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Of Litter and Letters

We cease to think when we refuse to do so under the constraint of language.

- Friedrich Nietzsche

And in order to highlight the import of the word literature I'll invoke the equivocality upon which Joyce often plays - letter, litter. The letter is refuse.

- Jacques Lacan

You do not have to be a cyber culture freak to decide that life is too short to accommodate the rows of books lining your bookshelves. Like the narrator in Gerald Murnane's 'In Far Field', you might fancy driving to a paper-manufacturing plant and dumping boxfuls of books down the chute (Murnane 1995). But you might already have done that, at home, as you are in the electronic agora described by William Mitchell, where even the notion of a human community is a matter of disk space, of 'writing computer code and deploying software objects to create virtual places and electronic interconnections between them' (Mitchell 1995: 160). For you, then, no doubt, books are old hat, and literature the dust on the hat. Now, if I have the gall to mention 'old' literature, you will surely tell me that it belongs in the dustbin of history. Some of my students have done so in much more colourful language. Still. I believe that even in the electronic age students of creative writing need to read broadly, not only on a synchronic plane, but a diachronic one as well, for as Alain Badiou reminds us, 'the subject of an artistic truth is the set of the works which compose it' (Badiou 2004)

Is it technophobia on my part? Is it nostalgia? Does it matter? I protest all the same and wish to argue here in defence of books, literature, and 'old' literature in particular. For no writing occurs without reading. Besides, 'each new reading is cumulative and proceeds by geometrical progression: each new reading builds upon whatever the reader has read before' (Manguel 1997: 19 quoted in Brophy 2003: 36)

The author of Finnegans Wake is an egg laid by an adoptive chicken lettered, rather than named, F.W., that cackles and forages in the litter of its own text. The 'letter' plays on the 'litter’ which signifies both litter and refuse. The pun is too good to be true, and the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan devotes a whole one-year seminar to
cackling about Joyce and the letter as refuse (Lacan 2005).

When Lacan, however, says that the letter is refuse, he means that the letter is a by-product of the unconscious. The letter is not a mere graphic representation of a sound, but the material basis of language, i.e. that irreducible kernel which escapes symbolisation and yet underpins the symbolic order. In this sense, the letter is inscribed in the very matrix of language and history that we all inhabit albeit in varying ways, and indeed, in the history of language as such. So is the very notion of literature as both record of knowledge and art form.

Moreover, because these two categories intersect and interact with each other, I would argue that the history of literature is the history of all literate beings - if not speaking beings - for as T.S. Eliot reminds us 'it affects us as entire human beings' (Eliot 1953: 40). To put it differently, 'the book is not only the memory but the imagination of mankind' (Borges 1985: 13). This makes literature the litter of all speaking beings, the cradle of 'homo fabula' (Okri 1997: 114).

LITERATURE. The word fused into English in the Renaissance (14th century) in the sense of 'polite learning through reading' (Williams 1976: 184). Both the Latin litteratura and the French littérature had the same general sense. From its inception into the English language to its difficult acceptance in postmodern culture, the term 'literature' has seen quite a few reviews. While the major semantic shift is a product of Romanticism - literature as that which is art, aesthetic, creative, imaginative - the more recent semantic dissemination of the word is a by-product of post-structuralism with its interest in the problematics of writing and communication. Exciting though it might be to survey this dissemination, it is clearly beyond the scope of this essay and I will keep to the common consensual meaning of the word in its post-romantic sense.

OLD. What a lamentably vague temporal marker. It smells of dust. It reeks of decay. Which will you have? My old hat, or my old socks? Whichever way, the word needs dusting. At the risk of sounding pedantic, 'old' could mean anything which does not occur right now. You've missed it already. As I write, the tips of my fingers create 'new' literature on my computer screen. By the time I manage to print the text, my words will be 'old'. So, you are already too late.

Of course, in terms of post-structuralist theories, your interaction as a reader is imperative for any literature to be 'new' - the word you are reading now is new. Does that mean that there is no 'old' literature as such? Could it be that even the inscriptions on clay tablets are 'new' every time you read them - as you read them? Yet linguistic competence depends upon prior linguistic experience, which would mean that the texts you read refuse to go away once they are no longer on your mind - a simplistic though resonant way of describing how knowledge is secured and how the letter is anchored in subjectivity. New readings, echoes of old.

