THE LITERATURE MYTH

Magnus Persson

1. Introduction

The answers to the question of why one should read—or study—literature are no longer obvious (Persson, 2007). Reading literature in school is now a contested activity in strong need of legitimization. Its role as a privileged tool for Bildung is questioned both by pupils and by teachers. The use value of literature has to be clearly explained in ways that are different than before. In light of this uncertainty it is striking how a number of unexpected actors are now making themselves spokespersons for these values, from politicians and health researchers to therapists and global fast-food chains (for example, McDonald’s cooperation with the Swedish Reading Movement/Läsrörelsen). At a time when the traditional agents of the literary institution (literary scholars, critics, librarians, teachers) are finding it harder to make strong arguments for reading, others are ready to step into the breach. Despite this uncertainty about the value of literature, there is still a widespread and almost religious belief that good literature creates good individuals.

In 1979 Harvey J. Graff coined the phrase the “literacy myth” as a criticism of the strongly entrenched notion that literacy itself, regardless of historical context and social circumstances, leads to a long list of good things, from rational thinking to democracy (Graff, 1979). According to Graff, literacy is not a timeless neutral entity; instead it is always embedded in various social and ideological contexts. By analogy with Graff’s term I wish to introduce the concept of “literature myth” to show how ideas about the positive values and effects of literature often rely on assumptions that are taken for granted instead of on critical thinking. Reading practices are subject to historical change, as are the legitimizations of them. The purpose of this article is to make a plea for a deeper and more creative commitment to the question of why we should continue to read literature in a culture which German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk (1999) has called both post-humanistic and post-literary.

In this article I will highlight several core elements of the literature myth. I am particularly interested in how values are ascribed to different reading practices and whether these values take into consideration the changed conditions for reading in a highly mediatized and culturally heterogeneous society. I will give some specific examples of how the myth operates. The examples
are taken from three kinds of empirical data: handbooks on the art of reading literature, educational policy documents, and bibliotherapeutic texts. As the educational system in Western culture both historically and today is the most important place for the production and reproduction of the literature myth, educational policy documents will be given considerably more attention than the other examples in my discussion.

What are the arguments for reading literature that can be discerned in my material? Despite the big differences both within and between the various types of empirical data, a recurring pattern can be seen. Together the examples indicate the presence of a myth about the goodness of literature. Here by myth I do not mean something made up or untrue. I use the concept in a way similar to Roland Barthes in his seminal **Mythologies** (Barthes, [1957] 1993), where “myth” designates a particular kind of depoliticized speech with universalizing and naturalizing aims. I am not claiming, of course, that literature cannot have the kinds of values and effects the myth propagates, creating empathy, for example, but I wish to underscore that these effects cannot be taken for granted and that the underlying values and ideologies of the myth must be made visible. Not all of my empirical examples articulate all the elements of this myth, and the differences can be considerable. But that they are inscribed, make themselves proponents for, or somehow must position themselves in relation to this myth will be obvious.

What, then, characterizes the literature myth? The following seven elements are prevalent and recurring: (1) Literature is both superior and under threat. (2) The goodness of literature is taken for granted. (3) Good literature (automatically) has good effects. (4) The notion of literature and culture is dualistic and hierarchical. (5) Good literature works against bad culture. (6) The myth uses a combination of an inclusive rhetoric and an exclusive practice. (7) Reading literature has a disciplining effect.

It is important to stress that the articulations of the myth can be very different in terms of their complexity. They range from the naïve to the highly nuanced and self-reflexive. One must not forget that critical theory—and critical reading—have long been, and still are, central to literary studies. Feminist, postcolonial, and Marxist scholars have produced an impressive number of demystifying interpretations of both canonical and popular literature in which the notion of an inherent value in literature has been strongly questioned. But literary studies is just one arena, albeit a highly influential one, in which the dissemination of literary values takes place. And even here it turns out that completely abandoning the literature myth might be very difficult, if not impossible. Let me give just one example. The starting point for John Beverley’s *Against Literature* goes like this: