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Literature's Loss of Status? Which Status? Whose Status?

Helena Carvalhã Buescu

Abstract: Humanities' loss of symbolic status and, most especially, literature's loss of symbolic status have, in the last decades, been stated, and frequently overstated. The pessimistic position is to consider that there will be no way back—as if we were at the famous “end of history” that Fukuyama thought to have foreseen with the end of the Berlin wall and the pivotal historical moment lived in its wake. I propose to look at this question with a deeper historical insight, taking into consideration that status (either gained or lost) is always a matter of perspective, of position, and of the nature of the encyclopedia that we as observers and readers culturally tackle. I therefore discuss the nature of the supposed loss of status, to underline that it is an heritage of the understanding of literature as first and foremost an expression of a nation. If we take alternative stances, however, the nature of the question we are discussing interestingly differs. I then proceed to discuss “forms of belonging” as crucial to the understanding of the symbolic nature of literature and the humanities, by stressing that losses are always transformations; that we should take into account the distinction between knowledge and cultural capital (Jeffrey Adams); and that we are surrounded by practical fields in which this distinction and its consequences are played for us to understand them. In my view, then, we should relativise all the “ends” and “deaths” that have plagued our field, which have led to the idea that literature is condemned to be just a cultural and symbolic loss, or marker of a doomed past.

Keywords: symbolic value of literature; literature and nation; end of literature

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标题: 文学地位不再? 何种地位? 谁之地位?

摘要: 在过去的几十年里,人们常说,且往往夸大其词地说,人文科学——尤其是文学——已失去了象征性地位。这一悲观的立场认为,我们将无路可退——仿佛我们位处著名的“历史的终结”时刻,一如福山在柏林墙倒塌后所预见的那样。我建议以更深刻的历史洞察力来看待这个问题,并考虑到对地位(无论是获得还是失去)的讨论往往出于一个视角、一种立场,其性质也关乎我们作为观察者和读者在文化上处理的文学百科全书。因此,我讨论了所谓“地位不再”的性质,以强调它根植于将文学作为首要的民族的表达这一理解。然而,如果我们采取其他立场,这一问题性质就会发生有趣的变化。然后,通过强调损失往往意味着转化,我继续讨论“归属形式”对于理解文学和人文学科的象征性质的关键作用。我们应该考虑到知识和文化资本之间的区别,这种区别有助于我们理解周围的诸多实践领域。总之,我们应该将所有困扰我们领域的“终结”和“死亡”予以相对化的处理,因为它们认为文学注定会成为一种文化和象征意义上的损失,或标志着注定消失的过去。

关键词: 文学的象征价值 文学与民族 文学的终结

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The title I have chosen is a condensed abstract of the argument I shall try to develop here in its broader implications—and it could be subsumed by the question that follows: when we talk about literature's loss of status, as we are prone to do (and are actually doing), which status are we talking about? And whose status are we addressing? This formulation of the question, of course, suggests that we have to think about the "nature" (I mean, the cultural, political and symbolic nature) of that status. Only after considering this factor may we understand the changes in that nature that literature has undergone. I will briefly describe these two questions, and then proceed to develop the consequences that each one of them has for the ways we view, relate, and connect to literature.

To say "which status?" means, of course, that we have to realise that there are several kinds of statuses, and that there are differences between them that have to be taken into consideration, since they modify, in no small way, the category of literature itself. Is "status" unique and universal? Is it a category outside history, always there and always the same? Are we referring to the same kind of reality when we say the "status" of literature has changed in medieval times as opposed to the Romantic period or the New Age movement? Can we really infer that this status *is* the same, and thus comparable only in its differences? With regards to the first question posed, these are the main issues that I shall try to address.

But the second question is no less important, from my perspective, quite the contrary: "whose status?" takes us a step further, by implying that the differences in the several statuses are really differences in groups and in social and symbolic types of consensus. In short, these differences tell us as much about the "nature" of literature as about the "nature" of the audience that literature addresses (or does not address, which is, of course, a different form of address). In any case, more is revealed about these audiences than about literature itself.

I will now proceed to consider each one of these categories by itself, although I might state from the very beginning that I do not really consider them apart; I only distinguish them for the sake of clarity, and not really because I imagine they can in any way be dissociated from each other.