Less extreme would be to view 'old' literature as those works for which the shelf life has expired. It is, however, now more customary to use 'old' when referring to texts written before the advent of modernity: my
choice for the purpose of the argument.

Poetry...can arm kings, marshal them for war, launch whole fleets from their docks, nay counterfeit sky, land, sea, adorn young maidens with flowery garlands, portray human character in its various phases, awake the idle, stimulate the dull, restrain the rash, subdue the criminal, and distinguish excellent men with their proper need of praise. (Boccaccio 1981: 421-22)

Despite its antiquated imagery, Boccaccio's 'In Praise of Poetry' still rings true. Though it dates back to the beginning of the Italian Renaissance (1363), at a time when new writing was fuelled by the rediscovery of ancient learning, it does convey the much-discussed existential notion that to write is to act.

Of course, literature is defined by and for the literary institution, and the practice itself has a social, political and philosophical history as well as an institutional bias, which still contributes to the construction of literary canons and their necessary deconstruction. As another Renaissance author has it: 'the first thing always asked is this: who wrote it? And judgments based upon his name's allure' (Cellini 1989: 77). This kind of literary snobbery reflects a confusion of value which 'permeates all social strata', even if only to rebel against this state of affairs (Koestler 1981: 408). Such an attitude is indeed ironically largely responsible for the emergence and eminence of literature as an art form, as well as its now more common status of waste of space, time, and money - yes, refuse.

Nonetheless, 'literature is a form of delight', writes Borges, and the pleasure derived from reading has little to do with the age of the text (Borges 1985: 25). And let's not forget that traditionally literature has also been regarded as an instrument of learning, and in this sense, old literature is a vast receptacle of knowledge:

Of writing well, be sure the secret lies
In wisdom: therefore study to be wise,
The page of Plato may suggest the thought. (Horace 1909: 297)

The general end therefore of all the booke [The Faerie Queene] is to fashion a gentleman or noble person in vertuous and gentle dicipline. (Spenser 1932: 407)

Poetry extendeth itself out of the limits of a man's own little world. (Sidney n.d.: 14)

As indeed old ideas beget new ones: when Gutenberg looked for ways of speeding up and simplifying printing methods, he was inspired by two old ideas (the seal stamping vellum and the wine press that applied inexorable pressure to grapes) and proceeded to design his printing press. Books, and thus ideas, could be mass-produced and circulated. No wonder that this is now considered as a huge punctuation mark in the text of Western history, for it is via texts that ideas are passed on and perpetuated across the ages.
Still, many ideas are recycled over time, and thus remain relevant despite technological and cultural developments:

The subtle salt and spirit of the antient raillery...is evaporated through length of time, and what remains of it becomes flat and insipid to us; though the sharpest part will retain its vigour throughout all ages. (Rollin 1739: 89)

While Boccaccio would say that literature 'has to do with many high and noble matters that constantly occupy even those who deny its existence', I would happily discard the second adjective in the sentence (Boccaccio 1981: 423). Though the development of cultures is bound to change socio-political conditions and thus estrange the reader from old texts, reading always involves some sort of empathic leap into the world of the text, whose allure is often heightened, rather than diminished, by the process of defamiliarization.

However, it is not uncommon for the socio-political aspects of 'old' literature to translate quite easily into contemporary frames of reference: witness the proliferation of adaptations of plays by Shakespeare to the tastes and ideologies of today's audiences from, say, Zeffirelli's Romeo and Juliet to Luhrman's version of it, to take but two, though striking enough, examples.

