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The creative writing workshops: Sociality and symbolic construction

I. Introduction

I have been teaching for ten years in creative writing workshops in public workshops, in libraries and cultural centres in the Basque Country (North of Spain). I would like to introduce my experience teaching and researching in this domain. When I began to study at university I decided to study Sociology even though I loved Literature and that was the field I was interested in. But in school and after, all the approaches to the literature I knew were based on memorizing and composition rules. I wanted to write as to learn how to do it. So I found in Sociology a way to study literature as a subject and to research about it as an object.

We could say that a creative writing workshop is a group of people with a task, a deadline and objectives to write in a cooperative dynamic. In creative writing workshops, takes place all the processes that we can find in society as little, interesting and representative laboratory. In this laboratory we can observe the social dynamics among people who became part of an organization with common objective: to write, to learn, to have a meeting point, to tell and listen stories, to have an audience for their stories and, finally, to have a complete literary experience.

We are going to talk about this literary experience. But first of all I would like to introduce how sociology has approached to literature as a discipline.

II. Sociology and Literature:

In opposition to other areas of sociological inquiry, the Sociology or literature has not been able to establish a strong theoretical position as a sub-discipline. Hence two almost completely different approaches exist in it. On the one hand, an “internalist” approach focuses on the content of literary works and is more concerned with theory –involving an idealistic point of view. The internalist approach conceives the book as a reflection of society in a concrete historical time. The books are inquired as social empirical

information. On the other hand, the “externalist” approach is more concerned with empirical work and focuses on social models of literary production and consumption. Bourdieu’s sociology of the literary field and the work of his followers are representative examples of this second orientation.

a) Reading:

I’m interested in a theoretical contemporary approach which I think it is a conduit between sociology and literature. This is Bernard Lahire’s proposal. This sociologist has French formation and he knows the enormous tradition concerned on studies of reading in France, hence the Sociology of reading studies. We can see there is a parallelism between reading and democracy; in fact in the Enlightenment thought there was a direct connexion between democracy and reading, and as a result this thought exists nowadays, and it underlies cultural policies. So that is why many studies attempt to discover the manners, habits, and finally attempt to know how readers use the books. What do they do with their reading? How can we know about such a private, personal and delicate experience? It is usual the assumption that reading experience is a very metaphysical matter to know, to analyse or to investigate about, because the literature has been understood in a romantic and a mystic sense. We can do it, we can study the literature as a human product, because it is a material and real manifestation: There are books, readers, publishing market, and social experience among people; we could even know what happens with the story a reader has read. What does a person do with the reading experience?

Lahire suggests a philosophical framework to think on reading. He takes this frame from Mijail Bajtin. He talks about an “Esthetic disposition” and an “Ethical-Pragmatic disposition”. The first studies in France attempted to know what kind of reading population had. The researchers thought there were different manners of reading. Their hypothesis was that these manners depended on the social and educational level of readers. So, the main point of view was that readers with graduate studies had a higher education and consequently used to read focusing the reading on the aspects, structure and stylistic elements of the novels (this is an “esthetic disposition”). Otherwise, readers who did not have university studies were readers who focused their reading on vital experience, identifying themselves with the characters, situations and problems the

stories tell (this is an “ethical-pragmatic disposition”). The first conclusion was that all the readers read looking for an experience: All the readers want to know what happens with the main character in the story, how he or she is able to solve problems. The second conclusion was that the books chosen were stories that provided readers with a frame to solve their own problems, because the reader can see the consequences of a characters action, but readers will not suffer from them. Therefore it provides, as Lahire says, of a “theory of individual action”, action models and manners to do, think and feel. And he goes further and also he says, that reading experience is similar to the dreaming experience. Reading makes lots of images on reader’s mind. The reader is watching these images completely immersed in the story and forgets everything, where he is, what was he thinking about before starting to read, etc. The reader becomes a cowboy or a princess or a hero or a detective, or whoever. And then in the story will take part of the feelings, problems and actions of the characters only sitting in his comfortable chair. This mental work has a bigger resonance in the reader life because in the future, he might know how to solve problems or unknown situations, because he lived them before in fiction.

b) Writing:

In this sense when a person is writing experiments a similar process. In fact, when the story begins in the writer’s mind, lots of images begin to appear and the writer tries to capture them and tell in a story what happens. The process of dreaming is similar. There is Sociology of dreams, which studies the social effects of dreaming in a person life. John Gardner, a creative writing teacher, said about this question that the writer must try in his works to create a dream for the reader, like a dreaming experience; if the reader gets out the of the story it loses its magic. As a result we can talk about a complex process and an intense experience in writing.

