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Uniting the Two Torn Halves – High Culture and Popular Culture

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In a time when an on-going process of global restructuring affects all the social, political and economic structures and processes, in an era of choices, of liquidity and of ambivalence, one critical issue emerges from all these restructuring processes: the central role of Humanities and particularly the role of literature. The aim of this paper is to relate the study of literature to the study of culture, bearing in mind that literary texts codify patterns and structures of feeling, becoming creative, ethical, aesthetic and political projects. By reading the literary texts in a practice of aesthetic and political concerns we put into perspective what seems to be the two torn parts, the two antinomies: high culture and common culture, in an inclusive process of the ideas, attitudes, practices, institutions, structures of power, economy, sociology, history, as well as the cultural practices, the artistic forms, the texts and the canons.

Half a century after the founding fathers had grounded their practices on the intellectual ferment of the New Left, interested in questions of class, culture, democracy and socialism in the context of the history of the English working class, Cultural Studies has developed as a significant new academic discipline, well established in the *curricula*, especially in the English-speaking world, where it has attained legitimacy, and has revealed an openness to a range of complex cultural and social issues, producing innovative studies on representation, knowledge, ideology, identity, gender, class, etc.

The epistemological shift to a postmodern structure of feeling with its rejection of truth and of tradition, the increasing significance of heterogenization and localization in relation to identities, to youth culture, to music, to dance, to fashion, to cite only a few, expanded and disseminated Cultural Studies, turning it into a cornucopia, using Morley's metaphor (2001), of critical agendas which have, to a great extent, revised the study of culture as a totalising, whole way of life, valuating the study of the production of cultural objects, the study of the content of these cultural objects, the study of their reception and the meaning attributed to them.

The reduction of a practice of Cultural Studies to the knowable terrain of the popular narrows in and places a lot of interesting work outside the range and the scope of the foundations of Cultural Studies. As Grossberg (2006) writes, the growing into maturity of Cultural Studies, to whose emergence and development popular culture has been central, meant the multiplication of its borders and its affection by contiguous disciplines, academic and non-academic institutions, political movements and projects and creative practices of many kinds.

Cultural Studies practitioners and theorists have argued against this reduction and inversion of values; among them, David Morley, who, in 2001, explained that the state of British culture is one of profound ambivalence

surrounding the repeated calls for 'some' return to established or traditional cultural identities (Morley 2001: 9)

In fact, the critical turn of Cultural Studies to the popular seems to forget that in spite of the differences between Williams, Hoggart and Thompson,¹ their legacy is the stressing of ordinariness of culture as well as the creative and active capacity of people to construct shared meanings and practices, which can be found in the practices of everyday life, but also in the literary realm which has been ignored in the past years.

The diverse critical agendas seem to have been reducing the study of culture to the study of the popular, no longer centred on the signifying practices of a working class culture, on the common meanings, but constituted through the production of popular meaning located at the moment of consumption (Barker 2000:47); it is a study which, according to some authors,² diluted the "truly popular culture" in a populist celebration of popular forms.

The relations of knowledge, culture and power which have always been reinvented in the diverse theories and practices during these 50 years now seem to be tangled in the web of the

1 In *The Uses of Literacy*, Hoggart explores the character of English working class culture, first from his memories of his own upbringing, giving a detailed account of the lived culture of the working class, its authenticity; Thompson stresses the active and creative role of the English working class in the making of their own history and Williams defined culture as the everyday meanings and values as part of a totality.

2 Cf. Simon Frith. 'The Good, the Bad and the Indifferent: Defending Popular Culture from the Populists' – 'what's at stake in exploring popular cultural values is not just something out there (in the body), but involves a common culture, something in which we share, in the mind as well' Jim McGuigan. *Cultural Populism*. (1992).

popular as a radical, political project where "the symbolic experiences and practices of ordinary people are more important analytically and politically than culture with a capital C" (McGuigan 1992:4).

