

Literature of the Future and the Future of Literature

Mounir Ben Zid^{[a],*}

^[a]Dr., English Language and Literature Department, Sultan Qaboos University, Muscat, Oman.

*Corresponding author.

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Abstract

With the advent of technology, the triumph of immediacy, and the emergence of an environment of epistemic humility, a consensus has grown in some literary and academic quarters that literature is either dead, at death's door, or at best in intensive care. This paper argues that this kind of diagnosis and autopsy of the discipline is not due to the irrelevance of the old forms of literature in today's world, but rather to a failure of nerve and imagination in the face of immediacy and market temptation. The different scenarios and attempts to digitize the printed book through ebooks and "biterature" result in the literature of the future rather than the future of literature; the value of literature lies in its ability to challenge, rather than reinforce, our world assumptions. My argument is that for literature to be healthy and continue to thrive in today's environment, it should not be chameleon-like and forced to adjust its values to the tailored needs of the information and immediacy age or retreat before the forces of consumer vacillation. Instead, it should cling to its fundamental value of taking the lesser travelled path, no matter how maladapted, and writers and scholars should take remedial action against literature's unhealthy environment and habitat.

Key words: Literature; Future; Crisis; Biterature; Raison d'être

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INTRODUCTION

Literature has no doubt undergone significant change due to widespread use of technology like the internet, computers, and an ever-increasing market of mobile devices. The publishing industry has been panicking while books are either going out of business or being converted to digital formats.

There exists a vague consensus that literature is either dead or dying. Enemies of literature, in fact, have often been humiliating, backbiting, bickering and laughing at the fragile status of literature in several ways. In the past few years, a torrent of books such as *The Death of Literature* (Kernan, 1990), *Literature Lost* (Ellis, 1997), *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy* (Bauerlein, 1997), and *The Rise and Fall of English* (Sholes, 1998) show pessimistic responses towards the crisis of literature, suggesting that no more skirmishes in the war are left to fight. Such books proclaim the death of literature, demonstrating how literature has passed through a crisis of confidence and a radical questioning of its values, its importance to humanity, and its usefulness to society. This rhetoric belies the premise that the war is over and that the world of the literati is only left with a chant of lamentation for the death of literature. One can, in fact, discern the new desperate feeling in Kernan's elegiac *The Death of Literature* (1990) which initiated the *in memorium* theme.

Acting as the mortician at the death of literature, Alvin B. Kernan (1990) argues that literature "has in the past thirty years or so passed through a time of radical disturbances that turned the institution and its primary values topsy-turvy" (p.1). Announcing the death of literature in a similar vein to Nietzsche's the death of God, Kernan further points out that "the traditional romantic and modernist literary values have been completely reversed" and that "the author whose creative imagination had been said to be the source of literature, was declared dead" (p.2). What were once the masterpieces of "serious"

literature have ceased to be “plausible or useful under the pressures of new circumstances in the late twentieth century” (p.10), and have “by now only a coterie, and almost no presence in the world outside university literature departments” (p.3).

Bergonzi (1990) captures a similarly desperate mood by conceding that the sky has fallen on literature. He goes so far as to state, “the history of the discipline does not reveal an Eden in which all are in harmony” and that its study was a response to a world deeply corrupted where “the old values persisted in one important area: great literature, or a certain canon of it” (p.50).

Adopting a skeptical view of the power of literature, Gerald Graff also argues that the various oppositions to literature were present from the start and have often denied that “literature is to be valued for telling us truths about life and as an aid to culture” (p.61). Such a despairing, apocalyptic, and dyspeptic mood can be found in Sir Walter Raleigh’s apocalyptic words:

God forgives us all! If I am accused on judgment day of teaching literature, I shall plead that I never believed in it and that I maintained a wife and children. (Letter to George Gordon, January 11, 1921, Oxford University Press, as cited in Kernan, 1990, p.1)

On the same obituary note, Gore Vidal diagnosed the fall of literature and that one of its genres, the novel, was already in its death throes:

