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LIBRO RESEÑADO

Jesús G. MAESTRO

The Academy versus Babel.

*Fundamental Principles of Philosophical Materialism
as Contemporary Literary Theory,*

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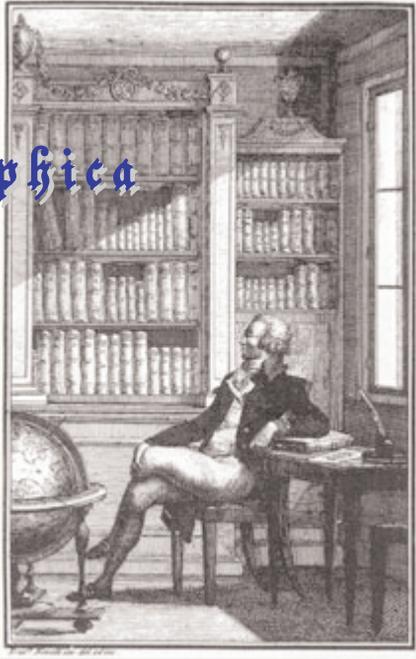
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// Interpreting from the already known is not interpreting, but falling into tautologies and into the doxographical recital of clichés and topics". (Maestro, 2008: 9) This first warning already anticipates the whole book's purpose, that of revolving against all the literary modes that are poisoning our age and distorting our way of both interpreting and understanding Literature. *The Academy versus Babel* constitutes the starting point of a series of books dedicated to exposing in a clear-cut manner the building principles of Philosophical Materialism in a most corrosive way so as to awake the consciousness that Post Modernism has put to sleep.

Beware those who might think that they confront a genteel bedtime book, intended for people who consider all the answers to be right. This is a book designed to strip the founding principles of most contemporary theories and leave them defenceless against our judgement. Basically, it is a book devoted to proving how, where all contemporary theories fail to explain the whole set of past and present

-Isms, Philosophical Materialism succeeds in agglutinating them under its premises and exposing their lights and shadows coherently and consistently.

Philosophical Materialism aims at interpreting literary materials not from ideology, but from a rational and scientific Theory of Literature that pays attention to the whole set of dimensions which articulate those very materials. As a mode of interpretation, Philosophical Materialism (from here onwards, PM) finds a series of obstacles when applied to modern literary criticism. Taking into account the context of Contemporary Literary Theory, especially Postmodernism, one is prone to find clashing positions that seem difficult to reconcile and that we will be exposed in the following lines. The goal will be that of showing how PM as a literary theory can be characterized as a construct in which a literary fact is included and subsequently integrated within a definite context, which, at the same time, evolves and creates new references towards other literary facts. This universality of PM is precisely what makes it a superior system of interpretation as opposed to other sets of interpretation which are too much focused on one single aspect of literature thus falling into the trap of subjectivity.

In order to interpret a literary text we need to take into account certain criteria. PM stems from the principle that everything is based on Reason and any thing that cannot be explained by it is therefore erroneous. Postmodernism ignores this idea and focuses in specific formal aspects, ideals or feelings. Consequently, and, given this freedom of movement, almost any interpretation of a text is acceptable for a Modernist. Ambiguity is accepted so as to avoid radicalisms, truth is no longer absolute. But we need to bear in mind that a theory should not be a politically correct or incorrect exhibitor. It needs to be more than that.

In sharp opposition to the post modern acritical acceptance of forms lacking content and theories having no referent at all, PM relies on Rationalism as the means of creation, communication and interpreting of ideas. In clear contrast to contemporary theories, irrational, idealistic and dogmatic, PM endorses a literary theory based upon the gnoseological opposition matter/form and whose objects of interpretation are the literary materials.

