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## **Umberto Eco's New Paradigm and Experimentalism in the 1960s**

### Abstract

In this paper I analyse the results of a paradigmatic shift in the history of experimental writing. Drawing from the historiographical structure of natural sciences proposed by Thomas S. Kuhn in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962), I read Umberto Eco's theory of the 'open work' as a narrativisation of that shift or 'change of paradigm'. In *The Open Work* (1962) Eco reads James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922) as a watershed for Western history. Joyce's writing, according to Eco, offered a successful response to the European context of the 1920s that would change the experience of reading and writing forever, as well as the understanding of literary experimentation. This Joycean shift becomes apparent in the 1960s, when experimental publications by authors such as Italo Calvino, Julio Cortázar, Bryan Stanley Johnson and Georges Perec indicate that something characteristic was shared under this new paradigm; something that I call an experimentalism.

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In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962) Thomas S. Kuhn states that there is an important development in natural sciences every time “an individual or group first produces a synthesis able to attract most of the next generation’s practitioners” (1962: 19). Kuhn explains that scientific knowledge advances when a crisis prompts a revolution at the core of the dominant paradigm. A crisis is normally caused by an important discovery or invention that shatters a set of fundamental laws previously taken for granted. According to Kuhn, the destruction and subsequent rearticulation of our understanding can be historically theorised as a change of scientific paradigm; i.e. the manner in which scientists approach nature and, in turn, their experiments. In *Opera Aperta* (also published in 1962) [*The Open Work* (1989)] Umberto Eco reads James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) in this way, as the trigger that caused a revolution in the history of literature, changing the understanding and methodology of an entire generation of experimental writers. Joyce’s poetics identified a crisis that changed the way we understand literature to the present day, mainly because his literary representation was more adjusted to modernity. In this paper, in fact, I study the reasons why Eco reads Joyce as a writer that provided a successful response to the European context of the 1920s, and what are the focuses of literary experimentation that spring from the new literary paradigm.

Firstly I will discuss three main critical categories that Eco attributes to the poetics of Modernism because, according to him, these categories were still unfolding throughout the 1960s Western European literary world and are indispensable to understand the practises of these new experimental writers. The categories are the ‘open work’, the ‘new chaosmos’ and the ‘model reader’. Then I will provide an understanding of experimentalism after Joyce through a reconceptualization of Eco’s theoretical work, and I will create a useful metaphorical analogy with the structure of scientific revolutions established by Kuhn.

## **The Poetics of the Open Work**

In *The Open Work* Eco articulates his theory of openness in order to explain what he believes to be the new poetics of literary form. Eco’s proposal represents a response to the idealism of the Italian thinker Benedetto Croce, a Hegelian who opposed Positivism and rejected the idea that reality can only be explained by scientific means. Croce, instead, insisted upon the

importance of aesthetics to the understanding of a reality constructed with our intuition and our senses, and went so far as to attempt to establish a universal and unequivocal description of the aesthetic experience which, according to Eco, completely foregoes the materiality of the work of art and its socio-historical context:

Art for Croce was a purely mental phenomenon that could be communicated directly from the mind of the artist to that of the reader, viewer, or listener. The intuition/expression which constituted the essence of the work of art was thus an unchanging entity... The material medium of the artistic work was of no real significance; it merely served as a stimulus to enable the reader to reproduce in him- or herself the artist's original intuition. (Robey 1989: 9)

Eco does not undervalue the importance of aesthetic expression but he feels that it is necessary to draw attention away from the work of art towards its consumption. He wants to move from a potentially sterile idealism to a fertile exchange of information focusing on the reception of determinate pieces (Eco 1989b: 25). In the 1950s, Luigi Pareyson, Eco's tutor and doctoral supervisor at the University of Turin, developed a similar approach with his theory of 'formativity', in which more importance is placed on the 'consumption' and 'interpretation' of the work of art, rather than on its 'expression'. Eco, however, took Pareyson's ideas further, developing the concept of openness and analysing the cultural meaning of the Western European new avant-gardes (Robey 1989: 12).

