

Me and the Other

A dialogue crossing sciences

Par:

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Abstract:

The adjective *active*, common to both readers and pupils, denotes a raised awareness of the existence of an Other that, by itself, sets limits to the selfish omnipotence of the subject, be it an author or a teacher. This is a process that finds its roots in the democratization of society (18th century) and whose epistemological formulation was first due to the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure. Although literary theory and didactics have made of this concept the pivot of the 20th century, we must not forget its origins and, above all, we should not abandon the use of linguistic analysis and literary text in the language class.

Résumé:

L'adjectif actif, commun à l'ensemble des lecteurs, désigne une prise de conscience de l'existence d'un Autre qui, par lui-même, fixe des limites à la toute-puissance égoïste de l'objet, que ce soit un auteur ou un enseignant. Ceci est un processus qui trouve ses racines dans la démocratisation de la société (18^{ème} siècle) et dont la formulation épistémologique a été le premier en raison du linguiste Ferdinand de Saussure. Bien que la théorie littéraire et didactique ont fait de ce concept le pivot du 20^e siècle, nous ne devons pas oublier ses origines et, surtout, nous ne devons pas abandonner l'utilisation de l'analyse linguistique et littéraire dans le texte classe de langue.

“Écriture et lecture sont les deux faces d’un même fait d’histoire (...)”.¹ This almost symbiotic relation is explained by Sartre in the following words : « Aussi y a-t-il en chacun un recours implicite à des institutions, à des mœurs (...) à des valeurs reçues, à tout un monde que l’auteur et le lecteur ont en commun. C’est ce monde bien connu que l’auteur anime (...) : il est l’aliénation, la situation, l’histoire (...) ».² This close relation between author and public is necessarily dialectic, functioning as a dichotomy between *me and the other (l’autre et moi)*. It is the reading itself as a construction made of the dialogue between writer and reader. Thus, the text works as a pre-text; even so it must be interpreted. The more accurate its interpretation is, the more effective the generated dialogue will be, and here the experiences of the reader are also called into play in order to be contrasted with the experiences of the writer. With regard to this, Sartre said:

*“En lisant, on prévoit, on attend. On prévoit la fin de la phrase, la phrase suivante, la page d’après ; on attend qu’elles confirment ou qu’elles infirment ces prévisions ; la lecture se compose d’une foule d’hypothèses, de rêves suivis de réveils, d’espoirs et de déceptions ; les lecteurs sont toujours en avance sur la phrase qu’ils lisent, dans un avenir seulement probable qui s’écroule en partie et se consolide en partie à mesure qu’ils progressent, qui recoule d’une page à l’autre et forme l’horizon mouvant de l’objet littéraire. Sans attente, sans avenir, sans ignorance, pas d’objectivité. Or l’opération d’écrire comporte une quasi lecture implicite qui rend la vraie lecture impossible. Quand les mots se forment sous la plume, l’auteur les voit, sans doute, mais il ne les voit pas comme le lecteur puisqu’il les connaît avant de les écrire ; (...). L’écrivain ne prévoit ni ne conjecture : il projette.”*³

¹ SARTRE, Jean-Paul (1972). “Qu’est-ce que la littérature ? », Idées, Gallimard, Paris, 90.

[“Writing and reading are the two faces of a same historical fact (...)”]

² *idem*, 91

[“Also, there is in each of them an implicit recourse to institutions, customs, inherited values (...), to an entire world that is shared by both author and reader. It is this well-known world that the author animates (...): it is the alienation, the situation, the story (...)”]

³ *idem*, 53

[“When we read, we anticipate, we expect. We anticipate the end of the sentence, the next sentence, the following page; we expect them to confirm or to contradict these predictions; the act of reading is made of a multitude of hypotheses, of dreams followed by awakenings, of hope and disenchantment; the readers are always in advance of the sentence they’re reading, in an only likely future that partly disintegrates, partly consolidates itself as their reading progresses, that goes back from one page to another and forms the moving horizon of the literary object. Without expectation, without future, without ignorance, there is no objectivity. Now, the process of writing carries an almost implicit reading that makes true reading impossible. When words form beneath his pen, the author sees them, to be sure, but he does not see them as the reader does, because he knows what they will be before he writes them down; (...). The writer does not predict, neither does he guess: he projects.”]

