

Aula 6

LITERARY HISTORY AND CULTURAL SUPREMACY

META

Apresentar a importância da história da literatura para os estudos literários.

OBJETIVOS

At the end of this class, it is expected that the students:

- Understanding the way how literary history not only did a relevant service to the nation states, giving them the necessary data for the construction of their national identities, but also established the basis for the (re) conceptualization of literature, which came to be understood as the expression of the spirit of the peoples, as well as of their national cultures, and for its constitution as an object of study and teaching.

PRERREQUISITOS

Familiaridade com os períodos formativos da literatura inglesa;
Conceitos-chave da Teoria da Literatura e da história literária.

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INTRODUCTION

Literary history can be understood as a discipline of literary studies which acquired autonomy and consolidation at schools and universities with the decay of the studies of rhetoric and poetics, in the middle of the nineteenth century. Absorbing and appropriating some theoretical and methodological elements from those disciplines, as well as from modern philology, it not only did a relevant service to the nation states, giving them the necessary data for the construction of their national identities, but also established the basis for the (re)conceptualization of literature, which came to be understood as the expression of the spirit of the peoples, as well as of their national cultures, and for its constitution as an object of study and teaching.

Occupying, initially, a subsidiary place in the domains of Rhetoric and Poetics, especially in the secondary studies curriculum, literary history assumed an indisputable hegemony both in criticism and in the system of education, something represented, in Brazil, by the great quantity of history of Brazilian literature textbooks published since the second half of the nineteenth century, as well as by the celebrity of the authors who produced them (Oliveira, 1999).

Thus, if the study of literature, attached to that of the languages, was based on a series of exercises – reading, writing, spelling, dictation, translation, themes and composition – which had as objects fragments of classical texts, now it had to be justified by literary history, that is, by the study of foreign nations' literary production, which could raise the pride and respect in their peoples, contributing to the development of students' moral and patriotic background, as the nineteenth century priest, teacher and textbook author Fernandes Pinheiro says, in his *Resumo de Historia Litteraria* (“Summary of Literary history”), a book published in 1872 and designed especially for his classes at the Imperial Colégio de Pedro II, an institution which, besides bearing the name of our Emperor, was in many aspects under his personal care (Oliveira, 2008).

Once literary history is closely related to the teaching of literature, schools become the most important institutions in the process of construction of the literary canon, because they reinforce the establishment and fixation of certain literary works or authors as canonical, through literary history textbooks. In this perspective, Chartier (2000)

suggests a fertile field of investigation which intends to verify the processes through which, in different periods or epochs, certain authors or literary works kept their condition of canon and not others, in literary history textbooks. To such an investigation, it is necessary not only to take into account the typographical devices and the external agents in the pro-

cess of signification of texts, but also the internal agents, that is, the textual devices through which a literary work can be (re)read or (re)interpreted, despite its temporal distance or the author's or editor's purpose.

In the conclusion of Chervel's article "História das disciplinas escolares: reflexões sobre um campo de pesquisa" ("History of the school disciplines: reflections on a research field"), the author situates the issue among the effects caused by the penetration of school disciplines in the "social body", that is, in their intervention in the cultural history of society (Chervel, 1990). For the French author, although they have a functional aspect for the preparation of the acculturation of students, according to certain purposes, school disciplines, when considered in themselves, become cultural entities which transpose the walls of schools and penetrate society exerting a pressure on the culture of the time.

According to Chervel (1990), it is possible to analyze the interpenetration between school culture and literary activity. This is a topic which never called the attention of literary historians. The author illustrates the question with literary workd like *Easther* and *Athalie*: why are they the only plays which were maintained in the school syllabuses in France during throughout the nineteenth century? Because they were composed by Racine or because they were destined to school exploration? It seems this kind of question is much more involved with the history of the teaching of literature than with literary history.

