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LITERATURE AS GOODS, LITERATURE AS TOOLS

Literature, like any other social activity capable of generating perpetuated products, has likewise functioned along the ages on two different levels. On the one level, it managed to generate and provide possible models for consensual explanations of the world as well as for actual behavior. On the other, it managed to establish itself as a possible asset in an international stock exchange of symbolic capitals. Writing an adequate history of literature, it is suggested in this paper, should better take into account these two levels, as well as the correlations between them. With a better understanding of these correlations, the history of literature can be better understood as an often major factor in the social organization of life. This can help, on a more general level, to integrate the study of literature into a wider framework, by underlining the most distinctive and manifest function of literature in the creation and maintenance of society by means of its culture.

1. In my paper “The Making of Culture Repertoire and the Wealth of Collective Entities” (Even-Zohar 2000 [1997]) I proposed to analyze the current positions in the field of thought and work on “culture” with the help of a summary division of the prevailing perspectives into two major categories: on the one hand – the conception of culture as “goods”; on the other – the conception of culture as “tools”.

2. In the conception of culture as goods, culture is considered as a set of valuable assets, the possession of which signifies wealth and prestige. The possessor of such a set therefore can use it for manifesting wealth. This is a procedure (a practice) that can be adopted by an individual or by an organized collective of individuals, such as

* Based on talk given at the University of Almería, April 29, 1997, held in the framework of a seminar on the History of Literature organized by Professor Miguel Gallego Roca. A part was also presented at the University of Granada, April 28, 1997, as a first of a series of lectures hosted by Professor Antonio Sánchez Trigueros. I am grateful to both for having given me the opportunity of presenting these ideas. The Spanish version was published as Even-Zohar 1999. This English version is dedicated to the memory of György Mihály Vajda, great friend, colleague, and scholar.

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a social entity. The goods can be either material or semiotic (problematically called “symbolic” in some traditions) – i.e., “palpable/tangible” and “not palpable/tangible”. It matters little, in terms of their respective functions, whether the goods are lapis lazuli, a palace, running water, a car, a computer, a set of texts or a group of producers of the latter (“poets”, “writers”), a collection of musical sheets, a collection of paintings or sculptures, a theatre, and so on. Once a defined set of such goods becomes evaluable, it can be assigned a defined value. Goods which cannot be evaluated by an accepted market cannot consequently have value, and therefore are not labeled – in this conception of culture – as “culture”. In this conception, one is therefore allowed to speak of entities as “having no culture”, if they are diagnosed as not being in possession of a defined set of required goods.

3. In the conception of culture as tools, culture is considered as a set of tools for the organization of life, on the levels of both collectives and individuals. These “tools” are basically of two types:

3.1. “Passive” tools, which are procedures with the help of which “reality” is analyzed, explained, and gets to “make sense” for human beings. This perspective has in fact its roots in the hermeneutic tradition: it observes the world as a set of signs that need be interpreted in order to make some sense of life. The idea of a “modeling system”, developed by Ivanov, Lotman, and other Russian semioticians, is above all understood as a coherent set of procedures with the help of which the world is organized in the mind. This principle is formulated by Lotman and Uspenskij (1971: 146-147; 1978) as follows:

The main “work” of culture [...] is the structural organization of the surrounding world. Culture is a generator of “structuredness” and it creates social sphere around man which, like biosphere, makes life possible (in this case social and not organic). (Translation by Segal 1974: 94-95).

3.2. “Active” tools, which are procedures with the help of which an individual can handle any given situation, as well as produce any such situation. As Swidler puts it, culture is “a repertoire, or ‘toolkit’ of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’” (Swidler 1986: 273). This perspective is thus connected with ideas of ‘acting’ and ‘activity’ rather than with the ideas of ‘understanding’, as is the case with the passive tools. Evidently, it is indispensable to ‘understand’ in order to ‘act’, but what matters here is the principle of making active decisions and perform, rather than ‘make sense’ of given situations.

4. While the tools, whether “passive” or “active”, operate as organizers of “life”, the goods can be considered as “organizers” only indirectly, practically when converted, or transformed, into tools. That is, when they can help an owner to convert the signified value into a serviceable tool. What is involved in this conversion is the making (creating, producing) of models – either in order to understand or act – from signs or symbols. This is basically analogous to the transformation of materials from symbols to use, as has been suggested by Renfrew (1986).

5. If we try to think of literature in these terms, this type of analysis seems able to help us developing a larger vision and perhaps a more adequate comprehension of this phenomenon. Of course, in order to be able to work in a similar framework, one must first be freed from the conception of “literature” as only a collection of texts, chiefly canonical. If we accept the idea that we could better be served by treating “literature” as a network, a complex of activities, the distinction between “goods” and “tools” in this network would be a step forward in liberating the analysis of “literature” from the isolation that has emerged as a result of its treatment as a phenomenon *sui generis*.