1. Which status?

The first question arises from a concern about the "nature" of the status we are discussing. If it is, indeed, not really dissociable from the second question, as I have just suggested, it does present some rather self-evident consequences that I would now like to underline. One of them, perhaps the most important from my point of view, is this rather obvious, though often overlooked, idea: there is actually not *one* status, predefined, stable and continuous, but rather *several* types and forms of statuses, and their relative positions determine both their nature and functions. It is important to understand that when we talk about "the status of literature," we may be talking of very different things. If it is not clear exactly what that status is, it becomes rather difficult, if not impossible, to think about apparent "losses" or "differences" in status. We are definitely not talking of an abstract and universal status—but of an *historical* status that should be viewed under *historical* conditions.

In this context, I would first like to note that we are really assuming as our point of departure a construct that we have naturalised (and thus ignored as a construct). It is a construct based upon the equation of *language*, *literature* and *nation*. This equation originated, as we know, in the mid-eighteenth century. It is at the core of the revolution that Benedict Anderson has termed the "lexicographic revolution" (Anderson 66–79), the collusion of language and literature (literature *belonging* to a language; language *containing* a literature) as a strategy for the construction of a *national identity* (i. e. the standpoint from which one can talk of a "national literature") and a communitarian educational program built upon its recognition. Anderson's construct represents a

development in our modern perception of literature whose very consistency (even if slightly obscured by naturalisation) is examined in by Nancy Armstrong in a recent essay where she addresses the relationship between a “national being” (related to a definite form of “well-being”) and the concept of literature (Armstrong 17 – 49). Armstrong shows that there is a form of continuity within the Anglo-Saxon debate, dating from the Victorian period, particularly from John Stuart Mill and Matthew Arnold, to Richard Rorty’s polemical reflections in a book entitled *Achieving our Country* (an enlightening title, one has to admit).

In *La République mondiale des lettres*, Pascale Casanova emphasized the way Herder’s thought and its European reception shaped all the subsequent concepts of both “nation” and “national literature” and, consequently, the place literature can and, from Herder’s perspective, should occupy in the nation. In that manifesto of sorts, *Yet Another Philosophy of History of the Education of Humanity* (1774), Herder evoked the philosophy of history underlying the idea of “national genius” and how it contributed to the “education of humanity.” Casanova adds the following significant remarks:

The new definition that he (Herder) proposes both for language “mirror of the people” and literature “language is the repository and contents of literature,” as he already wrote in his fragments of 1767-antagonistic to the dominant French aristocratic definition, turns upside down the notion of literary legitimacy as well as the rules of the international literary game. It presupposes that the people itself serves as the literary school and womb. Thus, one can in the future measure the greatness of literature by its importance or the authenticity of its popular traditions. The invention of this other literary legitimacy-national and popular-will permit the accumulation of another type of

resource, unknown until now in the literary universe. It will join the literary even more to the political. All these little nations of Europe and elsewhere will be able to pretend that they also, because of their ennoblement by the people, have an independent existence, inseparably political and literary. (Casanova 112 – 13, my translation)

It is this matrix, thus, that underlies a status for literature in which there seems to be an inevitable coincidence between the literary project and the national educational project. Its major goal is the acquisition of a specific form of literacy through which a specific national culture is both acquired and transmitted, becoming the common sediment or ground of a community. It should be noted that this matrix, however ample, is nevertheless historical and has provided a distinctive modern history for the concepts it uses, such as *nation*, *language*, and *literature*.

Not only has this situation not always been the case, but there has always been a historical tension arising from different concepts of literature, which has been at the root of historical, philosophical, and radically aesthetic distinctions between “literature in general” and “poetry” in particular.^① Such distinctions re-emerge even today and they are not exclusively modern. One has only to think of Malherbe, for example. We can also cite Charles Altieri’s recent observations regarding the powers specific to lyrical poetry or Jonathan Culler’s insistence on the role that apostrophe (which he takes from Baudelaire) plays in our understanding of poetry. We should borrow from Benjamin his certitude regarding narrative as the true obsession of modernity and add to this obsession the proposal that “literal lyrics” comprise a “prose culture.” In the middle of the nineteenth century, the Portuguese writer Garrett, evoking the playwright Manuel de Figueiredo, believed himself “to be a poet in an age of prose.” Garrett was perhaps echoing the

conviction, shared by the German Romantics, that they lived in basically non-Romantic times. We are, indeed, aware that poetry is conceived as a distinct form from literature in general. It provides a specific consciousness of language, in which difficulty and estrangement are not real barriers, but a kind of heightened form of being in language. This is precisely the reason why Altieri is able to say that lyrics “keep the difficulties alive” (Altieri 32), in a clear stand against the homogenisation of language and, of course, the world (s) they represent and constitute.

