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The role of the reader and its increasing importance in current French literary criticism

El papel del lector y su auge en la reciente teoría literaria francesa

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Abstract

The end of the last century witnessed a debate in the field of literary theory around the limits of interpretation: on the one hand, scholars like Umberto Eco maintained that text has a system of internal coherence that limits the number of possible interpretations; on the other, American authors like Rorty or Culler proclaimed the total freedom of readers in the process of meaning creation. During the first two decades of the 21st Century, most theorists in the French-speaking world seem to lean towards the latter option. The influence of Michel Charles' and Stanley Fish's works has given rise to new critical approaches like the Theory of the Possible Texts (Michel Charles and *Fabula* Group), the interventionist critique (Pierre Bayard) or Post-textualism (Franc Schuerewegen), which agree on the view that the properties of the text (coherence, meaning, literariness) are in reality readers' contributions. From this perspective, the critic's goal is not so much to interpret the text as to update it through a new and creative reading which ultimately identifies with rewriting.

Resumen

En el terreno de la teoría de la Literatura, el debate que cerró el siglo pasado fue el de los límites de la interpretación: por una parte, estudiosos como Umberto Eco defendían que el texto posee un sistema de coherencia interna que limita el número de interpretaciones posibles; por otra, autores estadounidenses como Rorty o Culler proclamaban la libertad total del lector en el proceso de creación de significados. En los dos primeros decenios del siglo XXI, los teóricos del ámbito francófono parecen inclinarse mayoritariamente por la segunda opción. La influencia de los trabajos de Michel Charles y de Stanley Fish ha dado lugar a nuevas aproximaciones críticas como la teoría de los textos posibles (Michel Charles y grupo Fabula), la crítica intervencionista (Pierre Bayard) o el postextualismo (Franc Schuerewegen), que coinciden en la idea de que las propiedades del texto (coherencia, significado, literariedad) son en realidad aportaciones del lector. A partir de aquí, la misión del crítico no es tanto interpretar el texto como actualizarlo a partir de una lectura innovadora y creativa que en última instancia se identifica con la reescritura.

Introduction: the limits of interpretation

In the field of literary criticism, the debate that closed the last century dealt with the limits of interpretation. Let us remember: once the death of the author (Barthes, 1968) and the plurality of meanings of the work (Eco, 1962) had been proclaimed in the 1960s, the main question that remained unresolved was that of delimiting the role of the reader in the process of the generation of meaning. Among the many possibilities, two trends emerged quite clearly. The first of these stated that reading is programmed within the text, so that the reader's action is essentially limited to recognising and exploiting the strategies pre-established by the author. From this approach, any possible interpretative divergence us due to the fact that the competence of real readers is never the same, since each individual mobilises only a part of the instructions of the text: different avatars of the fictional reader appear, such as the "arch reader" (Riffaterre, 1970), the "implicit reader" (Iser, 1972) or the "model reader" (Eco, 1979). Very popular in Europe, in the United States this trend came up against many dissenting voices, including those of well-known pragmatists such as Stanley Fish and Richard Rorty or deconstructionists such as Jonathan Culler -to whom we intend to return- who ignore the figure of the fictional reader in favour of a real reader and whose mission is to give himself completely over to the incessant drift of meaning.

As we know, it was precisely the exegetical liberties taken by some of his contemporaries that led Umberto Eco to publish The Limits of Interpretation in 1990. In this essay, he defended the thesis that "excessively favouring [...] the interpreter's initiative" (1992, p. 19) constitutes an abuse of the idea of unlimited semiosis that he himself had defended. In order to establish the acceptability of interpretative acts, Eco proposed here a trichotomy made up of three types of intention: *intentio auctoris* (what the author wants to say), *intentio operis* (what the text says from its own internal coherence, independently of the author's intention) and *intentio lectoris* (what the recipient extracts from the text according to his or her own systems of signification). From this point on, Eco distinguishes between interpretation, which is confined to the *intentio operis,* and the use of texts, which gives free rein to the reader's activity and creativity.

Two years later, all these questions were revisited at the famous Tanner conferences in Cambridge, where Rorty and Culler demonstrated that their critical positions were still far away from Eco's. Rorty rejects the very idea of *intentio operis,* primarily because he believes that the coherence of the text is not a prior and independent property, but comes from the act of reading itself:

> [...] I see no way to preserve the metaphor of *internal* textual coherence. I would think that a text only has the coherence that it manages to bring together in the last turn of the hermeneutic wheel, in the same way that a pile of clay has the coherence that it has managed to bring together in the last turn of the potter's wheel. So, I would rather say that textual coherence [...] is nothing more than the fact that someone has found something interesting to say about a group of marks or noises (Rorty, 1995, p. 105).

