Reader Education and Reasons for Literature[1]

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There is much talk about "reader education." It is "politically correct" to praise literature and reading. Unfortunately, many children have contact with adults – parents, teachers and others – who recommend reading, talk about books and "classical" authors but in reality are not readers and are not even interested in literature. Although they mean well, these people, who believe in the "do what I say not what I do" rule, usually describe literature in a very idealistic way. They talk about "magic," about an "indescribable" pleasure, they mention traveling and other similar subjects. Seldom, though, maybe because they have no such experience, do they remember to comment on how reading, as many good things in life, requires effort, or about how the so-called pleasure of reading is a construction resulting from training, capacity building, and accumulation. In any case, I am sure that the contact with pseudo-reader adults and unfortunate idealized visions of literature and reading do not contribute to educate new readers.

But what exactly is a reader? From a given point of view, one can say that readers are simply people who know how to enjoy different kinds of books, different existing "literatures" – scientific, artistic, didactic-informational, religious, and technical, among others. They are thus able to differentiate a literary and artistic work from a scientific text, or a book on philosophy from a merely informational guide. Readers may be described as people able to use texts in their own benefit, be it for esthetical motives, to get information, as an instrument to broaden his or her vision of the world, for religious motives, or for plain entertainment.

First we must consider that all "literatures" are important and have reasons for existing. Not being able to differentiate among them, though, could move people away from reading.

Let us examine just one example: imagine that a child presupposes that *all* books are, ultimately, didactic. She will read a poetry book with the assumption that she is studying, and thus will feel obliged to perceive, understand, and learn a lesson. More: she

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[1] Article in Portuguese published in SOUZA, Renata Junqueira de (org.) Caminhos para a formação do leitor. São Paulo, DCL, 2004. Translated here by Leda Beck.

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will imagine that all readers of this particular book must necessarily reach one and the same interpretation.

If this expectation is perfectly suitable for a didactic-informational book, it is at least bizarre when applied to a poetic work. Also, it reveals a regrettable mistake that will possibly move away from literature any potential reader. Later on I will explain which literature I am referring to.

It is important to make it clear: in order to educate a reader it is essential to establish, between the person who reads and the text, a kind of communion based on pleasure, identification, interest, and freedom of interpretation. Effort is also necessary, and it is justifiable and legitimated precisely through the established communion.

Among various existing "literatures," we are interested in the one that presupposes esthetical motivation. I am referring to that art form made with words that is conventionally called Literature. It is worth to point out a few of its main characteristics.

In the first place, to speak about Literature requires a reference to fiction and the poetic discourse.

Through the poetic discourse, we give up the objective, logic, systematic, impersonal, coherent, and unequivocal language of didactic-informational books. It is not a coincidence that all didactic works present a very similar discourse; in them, the personal voice of the author practically disappears. There is a simple reason for that: this kind of book aims at having all of its readers arrive to the same and unique interpretation. In order to reach that goal it is not possible, obviously, to use discourses that may result in multiple readings.

In opposition, the poetic discourse, the literary text by definition, is and must be subjective; it can make up words; it may transgress official norms of the language; it may create unexpected rhythms, and explore sonorities between words; it can play with puns and double senses; it may use metaphors, metonymies, and ironies; it can be symbolic; it can be deliberately ambivalent and even obscure. This kind of discourse tends to multiple meanings, to connote, and it wants different readers to reach different interpretations. It is possible to affirm that the quality of a literary text is proportional to the number of different readings it allows.

Beyond the poetic discourse, Literature presupposes recourse to fiction. When we enter the domain of fiction, we always renounce to the (legitimate) attempt to see the

world from an objective point of view (to see it from a "non-subjective" bias), systematic logic, and analytical thought – in short, the "scientific" model characteristic of didactic-informational books. Through fiction, we penetrate the area of subjectivity (the personal and singular view of the world), of analogy, intuition, imagination, and fantasy.

Here is a parenthesis: while didactic-informational books need periodic updating – information and methodology change constantly, after all – there is no sense in updating a poetic or literary work, unless the procedure is limited to orthographic norms.

In any case, it is necessary to vehemently state that fictional literature, as well as the didactic-informational one and other works, may also be a form of thought about life and the world.

Through an invented story, and characters that never existed, it is possible to bring up and discuss, in a pleasant and playful way, relevant human issues, many of which, by the way, are generally avoided by the didactic-informational discourse – and even by science – precisely because they are considered subjective, ambivalent, and not measurable.

