

Euro-American Literary Studies at the Beginning of the 21st Century an Approach to Literary Theory

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Abstract: We seek to present a summarized vision of Euro-American literary theory as seen from Latin America, fundamentally within its university classrooms, the space we have in mind when making some proposals at the end of this writing.

Keywords: Euro-American literary theory, conceptualization of literary theory, tenuousness of this theory.

I. Introduction

The title of this paper may seem ambitious; we will not deal with literary research in general, but only with its theory, and in a modest way, insofar as the local situation has led us to consider what has brought about the changes observed in the field of literary theory during the 20th century, a period precisely called the century of theory in literary studies.

We will begin with some observations and by outlining a vision of literary theory in the last century, mainly in its final decades, then refer to the role it is granted in teaching, and later make some proposals regarding this practice.

II. Some Observations

These lines have been motivated by what we have observed in literary research developed in higher education institutions, primarily in our place of work, but also, although to a lesser extent, in other latitudes, now that university mobility allows us to observe what our peers do in other institutions.

Why take in account, only the research developed in higher education institutions? Because it is the research that exists to the greatest extent. There are certainly scholars and research groups that organize themselves to develop specific projects that identify the organization they form, but these are, in most cases, professors assigned to or who have been members of the faculty of a university or other similar institution. There are known cases of literary creators who also publish their theoretical writings, but these are few and sometimes not entirely detached from teaching. So, we can say that literary studies are almost always related to teaching. Most recognized theorists have been members of an educational institution. This indicates that, perhaps, this is the area where the research we refer to acquires the greatest significance.

To educate (*educere*) means to lead out, to guide toward what is sought; it indicates making a path by walking it¹. It is frequently said that teaching that has its object completely defined does not educate, it merely informs. In agreement with this sense, we understand teaching as an intersubjective relationship between persons, as a cognitive process in which the researcher and those interested in knowledge relate around a common interest. From this perspective, teaching that deserves such a name is investigative teaching, in which it is not the individual but two or more persons who trace a path. We believe that research must, in principle, be eminently teachable.

¹ The new trends in teaching are giving increasing importance to this sense, which we will return to in a later section.

III. The Vicissitudes of Literary Theory

Etymologically, *theory* means "to look," "to contemplate," "to inspect." In the proper sense of mental operations, it means "to observe with the intellect," "to consider," to achieve a vision of the object that, in our case, allows us to distinguish the foundations of literary exegesis and critical evaluation within a system of some conceptual generality.

There has been theorizing about literature at least since Greek antiquity, but until a few decades ago, literary theory was seen as something uncommon; it was scarce and was considered a specialization of a few individuals who, within literary studies, were disguised as literary critics but easily revealed their quality as philosophers. Until recently, these studies took for granted that the expression conceived as literary was universal and that it manifested the vicissitudes of human reality; thus, under the banner of common sense, literary texts spoke of personal or collective experience, the historical and social background of the work, the imaginative genius, the poetic beauty of great works, and their human content. However, around the 1960s, literary studies registered broad changes, with which challenges previously unimaginable had to be faced, to the extent that today, the reader of a certain level of preparation and even the academic cannot dispense with, at the very least, some of the elaborate paths traced by the main theorists in order to communicate within certain theoretical enclaves.

Literary theory acquired great notoriety for the first time in the United States and France—less so in other European countries—around the 1960s; it then experienced an incontrovertible peak, partly as a consequence of Russian Formalism, the contributions of the Prague Circle, Anglo-American New Criticism, and other approaches developed in the first half of the century. From France, various theoretical denominations spread, such as "New Criticism," "poetics," "structuralism," "semiology," "narratology." While these names remained at the crest of the wave, theory also remained at its point of maximum splendor, and the image of literary studies based on any of its models was seductive, persuasive, and triumphant; it was believed that we were finally on the verge of achieving what some literary scholars had proposed in the early decades of the 20th century. To participate in the fashionable discussions of the time, the appropriate calling card was the use of a certain terminology and sufficient interest in then-central questions such as literariness and its derivatives, the distinction between literary artistic forms and non-verbal artistic forms, or other issues that progressively focused on a discussion delimited purely to the textual; or, if one preferred to start from phenomenological bases, one had to participate in attempts to formulate a phenomenology of literary activity as writing, reading, or both.

Nevertheless, in any of these possibilities, there was no lack of significant obstacles and difficulties, although seemingly simple, yet unresolved, such as the delimitation of the corpus and the *état présent* of the question. Despite the striking development that literary theory registered in the advanced 1960s, throughout the seventies and even for some years after, it remained a poorly defined field, sometimes chaotic, and still difficult to recognize in some places.

It is true that before the 1960s, work had been written on literary theory, closely following the sentiment and thought of each period, considering the change and the concerns of groups or currents in a given time and space, sometimes formulating theoretical schemes with a certain success, especially throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, but that success depended on an external perspective of study; it was the result of the power of a system of thought (philosophical, religious, or ideological) that determined an *a priori* conception of what was accepted as "literary," starting from the premises of the system rather than from the supposed literary thing itself². Now, by contrast, reservations regarding certain definitions are truly real, so real that they are the subject of extensive discussions and conflicting points of view; the oft-repeated question—what is literature?—remains in the air, and consequently, if the existence of an entity is itself particularly doubtful, the theoretical vision of that entity cannot achieve appreciable consistency and can only rely on the pragmatic. The brief history of literary theory indicates that this is what happens with literature³. Thus, the attempt to

²-before 1960 -this is another fact often adduced in the distinction noted between modernity and postmodernity- within the field of literary studies there were already major discussions, polemics, and differences of approach covering a wide spectrum of points, but the fundamentals of literary studies were never seriously called into question, nor was there doubt about the type of talent and preparation required for them. In the United States, to name one case, the points of view of New Criticism were adopted without hesitation and were taken as established in university centers. Nor was there any reluctance in that country regarding a national tradition. Thus, as Paul de Man points out in his book *The Resistance to theory*, the normative principles of that period were cultural and ideological rather than theoretical, oriented towards the integrity of a social and historical self rather than toward the impersonal coherence that theory requires.

³ Consider a recent case, that of Harold Bloom, who, while maintaining that the notion of autonomy is essential to literature, has himself progressively extended the limits of what he understands by "strong" poetry and poetic

treat literature theoretically is forced into the resignation of accepting the fact of beginning with considerations that are largely pragmatic.

For the reasons stated above, the 20th century is considered the century of literary theory; never before had there been so much theorizing in this field, although little progress has been made and its conceptualization is, to some extent, continually revised and diversified. The approaches to literature developed from the 1960s onward, which gave rise to the literary theory that dominated for some time, were not in fact exclusive to a single school nor developed in one particular field; the new mode of practicing literary criticism—which was indeed impactful—is linked to several well-known personalities who worked in different fields, among which, starting with Saussure, stand out: Jakobson, C. Lévi-Strauss, Barthes, Greimas, Althusser, among others. All of them developed different projects but were supported by some of the premises of the former.