Following the fundamental postulates exposed in *The Academy versus Babel*, we may conclude that there are four modes of interpretation that can still be considered as effective in the XXI century:

The first of these is Philology, which is seen by PM as a rather teachable and transmittable discipline but irremediably outmoded, dying, having turned more into a sort of scholastics of literature than in a consistent discipline. The second mode of interpretation analysed by PM is the impressionist or mundane criticism of literary works, which unavoidably offers a psychologizing interpretation of such works, therefore lacking any scientific knowledge. At this point, PM is especially critical of Deconstruction, seeing it as the synthesis of modern cult to Ideology, subsequently disregarding the whole complex relationship existing among the literary materials as an interrelated continuum. What is more, PM sees these impressionist criticisms as a menace. Considering that the modern theories produce their interpretation taking into account certain values (such as Good, Evil, Democracy or Freedom) which prioritise personal experience in detriment of scientifically regulated knowledge, knowledge and interpretation are no longer universal but become adjusted to the interpreter's background. And that leads us to the third mode of interpretation, consisting in a group of what PM has called "The Interpreter's Ideologies leaked into literature", that is, the series of postmodern literary theories assumed as such by the majority of scholars but which instead work pretty much like ideological discourses, whose procedures are, again, not scientific but clearly sophistic. Therefore, it is unacceptable for PM to consider them "theories" because they are mainly used to justify the transductor's ideological positioning in the world.

The fourth and definite mode of interpretation is no other than Philosophical Materialism itself. Having five milestones—Rationalism, Criticism, Dialectics, Science and *Symploké*—it presents a logical explanation which is coherent to the doctrinal corpus to which the above mentioned postulates belong. PM establishes that, within the context of literary interpretation, those ideas which surpass reason cannot be accepted, since it is impossible to find the answer to something that cannot be explained in scientific terms. Therefore, all the theological and mystical interpretations of literary works appear as unsatisfactory because they do not provide us with information regarding the work itself, but the subjects who are interpreting it for us. This is the diverging point between Postmodernism and PM: the former accepts any literary interpretation disregarding the criteria to be followed; the latter considers unacceptable any interpretation located outside the limits of Reason.

In order to seriously define a text we do need to take into account the three different axes of the anthropological space because literature

is, after all, a human construction: first we have the radial axis, the one which analyses the connections between human beings and nature; then it comes the circular axis, that deals with the relationships among human beings, and finally we have the angular axis, the one which considers the connections between human beings and animals. Everything that causes a suspension of judgement is considered irrational, thus metaphysics and the supernatural are inadmissible in any way. Rational criticism disappears at the very same moment when a certain concept is imposed rather than analysed, that moment when reality is sold to the best offer, thus acquiring a sectarian quality. In close relation to this, PM discriminates the “I” from the “collective”, introducing the terms “morals” and “ethics”; “morals” being the closest to the Postmodern “I”, though defined as the set of rules directed to the preservation of a certain group’s cohesion. Normally, such a group tends to be a guild-prone one and quite apart from the notion of “ethics”, that is, all that which is directed to the preservation of humankind’s life and welfare.

Labelling Postmodern theories as doxographical and ideological, PM constitutes a literary criticism which must be necessarily scientific and dialectic. So as to achieve this, any criticism must be based on the three fundamental principles of matter, form and truth, i.e., it must follow a materialistic gnoseology. Such gnoseology attempts to determine the existing relationship between literary materials and the theories, forms and theorems that study these materials, endowing the reader with the means to interpret the truth in them. When operating within the gnoseological bearings of matter, form and truth, materialistic gnoseology constitutes what has been called the “Theory of the Categorical Closure” (Bueno, *Teoría del Cierre Categorical*, Oviedo, Pentalfa, 1992). Such theory looks for the conformation of a certain science from the links that relate such science to its own contents of truth, embodied in the unitary relationships between its parts. These parts form an immanent or inherent whole, which effectively stems from the synthetic unity of every one of its material parts.

Thanks to this theory, literature becomes much more than a mere physical entity, as many Formalisms have sought to prove, or a psychologising tool to preach the masses and create the Modern Gods of the Female or the Postcolonial, among many others. Literature, framed within the gnoseological space provided by the Theory of the Categorical Closure becomes the field of study of Literary Theory; but since explaining this in depth is a highly complex task, here it will be

only hinted at, being further developed and explained by the author in the book *Los Venenos de la Literatura. Idea y Concepto de la Literatura desde el Materialismo Filosófico* (Vigo, Editorial Academia del Hispanismo, 2007). Even at risk of sounding redundant, it might be worth remembering that PM cannot accept the global ideologies and –isms because they constitute a clear outrage to reason and dialectics as understood by PM, the end of free confrontation of ideas and points of view. All contemporary theories by definition are highly intolerant with discerning points of view, be it either due to the knowledge of being weaker than other well-established theories, or to the lack of scientific basis of their postulates, which cannot abide open questioning.

