

**EDUCATING FOR AUTONOMY: LITERATURE AS A DEVELOPER OF
CRITICAL THINKING**

***EDUCAR PARA A AUTONOMIA: A LITERATURA COMO FORMADORA DO
PENSAMENTO CRÍTICO***

***EDUCAR PARA LA AUTONOMÍA: LA LITERATURA COMO FORMADORA DEL
PENSAMIENTO CRÍTICO***



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ABSTRACT: Paulo Freire understands reading as an act of transgression and practice of autonomy for the construction of critical thinking, which is developed by the dialogic relation between reading the world and reading the written word. This paper defends the role of Literature as a space capable of mobilizing a complete field of knowledge and an effective instrument of social innovation, insofar as it contributes to the practice of alterity and diversity. How should the poetic word, formed by a specific language system which takes into consideration the reader's experience, be presented in the classroom?

KEYWORDS: Paulo Freire. Critical pedagogy. Reading. Poetry in the classroom. Critical thinking.

RESUMO: Paulo Freire concebe a leitura como um ato de transgressão e prática de autonomia para a formação do pensamento crítico, que se desenvolve na relação dialógica entre leitura do mundo e leitura da palavra escrita. O presente artigo defende o papel da literatura como espaço capaz de mobilizar um campo completo de saberes e um efetivo instrumento de inovação social, à medida que contribui para o exercício da alteridade e da diversidade. Como a palavra poética, formada por um sistema específico de linguagem, que leva em conta a vivência do leitor, deve ser apresentada na sala de aula?

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Paulo Freire. Pedagogia crítica. Leitura. Poesia em sala de aula. Pensamento crítico.

RESUMEN: Paulo Freire concibe la literatura como un acto de transgresión y práctica de autonomía para la formación del pensamiento crítico, que se desarrolla en la relación dialógica entre leer el mundo y leer la palabra escrita. El presente artículo defiende el papel de la literatura como espacio capacitado de movilización del campo completo de saberes y un efectivo instrumento de innovación social, contribuyendo a la medida para el ejercicio de alteridad e de la diversidad. ¿Cómo debe presentarse en el aula la palabra poética, formada por un sistema lingüístico específico, que tenga en cuenta la experiencia del lector?

PALABRAS CLAVE: Paulo Freire. Pedagogía crítica. Lectura. Poesía en el aula. Pensamiento crític

Introduction

Paulo Freire, first, read the world. Then he read the word. He first became literate with the house of his childhood, the dance of the treetops and the singing of the birds. He read the water of the rains, the whistling of the wind. He read the shape of the leaves, the smell of the flowers, the peel of the fruit. Then he read the written word, the action-word: he was introduced to the reading of the written word by his parents, on the floor of their house, with the words of his world as a boy, with his own words. With Eunice, his first teacher, the reading of the written word was not a rupture, but a complement. In junior high school, Freire got to know the power of critical reading of the word, at a moment when the text was offered to his intense search.

A subject that elaborated his experience and later transformed it into practice and method, Freire teaches us that the place of reading should go beyond, far beyond the decoding of the written word. Following a trajectory marked by real and symbolic concerns about the illiteracy rates in Brazil, especially among the adult, working, and popular population, and always highlighting the social role of working with words, Paulo Freire is, for us, the symbol of the need to see "[...] reading and writing from the angle of political struggle" (FREIRE, 1996, p. 17, our translation).

If we start from the understanding that Freire defends reading as an act of transgression and as a practice of autonomy, we should reflect on what is the work with the word capable of promoting transgressive action. Certainly, we are not talking about any descriptive reading, since the educator informs us that "[...] the reading of a text, taken as a pure description of an object, is done in the sense of memorizing it, nor is it real reading, nor does it, therefore, result in knowledge of the object of which the text speaks" (FREIRE, 1996, p. 26, our translation). It turns out that transgression, the formation of critical thinking, takes place in the formative exercise that promotes the dialogical relationship between reading the world and reading the written word, the latter being preceded by the former, in a dance in which both tasks complement each other mutually, and in this relationship with critical reading, and with the general understanding of the pedagogical act, the educator's role will be much less that of providing answers and depositing content and much more that of helping to elaborate and educate for autonomy.

