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The Function of Literary Studies

I

Repeated economical surveys show that since the beginning of the 20th century the most valuable and desirable good is a car. Or rather: was. Compelling data collected by “The Economist”¹ tellingly shows that since 2010 education is in the first place of the most wanted goods in the world. The output is not so clear as it may look at first glance, because in conclusion we have rather logical alternative interpretations. People are aware that knowledge is just better than a car, or they have realised that education is a compulsory step to a well-paid job and the car showroom in the end. We may suppose that people do not choose humanities or literary studies, if the main premise of their choice is the further possibility of having a car, but it is not true. This is because reliable measures of the quality of education still do not exist. That is why employers prefer graduates of those universities which have very stringent criteria for entrance. Correlation between earnings and education is still relevant only to developing countries, which today means only Sub-Saharan Africa. Economists and sociologists also predict that in the coming decades employment in industry will plunge 30 percent and, furthermore, 47 percent of today’s existing professions will be automated. On the basis of those facts, and assuming that young people are actually prone to study anything, we can conclude as follows: Literary studies are not especially imperilled by the economy or the job market. It does not mean that there is no threat and we can sleep well. The truth is that every field of study, including science, is under threat of extinguishment. It also means that

¹ “The whole world is going to university. Is it worth it? A special report, “The Economist, March 28th–April 3rd (2015), 1–19.

in the 20th century, maybe 40 years after Michel Foucault, knowledge is not synonymous with power anymore.²

Fortunately we have already been in such a situation and therefore we can feel prepared. All the problems arising from the mentioned facts are considered by Plato in "Protagoras". In the dialogue Socrates and Protagoras agree in maybe one case, which is essential for this paper. Protagoras remarks:

I am of the opinion, Socrates, (he said), that skill in poetry is the principal part of education; and this I conceive to be the power of knowing what compositions of the poets are correct, and what are not, and how they are to be distinguished, and of explaining when asked the reason of the difference. And I propose to transfer the question which you and I have been discussing to the domain of poetry; we will speak as before of virtue, but in reference to a passage of a poet.³

Then Socrates puts the following questions: What kind of knowledge is acquired, if no practical skill appears as an effect of the study? Is such a study worth money? And how much? It's obvious that if you are apprenticed to a painter, observes Socrates, you receive some painting skills. With this in mind we can similarly ask, what particular kind of promise is given by literary study?

Socrates's answer is complex: Certainly people who study are able to acquire practical skills, yet it's extremely uncertain that they will be better citizens in the end. That's because skills have nothing in common with human virtues. In other words: skill is not real knowledge. Socrates explicitly declares: if we meet real knowledge, the soul cannot stay untouched. For the reason that each idea of education before the 20th century was based on the concept of inner virtues, in other contexts called "self-reflexion" or "self-improvement", I deem this statement a crucial theoretical step.

² About knowledge as power in 19th Century and further see: Reinhart Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten. Studien zur Semantik und Pragmatik der politischen und sozialen Sprache. Mit zwei Beiträgen von Ulrike Spree und Wilibald Steinmetz sowie einem Nachwort zu Einleitungsfragmenten Reinhart Kosellecks von Carsten Dutt* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2006), 107; 115-116.

³ Plato, *Protagoras*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (The Project Gutenberg), 339 a. Accessed August 27, 2016. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1591/1591-h/1591-h.htm>.

II

As Reinhart Koselleck⁴ mentioned, even the word “education” is vague, because it tells us nothing about education as a historical process. It also tells us little of the immediate experience scholars have in classes. The same sort of problems might be listed in the case of “Bildung”, “Ausbildung”, “formation”. In similar lines Ferenc Hörcher explains that

The concept of *Bildung* is known from the German theoretical literature – therefore one should be careful not to mix it up with the English term ‘building’. While in the German term *Bildung* we find the root of the word ‘picture’ or ‘image’ (*Bild*), behind the etymology of ‘building’ there is the verb ‘to build’. According to Geuss, at the turn of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, there were three terms with approximately the same meaning: culture (*Kultur*), formation (*Bildung*), and spirit (*Geist*). The field of meaning of these three words partly overlapped [...].⁵

By and large, before the XX century, education was based on three factors: self-reflection, an understanding of art and culture, and experience. Self-reflection, especially in the German context, was essential for this structure, because it acted as a constant knowledge, independent of any experience. The theory of analytic propositions is perhaps the most distinctive embodiment of this problem.

