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The place and function of literature in the next millennium: implications of the "Rushdie affair"

Recent reflections on the place and function of literature today have increasingly struck a somewhat defensive note, deriving well-argued affirmations of literature's importance from meeting powerful evidence to the contrary. The pervasive presence of this argumentative figure can be discerned in the contributions to a volume entitled *Why Literature Matters* (Ahrens & Volkmann) published in 1996. It is most obvious in Wolfgang Iser's systematic (or in this respect rather programmatic) introductory essay of the same title. Iser starts out by describing the sociocultural functions of modern literature in a characteristically circular manner as "ranging from entertainment through information and documentation to pastime" and goes on to observe that even in this noncommittal definition "these have now been distributed among many independent institutions that not only compete fiercely with literature but also deprive it of its formerly all-encompassing function." (13)

Nevertheless, Iser points to "at least three different realms within which literature turns out to have an important function" (14) today: a) literature "embodies the cultural capital coveted by social groups who struggle for recognition" (14), b) literature provides "[p]erturbing noise [...] out of step with technocratic modernity" (16), and c) literature is a form of "[h]uman self-enactment [...] which incorporates into itself the inauthenticity of all the human patternings it features" (19). It is clear that with this outline of political, systematic, and anthropological dimensions (cf. 14) Iser emphasizes the critical potential of literature in opposition to the mainstream of Western society. In fact, he finishes celebrating the "strength of [literature's] marginality" which "provokes an ever-changing conceptualization of what [literature] might be and of the function it is meant to fulfill." (22)

While this self-reflexive turn is the most widespread symptom of making a virtue out of necessity in 20th century literary theory, it nevertheless poses serious problems if it is considered on a global scale.

After all, Iser's functions are deeply embedded in ("post-")modern Western society, and it is only there that literature has developed an aura of autonomy and universality. While a clash between Western concepts of literature and non-Western attitudes has on the whole been avoided by the marginality Iser celebrates, matters have recently been brought to a head by the so-called "Rushdie affair." In spite of the initial clamour which

was speedily boiled down by the mass media to the opposition "the West" vs. "Islam"², the conflict has nevertheless initiated a subtler debate which spurns dogmatically conservative positions on both sides. Even so, the underlying problems cannot really be addressed in a suitably eased atmosphere because of the stumbling block of Khomeini's unacceptable *fatwa*.

This, it is worth pointing out, originated not in Islam *per se* but rather in a particularly dogmatic and conservative brand of Islam with, more importantly, political aspirations, and, even more importantly, worldly power at its disposal because of very specific historical circumstances.

However, there can be no doubt that Rushdie's novel had (and has) the potential to hurt the feelings of devout Muslims even without the Ayatollah's (and others') idea of political expediency (see, for example, Darwish). Leaving aside the question of who read the book and who did not it would be naive (or complacent) to simply state that Muslims have no right to feel that way because taking offence at Rushdie's book is the result of failing to read it adequately, that is as fiction/literature. Nevertheless, this is exactly the line taken by Rushdie himself and many of his supporters in the first phase of the conflict. In his essay "In Good Faith" (1990) Rushdie insists on *The Satanic Verses'* status as "a novel, a work of fiction, one that aspires to the condition of literature" (393): "Not to see this, to treat fiction as if it were fact, is to make a serious mistake of categories. The case of *The Satanic Verses* may be one of the biggest category mistakes in literary history." (409) The problem with this stance is not only that it fails to acknowledge the fact that the "category" in question - which requires a "literary" reading of the kind implied by Rushdie's explanatory essay - presupposes a Western/modern tradition many Muslim readers do not and are not willing to share. Even *within* this framework it relies on rather outdated ideas of the autonomy of the literary work of art. As K.M. Newton has pointed out in an article on "Literary Theory and the Rushdie Affair" Rushdie is in this respect and in marked contrast to his literary practice strangely out of tune with contemporary literary theory.