The writer's project is accomplished through the reading, that symbiotic act of which Sartre said:

*Mais l'opération d'écrire implique celle de lire comme son corrélatif dialectique et ces deux actes connexes nécessitent deux agents distincts. C'est l'effort conjugué de l'auteur et du lecteur qui fera surgir cet objet concret et imaginaire qu'est l'ouvrage de l'esprit : il n'y a d'art que pour et par autrui.*⁴

We can therefore say that this is a matter of generosity, of openness to the Other: the first generous act being that of the writer when he projects and gives rise to a construction – reading – in which he enters in co-authorship with his reader.

We see then the highlighting of the process, in this case, of reading. A major reason for that to happen was the awareness of the reader's importance – a reader who, although virtually, is somehow present from the very act of writing that sets off the process. Their increasing relevance reaches its peak when, ceasing to be a virtual entity, they become a real presence and take hold of the work. And here we would say that, in order to prevent its distortion, this process must pass through an indispensable phase of correct interpretation of the text that will generate the affective response of comparing experiences. At this stage, the literary work will have attained its major goal, which is, contributing to the growth of its reader by presenting them with different models and experiences that they must confront themselves with (their fight “against the dragons”).

The risk of skipping this most important phase of rigorous interpretation is precisely the risk of not fulfilling this major goal. And in that case, instead of contributing to the growth of its reader by putting them in contact with different models and erasing their prejudices, interpretation may have the opposite effect. It will close them further in their small world, made of undisputed truths that will never be challenged by others. And freedom will become an increasingly distant mirage, cut off by the thick barrier of prejudice. The reader won't have a chance to test the result of their experiences and so, they will keep on inflating their

⁴ *idem*, 55

[“But the act of writing implies the act of reading as its dialectic correlative, and these two connected acts require two different agents. It is the combined effort of both author and reader that produces this concrete and imaginary object that represents a work of the spirit: there is no art but for and through the other.”]

pride in a truth that avoids all confrontation. Because this reader is unable to read the Other, they will never understand another reasoning but their own.

To put it briefly, in the middle of the 20th century people became aware of the social act represented by writing and art in general and, above all, of the fact that communication not only constitutes the basis of evolution but is latent in each and every act. The communicative process has always a receiver, either virtual or real.

In fact, what changed was the way of thinking... art, language. And here we cannot forget to mention the contribution of Saussure, to whom we owe that great turn that began by being linguistic and subsequently spread to all critical and philosophical thought. The Saussurean principles dichotomize and bipolarize thought: synchrony and diachrony; language and speech; signified and signifier (whose association forms the sign, the arbitrary minimal unit of the linguistic system; language, in its turn, manifests itself through structures). These principles of Saussure, expressed in his work "Cours de linguistique générale" became a landmark to each and every critical and scientific approach that chose to adopt a structuralist point of view.

The approach to language as a system of signs is at the origin of semiology: given the arbitrariness of signs, other systems become possible and equally able to reach the communicative target. In this way, these principles that started by being purely linguistic would soon invade literature and culture. Everything began to be interpreted in the light of systems of differences whose signification depends on the inter-relation between their elements. Structure was the key.

Since its object is language, the teaching of foreign languages would be the first to embrace this new way of thinking. For political reasons, Bloomfield was chosen to be its inaugurator. This linguist, along with others, was hired by the Army to make up linguistic text-books designed to teach the indispensable rudiments of the languages of the countries in which the military fields were to be installed. This happened after the surprise attack of the Japanese army that forced the Americans into World War II. Thus began the audio-oral method with phonetics in the front position, in which grammar is learnt through exercises of repetition and lists of the most commonly used words. We may therefore say that the American audio-oral method began by being a strategy of the Second World War. It was created in the

1940's and kept in use for about twenty years. After that came the audio-visual method, which was, so to speak, a copy of the former but employing more advanced pedagogical means. If the audio-visual method was born in France, as it is usually said, the audio-visual expression was born in North America, at the end of World War II, at the exact moment when the audio-visual materials became an indispensable pedagogical tool. In these global structural methods, structure is viewed as the smallest unit of the teaching-learning process in foreign languages. It is the structure that must be mechanized, automated.

