IMPACTS OF CONTEMPORARY DEVELOPMENTS ON GENERAL AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURE

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Summary

The application of technology to information, communication, and culture has been through the history of humanity a key factor in social progress and well being. The impact of digital technology is vital for the contemporary culture and is leaving in it some identity tracks that are changing certain uses of the previous tradition. Similarly, the literary system is also being powerfully affected in three aspects. In the first place, computer resources have been used to preserve and edit literary texts, associating to them graphical material, links with related texts or with dictionaries, and, above all, developing search tools of concordance and syntactic/semantic analysis. Secondly, we are watching the birth of a digital literature, with new generic characteristics, new creators, with knowledge of both, technological mechanisms and literary resources, and a reader capable of interpreting and enjoying texts on the screen. Thirdly, literary theory has expressed new postulates with regard to the multiple authorship of digital texts, the disintegration of the textual meaning, the intertextuality and implications of the reader in the creation process and the interpretation of the texts. These three impacts imply, for some authors, the search of a new paradigm for the creation, reading, and interpretation of digital texts, which points to a new humanism.
1. The Search for Interdisciplinarity

The relations between literature and technology are nothing new, not even recent. And if we can still speak of novelty, regarding the title above, it is no longer in the adjective comparative, but, maybe, in the specific field of the digital technologies above mentioned. Nevertheless, considering all that has been written and affirmed since the sixties about the relations between literature and technology, we are facing disjunctive elements, in which one does not reduce itself nor imposes itself on the other. In this case, it is as if we were describing a conceptual space very similar to digital logic, in which only zeros and ones exist, and in which these and those do not annul each other, nor transform into a third element (in Boolean algebra, any operation done with zeros and ones, will have as a result only zero or one).

Thus, to explore this space of approaching and reproaching between (comparative) literature and (digital) technology, it will be necessary, first, to explain the misconceptions of this disjunction and to show that there has always been conflict, confrontation and concord, at the same time, between one and the other. Only after this stage, it will be possible to question what novelties these discussions still bring to the fields of literary studies. And, then, it will be possible to advance to what is really of interest, in other words, the mapping of tensions and intersections between comparative literature and the digital medium, proposing reflections that may, perhaps, incline the fields of comparative literary studies and provide, certainly, other ways of seeing, describing, utilizing and projecting the digital space.

Returning to the images of the zeros and ones, it is possible to speak of digitalization, or better yet, of binarization of the concepts and even of the discussions, when we enter the field of relations between literature and technology. In the other arts (mainly in the visual arts), this discussion is already part of the past; since the beginning of 20th century, no opposition of art with techniques and technologies has been established. Only in literature, this binarization still resists and contaminates the fields of literary studies. It seems that these have retained, of the information and communication technology, solely these dualities that do not go ahead, proposing incessantly oppositions without syntheses or solutions. Zeros and ones would be, thus, in all places, even in the reductionist and superficial way of understanding science, technology, art, and literature.

To discuss all these cases, these conflicting relations between literature and technology, is truly an arduous task, even if we consider what has been published in the last years. Many things have been said and written, and a good deal of them are contaminated or influenced by some type of dualist vision. Since most of the contemporary societies and cultures have entered or wish to enter decidedly in a condition that we may call as “high technological density”, we perceive without much difficulty that the information and communication technologies have acquired a certain degree of hegemony. And, in consequence to this hegemony, we go from a critical assimilation of techniques and processes of globalization, to a blind refusal. In other words, one practically eliminates any intermediate stages that can express another type of commitment that is not surrender or systematical refusal. In consequence, limiting oneself merely to what is published nowadays, with regards to this subject, would perhaps bring more problems
than clarify the situation. It could be more productive to retake some suggested discussions from more or less fifty years ago, when this process of high technological density was initiated.