Surely, even though it is necessary to question and dismantle canons, it is not an overstatement to claim that classical literature is the cornerstone of Western literature and society. The entire development of Western philosophy has indeed been called a series of footnotes to Plato, and ancient ideas have become so intrinsic to modern Western culture that reading the classics becomes an uncanny experience (Calvino 1989: 129). Being 'accustomed to consult nature and to take her for their guide in all things', classical authors founded their thought and literature upon humanistic grounds, wherein lies their fame. Shakespeare's 'genius' springs from a similar source - his oeuvre is not distinguished for its new stories, since most of his plays are adaptations of old plots, but for the multi-layered analysis of humanity which characterizes his poetic output. Elizabethan literature as a whole may very well be characterized, as T.S. Eliot argued, by the humanist focus on universal human concerns at the expense of authorial concerns and of the analysis of the age in which they lived (Eliot 1953: 102-3). Like all literature, it is, however, replete with the concerns of its age as the 'seasoned life of man preserv'd and stor'd up in Books' (Milton 1944: 6) in terms of power as much as mores. For example, as New Historicism has taught us, the narratives of unrequited love that are ubiquitous in Elizabethan love poetry - the sonnets of Sidney, Spencer and Shakespeare - should be read in the context of the courtier poets' anxiety about the power over their lives held by one single woman, Elizabeth I.

'Old' literature is also valuable as a link to authors now dead. Traditionally, at least, the author was thought to fashion his text, 'to nourish the book' (Barthes 1993: 155). With Emerson, there is a twist,
perhaps, since he describes a library as 'a kind of magic cabinet in which the great human spirits are kept in chains and are waiting for a word from us to regain their power of speech' (Borges 1985: 24). Like any art form, literature enhances some point of contact between artist and audience, an experience so powerful that readers can often feel an intimacy with authors they have never met. Erasmus frequently cites the authors of 'old' literature to corroborate his argument, and writes of them almost as if they were acquaintances, or contemporary experts, rather than men long dead and culturally alien:

Maybe they ought to distinguish two kinds of madness, in the manner of Socrates who teaches in Plato's "Dialogues" to divide Cupids and Venuses and one kind of madness from another - at least if they should wish to be considered sane themselves. Not every madness is calamity. Otherwise Horace would not have said: "A pleasant madness inspired me". Nor would Plato have placed the frenzy of poets and seers among the chief blessings of life, and the oracle would not have called the labours of Aeneas insane. (Erasmus 1967: 126)

There is an importance attached to the genuine article, as was already evident nearly two thousand years ago when Petronius wrote 'The Satyricon' and which survives today in Western mass-produced goods society (Petronius 1996: 27-28). In the context of literature, this idea translates into the 'sympathetic magic' which links readers to the minds of the past via 'old' literature (Koestler 1981: 405). Perhaps we are not confined to the one place and time, and in reading, our minds can span the void between our text and the author's, between the author and ourselves (Winterson 1996: 18).

The 'notion of the literary work as a map of the world and of the knowable' suggests that 'old' literature can be used as a historical document that contains insights into the history of the world beyond the text (Calvino 1989: 32). Authors cannot help but portray in their work the social and cultural milieu with which they interact. Therefore a reader can view 'old' literature as a means of winning back something from the past. The reader thus acquires a variety of views on life, which in turn foster a more complex and interactive appreciation of his or her own culture and society.

My companion, though she told me it was strictly forbidden, caught a sonnet in a wooden box and gave it to me as a memento. If I open the box by the tiniest amount I may hear it, repeating itself endlessly as it is destined to do until someone sets it free. (Winterson 1996: 18)

Words are a weighty commodity, determining our cultural heritage as they do; yet they have often received harsh treatment over the course of history. An unknown proportion of 'old' literature has not survived the test of time - through physical decay, accidental destruction (the fire in
the library of Alexandria) or deliberate destruction due to ignorance or changes in political or social conditions. 'Revolutions of ages', indeed, 'do not oft recover the losse of a rejected truth, for the want of which whole nations fare the worse' (Milton 1944: 6). Of the fraction of 'old' literature preserved, it is dispiriting to note as Sisam does, how much detail is blurred by the uncertainty and ignorance which surrounds the fragments (Sisam 1962: xiii). 'Man's works, however, must perish: how should words evade the general doom, and flourish undecayed?' (Horace 1909: 279).