The principle of the active pupil, sketched at the beginning of the century by the direct method, has now become crucial. Dialogue is instituted as an obligatory practice and repetition is adopted as a strategy to attain assimilation through automation – the structures of dialogue are repeated in order to be reused and liberated, although in a mechanical way. Behaviourism has been pointed as the underlying psychological theory in this method; but nothing is said about the political pressure that led to this change that started at the beginning of the 20th century, when the Ministries of Education of France and Portugal (in 1902 and 1905, respectively) imposed the direct method for the teaching of foreign languages, instructing schools to teach just the indispensable grammar (ordinance of the 15th November 1901, which preceded the decree from the 31st May 1902 of the French Ministry of Education and the Regulation from the 3rd November 1905 issued by its Portuguese counterpart). The political reasons that underlie this reform, namely, the implementation of mass education and, more specifically, the massive teaching of foreign languages, justify the ease of the learning method. Although it is known that changes take time, minds were framed in the sense of associating linguistic analysis to a minority education viewed as obsolete and almost counter-natural. In other words, linguistic reasoning and interpretation were overlooked. This shift was the price to pay for the political interference in education.

While it is undeniable that mass education is a social advance, we shouldn't have given up linguistic and textual analysis, while making use of the latest linguistic discoveries and adopting dialogue as the standard procedure in the foreign language class. The purpose of reaching out to the pupil, altering the learning strategies and even its contents, is based on the assumption that, contrary to a traditional school that viewed pupils as miniature adults, children were finally recognized for what they really are.

From all of this remained, among other things, the centring of the class around the pupil – a concept driven to an exaggeration when, through fear of contradicting the pupils' interpretations, they were entitled to express their opinions on every subject, thus falling into a self-centredness that lacks the necessary humility to truly interpret the Other, that is to say, to simply learn how to read.

This pedagogical position hasn't emerged by chance: it is rather the conscious or unconscious consequence of a philosophical and literary attitude. The 20th century, in fact, trod a very comprehensive path, in which literary criticism alternately focused on the writer, on the text, on the reading or on the reader.

Let us now examine the different trends in text interpretation.

The first half of the 20th century centred on the mechanisms of creation – Bergson and Valéry were the predecessors of the anti-positivist criticism that dominated the first half of the 20th century in France. Interpretative criticism, in all its variants, wants to grasp subjectivity, *i.e.* the consciousness that creates the whole of the work of a given author.

There followed, around 1960, the emphasis on the text, as a result of the principle of arbitrariness through which Saussure regarded language. From this point of view, the meaning of a text is not dictated by its author, but rather by its language, its structure. But we also find here other influences, such as the Russian formalism, which since 1915-16 proclaimed the autonomy of the literary work and literature as an ensemble of formal processes – a belief in the unity of the text and its meaning and, at the same time, in the changes of this relational system throughout history. In the wake of Saussure, it was seen as a synchronic system which, considered along a diachronic axis, would be transformable into an infinity of other synchronic systems. Lastly, we find the influence of the new criticism that in the 1930's dominated the United States and England, proclaiming the return to text and reading.

The thought of Saussure rules. One of its followers is Lévi-Strauss, who applies the linguistic model to other cultural phenomena, seen as systems of differences in which interpretation depends on the relations among their multiple elements. There is an analytic

approach in structuralism as in semiology that attempts to describe the conditions of literary signification through the model of linguistic signification. Underlying this approach is the dichotomic distinction, established by Saussure, between language and speech. In this line of thought, the literary work is an individual linguistic achievement.

Also in this line of thought we find Roland Barthes (1970) and Gérard Genette (1972) who, following a descriptive method, attempted to isolate general principles in individual works, relegating interpretation to a secondary level. With the proposition of a method for interpreting texts, epistemological principles were established. There was a clear deviation from the positivist, hermeneutic and historical line that aimed to reconstruct the original, historical context of the work.

After this, we have the aesthetic of reception, which highlights the reader and the reading. Wolfgang Iser sees text as a potential structure actualized by a reader when they give it a meaning generated by its relation with their own references. Thus, reading functions as an experience and emphasis is put on the process itself – of looking for the global meaning of a text – that is made of expectations, reinterpretations, advances and retreats. And because it is a process, those who enter it will never leave the same.