If we think, for example, of Paulo Freire's approach to the subject of literacy, a field that still today carries historical contributions from the educator, we will be able to locate several passages in his writings in which the problem of the massive illiteracy of the Brazilian population is established as a nuisance:

In a society that excludes two-thirds of its population and still imposes profound injustices on a large part of the third for which it works, it is urgent that the issue of reading and writing be seen emphatically from the angle of political struggle, and that the scientific understanding of the problem brings its collaboration.

It is absurd that we are reaching the end of the century, the end of the millennium, boasting illiteracy rates, the rates of those who, barely literate, are equally forbidden to read and write, the alarming number of children forbidden to attend school, and that we live with all this almost as if we were anesthetized (FREIRE, 1996, p. 17-18, our translation).

We find a parallel of this discomfort in bell hooks, when she states that,

[...] Without literacy, (non-white) populations are simply condemned to slave wages, favoring a privileged class of slavers who prefer their workers deaf and dumb. Recent studies in literacy reveal that black men are rapidly forming one of the most illiterate groups in our society (HOOKS, 2020, p. 203, our translation).

Although the lenses of interpretation are different, since Paulo Freire focused on the problem of illiteracy, especially among the working class, popular, and adult population, and bell hooks seeks to discuss the effects of mass illiteracy on the black North American population, the paths of both authors lead us to a common place: what will be the possibility for the future of a group that does not have access to literacy, to the literate universe, and to the written world? If the insertion of the individual in our social practices depends on the mastery of writing, there seems to be no other way to think of a logic of social ascension for certain historically oppressed and marginalized groups without training them to work critically with the word.

The centennial of Paulo Freire comes with a number of challenges. Despite statistical advances, Brazil is still among the 10 countries with the most illiterate adults ³ in the world, having been 11 million in 2019, according to IBGE data (2019), and being far from reaching the fifth goal of the 2014 National Education Plan, which proposes the eradication of illiteracy by the year 2024⁴. The dismantling of educational policies and the recent cuts in the education sector make the road to achieving these goals even longer and unreachable. Above all because

³ According to the UNESCO Global Education Monitoring Report 2019. Available at: <https://gem-report-2019.unesco.org/>. Access: 10 Dec. 2022.

⁴ The National Education Plan (2014-2024) presents as its fifth objective goal the task of: "Literate all children, at most, by the end of the 3rd (third) year of primary education", being an explicit concern in the document itself the idea that "[...] literacy today can no longer be considered a mechanical (de)codification of letters and syllables; it should be understood in relation to the effective participation of the child in literacy practices to which it is exposed, inside and outside of school. Thus, it becomes necessary to take the uses and functions of the written language as a basis for the development of meaningful reading and writing activities" (BRAZIL, 2015, p. 85).

thinking about Paulo Freire means thinking not only about the opportunity of contact with the written culture, but also about the process of critical formation through the word, since "[...] reading the world is not only an interest in observing it, but an interest in writing it, transforming it through a conscious practice (which can and should be mediated by reading education, reading and writing)" (Paulo Freire, 1998.)" (FREIRE, 1996, p. 22, our translation).

We cannot disregard the fact that in addition to the more than 11 million Brazilians who are still illiterate, 30% of the population between 15 and 60 years of age is considered "functionally illiterate", according to the National Indicator of Functional Literacy (INAF), that is, a large volume of people who are able to find explicit information in simple texts, but are not able to make inferences or develop an autonomous critical thought about what they read. Thus, we are led to a discussion not only about the high rate of illiteracy, a quantitative problem, but also about the quality of this work that has been developed on the written word, reiterating the need to return to Paulo Freire in the defense of articulated work between reading the world and reading the word.

At the same time that the memory of Paulo Freire is being vilified in the country, national and international intellectuals have been mobilizing themselves to reflect, in academic events, on the dimension of the legacy of Freire's work. The celebrations of the centennial of the national patron of education encourage us to think about the role of literature and its contribution to a transgressive education.

As the literary text has an unlimited potential to expand the student's universe of meanings about the two levels of reality - the external one, which enables reflection on objective aspects of society, and the internal one, which prompts a probe into the subjective universe of the individual -, we argue that literature should occupy a privileged place in the integral formation of the student.