The exceptions mentioned by the author are Hery Peyre, who, listing the most indispensable works to the writing of a literary history, emphasizes the "history of studies", in *L'Influence des Littératures Antiques sur la Littérature Française Moderne*, published in 1941, and François de Dainville, historian of the Jesuit's colleges, who, in his 1976's text "*La littérature française du XVIIIo siècle dans l'enseignement secondaire en France au XIX siècle: le Manuel de Noël et La Place, 1804-1862*", says that a serious literary history must be supported by a history of the teaching of literature (Chervel, 1990, p. 221).

Sometime later, dealing with the teaching of humanities, the same author, in partnership with Marie-Madeleine Compère, will associate the process of constitution of a canon of French authors – at the turning of the seventeenth to the eighteenth century, a period in which French, as a school discipline, begins its stairway to power – with the survival of the "classical humanities" in the French schools. As for the emergence of the "modern humanities", object of an intense pedagogical debate at the end of the nineteenth century, the authors say that they vindicated the same status of the classical ones, producing a "general culture" through the teaching of the languages and literatures. Such vindication consisted of substituting classical languages by modern ones, offering the students, instead of Homer, Virgil and Cicero, the new referential figures of Shakespeare, Dante and Cervantes (Chervel & Compère, 1999, p. 166).

In the case of English literature, its teaching, in Brazil, is intimately related to the publication and circulation, in the country, of the textbooks of history of English literature, or of history of universal literature which included, among their chapters, one dedicated to English literature, written by foreign and Brazilian authors/teachers, as well as to the institutionalization of its teaching, first in secondary education, in the nineteenth century, and then in higher education, when the first Brazilian universities – and their first English courses – were founded (Oliveira, 1999).

Thus, the teaching of literature, in general – at least in the Brazilian case –, as long as it legitimates the production or (re)edition of literary histories, has its structure conditioned by the standard of the books of literary history indicated – or adopted –, keeping the classical model marked by periodization and chronology, in spite of the multiplicity of approaches and theoretical, ideological and methodological tendencies.

This emphasis on the chronological approach can be easily seen in the teaching of English literature. In the programs and syllabuses of Brazilian universities, it is not hard to find out, by the content and bibliography of the courses, that the great majority of the graduation courses adopts a historical perspective, reproducing, this way, the official periodization and chronology of English literature, just like they were fixed by most of the literary history textbooks of this kind.

The Brazilian historiography of English literature

From 1872 to 1940, in Brazil, some English literature textbooks were published and directed to the Brazilian school public. These books, which I have called “the Brazilian historiography of English literature” (Oliveira, 1999) and which will be analyzed here from another perspective, are important because they can support an investigation of the way how a historical narrative of English literature, as well as the construction of its canon, exporting and selling an image of political and cultural supremacy to other countries, especially to the countries of the so called “third world”, works like an agency of legitimation and self-affirmation of its national identity.

According to Benedict Anderson (apud Hall, 2005, p. 51), national identity is an “imagined community”, once the differences among the nations consist of the different forms they are imagined. Thus, nation can be seen as narration, something which loses its origins in the myths of time (Bhabha, 2006, p. 1), becoming, more than a juridical and geopolitical delimitation, a “spiritual principle” of belonging to a certain nationality (Renan, 2006, p. 18).

Among the main representational strategies which are activated to build our common sense about that “spiritual principle” are the invention of tradition and the creation of a foundational myth through historical, political, literary and popular narratives (Hall, 2005, p. 52-56). In the case of the English language and literature, its transformation into popular culture

(Doyle, 1989), as well as its constitution as an academic discipline (Eagleton, 1996), responded to ideological and political projects very well devised in relation to the construction of its national identity in confrontation to the Other in the colonies, especially during the Victorian period, once “national selfhood in Britain had traditionally been forged in opposition to an Other overseas” (Boehmer, 1995, p. 32). Moreover, from a cultural point of view, after the fall of British economic hegemony, when English literature began to be treated as something serious among the scholars, the United States could have the power of popular music and film industry, but Britain would secure its label of “high culture” of canonical authors like Shakespeare and of the English language itself.