From this approach of view, the distinction between interpretation and use of texts is no longer operational:

> This is obviously a distinction that pragmatists do not wish to make. In our opinion, all you do with anything is use it. Interpreting something, knowing it, exploring its essence, etc. are just some ways of describing some process of putting it into operation (p. 101).

For his part, Culler does believe in interpretation as a specific act, but as the eloquent title of his lecture "In Defence of Overinterpretation" announces, he opposes any attempt to constrain the infinite virtualities of the *intentio lectoris,* on the contrary:

> [...] I do not think that the production of interpretations of literary works should be regarded as the ultimate aim, let alone the only goal of literary studies, but if critics are to devote their time to the generation and proposal of interpretations, then they must apply as much interpretative pressure as they can, they must push their thinking as far as they can.

No doubt many "extreme" interpretations, just like many moderate ones, will have little impact, because they will be judged unconvincing, redundant, irrelevant or boring, but if they are extreme, they will, in my opinion, have a greater chance of bringing to light connections or implications not previously observed or reflected upon (Culler, 1995, p. 128)[1].

At the end of the last century, the debate between under-interpretation and over-interpretation was therefore still open. In this sense and in order to get closer to the specific subject of this paper, we will point out that contributions from the French-speaking world were not particularly relevant these years. It is true that a number of French critics opted to update already consolidated methods by reorienting them towards the figure of the real reader. This highly beneficial turn gave rise, for example, to the sociology of reading by Alain Viala (1985) and Jacques Lennhardt (1982), to the history of reading by the eminent Roger Chartier (1987) or to the psychoanalysis of reading with Michel Picard (1986) and Vincent Jouve (1993). However, for the most part, these approaches were primarily interested in understanding the different modalities of the actual reading, without really going into the question of the limits of interpretation. The only exception to this rule was probably that of Antoine Compagnon, whose *Le démon de la théorie. Littérature et sens commun* (1998) is an overview of the milestones of contemporary literary criticism. However, what this essay does is not so much to seek a solution to the interpretation debate as to note that the debate is itself irresolvable, essentially because the two opposing positions -*intentio auctoris* vs. *intentio lectoris*- are indefensible *per se:* using a clever play on words, Compagnon concludes that the creation of meaning is a participatory process involving both the author and the reader, i.e., that we are simply dealing with a case of common sense (1998, pp. 163-194).

From the author's death to the text's death

Given the popularity of Eco's ideas in Europe at that time, nothing would possibly suggest that the balance would shift significantly to the reader's side over the next two decades. In 1995, the publication of *Introduction à l'étude des textes,* a study based on the principle that interaction between text and commentary is total and inseparable, in which Michel Charles develops a theory that directs the practice of reading in completely new directions, made a very significant contribution to this. To that end, it starts by reviewing the definition of text itself:

> We are now facing two different definitions of text: a text is a language being with authority; a text is what is taken as the object of commentary. That the second definition obviously encompasses the first in every sense of the term [...]. Instead of saying that the text has authority, or rather, instead of behaving as if it did, I realise that I, as a reader or a critic, am attributing authority to it (Charles, 1995, pp. 47-48)[2].

Moreover, the authority of the text is in turn the source of two critical prejudices that are not independent from the reader's action either. The first is the very existence of the text itself:

> My intervention on the text, whether under the form of simple reading or analytical work, does not only makes it vary, but it makes it exist [...]. Our new definition of the text radically challenges the first critical prejudice: from the moment that there is prior and inextricable text-commentary interaction, the very idea of a text's existence is indefensible (pp. 47-48).

The second is its alleged unity, which according to Charles "is nothing more than the projection of the coherence of the analysis" (p.58). This last prejudice is even more transcendental, as it compromises the very possibility of hermeneutics, understood as the operation that consists of extracting a pre-existing meaning from the text. In short, there is no text as such, nor is there a meaning of the text, for both arise from the reading process itself:

> It can be assumed that the constructions of meaning made by the reader are not completely anarchic or random, it is eminently desirable that they should not be. In any case, in the context of this operation, it seems *a priori* presumptuous to try to decide on what depends on an organisation operated by the reader and what depends on an organisation proposed by the text (p. 138).