Conceived as a specific system of language, with its own procedures to obtain an effect of meaning and which, at the same time, must take into account the experience and the living of the reader, how should the literary text be presented in the pedagogical relationship and in the classroom? How can we avoid using literary genres as mere instruments, read on the same level as referential texts, serving only as a vehicle to reinforce the learning of other subjects or as a mere support for grammar exercises? How can literature play a predominant role in shaping human beings?

The questions raised above are at the core of the very reflection around the nature and function of literature in an education for autonomy and its emancipating character, which we

will seek to develop below, based on the theoretical contributions coming from the places where we erected our discourse: literary theory and the sociology of education. After all, if on one hand the dominant pedagogy is a "[...] closed barrier to the educational possibilities of those who are situated in the subcultures of the proletariat and marginal" (FIORI, 2019, p. 11, our translation), on the other hand the respectful, transgressive and critical educational process opens paths for the formation of autonomous subjects, in which the one who had always been oppressed "[...] has conditions to reflexively discover and conquer himself as the subject of his own historical destiny" (FIORI, 2019, p. 11), and thus responsibly configure himself in his formation and in his path. It is on behalf of this second option that we take up Paulo Freire again and raise our voice.

Literature: a complete field of knowledge

By mobilizing a complete field of knowledge and cultural traditions, through the most varied forms of written texts or oral creations produced at all times throughout history, in virtually all human societies, literature constitutes a privileged means of knowledge of the human being and his social relations - either in a universal perspective, which emphasizes the traits found in all human beings, regardless of their time or geographical space, a view much valued by modern utopias, either in their historical, regional and local specificities.

Each people creates its imaginary resources, from its "simple forms" (JOLLES, 1976), that is, the myths, the sagas, the legends and the proverbs, passing through the written language, besides the need of bonding and belonging to a group, to respond in symbolic representation forms to the effects caused in its subjectivity coming from the external reality. Transfigured into artistic language, the ties with the reality that gave rise to it acquire another status, different from the natural facts objectified by science or history. On the other hand, the further they move away from the concrete reality, the more they gain power of symbolization, amplifying the universal nature of the literary work of art.

When asked in an interview if it is possible to teach literature, Roland Barthes replied bluntly: "To this question that I receive directly, I will also answer directly, saying that it is only necessary to teach literature" (BARTHES, 1995, p. 262, our translation). The French theorist justifies his answer by arguing that:

[...] literature is [...] a *mathesis*: a complete field of knowledge. It stages, through very diverse texts, all the knowledge of the world at a given moment. It is, in fact, obvious that it is not scientific knowledge, even if it is based on

the scientific codes of different times (BARTHES, 1995, p. 262, our translation).

The French theorist also emphasizes the political power of literary creations:

Literature' is undoubtedly a narrative, metaphorical code, but it is also a place where, for example, an immense political knowledge is involved. This is why I say, paradoxically, that it is only necessary to teach literature, because with it, one could be close to all knowledge (BARTHES, 1995, p. 262-263, our translation).

Still in the same interview, the theorist destabilizes the discourse that intends to fix literature to the entertainment space by believing that literary work has no commitment to facts, and that, therefore, knowledge could only be shared by the "scientific" disciplines, considered the only ones that tell the truth. Here is Barthes' response:

Literature" does not tell the truth, but the truth is not only there where one does not lie [...]: the opposite of lying is not necessarily telling the truth. It is necessary to shift the question: the important thing is not to elaborate, to spread a knowledge about literature (in the "histories of literature"), it is to show literature as a mediator of knowledge" (BARTHES, 1995, p. 263, our translation).

In this defense of literature, it remains to say that it constitutes a form of knowledge of the other, being an effective instrument of social innovation, as it contributes to the exercise of alterity and cultural diversity. In the same way, Literature maintains links with Philosophy, although the former uses a specific formal language. Both are true in their own particularities, within their specificities. They coincide neither in form nor in language, because their internal logics, as well as their construction processes, are different. Literature says things that Philosophy wouldn't know how to say. It is these specificities that guarantee that each one of them is a fertile field for the humanization of the world. As Todorov (2006, p. 81, our translation) summarizes, "[...] literature must be understood in its specificity, as literature, before trying to establish its relationship with something different from itself. Literature is not and does not pretend to be the representation of society, nor a philosophical model for thinking the world; it is a singular language that is linked to society, philosophy, and other disciplines.