I am not defending an elitist, academic discourse and practice, nor am I depoliticising or aestheticising popular culture. On the contrary, as I wrote in 1999, (almost ten years ago) at the International Conference "English in the World – New Directions", in a paper entitled "The tables have been turned - academic culture and the need to turn outside" the teaching of literature in this globalized world will have to engage in a new strategy, where there is no separating out of academic culture from the personal and social agency outside. It was a proposal towards the need of changing teaching practices, methods, contents and contexts, in such a way as to give place to both the still active remains of older practices of high, academic and learned culture and to the changing cultural representations of contemporary society.

The need to write again on the re-centring of literature in a cultural studies practice arose from the recent and unexpected success of the Master's Degree in Contemporary Literary Creations, offered by my Department. This led me to think of a critical perspective in the analysis and in the teaching of literature, more specifically of English literature, which might reconcile the literary canon with cultural practices, following on the steps of Williams, who, unlike Grossberg's opinion,³ was able to articulate the study of literature with the study of culture, because he has

grasped the fundamental relation between meanings arrived at by creative interpretation and description, and meanings embodied by conventions and institutions. (Williams 1961:56)

At the threshold of revision, I would propose a call for some return to the founding grounds of Cultural Studies, finding a renewed future for the discipline and new profiles of hope in the tenses of our imagination, re-centring and repositioning literature, rearticulating it with the cultural analysis of all forms of signification.

In literature we find the lived experiences and contexts of a particular period, in it we find the recorded culture, the dominant and the emergent structures of feeling – the culture of a period. In literature we find all elements in solution, keeping them alive and active in human and social relationships.

In a time when an on-going process of global restructuring affects all the social, political and economic structures and processes, in an era of choices, of liquidity and of ambivalence, in Bauman's words, literary texts are still changes of presence which codify patterns and structures of feeling (Murdock 1997), becoming creative, ethical, aesthetic and political projects.

To read literary texts in a practice of cultural studies is to put into perspective what seems to be the two torn parts, the two antinomies, inaugurated in the English thought by S.T. Coleridge, Thomas Carlyle, Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis. In fact, it is a practice that simultaneously integrates and excludes some of the propositions contained in the pompously called discipline of *English*, in an effort of opening new perspectives and horizons to the limits imposed by this ideological apparatus which excluded all social or cultural practice from the academic context. Truly, it is a practice that considers art as a human activity that reflects society, but also an activity that

3 Cf. Grossberg, L. Introduction to *Bringing it all Back Home* (1997). Duke University Press, Durham and London.

creates, by new perceptions and responses, elements which the society, as such, is not able to realize. (Williams 1961: 86)

In the artistic lies the creative capacity of the author in making an experience knowable to the others and thus create a community of knowledge and power. The double articulation of literature and of culture as simultaneously the field from where analysis starts – the object of study – and the field of critical intervention enables us to understand the culture of the common meanings and the culture of the special processes of discovery and of creative effort – in other words, the arts and the learning.

The storehouse of canonical cultural and literary materials represents the regulatory, golden standard of a certain cultural currency by which the humanities and their productions are measured. But to research, in the pursuit of knowledge, should not be only contained in the pursuit of perfection, in the knowledge of the best that has been written or said, we have to be able to identify ourselves with the experience, with the ways of thinking and with the situation described by a certain author in a certain time and space.

This critical stance brings together what the historical developments of the modern thought have separated in the relation between culture and society, as if these were two antagonistic terrains, where the high, elitist culture was divorced from the individual and social experience, ignoring thus the representation of experience and of the structures of feeling – of the specific feelings and rhythms as well as of the conventions and institutions.

All forms of cultural production should be studied in relation to the social structures, as well as to the structures of power, and to the artistic, aesthetic foundations in an interdisciplinary, transdisciplinary perspective, diluting the tension between aesthetic and political or ethical and personal instances.

