

Transpersonal Research: The Need for a New Research Paradigm

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I. INTRODUCTION

LITERARY criticism at the beginning of the twenty-first century seems to be in a situation of crisis. A crisis that affects not only the academe but especially the relationship between the literary critic and the general public.

There are many literary journals in most countries but they are aimed at professional readers. Those with the general public in mind are few and their readership is dwindling and, which is worse, ageing. In the United States, for instance, despite the dimensions of one of the largest book markets in the world, there is only one important periodical dedicated to literary criticism: The New York Review of Books. If current trends are preserved, sooner or later literary criticism will be confined to the academe in terms of both production and consumption and its relevance to the general public will become negligible. Needless to say, its social value will share the same fate.

In 2011, the prestigious Spanish newspaper El País published Radiografía de la crítica literaria , an article that discusses the fate of literary criticism in our postmodern times. In it, Eliot Weinberger, a distinguished American

essayist, translator and editor, points out another problem of criticism, besides the above one: after the 1960s, “serious” criticism became the domain of academics who developed an increasingly complex jargon, impenetrable to the general public. In contrast, before the 1960s critics produced a prose that was accessible to anyone and used literature in their comment on various issues of the day. However, as Philippe Lançon notes in the same article, the figure of the “great critic” has lost its legitimacy and disappeared, together with that of the “great writer.” This is exactly what Terry Eagleton claims in his *After Theory*: the young generation of critics has failed to produce work to match the masterpieces of the older generation so “for the moment we are still trading on the past” (Eagleton 2003).

Last but not least, one has to speak about the long range effects of criticism, something that Eagleton falls short of evaluating. By long range effects I mean the impact of various literary theories on current public affairs, on the way in which society addresses its problems. The Marxian critic notices that much of the criticism of the past decades has been politically oriented, focusing on minorities and creating a sense of exclusion for those belonging to the majority, although the role of majorities should never be underestimated! We can take this line of argument one step further and state that the current focus on things that set members of society apart, together with the critique of the state itself—as performed by Foucault and his followers, for instance—contributes to society’s greatest problem, instead of offering a solution to it: atomization, indeed, appears to be one of Western society’s greatest problem, in contrast with the cohesion of pre-modern or traditional societies. But cohesion is absolutely necessary for a smooth functioning of

any society. In its absence, we deal with disconnected individuals, with little or no ties and bonds, who aggressively pursue private agendas and see norms, regulations and shared moral principles as obstacles in the expression of their “unencumbered self” (Sandel 1996). This situation generates high levels of violence and struggle in libertarian countries like the United States. In countries that still preserve “a much thicker social order” (Etzioni 1996), like Finland or Switzerland, violence levels are quite low.

An answer to the above predicament, to the need for finding a more satisfactory, unifying explanation of human behavior, may be transpersonal studies. As the Latin roots of the word “transpersonal” suggest, we deal with an approach that goes beyond our inherent identification with our biological self in order to get access to the full range and depth of human experience.

Since the transpersonal field is rather vast, we will only focus on the theories of two of its outstanding representatives, Viktor Frankl and his follower, Alfried Längle and on their practical usefulness to literary criticism.

Viktor Frankl is the father of existential analysis—not to be mistaken for existentialism, despite some common elements—or logotherapy (therapy through meaning). Existential analysis was seen as an analytical procedure that helped the individual to attach meaning to his personal existence (Frankl 1985). Today, it deals with the analysis, prevention and therapy of meaning-related problems and especially with the loss of meaning.

Existential analysis refers to a psychotherapeutic approach whose aim is to empower people to live their lives with inner consent (Längle 1995). Briefly speaking, it analyzes the conditions necessary for a fulfilled, meaningful life.

The advent of existential analysis occurred in the aftermath of the Second World War when Darwinist and naturalistic conceptions of humanity brought about widespread pessimism and meaninglessness. According to those theories, human beings were not free but determined by both heredity and environment, life being a mere struggle for survival. But Frankl showed that human existence is characterized by freedom, the capacity for decision and responsibility.

Frankl also reacted to the shortcomings of the psychologies of Freud and Adler that he considered reductionist as they attributed human behavior solely to deterministic causes. This was necessarily so, as both Freud and Adler dealt with only two dimensions of human life: body and psyche. Frankl sought to correct this situation by adding a third dimension: the spiritual or noetic dimension, also known under the name of “personal dimension,” which deals with specific human qualities, i.e. a person’s capacity for freedom, responsibility and the search for meaning.

It is this quest for meaning that represents the most important human motivation (not libido or the thirst for power). Good physical health and drive satisfaction alone are not able to bring fulfillment to human existence. More important is the individual’s need to transcend his/her biological self and open up towards the others, to devote his/her existence to something larger than an individual life and derive corresponding values. This domain of meaning and values is the main subject matter of existential analysis, although physical needs and the search for pleasure, at an emotional level, are never neglected: they are part and parcel of a complete human experience.

Frankl’s work has been further expanded and enriched by

his collaborator, Alfried Längle, who founded the Gesellschaft für Logotherapie und Existenzanalyse (Society for Logotherapy and Existential Analysis, GLE) in Vienna in the 1980s. Dr. Längle developed the three-dimensional model of his predecessor by stressing the human capacity of decision-making, which accompanies the awareness of being human. He analyzed not only the nature of the three dimensions and their relations to each other but also the tensions that may occur among them. Moreover, Alfried Längle discovered that the quest for meaning and its success depend heavily upon three additional existential conditions, all belonging to the same personal or noetic sphere. Accordingly, he developed a model that thoroughly describes the four prerequisites of a fulfilled existence (Längle 2000).