As Antonio Candido teaches us, the values, the worldview that a society defends or considers harmful, or that it denounces or denies, are demonstrated in the various literary and cultural manifestations of a nation. Art is always a social product. Literary work brings us into contact with life in its local and universal truths, common to all men and places, because they

are the truths inherent to the human condition, but the way to do this is, above all, through language, in it and with it.

It is not the writer's aim to narrate the facts, but to expose the gaps, to unmask obscure points, opening up to possibilities of human experience, through the lens of verisimilitude. This marks the difference between the writer, the historian, and the sociologist. Although traces of fictional language permeate the discourses of history, and many historians allow themselves to be fed by the imaginary aspects, it is undeniable that, as scientists, historians have procedures for collecting, delimiting, probing and analyzing facts, based on criteria of objectivity and commitment to past events which ensure a scientific character to their field, while literature has a freedom to fix itself on a fictional approach to the facts, so that, if both can work with aspects related to historical facts, the procedures and the way to create their discourses differ completely.

It is because of this universal content, present in literary works, that it is worth remembering here the famous teaching of Ezra Pound in his classic essay *ABC of reading*, in which he argues that if one wants to find a synthesis of the consciousness of a certain century, one should look for it in literature, whether in theater, poetry, or the narrative of the time. Pound says: "Artists are the antennae of the race" (POUND, 1970, p. 77, our translation) for capturing, anticipating, and predicting the spirit of an age faster than scientists, and for perceiving social changes with great insight, being able to make them visible to the reader through their recreations made with language.

The writer is a type of intellectual whose work involves a concern with language. He creates a fictional truth that cannot be measured by the parameters of factual truths. The facts that he manipulates in fiction are not only those of concrete reality. They are universal human truths, which rather translate a feeling of experience, an understanding and a judgment of things, and which provide a vivid and insinuating portrait of life. Feelings such as anguish at death, the awareness of the passage of time, the problems of old age, indignation at oppression and injustice, the lack of communication between people, the domination games of some people over others, the suffering caused by the passions - among other relevant themes - are dealt with in literary works of all times.

Representing one's experiences is an activity inherent to human beings. As Aristotle (1994) observes, man is predisposed to representation and finds great intellectual pleasure in this predisposition to imitate. Antonio Candido also defends that fabulation, the capacity of imagination is inherent to man: "There is no people and there is no man who can live without

it, that is, without the possibility of coming into contact with some kind of fabulation” (CANDIDO, 2011, p. 175, our translation).

Up to this point, we have reflected on the humanizing and shaping potential of critical thinking. Next, we will give a brief sample of how the poet provokes the reader's critical thinking by building a poetry of resistance to hegemonic ideology. To do so, we will illustrate our discussion with two poems by Luiz Silva, Cuti, theoretician, literary critic, playwright, fictionist, poet, and one of the founders and supporters of *Cadernos negros* (1978-1993) and of the group "Quilombhoje".

With a consistent theoretical and literary background and a defined political-ideological action, Cuti's poetics is born from a cultural resistance and transgressive attitude. Conceiving poetic language as a transforming power of consciousness, the poet reveals resistance tactics, despite restrictions of all kinds. To do so, he stages the ideological confrontation between black and white discourses, turning the word into an arena of symbolic struggle, to use Bakhtin's famous image, as in the metalinguistic poem "Aesthetics", published in *Sanga* (2002):

quando o escravo
surrupiou a escrita
disse o senhor:
– precisão, síntese, regras
e boas maneiras!
são seus deveres

enxurrada se riu demais em chuva
do conta-gotas e sua bota de borracha rota
na maior despercebida enchente daqueles tempos
adjetivos
escorrendo ainda hoje
em negrito.
(CUTI, 2002, p. 77)⁵.

⁵ English translation:

when the slave
stole the writing
said the master:
- precision, synthesis, rules
and good manners!
are your duties
torrent laughed too much in rain
at the dropper and his broken rubber boot
in the most unnoticed flood of those times
adjectives
still flowing today
in bold (CUTI, 2002, p. 77, our translation).