In fact, so far Charles is merely developing some ideas which, as we saw earlier, had already been expressed by Richard Rorty. The innovative fact comes when the French critic, moving from a hermeneutic perspective to a rhetorical perspective, proposes replacing the authority of the text with its variability, an idea that leads to what is known today as the theory of possible texts.

What the formula "the text does not exist" wants to express that we do not have a philological starting object with an effective presence —which Charles calls "ideal text" in his most recent book (2018, p. 21)— but that this same object constitutes only one possible variant of a multiple reality: the real text. In it are not only included the other previous and subsequent states of the text that critical editions have excluded, but also each and every one of the hypotheses on writing that the author could rule out or not consider at the time and that the reader can construct in his imagination: that is, a combination of all the real and virtual forms that the text has been adopted and can effectively adopt. From this point on, the critic's task will be to start from the ideal text in order to explore the unstable and multiple universe that is the real text:

> If we want […] to bring some theoretical reflection to the practice of commentary, it will therefore not be enough to speculate about "approaches" or methods, we will have to take action […] in a more radical and decisive way. At this point, the concept of "possibles" comes into play again, and not only of the possibles of writing, but also and above all of the possibles of reading, or of the possibles that reading attributes to writing. The real text will be considered as effective as much for what it does not use and abandons as for what it actually puts into operation; the real text will be considered as surrounded by virtual texts and traversed by them, to the extent that it itself becomes a virtual text among others. On the one hand, it is thus possible to do away with the principle of the authority of the text […]. On the other hand, a dimension that *a priori* seemed inadmissible is introduced into the commentary: creativity, since the aim is no more and no less than to produce other texts (virtual, but describable) from the text under examination (1995, pp. 107-108).

Indeed, Charles is well aware that his method involves a significant amount of creativity and, at the same time, subjectivity, a circumstance that he accepts not as a disadvantage but as an advantage:

> The procedure is not without risk, given that, by definition, possibles do not exist, but we should not hesitate to construct them. And the reading will follow many paths not led by the text, or what is left of it. In the end, there is no great risk in radicalising one's point of view, other than that of discovering new horizons (p. 113).

Moreover, the application of the procedure proposed in *Introduction à l'étude des textes* is rather cautious, as it makes use of practical cases in which the very literalness of the source text gives rise to different interpretations. Therefore, by way of example, from a collection by the French historian Claude-François Ménestrier (1694), Charles picks a classic enigma -that is, a riddle under the form of a poem- which presents more than one possible resolution, a plurality that ultimately legitimises the reader's right to construct his own text.

The theory of possible texts has steadily won people over to it in subsequent years. Charles' own teaching has undoubtedly contributed to this, but also the publication, in 2007, of *Quand lire c'est faire,* the first French edition of Stanley Fish's most important texts, which has had a considerable impact on French criticism. In Fish's theory, the reader's role is absolutely vital, since both the literariness of the text -"It is not the presence of poetic qualities that imposes a certain kind of attention, but the fact of paying a certain kind of attention that leads to the emergence of poetic qualities" (2007, p. 60) - and its meaning depend on the reader: "Interpreting is not the art of construing, but the art of constructing. Interpreters do not decode poems, they make them" (p. 62). Does this mean that, in the end, anything goes in the sphere of interpretation? No, because Fish's theory introduces an elementary nuance that considerably limits the scope of the drift of meaning. We refer to the concept of interpretative community, understood as a combination of rules of textual construction in which the reader is immersed and which severely condition

his approach to literature, not least because they are what ultimately establish the acceptability of a specific interpretation. As rightly summarised by Yves Citton (2007), Fish legitimises *de jure* any interpretation of a text, even the most aberrant, but legitimises it *de jure* "but not *de facto,* since we are in fact obliged to recognise an interpretation as acceptable or unacceptable -i.e., "good" or "bad"- depending on the prevailing norms of the interpretative community with which we identify" (p. 115).

Far from anathematising Fish's ideas -like Antoine Compagnon (1998)- the new generation of French critics seem to have found in the American author's pragmatist relativism the doctrinal basis that definitively legitimises the path not only of free interpretation, but also of any other action that the reader decides to exercise on the text, rewriting included.

