
Difference Unbound:

The Rise of Pluralism
in Literature and Criticism

Stamos Metzidakis

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INTRODUCTION

In a book that appeared in 1985, the political scientist Stanislaw Ehrlich states that the phenomenon of pluralism

should be the object of research on the level of political structure, economic structure and in the field of cultural life.¹

Because he limits himself in his book to an analysis of the first two levels only, Ehrlich implicitly extends an open invitation to future researchers who would concentrate instead on the third field mentioned in this quotation. The present essay represents an acceptance of the invitation thus extended. It examines the particular cultural field known as literature from a pluralistic perspective. To be more specific, this book examines the historical importance of the concepts of difference, originality, and progress in relation to the production and interpretation of literature, to the rise of what I shall call "literary pluralism." It is the *historical* perspective of this book then, rather than a primarily *epistemological* one, that distinguishes it most from other recent attempts to study the subject of pluralism and literature.²

By arguing that the contemporary critical emphasis on *difference* results from the nineteenth century's fusion of the concepts of originality and progress, I shall seek to redefine cultural pluralism in its various literary manifestations. Given the scope of such a project, few readers will be surprised to learn that the background material for this study has been gathered from the philosophic and literary traditions of many different countries. What all these traditions have in common is the profound influence they have had on the ways literature has been produced as well as described in most economically advanced Western countries. The countries most important for my purposes here happen to be France, England, Germany, and the United States. The reason for this lies not in any deliberate Eurocentric bias on my part, but rather in the realization that these countries, rightly or wrongly, have been the most highly

instrumental in the creation and understanding of Western Literature as it is generally known today in the Anglo-American context.

The reader will also notice that the following pages contain many different styles and discourses. At certain times, for example, one finds passages whose tone recalls an older, more traditional form of literary history. On other occasions, the book reads like a series of close textual analyses. At still other moments, a more generalized type of theoretical argument and statement is favored. One will even discover a few pages which are best described as quasi-autobiographical, confessional perhaps. In all of these instances, it is hoped that the reader understands why such a discursive potpourri or stylistic admixture should not be considered a fundamental flaw in the analysis of the problem at hand. Instead, this "weakness" serves as a kind of icon of our problem. Consequently, insofar as we shall be examining the phenomenon of pluralism as it relates to literature, one should expect a *plurality* of tones and approaches, foci and emphases. As will be suggested in chapter four, the mimetic impulse of all critics (not to mention all people) to copy their subject-matter may very well be unavoidable anyway.

The majority of specifically "literary" examples used in this analysis—by which adjective is meant certain linguistic phenomena whose ontological differentiation from theoretical statements is, for the moment, assumed—are taken from the works of several paradigmatic French writers (especially poets) of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries. To this extent, some may think that it would have been better to give the present book a more restrictive subtitle like "The Rise of Pluralism in *French* Literature and Criticism" rather than the more inclusive title, "The Rise of Pluralism in Literature and Criticism." Since the former subtitle underscores the national specificity of a large number of my examples, in a certain sense, it may indeed be more accurate. One would, therefore, be well advised to keep it in the back of one's mind throughout a reading of this book.

In spite of the admittedly Gallic slant of this study, i.e. despite the specific ties that I, like most other students of literature, have to a specialized subject-matter, I have nevertheless chosen to retain the

more ambitious title. To say that the various language and literature sections of established Western universities today are places where diverse critical influences meet and interact daily is, after all, hardly an exaggeration. Indeed, the very sections in question distinguish themselves from each other not so much by selecting a specific kind of methodology or theoretical perspective over others as by focusing their critical energies and attention on texts written in one language, and one language only.

