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The Malaise

Our contribution will make use of a long professional experience gathered in academic life to comment on the connected tasks of teaching and research within the contemporary framework of the modern humanities. In order to bring the situation into focus, I will zoom in on the external conditions, the present predicament, and the future prospects of literary research at the University of Lisbon.

In the globalized world of higher education, at the turn of the century, there was an increasingly strong tendency in favour of pragmatic, market-driven, and vocationally oriented policies, which claimed to offer graduates more employment opportunities in the short term. However, the truth is that the emphasis on the necessity to adjust universities to the priorities and requirements of the job market has been dramatically challenged in recent years by a devastating financial, economic, social, and political worldwide crisis which may have evolved past the point of recovery. Mismanagement in private and public sectors, substantial budgetary cuts, economic recession, soaring unemployment figures, and the bleak prospects of taxpayers gradually deprived of essential services once provided by the welfare state have jointly created a general atmosphere of anxiety,

Considering that (inter)national policy makers believe that hard sciences and technologies are the major driving force of economic growth and should accordingly receive the lion's share in the allocation of funds, the classical and modern humanities have to struggle for bare survival, amid a deepening poverty of resources. Additionally, the directors and coordinators of humanities research centres in Portugal cannot

escape the uneasiness of suspecting that FCT financial discrimination ultimately derives from the alleged economic irrelevance of literary, linguistic, and cultural branches of knowledge that fail to generate richness and visibly contribute to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP). In practical terms, this means that somehow professional excellence, academic distinction, and scholarly achievement are no longer the only hallmarks of successful research units. Nowadays, administrative skills, fund raising abilities, institutional contacts with private sponsors and networking with internationally funded projects sadly rank high in the FCT assessment scale.

Altogether, both the downgrading of the humanities and the absence of career prospects for graduate trainees, students and investigators often discourage or negatively influence the production of wide-range, long-term scholarly work. Thus, while striving to attain academic respectability and social recognition, younger researchers tend to pursue over-specialisation in increasingly narrow subjects, which will eventually give them the ephemeral glory of contributing to one of the journals listed in the Web of Knowledge canon. The ultimate merit of such painstaking efforts is then evaluated by means of the analysis of citation indexes and scholars can only hope that the impact factor of their output upon academic circles will impress the members of the next assessment panel to the point of recommending the allocation of funds for the survival of on-going research projects. Crisis has become the shorthand term for all these signs of social and academic distress.

Yet, the term “crisis” has been so vaguely used to describe the present malaise of the humanities, particularly in the case of English Studies, that it has become a mere cliché unable to perform the disambiguating function of a verbal sign. Besides, any survey of the historical changes brought about in social formations, economic theories, political beliefs, scientific paradigms, aesthetic conventions or philosophical systems will show that radical innovations have often been the unexpected, positive outcome of the immense creative potential associated with any deep-rooted, far-reaching crisis.

A variety of this model of renewal through conflict would also account for the familiar tripartite sequence of stability – disruption – innovation that often accompanies the development of scholarly

methods. As a rule, after successfully exploring the possibilities of new techniques in probing previously unavailable data or fostering ground-breaking interpretations of facts, research models extend their reach to an increasing number of different situations and problems. Nevertheless, in order to meet the requirements of rigorous research, this all-encompassing move implies a number of adjustments, corrections, and fine-tuning operations that may risk the comprehensiveness of the model and even erode the validity of its key concepts or procedures. As a result, the ensuing epistemological instability will soon turn into overt conflict and urge the rejection of the former research paradigm, while the threat of an impending void quickly leads to experiments with alternative theories and eventually to the emergence of new methodologies. In other words, from an optimistic point of view, it would be appropriate to suggest that, after all, in more than one sense of the word, the dynamics of crises can be instrumental in securing the continuity and advancement of learning.

This is neither the time nor place for autobiographical reminiscing but the fact is that my generation has been taught and trained according to the historical methodologies that pervaded academic programmes in mid twentieth century Portugal. In order to provide a broadly designed education in the humanities, the philological approach was generally adopted in the study of language, literature, and culture but more often than not flexible structures would accommodate the legacy of positivist historicism together with the early signs of emerging structuralism.

By the late sixties, however, literary studies had absorbed the drive of practical criticism and close reading to re-establish rhetoric as a central paradigm in the discussion of how literary texts are put together. A thorough examination of every verbal structure was then carried on with a view to tracing and explaining the ambiguous nature or the cohesive function of recurrent imagery and other verbal artefacts in the woven fabric of the text.