In *The Open Work* Eco argues that contemporary culture is in crisis and that the author cannot provide a harmonious image of the world without betraying its nature; instead, the author has to offer an interwoven cosmos of connotations, a metafictional and self-referential narrative that reflects upon the perception of our surroundings and ourselves and involves the reader in the creative process. Eco states that "the techniques of the open work reproduce in depth the crisis of our vision of the world in the structure of the work of art" (Eco 1962: 5). For Eco, Joyce is the writer who most successfully achieves to identify this crisis in his poetics. *Ulysses* is a work that Eco studies in depth due to its openness; i.e. the work, as I will shortly refer to, unravels a series of intertextualities that work on a metafictional level and involve the reader in the creation of meaning, at the same time that the style that Joyce uses for every chapter is self-referential of the action developed within it. According to Eco, Joyce breaks with an old paradigm dominated by the aesthetic postulates of Aristotle and St. Thomas de Aquinas, reproducing a complex narrative more adjusted to the experience of the modern world. Joyce's great achievement in *Ulysses*, in fact, is precisely the turn of the form of the narrative into meaning itself. In other words, the form of the narrative becomes a reflection of a universe that has lost its order (a rather artificial order, perhaps). Eco associates the apparent disorder, or 'openness', of *Ulysses* with Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, which, in turn, provoked a Kuhnian change of paradigm in the natural sciences.

Literary works that put the emphasis on the metafictional and the self-referential, however, precede this crisis. Miguel de Cervantes and Laurence Sterne, for instance, are writers whose oeuvres comprise a comparable encyclopaedic and chaotic summa to that of the author of *Ulysses*. In fact, the level of 'closure' (as opposed to 'openness') in some medieval works may also be debatable, because a fourteenth-century book like Dante Alighieri's *Divine Comedy* suggests manifold interpretations, and High Modernist writers certainly did

not invent symbolism and intertextuality. Nonetheless, for Eco, the *Divine Comedy* is “the very antithesis of the open work” (Eco 1989b: 78) because Dante uses a fourfold stratification of meaning — Dante states that a good piece of writing should have a literal, allegorical, moral and spiritual sense<sup>1</sup> — and thus the book is a summa that only allows four levels of interpretation. With this differentiation Eco means to stress that the techniques of the new writers establish a dialogue with the medieval world but, at the same time, go beyond that rigid allegorical system in order to reproduce the crisis of that order.

Whereas metafiction and self-referentiality are not new, for Eco the fact that Joyce is the first to favour this form of representation becomes central to an understanding of what happens to literature in the course of the twentieth-century. As the century began, the Western world was experiencing a scientific and technological revolution that came to affect all of the fields of experience and Joyce's representation, according to Eco, became, then, a *metafore epistemologica* [‘epistemological metaphor’] (Eco 1962: 3)<sup>2</sup> of that cultural break. In other words, it represented the beginning of a new paradigm, which was absorbed by the public sphere by the 1950s and 1960s, when writings demanding a participant reader became more prevalent than ever.

Eco insists that the ambivalence we find in the contemporary work of art is related to the concept of relativism found throughout modern science and philosophy. As Einstein's theories suggest, what we understand as the physical world constitutes a complex system of approaches subjected to individual points of view that are always relative to their position; Eco, in fact, emphasises that the multiple polarity of these modern texts “is extremely close to the spatiotemporal conception of the universe which we owe to Einstein” (Eco 1989b: 18). For Eco, the inclusion of ambivalence in the work of art, then, is not a mere game of forms, a cold entertainment or something restricted to High Modernist practices, but a contemporary inclusion extensive to later twentieth-century's artistic manifestations. The critic Michael Caesar explains that since the Symbolists “the «point» of the work appears to be exhausted in the description of it, rather than in the enjoyment of the work itself”, mainly because we are “in an age in which art is appreciated rationally, with the intellect, not intuitively” (Caesar 1999: 14). According to Caesar, with the ‘open work’ Eco is conceptualising the cultural reception of the work of art after Joyce, which, in spite of its rational bias, can also provide an enjoyment that does not necessarily call for a total understanding of the work. In order to justify this enjoyment, Eco uses the example of Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* (1939), as we do not need to exhaust the totality of its meaning to experience a certain *intuitive* pleasure when we read. In fact, as Caesar warns us, the poetics of the open work have often been misinterpreted because they “are not those of aesthetics, but of cultural history” (Caesar 1999: 19). The right approach to a re-examination of the adequacy of Eco's category is, then, to ask whether openness is able to offer a more acute understanding of experimental writing in the cultural environment of the 1960s, particularly after the vortex of High Modernism and Joyce's ‘new chaosmos’.