IV. A New Concept of Theory

It can be said that literary theory, which achieved great resonance, appeared when the study of literary texts ceased to be based on non-linguistic and external considerations, as had been done until the 19th century by developing historical, sociological, psychological, and aesthetic perspectives; in other words, a new conception of literary theory began when the object of study—frequently the cause of heated debate—was no longer meaning or value in the text, but rather the modalities of its production and reception. This approach was made possible by drawing on the contributions of Saussurean linguistics, thanks to the introduction of linguistic vision and terminology into the metalanguage about literature.

One might think that the appealing development that literary theory has undergone in recent times is a lateral consequence of broader philosophical developments or one of the manifestations of dominant thought. It is possible to think that, due to its mode of proceeding and its aims, literary theory has a direct connection with philosophy, as it did until a few decades ago; or that it is one of its derivations. But literary theory, as it has been taking shape since the 1960s, is a relatively autonomous vision of questions—which undoubtedly also interest philosophy—"and not necessarily in a clearer or more rigorous form."

The literary theory we refer to emerged rather outside of philosophy and in clear rebellion against the preminent place of aesthetics, considered one of the main components of the traditional philosophical system. At its peak, post-Saussurean literary theory was, in effect, a counter-discourse that called into question nothing less than the premises of traditional criticism. In this order of ideas, this new theory does not pretend to have a normative function, as the previous one did from the proposals of Plato and Aristotle; it tends rather to be analytical. The new literary theory emerges as a reaction; it presupposes the existence of literary studies established in the 19th century from Romanticism onward. Indeed, to a certain extent it can be seen as a philosophy of literature, as a derivation of aesthetics that reflects on the nature and function of art, on the production and reception of meanings and values, but perhaps it can be said more properly that literary theory is not the philosophy of literature, because it is not speculative or abstract; it is rather analytical; it is a practice whose object is discourses *about* literature, that is, literary criticism and literary history, which it often discomferts, because it interrogates, problematizes, and organizes their practice. So, it is clear that the theory of literature is not the formula of letters, nor is it the formula for their study; it is, in a way, their epistemology. However, it has not ceased to be pointed out that, although there is a space of common interest between what literary theory pursues and the objectives of philosophy, ultimately the necessity of literary theory as a disciplinary approach remains. De Man says that "contemporary literary theory is a relatively autonomous version of questions that also appear, in a different context, in philosophy, though not necessarily in a clearer or more rigorous form."⁴ The truth is that the relations between philosophy and literature are close and intense, as demonstrated by aesthetics seen as part of a general system of philosophy. Furthermore, the development of literary theory is largely related to philosophical speculations. Hence, "literary theory may well have become an object of legitimate interest for philosophy, but it cannot be assimilated into it, neither on factual

tradition, to the point of encompassing all canonical texts, from the Bible to Freud, which appear here and there distinguished as theology, philosophy, psychoanalysis, but which, according to him, are literary insofar as they exhibit what is essential: their strong will to rhetorical persuasion. His reasoning can be summarized as follows: a culture becomes literary when its basic conceptual modes have failed it, that is, when religion, philosophy, and science have lost their authority. Graham Allen summarizes Bloom's point of view very well in his book *Harold Bloom: A Poetics of conflict*.

⁴ De Man, Paul, *The Resistances to Theory*, p.21.

nor on theoretical grounds."⁵ On the other hand, we must also take into account that, paradoxically, literary theory has a necessarily pragmatic moment that weakens it as theory or as generalization and adds a subversive patina of unpredictability; in other words, it cannot be considered the result of a simple deduction made from general and philosophical assumptions.

And if we accept Gadamer's formulation as a disjunction between truth and method, between the experience of truth communicated by the work of art and a scientific methodology that recognizes its limitations before art, the longed-for justification of a literary theory as science becomes even more problematic, because, as this author says, "That truth is experienced in the work of art that cannot be reached in any other way constitutes the philosophical significance of art, which asserts itself against all reasoning. Alongside the experience of philosophy, the experience of art represents the clearest imperative that scientific consciousness recognize its limits".⁶

If literary theory implies research aimed at achieving knowledge, it is positioned alongside philosophy and also approaches science⁷. In relation to philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and semiotics, literary theory has sought to delimit its own space; in reality, it cannot evade its principal activity; it is destined to encompass the most dissimilar aspects that literature can comprise. In this sense, it is not a discipline like others; nor is it a science with a clear delimitation of objectives and methodologies. In this, it is closer to philosophy. Its definition is highly debated, and it is considered in various ways; for Terry Eagleton, to name one case, literary theory is a myth, since it possesses neither an object of study nor methods that would allow it to proclaim its autonomy. The object of theory is illusory, and its methods truly belong to other disciplines such as linguistics, history, sociology. Consequently, for this author, literary theory is nothing but an illusion, since it is really a branch of social ideologies⁸. However, literary theory exists. In any case, these uncertainties about its possibility of creating knowledge about a diffuse object that can hardly be separated from that of other disciplines such as philosophy, fuel today the resistance to accepting it, although frequently this resistance is justified by traditional ethical and aesthetic values. In its period of splendor, by contrast, it did not have so many challenges; mainly from France, various theoretical perspectives branched out with promising denominations, and in those years, literary studies supported by them constituted the attraction of the moment. Theory was then a new and clear possibility that was placed alongside or apart from literary criticism and literary history; its identity card consisted, as we have indicated, in the introduction of linguistic terminology into the metalanguage about literature. This appropriation has been truly decisive and has given rise to a change of great significance, such as the so-called "linguistic turn" experienced mainly by Anglo-American linguistic philosophy in the 20th century.

By the designation "linguistic terminology," we refer here to expressions that consider reference as a function of language and not necessarily as an intuition, because the latter implies perception, consciousness, experience. Thus, the interest of philologists such as Roman Jakobson or literary critics such as Roland Barthes in semiology awakened great attraction and directed literary studies toward the examination of linguistic signs. Thus, by considering language as a system of signs and signification rather than as an established configuration of meanings, the horizon of literary studies changed decisively. It should be noted here that, indeed, the encounter between semiology and literature yielded greater results in some respects if we take in account other theoretical models—philological, psychological, or classically epistemological—models that literary researchers had already tried before. It has been pointed out, in this regard, as Paul de Man does⁹ among others, that while some approaches were not capable of going beyond observations that could be paraphrased or translated into terms of common knowledge, semiotic analyses revealed, by contrast, configurations that could only be described in terms of their own, specifically linguistic, aspects. These two fields, linguistics and semiology, have in the study of literature something in common that can only be detected by the perspective they share, by something that belongs only to them. The distinction of this "something"—often referred to as literariness—has become the object of literary theory from this perspective.

⁵ Ibid. P. 18.

⁶ Gadamer, H. G., *Truth and Method*, p.24.

⁷ Considering that the aim of science lies in the deepest Discovery If laws, consists in the systematization of the theories handled, and in the refinement of methods to achieve a superior degree that can (and sometimes even must) differ radically from ordinary knowledge.