A person who comes to creative writing workshops is looking for a literary experience. In this way they can get a very easy relationship through the writing workshops dynamic. In workshops you can see and follow the work in progress, the students work together on it, and the group helps each other in the construction of the work. In our society a person interested in literature can’t get this kind of relationship with works because he only attends to the product of this activity. This contact with a work begins

when someone buys a book or when there is a meeting, a debate or a presentation with a writer, but the work is finished, people doesn't know the process of that work, only knows the result. Otherwise if a person wants to produce some creative texts usually hasn't audience for it. This is a problem for a writer, the work in an artistic piece need an interlocutor, and a workshop creates this space for it.

In the writing workshop we find all this ingredients: a literary experience, a creative work and an audience to share with: the work, friends, and passion for the art of writing.

But let think about the type of literary experience we are discussing about:

- 1) A reading experience: all the writers in a workshop are generally good readers, but may not have a criticism sense, but they love reading and they have a good socialization in this activity. There they can talk about readings, authors, matters, literature, in creative writing workshop; there students will find a community of reference.
- 2) Participants in workshops want to write, maybe to have an experimental experience with language and art or to work in a play or to get some narrative tools to tell stories. But in the end it is a place to practice and to train on writing.
- 3) The students can share all the technical problems, they learn with a common aim and interact with the group. There is a romantic thought about the writer alone in his "ivory tower". But the group and the interaction is probably the best way of learning: sharing the experiences and working together.
- 4) And, finally, in writing workshops we can take part of a group who recognize each member as a writer. During my 10 years teaching the public cultural workshops I have met people that had in secret they wrote. The workshop offers a social space for writing and gives a different value to writing because it becomes a social practice. This recognition from the group and from the cultural institutions constructs the writer identity.

III. Sociality and symbolic construction:

So in the creative writing workshops the act of writing develops a social practice and so it needs specific methodologies. The substance of the writing work is language and it must be understood as concrete and symbolic matter: the signifier and signified, the meaning and the sense, and how these elements grow in symbolic communication of human relationship.

Literature is plenty of metaphors life and life is full of literary metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson tell us about a dialectical model between the experience and the language metaphoric fields which are in a continuous battle of growth and change. The nature of the language is metaphorical but we go further, because the logic from which we run our life is metaphorical too.

For example, Lakoff says about some metaphors on language: “an argument is a battle”, “to understand is to see”, “the time flies”, etc. All these metaphors are in the language but we don’t think about it, we just use them. Lakoff says that they are *catacresis* because they are in language, but they are dead metaphors, metaphors we may not always notice. Metaphors are an imaginative way to interpret the reality and the human experience. The creative writing workshop is the place specific for it, the place to work on/with metaphors, and to go further in reading and the writing fiction.

In creative writing workshops this dialectical and symbolic battle is on the base of a writing activity. In fiction writing, those metaphors are the matter which writers are working on. The members of a workshop create, share and think about new metaphors of language and life, which are used to achieve a literary form in the stories. This symbolic world is the centre of the works; to find the form to build a literary fiction text. Fiction, then, is the main reality in this work.

IV. Conclusion

In this sense we could say that creative writing workshop produce a field of symbolic interaction and a construction of collective imaginaries, with/from the language exchange. The literary language becomes a vehicle of identity and social construction among people which take part on the creative writing workshops. This dynamic group weaves a particular relationship in the structure of the creative writing workshops because all the text produced are in the base of a symbolic world shared among the writers. The workshops are founded on methodologies that take place in the creative writing workshops. In order to write and work their own texts, the writers will develop them not only in an individual way, but also in a group. In this sense, we can talk about an especial sociality, about a group interaction, and a narrative way of reading the reality. To sum up, I deeply think that workshops provides a enrich way of thinking and living the literature and writing/reading experience.

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