(...) we find ourselves moving into a process which cannot be the simple comparison of art and society, but which must start from the recognition that all the acts of man comprise a general reality within which both art and what we ordinarily call society are comprised. We do not now compare the art with the society; we compare both with the whole complex of human actions and feelings (Williams 1961: 86/87).

In my argument, I will, briefly, refer to the narratives of literary and cultural studies, to find a possible answer to the needs and feelings showed, at the interview, by the applicants to the referred Master's Degree. Theirs was the wish to study literature as a literary creation and also as a representation of individual and social experience, a producer of meaning; theirs was the aim at researching the individual, imaginative and creative account of the writing process, and the "particular kind of response to the real shape of a social order" (Williams 1983).

Their expectations have opened the path to many questions. In a world where the image is a consciousness maker where does literature lie? I was quite surprised, I must say, to feel the need in these young men and women of a returning to the several layers of meaning of the word literature: letter, word, reading ability and reading experience, imaginative creation, discourse, representation and signifying practice, envisaging literature not only as a category of use and of condition, but also as production. They were looking forward to studying literature "in some integrated way (...) without any prior separation of private and public or individual and social experience" (Williams 1983).

Put before this reality, my question was – which paradigm was I going to adopt in my seminars? Which authors? Was there a label or a definition for contemporary English literature? Should I teach "knowing in new ways the structures of feeling that have directed and now hold us", or should I teach "finding in new ways the shape of an alternative, a future that can be genuinely imagined and hopefully lived" (Williams 1983)?

Stressing the importance of our tenses of imagination (Williams 1983), I hesitated between tenses, in the wish to bring together the past, present and future critical agendas and grammars of literary and cultural studies, embedded in the two major modern developments regarding the study of literature and culture: the aesthetic, imaginative paradigm, founded by Aristotle's notion of 'imitation' and the ethical, political one, founded on Plato's concept of representation.

The interplay between the imitation of reality and the representation of reality, together with experience, is of critical importance for creative practices; the experience of the world is given significance and is shaped by the creative act of writing, but the understanding of the world is only realised through the process of communication of experience. As Keith Negus and Michael Pickering (2004) explain, there is a need for creative experience to be recognised, because

conceiving the experience in this way means that we cannot confine creativity to the artist or the cultural producer alone. Creativity entails a communicative experience which is cross-relational. It is an intersubjective and interactive dialogue bringing its participants together in the activity of interpretation, exchange and understanding (Negus and Pickering 2004: 23).

Without communication, without discursive alliances between author, text and reader, where the aesthetic is given the same importance as the cultural and the social, the creative process is never complete. In 1961 Williams suggested that an artist only succeeds when he conveys an experience to others in such a way that

the experience is actively re-created – not contemplated, not examined, not passively received (Williams 1961:51).

The elevation of literature to the status of a major art in English Studies, an elevation which established it as an ideological apparatus, helped the humanist hegemony of literary studies, attributing to them a normative primacy over all other cultural expressions, becoming the kernel of modern education. It was a hierarchy formed within particular social and historical contexts, as representative of a set of aesthetic criteria.

As Williams points out

It was certainly an error to suppose that values of art-works could be adequately studied without reference to the particular society within which they were expressed, but it is equally an error to suppose that the social explanation is determining, or that the values and works are mere by-products. (Williams 1961:61)

Literature and by culture, viewed as the form of human civilization, as the "best that has been thought and said" (Arnold 1932) was the high point of civilization and the concern of an educated minority. This process projected literature not only into categories of selectivity, into a body of knowledge of the canon of a great tradition, with an essential English character but also as a human experience, segregating the field of expertise of aesthetics (beauty, goodness and value) from all other activities (Easthope 1991).

The cultural turn of literary studies had a future, when Williams and Hoggart brought literature outside the walls of the academy, profiting from the best of the intellectual work and bringing it to a space of discussion and confrontation; they fought against the idea that the culture of the academy rhymes with vulture or sepulture, using Williams's metaphor in "Culture is ordinary"(1958).