6. What meaning, then, may the concept of “goods” have in the context of literature?

6.1. What we have here, very simply, is a historical phenomenon known already from the most ancient literate societies of Sumer, Akkad, Babylon, Egypt, and Assyria. Already in Sumer, through school (*É-dubba*), there emerged – perhaps for the first time in human history – the institution of canonical texts, and with them – the importance of the people proficient in reproducing them. This basic relationship, in spite of the huge changes throughout history, has not changed. For those who are involved in the production, or reproduction, of texts – either written or recited – what matters in the first place is to be able to incorporate their products in the group of canonical texts, which are evaluable and valuable.

6.2. The idea that some texts can be transformed into desired goods is not necessarily “natural”, above all when the matter discussed is competition between powers. One can easily understand why a king like Kadashman-Enlil of Babylon – like almost all the other rulers who have had relations with the Pharaoh of Egypt – wish so much to have gold.¹ In contradistinction, the transformation of non-material products into valuable goods has not been sufficiently investigated, though it seems to be a very important chapter in the history of “literature”. However, we know about it enough to recognize that it has not been a linear process, nor a unique event that might have occurred once and for all in some yore. On the contrary, it has been a permanent struggle, and with many fluctuations, carried out by producers of texts, to convert their products into valuable goods and, above all, to maintain them as such.

6.3. Value, being above all symbolic, does not necessarily require ample production. Sometimes, the capacity to produce can be sufficient in order for “the obligatory list of indispensable goods” to be checked off in the relevant category. In very extreme cases, the persons that are potentially capable of producing texts are more im-

¹ This king threatens Amenophis III of Egypt (century XIV B.C.) that he would not give him his daughter for wife if the former would not send him the promised gold within a defined span of time: “Lu 3 lim bilti sha hurasi subī – ul amahar; utaraku, or marti ana ahuzati ul anadin” ([even] if you send me 3 thousand gold talents, I would not accept them, [but] would return them [to you], and would not give you my daughter for a wife) (Knudtzon 1907–1915: 74/75, lines 49–50; Mercer 1939: 14/15, lines 49–50).

portant than the products. I cannot help thinking, for example, of Cacafonix, this bard of the Armorican village of *Asterix*, who is never allowed to sing his poems, although his role as “the village bard” is indispensable. In Spanish Galicia, as without doubt in other places, one still knows of those “village poets” whose only textual products are their detailed descriptions of the poems they are going to make. These cases, perhaps rare and extreme, are cited here to underline the importance of distinguishing between all the possible uses of texts on the one hand, and their symbolic value, operating as capital, on the other.

6.4. Of course, in most cases, in order to be able to accumulate this capital one must invest in relevant commodities. For example, collect texts as did the emperor Ashurbanipal of Assyria (669–633), who left us a huge library of almost 25000 clay tablets. And, furthermore, collect persons who produce texts. As Gentili puts it, speaking of Greece between the fourth and the sixth centuries B.C., “[...] attraverso l’opera dell’artista, il ricco signore o l’aristocratico della città, e soprattutto il tirano miravano a nobilitarsi e a consolidare il proprio potere politico” (1984:153).²

No wonder then that such commodities might figure among the obligatory repertoire of tributes from minor to major rulers. The Assyrian king Sennacherib, for example, boasts of the reciters, both male and female, he forced Hezekiah, king of Judah, to pay him as part of a bountiful tribute. No doubt, “possessing a literature” is thus equivalent to “possessing riches appropriate for a powerful ruler”.³

6.5. However, in the history of literature as goods, these goods change proprietors. From a state in which in order to be evaluable they must belong to a ruler, they become goods belonging “to everybody”.

As such, instead of “ennobling and consolidating” the political power of a ruler, they then ennoble and consolidate the sense of identity and the welfare of large collectives. Furthermore, the possession of such goods is presented – through the propaganda carried out by those who have interests in the creation or maintenance of those collective entity – as a sign of community and shared wealth. Since the eighteenth century, the foundation of some national languages and literatures has then been equivalent to the acquirement of goods for self-identification and self-construction, which in other times had been characteristic of leading groups only. The sentiment of the ruler has been transferred from the individual ruler and the noblemen to the entire anonymous body called “the nation”. Each member of this body, only by his/her participation in “the nation”, has gained the right to share the acquired goods. Thus, to demonstrate the aptness of the German language for any intellectual and spiritual task has meant, from the point of view of “the Germans” (according to Blackall’s description of the birth of Germany): “we do not feel any longer inferior to the French

² [through the work of the artist, the rich lord or the aristocrat of the city, and above all the tyrant, take care to ennoble themselves and consolidate their own political power. – Translation mine.]