We shall go on for quite a long time talking of books and writing books, pretending all the while not to notice that the church is empty and the parishioners have gone elsewhere to attend other gods. (as cited in Decurtis, 1992, p.273)

Grounding his belief on a social view of literature, Kernan also observes that some of the agents contributing to literature’s demise in the age of information is that, as a socially constructed category, literature is fragile and vulnerable. Another reason for the deterioration of literature is the professionalization of what should be a vocation and the fact that literature has also failed to become deeply inscribed within society like other institutions. Indeed it has resisted, ridiculed, and opposed the social, political, and moral values of the surrounding society, instead of doing its primary duty as a social institution, which is to legitimize them. Refusing to play an important social role and avoiding awareness of the social setting and worldly conditions,

Poetry and literature have always preferred to take themselves more in metaphysical than in sociological terms—perhaps in an attempt to conceal their persistent social marginality. (Kernan, 1990, p. 8)

One further reason for Kernan’s autopsy of literature is that the discipline committed a partial suicide and then experienced a felonious assault from an academic profession. Kernan also contends that the death of literature is an accident—that literature was crashed within the intellectual, political, technological and social

change that occurred in America during the 1970s. Its demise should not be understood as “a culpable act but as part of a broad cultural change” (Ibid., p.209).

Kernan also relates the death of literature to the deplorable status of literary criticism which, according to Mark Bauerlein, lacks systematicity or discipline; it cannot survive the violation of its boundaries or accommodate the diverse and unique nature of literature, and which “has turned on literature and deconstruction its basic principles” (Ibid., p.3). As Kernan puts it: “Criticism, which was once the second servant of literature, has declared its independence and insisted that it too is literature” (1990, p.2).

Other scholars maintain that the death of literature spawns from a position of relatively bad-faith, which employs very restrictive criteria for what literature is and should be, thus making it more homogenized and uninteresting. At the heart of such doom-and-gloom pessimism about the future of literature is the belief that poets lack ambition, too timid to dare hope that their words can change the world.

Many other academics attribute the deterioration of the status of literature to its fragility and inability to define itself or provide its own justification. In other words, literature lacks a theoretical basis and a systematic organization or analysis of its parts that would make it real and meaningful in the larger social world and prepare it to withstand social activists and skeptical theorists’ attacks directed at it.

Another important factor contributing to the deterioration of literature, Kernan (1990) observes, is the current dominance of electronic media and the shift from a print to an electronic culture in which television and other forms of electronic communication have replaced the printed book. The boom of computers and television have affected the status of literature through “a transition from a print to an electronic culture” (p.127). In *The Imaginary Library: An Essay on Literature and Society*, Kernan similarly pointed out that starting from the 1960s literature was ceasing to be meaningful and “shared a crisis of confidence in some of its most fundamental values” (2014, p.25).

In a similar vein, Graham Swift, author of *Last Orders*, which won the Booker Prize in 1996, also points out that e-readers like the Kindle are threatening the future of literature and that the growing popularity of such devices have led to new writers receiving lower royalties than hard and paperback books. Kernan eloquently sums up the main point in the following lines:

Television and other forms of electronic communication have increasingly replaced the printed book, especially its idealized form, literature, as a more attractive and authoritative source of knowledge. (1990, p.3)

The crisis of literature is also one of habitat, the fact that the morphology of old literature belongs to a far

different social and technological environment than our own and is, with its brachiating arms, striving to reach for heights it can no longer climb. The age of information—with the internet, the smart phone, and satellite and cable television—is witnessing a semantic and social habitat destruction.

More indicative of the reasons for the diminished stature of literature are the evolution of the romantic and modern conception of the author, the role of dictionaries in the construction of language, the relationship between literature and the law, and the Marxist, feminist, and deconstructionist assaults on the integrity of literature, the creativity of authors, and superiority of literature to criticism. Instead of serving literature, literary critics instead wrote about it to earn a living and impose their social status and thus demonstrate “the meanness and emptiness of books and poems that had long been read and taught as the highest achievements of the human spirit” (Kernan, 1990, p.70).