In the fourteenth century, the civilizations of Ancient Greece and Rome inspired Italian culture, due to both increased civic pride resulting from hopes for the unification of Italy, and as a reaction against the political uncertainty of medieval times. Francesco Petrarca opened up libraries, which had long been closed, and 'removed the dust and filth from the good books and ancient writers' (Le Roy 1981: 93). Only one hundred years after Horace, Pliny the Younger also posited that art, like science, evolves cumulatively, except for momentous turning points where many cultures intersect and interact. The Renaissance was one such turning point, as Byzantine, Gothic, Classical Greek and Roman art interconnected. Classical texts were introduced to Europe from Byzantine copies and a 'Golden Age' was seen as evolving from the achievements of ancient literature (Ficino 1981: 79). During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Italians read 'old' literature in preference to their modern vernacular and the Humanist revolution in language was modelled on classical Latin. For example, Spenser claimed outright that he studied all the antique poets and modelled his characters on theirs (Spenser 1932: 407). As Le Roy put it: 'The languages [are] restored, and not only the deeds and writings of the ancients brought back to light, but also many fine things newly discovered' (Le Roy 1981: 91-2). For although the Renaissance was founded upon classical learning, the old ideas inspired new ones. Leonardo da Vinci thought 'it was a wretched pupil who did not surpass his master', and likewise the Renaissance writers attempted to surpass their predecessors (Koestler 1981: 394).

The spread of education, the printed book, and the influence of Renaissance learning, created a public interested in literature. For generations, the classics provided a common basis for European education, which unified the art of literature. Thus 'old' literature can be examined as a developing art - a history of aesthetic achievements and also a history of ideas. Hence the frame of the period creates a hole in time and assigns 'old' literature its place in history. Readers can look backwards and forwards along the ways tracing the rise and development of forms.

Literature also has an important place in the broader history of civilization, because the technology of writing bridges the gap between letter and litter, between that which drives a certain man to read or write certain books and that which makes him wonder whether he 'might as conveniently have dropped those books down a well' (Murnane 2005: 32). Although literature can be viewed as passive entertainment, it does, by its very nature, contribute to political, social, philosophical and cultural change. Like 'new' literatures, 'old' literature was once confined
within an institutional context, but even within such limitations, it is true to say that all literature is potentially transgressive and interacts with history. Besides, the historical frames readers adopt impact upon their perception of the text. By way of illustration, here is what Borges and Calvino have to say in this respect:

One literature differs from another, prior or posterior, less because of the text than because of the way it's read. (Borges 1985: 26)

If I read the "Odyssey" I read Homer's text, but I cannot forget all that the adventures of Ulysses have come to mean in the course of the centuries, and I cannot help wondering if these meanings were implicit in the text, or whether they are encrustations, or distortions or expansions. (Calvino 1989: 128)

The definition of 'literature' is unstable, subjective, and changes over time, due to the relativism of aesthetic judgment and the capricious nature of the literary institution. 'Old' literature is likely to be misread or misrepresented if judged by the current literary standards of the reader. Shakespeare's Measure for Measure was strongly criticized in the Victorian era for faults, which more accurately reflected Victorian values than the literary measure of the play, for instance. It is certain that the Elizabethan conception of tragedy differed from ours, so it is likely that perceptions of texts change over time. 'Old' literature is cultural memory. There is, however, no way of knowing for sure how culturally-specific the texts were when written, or how culturally-laden any reading is.

Life is only contained in one shape for a moment. Monuments and cities fade away like the people who built them... There was no history that could not be rewritten. (Winterson 1996: 133)

'Old' literature is enriched by interpretation, because literature is as much what people do to writing as what writing does to them. Books are always different each time they are read because 'every mapped-out journey contains another journey hidden within its lines' (Winterson 1996: 22).