³ See a more detailed discussion of the idea of the “indispensabilia of power” in Even-Zohar 1994.

nation, or to any other nation". To have a literature which is even capable of competing with other evidently implies that "we are a great nation". For any individual who happens to live in a community, the greatness of the nation confers upon him individual greatness, too: "I am great, because I belong to a nation which has generated Goethe". This is not very much different from the type of sentiments involved with any competition: "I am great because I belong to a nation whose football team has gained the Cup of Europe". It is simply "worthwhile" to be a member of such a nation, and this asset is converted into a powerful factor in strengthening and feeding the sentiment of ownership.

6.6. From the point of view of the *producers* of texts, in a historical perspective, it is interesting to observe how they have had success in liberating themselves – in the democratic countries – of their total dependency on power-holders, without losing the option of maintaining the value of their products, to continue benefiting from their privileged position in economic and cultural terms. The state of "literature", with its agents and workers, has become almost indisputable in our times. This means that one must invest relatively little in maintaining the acquired state, in spite of the fact that – above all in economic terms – one is threatened by the products called "popular" of the mass media.

This liberation vis-à-vis power, together with the continued valorization of the products as valuable goods, has been achieved throughout the 19th and 20th centuries through the relative autonomization of the literary activities (Bourdieu 1971). It is possible to track this struggle, for example, analyzing the careers of the French "poètes maudits". But this liberation has also generated an almost complete nonchalance toward literature on the part of power in some societies in which literature, writers, and the intelligentsia in general have lost their almost primary position. I am referring above all to countries such as the United States.

7. What sense has, on the other hand, the concept of "tools" in the context of literature?

7.1. Basically, the same principles that are valid for culture at large are also valid for literature in this context. That is, on the one hand, literature serves to provide explanation models of the world, of reality. On the other, it functions to provide models of action.

7.1.1. *Tools for understanding the world.* In the first instance, "tools" are about "understanding" life. This function is already pertinent in the most ancient texts of civilization, such as those of Sumer and Akkad (Babylon). These explain the creation of the world, the function of love, the mortality of humans, nature, and how the world of organized humanity can be related with that of the wild. These texts postulate causality, regularity and simplicity for the large part of the known facts and of both daily and uncommon problems.

In this sense, little has changed from those remote times of human history. The most recent texts of our era, whether written or cinematographic, continue making the same work: they provide us with explanations, relatively coherent, of a complex

reality. In short, what we are talking about here is a rather restricted repertoire of explanatory models.

7.1.2. *Tools for acting in the world.* In the second instance, “tools” have to do with models of action. That is, the texts provide not only explanations, justifications and motives, but also – or sometimes in the first place – plans (or “scripts”) of action. The people who read or watch these texts not only get conceptions and coherent images of reality, but can also extract from them practical instructions for daily behavior. Thus, the texts propose not only how to behave in particular cases (for example, how to eat or speak, kiss or react to whatever event), but how life should be organized: whether to execute, and in what ways, various options. For example, fall in love, get married, have children, work or avoid working, feel happy for dying for the fatherland... In short, what we are talking about here is a rather restricted repertoire of models for action.

7.2. Naturally (though it still may need be underlined), we are not speaking here of texts only, but of all of the activities involved with their production, distribution, repetition and valuation. In short, the network of roles and positions which constitute jointly what has been called “literature”. The models that the texts offer need mediation of agents in order to be effective. And – as I have discussed elsewhere⁴ – what we are talking about here is a complex set of heterogeneous relations (briefly, a “polysystem”) between various socio-cultural factors.

7.3. It is this whole, this net of activities operating as an industry of indispensable tools for the organization of life, which explains – as already follows from the formulations of the Russian semioticians (Lotman, Ivanov, Uspenskij) – the immense power of literature throughout the ages. In this conception, “literature” does not figure either as an “aesthetic” instrument or amusement for the privileged. It is, rather, conceived of the other way around, namely as a powerful social institution, one of the most basic instruments of most human societies, which has served to order and handle their repertoires for organizing their life.

7.4. As in the issue of goods, here too, the foremost aspect of the socio-cultural interaction is the question who are those who control and manage the repertoires. If in the case of the goods what counts is to whom they belong, in the case of tools it is who have the capacity of determining what the actual repertoires will be, not only the official ones, but those the people employ in their lives.

