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Why Study Literature?

WHY STUDY LITERATURE?

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INTRODUCTION

WHY STUDY LITERATURE?

The editors

“Why study literature?” is an important question that continuously needs to be asked and framed. This book aims to provide a range of answers that takes into account the current status and challenges of literary studies. The book is thus one step on the road towards a theoretically well-founded basis and explanation for what might presently be considered a relatively unfounded historical fact: that literature and the teaching of literature hold a privileged place in many educational institutions in fields of study otherwise defined or outlined geographically or by language, as for instance in the departments of English, French, German, and Scandinavian that are still common in both Europe and the United States. We hope that the question “Why study literature?” will provide new ways of thinking about the historical, epistemological, and institutional role of literature.

In this introduction, we will outline first some often reiterated but probably untenable defences of literature, and some equally common and – we believe – equally untenable attacks on literature (or arguments in favor of the death of literature). Secondly, we will present earlier books and approaches that address the question of “why study literature?”. Notably, almost all of these studies focus on literature itself rather than on the question of *why* it should be studied within the educational system. Thirdly, we will present a range of reasons why people should *study* literature, and finally we will outline the structure of the present volume as well as each of the contributions.

REFRAMING LITERATURE

“Literature is under pressure” has become a recurring mantra for both those who welcome and those who dread a decline of literature. Why is that? Is it true? And if so: in what sense? At the very least the omnipresence of the feeling or its expression suggests that the study of literature is no longer an auto-legitimizing enterprise. And indeed, there is a level at which the study

of literature lacks legitimization. It seems to be the case, as suggested by Gregory Jusdanis (2010), that the pressure on literature and literary scholars to define the necessity of the literary field has muted the proponents of literature. It is a fact that even though billions of kroner in Denmark, and billions and billions of euros, pounds, yens and dollars etc. worldwide, are spent in educational systems from lower schools to universities on the teaching of literature, we know very little about its advantages and disadvantages, e.g. with regard to reading skills and general learning competences. Historically the study and teaching of literature has held and still holds a privileged position, but the historical reasons for this are contested today in several ways. Even if historical reasons are not necessarily invalid, they cannot in themselves justify the comparatively large amount of time and money spent on the teaching of literature in educational systems worldwide. Historical reasoning, such as the knowledge of a national literary canon, must therefore be replaced with other arguments: arguments that are not limited to a particular historical reason but take into account the contemporary conditions of the global knowledge society.

Literary scholars and critics have during the previous decade written quite extensively on the reasons why literature matters, producing or reproducing one or more of the following characterizations of literature:

- an exercise in empathy; the reader gains insight into lives and thoughts of other people
- an encounter with otherness and/or singularity
- a scene where one can encounter friendship and guidance in life through a mirror of society or history; because of what one conceives as the solitude and singularity of the individual reader literature supposedly holds up a mirror in which every reader sees something different
- a privileged medium for studying points of view (a perspective which has since been adopted by a series of other fields and disciplines)
- a means of improving the ethical judgments of readers
- a place of beauty and aesthetic experiences

These reasons for the necessity of literature and the study thereof are obviously valid, but a recurring starting point is nevertheless that they and the study of literature as such are threatened. In both historical and contemporary accounts for and defences of literature the hotly-debated notion of the death of literature recurs; to some this notion holds true while others find it greatly exaggerated. The death of literature is often described as an

effect of the rise of new media. This perceived threat from, e.g., visual media is humorously exemplified by a scene in an episode of the TV series *The Simpsons*. Springfield library takes up the battle against visual media by proudly announcing on a large banner:

OLD SPRINGFIELD LIBRARY: WE HAVE BOOKS ABOUT TV

And when the library conducts a used books sale, Homer wonders: “A library selling books? If I didn’t want ‘em for free why would I wanna pay for them?”

In fact it has often been suggested that the “new media”, “new forms of documentary”, “technology”, or even “the world wide web” either present a threat to literature or have already caused its death. This suggestion is often followed by statements about today’s students being lazier and less prepared than their predecessors (whether at the high school level or the university level) and showing little interest in literature – all of which is supposedly caused by their preference for movies and video games. This notion of a general lack of “Bildung” within the school system has also been put forward with regard to general literary interest in Western societies.