While this in itself may serve to illustrate the retrogressive tendencies of defensive discursive strategies, it is also interesting to note that literary theorists have largely refrained from a sustained discussion of the "Rushdie affair" in the light of their theories. As Newton's essay indicates, the results might be unexpectedly uncomfortable, but not in the sense that theories would appear as *mere* theories. Quite the contrary: it could be that the complexity of the "Rushdie affair" can in the long run only adequately be dealt with if deconstructive, constructivist, and systems-theoretical approaches - to name just the theoretically most advanced and philosophically most ambitious pillars of contemporary literary theory (cf. de Berg & Prangel) - leave the ivory tower of academia and join the debate, preferably in comprehensible and undogmatic language. After all there are no easy solutions and too much is at stake: where real interests are concerned debate seems to be the only alternative to war (in other cases silence will do). Unfortunately, the mere concept of debate has increasingly come under attack as just another Western imperialist

1 Here Iser quotes Paulson, 181.

2 For documentation see Appignanesi/Maitland, the volumes of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, and the bibliography in Fletcher.

device. This, however, is a matter not only of debate but especially of the quality of debate. Rushdie himself addressed this delicate problem in an essay entitled "Is Nothing Sacred?", also published in 1990. After referring to his pre-*Satanic Verses* position on the title question - "No, nothing is sacred in and of itself" (416) - he asks himself in the light of the preceding year's events:

Do I, perhaps, find something sacred after all? Am I prepared to set aside as holy the idea of the absolute freedom of the imagination and alongside it my own notions of the World, the Text, and the Good? Does this add up to what the apologists of religion have started calling 'secular fundamentalism'? And if so, must I accept that this 'secular fundamentalism' is as likely to lead to excesses, abuses and oppressions as the canons of religious faith? (418)

His answer is a somewhat qualified *no* on all counts. In spite of his "sweeping claims for literature" and his "slightly messianic tone" he finds himself "backing away from the idea of sacralizing literature" and rejects "the idea of the writer as secular prophet" because, in contrast to everything held to be sacred in human history before, "all art must inevitably end in failure." (427) It seems that this strange mixture of self-confidence and self-consciousness has become the defining quality of modern art in its "postmodern" manifestations, and the same ambiguity runs through many positions held in contemporary literary theory.

If, as was pointed out before, "debate" or, more generally, "communication" is not only a sign but also the dictates of today's times, it is clear that such a mixture of positive spirit and self-critical attitude³ could lay the foundations for a new quality of debate in terms of multiculturalism and, where possible, hybridity.⁴ However, it takes (at least) two to debate, and it is very likely that postcolonial or otherwise non-Western subjects will spurn this achievement precisely because of its Western origins. But, in the long run, the conveniently protective shields of cultural isolationism and its progressive counterpart, cultural relativism, will not suffice for solving material problems, and the West will (in the most favourable of all the scenarios which can be imagined) be forced to adopt a position blueprinted in Rushdie's oeuvre:

"Taking a stand while lacking a center." (cf. Hume) In the end, Christopher Hitchens is right when he concludes: "One must side with Salman Rushdie not because he is an underdog but because there is no other side to be on." (15) At any rate, if one stops to think, the consequences of compromise on questions of censorship are untenable once the adoption of a global (or at least less particular) perspective is attempted (see, for example, Easterman).

3 In this sense Rushdie has been hailed as the "Prophet of a New Postmodernism" (cf. Edmundson).

4 One of the most prominent features of Rushdie's oeuvre is the emergence of a positive concept of cultural hybridity which has since become "something of an orthodoxy in contemporary post-colonial theory" (Cundy, 107). Lately a more critical attitude can be observed, so it seems as if the concept shares the fate of "multiculturalism" in mutating from hopeful ideal to fully developed or finally discarded concept.

And it should not be forgotten that it was a work aspiring to the condition of literature which stirred this debate. What, then, could be the place and function of literature in the next millennium? Obviously, Iser is right about its marginality and his suggestions as to its continuing importance are not off the mark. It is just that they do not cover the whole range of literature's potential. Literature embodies "cultural capital" by implying and subverting Western standards at the same time.⁵ Literature provides noise which simultaneously perturbs and perpetuates Western culture. And finally: literature may serve as a medium of human self-enactment, but it can also, if only in admittedly extremely contingent cases, destroy lives. It may well be that the "Rushdie affair" will come to be seen as the foundation stone of literature's place and function in the next millennium. As "reality" will increasingly have to be dealt with on a global scale (cf. Craige) one hopes that a medium for sustained, imaginative, multidimensional, embedded yet independent, critical yet positive, self-confident yet self-conscious, and, last but by no means least, entertaining investigation and reflection will be in demand, even if it cannot deny its Western background.

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5 This is one of the central problems of postcolonial theory. For an instructive empirical observation with regard to Rushdie cf. Huggan.

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