Still following this course, we find Hans Robert Jauss, who played with the coordinate of history, given the relativist light it throws on the meaning and value of a text – another way of saying that interpretation is conditioned by the history of reception. This author used the expression *fusion of horizons* to express the circumstantial projection of the historical present that a reader inevitably makes when they read a work from the past. We may therefore say that Jauss has adopted the hermeneutic perspective of Hans Georg Gadamer, for whom the meaning of a text results from a dialogue between the present (the time of reading) and the past (the time of writing). To put it briefly, the reception of a text is always conditioned by the historical situation of its interpreter.

This focus on the reader and on the act of reading was driven to an extreme by an American trend – the so-called “Reader-Response Theory” – that defended the indeterminacy of meaning. Stanley Fish saw the possibility of multiple readings because each of them is an experience and a temporal process. This author went as far as associating readers by their abilities, forming what he called interpretative communities. In addition to the American

taste for groups, what we also find here is an annihilation of the text by the imposed interpretation of a group.

This trend had an impact on the language class, where structures were replaced by functions and learning goals were defined by the pupil's needs. We are thus in presence of the so-called functionalism. As we know, the functional communicative methods emerged around 1975. Since the main objective was the discovery of the pupil and the competence to be acquired was the ability to communicate, the text became a pretext for discussing ideas. With the slogans of freedom of interpretation and textual polysemy, no one dared contradict the pupils, whose understanding of the text was considered an expression of their freedom of speech. There are obviously political reasons that justify this critical, philosophical and pedagogical attitude (such as the collapse of several dictatorships throughout the world). But the fact of understanding this process should not prevent us from reasoning with a lucid and critical mind on the results of an extreme position such as this. If we add the evolution of critical philosophy throughout the 20th century to the ministerial instructions from the early 1900's regarding the learning of foreign languages in secondary school, it won't be difficult to understand the lack of room reserved in class for linguistic and textual analysis, nor the almost repudiation of its crucial role in the search for (the) meaning in a text.

In our days, the written text has reacquired its importance, both in the classroom and in literary criticism. To Derrida, speech is a form of writing that, for this very reason, is subject to arbitrariness, evolution and the complexities involved in its interpretation. That is why we may talk of a slippery meaning that, such as the river waters, never reaches its end. The flexibility of the signifier has two implications in two opposite senses – on the one side, the impossibility of a coincidence between expression and its underlying intention; and, on the other, the impossibility of attaining true understanding.

These two sides merge into one because it is the Idea that is unattainable. In the final analysis, we might say that this impossibility makes us aware of our humble condition as human beings. The text is not produced by an author and its "reading" or comprehension is simply unattainable. We are thus left with the idea of a writing, of a system of differences that precedes each and every linguistic act. Deconstruction is the proposed way to attain a meaning, an idea, in analogy with the path trodden by the author in the act of creating. In concrete, we only have the text and the recognition of our limitation both as creators, transmitters, and readers, receivers.

The bilateral character of an act of communication, creation or interpretation, of writing or reading, is totally assumed by the end of the 20th century, in a process that has its roots in the beginning of that same century. The school accompanied the ideological transformations that affected both its nature and its objectives, in a process of statistical democratization. If, at the beginning of the 20th century, there was a break with the so-called traditional school, where the uncontested figure of the teacher functioned as the pivot around which the – vertically conceived – class turned, it was only, however, after World War II that this idea came to be completely accepted. This political and historical event enabled the social and intellectual opening that laid the ground for a full adoption of a new way of thinking that in school would be expressed, *latu sensu*, by a horizontal conception of the classroom.

Past the phase of leaning either more to one side or to the other, we reach a position of equality between both participants – teacher and pupil. The double meaning of every social act is expressed by the communicative chain when it becomes clear that the two elements, transmitter and receiver, function alternately and simultaneously. This alternation and simultaneity of roles brings us to mind two verses of Alberto Caeiro that run as follows:

*I cut the orange in two and the two halves could not be equal.
To which one have I been unfair – me, who will eat them both?*⁵

While being a result of the assimilation of a new ideology, underlying the adopted philosophical trend, the social mutation commands and imposes an ideological change. What we observe, throughout the 20th century, is the evolution of a human thought that opens itself to the Other, in a process of acceptance and recognition of difference. The complete acceptance of the Other culminates in the fusion Me/Other. We may call it a process of democratization in which the Other achieves a new status in fact and by right.