However, there is very little empirical evidence to confirm these conclusions. On the contrary, actual numbers do not seem to confirm a turning away of consumers from the book market. When examining the statistics of book sales in a country such as Denmark during the last thirty years it is evident that the sales figures have not decreased dramatically since the beginning of the 1980s but have rather remained at a stable level. This does not indicate that the processes of globalization and the global media system do not alter the public uses of literature, but rather than wiping out literature, they transform it as a medium. The access to and use of literature has simply changed due to global media and communication technologies. We buy paper books, but we also access novels as well as theoretical texts online, or we buy them via our iPhones, iPads, or Kindle Readers. Reading literature is no longer, if it ever was, merely a question of individual immersion in one text. Reading literature can also mean browsing through one’s iPhone while waiting at a bus stop, and the traditional book is to a great extent becoming the object of a fan culture of a type previously limited to film and TV. Online communities thus emerge around the reading of books, and it is not merely books that are adapted to the screen, such as *Harry Potter* and *Twilight*, but also authors like Bukowski, Dostoyevsky, Dante, and Joyce that have become the centre of ongoing online communities and debates. Literature is included in the global culture industry, and books have become

objects in what Henry Jenkins calls the “convergence culture”: “Welcome to convergence culture, where old and new media collide, where grassroots and corporate media intersect, where the power of the media producer and the power of the media consumer interact in unpredictable ways” (Jenkins 2006, 2). One of Jenkins’ arguments is that the convergence of modes is blurring the lines between different medias and their uses. Conversely, a service that was provided in the past by a single medium – as for instance literature – is now provided in several different ways. Therefore the one-to-one relationship between a medium and its use is being eroded. Due to the process of globalization, literature is being remediated. According to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin, the term ‘remediation’ denotes both the ways in which new media absorb old media and the ways in which old media are modernized in order to answer the challenges of the new media (Bolter and Grusin 1999). Hence, books are remediated when they are adapted to the screen, but the screen and the Internet also partake in the modernization of literature that extends its territory when entering everyday digital units, such as our mobile phones, Kindles, or iPads. The effect of the global media environment or the convergence culture on literature is thus twofold. It can be understood as a dialectic between deterritorialization and reterritorialization (Tomlinson 1999). Deterritorialization basically describes how the conceptual ties between cultures, identity, and geographic and social territories are dissolving or at least thought of as being dissolved. Globalization deterritorializes literature in the sense that it dissolves the relation between the literary content, a single medium, and the reader. Yet this deterritorialization is met by numerous reterritorializing processes, in which the literary field gains a renewed importance by being remediated. By means of remediation, literature maintains its social importance, even though its characteristics as a medium are radically transformed.

Thus this book does not empathize with the notion that the global media environment causes the death of literature; rather, we argue that the literary field is being transformed. This poses new arguments for the continuing study of literature: we have to investigate the ways in which literature, as a medium, is altered as a response to societal developments. Furthermore, the remediation of literature calls attention to the fact that the lifeworld of human beings is always undergoing transformations which appear in literature; we must therefore investigate and study the ever-changing human lifeworld as it manifests itself in literature.

So if literature is under pressure, it is hardly from globalization or from emerging new media. Rather, it seems that the external pressure on the

study of literature is mainly the need it shares with most sciences of art to legitimize itself in a political era of utilitarianism. An internal pressure occurs when literary studies simultaneously refuses to answer the most urgent questions about its *raison d'être* and its eagerness to make itself useful in anything but the study of literary works – ranging all the way from medicine and ethics to the oil industry.

In this book we want to counter the feelings of resentment implied in the notion of the death of literature by not only welcoming, but also emphatically posing the question “Why study literature?”. The question also stems from a desire to actually and eventually acquire knowledge of some of the most basic and interesting questions about literature and its study:

- What is the difference between statements that are true, statements that are false, and statements that are fictional?
- Why do we care about what happens to fictional characters?
- What are the differences and the potential overlaps between prose, drama, and poetry?
- Why is even a three-year-old child able to see that there is a difference between a fairy tale about dragons and a realist story about a horse?

Questions like these are so basic that we forget even to ask them, although their consequences for our understanding and interpretation of literature and the reasons for its study are of great importance.

WHY LITERATURE?

During the previous decade several monographs, anthologies and articles have raised and attempted to deal with the question of the role and function of literature in present day society. As a means of framing the more specific question of this anthology – “why study literature?” – we will in the following dwell on some of the recent work done on the broader question “why literature?”. A quick glance at the long list of titles on this subject indicates that a substantial number of writers have felt the need to perform legitimating actions on behalf of literature: from *Why Literature Matters: Theories and Functions of Literature* (Ahrens and Volkmann 1996) to *Why does Literature Matter?* (Farrell 2004), *Why Literature Matters in the 21st Century* (Roche 2004) and *Why We Read Fiction: Theory of Mind and the Novel* (Zunshine 2006), the role of and need for literature has quite manifestly been questioned, though in most cases by literary scholars keen on