Though this study is in some sense limited then by the (a?) literary canon which forms my personal academic specialty, it is my firm belief that it has much wider theoretical implications of use to specialists in other domains as well. For the phrase "literary pluralism" as it is conceived here is a term which covers both the production *and* interpretation of literature in Western countries since the eighteenth century, irrespective of the particular language isolated. Within the term "literary pluralism" I thus include both *aesthetic* and *critical* manifestations of pluralism or pluralistic thought. My book does not limit itself then *merely* to "critical pluralism," even if fundamentally critical issues are raised throughout. The goal of chapter one is precisely to delimit these two facets of our problem and to set the stage for my later development of them.

The main thrust of this essay is to explain and justify the need for a more limited view of pluralism, of the ways in which it actually benefits or hinders people working in the literary field. The reason we require such an apology now is that not very many people in the profession believe in the idea of aesthetic or hermeneutic limitations. That is, while *in practice* many writers and critics of literature accept limits (notwithstanding some of their dearest beliefs about themselves and their work), few appear comfortable in admitting that this is the case. No doubt because of our society's collective sense of ideological, or even "political" correctness vis-à-vis all forms of cultural pluralism and diversity, most artists and intellectuals nowadays seem inclined instead to act as if their true preferences were to live and to let live, to accept different kinds of literary texts and different readings of texts, provided that sufficient justification

or "evidence" be presented to support their existence. In this respect, my apology for a limited or more restricted view of literary pluralism will inevitably reveal the degree to which modern writers and critics have unwittingly supported, and contributed to, the widespread acceptance of pluralism, through their desire for palatable *self-perceptions*.

As it turns out though, their own practice has not always meshed with this desire to be "pluralistic." To pick a particularly telling example, in an earlier essay,³ I tried to show how the influential critic, Roland Barthes, remained much more of a structuralist throughout his career than he himself was willing to admit. To grasp how important this question of *self-image* was to Barthes—and, by extension, to many other modern critics—it suffices to trace the obsessive usage of the term "image" throughout the various phases of his evolving work. From the so-called structuralist beginning of his career to the post-structuralist, autobiographical end, images are what continually come to the fore in Barthes' essays. Images of countless varieties, from poetic to photographic, always seem to attract his critical eye.

Yet, if we are to understand fully the significance of Barthes' obsession with the word/concept "image," we must first of all remember that the term itself derives from the Latin verb *imitare*, "to imitate." This fact, insignificant by itself, takes on special meaning if we remember that when he first defined "structuralist activity" in the early 1960s, this form of cognitive activity meant nothing less to Barthes than the symbolic elaboration of perceived *imitations* or recurrences in target texts. As my essay indicates, Barthes continued nonetheless to favor this term well after 1963. Although it is true that he applied it more and more to *himself* in his later works, and less and less to other "texts," one can argue (as I did) that this transformation signals not so much a change in the logic and/or procedures subtending his critical *activity* as it does a change in his critical *focus* or perspective. This change can most succinctly be described as a shift in Barthes' interpretive focus from the "text itself" to the reader-of-the-text. In chapter two, we shall examine more closely how this personal shift in focus came to be

standard operating procedure in many other critical writings of the time as well, not just Barthes', and why, from the point of view of literary pluralism, this shift turns out to be both a necessary and epistemologically valid change of perspective.

However, the crucial point regarding Barthes' (and our) hermeneutic *practice* that my article tried to emphasize is this: changing the set of textual "data" to be analyzed, from the text itself to the reader, as Barthes and so many others have done, does not necessarily mean changing the analytical means of "explicating" these data. The particular choice of "texts" or textual features may change, but it is not clear whether, cognitively, critics ever significantly modify their individual practices of analyzing them. In this sense, we can say that for Barthes, and probably for most other readers as well, the perception of imitation remained the procedural key to his critical practice; and this, even though the objects he sought to understand through such perception varied constantly. So, while he and many other contemporary critics appeared to be more and more "pluralistic" in their modern quest for textual *difference*, it is a fact worth noting from the very beginning of this study that his writings consistently relied on the hermeneutic stability and pragmatic *identity* afforded by the models and copies created whenever a reader perceives an imitation, a repetition. Without perceiving these "images," he, like others, might have had, literally, *nothing to say*.