Marc Escola is one of them, and in his work *Lupus in fabula. Six façons d'affabuler La Fontaine* (2003) operates an intertextual reading that, mixing analysis and rewriting, connects La Fontaine's fables with real texts by other authors (Perrault, Rabelais), as well as with other virtual fables made up by the critic himself. It is an exercise without limits and without complexes: it is not in vain that Escola vindicates the figure of Borges and his well-known invitation to read *The Imitation of Christ* as if it had been written by Louis-Ferdinand Céline (pp. 239-240). An invitation that, precisely, Umberto Eco had evoked to illustrate the case of the use of texts (1992, p. 40). A few years later, Escola was joined by the Fabula team -probably the most active research group on the current French literary theory scene- which has systematically developed and disseminated Michel Charles's programme through publications such as *La Case Blanche. Théorie littéraire et textes possibles* (2006), *Lire contre l'auteur* (2012) and *Théorie littéraire des textes possibles* (2012) above all. In particular, reading of this latest volume shows that the creativity of the new generations of critics is increasingly daring, and a couple of examples will be sufficient to prove it. According to Marc Douguet, the last

sixteen scenes of Racine's tragedy *Phèdre* can be permuted without affecting the coherence of the plot, an elasticity from which we obtain a wide range of different variants whose analysis gives us a better understanding of Racine's writing in particular, as well as of the casuistry surrounding dramatic composition in general (2012, pp. 39-53). For her part, Laure Depretto took upon herself the challenge of writing Octave's enigmatic letter of confession in Stendhal's *Armance,* a letter that is not reproduced in the novel and whose content is unknown to the reader, and then studies the impact of this addition on the work (2012, pp. 87-99).

Often, the theoretical discourses of possible texts start from a striking, occasionally unknown and even mysterious element, which drives the analysis towards the resolution of a possible enigma that the reader can and must take, even distrusting the information that the writer may have offered in his work. This path was opened earlier by Pierre Bayard, an analyst well known in the French-speaking world for his controversial theory of plagiarism by anticipation -according to which there are authors who have been inspired by works written centuries later- and, above all, for the voluntarily iconoclastic and provocative spirit of *How to talk about books you haven't read?* (2008)[3]. Although not explicitly in line with Michel Charles, Bayard believes that our relationship with books must be completely transformed, evolving towards an interventionist criticism based on the desacralisation of the author and the literary text:

> First of all, this evolution implies becoming capable of ridding ourselves of a whole series of prohibitions, most unconscious and a burden on our representation of books and which lead us to think of them, since our school years, as intangible objects and, consequently, to blame ourselves as soon as we cause a transformation in them (2008, p. 191).

Not surprisingly, before he became popular, Bayard had conducted a series of studies in which the contradictions surrounding the crimes committed in some of the classics of literature in general and of the detective novel in particular are revealed.

We are referring to *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* (1998), *Enquête sur Hamlet. Le Dialogue de sourds* (2002), a series subsequently completed with *L'Affaire du chien des Baskerville* (2008) and, most recently, *La Vérité sur "Dix petits nègres"* (2019). Bayard even questions not only the enquiries of heroes of detective fiction such as Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, but also the writing choices of Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie -which is obvious from one of the titles mentioned, of Shakespeare himself- and finally proposes an alternative denouement of the mystery to that of our classics. It is thus a free mixture of criticism and fiction -Bayard later referred to intercreativity (2010)- that dignifies the act of reading and which, for the same reason, should be incorporated not only into the field of criticism, but also into that of the literature teaching:

> This is because our students do not give themselves the right […] to invent the books. Paralysed by the respect due to texts and the prohibition to modify them, forced to memorise them or to know what they "contain", many students lose their inner capacity to scape and refuse to use their imagination in circumstances where it would nevertheless be most useful (2008, p. 161).

Moreover, Bayard is not alone in this claim. In this veil, it is the case of Yves Citton, a regular contributor to the Fabula group and author of *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* In this essay, Citton calls for an "actualising reading" aimed at extracting from the text not so much what the author intends to say, but what is illuminating in the analysis of the present, a reading, so to speak, "applied" to the interpreter's present situation which, far from condemning anachronism, exploits it as a creative element. By way of example Citton stated: "I read Étienne de la Boétie's *Discourse on voluntary servitude* and in this Renaissance writer's text I "see" […] the accurate description of our television entertainment at the beginning of the 21st century" (2007, p. 31). In short, it is a beneficial practice for the reader, as it helps him to better understand his time, but also for literature itself, as it justifies its validity -" a text remains literarily alive to the extent that an interpreter updates it" (p. 394) -, its usefulness and, ultimately, its presence

at all levels of education. It must be said that, at the basis of his theory, Citton is directly inspired by Jean-Louis Dufays, who in *Stéréotype et lecture* distinguished between "generative reading, which tries to insert the text as much as possible in its original context, and actualising reading, which tries on the contrary to give meaning to the text from contemporary codes" (1994, p. 175).