The sound resources used in the first stanza, such as the vibrant /r/ in consonantal encounters, stages a locked and disciplinary discourse ("slave", "writing", "precision", "rules") that opposes the sonority of "to steal": taking for oneself the writing, a mark of civilization and representation of power that had been denied to the black man, is the gesture of resistance of this aesthetic.

The two stanzas, with six verses each, are regulated by two rival discourses: the images of containment, locking and rigidity (in the first) suffer a reaction (in the second), figurativized by an aquatic semantic field, reinforcing the image of fluidity of the free and conversational verses, which arouse the effect of freedom.

The sarcastic way in which the lyric self rejects the charge of "[...] precision, synthesis, rules / and good manners!" (vv. 4-5) evidences a technique that is refractory to the idea of "containment," but that seeks expansiveness, through free verse, as in the caudal and sonorous "[...] enxurrada se riru demais em chuva" (v. 7), whose alliterations in ch and r prolong the effect of the torrent, punctuating the difference of the discourse of containment and good manners from a "dropper" production. The impermeability and barrier from the outside world, inscribed in the rubber boots, wishing to stay dry from the downpours, do not work, for the boots, whose shelf life is counted, are torn.

The access and mastery of the forms of white expression are transformed into a metaphor of a torrent that, growing in silence through individual and collective wills, overflows, gets out of control, and promotes the change of the substance "time"- "[...] times / adjectives" (v. 9-10). The writing, now suppressed, becomes a space of expression of the black's subjectivity and continues to strengthen the identity bonds between the past and the present: "[...] oozing even today / in bold" (v. 11-12).

Cuti seeks to operate a split not only in the aesthetic field, incorporating and deconstructing a language that carries white meanings, but also in the ethical field, when he raises reflection and opens space for the denunciation of a history of prejudice and racial discrimination, as he tries to explain in the fragment below:

Blitz in the dark feeling is a constant. Accused of rancor, one is left with the alternative of living in oneself, while learning the rules of the blind eye and the flouting of expression. In the agenda of the permitted everyone must strive for the sustenance of all the notes of hypocrisy in race relations. [...]. Today there is a considerable data in the transformation, the presence of the descendants, more visible, of the slaves. The written text begins to bear the mark of a life experience distinct from the established. Emotion - the enemy of the so-called neutral intellectuals - enters the field, dragging old pains and

unleashing rusty silences. It is poetry made by the conscious black Brazilian (CUTI, 1985, p. 13, our translation).

In "Mamice", the lyrical voice subverts the conformist message that is at the base of the popular saying "Don't cry over spilled milk" and its appeasing meaning, seeking to keep the other in a pacifying condition about negative events that happened in the past:

Sou daqueles
que cobram o leite derramado

vovó que não era vaca
morreu seca
e seus bezerros brancos
agora touros desmamados
ainda procuram tetas
para seus rebentos viciados

sou daqueles
que cobram o leite derramado
e não aceito esmola
do que me foi roubado
(CUTI, 2010, p. 46)⁶.

The lyrical self does not cry over spilled milk; rather, he charges and demands reparation for the historical damage caused by the colonial enterprise. The popular saying is the driving spring of the poem, but the meanings of "milk" as a "source of nourishment" in Western culture become metonymy of "source of exploitation" against the black population. Another popular expression that complements the construction of the poem is "suckling at the cow", a type of response given to those who want to achieve their goals, but do not want to invest in personal effort.

The lyrical voice reverses the process of animalization of the black body, an inheritance of the slave mentality, first by denial (his grandmother, black, was not a cow); then, by

⁶ English translation:

I am one of those
who charge for spilled milk
grandma who was not a cow
died dry
and her white calves
now weaned bulls
still looking for teats
for their addicted offspring
I am one of those
who charge for spilled milk
and I don't accept alms
of what was stolen from me
(CUTI, 2010, p. 46, our translation).

comparison (whites were insatiable bulls and calves, vicious shoots to exploit). The lyric self closes the poem by warning that he does not want alms, but what is rightfully his, that which "[...] has been stolen from him" (v. 12).