⁸ Eagleton, T., *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 243.

⁹ De Man Paul, *The Resistans to Theory*, p. 20.

Literariness, however, is one of the concepts that remains open today; it has not yet been determined, and it has been thought that, after all, literariness is but another word to designate the aesthetic response; it has been considered that this word intends nothing other than what other theories sought, something that responds to the particularities of the perspective itself. Because insofar as there is a convergence of the phenomenal aspects of language, such as sound with the signifying function, to that extent it is an aesthetically oriented conception. In this sense, Barthes and Jakobson often seem to invite a purely aesthetic reading, but this is only apparent, because we must not forget that some of their statements point in the opposite direction. The convergence of sound and meaning, for example, celebrated by Barthes in Proust—a convergence later dismantled by Proust himself as a seductive temptation for darkened minds¹⁰—is seen by the followers of Saussure as a mere effect that language can perfectly achieve, but which bears no substantial relation, by analogy or by ontologically based imitation, to anything beyond that particular effect. It is not, then, an aesthetic function but a rhetorical function of language; it is an identifiable trope that operates at the level of the signifier and contains no responsible statement about the nature of the world—despite its strong potential to create the opposite illusion. For these authors, the quality of phenomenon of the signifier, such as sound, is unquestionably implicated in the correspondence between the name and the thing named, but the link, the relation between the word and the thing, is not phenomenal but conventional, as has been maintained in linguistics since Saussure.

Although Paul de Man is one of the theorists who reject the claim to truth of epistemology and tends to undermine the relation of language and thought in terms of truth, he admits that this conventionality of the signifier, on the one hand, frees language from referential limitations, but on the other, makes it epistemologically suspect and volatile, because in this conventionality it can no longer be said, for example, that the use of language is determined by considerations of truth or falsity, of good or evil, of beauty or ugliness, of pain or pleasure¹¹.

It is opportune to consider here the difference between theory and ideology. The latter always refers to reality and would do nothing other than legitimize certain practices through lies, disguising their conditions of possibility; literary theory, by contrast, and in our opinion, is a work of exploration, of research into knowledge. As we have already pointed out, it has a function very close to the philosophical; it would seem to belong to philosophy and, in this sense, can be seen as a branch of aesthetics that studies the particularities of artistic expression that seeks the definition of beauty and value. But theory has as its object discourses *about* literature; it studies the discourses of literary criticism and literary history; it is fundamentally an analytical and aporetic attitude; it is a critical *tirocinium* [apprenticeship] that tends to investigate the presuppositions of critical exercises in literature. Because, as Julien Gracq said, in matters of literary criticism, all approaches that prescribe categories are traps.¹²

Almost always when, in textual analyses, the point of the autonomous potential of language appears as concomitant or brought about, we can say that we are facing a perspective that seeks literariness; in other words, it is an analysis that considers the text as the place where one can find a use of language that lacks reliability because it does not refer to something. Hence arises the foregrounding of the material, phenomenal aspects of the signifier which, on the one hand, create a strong illusion of aesthetic seduction, but on the other, at the same time, contradict the declared suspension of the real aesthetic function¹³. One of the consequences of semiology and similarly oriented methods is that, while we have

¹⁰ A dismantling persuasively expounded by Gérard Genette in “Proust et le langage indirect”, in *Figures II*, Paris, Seuil, 1969.

¹¹ De Man, Paul, op. cit., p.21.

¹² Julien Gracq, *En lisant en écrivant*, p. 174.

¹³ When linguistics emerged as a discipline, the structural model provided its own point of view, not subordinate to other fields. Saussure delimited a homogeneous object he called “language”, which he defined as an autonomous system of signs independent of speakers and the social environment. Inevitably, such an effort of conceptual aestheticization would produce a total distancing from reality, so that psycholinguistic, sociolinguistic, and historical studies were marginalized from the new science of language. Structuralism as a discipline is thus an inmanent body where intrusions from the outside have no place and which, for this reason, seems to facilitate the status of science. But recent linguistics, as T. Moure points out in *La lingüística en el conjunto del conocimiento*, among other authors, attempts above all to combine internal explanations with those provided by other external forms of knowledge. As a result, linguistics expands into a rich set of disciplines. In the model of linguistics elaborated by structuralism, the scientific study was to be a specialized knowledge, alien to the aspects of language that could be observed from other fields of knowledge. From recent perspectives, linguistics must absorb as its own field any topic, debate, or question that relates, even remotely, to its object of attention.

traditionally been accustomed to reading literature by analogy with the plastic arts and music, we must now accept the necessity of a non-perceptual and purely linguistic moment in painting and music; we must now learn to read paintings rather than imagine meanings.

As a synthesis of this section, we say that the dominant theory in recent decades has been related to linguistics and, for this reason, differs from traditional theory. The latter, from its beginnings, had less presence; it was rarely mentioned as such – although it was included in studies of literature – and even less was it the subject of heated polemic like that which Barthes starred in. The dominant trends in literary criticism prior to the 1960s were little discussed; there was then a kind of tranquil acceptance of the guidelines of the great critics and groups of literary scholars, who, by the way, did not appear as theorists; none had considered themselves theorists in the sense of the term after 1960, nor did their points of view provoke such strong reactions, whether positive or negative, similar to those incited by later theorists, such as those who were part of New Criticism. In the 1960s, literary theory occupied a place of primary importance; it was a new theory, developed under linguistic assumptions.

V. The Decline of this Theory and its Persistence in Teaching

The advent of theory, which we can say experienced a "Boom," took shape in contrast to traditional literary history and literary criticism; this struggle projected it and clothed it with great appeal for some time. Now, the interest it arouses seems to decrease insofar as it becomes better known and as a certain weariness and disappointment follow the initial enthusiasm. Its main representatives no longer figure on the scene and, what is more revealing, some of them have changed their horizon and dedicate themselves to activities very different from those that gave them notoriety; some, like Tzvetan Todorov or Gérard Genette, have shifted to the fields of ethics and aesthetics; others have returned to something akin to traditional criticism and literary history, such as Cesare Segre¹⁴, who speaks of the current crisis of speculative activity, which is, according to him, a crisis not caused by the exhaustion or discredit of methods, but by the interruption in the development of those very methods and by a kind of disaffection. He had already pointed out this situation in 1993 in *Notizie dalla crisi. Dove va la critica letteraria*. At the beginning of the 21st century, the stagnation in question continues, but now accompanied by dismay at the changes in cultural activity, at the decline in the prestige of literature and consequently of literary criticism¹⁵. Segre points out that the dominant criticism from the 1960s to the 1980s had, among its ambitions, that of a totality, in which each new procedure or point of view found its place in a system; today, by contrast, the seduction of totality has faded, and one can only walk either in the forest of literature, or following official signage, or adopting the lures of another genre. What then became of literariness?