My central thesis, therefore, constitutes a three-fold polemic against contemporary literary pluralism. One part argues that most critics, despite any dramatic pronouncements they may make, usually choose one textual interpretation, or one type of interpretation, over others. They thereby limit their own, sometimes professed, theoretical receptiveness to pluralism. A second part insists that all writers have always written within various kinds of boundaries, despite the incontestable fact that they often make a point of trying radically to break "out" of such boundaries. The last part of my polemic advances the idea that because of certain trans-historical factors discussed in chapter four, writers and critics will most likely never cease behaving in the manner to which we have grown

accustomed. By means of the present argument, my hope is merely that some of them might at least be persuaded to modify ever so slightly their *perception* of their respective activities. For, modifying these perceptions is surely one way to help future poets, critics, and students view literature in a truly different light, not *just* in the light of difference.

Before concluding these introductory remarks, let me emphasize how much we must all begin to recognize our practice for what it is, and to stop living under various illusions perpetrated by certain powerful poetic and critical precursors. The major illusion to which I refer is the all-encompassing one of "literary pluralism" that my first chapter aims to define. It is time for us to stop acting as if we were perfectly open to the literary styles, techniques, or methods of others when, in fact, we are far more limited *in our practice* than we realize. No longer should we give mere lip-service to the notion of pluralism when, in reality, no such complete acceptance of the phenomenon has ever really existed. In a word, it is time to change our views concerning the causes and effects of literary pluralism so that we might better understand exactly what is being done when we "do" literary criticism and/or theory, or when we "make" verbal art.

* * *

In order to facilitate the extrapolation from my examples to those of other literary traditions, English translations of materials published originally in other languages are provided. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from the French are my own. Whenever the original text contains certain stylistic features whose translation is open to considerable debate—as will often be the case for versified poems—the original appears before the translation. If, however, in a given context, the non-English text's form matters much less than the thought(s) it conveys, only a translation is used.

For their generous support at the start of this long project, I would like to thank the trustees of the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, France, and especially the foundation's director, Mr. Michael

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Finally, I wish to dedicate this study to the memory of my late father, Steve Metzidakis. His sense of duty, in all its forms, kept me focused when many distractions, including his prolonged illness, threatened to dampen my enthusiasm for the project. In many subtle ways, this book reflects my understanding of, and respect for, the positive pluralistic model he and the rest of my Greek-American family have provided me over the years.

NOTES

¹ Stanislaw Ehrlich, *Pluralism On and Off Course* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1985), p. 233.

² Three other recent books on the subject of pluralism and literature, written by Wayne Booth, Ellen Rooney, and K. M. Newton, tacitly respond to Ehrlich's invitation as well, though in ways dissimilar from mine. I shall have numerous occasions to cite these works later on, and to show more completely how the present book differs from them.

³ See my article, "Barthes' Image," *Neophilologus*, 71 (1987), 489-495.

Chapter I

THE "PROBLEM" OF LITERARY PLURALISM

Following a heated debate over a lecture I delivered a few years ago, a colleague asked me a question that he surely thought—as, I confess, I myself and others in the hall at the time also thought—was perfectly simple and appropriate to the issue at hand. His question was this: "What is *wrong* with one more new reading of *Hamlet*?" To appreciate fully the sense and effect of his inquiry, it is necessary to realize that earlier in the discussion I had advanced the apparently bizarre idea that perhaps nothing of real value was to be gained by producing an indefinite number of new readings or interpretations of the same work of art. In this respect, the simplicity of his question derived from a direct assessment of what he had taken to be the main thrust of my initial argument.

