly, analyzing literature as if it were an independent phenomenon cannot be sustained unless one means for it to be the only object of interest. Elias J. Torres Feijó (2012) maintains that the diminished role of literature has caused literary studies to lose their former relevance. In his words, “The old alliance between the State and the study of (national) literature via the school system has collapsed” (154). He advises against “wast[ing] time on melancholy, remembering those good old days in which to know literature, socially speaking, or to be a professor of literature, still had its Archimedean social weight” (156). Instead, it is time to leverage the situation and design a discipline that could be more extensive than literary studies and more capable of dealing with the complexity of our cultural environments. Such a discipline could be more relevant to present-day life and could also provide new generations with more adequate and convincing knowledge from the point of view of the postulates of research. Such a discipline already exists: “Culture Research (not to be confused with Cultural Studies)” (165). As far as academic practice is concerned, it is urgent to acknowledge this situation and suggest some solutions before it is too late.

Moreover, without contradicting the previous argument, it is possible to come to the same conclusions by other means based on the *inner logic* of literary studies. Over thirty years ago, in 1985, at a symposium at the University of Bayreuth, Even-Zohar voiced his doubts about the possibility of con-

tinuing with the concepts and accepted methods of literary studies. His arguments were related to the ongoing efforts at that time to develop a more appropriate discipline for the study of literature. He argued that it was necessary to reform the science of literature, since it was impossible to investigate literature as an isolated phenomenon (Even-Zohar 1986; see also Even-Zohar 1997: 16).

Such attitudes are not unique. A large number of literary scholars has voiced similar expressions of doubt and dissatisfaction, whether on the basis of their understanding that there was no longer a strong rationale for studying literature as a hegemonic system or on the basis of their dissatisfaction with the concentration on branded goods, namely, on the texts and authors admitted to local and global pantheons. Franco Moretti's (2005) advocacy of quantitative methods, which has triggered a sense of unease in the community (see the collected critiques in Goodwin and Holbo 2011), and Ottmar Ette's stimulating proposal for converting literary studies to "a life science" (*Lebenswissenschaft*) (Asholt and Ette 2010), which would be roughly equivalent to what we understand as *culture research* (see Ette 2015; Ette and Kutzenski 2010), are just two conspicuous examples of this development.

Finally, all of these considerations unavoidably compel us to reflect about our role as academic researchers. Which questions define the focus and scope of our discipline? One of the questions we should answer is to whom and to what we owe our intellectual and professional loyalty. The moment we acknowledge that the social relevance of literature has changed, it should be possible to distinguish between the study of the specificity of the literary system and its functioning and a more ambitious enterprise that observes literature in relation to the larger framework of culture. Are we specialists in literary studies, understood as an independent discipline, or are we rather researchers of human behavior? If we are interested in literature as a component of human behavior—whatever its operating modes—the answer should be that we must be loyal to research on human behavior and adapt literary studies to that goal. As Torres Feijó (2012: 165) puts it, "Literary Studies should elaborate conceptual and methodological frameworks that allow for work with instruments for analyzing reality" (Torres Feijó 2011). Today's research on culture, which involves the humanities, the social sciences, and biology, will make it possible to study literature in connection with and in the context of other processes instead of consigning it to an arcane fate. We are talking about a discipline that investigates the creation of resources that make life possible not only for human beings but for a wide variety of animals. Only by studying this creation in its context can we tell how verbal and textual activities contribute to it. We owe it not only to ourselves as scholars but also to our future students and certainly to society at large to

undertake this transition. The transition toward an ampler framework will allow us to replace a once-and-for-all object of study with a dynamic set of questions, which, if relevant to some phenomena that could be referred to as *literature*, will reveal its dynamics. The making and consumption of nonpractical texts may never come to a real end, but the industry of “literature” and its producers as we have known them may possibly have reached the end of their road.

Conclusion

We have argued in this article that literature has lost, in most societies all over the globe, its role as a major source of ideas and directives for sociocultural activity and consciousness. This does not need much substantiation, as counterexamples are limited to specific communities and conditions. We emphasize, though, that the industry still maintains other instrumental functions, including entertainment, education, practical guides (for tourism), and even developing cognitive competencies like empathy and sociocultural interaction. At the same time, “literature” as symbolic goods in a competitive market of assets has not lost its prominent position, though sports and other so-called cultural industries may have already superseded it on a global level. We believe that these developments call for a change of perspectives and methods in literary studies. One way may be to pay attention to literature as part of the culture when it is relevant to understand societies or collectives. While textual modes of expression have indeed been recognized as inherent features of humanity, the institutionalized bodies of texts and producers known as “literature” may have become more and more marginal.

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