If we want to accept this stand as a metaphoric statement about “things” in general (and indeed we can and, perhaps, should), we might then suggest, as does Anthony J. Cascardi, that “an acceptance of the ‘failure’ of democratic universalism remains an ineradicable and irreducible condition of ‘post-Enlightenment’ political thought” (Cascardi 180). For it becomes rather obvious, in this light, that the ‘failure’ here proposed is really the point from which the critique originates, and which it does not intend, in fact, to overcome (partly, but not only, because it is not possible to overcome that kind of ‘failure’ -one has simply to think and *start from it*). A critical stance on literature must then also be viewed in this light-for this failure affects it in its inner core, where language and literature come together in the “perfect form” of the nation or community. The rational and conscious subject, embedded in such a project, shares and partakes of a shared common knowledge. Of necessity, this subject becomes aware of its own specific failures as well as *other* demands that are not completely answered by the overall project of a national literature as a vehicle for unifying ideologies. It is this other kind of subject that Cascardi seems to propose, as he observes:

... I would suggest, first, that the affective subject must be acknowledged, and second that it must be imagined as acting within a symbolic domain if we are

to speak of it as the “subject of justice”-a subject that not only chooses but also wills and wills, moreover, as a certain kind of person, with desires, passions, and attachments in addition to fears (Cascardi 201).

The proposal of a world (academia, school, or research project), where there are no great pleasures, difficulties or resistances, forecloses all such territories as described by Cascardi and definitely bars his affective subject from actively and critically relating to knowledge, and the way it is communicated and produced. In this respect, I would like to draw the reader’s attention to the last chapter of his book, “Feeling and/as force.”

We might also like to recall along with Adorno, that self-reflection may also be viewed as a definite form of addressing (and ultimately trying to establish) forms of legitimization or authentication in literature and that it has become central to modern art. What I would like to stress here is that we can basically view self-reflection (authentication) as a way of reflecting a basic distrust in artistic premises. In this sense, we might also say that self-reflection acknowledges the problematic status of art itself and, in particular, literature. In other words, I am not at all convinced that all literature is but a way of affirming its absolute existence and position within a universe. On the contrary, I quite suspect that concerns regarding literature’s status arise from literature itself and are an essential part of what it does and how it does it. Consequently, what I would also like to suggest here is that our sense of the precariousness of art and literature in particular, derives perhaps from these various forms of artistic self-awareness. For as much as we would like to ignore it, self-awareness has never produced bliss, or proceeded from it.

2. Whose status?

This second half of my question stems from the same kind of observations as those presented above and addresses them in, perhaps, a more concrete

way. The basic issue concerns status as a form of *belonging*. Because status reflects belonging, it also has to be recognized as an affective and symbolic form of sharing within a specific community that perceives itself as coexisting with other such communities. There are several ways to belong. We can belong at the same time to different kinds of groups and share differently in their statuses, functions and natures. Forms of belonging represent a very basic awareness of the ways we understand ourselves living and making sense within the groups to which we belong. But, they also enable us to understand the very simple fact that only a real ambiguity, whose roots are at the core of an optimistic project (and in this measure a well-intentioned project, of course), conceives of literature as a form of universal program, valid under the same conditions anywhere and serving the same goals. We have just seen that this is, in fact, the project of the Enlightenment, and that it responds to a specific form of ideology that has been at the core of modern Western societies. We should not be blinded to the fact that what we now call literature has stemmed, been transformed and maintained throughout the ages in ways that are very different from those we came to view as universal. It has been this ambiguity that has blinded us to the problem of belonging-confirming for us, proudly (even if tacitly) the idea of a universal and probably immutable status that, once achieved, would only need maintenance. The references to this project have, of course, changed. The formula “mass literature”, for example, might just be another version (a more global, but also more neutralised version) of what appeared, under a more “technical” formulation, as “universal literature”, “littérature générale”, etc.

I might then suggest that what is implied by this loss of status, often with a kind of melancholy which is, of course, understandable, is basically the failure of that “over-human” project stemming from the Enlightenment, the project that views literature as having the capacity to build a category which,

originating in history, can explain *all* history and organise *all times* (future, present and past), not only in terms of *understanding* but also in terms of *doing*. Literature itself would then be this category. If measured against this “over-human” project, literature’s loss of status is not only irredeemable, but also total. Nevertheless, I would like to present some points that, from my perspective, might help us change the way we view this picture, and I will briefly describe the implications of my three main arguments.