⁵ CAEIRO, Alberto (1984). “Poemas”, Obras Completas de Fernando Pessoa, Ática, Lisboa, 78.

This process of the 20th century had already begun in the 18th century, when the moneyed bourgeoisie began to imitate the aristocratic model without having the culture to fulfil such pretension. Let us elaborate on this.

Until the 18th century, writer and reader belonged to the same social class – which means that in the Middle Ages the clergy wrote, so to speak, to themselves, for the simple reason that they were the only ones able to read. We see this reality portrayed in the book *The Name of the Rose*, by Umberto Eco, in which knowledge is jealously kept in a convent where scribes live. Curiously enough, the forbidden book was the *Comedy* of Aristotle.

In classicism, we also see the nobility writing and reading – which means that each reader is a potential writer. Dialectics could not exist because neither the process of writing nor the process of reading included an Other with different interests and points of view, and the class in question had no reason to criticize itself.

With the emergence of a new social class that wanted to be both reader and spectator, considering itself entitled to a lifestyle identical to the aristocratic model – reading and attending theatrical plays – dialectic imposed itself. Since this new class – the bourgeoisie – was on the one hand rich but uncultivated, and, on the other, endowed with different social and political interests, it would soon raise its voice to demand a literature more able to reflect its aspirations. The bourgeois wanted to see themselves portrayed both in books and on stage. But they also wanted to understand the literary and dramatic contents. They wanted moral and character models made in their own image. They wanted to see their interests defended. They wanted to establish their new ideology. They wanted to put literature and theatre at their own service in order to promote the diffusion and implantation of their ideological principles. But they also wanted and needed to be educated.

We may therefore say that the 18th century had a dialogist nature – there's a permanent dialogue between tradition and innovation, the first being assumed by the nobility and the second represented by the bourgeoisie. But these weren't the only participants in the dialogue. There was also an interchange that began to develop between countries that simultaneously imported and exported cultural and rational models, stimulating contact with and permeability to the Other. To put it briefly, this was a dialogue that preceded and followed the acceptance of difference. And we may say that the great difference came

precisely from the other side of the ocean. The old continent, in spite of being seen as civilized in relation to the newly-discovered one, allowed itself to be *corrupted* by the novelty brought by the Discoveries as it began to consider other social and human models. The access to an exchange of ideas and the whole search for new religious, ethnic and political arguments would, by itself, enrich the thought of this enlightened century. This was the century where reason imposed itself, sometimes, one might say, with the same impertinence that earlier characterized the conformist and undisputed divine spirit. And all of this was magnificently expressed by Diderot through his character *Jacques the fatalist*, whose ability to argue made him capable of defending even opposite principles.

Seeing the 18th century as an undulant social and historical space in which tradition was purified by its contact with a new ideology and society received new currents of thought from the new continents, we are forced to view it as a dialectic space. In other words, that time-space, which was the 18th century, dialogued not only with the classical *chronotopos*, trying to rationalize its models, but also with the 19th century, that affiliated thought to literary schools, and, above all, with the 20th century, that showed off as its own conquests (with no mention of their true origins) some literary and pedagogical models that had already been outlined in the century of Enlightenment.

We are thinking, right now, on the author/reader dialectic that emerged precisely in the 18th century, as a result of the confrontation between two classes, one that wrote and another that read – one who had already asserted itself but saw its position at stake, and another who wanted to lay its claims. Let us, once more, evoke Diderot, who, by introducing the figure of the reader as a character in his novel *Jacques the fatalist and his master*, consciously incarnated (in that character) this presence without real presence in the act of writing. Throughout the dialogue between narrator and narratee – that constituted a meta-text with a parallel action – the author exposed the process of literary creation, already focusing on the question of inter-textuality. To this purpose, we may quote an excerpt from a speech of the author (the designation of this character):

(...) *Je vous fais grâce de toutes ces choses, que vous trouverez dans les romans, dans la comédie ancienne et dans la société. Lorsque j'entendis l'hôte s'écrier de sa femme « que*

diable faisait-elle à sa porte! » je me rappelai l'Harpagon de Molière, lorsqu'il dit de son fils : « Qu'allait-il faire dans cette galère ? (...)»⁶

Another method used that demonstrates how aware the author was of this phenomenon of inter-textuality – or, to say it in other words, of the impossibility of ascribing an authorship to an idea – is the transcription of a situation in all its details, so that the reader easily recognizes that other work that lies behind it.