If literature has died, Allan Bloom adds, it is also due to the views of German philosophers like Nietzsche, which have led education “away from the classic texts and their Socratic search for the good and the true” (Bloom, 1975, as cited in Kernan, 1990, p.4).

The demise of literature is also caused by the breakdown of literary education and abandoning “the traditional intellectual qualities [and] the great books and their quest for the best course of belief or action” represented by the classics of literature (Kernan, 1990, p.4).

In order to argue for a posture on the current ‘crisis’ of literature, three issues must be addressed: First, the etymology of the term crisis. Second, what is meant by the crisis of literature and in what sense is literature dead? And if we concede that literature is dead, who killed it?

In classical Greek, the term ‘crisis’ created a broad spectrum of meanings and a multi-layered and metaphorical flexibility; it has always demarcated different meanings and imposed decisions and choices between stark alternatives—salvation or damnation, life or death. In the case of literature as a case of illness, crisis refers both to the observable condition and to the judgment about the course of an illness. In other words, crisis assumes a double meaning status and objective condition or “alarming situation”, “a decisive point in time” (Koselleck, 2006, p.365), a decision or subjective critique of the condition and a healing act through the matter of the illness is driven out of the body. Based on these lexical findings, this paper defines crisis not only as a critical alarming situation or harsh and non-negotiable alternatives, but also as a phase in a progressive process, a change and transition from one condition to another and a subjective decision.

Refuting Kernan’s concept of literature as a social institution and the apocalyptic vision of the term “crisis” as damnation and death, the study argues for a normative role of literature. It considers Kernan’s erratic sarcasm,

cynicism, and dissatisfaction as symptoms of defeatism, which is a deplorable quality. In contrast to the reigning sociological view of literature, the present study defines it as normative, i.e., prescribing subjective norms and standards and expressing value judgment as contrasted with stating real facts about literature.

1. LITERATURE OF THE FUTURE

Assuming that the end of the printed book heralds the demise of literature, mainstream scholars have imagined myriad scenarios for the future of literature. Many of them, in fact, assume that the future of literature lies in ebooks and new electronic reading devices. Gomez (2008) observes that “while print is not yet dead, it is undoubtedly sickening [and] that books are indeed on the way out, while screens keep inching their way in” (p.13). In the same lines, Gomez also contends that printed books are doomed to extinction and imagines a future in which printed books are reduced to a technological minority. Such negativist vision for the future of printed books has led to the positioning of ebooks as the principal means for delivering all forms of literary works.

With the decline of the printed press and a bookless future, Thompson (2005) declares ebooks and other forms of electronic dissemination and digital printing have taken over as “a serious alternative to the traditional offset presses” (p.421).

Moreover, two other e-book ventures have helped to digitize part of the printed book collections of major research libraries, thus making millions of books available to anyone with an internet connection. One of the means of digitizing printed books and thus announcing a new shape for literature’s future is Kindle, a portable e-reader whose purpose is to bring books “the last bastion of analog” into the digital realm (Bezos, as cited in Alef, 2011, p.10). Thanks to Kindle, as Jeff Bezos observes,

readers should be able to read any book in any language that’s ever been printed, whether it’s in print or out of print [and] should be able to buy and get that book downloaded to their kindle in less than 60 seconds. (as cited in Striphos, 2009, p.20)

Another means of digitizing the printed book as an integral part of the foreseeable future of literature is self-published e-books through the BoomWriter, a free service allowing teachers and students to publish books and be acknowledged as authors, and through which readers can buy copies of the bound paperback through the BoomWriter website.