#1 *Losses*, in retrospect, have always been *transformations*: “literature” itself, as we understand it nowadays, including, for example, the journalistic column, chronicle, or the historiographical narrative, has been built upon ruins that need to be rebuilt. This is precisely what history is all about, a palimpsest writing that, as it erases and rewrites, also maintains. Things never really go away. Let us, for example, consider the way the Renaissance built and transformed rhetoric, by producing a shift through which rhetoric and poetics were made to coincide. Poetics would never be the same again, but neither would rhetoric and, if we think about it, this coincidence was at the root of what the eighteenth century would come to know as literature—and of which, since Baumgarten, aesthetic criteria would be the cornerstone. From this point of view, an inevitable melancholy, understood contextually, might be seasoned with a certain amount of *granum salis*. I am really convinced that there must be alternatives to the glorious project of a “universal literature” and the mourning implied by the concept of “literature in ruins.” I do think, also, that we have to recognise the seriousness of both concepts. In the latter, we should reflect how Benjamin initiated this problematic for modernity and how we should recognise the manner in which it deeply influences writers such as Aguiar e Silva and Giulio Ferroni^②.

#2. The distinction that Jeffrey Allen proposed between “knowledge” and “cultural capital” (the latter concept coined by John Guillory) may help us

to understand how these two concepts, even if they are related, are neither the same nor congruent. Cultural capital as a generalization has characterised literature as a consequence of the project which viewed the intellectual (and the writer) as the symbolic (and sometimes mythical) role model for certain kinds of social values. This cultural capital has, indeed, been affected by all the radical changes produced within interpersonal strategies and forms of communication, particularly those related to the media. We can thus say that cultural capital has been affected in quantitative and universalising terms. However, it is also clear that this *did not and does not negate* (quite the contrary!) the recognition of cultural capital as a definable and differentiable project. Moreover, it not only does not establish its indefinite extension as a goal but, on the contrary, insists upon forms of *comprehension*. It radically renounces forms through which expansion might be possible. It reflects upon itself through a movement whose symbolic direction must be understood in depth and inwardly. When we look around us, we see that “trash literature”, even if screamingly and noisily existing, is not able to silence “other” projects. In fact, “massification” inevitably raises noises, resistances, and cracks through which we see other projects burgeoning, other forms of practicing, writing, and thinking. These are all gestures of resistance, embodying what I would call *cultural resilience*. I suspect that we sometimes tend to think such gestures are specific only to our times because we do not have or use the tools necessary to discern them in others epochs.

#3. The same distinction (knowledge vs. cultural capital) enables us to illuminate another part of the problem that I would like to address in the following brief and paradigmatic example. In the middle of 2001, a huge polemic suddenly erupted in journals and newspapers throughout Portugal. I would like to stress that this debate was neither merely academic nor professional. It concerned curricular reform in secondary education and, especially, in the teaching of Portuguese. Up until

then, on tenth, eleventh and twelfth grade level, instruction in Portuguese consisted largely in learning the literature, specifically the stylistic, periodological and historical knowledge of texts dating from the fourteenth century onward. Now, a clear distinction is made between learning Portuguese and Portuguese literature. The former is taught within a general program, with texts coming primarily from newspapers, with an almost near exclusion of literary texts, implicitly considered as difficult and culturally exclusionary. The study of Portuguese literature is almost exclusively reserved for those students who have chosen, within the humanities, the field of language and literature studies.

The ensuing debate was quite *extensive* and *varied*. It involved interviews, interventions, letters in newspapers and literary journals, debates on the radio, television, and in public fora. Discussion was also extremely *heterogeneous*. It consisted of commentaries from teachers and other professionals as well as students, parents, politicians, legislators, and anonymous citizens. I would like to briefly analyse a paradigmatic intervention in this debate. A professor of sociology of University of Porto argued with the following fallacious reasoning: literature exists so that we may be able to *like* and *enjoy* it. In itself, this argument can be viewed as a well-intentioned statement, nothing else. He then continued (and this is the fallacious part): what we have to do is *not teach literature* in order to ensure that those to whom it has not been taught may subsequently really learn how to *love* it.