After 1974, teaching and research in Portuguese universities underwent major changes under the pressure of radical indoctrination, and reading methodologies have tended to discard the aesthetic value of literary works as verbal monuments, in favour of their interest as documentary products of a particular historical or cultural formation.

In line with such principles, the intrinsic merit of literary works was steadily downplayed whereas their political role and position within the cultural field as well as their capacity to stir up new controversies and clashes certainly occupied the foreground of research. In a certain sense, such turning of the tables seriously questioned the traditional supremacy of verbal discourse and was later to pave the way for the onset of cultural studies and their outright refusal to award literature any special status among other social or aesthetic practices.

In recent years, under the growing pressure of a postmodern, postcolonial, and post literary culture, research groups have tried to keep up with the pace of computer technologies and to cope with the current proliferation of methodologies. Sustained efforts to attain international excellence standards explain the selection of approaches that prove compatible with the mission of a university research unit and will potentially enhance its strategic goals. In general terms and bearing in mind that current literary hermeneutics can in no way dispense with a sound philological basis, our work significantly profits from the disciplinary cross-fertilization to be derived from integrative research in the areas of Language, Literature, and Culture.

After bringing together both well-established historical procedures and innovative critical assumptions, emphasis has shifted to the discussion of theoretical issues and practical problems deriving from the unprecedented expansion of English studies in our time. Consequently, we are now dealing with English as a mega-discipline that caters for a cluster of subjects and comprehends the broadening of the literary canon, the re-centring of formerly peripheral texts, cultural studies of past and present ages, digital multimedia, corpora analysis, audio-visual paraphernalia, etc. At the same time, academic publications bear witness to the on-going emergence of sub-disciplines and scientific approaches that cover discourse analysis, sociological and anthropological approaches, literary theory, reception and translation studies, inter-artistic dialogues, and environmental concerns, as well as ethnic, identity and gender issues.

The present situation raises problems well beyond our disciplinary commitment to English Studies. In fact, where can we possibly find a giant umbrella to shelter and encompass so many disparate projects that

doom the field to irreversible fragmentation? How can we encourage knowledge sharing and transfer between highly differentiated branches of science, which have adopted specific codes of communication? Is it possible to steer a middle course between the complexity of scholarship and the responsibility of making its results available and meaningful to society at large?

In the remaining paragraphs of our contribution we can give only an oblique, general response to such momentous challenges, in the hope that fellow researchers will suggest alternative guidelines.

In the first place, let us emphasize that professional expertise certainly implies critical alertness and a number of competences that are within easy reach of fully trained humanities scholars. In fact, scholarly rigour will provide them with both a sense of history and the open mindedness to adopt new concepts and models, while research routines can easily enhance the accuracy of information supplied by documentation sources. Besides, the practise of textual analysis, production, and evaluation is certainly an asset or even a prerequisite for the interpretation of the overt and covert meaning of various data supplied by reports and case studies. Furthermore, cooperation in a unit's research teamwork is a powerful means of developing familiarity with the state of various questions and readiness to test and implement innovative approaches. As an overall result, it is high time prospective employers were made aware of the added value of scholarly training in the professional curriculum of candidates.

Secondly, we firmly believe that an exclusive concern with interdisciplinary work will fall short of the ultimate educational aims of university teaching and research. If we are to cooperate in the social legitimation and prestige of the humanities, efforts should rather be redirected towards the setting and implementation of transdisciplinary goals that can optimize individual contributions within a fully inclusive society. From the point of view of effectiveness, it is obvious that the true relevance of the humanities and the utility of literary research cannot be evaluated in the short and middle term. In so far as accurate critical thinking is the very basis for political opinion and makes individuals aware of their responsibility to ameliorate community decision making, the lasting effects of academic work cannot fail to be apparent in the

long run, as a major influence that will produce shifts in attitude and contribute to societal change.

Finally, the central role of the humanities in the present time has a transdisciplinary reach that seems to lie well beyond the claims of old or new methodologies. In fact, the fundamental task of literary and cultural studies is to counterbalance the powers that be in their suicidal drive towards discontinuity, fragmentation and amnesia, which will create a society where the past has been deleted and the next generation will face the prospects of a dismal future.

As a summing up of our point, let us submit that a renewal of cultural memory – cultivated by classical and modern humanities and transmitted through multiple varieties of symbolic discourse – would certainly fill the present void and actively participate in the alternative shaping of social, economic, and political conditions worth looking forward to.