What are these issues? Among others: human passions and emotions; the search for self-knowledge; the attempt to understand our identity (who we are); the construction of a personal voice; the numerous difficulties in interpreting the Other; the individual utopias; mortality; sexuality (I do not mean sexual education, but the essentially subjective, physical, and emotional sexual-affective relationship); the always complicated distinction between "reality" and "fantasy"; temporality and ephemerality (i.e., aging and its implications); numerous and intricate ethical questions; the existence of different valid points of view about the same subject, etc.

Alas, such themes and issues, although not appearing in didactic-informational books or in the disciplines of the official curriculum, are of the utmost importance and complexity, and must be addressed. After all, in real life, all human beings, willingly or not, are permanently plunged in a learning process, and in the search for self-knowledge. A 90-year old man was never 90 years old before, and thus will have to learn to deal with his new situation. A 10-year old boy goes through a similar process, and so on.

On the other hand, if we are constantly changing as we acquire new information, go through new experiences and age, how can one talk about "identity," which is generally described as a fixed and immutable abstraction?

It is also worth to ask this question: how to deal with our emotions and feelings? How often does our reason ask for one thing, and our feelings want another, completely different?

How to construct a genuine personal discourse, how to be really expressive in a world full of "information" (opposed, here, to "experience"), preconceived ideas, behavior formulae, and "politically correct" attitudes?

How to "objectively" (i.e., impersonally) deal with mortality? How to confront the inexorable and the unknown? Why do we have projects, and build utopias, if we will unavoidably die? Some theorists[3] ponder that one critical existential problem is that the human being has no cognitive access to her birth (she was already born a long time ago when she realizes it) or to her death (when it dawns on her, she is already dead), and, to complicate matters further, she changes constantly in between, as she ages and acquires experience. What to do?

Going back to the distinction between reality and fantasy, how to determine it if we know that a past experience may unconsciously influence the present? A simple example: someone aggressed us when we were a child. In adulthood, we meet someone else who reminds us of that person. Our tendency will be to unjustly treat this person badly, fear her, or even aggress her. The debate about what is indeed "reality" is very complicated. For some researchers, what we call "reality" is, in truth, just a social construction, and through this bias we can only see that which we are socially conditioned to see.[4] As an example: that which is described to us as "white" is a complex set of more than a hundred colors for an Eskimo.

And what about ethical questions? Should we tell the truth if, in a given situation, lying would save the life of a person? Is it possible to think of an act of violence ethically justifiable? And what to make of free will in face of a set of customs and abstract laws that we theoretically should respect?

Issues and themes such as these – always treated through fiction and poetry – are recurring in literary works but, I insist, do not exist in most didactic-informational books.

To argue that these issues do not belong in the "child universe" is to adopt an improbable and reductive but comfortable theoretical-abstract model of what childhood

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[3] See ISER, Wolfgang. O Fictício e o Imaginário – Perspectiva de uma Antropologia Literária. Rio de Janeiro: EdUERJ, 1996 (Das Fiktive und das Imaginäre. Perspektiven literarischer Anthopologie. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1991).

[4] See BERGER, Peter L., and LUCKMANN, Thomas. A construção social da realidade. Tratado de Sociologia do Conhecimento. Petrópolis: Editora Vozes, 2002 (The social construction of reality. Doubleday, 1966).

is. In real life, unconsciously or not, children do search their self-knowledge and their identities; they have feelings and reason; they dream and fall in love; they have doubts, fears, and pleasures; they remain perplex in face of multiple points of view; they have difficulties to separate reality and fantasy; they are sexed and mortal. In short, they are essentially human beings.

Beyond that, as indicate several studies[5] by anthropologists and psychologists, some cognitive characteristics deemed to be typical of "childhood" remain in adults – capable and intelligent adults – who simply did not have access to written culture.

There is something else: as we know, in our country, many twelve-, ten-year olds or even younger already work, and with dignity contribute to the support of their families. Meanwhile, in the other social extreme, one can meet adults older than 20 who never worked, and, although having attended schools considered good, live lives alienated from social issues, from citizenship, and from politics. Worst, some of them – fortunately few – sometimes go around committing hideous crimes, maybe due to the boredom caused by their own alienation. I am referring to the unacceptable murder, in Brasília, of the Pataxó native Galdino de Jesus, among other crimes committed by elite youth, and published on the press.

I do not intend to mean – and it is important to thoroughly clarify this – that children are equivalent to adults. I mean, instead, that the labeling of people with sterile and abstract age brackets appears to be, when indiscriminately used, a mistaken and reductive idea that needs urgent rethinking. I am sure that, for instance, the mention of ages on covers of Literature books – which presupposes the existence of "special" literary texts for people aged 7, 9, or 11, and thus the belief that children of, say, 9 years old are *all* alike (!) – does not contribute a bit, on the contrary, to the education of new readers. Note that the same initiative in didactic-informational books may be absolutely correct.