When talking about dialectics and PM, it is worth highlighting that PM uses dialectics in the Platonic sense. What is more, for PM dialectics is based upon the principle of symploké, and does not rely on the principle of the “multilateralism of relationships” taking part in any process, something from which a number of schools of thought have stemmed. This conception of dialectics subordinates dialectics to the “totality”, as authors like Lukács and Goldmann have done. PM does not endorse either the conception of dialectics as a structure of negative feed-back that defines a series of systems called “dialectic systems” because it considers such a conception a reduction of the tridimensional nature of dialectics. Once the meaning of dialectics as employed by PM has been clarified, we can begin to explain the dialectics of symploké, probably the most complex principle exposed in the book, and the one which irremediably divorces PM from the whole set of contemporary literary theories.

Maestro defines symploké as the ternary and rational combination of ideas that prevents the dissociation of the material reality and any kind of interpretation framed outside the margins imposed by Reason. Accordingly, the dialectics of symploké tries to explain every position that could appear as an alternative to Reason. Let us not be misled by this, PM’s chief purpose is not to deconstruct Reason itself, but to deconstruct the supposedly rationalist critical or scientific postulates of the opposed school of thought, hence exposing its ideological sophisms, acritical doxography and moral incompatibilities. So we could say that PM as a literary theory does not emerge as an alternative among other alternatives, but as THE alternative opposed to the rest of existing alternatives. And its principal means to do so is through the dialectics of the symploké, PM’s backbone together with the above mentioned Theory of the Categorical Closure. If we were to describe the

situation between Postmodernism and PM in a short sentence, we would say that it represents the struggle of Monism against *symploké*: Postmodernism cradles a single idea or concept to which all the rest must be subordinated, whereas PM considers that such a statement averts the confrontation of ideas, thus killing dialectics.

So far we have dealt with the fundamental postulates of PM as a Literary Theory, describing its chief diverging points with contemporary theories and exposing its essential arguments. It is just about time that we talk a little about PM on its practical application, i.e., as a literary criticism, as a philosophy whose object of study is no longer the concept determined by science, but the ideas springing from the application of such concepts on the different literary materials. Grasping the following distinction is essential to understand the last part of *The Academy versus Babel*: a literary theory deals with concepts; a literary criticism, with ideas. One cannot make up ideas if they lack the basic concepts on which to sustain them, and those ideas cannot be developed unless they are to interact dialectically with the contents of the literary works in *symploké*. The concept of *symploké* brings us back to the tridimensional axis, where ideas constitute transcendental realities, called this way because they transform or transcend ever one of the particular concepts they are formed of. Since Postmodern theories lack this tridimensional nature, they remain individualistic approaches to the vast complex of literary materials. In them, the literary critic is replaced by the literary theologian. It cannot be other way. The so-called Postmodern thinkers consider themselves as having endowed Literary Theories with freedom, multiplicity of choice and diversity. They claim for the globalizing of literature as a personal achievement. But PM shows us that their only and pitiful contribution is that of reducing universal works of literature to poor personal approaches, totally subdued to their psyches.

“Literature is not apt for naïve minds, that is to say, for studies whose rational knowledge is determined and limited by its rational beliefs” (Maestro, 2008: 10) Once we get to the end of the book, this somewhat enigmatic sentence found at the beginning acquires full meaning and relevance, making us understand how modern literature is saturated by easy readings and contemporary Gods. *The Academy versus Babel*, in exposing the main faults of Postmodern theories under the light of Philosophical Materialism, destroys the myth of present-day literature as being eclectic, plural and critical. It defies those who reduce literature to a psychologising metaphor, and those who use it to sustain their ideals. Attempting to expose such ideologies (and I call

them ideologies because following PM's precepts, they do not even deserve to be labelled as theories) this book masterfully refutes every one of them. Now it is the reader who must decide which road to take.

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