With computers acquiring an ability to function linguistically and readers losing the ability to read an entire page of text, biterature (nonhuman literature) has also emerged as a new species of future literature. As Swirski boldly assumes in *From Literature to Biterature* (2013), computhors (computer authors) will become capable of creating sophisticated works of literature

consisting of extremely short stories, quotes and thoughts. Speculating on the future of literature in an interview with *Critical Marging*, Swirski claims that “at a certain point in the already foreseeable future, computers will be able to create works of literature in and of themselves” (as cited in Osadnik, 2014, p.2). Announcing the possible transition from human to machine authorship, he also adds that if his scenario is correct, “literature, as written by computer authors or computhors will be a manifestation of the beginning of the end of the cultural world as we know it” (as cited in Osadnik, 2014, p.2). In his imagined future, Swirski (2013) foresees that human authors will be replaced by computhors, storytelling robot sonneteers, poetry will be written by algorithms, and computhors will write novels and sonnets not to evoke love but rather to describe things such as antivirus software.

2. THE FUTURE OF LITERATURE

Contrary to these different scenarios of doom, these death knells do not represent the future of literature. Rather this paper stands on the statement that literature “ain’t dead” (Schwartz, 1999) and that “the most obvious step that could be taken to reverse or halt the deteriorating status of literature is “to stop the mechanism that continues to make the situation worse day by day: affirmative action” (Schwartz, 1999, p.226).

In an attempt to reverse the deterioration of literature, decrease its negative reputation, and revitalize the discipline, Nathan Hollier (2007) argues that stopping the autopsy of literature needs a positive common move and self-vaccination against negativity and short-sightedness. What is needed to save literature, Hollier continues, is “a sort of meta genre, the death of the death of literature genre,” which puts an end to such negativity and pushes people away “from taking the death of literature genre and the decline of the literary paradigm seriously” (p.11).

It would certainly be a mistake to view literature as belonging to an autonomous and elevated sphere of human life or to perceive it as having an existence apart from all the requirements of modern society. However, this in no way amounts to saying that literature is dependent or cannot exist without them. Doubtless, literature, like God, does not really die; only our own conceptions about it change.

This paper contends, therefore, that the future of literature is not in the scholars and critics’ concession and acceptance of the idea that it cannot exist but as a “social reality” or in claiming a place of some usefulness for society as a whole (Kernan, 1990). If literature is to play a key role in years to come, it should, on the contrary, reclaim its lost status and values, regain positivity, and restore its *raison d’être*, which is to bite the hand that feeds it.

Antithetical to Kernan’s social view of literature, literature’s authentic mode of existence is not as a social institution. Rather, its primary mission is to shake things

up and challenge the status quo—not reinforce our view of reality and our background assumptions. If literature reinforces a given society’s assumptions and norms, then literature will cease to exist turning instead to grovel propaganda. Kernan’s quandary, in fact, is not only that he views literature as a “floating and changing social reality” (Kernan, 1990, p. 191), or that he characterizes the assault on literature as a grab for power, but that he finds “few things stranger than the violence and even hatred with which the old literature was deconstructed by those who earn their living teaching and writing about it” (Ibid., p.70).

The real remedy for the dilemma on the future of literature is not merely in showing a positivist attitude or expressing a passive feeling of nostalgia for a better time, but rather in supporting the principle that literature takes precedence over all other values of a society. What is needed is a conception of literature that continues to resist the social norms and the new ethos of post-industrialism. The battle to save literature will be won by reaffirming its *raison d’être*, reclaiming its lost values, and “taking a stand for the power and truth of the literary experience, even with its connection to the human soul” (Iannone, 1992, p. 7).

CONCLUSION

The future of literature lies in creating a reality of its own, a reality that challenges and attacks people’s infatuation with immediacy and consumer idiotism, whose truth “consists in its consistent inconsistency” (Mack, 2014, p.11). Literature’s future mission and *raison d’être* is not to serve the established social order and its values, but rather to avoid a mode of thinking that reduces life to mere calculation and cold logic. Literature’s future role is, in fact, at odds with “the new world of money, cities, factories, and machines” (Kernan, 1990, p.16). Privileged by literature’s beauty and style, novelists and poets should set themselves free from the materialistic values of a digitalized society and strive to write a book “about nothing, a book dependent on nothing external, which would be held together by the strength of its style ... a work of art which speaks for beauty, for sweetness and light, or for a disinterested art for art’s sake” (Flaubert, 1954, as cited in Kernan, 1990, pp.21-22).

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