The existential conditions of a successful life are also called the four existential motivations (Längle 1995). They are emphasized by the answer one gives to the following four sets of questions:

- 1) Can I accept my place in this world and the conditions of life that I am subjected to? Irrespective of hardships, one needs to accept one's particular situation as part of one's reality, otherwise it is impossible to approach the next level.
- 2) Am I satisfied with my relationships? This requires feeling close to people, animals, things, and taking time for establishing and nurturing relationships. A positive answer means consent to life and access to the next level.
- 3) Do I experience myself and my inner world as unique? Do I sense that I have the permission to be myself and to be authentic? The answers to these questions must be

positive but they must cover not only the attitude of others towards us but also our own attitude towards ourselves. Our identity and its value to self and society are at stake here. Again, positive acknowledgement leads to a sense of ability, of consent to one's worth and, implicitly to life in general.

- 4) Do I sense my own purpose in the world as an orientation for the meaning of my life? As shown above, human beings want to transcend themselves and want their lives to serve a higher purpose. If the individual is able to decide and act accordingly, a sense of existential meaning is created and the possibility of fulfillment is actualized. This condition, as opposed to the previous three, refers not just to the present but mostly to the future. It attempts to place an individual existence under the sign of a higher ideal in order to make it relevant long after its biological end. This relevance to more than one individual and to more than one period is the domain of existential analysis.

As can be seen from the above list, the quest for meaning, addressed by the question of the fourth set, is conditioned by the positive answer to the three previous sets, referring to our need for support and safety, the search for satisfactory relationships and the acknowledgement of our individuality and autonomy. All these questions and relationships can be used effectively to pinpoint the behavior and development of any literary character. They are likely to go beyond mechanistic and deterministic interpretations and reveal truly human features, the ones that truly differentiate us from animals: our capacity to search for a meaning beyond our own immediate needs, a meaning that transcends our

biological existence. It would be difficult to imagine a more appropriate approach to the “maladies” of modernity: alienation, solitude and, above all, the meaninglessness of modern life.

Having seen the advantages of the above approach, one needs to take the next logical step: developing a suitable research methodology. Indeed, the use of the above model in literary criticism could be greatly enhanced by one of the five research methods suggested by the seminal *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences* (Braud & Anderson 1998). By promoting the transpersonal paradigm, the authors advocate the wider inclusion of qualitative methods in order to address appropriately significant human experiences; the focus on individual experiences as they always mirror more general, even universal laws or truths; the use of all sources of evidence, of all modes of knowing, both objective/observational and subjective/experiential as equally valid; last but not least, it is acknowledged that the critic cannot and should not be a detached observer of facts. The investigator is intimately involved in the research, aware of the myriad interconnections, both obvious and subtle, with the research material or/and research participants.

According to the above, the process of research becomes one of transformative integration. Five aspects can be distinguished in this process. It begins with mindfulness (of heart and intellect), a state of watchfulness characterized by a compassionate awareness of actions, thoughts and motives. Mindfulness is accompanied by discernment, an accurate discrimination regarding sources, importance, pattern and motives. The first two aspects bring about the third: appreciation and understanding. This aspect refers to direct,

heartfelt perception, without the need for logical conceptualization. It involves knowledge immediately perceived by the heart as right, moral, relevant. Conceptualization is not necessary but also not excluded altogether. The fourth aspect, the transformation of the self, refers to the integration of the results of research into the researcher's life and the subsequent transformation. The fifth aspect deals with the transformation of others. Through various ways of sharing, the results of research are disseminated to other individuals, groups, organizations, institutions, societies and cultures and are likely to effect positive transformations.

At this point we can understand how transpersonal studies can successfully deal with what Griffin calls deconstructive or eliminative postmodernism (Griffin 1998); according to him, familiar postmodernism overcomes the modern worldview through an anti-worldview: it deconstructs or eliminates the ingredients necessary for a worldview, such as God, self, purpose, meaning, a real world, and truth as correspondence. (p. x)

Griffin suggests another form of postmodernism that might be termed constructive or revisionary, one that overcomes the modern worldview not by eliminating the possibility of a worldview but by constructing a postmodern worldview through a revision of modern premises and traditional concepts. This constructive or revisionary postmodernism involves a new unity of scientific, ethical, aesthetic, and religious institutions. It rejects not science as such but only that scientism in which the data of modern natural sciences are alone allowed to contribute to the construction of our worldview. (pp. x-xi)

II. CONCLUSION

As a conclusion, one has to admit that the end goal of research is not the mere accumulation of factual data; just like any other human activity, it needs to contribute to what Braud and Anderson call the good society. And since we live in a global society, more than ever we are in need of a critical approach that can bring us all together, irrespective of our numerous differences. Having in mind the above, transpersonal studies seems to be a promising contribution to the global village that we all dream of, characterized by peace and cooperation and unity in diversity.

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i. The article interviews about 17 authors, translators, editors and critics from various European countries and the United States. See the electronic version of the newspaper at http://elpais.com/diario/2011/11/26/babelia/1322269936_850215.html#despiece1

ii. Braud and Anderson speak about five transpersonal approaches to research: Integral inquiry, Intuitive inquiry, Organic research, Transpersonal-phenomenological inquiry, and Inquiry informed by exceptional human experiences. For example, Intuitive inquiry introduces intuition as core method of inquiry, compassion as sustaining value in research, sympathetic resonance and circles of sympathetic resonance as validating procedures for research findings. It introduces innovative concepts such as including the role of reflective listening, “trickstering,” varying focal depth, ritualizing intention and others. See Braud, W., & Anderson, R. (1998) for a comprehensive discussion of these methods.