Such arguments, proposing the non-compatibility between love, or pleasure, and knowledge, in order to justify the exclusion of literary texts from high school curricula and their circumscription to the domain of the “*literati*” (not even all students of humanities!), produce, in fact, a perverse logic that I would like to briefly examine:

- i) it is not possible to *learn to like*
- ii) literature relates only to the

technocrats and the professional people involved in its study-and not to all those who, speaking a language, are a part of all its (im) possibilities, as Manuel Gusmão puts it

- iii) “literature” is just a matter of “profession”
- iv) every user of language is the object of a “laundry” operation, through which language becomes a site merely for neutral address and information
- v) school washes away all social differences—and those who “have” (that is, know) more just have to “lie” or pretend they do not possess knowledge
- vi) School is ostensibly trusted, but in reality, it is deeply distrusted. It is recognised that school can never impart the most important thing: an interesting knowledge (in the etymological sense, and hence in the strongest sense, of the word).

Of course, this situation also reflects what James Shapiro observed when he wrote that today's literature classes mirror societal expediency, brevity, and uniformity (Shapiro 1999). What is said for the study of literature can also be said for the way we view society and our role in it. That is why I would like to examine three of the above implications more closely.

First, the radical dissociation between teaching/learning and liking (in its broad sense) is a fallacy which, if accepted, would render every learning process radically impossible. Here, I speak not only about literature but also mathematics, philosophy, geography, medicine and, I suppose, even sociology. *Entre parenthèses*, I am genuinely sorry for my sociologist colleague because, since he

had to *learn* sociology, I can presume that he obviously does not *like* it and, therefore, does not like what he does for a living.

Secondly, under the guise of a *democratic project* (not teaching literature is a way of equalising and neutralising in school the differences the students bring from home and society in general, with the term “equalising” really meaning “omitting”), deep and potentially dangerous arguments are played out that all lead to the self-legitimization of presumably neutralised differences. Omitting a difference is no way of solving it. In fact, it is really a way of *not solving* it, as any student of literature knows. Excluding individuals from access to knowledge and culture does not make members of a community equals in ignorance. On the contrary, it only leads to a situation where those to whom access is permitted obtain first what is initially denied to others. That is why this reasoning is so perverse; it self-legitimises a position of symbolic discrimination through arguments that seem to be politically (and socially) effective.

Thirdly, this position holds that school and learning should be made *easy* and *facilitated*. Anything that tends *a priori* to create resistance to this simplicity must be eliminated so they can be included in an overall statistically happy project. We would then be living in the best of worlds—and *ignorance* would also be the goal of a happy, easy and unproblematic life. The problem with this view, of course, is that it is rooted in ignorance and happiness exists in ignorance only if, as Fernando Pessoa made quite clear, we accept existing like cats, trees or machines. From the moment we know ourselves to be *other than* trees, cats and machines, from that moment on, knowledge and its difficulties (and, *pace* my colleague sociologist, its pleasures) become part of our personal lives and life within a community.

My position is as follows: perhaps the best thing to do is to be aware of the tension between these two poles. On the one hand, we should historically recognise the ideological role of the so-

designated literature (and, in particular, the novel) as constituting and stabilising a political-ideological project, developed mainly within the educational system and our belief that it can be universal. On the other hand, we should recognise a certain degree of elitism (which, of course, is also a form of non-universalism) of literary phenomena as transtemporal phenomena. We just have to understand whether recognition of that non-universalism really *ipso facto* implies, in a necessary way, *the death or the end*—that is, a total and irredeemable apocalypse. Are there not (have there not always been) forms of resistance and transformation inside language that both confine and interact with other human practices?

I would like to conclude by stressing that history also teaches that “what goes around comes around.” The system itself will undoubtedly find ways of integrating what has been excluded—even if symbolically adding, again, to the cultural capital it today has apparently lost. It is not only men who can be ironic. Indeed, times and history themselves know how to be so. Perhaps, the best way to end would be by quoting some words Italo Calvino wrote a short time before his death:

Perhaps it is a sign of our millennium's end that we frequently wonder what will happen to literature and books in the so-called post-industrial era of technology. I don't much feel like indulging in this sort of speculation. My confidence in the future of literature consists in the knowledge that there are things that only literature can give us, by means specific to it (Calvino 1).

I think Calvino was right.

Notes

- ① I owe my friend and colleague Manuel Gusmão for this insight—in one of many enlightening conversations about literature.
- ② As expressed in Vitor Manuel de Aguiar e Silva's opening address to the 4th Congress of APLC, Évora, May 2001; and Giulio Ferroni, *Dopo la Fine. Sulla Condizione Postuma della Letteratura*, Torino, Einaudi, 1996.

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