The rise of English literary history is sometimes associated with the decline of literary theory in England during the first decades of the nineteenth century. This decline, according to Wellek (1972, p. 94), was due to the – then – non-existence of a critical tradition in English Romanticism, in spite of Coleridge’s attempts. Following this argument, this would be the reason why, until the end of the nineteenth century, no coherent and original literary history was produced in England.

From this perspective, Taine’s *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* (1863-64) can be considered not only the first complete panorama of English literature, once the other histories of English literature dealt with a specific literary genre, like poetry or drama, but also as one of the works, together with Samuel Johnson’s *The Lives of the English Poets* (1779-1781) and Henry Morley’s *English Writers* (1864), which are responsible for the establishment and fixation of the English literary canon.

Even so, the intimate relation between the production of these first literary histories and the construction of English national identity can be shown in Thomas Warton’s *History of English Poetry* (1774-81), who wanted to record faithfully the spirit of the epochs and transmit to posterity the authentic portrait of life, or in Henry Morley’s preface to *English Writers* (1864), in which he conceives literature as a “national biography” or the “history of the English spirit” (Wellek & Warren, 1962, p. 315).

The current periodization of English literature, that is, the way it is presented in most of English literature textbooks, although the various origins of its most usual labels, such as “Romanticism”, “Renaissance”, “Classicism”, “Modernism”, etc., still keep residual elements of the traditional criterion of classification according to the reigns of the English kings and queens, as the terms “Elizabethan”, “Jacobean” or “Victorian” can attest. Nowadays, however, these labels acquired new meanings, and they just symbolize the chronological space comprehended by the ascension to the throne and death of a monarch.

The Victorian Age, specifically, takes place the moment which it is believed Britain had a destiny to rule the world. The study of literature, by

this time, was held as a means of inculcating a sense of imperial loyalty in the colonized. As Boehmer (1995, p. 31) says, Victorian high imperialism can be distinguished by its geographic magnitude, the institutionalization of colonial power and the formalization of imperialist ideologies: “the new Empire invited from its propagandists and poets comparison with Imperial Rome”.

The study of English language and literature, in turn, became a powerful instrument for the cause of nationalism. Being a political and cultural phenomenon, the development of English studies and their institutionalization as an academic discipline, with its inclusion in the syllabuses of Oxford and Cambridge, was an attempt to replace the Classics at the heart of the nineteenth-century humanistic studies, as we have seen. This happened to all the modern languages in Europe, but the case of English is a very notable one because of its involvement with the development of the nineteenth century forms of imperialism. That’s why the study of English and the growth of the British Empire, according to Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin (1989), proceeded from a single ideological climate and that the development of the one is intrinsically bound up with the development of the other.

In the first Brazilian textbook of History of Universal Literature – that is, textbooks in which all the Western and some Eastern literatures are studied –, Fernandes Pinheiro’s *Resumo de História Literária* (“Summary of Literary History”), published in 1872, produced especially to respond to a curriculum change of the Imperial Colégio de Pedro II, regulated by a decree published in 1870, the history of English literature is counted from its “origins” to the Victorian period, contemporary to the author, and Thomas Carlyle is the last English writer mentioned.

The study of the different epochs is divided by genres – lyrical poetry, dramatic poetry, “didactic poetry”, “history”, “literary criticism”, “philosophy”, etc. It is interesting to notice that the study of English literature is justified by its “progress in commerce and industry”, as well as by the propagation of the English language “in all the harbors of the globe” and the greatness of the English authors (Pinheiro, p. 246).

Pinheiro doesn’t hide his sources – something very common in textbooks of the kind. In the case of English literature, his references indicate his up to date knowledge about the matter: *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* (1863-64), by Hippolyte Taine, and *Études de Littérature Ancienne et Étrangère* (1857), by Abel François Villemain. In the topic dedicated to the Elizabethan period, we can notice the vigor of the ideas borrowed from Taine, once literature is defined as a product of the “race”, “milieu” and “historical moment”. Besides, the expression used by the French literary historian is reproduced by Pinheiro to designate the period: “renaissance of the Saxon genius” (Pinheiro, 1872, p. 252).

