Literature: Absurd Construct, or Mankind’s Saving Grace?

1. Introduction

Confronted with a falling level in primary and secondary education, and with an economy which is following suit, the United States has decided that the problem resides in the fact that not enough math and sciences are being taught in school. After all, isn’t the future of the country, of the world, in the hands of the economists and scientists who are going to solve the ever growing problems of climate change, scarcity of petroleum, and diminishing world’s resources?

Unfortunately, the emphasis on sciences and technology disregards the basic fact that human beings require emotional, intellectual, and moral, as much as physical comfort. Rabelais’ often quoted sentence, “science sans conscience n’est que ruine de l’âme” (“knowledge without conscience is nothing but the ruin of the human soul”) is just as relevant today as it was in the 16th century. But desperate professors of literature, who are witnessing the relevancy of the humanities slip from between the pages of their unread books, not only agree with the new emphasis, they even propose to make literature “more like science” in the hope of regaining some pertinence in the 21st century.

2. The fallacy

One such professor is author and teacher of English Literature Jonathan Gottschall. In a recent article (Boston Globe, May 11th, 2008), Professor Gottschall proposed that in order
“to emerge from the present crisis, literary studies must borrow more from the sciences than the habit of experimentation. We must also study its theories, its evidentiary standards, and its optimistic philosophy of knowledge.” For Gottschall, literature and its study is not only similar to the field of the “hard sciences,” but its aim should be the same: to provide humankind with hard proofs and with knowledge. Most of us rational beings tend not to question the certitudes brought on by the development of the empirical sciences and most of us accept that the earth revolves around the sun, that polymerization gives us plastic or that DNA constitutes the genome of most living organisms. But, what proof do we bring when we, the humanists, claim that Pamuk’s novel *Snow* is a retelling of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which is a striking psychological study, or that Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* is a postmodern recounting of World War II and of the stupidity and futility of human existence?

Gottschall’s answer is that the study of literature is one of our best tools for understanding the human condition and literary criticism is indeed its most obvious expression, but to be considered relevant in our modern life, it needs a radical change: to embrace science. Gottschall proposes a new type of approach to the teaching of literature: “Literature professors should apply science’s research method, its theories, its statistical tools, and its insistence on hypothesis and proof.” To exemplify his theories, he reports that the result of his collecting and analyzing of thousands of folktales from around the world proves, without a doubt, that the female beauty myth in literature is not a Western Culture particular, nor is it a sign of the sexism permeating Western Culture in order to keep male dominance alive, it actually lies deep in human nature. Joseph Campbell had
reached the same conclusion some 60 years earlier, in his remarkable study of the myths of the world, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.

A seemingly more meaningful study of Roland Barthes’ claim that “the author is dead” reveals, on closer inspection, that Gottschall may have been hasty in equating Barthes’ statement “the death of the author is the birth of the reader” to the “manufacturing [of] our own highly idiosyncratic meanings [with] no shared understanding of what literary works mean.” Barthes did not assert that readers should give their “own highly idiosyncratic meanings” to the works they read, as they hold together “in a single field *all the traces* (my emphasis) by which the written text is constituted.” Thus, by giving the reader a greater role in the creation of meaning, Barthes sees the works of literature as analogous to works of music — they are structures to be played and created as they are interpreted. Michel Foucault did respond to Barthes’ assertion by arguing that whereas a “work” contains meanings that can be traced back undeniably to the author and is therefore closed, the text is actually something that remains open. The resulting concept of intertextuality implies that meaning is brought to any cultural object by its audience and does not intrinsically reside in the object. It is the permanent ability of literature to adapt to the changing conditions of culture, history, society, art, aesthetics, etc., exhibiting a state of permanent flux, that places it in a privileged position to start a dialogue across disciplines.

And there resides part of the problem and Gottschall’s fallacy: it is not for literature to emulate science, but for science to remember what enables it to formulate itself. For the
poet/novelist Louis Aragon, “Science still has a lot to do before it can integrate in its classifications the human adventure. What still escapes it, in this domain, is named the *novel.*”¹ Without words, there is no explanation, no imagination, no theorizing. This simple realization was best worded by the philosopher Finkielkraut who remarked:

> There is no direct access to reality, to a pure, naked reality divested of all prior shaping. There is no experience without reference: words are lodged in things, a third authority slips in between us and the others, us and the world, us and ourselves. And, as we cannot escape the mediation, as literature is decidedly all powerful, the question is to know to which library does one entrust one’s destiny.²

3. **The problem**

If we recognize that literature is a vital part of the human condition, existing independently of science while being a complement to it, why can authors such as Gottschall declare with, according to him, “more and more literary scholars … that the field has become moribund, aimless, and increasingly irrelevant to the concerns not only of the ‘outside world,’ but also to the world inside the ivory tower”? Gottschall actually touches upon part of the answer when he suggests that “the great minds of literary studies have, over the past few decades, chiefly produced theories and speculations with little relevance to anyone but the scholars themselves.” The emphasis on literary theories to the
The detriment of the literary work itself prompted the great 20th century theorist of literary criticism, Tzvetan Todorov, to write, in 2006, *La littérature en péril*.