<sup>1</sup> Dante's description of the fourfold method of interpretation can be found in his letter to Can Grande della Scala. *Dante to Cangrande: English Version* [online:] Faculty of Georgetown, Internet, 27th April 2015, <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/cangrande.english.html>

<sup>2</sup> Eco's emphasis.

## Unravelling the New Chaosmos

But what is this ‘new chaosmos’? And why is it so relevant to understand mid-twentieth-century’s experimental writing? We have seen that for Eco Joyce’s *Ulysses* represents a watershed in Western literature because, according to him, *Ulysses* is the first novel to venture beyond what Aquinas refers to as the ‘Cosmo Ordinatio’ [‘Ordered Cosmos’] (1962: 3) to actually create ‘a new cosmos’ (1989a: 2). The word is taken from Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake* (see Joyce 2012: 118, line 21), and Eco uses it to explain this new cosmos characterised by an endless constellation of intertextual references that mirror modernity’s paradoxical ‘chaosmos’ (a fusion of chaos and order), and produces a sense of ambiguity at its reception (Eco 1989b: 41). It is by studying Joyce’s reception that Eco realises that literature had, through High Modernism, reached a state of representation that went far beyond the field of pure aesthetic experience proposed by Croce. The new open literature focuses, instead, on a search for a more authentic account of the real and a more committed receptor to receive this account (Caesar 1999: 6–7). Eco attaches the critical term ‘new chaosmos’, then, to this new understanding and representation of the world, which involves self-referentiality in the creative search and an active collaboration on the part of the reader. The process of writing and a lack of completion are made explicit in the open narrative and, at the same time — or perhaps consequently — it creates a recipient who becomes paramount in the production of meaning.

In his book of essays *Le poetiche di Joyce* (1965) [*The Aesthetics of Chaosmos* (1989)], Eco starts by studying the significance of Joyce’s work within the paradigm of twentieth-century literature. *Ulysses* is the book in which Joyce first achieves a famously particular way of melding the structure of his narrative, and the style and action developed within it with the cultural context of the period. As the famous ‘schemata’ (Gilbert 1955: 30) that Stuart Gilbert extracted from the author reveals, Joyce narrates a day in the life of Leopold Bloom in Dublin, so that every hour corresponds to a different chapter — with each chapter adopting a particular style according to its action, and with every action corresponding to one of the episodes of Homer’s *Odyssey*. As Gilbert proposed, they could each also correspond to an organ of the body, a discipline, a colour, a symbol and a writing technique. Form and content speak of, and to, one another to the extent that it becomes impossible to conceive of them as separate, and it is precisely this amalgam of styles, subjects and references, the multiplicity of readings that arise from the narrative and the consequent demand for an attentive reader that causes Eco to think of *Ulysses* as one of the most representative ‘open works’ ever written — the *most* representative is, unsurprisingly, *Finnegans Wake* (Eco 2010: 59)<sup>3</sup>. Joyce’s great achievement in *Ulysses* — this turning of the form of the expression into meaning itself — was therefore to renovate an adequacy of form previously generally taken for granted or subject to determinate tradition. With this Joyce rejects, or, according to Eco, *destroys* the traditional world and the biased determinism of Naturalist writers in order to create a new formal representation of modern culture. Eco writes that “[t]his radical conversion from ‘meaning’ as content of an expression, to the form of the expression as meaning, is the direct consequence of the refusal and destruction of the traditional world in *Ulysses*” (Eco 1989a: 37).

<sup>3</sup> Eco argues: “Even the last Joyce, author of the most open text we can talk about [*Finnegans Wake*], builds its reader through a textual strategy” [My translation].