In *Lições de Literatura* (“Lessons of Literature”), textbook published by

Leopoldo de Freitas in 1909, seven pages are dedicated to English literature. Five in Lesson VIII, where a brief panorama of the period of Queen Elizabeth is traced, and two in Lesson X, which deals with Romanticism. The Elizabethan Age occupies almost all the space available to English literature and it is characterized by the splendor of English history and by remarkable figures in all the areas of human knowledge (Freitas, 1909, p. 47).

The expression “renaissance of the Saxon genius” is also reproduced by Oscar Przewodowski, in his textbook *Origens da Língua Inglesa – sua literatura* (“Origins of the English language: its literature”), published in 1920. Here, English literature is studied since Beowulf until the Victorian period, when some philosophers and scientists are mentioned (Przewodowski, 1920, p. 104).

In *Literaturas Estrangeiras* (“Foreign Literatures”), published in 1931 by the editor Frei Theodoro Durant, the study of English literature consists of a list of biobibliographical notes about the main English authors of each period, preceded by a historical introduction, where the tainean factors of race, milieu and historical moment are intermingled with short paragraphs written by famous literary critics. The ones which refer to English literature are written by Agripino Grieco, who says that, although England is one of the most practical and cold nations in the world, it could produce many maniac authors like Swift, Defoe and Sterne (FTD, 1931, p. 547).

In *História Universal da Literatura* (“Universal History of Literature”), written by Estevão Cruz and published in 1936, the study of English literature is preceded by an analysis of its “static elements”: race and language. His narrative, which goes from “the first literary manifestations” to contemporary literature, follows the biobibliographical model and is divided into three topics dedicated to the main authors: biography, bibliography and criticism. The “minor” writers are just mentioned, when they don’t deserve a brief note. The Elizabethan Age and Shakespeare are given great remark and are held as the heyday of English history and literature, despite the threatens, very common at the time, of Bacon’s hypothesis (Cruz, 1836, p. 556).

Taine is quoted textually in A. Velloso Rebello’s *Literaturas Estrangeiras* (“Foreign Literatures”), also published in 1936. The French literary historian is quoted to give a biographical note about Edmund Spenser, “the greatest writer” of the Elizabethan Age, the one who was given a title of Poet Laureate by the Queen because of his great fantasy epic, *The Faerie Queene* (1590), dedicated to Elizabeth.

English Literature, published in 1937 and written by Melissa Stodart Hull e Machado da Silva, is the first textbook especially dedicated to English literature produced in Brazil and written in English. The book is divided into three parts: “historical outline” of English and North American literatures; “biographies, representative extracts and commentaries” of the

main English and North American writers, from Chaucer to H.G. Wells and from Washington Irving to Sinclair Lewis; “chronological tables”, displaying the “sovereigns of England”; a “historical chronology” and a “list of English writers” and of “American authors”, not to mention the chart about “contemporary literature” and the chronological series of excerpts of many authors entitled “what some of his countrymen and others thought of Shakespeare”. At the end of the book, there’s a “literary map of England”, including Scottish and Irish authors. Although the authors of the book do not indicate their theoretical or historiographical sources, some Romantic and Naturalistic elements emerge in their discourse:

Literature grows out of life. In its turn it reveals life. It has been called “a criticism of life” and “the interpretation of life”. It interprets to the reader not only the individuality of the writer, but the spirit of the age, the characteristics of the race, the forms of nationality; and if it is great literature, it is a wider revelation of our common and fundamental humanity, transcending all limits of nation, race, epoch or personality (Hull e Silva, 1946, p. 5).

The history of English literature is narrated since the Age of Chaucer. The Age of Shakespeare, a period of expansion and enthusiasm, occupies six pages of the historical sketch of English literature. The narrative of the book, as the names of the chapters suggest, is based on the most representative authors of each period. The “minor poets”, who are just mentioned, have short biographical sketches at the second part of the book. The adjectives used to describe the main English authors resemble England’s economic and cultural supremacy, once they are held as the “founders” or the “greatest” of many literary genres.