Our conception of literature has become narrower as we have compartmentalized it, cut it from its roots, separated it from the other disciplines which make up mankind’s knowledge and *raison d’être*. Proust reminds us that “reading in its original essence, is that fruitful miracle of a communication in the midst of solitude.” But, our study and our teaching of literature is not fulfilling its main goal of communication, of reflection to help us be better human beings. According to Todorov, literature has been reduced to an absurd construct, “a closed language object, self-sufficient, absolute” which can be approached only with critical literary theories which are used “to emphasize the play of its constitutive elements.” And he adds that a strict internal approach of the text cannot convey the meaning of the text, as it is always created in a context with which it remains in dialogue.

A rapid jaunt through history brings Todorov to conclude that literature, poetry at its origin, has progressed from being a creation having a utility to being a creation for itself. And, at the beginning of the 20th century, the relation of art to the world is decisively ruptured and two types of literature appear: the popular literature directly engaged with the daily life of its readers and the elite literature, read by the professionals — critics, professors, writers — who seek only the technical prowess of its creators. “Literature does not embody anymore the subtle equilibrium between the representation of the common world and perfection of the novelistic construction” (64). Reaction against the
totalitarian regimes which appeared after the 1st World War and demanded that art and literature be tools of their utopian projects, whatever they may be, led the societies where freedom of expression existed to proclaim that art and literature have no significant rapport with the world, and that is the prevalent view of literature nowadays in the teaching establishments of France or the USA. It is a reductive absurdist vision of literature which the literary theories of the second half of the 20th century have reduced further by attempting to make it more scientific by analyzing its forms rather than its content.

Todorov cites the American philosopher Richard Rorty, who proposes that “literature is less a remedy to our ignorance than it is a cure to our ‘egotism,’ understood as the illusion of self-sufficiency,” as the reading of novels is similar to going towards others: it is the capability of communication with beings different from ourselves or, as Kant put it, it is “thinking while putting oneself in the place of any other human being” — thus reaching toward universality (76-78). And, in order to do so, one needs to replace literature into the bosom of the humanities, alongside history, philosophy, and all the other disciplines that make for a great liberal arts education.

4. What can literature do?

Despite the basic error of his argument, Gottschall does remember where literature comes from:
Across the breadth of human history, across the wide mosaic of world cultures, there has never been a society in which people don’t devote great gobs of time to seeing, creating, and hearing fictions — from folktales to film, from theater to television. Stories represent our biggest and most preciously varied repository of information about human nature. Without a robust study of literature, there can be no adequate reckoning of the human condition — no full understanding of art, culture, psychology, or even of biology.

And just as Joseph Campbell noted in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, humans have been telling themselves, not only stories, but the same story over and over again, for “the story” is what makes us forget about the brevity of our life, the futility of it, the sheer absurdity of it — as Camus, in yet another retelling of the story, pointed out. And what is literature if not “the story” in its many guises which gives meaning to our human life. Two authors, Roger Rosenblatt and Muriel Barbery, have pondered this question and dealt with the seeming irrelevance of literature in our life and in college teaching while indulging the human being’s basic need for a good story by writing *Beet* (New York, Harper Collins, 2008), Rosenblatt’s satirical gem, and *L’élégance du hérisson* (Paris, Gallimard, 2006), Barbery’s classically beautiful novel.

At first glance, the two novels have nothing in common, one set in a luxurious apartment building in the richest part of Paris, the other in a small, exclusive New England liberal arts college. The two main characters could not be any more different: “My name is
Renée. I am fifty-four years old. For the last 27 years, I have been the concierge of number 7 Grenelle St. […] I am a widow, I am short, ugly, pudgy. […] I have not gone to college, have always been poor, discrete and insignificant” (15), while Beet’s main character is “Peace Porterfield, the youngest full professor in the school’s history, […] eyes as blue as daylight, hair the color of damp sand that flapped over his forehead. Six foot one, give or take. An athlete’s careful lope. And a stoic expression, created and often tested by the name his 1960s-generation parents had burdened him with” (1-2).

But from the onset of both novels, it is obvious that they are not the stereotypes of their professions, as both have discovered the power of literature and how to reach the young. Both Renée and Peace are accompanied by a child, a remarkably intelligent, precocious 12 year old, Paloma, for Renée, and a funnily perceptive and tenacious teenager, Akim, for Peace. Both children, at the beginning of the novels, are so disturbed by their environment that they have decided to commit suicide as a grand gesture to bring the indifferent adults back to reality.

Paloma’s description of a literature class is a scathing critique of the way literature is being taught in schools.