Literature became one of the objects of study of cultural studies, considered not as a product of elite, but rather as a reflex of a whole way of life, to which many political projects

have contributed.⁴ Refusing the role of literature as an absolute value of the arts and of the culture, Williams focussed his analysis on literature as a discourse and as a form of signification within the means and the conditions of its production.

In *The Long Revolution* (1961), Raymond Williams recurrently used literary texts in order to produce meanings, in the representation of realities and of experiences considering literature and culture within the real social context of our economic and political life (Williams 1961) and showing that literature takes the reader beyond itself, as discussions about literature quickly turn into deliberations about the world they represent.

To study the relations adequately we must study them actively, seeing all the activities as particular and contemporary forms of human energy. (...) It is then not a question of relating the art to the society, but of studying all the activities and their interrelations without any concession of priority to any one of them we may choose to abstract. (Williams [1961] 1965: 61-62)

The first story of cultural studies concerns the move from perceiving culture as the arts to seeing it as being ordinary and common. The second story concerns the place of culture as a signifying practice in a social formation and in its relationship with other social practices, namely economic and political (Barker 2000).

Understood from this point of view, it is easy to make our postgraduate students follow an agenda and research the literary texts in a dynamic process, overcoming the limits of the literary, heading towards the territories of cultural criticism, in a recognition that art and society can be articulated, mediated by the polarity of the literary paradigm and the polarity of the cultural paradigm. Discussions in the seminars evolved around and revealed the interest in literature in its simultaneous capacity of dealing with the intellectual, imaginative, aesthetic and artistic life, normally more individual, and of articulating social sensibilities and experiences. Students' creative capacity to understand that the arts are part of our social organization and that the selection and interpretation they made of the literary texts embodied their attitudes and interests made clear that we must make a turn in the methods of teaching and of understanding literature, considering it an important element in the making of meanings out of our experience, since it is through it that we achieve communicative value (Negus and Pickering 2004). By linking art and everyday life, we have to consider literature as a realm that does not transcend life, and by doing this we are grasping

the fundamental relation between meanings arrived at by creative interpretation and description, and meanings embodied by conventions and institutions, we are in a position to reconcile the meanings of culture as 'creative activity' and a 'whole way of life', and this reconciliation is then a real extension of our powers to understand ourselves and our societies' (Williams 1961: 56).

Williams was surely right, the reconciliation of the creative activity with a whole way of life enables us to understand ourselves and our society. We can not see literature as only belonging to any canon or museum, in the abstract, as we can not lose ourselves from the sense of what connects ordinary experience and the expressive configuration of its aesthetic dimensions. There has to be an intrinsic connection between creative practice and everyday life, in a process of reconstruction and articulation of cultural power.

Are researchers and practitioners of Cultural Studies willing to bring literature to the centre, reinventing it within the cultural, the educational and the political frames and

4 Projects that range from Cultural Marxism, to Structuralism, *Post-Structuralism*, Anthropology, Sociology, Feminism, Postcolonialism, etc.

determining the modes how the intimate relationship between textual and cultural analysis is to be understood? It is a question of uniting aesthetic values with ethical and political components in an interpretative effort of bringing together the literary and the cultural paradigms; high and low culture should not be separated cultural realms in terms of institutions, discourses, research and practices, there should be no moving away from the theoretical high ground or from the empirical flatlands (Nowell-Smith 1987).

As Williams did (1961), what I wish to do is to describe some possible ways forward and ask for these to be considered in an open discussion in order to keep the revolution going. I would like to end by saying that my students are now well aware that scholarly literary knowledge of the aesthetic value and quality of literary works of art broadens, enriches and empowers their cultural studies practice and analysis. Mapping the geography for the new conditions of possibility in the analysis of literature and of culture, in new cultural alliances and dynamics, they become agents of change reconstructing the basis and clarifying the contradictions between the literary and the cultural paradigms.

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