

LITERATURE AND COMPLEXITY

Emilio Sisi

PRESENTATION: THE HORIZONS

In June 2018 I published a booklet entitled “Poetry builds the ego”. It was not a literature course, but an effort to make public the importance of literature in the construction of one’s person. Starting with me. Above all, however, I have never seen art, and literature in particular, from an aesthetic point of view: it was not a matter of taste (I like it, I don’t like it), but of interest in the construction of my person. While I was building my person I was also building my own literature. All the readings that I have done during those decades met and clashed with this process.

The picture I was drawing and painting of my person, unlike Dorian Gray, was an unfinished picture but which always took on new forms and new colors: shapes and colors that were my I, an I under construction.

In the booklet published two years ago I showed how literature (and art) had contributed to making me what I was. In this new book, on the other hand, I want to broaden my gaze, retracing in a chronological key, as if we were in the three years of high school, the chapters that we are normally invited to propose to classes. I will explain the choices, and therefore the exclusions (especially in the penultimate chapter), which want to give the reader a sense of what he has studied without bias to what is the key to the reading, not an aesthetic but an epistemological key.

In Brazil, an Italian teacher did not introduce Petrarch to his students because he was “complaining” and ironized with the phrase from a well-known song “Tell Laura I love her”. And so both the humble of Manzoni and the vanquished of Verga were forced towards the

proletariat; a collection like Ungaretti's "Allegria" became the universal sign of pacifism and the ending of Zeno's Conscience was an anticipation of ecological environmentalism.

Convinced that the school is not a Social Center, I have always tried to keep up not with the alleged needs of my students, but with the acquisitions that culture proposed. Culture is that something that holds a community together and which, as the word itself says, allows us to cultivate, from seed to fruit and again from fruit to seed so that a new fruit can be produced.

It is not a question of following new fashions or new technological innovations; although useful, they are not foundational. It is not even a question of that generic "general culture" that is often spoken of, nor of a specific "culture functional to work".

A personal sense means that literature offers something that allows the reader to confront himself in order to build himself. Over time and taking responsibility for their choices. Literature has a quality that what everyone calls "reality" does not have: it is always greater and, by dint of expanding, it transcends reality and allows for an encounter and a confrontation that reality itself cannot and cannot be spatial and temporal. Limiting reading to specific fields goes against the very life of literature. Following this perspective, we already have a horizon towards which to move: literature has meaning, that is, meaning and direction, only if it allows us to broaden and deepen our reflection on the world and life on ourselves. So then the meaning of literature does not lie in itself, in this or that characteristic that distinguishes it, but in the sense that each of us is able to give to literature. Literature is like the world, a universe rich in shapes, sounds, colours and there is no need to discuss whether the world is valid for monuments or for landscapes or for food or for people or...The world is valid because it is all this and more: the whole is always greater than the sum of the parts. The world is valid because it allows me to confront, which is encounter and confrontation, with a universe that goes beyond my comfort zone. The same way literature works. It is valid because it offers me the greatest amount of material with which to confront myself and thanks to which I can deal with myself. Many readers limit themselves to reading books that are always the same book in the end, thus becoming like supporters of a football team or like supporters of a "life for surfing and surfing for life" type of practice.

This does not mean that we have to read everything, much less everything. Any book can be useful to move something inside us and to open a passage that allows us to connect.

In these lessons I will follow the typical scheme and passages of high school teaching, so that they can also represent a parallel lane to those engaged in studies, built in a particular way, but adhering to how I proposed the teaching of literature in my career as a professor. The articulation of the contents of these lessons is done through answers that are at the same time questions in a process that is recursive (the answer influences the question that influences the answer), but also, and at the same time, reticular, because in every partial response there

is always a gray area that asks to be illuminated. It is like it happens with plants, when you discover that there is a small and almost invisible sprout, which you cannot overlook, but which serves to enrich and beautify the plant. It may be that it gives life to a more luxuriant branch than the others present and it may instead be aborted, but in literature (as in human life) the discourse is even more complex, because that gray area can also stop but it can also do it after posting new ideas. This is how a network of networks is born and it is like this in the life of each of us and in literature.