After some reflection, I finally saw that the problem was not so much the reaction of my friend or my audience as it was the form of his question. Rephrasing his question, I thus responded in the following way: While having 2001 interpretations of *Hamlet* was certainly not, to my mind, "bad" in any transcendental or metaphysical way,¹ the more important question was rather why it seemed so *correct* to almost everyone there, and, one might add, elsewhere, that this be the (desired) case in literary criticism and theory. What I wanted to convey was my uneasiness with the knowledge that modern literary studies as a whole appeared permeated by just such a pluralistic attitude. For it seemed to me then only normal, indeed indispensable (as it still does), to ask why no one else wondered whether this unquestioned faith in pluralism constituted a positive sign of modern critical activity or not. It was as if pluralism was, by definition, not only desirable, but possibly even *necessary*; that to doubt this fact was tantamount to my being either a fascist, or, at the very least, a reactionary anachronism in aesthetic circles.

Since I never considered myself to exemplify either of these unsavory options, I, of course, felt that a legitimate defense was in order. My defense has taken the form of this book. In the process of defending my own critical positions, I have become ever so slightly

sympathetic, as more "progressive" thinkers might fear, to the repeated attempts by E.D. Hirsch and a host of others in the United States and Europe to valorize the notion of interpretative validity, of critical acceptability. Lest there be any misunderstanding, however, I must confess right away that my moderate sympathy with Hirsch's arguments has in no way translated into acquiescence. I still harbor very serious doubts about the actual success he and his defenders have had in proving the many intriguing points they try to make concerning an author's intention, the notion of a "correct" interpretation, and the supposed existence of a shared body of knowledge whose proper assimilation leads to "cultural literacy." It is not so much the idea of shared knowledge that bothers me, but rather the formulation of any and all *specific* canons or dictionaries that would presume to serve everyone, and for all time.

Yet, in spite of these important reservations, I feel that the time has come for us in the literary profession to examine some of the reasons why so much controversy has surrounded not just Hirsch's seminal work on the subject,² but more importantly, his *type* of research. My intention is not to serve as apologist for Hirsch or any one thinker in particular; nor to return us to "the good old days" of even earlier criticism, when critics were white males of European descent, and their truth was The Truth. Rather, I would like to analyze our ever-increasing collective resistance to the very *possibility* of critical determinacy in general. The issue is not whether critics and theorists possess a set number of criteria for interpretative validity, but instead whether, as a recent critic has stated, "such coherent criteria are even possible in theory."³

This book attempts to provide some answers to questions that derive logically from an extended consideration of the situation just described. The questions are: 1) Why do the vast majority of modern⁴ readers and writers think that artistic works in general, and literary works in particular must, at all costs, be different somehow from those produced before?, 2) By what means do texts and interpretations distinguish themselves from others?, and finally, 3) How has it happened that pluralism has become so acceptable in Western intellectual circles? Why, in other words, does anyone pondering its

suitability as a guiding principle in criticism, and more generally, in things literary, provoke disbelief, impatience, even resentment on the part of individuals who are sometimes barely even aware of the tacit support they give thereby to the ideological hegemony of pluralism?

The expression "ideological hegemony" needs to be emphasized here because of how widespread the ostensibly blind acceptance of pluralism—or what might more accurately be described as the need or demand for *difference* in all cultural spheres—has become. Indeed, in the United States, at least, it has become so entrenched and reified that it has turned into a kind of absolute article of intellectual and quasi-political faith of our time. As an article of faith, the acceptance of pluralism has taken the form of an all-too-natural belief, a belief that most people think is not just shared by large "interpretative communities" (to use Stanley Fish's term), but more disturbingly perhaps, *must* be shared by all. Questioning the legitimacy of this belief, as I intend to do in the pages that follow, is thus equivalent, or so it would seem, to flying in the face of one of modern society's most solid, if relatively new, conceptual foundations. Questioning pluralism amounts to undermining the authority of this concept/phenomenon to determine the very way people regard any cultural productions whatsoever, and in particular, literary ones.