Since the Middle Ages people have organised their inner spiritual world using practical books such as “The Imitation of Christ” by Thomas à Kempis, “Spiritual Exercises” by Ignatius of Loyola, and other handbooks of asceticism. The perennial status of those works was warranted by religion, which is a truism, but makes a significant difference to modern books of guidance. These books created “the wisdom paradigm of literary interpretation”⁶ and paved the way to treating literature as a possible source of self-fashioning and – in a general sense – knowledge about the world.

Certainly, the psychological thinking of the day is not easy compared to the present state of the discipline: it mainly relied on the results of ancient philosophy, but Montaigne’s monumental work is a proof that there were very important practical observations even on the terrain of self-knowledge in the early modern period, not independently of the tradition of Christian

⁴ Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*, 106-107.

⁵ Ferenc Hörcher, “Culture, Self-Formation and Community-Building. The *Bildungsideal* from the Perspective of the Intellectual History of Civil Sociability”, *Ethos* 1 (2015): 66.

⁶ Bruce E. Fleming, “What is the Value of Literary Studies?”, *New Literary History* 3 (2000): 459-476.

spiritual literature (including St Augustine) and its offspring (like the writings of St John of the Cross or St Teresa of Avila). The literary genres of Christian spirituality usually ended up in the realm of latter day fiction.⁷

So-called half education is marked by many traits, listed by Adorno, but all those features have something in common: an absence of internal culture, or self-reflexion.⁸ Following Protagoras I shall try to spot some general literary cases, which mark the process of dwindling inner self-improvement. In the very beginning is the *Bildungsroman* as novel about developing and improving characters, both in the empirical and the intrinsic meaning. Wilhelm Meister and Green Henry are changing and maturing under the influence of experience and intrinsic considerations. Yet from Wilhelm Meister to Henry Green and, furthermore, from Madame Bovary, and Anna Karenina, to Molly Bloom and Mrs Dalloway, we can observe, how their inner world became more chaotic and murky, psychologically and biologically. Of course, this world is still a fascinating source for the understanding of the human condition, but is no longer able to act as a moral guideline in life. We may think that in that moment when the human being's crisis take place, but we can also say, as I would, that in a way we meet here a realistic picture of self-improvement, which is rather a plight without future and consolation than a simple path ending with redemption. All those factors, including the crisis of W. Humboldt's education, based on the moral virtues of individuals, findings in empirical psychology and biology, Freudianism, of course, were circumstances for the biggest upheaval shaping the modern meaning of education.

III

First and foremost, since the 19th century, each text is treated as historical and fictional. Second, both asceticism and education were earlier based on the notion of the double nature of human beings, as described by Saint Paul in the Epistle to Galatians. Both the educated and the religious man should abide by the rule: "Live by the Spirit, I say, and do not gratify the desires of the flesh. For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want." The assumption that human nature is in origin rather evil is common in many theories of education, especially those founded on the ideas of the Enlightenment.

⁷ Hörcher, "Culture, Self-Formation and Community-Building," 72.

⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, "Theorie der Halbbildung", in *Gesellschaftstheorie und Kulturkritik* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1975).

The inclination to self-indulgence, the “flesh” cited above, should be suppressed for the sake of salvation, self-improvement, or economic and national needs of state, as Humboldt puts it.⁹ Nonetheless: a classical education prepared people for communicative action, not for asceticism or inner life for itself. As Blaise Pascal notes, internal considerations are based on the rhetorical model of disputation, not on the monologue structure. “The Art of Worldly Wisdom” by Baltasar Gracian is maybe the best proof that classical scholars were profoundly aware that man is an *animal sociale*.¹⁰

All those assumptions about human nature and classical education were in the beginning of the 20th century no longer generally accepted. Note that, if every text is fictional and historical, it cannot be used as a spiritual guide. If there is no difference between body and mind, the body’s features are to be highlighted rather than suppressed. Hence, as Koselleck suggests, education as a term is dependent on the structure described above and without this structure, without the three mentioned factors, virtually should not be used. It means that today’s teacher is not an educator, but a mass nurturer, who prepares people for life in modern society – which is completely opposite to the ideas, for example, of John Dewey. Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht got to the core:

We can say that literary studies owed their foundations and their nationally specific forms to normative concepts of “humanity” and the “nation”. But from the final decades of the nineteenth century on, a fast intensifying problematisation of the quasi-ontological status that had characterised these concepts caused a permanent crisis in the literary disciplines after a century of almost triumphant vitality. Now that their horizons of reference were called into question, a number of silent implications on which the nineteenth-century practice of literary studies had relied became open problems: What was the function of literary studies [...]?¹¹

