

LITERATURE AS UTOPIA: BETWEEN JACQUES DERRIDA AND INGEBOURG BACHMANN

A LITERATURA COMO UTOPIA: ENTRE JACQUES DERRIDA E INGEBOURG BACHMANN

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ABSTRACT

While Derrida admitted the “critical powers” of utopia, he was generally wary of the term and used it only very rarely. He was particularly concerned that it “can be too easily associated with dreams or demobilization”. By referring to the notion of utopia as proposed by Ingeborg Bachmann, which, from our point of view, overcomes the general concerns expressed by Derrida, this paper reconsiders the relationship between his philosophy and the utopian tradition.

On the one hand, we suggest that the utopian perspective can not only be applied to certain political concepts (such as the idea of “democracy to come” or the idea of “unconditional hospitality”), but also to the concept of writing itself, which Derrida analysed in *De la Grammatologie* (1967) and in his *Introduction* (1962) to Husserl’s *Origin of Geometry*. On the other hand, we draw some important analogies between Derrida’s conception of literature and the idea of “literature as utopia”, as discussed by Bachmann in a conference bearing that name in 1960.

KEYWORDS: Derrida; Bachmann; Utopia; Writing; Literature

RESUMO

Embora Derrida admitisse os “poderes críticos” da utopia, ele geralmente era cauteloso com o termo e o utilizava apenas muito raramente. Preocupava-se particularmente com o fato de que o termo “pode ser muito facilmente associado a sonhos ou desmobilização”. Ao se referir à noção de utopia como proposta por Ingeborg Bachmann, que, de nosso ponto de vista, supera as preocupações gerais expressas por Derrida, esse artigo reconsidera a relação entre sua filosofia e a tradição utópica. Por um lado, sugerimos que a perspectiva utópica não apenas pode ser aplicada a certos conceitos políticos

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(como a ideia da "democracia porvir" ou a ideia de "hospitalidade incondicional"), mas também ao conceito da própria escrita, que Derrida analisou em *De la Grammatologie* (1967) e em sua *Introduction* (1962) à *Origem da Geometria* de Husserl. Por outro lado, traçamos algumas importantes analogias entre a concepção de literatura de Derrida e a ideia de "literatura como utopia", como discutida por Bachmann em uma conferência com o mesmo nome em 1960.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Derrida, Bachmann, Utopia, Escrita, Literatura

Derrida has constantly been rather suspicious about utopia. He very rarely used this word and when he was solicited to comment on his relationship with this concept, he answered affirming a clear mistrust, and even an open rejection of utopianism and of utopia, at least concerning “what the word literally signifies or is ordinarily taken to mean” (DERRIDA, 1999, p.248).

In a 1998 interview, he explained his suspicion in this way: “Utopia has critical powers that we should probably never give up on, especially when we can make it a reason for resisting all alibis and all ‘realistic’ or ‘pragmatic’ cop-outs, but all the same I’m wary of the word. There are some contexts in which *utopia*, the word at any rate, can be too easily associated with dreams, or demobilization, or an impossible that is more of an urge to give up than an urge to action” (DERRIDA, 2005, p.131).

Nevertheless, there are different reasons to consider many concepts elaborated by Derrida as characterised by a strong continuity with the utopian tradition and perfectly compatible with it, even if this tradition clearly needs to be updated and critically reinterpreted. For example, we can think of the notion of impossible, the idea of the democracy to come (*démocratie à venir*), the idea of an unconditional hospitality (*hospitalité inconditionnelle*), the messianism without messiah (*messianicité sans messianisme*), the engagement of Derrida on the project of the cities of refuge (*villes refuges*), etc.

The relationship between the utopian tradition and each one of these elements, all of them thematised by Derrida relatively late, should be the object of specific analyses and studies. But what I’m going to discuss is a more transversal and preliminary aspect: the relation between utopia and Derrida’s conception of writing and literature.

Derrida, didn't question this relation explicitly, at least not in his published works. But it seems to me that it's crucial from two complementary and symmetrical perspectives.