Books are not absolutely dead things, but doe contain a potencies of life in them to be as active as that soule whose progeny they are; nay, they do preserve as in a viol the purest efficacie and extraction of that living intellect that bred them. I know they are as lively, and as vigorously productive, as those fabulous dragons' teeth; and being sown up and down, may chance to spring up armed men. (Milton 1944: 5)

As a text evolves through successive interpretations, the traditional role of the author as creator slowly wanes, the notion of intentionality wanes in the process of this ever-elusive search for meaning, this foraging and re-assembling of signifiers from the text. Post-structuralist theory
denies the previously fundamental assumption that literary meaning originates from the author. ‘To give a text an Author is to impose a limit', whereas without one the text becomes indeterminate, achieving reality in the imagination of the reader instead of the author's supposed intentions (Barthes 1993: 157). Hence the instability of the relationship between textual signifiers and their signifieds is acknowledged and used positively, not to undermine the possibility of consistent meaning, but to affirm the creativity inherent in the decoding process of reading.

Literary representation enters a complex negotiation with history - aware that naming things with words intimates the potential that those things might be otherwise. (Healy 1992: 24)

Thus 'old' literature is newly interpreted with each reading, undermining the negative connotation that 'old' literature is outdated, because texts can become relevant within any modern interpretative context. For 'a text is not a line of words releasing a single meaning, but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writing, none of them original, blend and clash. The text is a tissue of quotations' (Barthes 1993: 156). Indeed, even T.S. Eliot recognizes that every author has something to add to the matrix of material out of which future literature will emerge (Eliot 1953: 24). Moreover, in a literary institution that wills itself free of the monovalence of meaning, even apocryphal interpretations are validated by the fact of their own existence:

Books, everywhere, affect all other books. This is obvious: books inspire other books written in the future, and cite books written in the past. But the General Theory of [Library] Space suggests that, in that case, the contents of books as yet unwritten can be deduced from books now in existence. (Pratchett 1995: 19)

Clearly, the study of 'old' literature can impart a sense of participating both in the literary history, which stretches back to Homer and beyond, and also looms ahead into the future. The Romans and the Greeks respectively called poetry 'prophesying' and 'making' in their own languages (Sidney n.d.: 34). In Swift's Battle of the Books, Dryden claims Virgil as father, 'and by a large deduction of genealogies, made it plainly appear that they were nearly related' (Swift 1905: 38-39). After all, there are only a limited number of basic plots derived from basic patterns that recur throughout the ages. Canonical literature tends to echo archetypal experiences. Perhaps 'when eternity looks through the window of time', we can glimpse within a text the entire span of literature, from the Platonic form which fathered so many stories inscribed in our canonical lore to what remains the virtual texts of the future, whatever their forms might be (Koestler 1981: 357).

All said and done, in this age of fragmenting traditions and haphazard morality, perhaps it is appropriate to dissolve the bonds of time itself, releasing literature from constraints of meaning, history and generic identity. If 'old' literature is potentially new each and every time it is read, making the writing of old texts ubiquitous, 'there is no reason why we should not step out of one present and into another' (Winterson
1996: 90). There would hardly be anything new in this, except for some ethical footnotes, perhaps.

A historian accurately accounts Past, whereas a poet thrusts into the middle, recoursing to past and future. (Spenser 1932: 408).

But how can time be shared by any number of people when 'in a night 200,000 years can pass, time moving only in our minds?' (Winterson 1996: 132). Still, the words of authors long dead and mumified, sometimes anonymous, reach us across time, moving us as if the ink was still wet upon the scroll. The fate of literature is bound together with time and history, yet time, space and place become irrelevant to the journeys we embark on in our minds: 'all times can be inhabited, all places visited... The journey is not linear, it is always back and forth, denying the calendar, the wrinkles and lines of the body' (Winterson 1996: 80). Perhaps time itself is a false construct, albeit a necessary one, since our sanity depends upon it.

Binary though they are, all opposites are relative. Throughout history, reversals of values have therefore occurred. 'Old' is nothing more than a negative construction of a temporal concept in a world that refuses what was once valued for stability and meaningfulness, and is listed in the catalogue raisonné of ethics on the now obsolete page bearing the letter 'M' for morality. Other times, other urgencies. But is it not the case that literature supersedes history, as one of the ultimate signifiers in a universe literate in necessary layers of meanings? For literature, just as the art of speaking well, 'is the only weapon we have, in the descent into meaninglessness that is the inevitable accompaniment of the anti-ethical narcissism and asocial anomie' which appears to be our current predicament (Rutherford 2000: 209).

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