I also attempt to say the following: the didactic-informational model, cultivated by the school system, tends to present a symmetrical world, logic, balanced, coherent, and unequivocal. That seems to be necessary in order to allow the student-reader to organize and systematize important information for his social life, future studies, development, and to understand society.

[5] See ONG, W. Oralidade e cultura escrita. Campinas: Papirus Editora, 1998 (Orality & literacy: The technologizing of the world. Routledge, 1988).

Beyond the educational field – and it is critical not to forget this – the same reader lives in the real and particular (not theoretical) existence field, and is thus subject to numerous contradictory or unexpected situations, i.e., situations that are not included in the menu of ideal rules and models. I mentioned some above.

Note that – precisely for addressing the contradictory instead of working with idealized, foreseeable, and abstract (besides being "politically correct") characters, which are typical of pedagogic books – Literature may present the reader with fictitious but complex and paradoxical human beings, who are plunged in a constant process of modification and are busy constructing a significance for their lives. I believe it is of the utmost importance that readers – children or not – have access to such characters, which are responsible for the identification between the person who reads and the text. In the field of so-called children literature, to remain within well-known examples, I would mention Raquel (from Lygia Bojunga's *The Yellow Bag*[6]) and *The Nutty Boy* (from the homonymous book by Ziraldo Alves Pinto[7]) as such kind of characters.

In any case, I believe it is critical to always include ambivalence and the contradictory in the education of children and readers. Not, of course, as lessons – if there were explanations for the contradictory it would simply not exist – but as dialogue, meditation, debates, speculation, and exchange of opinions.

It is fulfilling to imagine a scenario were adults and children, together, at home, in a classroom, or wherever, may exchange ideas and impressions about issues that no one, no matter how old, can "teach." In that scenario, it is only possible to share experiences. On another hand, to suspect or to suggest that children do not have enough life experience to be shared with adults is to ignore the real human existence.

When Literature characteristics – among which I include the possibility of addressing the contradictory – are respected, the poetic and fictional discourse allows the emotional identification between the text and the person who reads. It thus may represent, in the school or not, a precious space for a certain vital speculation to blossom, be it by the reader alone, or with others.

Before I conclude, I believe it is worth to summarize the main ideas in this article:

[6] NUNES, Lygia Bojunga. A bolsa amarela. Rio de Janeiro: Agir, 1981.
[7] ZIRALDO. O menino maluquinho. São Paulo: Melhoramentos, 1980.

1. The need for children, and also adults, at home, at school, or in life, to learn to differentiate various kinds of texts. They will be educating themselves as readers when they start using the texts for their own benefit.
2. The realization that didactic-informational books have been very useful for spreading information, or as an important educational tool, but they certainly do not educate readers.
3. For reader education to happen, it is necessary to have between the text and the person who reads a kind of emotional communion that presupposes pleasure, great identification, and always the liberty to interpret. It is important to remember that there is an unavoidable effort involved in this process.
4. The need for Literature to be understood as a thought model, which uses fiction and poetry to interpret and give significance to life and the world beyond confusing clichés such as "reading trip," "free the imagination," or "on the wings of fantasy."
5. The awareness that, besides the objective and unequivocal discourses that rigorously follow the rules of the official education, there are other, subjective, analogical, playful, with multiple significations, and highly inventive discourses, which are allowed great manipulation of language resources, thus becoming extremely significant.
6. The need to recognize that beyond conventional issues that may be taught by adults to children there is an endless number of other contradictory, ambivalent, and complex themes that may only be debated and shared by people, no matter what their age is. In other words, it is not possible for adults to play the role of children's teachers all the time. On the contrary, it is necessary to recognize the rich complexity of real existence, be it in adult life or in childhood.
7. The importance of keeping in mind that Literature – and art in general, painting, theater, cinema, dance, music, etc. – may be a privileged space to address ambivalence and the contradictory. Here are a few simple examples, as a clarification, that are approaches to the contradictory in the field of the so-called children literature: the behavior of a character like Peter Pan, who refuses to grow up, criticizes "real" life and chooses to live in an utopia called

> "Neverland"; the journey of Alice to Wonderland, and her many pleasant discussions about the sense and the nonsense of things; the stepmothers that wish to destroy their stepdaughters as in Snow White, or the princes and princesses transformed in monsters or animals, all recurring characters in many wonderful tales.

I would conclude this article by arguing that it will be difficult to educate readers if we insist on idealizations about reading, and passively accept the indiscriminate labeling of people with abstract age brackets; if we ignore the existence of different kinds of books and texts; and also if we do not take into consideration some specificities of Literature, among them its profound and critical commitment to the real human existence.