First of all, it's in the context of a researching the notion of utopia that it is necessary to consider its written, fictional and literary dimension. Indeed, we cannot forget that utopia is not simply a political concept: beginning from the book published by Thomas More in 1516, utopia is a word and a concept that was born and has constantly been developed in a literary and fictional context, and is strictly connected with the capacity to imagine and describe different worlds.

But on the other hand, symmetrically, also when we discuss literature and writing it is important to consider their utopian dimension. This second perspective is probably less evident than the first one and has rarely been examined, but it has been openly theorised, for example, by philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, who, using an expression later analysed in depth by Miguel Abensour, spoke of "utopia of books" (LEVINAS, 1982, p.13)¹, or by writer Ingeborg Bachmann, who, in 1960, gave a conference in Frankfurt entitled "Literature as utopia". For instance, in this conference Bachmann affirms that:

In every great work, whether it be the *Don Quixote* or the *Divina Commedia*, we discover something that is faded, haggard, a gap that we ourselves fill giving it a chance, reading it today and intending to read it tomorrow again - an inadequacy so large that it pushes us to treat literature as if it were an utopia (BACHMANN, 1978, p.258-259).

But literature neither the old nor the modern is not a accomplished fact, it's the more open field [...] none of his works is *dated* and none of them can be made *harmless*, because they contain all of the assumptions that elude any agreement and any final cataloguing. I would like to try to define these assumptions inherent in the works themselves, 'utopian assumptions' (BACHMANN, 1978, p.259-260).

In other words, Bachmann is not interested in concrete utopias, but in the constitutive "openness" of literary texts. In her conference she also speaks of "utopia of language" and of utopia in relation to the community of writers, but if she adopts the expression "literature as utopia", it is mainly because of this openness and of the correlative capacity of literature to interact with readers and to produce effects in all time.

This last aspect is particularly pertinent here because it reveals how Bachmann avoids the general worries expressed by Derrida in the interview that we have quoted: for

¹ For the commentary proposed by Abensour see ABENSOUR, 2010.

her, contrary to the risk of demobilisation, the utopian dimension of literature is precisely what permits literature to influence and to change the present: not only a single present but every present.

As mentioned before, Derrida didn't explicitly express his position on this, or on similar perspectives, nor on the written and literary dimension of utopias. But I think that in his work we can find different positions and texts that could be useful to discuss and to develop both of them.

Even his earliest published work is particularly useful when considering the fundamental role of writing in constituting our world and every possible world.

I'm referring to Derrida's *Introduction* of 1962 to Husserl's *Origin of geometry*: the long text in which Derrida emphasized the importance of writing in a relatively minor husserlian text, which is to say that, in this text, writing is nothing less than the condition of possibility of ideality and of ideal objects.

As Derrida observes, "Husserl insists that truth is not fully objective, i.e., ideal, intelligible for everyone and indefinitely perdurable, as long as it cannot be said *and* written. [...] Paradoxically, the possibility of being written [*la possibilité graphique*] permits the ultimate freeing of ideality" (DERRIDA, 1978, p.90).

Only writing completely emancipates ideal objects from their present evidence for a determined subject: it's writing that makes them independent from the actual presence of real subjects and from their factual intentionality, thus permitting the absolute ideal objectivity to emerge.

To attest to the importance of this question and of the *Introduction* in Derrida's work, it is also interesting to consider the necessary relation, affirmed for example in *De la Grammatologie* (1967), between writing and the possibility of something like an institution. In this book published in 1967, in the attempt to consider a generalised sense of writing (a kind of writing that precedes both speech and writing), Derrida affirms both that "the only irreducible kernel of the concept of writing" is "the durable institution of a sign", and that "the very idea of institution [...] is unthinkable before the possibility of writing and outside of its horizon" (DERRIDA, 1977, p.44).