To hazard a preliminary response to the question of *why* people react so strongly against an interrogation of pluralism, let me advance an idea that it will be my task to prove a little later on. Critical attempts to denigrate pluralism nowadays go against Western society's epistemological grain mainly because they contradict or otherwise undermine two contemporary myths under whose spell we have lived unawares for almost two hundred years. The two myths in question are those of *originality* and *progress*. Any questioning of pluralism provokes negative reactions because it is seen as an attack on the following commonly-held idea: Whenever someone creates something original, e.g. a new poem or a different reading, one adds something new to the general pool of valuable literary art that, as such, is "significant." What makes this creation so significant is that it represents, as it were, something one step beyond that which has already existed.

The really important aspect of the process, however, is that somewhere along the way the creator⁵ of this originality, of this *difference*, as well as the (literary) society around the creator, are assumed to have made some type of human or humanistic "progress." Progress results from precisely that move "forward" and away from, that which has already been accomplished, said, or done elsewhere. To deny anyone the right to be, find, or make something new (which, after all, constitutes the gesture of the writer or critic who poses fundamental questions about the desirability of the simultaneous co-existence of *dissimilar* literary texts or readings, respectively) is therefore seen by die-hard supporters of pluralism as a potentially dangerous attempt to deny everyone the same possibility. Such a gesture is regarded as a threat to, or undermining of, the possibility of difference, a possibility which most people today, of course, scarcely even question. In other words, the gesture involved in questioning one's legitimate right-to-difference constitutes a temporary freezing of the universal praise and acceptance that are otherwise generously bestowed upon the author who purports to have presented, discovered, or produced something new in the midst of the already-there, i.e. previous literature and criticism.

From this point of view, it is ironic that all would-be enemies of those who question pluralism are in a very real sense more "reactionary" than any debunkers of pluralism could ever hope to be. It is important to emphasize the reactionary nature of these potential negative responses which the present critical inquiry (and any others that follow) may generate. The apparent unwillingness of most critics and theorists to ask many serious questions about pluralism can only be understood as a determined effort on all their parts to hold on to one of our culture's central mythologies. This mythology, an essentially uncontested faith in the intrinsic worth and value of pluralism, is promulgated throughout the West. It would have those of us who work in the literary domain believe that we are open to suggestion and to innovation, when, in fact, we are far less magnanimous with respect to "difference" than such a auto-fiction implies.

The important question, therefore, is not whether modern literary institutions like universities, publishing houses, academic journals, as well as literary "schools" from the early German Romantic *Athenaeum* group of Jena (1798-1800) to twentieth-century "avant-garde" movements have had the unalienable *right* to exercise authority. Once again, it is not a matter here of speculation on metaphysical rights or wrongs. Rather it is a question of ascertaining whether these same institutions, in the words of K. M. Newton, have not actually sought "to disguise through [an] attempt at mystification the fact that [they] control interpretation by force."⁶ Since my very contention is that pluralism exists more in words than in reality, what we have to determine is whether or not pluralism exists as something other than a kind of password to literary acceptability.⁷ We need to figure out whether it constitutes anything more than an ideologically-laden mystification of what is *really* happening.

On the other hand, it is crucial to understand how contemporary versions of the myths of originality and progress have also contributed significantly to the said mystification. As one shall see in the second half of this book, these two hitherto separate concepts began to merge at the end of the eighteenth century, and formed an important conceptual hybrid of the two. In turn, this hybrid or unquestioned overlapping of two theoretically distinct notions formed the seed of the modern predilection for pluralism. For the moment, however, I should perhaps leave these last ideas in the form of hypotheses, since much needs to be examined before they can be proved.

In any event, it is difficult to dispute the fact that originality and progress merit even more critical attention than they appear to have received, especially as they relate to literature and literary studies. That these myths continue to seduce poets and critics alike into believing a disturbing, perhaps even dangerous, fallacy about themselves and about their work has, to my mind, not been sufficiently examined. This fallacy deludes them into thinking that what they can, and moreover, *should* do within their respective areas of expertise is to seek out, almost indiscriminately, some kind of difference that would justify their practice. Put succinctly, difference