Joyce, then, destroys the traditional world by overcoming two traditional models, the Aristotelian and the Thomist, which for centuries defined the aesthetic parameters of Western literature. Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom's streams of consciousness, for instance, disrupt the Aristotelian notion of action in which characters need to respect a certain time and space continuum, and they also dislocate the Thomist triad of aesthetic principles (wholeness, harmony and radiance) that conceive of the work of art as a closed *summa* of the universe. According to Eco, the Thomist principles propose a model that individualises the aesthetic object, which is thought of as being harmoniously contained regardless of the artist's intentions and its reception. Thus Joyce, if he had followed this principle, could not have included an entire theory of the creative process as he had in *A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* (1913)<sup>4</sup>, for example, because he would have violated that wholeness. In fact, Joyce does not only include a theory on modern aesthetics through Stephen Dedalus, but also discusses the need for new terminology to describe the creative process via this character. The inclusion of this self-referential narrative, as Eco states, is "completely foreign to the Aristotelian-Thomist problematic" (Eco 1989a: 17).

Joyce interacts with literary tradition in *Ulysses* by adjusting the narrative to the situations that Bloom faces during the day: while he is at the office of the *Freeman's Journal* attempting to place an advertisement, the narrative breaks into small sections with headings suggesting the activity of the journalists, thereby reminding us of the idea of *consonantia* (harmony) posited by Aquinas and displayed in the traditional novel: the headings correspond to separable parts, the sum of which could constitute a harmonious whole which, in this case, would represent the hectic action of the journal's office and the style in which the news is written. More importantly, however, Joyce takes a step further and includes several registers that do not respect the understanding of the whole work as a closed system in the Dantean or medieval sense, but instead include the immense variety of voices and situations with which Bloom interacts through the day. This illustrates the chaotic sense that Eco emphasises in *Ulysses*. The intertextualities and stylistic varieties that refer to disparate texts and traditions pile up an indefinite sum of parts that may not create a harmonious cosmos or totality.

Gilbert indicates that *Ulysses* "achieves a coherent and integral interpretation of life, a static beauty according to the definition of Aquinas" and defines Joyce as "a composer who takes the facts which experience offers and harmonises them in such a way that, without losing their vitality and integrity, they yet fit together and form a concordant whole" (Gilbert 1975: 9–10). The difference between Gilbert's 'concordant whole' and Eco's 'new chaosmos', however, is that for Eco the new representation includes the disorder (chaos) or crisis of modernity in its form. Joyce does not harmonise his narrative in the same way as the classics and, thus, his project contains a more realistically chaotic image of the universe — an image that opens up a dialogue with his Thomist education at the same time as it takes a step further in his representation of modernity. In fact, the difficulty of giving a definite answer to the question of whether Joyce's work achieves a harmonious unity is one of the things that Eco wants to clarify:

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed explanation of the aesthetic principles, see James Joyce (1992) *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Penguin, London, 229–231.

Joyce has come to conceive this new image of the universe starting from a notion of order and form suggested to him by his Thomist education, and in his work one can notice the continuous dialectics between these two visions of the world; a dialectic that finds its mediation and its aporia, indicates a solution and reveals a crisis. (Eco 1962: 4–5)<sup>5</sup>

Joyce configures an image of the world in accordance with the culture of his period. He departs from a medieval summa in order to arrive at a more perceptive representation of the crisis of scientific and philosophical indeterminacy of modernity, a crisis which is not just scientific and philosophical, but also social and religious. In fact, Joyce, through his narrative, interacts with a tradition at the same time as he fills the gaps left by a deteriorated Catholicism. Eco, in order to find an example of this new order, refers to the episode known as ‘Proteus’. Here Stephen Dedalus’s thoughts are represented in a transformative narrative that echoes the philosophical sentiment of disorder that scientific advances and a diminishment of faith brought to society at the beginning of the twentieth-century, a dialectical approach that was, for Eco, introduced by the new paradigm launched by Einstein’s theory of relativity and by quantum physics. Thus the episode ‘Proteus’ demonstrates a change of paradigm for the literary world too: “the passage from an orderly cosmos to a fluid and watery chaos” (Eco 1989a: 36). He then argues that Joyce’s cultural world is in crisis and that the author cannot provide a harmonious and static image without betraying its nature. Indeed, Kuhn states that a crisis is needed in order for a new paradigm to emerge: “crises are a necessary precondition for the emergence of novel theories” (1962: 77).

Eco analyses these roots to indicate that 1950s and 1960s writers and composers all tend towards self-referentiality and give a major role to the receptor, just as Joyce had. Indeed, the work of art that follows Joyce’s shift continues to play with infinity of perception and multiplicity of meaning, demanding that the reader or spectator take part in the experience of its materiality. This work of art is, then, still the product of the crisis in the culture of the late nineteenth-century that followed the realisation that the world could not be explained through scientific progress alone, as the truly positivistic approach to reality simply cannot exist. Eco, after all, finds no better term than the fluid ‘openness’ to refer to this ‘new chaosmos’ embedded with this structural dialectical tension, which, in turn, involves a new reader, a ‘model reader’ in order to unravel its materiality.

### Eco’s Model Reader

The lack of completion of the work of art also means that it becomes more demanding for the recipient. Eco, aware of this special emphasis on the communicative exchange with the reader, ends up shaping a theory of semiology that he later gathers in *Lector in Fabula* (1979) [*The Role of the Reader* (1984)]. *Ulysses* may be the novel that inaugurates the transfer to the reader, but this tendency does not end with Joyce, for the structure of the works that Eco analyses also leaves in the receptor’s hands the choice of making connections between references spread throughout the narrative, and these connections, as well as their interpretations, may vary from one reader to the next, or even for one reader between consecutive readings. In fact, this multiplicity depends on the reader to the extent that it will vary according to each single representation, giving them the role of creators:

<sup>5</sup> My translation.



The «open work» in this context is one before which viewers must choose their own points of view, make their own connections; its forms are epistemological metaphors which confirm, in art, the categories of indeterminacy and statistical distribution that guide the interpretation of natural facts; it is not a narration, but an image... of discontinuity. (Caesar 1999: 20)

Eco calls this new collaborative and creative reader of discontinuity the 'model reader' (1984: 7). He focuses, specifically, on the cooperation that a determinate text or code demands from a reader or receptor, and states that the meaning of this cooperation is not to be found in the text or in the novel, as Croce believed, but in the information possessed by the receptor and their proneness to difference. The text, according to Eco, is not the full experience of the communicative act, but only a limited part of it. Instead, it is in the spaces that surround the code or text — which he calls blank spaces or invisible narrative: "the text is a lazy machine that demands from the Reader a tremendous cooperation in order to fill the unsaid or already-said spaces that remained blank so to speak" (Eco 2010: 25)<sup>6</sup> — where the production of one meaning or another occurs.

Eco admits, then, that a text can never be completely closed, as there will always be blanks to fill in and different representations to analyse. He also stresses that however open a work might be, and however contradictory its interpretations are, what remains certain is that a work "is still in the end a work, a made object, a thing done" (Caesar 1999: 20). Thus, while multiple interpretations can arise, the book (in its reproducibility) will always contain that particular work and not another. In fact, he suggests that there is a distinction between levels of openness that comes from stressing the work's materiality, and thus, according to this distinction, the more space for interpretation the text provides the more radical will be the text's openness. Stephen Mallarmé's *Le Livre*, for instance, was never completed because the author's project involved turning the book into a mirror of the universe. The universe, for Mallarmé, suggests an infinitude that his book was only able to achieve by being physically unfinished. In fact, Eco does not regard Mallarmé's book as a 'failed' project, but as another sort of open work, what he calls 'opera in movimento' ['work in movement' or 'in progress'], because it does not only contain that openness that we have studied, but the work is physically unfinished and polymorphic. Whereas in Joyce openness is dialectical, a result of a dialogue made with tradition and an effort to adjust the narrative to modern times, Mallarmé's openness turns into an oxymoron because it is unavoidable. *Le Livre* is not a book — despite its title — but a project or work in movement in constant change and mutability that pays attention to the unattainability of human beings regarding that aesthetic completeness. Eco regards *Le Livre* as a utopian book when he says that Mallarmé's project "was embroidered with evermore disconcerting aspirations and ingenuities, and it is not surprising that it was never brought to completion. We do not know whether, had the work been completed, the whole project would have had any real value" (Eco 1989b: 13). The work in progress, then, as a subcategory of the open work, refers to works that are radical experiments, that require no effort from the author's side to unify its parts and all of the emphasis falls on the reader's recreation.