But if, in relation with utopia, an analysis of writing as a condition of ideality and as condition of every institution deserves deeper examinations, from the point of view of the

utopian openness of literature underlined by Bachmann (but also by Levinas and Abensour), what is even more relevant is the fact that, in his major works, Derrida doesn't consider writing merely as the condition of possibility of ideality but also as its *condition of impossibility*.

This aspect was actually already anticipated in the *Introduction*. In fact, while Husserl is not at all concerned about the hypothesis of a factual destruction of what is written, Derrida, on the contrary, stresses the *Leiblichkeit* of writing (it being not only a constituted sensible body (*Körper*), but also a properly constituting body). In this way he distances himself from the position of Husserl, who doesn't consider the necessity of passing through writing to be a menace to ideality.

This distance, however is only fully affirmed and developed in the next books published by Derrida, in which it is articulated through a whole series of interrelated concepts such as *différance*, supplementarity, dissemination and iterability. It's while commenting on how the latter concept defines writing that, he affirms in *Limited Inc*: "iterability makes possible idealization – [...] – while at the same time limiting the idealization it makes possible: *broaching* and *breaching* it at once [elle l'entame]" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.61).

In other words, Derrida questioned and underlined the fact that writing, to be writing, must be iterable, which is to say repeatable and readable, in the absence of the writer and the receiver: an absence that, according to him, "is not a continuous modification of presence", but a necessary and constitutive "rupture in presence" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.8).

To write – as Derrida observes – is "to produce a mark that will constitute a sort of machine which is productive in turn" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.8) and which functions and offers things as well as itself to be read and rewritten, even when its author is dead. For this reason he affirms that "a written sign carries with it a force that breaks with its context" and that "this breaking force [*force de rupture*] is not an accidental predicate but the very structure of the written text" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.9).

In this perspective, iterability, for Derrida, "breaches, divides, expropriates the 'ideal' plenitude or self-presence of intention, of meaning (to say) and, a fortiori, of all adequation between meaning and saying" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.61-62).

Iterability also reveals how even the apparently simpler, poorer, and more univocal utterance remains open to extremely different readings². To exemplify this fact, Derrida cites a sentence that we can find in the unpublished writings of Nietzsche: the sentence "I forgot my umbrella", which he already analyzed in *Spurs: Nietzsche's Styles* (1973). In *Limited Inc*, he makes the following observation about it:

A thousand possibilities will always remain open even if one understands something in this phrase that makes sense (as a citation? the beginning of a novel? a proverb? someone else's secretarial archives? an exercise in learning language? the narration of a dream? an alibi? a cryptic code-conscious or not? the example of a linguist or of a speech act theoretician letting his imagination wander for short distances, etc?) (DERRIDA, 1988, p.63)

It is clear that the openness affirmed in this passage is not the same one stressed by Bachmann, who focused her attention specifically on literature and not on writing in general, or on a generalised sense of writing. Nevertheless I think that the inappropriability of writing thematised by Derrida, and his remarks on the "logic that ties repetition to alterity" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.63)³, could at least be studied as a condition of the utopian dimension of literature that interests Bachmann, Levinas and Abensour, among others.

With this direction in mind, and in conclusion, I'd like to now propose two main series of remarks about the relation between writing and literature.

The first one concerns the fact that both Derrida and Bachmann are very critical about the possibility of speaking of something such as an "essence" of literature.

On this point, Derrida, is particularly clear, specifically in an interview with Derek Attridge that took place in Laguna Beach in April 1989. Here, although his position was already clear in *Dissemination* (1972), Derrida underlines how "no *internal* criterion can guarantee the essential 'literariness' of a text. There is no assured essence or existence of literature" (ATTRIDGE, 1993, p.73).

² That being said, Derrida never told that every interpretation is possible and he always affirmed the necessity of rigor and accuracy.

³ "This etymology, of course, has no value qua proof and were it to be false, the very shift in meaning would confirm the law here indicated: the time and place of the other time already at work, altering from the start the start itself, the first time, the at once. Such are the vices that interest me: the other time in (stead of) the first, at once" (DERRIDA, 1988, p.63).