[it] can be summed up in a long series of technical exercises, be it grammar or the reading of texts. With her [the teacher], one would think that a text has been written so that we can identify its characters, the narrator, the places, the events,
the times of the narration, etc. I think that she never considered that a text is
before all written to be read and to produce emotions in the reader. Imagine that
she has never even asked the question: “Did you like this text/this book?” It is,
however, the only question which could give a meaning to the study of narrative
points of view or to the construction of the narration. (166)

And it is the profound emotion that Renée is able to arouse in Paloma as she narrates her
life and her discovery as a child that misery is commensurate to your level of poverty,
which awakens Paloma to the desire for a life in communication with the others: “Should
I become a doctor? Or maybe a writer? It’s almost the same, isn’t?” (318) What her
teacher had not been able to do with all the literature at her disposal, Renée created with a
simple, heartfelt, passionate narration.

Renée, who had spent her life devouring books in secret, discovering art and cinema,
philosophy and literature, remarks after watching a movie (The Hunt for Red October),

For who wants to understand the art of narration, one has only to see it; one
wonders why the university insists in teaching narrative principles through the
heavy use of Propp, Greimas or other punishments instead of investing in a
projection room. Premises, intrigue, agents, episodes, quest, heroes, and other
stimulants: all you need is Sean Connery in a Russian sub-mariner’s uniform and a few well-placed aircraft carriers. (77)

Rosenblatt’s character, Peace,

taught English and American literature—which is ordinarily enough to mark a person for disaster. If that didn’t do the trick, he also believed in what he did, being committed to an academic discipline said to have exhausted both its material and its usefulness, […] he believed in the value of a liberal arts education, and in colleges in general, from whose sacred waters, he further believed, civilization flowed. Need one glaze the duck? He believed in civilization. (1)

Peace, as Renée does, believes in the necessary and uplifting power of literature, and refuses the new tenet that colleges are like Wall Street-driven companies, required to make more money by attracting more students, which can only be done by lowering quality and standards.

His troubled child, Akim Ben Laden, né Arthur Horowitz, has decided to blow himself up, and part of the college with him, in emulation of Ben Laden, because the college has
been a huge disappointment to him: not only is the education it purports to offer not
eworth Akim’s intellect and interest, but the young man has also discovered that
substantive communication with professors is a thing of fiction, a charade at best. The
teenager who wanted to study journalism did not get accepted into a course labeled “How
to Write for the New York Times” by the professor who told him that, as he was above
average and a straight A student, he would not be fitting in at the New York Times and
flatly refused to discuss the matter further. In rebellion and frustration, he enrolled in one
of the brand new online courses, created to bring in money to the college while saving on
infrastructure, “No classes, no offices, no food, no services, no pens, no overhead,” in the
Homeland Security Department. Unfortunately, the online professor does not respond to
e-mails and the website for the department requires a password which has not been
divulged to the students, thus preventing them from entering the site and barring all
possibility of communication. When Peace meets Akim, he learns that the new Homeland
Security Department is running courses such as “Emergency Management: What If They
Come by Sea,” “If You’re My Mother, Where’s Your ID?” and “Police Brutality—Is It
Always Wrong?”

For Peace, who has been trying to come up with a way to save the college, as its
endowment has mysteriously disappeared, by thinking of a new curriculum that would
attract good students while keeping the reputation of Beet College intact, the plight of the
boy is only too obvious, and a new idea for a course slowly emerges.
What was the course? Storytelling. It would be a course in storytelling. […]

Stories were everywhere: [In the law, medicine, politics, business, religion.]
Every intellectual discipline, every college department was a story in progress. All one needed was to see it that way. Look at his own discipline. Literature was a story. Fiction most obviously, but essays and poems too. An essay was the story of an idea; a poem the story of a feeling. (198)

Storytelling is the communication, the capability to reach the other, to walk in his/her shoes, the universality of humankind, and the link between all disciplines.

5. Conclusion

While all the threads in Beet are being tied in a most satisfactory manner for most readers, “when it comes down to it, nothing that happened at Beet that fall affected anything in American higher education. Nothing ever does. Good or bad, splendid or inane, colleges go on and on and on” (225), one is troubled by the fate of its main character, to whom Rosenblatt offers a totally open future, except for teaching at the college. One cannot help but lament the loss of such a wonderful teacher, whose most striking accomplishment is encapsulated in Akim’s emerging maturity, as he has discovered his own humanity and his relationship to the world of the others through his dialogue with Peace. Renée’s disappearance in L’élégance du hérisson propels Paloma into a newly discovered humanity and desire to live and share with the others that incredible intellect of hers, to go beyond her own petty, egocentric desires, views, and
opinions, as she accuses the world around her of doing. Renée’s self-taught, true
Renaissance humanist culture, which brought her a kind of re-naissance, has also given
Paloma a second birth and reopened the door of the future for her. The message is clear:
literature is mankind’s saving grace as it allows us to participate fully in and to the story
of humanity.

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1 Alain Finkielkraut, et al., Ce que peut la littérature (Paris: Stock/Panama, 2006), 155.
2 Ibid., 10.
3 Steve Mitchelmore, http://this-space.blogspot.com/2008/05/against-science.html.