What is striking is that in educational centers, these theories facilitated by linguistics have been maintained for a longer time; they were institutionalized, reducing themselves practically to their methodical part; they have become the dominant technique that indicates how to do something without the minimal interest in knowing why or for what purpose it is done – a tendency that, by the way, goes hand in hand with the immediatism of our times.

What has also been observed is that the consecration of a theory and the attempt to "apply" it in a meticulous and monotonous way has accelerated its decline, for the simple reason that whoever attempts such an application, in that very exercise, easily realizes that such a purpose leads only to absurdity; this mode of proceeding also reveals the lack of a broad vision of the object studied and of reality itself. A method that cannot adapt or that does not lead to elucidating its object can only teach illusions, and this occurs when, in the study of the literary text, the method is considered a path already completely designed and ready for its application. When one attempts to carry out such work, it is then that the discrepancy between what the object offers and the understanding that these methods yield naturally emerges. This fact

¹⁴ See his book *Ritorno allá critica*.

¹⁵ Robert Jauss agreed with this assessment when he declared at the beginning of his book *Toward an Aesthetic of Reception* that literature, its history, and its study have been falling more and more into disrepute. Later, with postmodernity, the crisis intensified not only for literature but for many disciplines, and it has come to be considered that these must once again seek their legitimacy by investigating their object, their methods, their field of application, redefining their boundaries in times of globalization, the emergence of new ideologies, and attempts at new generalizations. In this regard, see, among others, the article by Vidal, Hernán "Los derechos humanos, hermenéutica para la crítica literaria y los estudios culturales latinoamericanistas: informe de una experiencia" in *Revista Iberoamericana* 276-177, pp. 719-729.

is, perhaps, the main cause of the hostility we now observe toward theory; it is the reason why it is considered dispensable and as an obstacle to research and teaching.

Nevertheless, there are cases of educational centers in which their members still hold extreme positions in relation to theory: some defend it tooth and nail, to the extent that they remind us of situations of positivism in its best days; others, by contrast, consider it something that can well be set aside, without thereby encouraging negative consequences. What is concerning is that the defenders of one or the other of these two positions show no willingness to yield an inch, are not disposed to reconsider them, thus maintaining an atmosphere of lack of communication, division, and dogmatism. Fortunately, there is also a position that we can distinguish as intermediate in some sense between those mentioned. There are those who maintain the necessity, the indispensability of theory, but understood not as was intended in the case of the so-called "strong" theories decades ago, but in the sense that the socialization of knowledge requires and establishes, and with all that this implies.

What is observed today is that theory does not attract as it did a few decades ago. Its century seems to be gradually remaining in the past. In the university classroom, literary theory is one more subject in the curriculum and is pointed to as pure abstraction, difficult to correspond with the literary text one seeks to study, and unclear in its contributions to the student's education. Barthes said in 1969 that "the new criticism must become, without compunction, a new fertilizer to make something else afterwards"¹⁶; that "something else afterwards" ran aground in its textual networks, because the vitality of criticism is no longer the same; it is now seen rather as harmless, beleaguered, without relation to other disciplines and to the rest of the world. It is no longer the criticism that debated and pointed out the paths by which to approach literature, that tended to determine its importance and the motivation for its study.

In 1966, an important year for the structuralist movement, Pierre Macherey published *Pour une théorie de la production littéraire* [A Theory of Literary Production], a work in which the Marxist sense of theory (critique of ideology, vision of science) and the Formalist sense (analysis of linguistic procedures) were combined behind the back of literature; this publication was already an indication of the theoretical dissociation underway. In 1972, Gérard Genette wrote that "The object of theory would then be not only the real, but the totality of the literary virtual"¹⁷. In his project, Genette relied on two cornerstones, Formalism and Marxism, to justify the investigation of variants or universals of literature, which would allow him to consider each work as possible rather than as real; in other words, he sought the possibility of seeing works as mere exemplifications of the underlying literary system, a purpose that characterized this theoretical current from its beginnings. Although at the start this was a critical, polemical, even militant theory, as indicated by the title of Boris Eichenbaum's 1927 book *Literatura, teorija, kritika, polemika* [Literature, Theory, Criticism, Polemic]¹⁸.

Shortly thereafter, Philippe Sollers would utter indicative words such as the following: "Theory will return, like all things..." These words appear in the preface to the new edition of *Théorie d'ensemble*, an ambitious volume published during the autumn following May 1968, whose title was taken from the field of mathematics and contains contributions from Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Jacques Derrida, Julia Kristeva, and the "Tel Quel" group; by this time, the period of theory's glory was beginning its twilight, but it still nourished the desire to do something. L. Althusser, when calling the collection he directed at Maspero publishing "Théorie," recalled what Lenin had once said: "We must develop theory in order not to lag behind life."

To conclude this part, we can say, in summary, that literary theory supported by linguistics no longer has the vitality of fifty years ago; the initial points of view of this perspective varied, causing its subsequent developments to evolve toward more realistic visions and causing some of its promoters to change their interests. In teaching, its decline has been slower, but the difficulty of practicing it has gradually set it aside. Various current tendencies, such as post-structuralism, accept a fundamental postulate: that linguistic structure cannot be adequately described or explained by conceiving it as a

¹⁶ Roland Barthes in his essay "Réflexions sur un Manuel", p. 186, presented a broad panorama of the innovations that were being promoted at the time.

¹⁷ Genette, G., "Critique et poétique", in *Figures III*, p. 11.

¹⁸ A book partially translated by Tzvetan Todorov in his anthology of the Russian Formalists, which was part of the project to found a science of literature; a purpose that, as we know, did not come to fruition and which, instead, indicates the dissociation and decline of this idea.

completely autonomous system. On the contrary, language and grammar, far from being independent of the external world and completely arbitrary, are regulated by external forces; they respond to communicative and cognitive interests.

VI. The Babel of Theory

It can be said that today there are as many literary theories as there are recognized scholars or centers of literary studies that can be counted. The experience of Cesare Segre mentioned above is a good example of what is currently happening in literary studies and literary theory. Unlike what this author offered us in previous volumes, in *Ritorno alla critica* he does not present an exposition of explicit theorization, although he does not disavow previous theorization either. This time he presents an essay that only hints at the literary theorist. Is it a return to traditional criticism, as the title of his book suggests, in which literature was judged but without revealing the foundation of those judgments? In Segre's book, theoretical supports are certainly not lacking, but they are drawn upon throughout the development of the interpretation and not in extensive, detailed prior expositions, followed by the so entrenched phase of "application." Segre opines that the purpose of finding a general model of literature, in which critical reflections would be located, had been nothing but simple *hybris*, an Enlightenment need to consider literary activity globally. A need that now, at least in one sense¹⁹, is set aside, until the era of transformations whose direction is not yet clear is overcome. What this author points out is the importance of not passively abandoning oneself to the vertigo of these transformations; he also indicates the need to maintain the critical spirit that, sooner or later, will allow us to see our situation and that of the world more clearly. In summary, Segre tells us that the Olympian attitude of the theorist is no longer possible in current circumstances. Something similar had already been said in 1992 by Pierre Bourdieu referring to the need for a new scientific mentality; he stated:

Those pretentious professions of faith from aspiring claimants eager to sit at the table of the "founding fathers" displease me as much as I am pleased by those works in which theory, because it is like the air one breathes, is everywhere and nowhere, around the corner of a footnote, in the commentary on an ancient text, in the very structure of the interpretive discourse. I fully identify with those authors who know how to introduce the most decisive theoretical questions into an empirical study developed with meticulousness, and who use concepts in a way that is both more modest and more aristocratic, even going so far as to conceal their own contribution in a creative reinterpretation of the theories immanent to their object²⁰.