In 1940, the first edition of Manuel Bandeira’s *Noções de História das Literaturas* (“Notions of History of Literatures”) was published. The book was written during the time the famous modernist poet was teaching literature at Colégio Pedro II. Curiously enough, in the introductory part of the book, our poet’s discourse about literature follows Taine’s lessons, for his concept of literature is based on the theory according to which literature is the result of the influences of race, milieu and historical moment (Bandeira, 1940, p. xv).

The twenty-six pages dedicated to English literature can be considered a very well written biobibliographical summary of the main English authors, from “the origins” to Virginia Woolf. The critical comments, as Bandeira calls the reader’s attention, in the beginning of the book, are just simplified reproductions of the masters of English literary history, like Taine himself.

CONCLUSION

As we can easily see, the preponderance of Taine's theory in most of the English literature textbooks produced and published in Brazil from 1872 to 1940 show how important role a category such as race can play in the maintenance of the idea of English cultural supremacy. As Boehmer (1995, p. 31) says, the formalization of imperialist ideologies during the Victorian period, especially those related to race, motivated the spread of Social Darwinist thought, making the English people believe, with the help of literary historians, that they were racially superior to any other people in the world. Thus British imperialist nationalism provoked race antipathies which worked, within the country, as strategic solidarities in opposition to the Other, that is, the weaker races. No wonder the fear they had of "going native", or "sinking racially", once miscegenation meant, for the most part, degeneration or degradation.

The force of such categories, which were used almost naturally in the discourse of literary historians and critics, is represented by their persistence in the way English literature is studied, especially in countries of the so called "third world", like Brazil. Their residual elements can be seen when the Brazilian literary historians/teachers of literature describes the Elizabethan Age, the golden age of English drama and of Western Renaissance, the most consistent creation of English literary history. A period of economic growth and imperialist expansion, it is also the scenery of elegant revelries in the court and of the popular performance of Shakespeare's plays, what makes it the favorite literary period of English literature.

Thus, it is not a surprise that Taine's *Histoire de la Littérature Anglaise* (1863-64), which served as a model also to the English literary historians, was the main reference of the Brazilian textbooks of English literature from 1872 to 1940, from a theoretical and formal point of view. His method, that is, the way he analyzed the authors and works of English literature, and even some of his expressions, were reproduced unconsciously by some Brazilian literary historians/teachers of literature.



SUMMARY

Literary history can be understood as a discipline of literary studies which acquired autonomy and consolidated at schools and in the universities with the decay of the studies of Rhetoric and Poetics, in the middle of the nineteenth century. Absorbing and appropriating some theoretical and methodological elements from those disciplines, as well as from modern

Philology, in its romantic enterprise of rescuing lost civilizations, it not only did a relevant service to the nation states, giving them the necessary data for the construction of their national identities, but also established the basis for the (re)conceptualization of literature, which came to be understood as the expression of the spirit of the peoples, as well as of their national cultures, and for its constitution as an object of study and teaching. This paper is related to the Research Group “History of the teaching of languages in Brazil” (UFS/CNPq), which intends to investigate the process of institutionalization of the teaching of languages and their respective literatures, as well as of their configuration as a school and academic discipline, trying to delineate its pedagogical, political and cultural purposes in the education system of the country. Its objective is to investigate the way how the institutionalization of English literary history became a privileged instrument in the process of affirmation of the national identity and cultural supremacy of the English people, analyzing the case of some textbooks of English literature produced or published in Brazil from 1872 to 1940.



ACTIVITY

Explain with your own word, in English, the importance of literary history to literary studies in justo ne paragraph.

Esta atividade tem por finalidade principal fazer você construa uma síntese dos principais conteúdos desta segunda Aula, de modo a compreender criticamente o modo como a história da literatura serviu de base para os estudos literários.



NEXT CLASS

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF THE TEACHING OF MODERN LANGUAGES IN BRAZIL

REFERENCE

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