In my experience, especially abroad, I paid a lot of attention to the new epistemological acquisitions that abandoned the separation between physical sciences and human sciences. I thought that the school cannot fail to dialogue with those acquisitions and I did not mind discovering that new aspects such as fractals are also treated in middle schools. However, I felt another task as my task, that of bringing subjects considered non-scientific such as literature closer to that universe in transformation represented by disciplines such as physics and biology. The science of complexity, by questioning the principle of objectivity and determinism as the founding element of science, has opened up a vast terrain in which even literature can enter and have a say. However, a leap in approaching the works is necessary, a leap that shifts the attention from the aesthetic dimension to that of knowledge and construction. It is no coincidence that it was precisely literature from the mid-1800s that anticipated many of those aspects that less than a century later will be the basis of the science of complexity. Literature (and in particular poetry) ceases to be a representation of reality to become a tool for creating reality: it is what is generally called the transition from mimesis to epiphany.

This leap, this change, this anticipation find a forerunner in Leopardi's *L'infinito*, but in Baudelaire and Rimbaud the real initiators. Having acquired this, the tendency may be to underestimate the previous literature, but it would be a mistake, because what happens before 1800 still expresses such a richness that it cannot be left behind. Just as not all the pages of Pascoli express this new possibility, so also in medieval, Renaissance or Baroque authors we can find important references and not simple traces of what would have been affirmed a few centuries later.

The twenty lessons I will teach here broaden the horizon presented in "Poetry builds the Ego", but they do not exhaust its possibilities. On the other hand, the same perspective remains valid. Literature is my literature, not the one I "like", but the one in which I find important aspects for the construction of the person. When I speak of construction or creation, I refer precisely to the acquisitions of the science of complexity and of all those paradigms that have opened a passage in the static vision of Science considered as an absolute value. A couple of examples can help you understand this.

Two biologists, Maturana and Varela, showed in *The Tree of Knowledge* how knowing

and creating are closely linked, because I know by creating and I create by knowing.

Neuroscientist Antonio Damasio has discovered how certain moments, until recently labeled as irrational, rightfully belong to neuronal activity. Neuroscientist Edelman made it clear that analogy is not an aesthetic component but an advanced function of the brain. And memory, which has played a pivotal role in the literature, has been thoroughly researched and widely revealed in the studies of Ramachadran and others.

In the last few years of teaching I had gathered my literature lessons in a non-deterministic literature course, because I wanted to show how literature was an important tool to bring us closer to the understanding of a complex reality, breaking what was a stereotype that had been going on for centuries: literature is subjective, science is objective; literature may be important but it is not science.

Since the Nobel Prize for Chemistry Ilya Prigogine in the seventies of the last century published *The new alliance* (between human sciences and physical sciences), a rapprochement between these two worlds has been achieved despite enormous and numerous resistances remain. The meaning of this new path lies in the fact that literature can also make a contribution to the understanding of life, of man, of reality. In my lessons at school and even more in these that will follow I have tried to show this aspect, highlighting how literature is not that book to keep on the bedside table to provide us with pleasure or entertainment, but an important moment to help us to know and build reality of which we are the protagonists. Each of us does his part in the growth of society thanks to his work: not everyone can be doctors, physicists, technicians, teachers, hairdressers. However, everyone can draw on literature to come to terms with themselves, taking responsibility for their choices.

The lessons that will follow do not claim to be universal, but express a method that can be used by everyone to make sense of their reading. I like to conclude this introduction with a sentence by Octavio Paz that not only served my training but also summarizes what literature can give us:

“Every text, open or closed, demands the death of the poet who writes and the birth of the poet who reads”.