Several pages later, Bourdieu points out that one must construct the place of coexistence of all points of view, from which are defined as many different and coinciding points of view, a place that is none other than the artistic, literary, philosophical field, etc. Taking up Bourdieu's idea, in literary studies there is hope of escaping the circle of relativizations that mutually minimize each other, provided that one puts into practice the greatest possible reflexivity and tries to construct the space of possible points of view on the literary fact. Literary theory needs to go further than it has so far, beyond the purpose of bringing to the consciousness of the writer and his readers the principles of vision and division that underlie the way of approaching the problems that arise; beyond the solutions that these principles provide, theory is also forced to encompass the new possibilities that literature presents to us. The history of criticism shows us, on the contrary, that positions taken on art and literature, the conditions in which they are engendered, are organized by oppositions inherited from a polemical past, antagonisms that are often conceived as insurmountable antinomies, as absolute alternatives in terms of all or nothing, which structure thought, but also confine it within a series of false dilemmas²¹.

Wellek and Warren's *Theory of Literature* of 1949 was seen – and some still consider it – as normative; it is also a reflection on the conditions of literature, literary criticism, and literary history in its time; in reality, these authors were doing criticism of criticism; their work was meta-critical. I say "in its time" because they reveal a cultural *doxa* by advocating a common explanation through the personality and life of the writer. In other words, they tacitly and as something evident admit the belief in the "creative genius" and, with them, undoubtedly so did the majority of their readers, thus placing themselves, according to their own terms, within one of the oldest and best-established methods of literary history, which consists of seeking in the author taken in isolation the explanatory principle of the work. In recent times, by contrast, for

¹⁹ I point this out because later I will argue that every reader tends, in the end, toward a global visión, at least insofar as it concerns them. Isolated parts and autonomies do not satisfy them; they find no sense in them.

²⁰ Bourdieu, P., *Las reglas del arte. Genesis y estructura del campo literario*, p. 266.

²¹ *Ibid.* p.289.

some, the reader does not matter; it would seem that they arrive at this position for reasons no more substantial than mere reaction against their predecessors.

Literary theory presents itself predominantly as a critique of literary criticism insofar as it seeks to bring to light what sustains it, makes its principles explicit, and thereby affirms that one always has a theory, even when one believes one does not; and this usually happens when one adopts—generally by inertia—the dominant theory in a given place and time. In this sense, such was the predominance, for example, of linguistic analysis of Saussure's derivation, that it was assumed that instead of being based on a convention, it was, rather, the very nature of language and literature.

Literary theory today tends to be more a lesson in limitations and pluralism; it shows us that instead of uniformity—which is what forced theories tend toward—what literary texts provoke is a plurality of responses; but not uniform, not always compatible or acceptable; rather than adding to one another in a vision of complete totality, they can mutually exclude each other because, as we can observe, not all call the same thing literature, they do not consider the same aspects of the object, nor do they start from the same assumptions. In any study in this field, there is always a delimitation; there is always a need to choose: ancient or modern, synchrony or diachrony, intrinsic or extrinsic; everything at once is not possible; each perspective deals with a part and has a theory of it or, better, is in the process of constituting one. So, in literary research one is always obliged to certain margins; one must delimit the object of study, as project protocols require. In the pursuit of knowledge, all disciplines practice a certain reductionism, insofar as they select the phenomena of reality in the manner most appropriate to the explanations they handle. As a result of this reductionism, the same object under observation can give rise to very different theoretical objects. The metaphor of the prism explains this fact: the object has many faces, each of which is studied by a discipline, and the fact that one limits oneself to it is considered a required methodological condition to avoid getting lost in mere generalizations and to achieve a certain level of depth in explanation. But for this very reason, there is often a lack of correspondence between the demands of the different study perspectives and the desire of the knowing subject. The feasibility of studies is partial, and what we desire is the totality of the object. Thus, it turns out that if I emphasize the role of the author, it is possible that I reduce the importance of language; if I insist on literariness, I will undoubtedly minimize the role of the reader; if I emphasize historical determination, I will give less importance to the contribution of genius. And what makes the matter more complex is that my decisions depend to a large extent on extraliterary conditions—ethical, existential—that regulate the other aspects of my life.

Until now, literary studies, whatever they may be, including hermeneutics which takes into account a certain breadth of aspects, have been delimited to one or some faces of the object of study; they have been of delimited scope, which, however, the interested party tries to integrate into a unified whole that is required under certain conditions of his life. In this state of affairs, any of the study perspectives allows one to delve into the study of the literary text, but will always require complementation from others, none of which is sufficient; for this reason, the order in which they are approached is in fact indifferent. From the standpoint of common sense, one usually thinks first of the author, then the reader, or also first of the matter, then the manner of treating it, but considering the diversity of tendencies in the study of literature, these show us that any order is possible. In recent years, there has been a tendency for each researcher to adopt one of the perspectives to study the object, but at the same time to try to contrast or negotiate their results with those obtained from other perspectives and methodologies. The intricate interdisciplinary relations are calling for permeability of views to work with tools that are difficult to harmonize and to pursue objectives that at other times seemed irreconcilable. The interdisciplinary perspective smooths out differences in approach; in it, instead of competing, the different views seem to need each other.

It is accepted that an epistemology in its general sense of philosophy of science must refer both to the set of physical-natural disciplines and to the humanistic ones, sets that until now have been considered as different or opposed, but that in the idea of knowledge promoted by man for man—by whom else and for whom else—are desired to be complementary²². There is not yet a general epistemology or an integrating core of the philosophy of science or theory of knowledge, but to varying degrees we all wish to have at our disposal the philosopher's stone or something similar that resolves our doubts; this has been a manifest desire throughout history and across different cultures. What has been achieved so far in this sense are only tugs or groupings of particular epistemologies that seek to ground themselves in each concrete disciplinary domain or in sets of them. In this sense, Husserl considers it necessary and feasible to undertake

²² De Haro, P., "Epistemología de la teoría y crítica de la literatura", en P. Aullón de Haro (Ed.) *Teoría de la crítica literaria*, p. 11.

the establishment of the human sciences from an equivalent epistemological plane, but with its own status different from that assignable to the physical-natural sciences, this by reason both of the different behaviors of the subject, and of the different methodological instrumentations and the distinct nature of the object²³. But the question is not simple; we certainly use the denomination of human sciences now for reasons such as those Husserl adduces, but also for other reasons, such as historical ones²⁴; so that, in contrast to the 19th-century denominations of *Geisteswissenschaften* [sciences of the spirit] or *Kulturwissenschaften* [sciences of culture], due to circumstances such as the constitution of new disciplines, the social sciences, for example, whose epistemological characterization is different, whether from the physical-natural or the human sciences, we now call the latter by that name.