It is, then, clear that the reader takes on paramount importance in the materialisation of the work of art. What is still left to be determined, however, is how all these categories proposed by Eco (the open work, the new chaosmos and the model reader) are still applicable to the practices of experimental writing of the 1960s.

<sup>6</sup> My translation.

## After the Revolution

According to David Robey, Eco insists on the importance of polysemy and the pre-eminent role of the reader, two of the major focuses of the Modernists which would also become recurrent themes in the experimental writing of the 1960s (Robey 1989: 8). What Robey does not note, however, is that Eco also rescues the epithet ‘experimental’ from the historical avant-gardes and gives it a new, renovated meaning more adjusted to the mass society of his time. For Eco the aesthetics of the open work are strictly connected to experimental writing. He establishes that in order for a work to be experimental it needs to be open because closed structures do not represent modernity; they are, instead, institutionalised forms that are not breaking away from their tradition — he puts forward the example of the detective novel (Doležel 1997: 111–120). Some experimental books from the 1960s such as Italo Calvino’s *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (1969), Julio Cortázar’s *Rayuela* (1963), B. S. Johnson’s *The Unfortunates* (1969) and George Perec’s *La Disparition* (1969), however, are examples of literature that involve a more demanding and collaborative reader. All these authors, in fact, emphasise the communicative act between author and reader, without which their experiments would be incomplete, or only partly realised.

Cortázar, for instance, on the first page of *Rayuela* includes a *Tablero de Instrucciones* [Table of Instructions] in which he indicates that there are different ways, at least two, of reading the novel. He suggests that readers begin at chapter 73, and then jump between the numbers of the chapters. However, if they prefer to read the book in the sequence of chapter numbers, they finish the novel knowing that it is incomplete; that the *Rayuela* they have put down is just a part of that book. Similarly, B. S. Johnson presents a book in an unconventional container: inside a box. *The Unfortunates* is made of unbound and non-sequential chapters that can be read in numerous orders, and thus the choice of their combination is also placed onto the reader. Perec undertakes the most famous lipogrammatic exercise in his book *La Disparition* (1969), a novel of 300 pages written without the vowel ‘e’ that demand an attentive reader. Calvino, in turn, in *Il castello dei destini incrociati*, includes a revision of literary forms of the past — particularly the folktale — and the carefully constructed scaffolding that supports such imaginative tales. This revision builds up through an unconventional reading of the Tarot cards, which images accompany the text on the margins of the page, and which also invite the reader to reach his/her own conclusions, or to finish the open message of the cards.

Kuhn affirms that “after a revolution scientists are responding to a different world” (1962: 111). Surely these experimental writers were also responding to a different world after Joyce. Eco regards the experimental writing that follows Joyce as something that has been detached from the ideologies of the firsts avant-gardes, and has its own poetics. In *Sugli specchi e altri saggi* (1985) Eco ventures that ‘experimentalism’ denotes an internal provocation on the form of the work. For experimental writers such as Johnson, Calvino, Cortázar, Perec and the members of the Italian Gruppo 63, which includes Eduardo Sanguinetti, Antonio Porta, Giorgio Manganelli and Eco himself among others, the work itself becomes the experiment to override the history of a determinate form (Picchione 2004: 46).

For the avant-gardist, the work of art is a medium directed to agitate an external agent; i.e. bourgeois society (Eco 1985: 98). In fact, in his essay *Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l'avanguardia* (1985) Eco distinguishes between the avant-garde movements which, according to him, stipulate certain poetics to provoke a social reaction, and the poetics of experimentalism

as a devotion for the work in itself: "Experimentalism tends to cause an internal provocation in the history of a given literary institution... while the avant-garde tends to an external provocation, wants that society as a whole acknowledges its own proposal" (1985: 98)<sup>7</sup>. This is, for Eco, the main shift for the meaning of the experimental under the new paradigm carried out by Joyce's new chaosmos. A shift that focuses on internal poetics in order to achieve a representation that includes the reader or recipient of the aesthetic (or cultural) experience, and which redefines experimentalism, giving it a new and autonomous sphere in the history of literature.

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<sup>7</sup> My translation.