1.1. The Scientific and Technological Process

Gilbert Simondon’s thesis *Du mode d'existence des objets techniques* dates from the year 1958. In 1959, Charles Pierce Snow published *The Two Cultures*; five years later, in 1964, Umberto Eco launched his *Apocalittici e integrati*. In this same year of 1964, Snow gave the public a second reflection concerning the same theme: *The Two Cultures: A Second Look*. Evidently, Simondon, Snow and Eco were neither the first nor the only ones to discuss the relations of artists and literati with the techniques of technology. They would not be the last. Nevertheless, they represent distinct attempts of thinking the relations between literature and technology, in a moment when the overcrowding and consumption of industrial objects became overcrowding and consumption of processes. Of course, the perspectives proposed by Simondon and Eco had more relevance, they were more fertile, if one considers other intellectuals that discussed their proposals. However, of the three, perhaps Snow is the most paradigmatic for us to comprehend the limits and the simplifications of the current discussions about science, technology, and literature. In fact, *The Two Cultures*, in 1958, already had as a point of departure a disjunctive position, the same one that may be identified nowadays. On the other hand, if we take the discussions of Eco and Simondon, we would clearly perceive that there is no place for insurmountable disjunctions between science and literature (or art), for both allow a third element to be brought to scene: technology. With this, the manichaest simplification breaks itself and the reflexive frame becomes rather complex, allowing a margin for rethinking science, literature (art), and technology in a much more open and fertile manner. For Snow, though, there is no glimpse of a way out from this opposition between science and literature, even if he claims to be writing his reflections in the sense of lowering the tensions and differences between one and the other. For him, there exists a large distance between the “literary intellectuals” (as he names them), on one side, and the “scientists”, on the other. A barrier of prejudice is raised from part to part. The “non-scientists” (e.g. the artists, still according to his own nomenclature) are, according to Snow, firmly convinced that the scientists lack any conscience of the human condition; that their optimism is, at least, superficial. On the other hand, “scientists” believe that “literary intellectuals” are people of little vision; in truth, profoundly anti-intellectual and occupied in limiting art and thought to the *hic et nunc*.

1.2. The Resistance of the Literary Field

As in current discussions, in Snow there is a strict conception of science and, consequently, of the relations between science and literature. And still, by not having a clearer vision of the differences and relations between science and technology, his own concept of art and, by extension, of literature, is negatively affected. As a result, we have a series of simplistic arguments and manichaeisms (that owe nothing to the ones produced since the sixties). According to Snow, literature and science evolve at different rhythms (as if *evolution* was a unique and unquestionable paradigm to be applied to sciences, arts, and techniques); the literary intellectuals have all the temperament of luddists; and share an ineluctable incapacity for comprehending the
evolution of the technical processes and the scientific discoveries (both, progress and discoveries, placed at the same level). Snow gets to saying that the only worldly renown writer that seemed to have understood, in a certain way, the industrial revolution, is Ibsen (Snow,1968:44), without giving attention to innumerous others, as, for example, Balzac. And still, he gives no importance to the relations between imagination and technology, as if they were specific of art, and this was subordinated to science; as if both (imagination and technology) were not intimately linked to one another.

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Biographical Sketches

Dolores Romero López was born in Toledo, Spain, the 14th of March, 1965. She studied Spanish Philology at the University of Salamanca, Spain, where she obtained her Ph. D on Spanish Contemporary Poetry. Later she went to University of Nottingham (U.K.) where she studied Critical Theory and Comparative Literature. She has published the following books: Orientaciones en Literatura Comparada (Madrid: Arco Libros, 1998), Una relectura del fin de siglo en el marco de la Literatura Comparada (Berna: Peter Lang, 1998), Naciones literarias (ed. Barcelona: Anthropos, 2006) and Seis siglos de poesía española escrita por mujeres (ed. Berna: Peter Lang, 2006). Her research interests include Spanish Literature, Comparative Literature and Literary Studies in the Digital Age. Currently, she is a teacher of the Spanish Literature Department at the University Complutense of Madrid (UCM). Prof. Romero is a member of LEETHI Research Group (Literaturas Españolas y Europeas del Texto al Hipertexto), an interdisciplinary research group dedicated to the study of literature and computers. She is the Chair of the Research Committee on Comparative Literature in the Digital Age (CLDA) of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA).

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