Possible texts, inventive criticism, actualising readings …. All these trends are more or less directly integrated into a new collective spirit called "post-textualism" by Franc Schuerewegen, an author who describes with particular lucidity the transcendence of the reader in the most recent French literary theory and with whom we will put an end to this study.

In his explanation and defence of the post-textual method, Schuerewegen (2012) begins by referring to Fish and Rorty to recall that the literariness and interpretability of the text, as well as its supposed internal coherence, are characteristics that originate in the act of reading (pp. 14-21). From this point on, he believes Eco's theory of intentions is not valid:

> I admit I have never found the distinction between the three levels very convincing […]. The word *intention* refers to a conscious will, it implies the presence of an animated subject. Can a text have one or several intentions? I have my doubts about this. As for what Eco calls *intentio auctoris*, can it be anything other than a hypothesis formulated by the reader about what the author *would have wanted to say* when he wrote the words he wrote? (2018, p. 230).

Insofar as the *intentio operis* is neither objective nor demonstrable, the distinction between interpretation and used of texts is called into question; indeed, what must be understood is that interpretation is already use and that the hermeneutic instrumentalises the text as much as anyone else. Now, if we rule out the possibility of interpretation, what is the purpose of textual analysis? Schuerewegen's answer is very simple. If like Fish we accept that interpretative communities severely condition our

rules of textual construction and with them our way of reading, we will have to admit the existence of a supplementary intention, the *intentio civitatis*, which constitutes both a common interpretative referent and a horizon against which to rebel. It is therefore a matter of making the texts work through an innovative reading, capable of "testing the limits of community consensus" (Schuerewegen, 2018, p. 233) and contributing to its evolution.

Conclusions

As we have tried to show in the preceding pages, in the 20th century the horizon of the interpretative act generated an extensive debate that has alternately swung between two opposing poles: the preservation of the author's intention and the vindication of the reader's rights. This is an endless debate, since, on the one hand, the very fact of opting exclusively for one or the other position means falling into under-interpretation or over-interpretation respectively, and, on the other hand, the search for intermediate formulas capable of reconciling both senses -Eco's *intentio operis* or Compagnon's common sense- do not seem to have a real reference in the practice of commentary: in the end, every interpretative element of the text is referred to the author or the reader.

The response of French literary critics to this challenge in the 21st century has essentially consisted on discarding the problem of interpretation on the basis of Charles' and Fish's theories, a process in which two main phases can be identified. The first of these has been characterised by placing the reader at the top of the interpretative hierarchy by granting him all powers over meaning: insofar as he ultimately constructs the text, the reader can, if he wishes, take into account the author's intention, but he is absolutely free to add his own impressions. This attitude is not as bold as it might seem. After all, our current conception of the classics is very different from the one we once had of them: by way of example, far from being regarded as a simple parody of the books of chivalry, *Don Quixote* is today seen as a thorough reflection on the human condition, a fact to which

the successive readings that have been made of it over the years are no stranger. It is a not completely new idea either, since it has already been extensively developed, for example, by the French writer Michel Tournier, in *Le vol du vampire* (1981), a book where he also includes a quotation from Paul Valéry that we find particularly illustrative: "Inspiration is not the state entered by poets to write, but the state they hope to help their readers enter through what they write" (p. 27).

The second phase, derived from the previous one, is more radical, for it proclaims not only the author's death, but also the text's death text as we have understood it up to now. If the reader is a basic element in the creativity and survival of the work, his action must not necessarily be limited to simple interpretation -however much this may be- but must go further, contributing complementary exogenous elements associated with his or her experience and even his or her imagination. Thus, the text's desacralisation allows the critic to participate in the universe of creation, either by orienting and prolonging the previous literary material towards possible scenarios not contemplated by the author, or by relocating it within the horizon of present-day experiences. In short, in order to explore the boundaries of reading, it is necessary to put one's heart and soul to writing and to fully exploit that inseparable relationship that Gérard Genette (1969) so elegantly described in *Raisons de la critique pure:*

The text is that tape of Mœbius in which the inner and the outer side, the signifying and the signified side, the writing and the reading side, turn and interchange relentlessly, in which writing never ceases to be read, in which reading never ceases to be written and recorded (p. 18).

Notes

1. See same reflection, although somewhat more developed, in Culler, 1997, p. 82 *et seq*.

2. As for books not translated into Spanish, our own translation is shown.

3. French original dates back to 2007 (*Les Éditions de Minuit*).

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