Each day there is more talk about a problem observed in the field of the humanistic disciplines, in which developments are accentuated that are attached to a certain logic or, better, to a rigorous order of procedures, but disconnected from the horizon that groups them as such. The supposed concept of human language in linguistics as a network of systematic relations that do not refer to the real world had initially served to obtain an interesting degree of generality and led to a risky habit: if linguistics disregards the material reality of language, it can only describe fictions. In the history of thought, theoretical disciplines have remained excessively separated from praxis. If one has wanted to see literature only as a specific use of language, one can understand that "literariness" manifests a particular interest in a system of signs and signification, that is, in its own semiotic organization, rather than in reference to extratextual elements. Thus, theory began to be distinguished from both literary history and literary criticism. A pitfall for those beginning literary studies lies precisely in the obligation to delve into dense theoretical frameworks without being able to glimpse their practical possibilities with relative ease. Another obstacle for the beginner is the pronounced segmentation of studies, which, nevertheless, facilitates the mirage of totality. The result of all this constitutes something like a new tower of Babel in which everyone claims to belong to a certain discipline, their concentrated interest is fixed only on it, and there is no need to concern oneself with what happens in contiguous fields. This state of affairs is certainly taken in account in educational policies when the inconveniences inherent in specialization considered in this way are mentioned, and for this reason interdisciplinarity is being promoted. In our day, disciplines are increasingly branching out; communication between them almost disappears, and this is beginning to provoke reactions. In our time, everything seems to indicate that, not to mention general epistemology, even the encouraged horizon of "integral formation" or the possibility that each individual can form an idea of his reality is truly unattainable. Some novice academics – and sometimes also those who are not so novice – make one think when they present their work developed within the framework of a discipline – they speak in such a way that they reveal their conviction of having achieved something transcendent, the fruit of a certain rigorously observed methodology. Disenchantment sets in when, after some time, their work rests in complete oblivion. Cases like this indicate that the disciplinary vision can become a vision of reality.

The current situation is markedly intricate. The disciplines seen from within also present something like the interior of a volcano; within the scope of their delimitation, there is a continuous struggle between the different ways of operating and conceiving their object of study; in them, too, the part is often taken for the whole. Perhaps the ideal of achieving a clear and distinct idea of what we do has led us down paths of mirages, has led us to postures of arrogance and dogmatism. The very distinction we have mentioned in these pages between literary history, criticism, and theory we have made out of the necessity to show that, in literary studies, literary criticism is not the final point of arrival; there is what we have pointed to as the critique of criticism, which is achieved only in an attentive attitude aware that we move in the sphere of the human, tending to achieve a grounded explanation of what we wish to know. Among these three forms of literary studies, there is in reality a permanent interrelation that sometimes makes it difficult for us to distinguish where one ends and where another begins. We notice with relative ease that if criticism ignores the theoretical presuppositions of literary creation, whether formulated or not by the poets themselves and by scholars of literary theory, it will undoubtedly obtain, in its effort and in the best of cases, characteristically impoverished results. Similarly, if literary history does not have prior critical arguments on which to base its selective criteria of inclusion, exclusion, and relevance that it inevitably grants in one way or another to the series of works, this history will lack minimal credibility. The interweaving of these disciplines is unavoidable when considering what is understood by and what literary studies encompass.

On the other hand, there is important criticism in our time that is not only philologically grounded and is markedly associated with other disciplines such as psychology and sociology, at the very least and necessarily. In reality, the contiguity and link between disciplines is unavoidable. As if this were not enough, in the field of the arts, both literature

²³ Husserl, E., *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.

²⁴ Vattimo, G., *The Transparent Society*.

and the other artistic expressions, like their corresponding disciplines, as we have pointed out, relate as a whole, from their level of concretization that particularizes, to philosophical aesthetics. Literary criticism and theory are in close contact with aesthetics. In fact, in the pragmatic order that can be considered from the most accentuated particularity to the greatest generality, we can see that literary criticism, literary theory, and aesthetics form a corpus that is difficult to dissociate; the three disciplines to some extent presuppose each other. What has come to be considered as the study of literature, the consideration of the literary text as a totality of event, structure, and relational dispositions, has been undertaken mainly from three points of view or from three philological disciplines that constitute literary studies: history, theory, and literary criticism; sometimes with a reduced vision of them, at other times with an open perspective that seems more fruitful. Openness to complementation is, however, sometimes frowned upon, but it is what allows us greater guarantees of achieving what we seek.

Now, interdisciplinary collaboration is frequent, both among disciplines within the field of literature and with others, but not with the frequency and depth as occurs between literary theory and criticism, which at times can be indistinguishable from each other. One can easily verify that the function of theory tends to be carried out *a priori* – its excesses have partly motivated these lines –; this happens when it is frequently made explicit by way of prescription, as has occurred for millennia, from ancient times with Aristotle's *Poetics*, Horace's *Epistle to the Pisons*, etc. But there also exists a *posteriori* literary theory, which is the theory implicit in the object, as Bourdieu prefers in the reference from previous pages. This theory is elucidated through inductive inquiry into the bases that the author has taken in account when constructing his work; in this case, from the artistic text, the literary theorist obtains sufficient inferences to establish his principles. There is no doubt that one type of theory has been more frequent than the other; *a priori* literary theory is what has succinctly acquainted us with the evolution of Western literary thought and is mainly contained in reflections on how or what literature should be; it appears in poetics or in orderings about how a certain class of texts is constructed or should be constructed. But, in the end, both theories converge on the same thing: distinguishing prior thought; both indicate the basis of textual elaboration.

Now, if we take into consideration the distinction between literary theory and criticism, it is clear that *a priori* literary theory is prior to the object, whereas literary criticism is subsequent to it. This fact clearly distinguishes them. But only up to a point, because if we take in account a *posteriori* theory and relate it to criticism, the distinction is no longer so clear, because the implicit theory converges with criticism insofar as it is subsequent to the study of the literary text; both develop, so to speak, in parallel and are directed at approaching the same object; both are interested, although in different ways, in its interpretation. This being so, it is understandable that frequently these activities or, rather, these denominations appear merged; in reality, they are the same project, whether one type of interests and results predominates or the other: theory attempts to discover the foundational literary ideas, the thought that governs the creation of the object; criticism attempts to analyze and interpret the object, considers its contextual relations, its place in a series, etc.; it is a discourse that emphasizes the reading experience, that describes and evaluates the meaning and effect that works have on readers. By these characteristics, we can see that the ideal environment for criticism is the salon where intellectuality gathers. Its main form is conversation. Literary theory, by contrast, seeks to make explicit the presuppositions of those affirmations; it deals with central questions such as: what is given the name literature? What are its criteria? It does not propose to reconcile the various perspectives, but to understand why they are diverse.