As Derrida argues, if we proceed to analyse all the elements of a literary work, we will never come across literature itself: in any case – it could be “a matter of the language, of the meanings or of the referents ("subjective" or "objective")” – we can only find some traits that literature shares or borrows, some traits that we can find elsewhere too, in other texts. He also observes that it is always possible to inscribe in literature something that was not originally destined to be literary.

Literature then, for Derrida, is first of all a specific historical institution: an institution that appeared in Europe recently and is linked to an authorization to say everything, and to the emergence of the modern idea of democracy. But this fact, as Derrida stresses in the cited interview, “does not mean that one can identify the literary object in a rigorous way. It doesn't mean that there is an essence of literature. It even means the opposite” (ATTRIDGE, 1993, p.41).

Bachmann is less explicit and radical than Derrida and if we consider only the title of her conference, “literature as utopia”, we could even be led to think that, for her, utopia is a kind of essence of literature. But we need only read her first paragraphs to understand how such an interpretation is inappropriate. In fact, Bachmann affirms that “literature always fatally escapes to research” and she underlines how we are structurally incapable of composing a literary Pantheon. She stresses also how it's perfectly normal that, during our lives, we change our opinions about literary works, and how, contrary to science, a work is never buried, in the sense of replaced and improved, by the next one.

For Bachmann literature is this: “It is the hope, and the desire which we shape drawing on our heritage, according to our needs - so that it is a kingdom which is opened to future, and we don't know its boundaries” (BACHMANN, 1978, p.258).

As I have already quoted, “literature, neither the old nor the modern is not a accomplished fact, it's the more open field” (BACHMANN, 1978, p.259). For Bachmann, then, speaking of literature as utopia exactly corresponds to affirming, as Derrida did, that it is impossible to “identify the literary object in a rigorous way” (ATTRIDGE, 1993, p.41).

The second and concluding series of remarks is about a particular “power” that Derrida recognizes in literary texts. Again in the interview that took place in Laguna Beach in 1989, he affirms that “The ‘economy’ of literature *sometimes* seems to me more powerful than that of other types of discourse: such as, for example, historical or

philosophical discourse. *Sometimes*: it depends on singularities and contexts. Literature would be potentially more potent” (ATTRIDGE, 1993, p.43).

Confirming Derrida’s mistrust in speaking of literature in general, the adverb “sometimes” is underlined here and written in italics. That being said, the interview particularly stresses two interrelated aspects. The first one is the existence of many literary texts that are openly “inscribed in a *critical* experience of literature” (ATTRIDGE, 1993, p.41): each one of them, in a singular way, operates “a sort of turning back” on the literary institution: a turning back that is not so common in other institutions. It’s the case, for example, when it comes to various texts signed by Mallarme, Joyce, Bataille, Artaud or Blanchot.

The second aspect is the fact that, “even if they always do so unequally and differently, poetry and literature have as a common feature that they suspend the ‘thetic’ naivety of the transcendent reading” (ATTRIDGE, 1993, p.45). In other words, they suspend a reading that is only interested in the meaning and the referent and not in the form and the language. Of course, as Derrida specifies, on the one hand, a non-transcendent reading of any text whatsoever is always possible, and, on the other hand, a literature which forbids any transcendent reading “would annul itself”.

Nevertheless what Derrida underlines is that “there is no literature without a suspended relation to meaning and reference. Suspended means suspense, but also dependence, condition, conditionality. In its suspended condition, literature can only exceed itself” (ATTRIDGE, 1993, p.48).

This last aspect is particularly relevant to our point of view, not only because it confirms a deep convergence with the utopian’s openness as stressed by Bachmann, but also because in the interpretation proposed by Abensour, the utopian character of Levinas’s works is strictly dependent on a concrete practice of suspension. Abensour, in fact, speaks of an utopian epoché: it’s a movement that can be caused by an encounter with the other, but also by a book: a movement that awakes us from the dogmatic sleep that considers the established order as necessary.

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