Another aspect we may remark is our author's notion of temporality and historicity, when Jacques makes the following statement:

Puis-je n'être pas moi ? Et étant moi, puis-je faire autrement que moi? Puis-je être moi un autre? Et depuis que je suis au monde, y a-t-il eu un seul instant où cela n'ait été vrai? Prêchez tant qu'il vous plaira, vos raisons seront peut-être bonnes ; mais s'il est écrit en moi ou là-haut que je les trouverai mauvaises, que voulez-vous que j'y fasse?»⁷

Finally, let us see the author's remark on the difficulty of establishing a correspondence between what is said and its underlying intention – in other words, the difficulty (or impossibility) of expressing and capturing the real meaning. This exemplification is made in a dialogue between the master and Jacques.

*Le Maître. Ne sois ni fade panégyriste ni censeur amer; dis la chose comme elle est.
Jacques. Cela n'est pas aisé. N'a-t-on pas son caractère, son intérêt, son goût, ses passions, d'après quoi l'on exagère ou l'on atténue? Dis la chose comme elle est!... Cela n'arrive peut-être pas deux fois en un jour dans toute une grande ville. Et celui qui vous écoute est-il*

⁶ DIDEROT, (1973), « Jacques le fataliste et son maître», Folio, Gallimard, France, 49

[(...) I exempt you from all those things that you will find in the novels, in ancient comedy and in society. When I heard the host shouting about his wife « What the hell was she doing at that door?», I remembered Harpagon of Molière when he said about his son “What was he doing in that vessel? (...)”]

⁷ Idem, 40-41

[(...) Could I not be me? And, being me, could I act other than me? Could I, myself, be another? And, since I came into the world, has there been a single moment when this was not true? Preach as much as you will, your reasons are perhaps good; but if it is written in me or up there that I will find them bad, what do you want me to do?”]

mieux disposé que celui qui parle? D'où il doit arriver que deux fois à peine en un jour, dans toute une grande ville, on soit entendu comme on dit..⁸

The duplicity of roles and the bilateral character of communication are part of the alternation between transmitter and receiver, that is, when the roles of narrator and narratee are alternately and indistinctly assumed.

We may conclude by saying that what is in question is the way of thinking the creative or the pedagogical process. From the moment our mental logic contemplates the element of reception, it abolishes the authoritarianism of the transmitter, who starts counting on the dialogue and criticism of the receiver. That is why we may say that at the source of the revolution in literary and pedagogic theory was the confrontation of different social models that emerged in the 18th century. And the thinker who systematized and expressed this dual process that led to an epistemological revolution was a linguist named Ferdinand de Saussure.

But we could not end this paper without mentioning someone who was both a writer and a pedagogue, historically situated in the 18th century. We are talking of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who in his *Émile ou de l'éducation* made the following remark:

La conscience de toute sensation est une proposition, un jugement ; donc, sitôt que l'on compare une sensation à une autre, on raisonne. L'art de juger et l'art de raisonner sont exactement le même.⁹

⁸ Idem, 89

[The Master: Don't be a dull panegyrist nor a bitter censor; say things as they are.

Jacques. That's not easy. Don't we all have our own character, our interests, our tastes and our passions, according to which we either exaggerate or attenuate? Say things as they are! ... That may not happen twice a day in a big city. And the one who listens, is he by any chance better disposed than the one who talks? From which it most probably happens that barely twice a day, in a big city, people get to be heard as they really speak.]

⁹ ROUSSEAU, J.-J., "Émile ou De l'éducation", Nouvelle Édition, Garnier Frères, Paris, 232.

« Dictionnaire des genres et notions littéraires », Encyclopaedia Universalis, Albin Michel

[The conscience of any sensation is a proposition, a judgement; so, as soon as we compare one sensation to another, we reason. The art of judging and the art of reasoning are exactly the same.]