Literary theory and criticism are also related to literary history as a discourse that takes in account factors external to the reading experience; it deals, for example, with the conception of works over time or their transmission. Literary history appeared in the 19th century in different places and with denominations such as philology, scholarship, *Wissenschaft* [science], or *recherche* [research]. The distinction most frequently mentioned and without complications is that between criticism and literary history; the former is considered a fundamentally intrinsic procedure, because it is centered on the text; literary history, by contrast, refers to context, is extrinsic, tends to explain the text in its relations with its exterior. Criticism usually tells us that a text has certain characteristics, evaluates it, tells us whether or not it is beautiful. Literary history offers us explanations such as the relations and derivation of a text or the place it occupies in the development of a certain theme or some literary current.

These three possibilities for the study of literature, however, in practice tend to accentuate their specificity, developing within the framework they have delimited as their own, and come to constitute themselves as closed and self-uncritical universes, to the extent that some who consider themselves literary critics, for example, sometimes presume they can dispense with all theory; or that those who dedicate themselves to theory seek to "apply" to every literary text that theory

they prefer. As M. Barbero points out²⁵, in our times we are experiencing an expansive process of fragmentation and volatility, perhaps both facilitated by growing virtuality which, paradoxically, makes us adhere to a certain vision of the world that seeks to become the only possible one. In academic circles, there are specialists dedicated to the study of a certain aspect of an object, of an author, and even of a certain methodology; this distinguishes them from other scholars, naming themselves according to their own specialty—as often happens in the field of literary studies, where they distinguish themselves as Formalists, Structuralists, Semioticians... or, to specify further, within a study perspective, they are distinguished as Freudians, Jungians, or followers of Derrida, Lukács, Goldmann, Bakhtin, or Morin, as if these particular ways of approaching the object of study were the only ones capable of doing so. If that were the case, which one is the best? Because there are many theories now circulating in the academic world. It is clear that in these cases the dimension of theory has been lost and that for this reason it can be absolutized. When this happens, the reduced field that is known becomes the whole; its theorization is consecrated and ends up becoming a "recipe." This state of affairs reminds us of what Karl Popper once defined as "closed societies," characterized by being uncritical, totalitarian, and exposed to arbitrariness. We know that in similar circumstances everything becomes rigid, prescriptive, because those who promote them measure everything with a single yardstick; they consider themselves to possess the finished vision of the object of study and that everything that can be said about it must necessarily coincide with that vision. In these cases, the "small" problem is that in practice there are no works (analyses, theses, research...) that truly conform to those required schemas, even less so when dealing with an object that loses its artistic quality if it is limited to the demands of a pre-established schema. This was precisely the problem of the theorists of socialist realism.

What follows from all this are results that one can well imagine as the fruit of fragmented, predetermined visions reduced to their normative function, which closes the doors to inquiry and to creation itself. Applying a theory is not the same as researching.

Another derived problem is that, while these conditions dominate, proposals such as interdisciplinarity, transversality, etc., which are formulated precisely because there is a problem, will lack possibility and meaning. In the way of working that we challenge, the student does not distinguish the relation of theory to what he needs and strives to achieve; what he sees in theory is something ethereal and far removed from his reality, which, nevertheless, does not entirely cancel out the weak supposition—which circulates but is not verified—that this theory is the path to knowledge. For some time now, there has been talk of the crisis in education, of the dissociation between educational programs and the needs of life; the way theory is worked on in the classroom is one of the ingredients of this problem.

In recent years, we also navigate a sea of theories, in which it is difficult to decide on which to anchor. The grand theories have ended. This is not entirely negative if we consider that, in the absence of a vision that offers us security, we will be forced to formulate our own, always with the disposition to reconsider it in coexistence with those who accompany us.

VII. What Is to Be Done?

The theories that have underpinned the study of literature in Latin America have mostly come from other latitudes; we have not elaborated explicit theories; we have made our own those of other countries and, if what we have put forward in these pages is accepted, we can say that we are in favorable conditions to outline, to articulate a vision of our reality, an attentive explication of how we consider ourselves, what we are, what our reality is, beginning with a conceptualization and its articulation into configurations that allow us to understand ourselves, because when language ceases to be a means for self-recognition and communication, then one begins to think that reality is elsewhere, and this effect does nothing but maintain subordination. As long as we do not manage to conceptualize our reality, we will not achieve a viable vision of it, and we will not be able to walk toward where we want. The concept is a theoretical manifestation of reality.

In circumstances of profound sociopolitical, technological, economic, and cultural transformations such as those we are living through by virtue of the lights and shadows of globalization processes, art sees its role as a pioneer in becoming strengthened; in it, we can identify traces and new elements; we can see the signs of what is to come. Art, together with the exercise of thought, provides us with symbols, representations, and possibilities of meaning within an individual and collective framework of desired perspectives. Men always coexists with desire; he has the permanent need to reinvent himself; he seeks to maintain conditions that offer him the possibilities to develop new ideas, to explore new horizons of

²⁵ Barbero, M., "Heterogeneidad, democracia y comunicación", in Sosnowsky, S. and Patiño R. *Una cultura para la democracia en América Latina*, cited in Edgar Montiel (Coord.), *Hacia una mundialización humanista*, p. 12.

fulfillment; if he stagnates in adverse conditions, these will end up suffocating him. In our day, there exists a globalization that consists of creating users who repeat slogans in the form of clichés and doctrinal pronouncements, and whoever adheres to this tendency is no longer himself but an echo or, as B. Melià says²⁶, is called a parrot. School systems, in no small part, are limited to these repetitions. The traditional function of catechisms seems to facilitate things excessively; in reality, it prevents us from moving and pursuing what we desire.

Ernst Gombrich pointed out around the middle of the 20th century that even in the most conformist imitative painting there is a strong interpretive component, because it is the painter's mental and emotional model that organizes the features and characteristics of the object to be reproduced²⁷. Gombrich's words also apply to the case of literature; they indicate that the work of art, to be such, both in its production and in its reception, cannot adhere to a model, because by doing so it would cease to be art to become mere copy.