7.5. The so-called canon struggles in the history of the making of texts are without doubt – in particular when literature maintains a strong position – conflicts of interest about who the authority and capacity to produce and propose repertoires that operate as storehouses of tools to handle life (both collective and individual) will have. It is therefore that the literary canon – whether understood as a repertoire of models more or less obligatory for production, or as a storehouse of immortal values – has become such a fundamental institution.

⁴ Specifically in “The ‘literary system’” (in Even-Zohar 1990). For a more updated version, though without particular discussion of “literature”, see Even-Zohar 1997.

7.5.1. When the texts operate as official bearers of the canonical world models, of course they help maintain the political and social order of the countries where they are known. But literature has had throughout its centuries-long history changing relationships with power. While we can see in certain periods producers of texts at the service of power, to the point that we do not know anything about their identity, already in ancient Israel (and then in ancient Greece), for the first time in the history of humanity texts have been produced with the manifest aspiration of operating as tools for the organization of life without the approval of power. And quite frequently (in the case of either the Israeli prophets, or of the Greek philosophers), even in confrontation with it.

This development of “free” production, as we know, has been intensified ever since, and, consequently, the struggle for controlling life repertoires via literature has turned out to be almost always associated with conflicts of interest not only between groups of various producers (as the *litterati* normally describe in histories of literature), but also between power and those who have been able to release themselves – at least to a certain point – from their dependence on it. Of course, from the point of view of power, whether it be one Czar Nicolai, one Stalin or one Franco, or – (though in a different way, no doubt) one Mitterand – the repertoires proposed by an industry more or less “free” (or less dependent) are too dangerous. (This is, obviously, because it can conflict with the repertoires desirable and preferred by the power.) Consequently, even when they cannot control directly this industry, power attempts to do it through an indirect control. This can be expressed today in several forms. For example, a quite generous treatment of the producers – or of the industry as a whole – in the form of subsidies, scholarships, positions in the administration (ministers, ambassadors), or sometimes simply in the form of an invitation extended to one Roland Barthes to have tea in the Elisées Palace with the President of the Republic. A most active intervention takes place also through the incorporation in and exclusion of texts in school readers and manifold other methods, overt or covert.

8. *The conversion of goods into tools and of tools into goods.* The two discussed aspects – that of goods and that of tools – allow us to write two different histories of literature. However, though it will be possible to distinguish one from the other, there are reasons – on the other hand – to also attempt and analyze them in interdependence. This can add a dimension to any new history, because it could explain the circumstances that make it possible for literature to maintain or lose its position in the incessant activity for handling life repertoires in society. When at least part of the net of activities related to literature is considered as valuable, i.e., as goods, it is simpler for the producers and the agents (those who have interest in employing the literary products) to use the various aspects of the industry to bring about that its models become acceptable as tools for life. Of course, the contrary is equally applicable: when literature is successful in proposing useful tools, it almost automatically acquires value as indispensable good.

8.1. This dynamic relationship between the function as goods and that as tools does not necessarily occur in each era. It seems that during several periods in history

literature did not have more than its value as goods, without any possibility of transforming these into tools. But it can be argued even in those cases (Medieval court poetry or the French theatre of the “*pièces bien faites*” are perhaps valid examples), that the function as tools is also present, though in a weak manner. In any case, here – as in many similar cases – it is the measure that counts, or more sensibly, the more decisive function. Renfrew’s proposal – to accept the possibility that certain objects might be in the first place only goods before transformed into tools after a complex development – can suggest for the analysis of literature a point of view that at least would be worth the trouble of examining. The other direction, i.e., that of tools being converted to goods, seems to require no particular explanation.

9. Finally, the proposals advanced in this paper have, in my opinion, two implications beyond the purpose of serving as solutions for professional problems such as “how to write more adequately the history of literature”.

In the first place, they help to integrate the study of literature into a wider framework, more concretely into culture research, not through reduction, but the other way round – by underlining the most distinctive and manifest function of literature in the creation and maintenance of society by means of its culture.

In the second place, without making particular reference to such problems as the possibility of developing “better” (or “more adequate”) disciplines, they give us – if we believe that there is still reason to maintain literary studies – an effective instrument to show that when studying and researching literature we provide something important to the comprehension of the society in which we live. However, one must pay a price that many “literati” would refuse. One must be liberated from the automatic identification, the result of the historical evolution described in this paper, of literature with positive “values”, whether aesthetic (in the sense of having atemporal validity) or otherwise, and from the popular idea that it bears the truth, authentic and deep – beyond what we know in daily life – about the world. It is precisely on this set of doxa that the current reputation of literature is based. But, work on a basis which depends on relationships with power can collapse between one day and the other, and make the entire literary group be transformed into irrelevant and marginal. It is high time we studied literature academically and not as brokers.

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