Literature is, above all, language. Language used in its maximum possible semantic power, allowing a meaning to open, like a fan, to a range of other meanings. The writer works the word in all its possibilities, exploring to the maximum its sound, visual, semantic and rhythmic material, in the search for the construction of ever new meanings about the object already seen, but, being a form of communication that uses a national language, literature is also the product of a history and a society. Literary forms have a strong relationship with all instances of society. Therefore, let's quote Ezra Pound again: "A nation that neglects the perceptions of its artists goes into decline. After a time, it ceases to act and only survives" (POUND, 1970, p. 78, our translation).

If, so far, we are referring to the nature of Literature, it is necessary to remember here its liberating function, already defined by the Russian formalists, in 1917, in Victor Chklovski's first essay, *Art as Procedure*, in which he demonstrates that the function of the work of art is to destroy the automatic and mechanical perception of the object. For Chklovski, "[...] the image does not seek to facilitate our understanding of its meaning, but to create a particular perception of the object. It seeks the creation of its vision, not its recognition" (CHKLOVSKI, 1978, p. 50, our translation). Even in this contemporary context, centered on the culture of the image and the speed of information, literature still reveals its liberating and humanizing force as an aesthetic construction.

In his essay "The Character of the Novel", Antonio Candido (1989) makes a fruitful relationship between the living being and the character, a fictional entity, made of paper, whose existence is structured within the plot of a novel. Reading literature provides a deep experience of language, as an experience with language and the cultural universe it expresses. Literature is, in itself, in its own language, resistance. In its autonomy, it resists the use of language as a currency of exchange, as a form of instrumental information. If it, literature, does not resist, it will be a human activity, integrated and alienated to the forces of capital, because it will become a commodity. In his classic essay, Chklovski (1978) teaches us that language, in its everyday use, for communication and information, tends toward automation, alienating the individual by emphasizing only the content of the information.

The linguistic constructions of the literary text, that which makes it hermetic, deny itself to be a language of communication. One of the main social functions of literary language is

precisely to break the automated perceptions of everyday life, causing strangeness and shock to the reader, because it presents a language that is, at the same time, familiar and strange. It is language that draws attention to itself, to its internal structure. It is as if literature creates a foreign language within language itself. It creates a particular vision of each object, describing it as if we were seeing it for the first time. It is this rational and conscious construction of art that tends more and more toward knowledge.

The function of art (in general) and of the literary work (specifically) is to provoke strangeness, to create a maximum effect on the reader about the object. For Chklovski, provoking strangeness consists "[...] in obscuring the form, in increasing the difficulty and duration of perception" (CHKLOVSKI, 1978, p. 54, our translation). And more:

Art, on the other hand, intends to establish a new perception of the object through a singularization procedure. There is, therefore, the attempt to make the forms opaque, to increase the difficulty of understanding in order to achieve a longer duration of perception, because "art is a means to experience the becoming of the object, what is already 'past' does not matter for art".

This method leads us to perceive what we see or read not in the everyday way, but in a more intense and prolonged way. Art postpones understanding as long as it can, so to speak, in order to broaden our internal understanding of things, as if we could feel how these things could or might be, and not how they are supposed to be already.

Literature "singularizes" our perception by showing itself at every moment as new, unique; it "de-familiarizes" its context and that of the readers by taking it into a space of the emotional abyss, deconstructing frozen, naturalized emotions, and it "de-alienates" as it displaces from our alienated condition of blunted beings to start looking at the world with free eyes.

By way of conclusion, it also becomes a form of privileged knowledge about the world and man. For Adorno (apud RAMOS-DE-OLIVEIRA; ZUIN; PUCCI, 2000, p. 101, our translation), the aesthetic experience is the most appropriate form of knowledge, because in it subject and object, idea and nature, reason and sensual experience are interrelated without any of the poles predominating, which provides the reader with a structural model for dialectical materialist knowledge. To think about the literary experience, its articulation with social elements, and all the possibilities of working to promote dialogue between text and critical thinking is also to evoke Paulo Freire. To evoke him in his libertarian, responsive essence, in the search for and practice of a transgressive education that instigates autonomy and makes each citizen a subject of his own history, in a continuous collective process of humanization.

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