In the work of art, there is also something decisive: the mixture of subject and object. In the process of literary production and its reading, the subject relates to the object not directly, but through the image that the subject forms of the object; in other words, the image of the object belongs to the subject, since it is he who constructs it. This can be clearly observed both in the production and in the reception of the literary text. We have alluded to the fact that not even in extreme cases does the writer lose all contact with the external world; indeed, the work is constituted in the unavoidable quality of vehicle of communication; it necessarily implies an uninterrupted relation, at least as desire. All this reveals the importance of the circumstances of both the producer and the receiver of the work of art. Neither in the moments of greatest surrender to creation nor of abandonment to its enjoyment does the subject completely detach himself from his circumstances; this allows us to understand that there are no two identical works, even if they have the same motif; nor are there two identical readings; each reader makes his own reading, and there are as many readings as there are readers. To explain this, we must distinguish between internal and external reality. Every personal world is part of external reality in the sense that it relies on referential objects of that reality; but at the same time, both the elaboration and the mere perception of the object belong to the subject, because it is an image that, as such, belongs to the one who forms it. And since one can only operate with the image of the object, the content of the text is also of internal reality; that is, it is necessarily subjective. Now, we operate with the images of the object as if they were the object, and consensus on such images seems to offer plausibility to our attempt to recognize behind them the object in its bare reality. But there is no object that is identical to the image that each of us who relates to it can form of it. Psychoanalysis tells us that there is no way to fantasize about a world that does not involve the fantasy of the subject who fantasizes it. Either one fantasizes about a world in its totality with the fantasizing subject inside it, occupying a certain position, or one fantasizes only about oneself, leaving external reality more or less as it is²⁸. But what has happened so far is that we have mediated our relationship with the world and the vision of ourselves. The models we have followed have not been our own formulation; they have been superimposed, so that, as the systems that were purported to be coherent and complete on which they relied have disappeared, we find ourselves forced to achieve a vision by ourselves; we are forced to find our own solutions; at the beginning, perhaps, we achieve this with enormous difficulty, in a tenuous way and in the form of *bricolage* due to the need to take ideas from one side and another, tending to structure our reality in our own way, with the advantage that it is ours and is indispensable for us in the pursuit of our purposes. This task certainly demands courage and imagination, because one must know how to move with a spirit of initiative in spaces that are either reduced or closed, which are what totalizing utopian projects leave us.

The first American art that followed the Conquest was undertaken in the copying of European models; nevertheless, the works produced by Indigenous people, although they appeared to be copies of the model, always showed a tendency to make them a projection of themselves. For this reason, something new resulted from their work; their works were a manifestation of themselves and at the same time a source of mestizaje and inventions. In the initial copy, the project deviated, modified, and enriched itself, because as it advanced, other cultural elements were incorporated, triggering combinations, juxtapositions, amalgamations, or new discoveries, often unexpected. In the Colonial period, the copy was never faithful or exact; in the small or large deviation, one can see not only a difference but also the conception and impulse

²⁶ Melià, Bartomeu, "Paraguay o el tiempo contra babel", in *Hacia una mundialización humanista*, p. 112.

²⁷ Gombrich, E., *Art and illusion: A Study in the Psychology of pictorial Representation*.

²⁸ Castilla del Pino, C., "El psicoanálisis, la hermenéutica y el universo literario", in P. Aullón de Haro (Ed.), *Teoría de la crítica literaria*, p. 347.

of the artists' projection. The artistic capacity of Indigenous people was capable of introducing subtle changes that would germinate new cultures from that which could not be reduced to a mere reproduction of defeat.

In Latin American countries, literary theory has not achieved the striking developments noted in Europe and North America; its development has been little explicit and articulated, but it has not been absent from the slow growth of national cultures. It has invariably been distinguished by its close relationship with the ever-vivid desire for self-determination, with what is most deeply felt in our experience. Its most prominent figures – Alfonso Reyes, Pedro Henríquez Ureña, José Carlos Mariátegui, José Martí, José Lezama Lima, and others – always manifested in their writings a common purpose: to find, through literary currents and through the discourse articulated about literary production, a unity and a vision of self-affirmation that would allow the construction of "American expression." We have not had great theoretical schools; we have had a shared need expressed by recognized individuals who have covered the first stretch of a path that is ours.

Octavio Paz lamented the absence of theory and criticism in Latin American literature; he said: "we lack a body of 'doctrine' or 'doctrines,' that is, of that world of ideas that, by unfolding, creates an intellectual space: the realm of a work, the resonance that prolongs or contradicts it. That space is the meeting place with other works, the possibility of dialogue between them"²⁹. The creation of that space of dialogue has been the ultimate goal of criticism in our countries; that is its contribution to the creation of a cultural tradition understood as the construction of an order of our own from inherited legacies through confrontations and polarities. As Todorov has said, speaking generally of literary criticism, in Latin America it has essentially been that dialogue that "speaks not about works but of works or rather with works (...) the criticized text is not an object to be taken up by a metalanguage, but a discourse that encounters the critic; the author is a you and not a he, is an interlocutor with whom one discusses human values"³⁰].

In our countries, little has been taught about thinking. Education scarcely prepares for this task; at most, it teaches how to describe once the habit of repetition has been overcome and the possibilities of creation are opened. Educational programs instruct and enable repetition, whereas thinking is the particular way of situating oneself in reality; if we do not situate ourselves, we will remain as mere consumers, without the capacity to add to the world the apprehension of our own reality. By not creating, we deny the world the knowledge of our history; we deny the concepts that define our being here, that allow us to give meaning to our life and to coexistence with others.

To access analytical thinking – the kind that enables society to produce its own self-knowledge – knowledge is required, which consists of the capacity to theorize, the possibility of conceptualizing, of arriving at the intelligible idea of the thing. To learn to think, the dialogical attitude that opens horizons is also fundamental. In the arduous task of constructing knowledge, in the confrontation of diverse positions, one learns to think, one arrives at emancipated knowledge, at the effort to understand ourselves, others, and the reality that surrounds us. Having achieved the conceptual apparatus in thinking for oneself, argumentative capacity is also decisive: the wholly unique way of approaching a problem, of formulating an inference or a thesis. In this way, one arrives at a possible truth, which tends to refute previous ones and project a new one, whether upon new foundations or upon realities not yet known.

In our America, the literary theorist, as an intellectual, assumes the responsibility of contributing to the ideals and practices of social improvement; he collaborates in the construction of a better destiny for the social and personal human condition. For the literary theorist in our countries, culture, which is the proper sphere of his action, is not limited to knowledge for its own sake or to art; it also acquires the character of a historical commitment, a commitment to reality that is constructed in the dynamic of a process aimed at establishing the ethical, rational, and autonomous image of human existence. That image cannot be the mere uncritical, emotional, or intuitive repetition of what is given, of what is established.

The critical spirit that theorizes tends to achieve some light on the process it lives; it seeks to analyze problems and not simply accept given solutions. Its only certainty is the limitation of knowledge, the insufficiency of its own knowledge; therefore, it questions, formulates hypotheses, concepts, propositions, affirmations. In its doubts, conjectures, and refutations, it is forced to maintain a permanent attitude of vigilance. Consequently, its stance cannot be closed; it must

²⁹ Paz, O., *Alternating Current*, p. 39.

³⁰ Todorov, Tz., *Criticism of Criticism*, p. 150.

remain open to the critical apprehension of historical reality. The interactive link between theory and the unfolding of events is what, ultimately, has characterized Latin American thought.

In today's world, in which technological resources have come to be transformed into ends in themselves and the human being, the true recipient of historical processes, has been reduced to a digitized means that sets in motion the logic and autonomous processes of technology, literature and its study are truly indispensable.

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