⁹ “And yet – [Humboldt] as the son of the age of sensibility and an admirer of mitigated sentimentalism – he is a careful observer of the importance of soft passions in the individual’s character-formation: a harmonious cooperation of human powers includes the cultivation of the faculties of sentiments. Instead of suppressing them, as in Stoicism or ascetic Christianity, he suggests to learn how to pacify human passions in order to let the sentiments work in accordance with the best (short- and long-term) rational interests of the individual” (Hörcher, “Culture, Self-Formation and Community-Building”, 79; see also page 88).

¹⁰ And *vita activa* was main goal of 19th century’s *Bildung* (Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichten*, 119).

¹¹ Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “The Future of Literary Studies?”, *New Literary History* 3 (1995): 503.

In this context literature has a unique function. Even though it is fictional, it still tells a story about humans' internal life. Benedict Anderson is to some extent right: the novel gives readers a transcendental image of a community, no matter whether peaceful or dreadful.¹² Yet it is half true, because the image of community does not make sense without a knowledge of the characters' inner life. Let us look at Franz Kafka's characters, who never think and whose minds always remains inaccessible to readers. When reading Kafka we feel, I guess, uncomfortable, because we cannot make any assumptions about the motive for their behaviour. Moreover, unless we do not know what the characters bear in mind, we also cannot understand, how the community in "The Castle" works. A "transparent mind", as Dorris Cohn called it, is a condition of recognising the internal and external norms of a fictional world. From that point of view it seems reasonable to claim¹³ that the difference between real people and fictional characters is abstraction, which shows that people evaluate the behaviour of characters in the same way and using the same measures as in real life. For this reason we may think that literature serves as a sort of laboratory for understanding and evaluating people. Our usual assumptions about others' minds have the same status as literary indirect speech or stream of consciousness. People have many cognitive and empirical sources of knowledge of others' thoughts, among which literature, especially the novel, is perhaps the most important. And treating the whole of life as a domain of interpretation is another similarity between literary studies and sophistry.

Protagoras is right in suggesting that many intellectual and practical preoccupations are disguised sophisms. Scholars use disguise, because they know that wisdom is in fact theoretical, so in a practical meaning futile, which could be confusing. Likewise the label "Literary Studies" today stands for training in social sensitivity and a few other skills.¹⁴ It might be disappointing, yet it implies something positive, which continues

¹² Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 2003); see also Jonathan Culler's commentary in *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007); see especially the chapter "The Novel and the Nation" (pp. 43-73).

¹³ And this claim is, in a way, against Dorris Kohn's conclusions from *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

¹⁴ "[T]he postparadigmatic state of literary theory offers the student and the teacher the opportunity to explore the uncertain yet addictive relationship between literary writing and their own more immediate perceptions of enjoyment, diversion, class, history, gender, race... Literary critics and theorists might not be able to do or achieve anything in particular, but we involve just about everything," Richard Bradford, preface to *The State of Theory*, ed. Richard Bradford (London:

Plato's idea of *paideia*. As opposed to science, literary studies always contains assumptions about human nature, and underlying instruction, and how to nurture it. And, if there is a need to define the practical goals and social reference of literary study, I would say, all things considered, that it educates people, how to understand, and maybe defend, the futility of others' preoccupations.¹⁵

Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to show that literary studies still have a future. This has been done by examining crucial upheavals and concepts in the history of education – starting from Plato's "Protagoras". The aspects explored are the changing structure, functions, and values of literary studies, and the contemporary economic and social circumstances of education. The main argument is that the subject of literary studies has an extraordinary trait, which makes it both protean and indispensable.

Key words: literary studies; education; economy; future; self-improvement

Routledge, 1993), xi; citation from Stein Haugom Olsen, "Progress in Literary Studies", *New Literary History* 3 (2005): 344.

¹⁵ As Gumbrecht propounds: "If we trust the current predictions about demographic, economic, and political developments in the coming century and if we maintain the traditional (but perhaps over-optimistic) conviction that the promotion of a mutual understanding between cultures can be a successful strategy in dealing with potentially devastating conflicts, then we can argue that such activities are more urgent and have a more important social function than any previous task in the history of literary studies" (Gumbrecht, "The Future of Literary Studies?", 511–512).

