

Introduction

French poetics today

TZVETAN TODOROV

I

Let me start with some remarks concerning each of the words in the title of this introduction.

Today is evidently a synecdoche for 'recent': the texts which follow, and which are the subject of this introduction, were written over the last ten years, between 1968 and 1978. This period was not chosen at random: before 1968 there were only sporadic publications in the area of poetics; today, however, it is reasonable to say, the time has arrived for a preliminary assessment.

French refers to the language of publication, not to the nationality of the authors. I realized after the fact that, of the eleven texts assembled here, only six are by authors who are French both by nationality and by birth. This proportion gives, I would think, a rather accurate idea of the 'French' participation in the world of publication in French.

Poetics, last of all, is a term I will deal with in more detail below. All that need be said at present is that it will be used as a synonym of 'theory of literature', and thus two other meanings it has, related to the first, will not be relevant here; these are: 'theory of poetry', as opposed to the theory of prose, and 'system of devices characteristic of the work of a writer', as when we speak of 'the poetics of Hugo', for example.

To indicate now the domain formed by the intersection of the three words in our title, I will comment briefly on the texts below, following the order and the groupings which I have imposed on them. I hasten to add that the assigning of each text to one of the headings involves a certain amount of arbitrariness, and that in fact each study raises problems which fall under one or more of the other headings.

II

1 Scope

The first question to be raised, and the most basic, since its answer is what

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permits the constitution of a domain of study, concerns the definition of poetics. It is treated here in just one text which, although short, synthesizes the results of more extensive evolving discussion.

Poetics, as it is understood here, is constituted by three kinds of choice, and develops from three types of opposition.

First of all, and this is the most important aspect, poetics is opposed to interpretation, or, to use the term common in literary studies, to criticism; this is simply a concrete case of the dichotomy between the general and the particular. The object of interpretation is each of the individual works which together make up literature; the object of poetics is the general laws which govern the functioning of literature, its forms and varieties (it thus presupposes the existence of such laws). I am convinced that it is impossible to speak of literature without having as point of departure a poetics, a general theory of literary discourse; the difference between the authors, or periods, which proclaim a poetics and those which renounce one (and there are many of the latter) lies not in whether a poetics is present or absent, but rather in whether there is acceptance of it, or failure to take it into account. The 'classics' invoked a poetics, the 'romantics' were ignorant of any; but there is a romantic poetics just as there is a classic one. The opposition between poetics and criticism, as well as the other oppositions to be mentioned below, is not of the value-assigning, exclusive variety (the *others* do that, but *we* do this); it involves a necessary complementarity. In practice, a piece of writing often mixes the two kinds of attitude, but the distinction is necessary and easy to establish in theory.

Second, poetics has its own way of carving out its object of study: that object is the literary text, or discourse, rather than the process by which it is produced or received. Speaking of the totality of disciplines which have the arts as object, René Passeron recently proposed the following classification: poetics, or the study of production; the sciences of art, hence of works of art, including poetics, musicology, etc.; and aesthetics in the etymological sense – the study of the reception or perception of works of art. Poetics, then, is primarily concerned with the verbal structures which are to be found in works of literature, and in this way it is related to linguistics, whose subject matter is also the verbal, but from a quite different point of view. However, this opposition is less sharp than the preceding one; it might be said that the preceding one is qualitative, while this one is merely quantitative. In fact, it is not evident that a theory of literary works is possible which does not take into account, or which does not deal, whether intentionally or not, with problems of production and reception; and it will be seen below that the question of the formal sources of the work, or of the reader's contract, is important. The opposition, in other words, concerns two poles of attraction, two predominant orientations, rather than a rigid exclusion.

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Third and last, the object of poetics is furnished by literary discourse, as opposed to other types of discourse. To my mind this is the least important distinction, so minor that, for most of the authors represented below, including myself, it is irrelevant – or rather it is relevant not to poetics, to the theory of discourse, but to the history of culture. Others, however, keep the distinction, and in this compilation will be found two kinds of answer to the question of how specific literary discourse is. The first, a classical one in that it is based on the idea of a norm, is defended here by Jean Cohen: it says that poetry represents a systematic deviation from the rules of language. The second is romantic, in that it defines poetry as over-structured discourse; it is represented here in its restricted (Jakobsonian) form by Nicolas Ruwet, who envisages supplementary constraints that are syntactic in nature, and intratextual (in short, repetitions). In its generalized form it is represented by Michael Riffaterre, who calls it ‘overdetermination’, and who includes paradigmatic and intertextual relations (for example, clichés). As for myself, I prefer to think that I am concerned with overdetermined, or deviant, discourse, without attempting to make this part of a definition of literature. Poetics is for me a theory of discourse, and the fact – whatever its importance – that poetics deals with works of literature is, from this point of view, not distinctive.

The discourse of poetics has existed at least since Aristotle; however, it is not an accident that our own epoch is a period of expansion. In turn, this fact has an explanation in terms of historical analysis. The classical world, dominated by the notion of a unique norm, does not provide sufficient room for a comfortable development of the theory of *discourses*, nor does the romantic outlook, which exalts the individual, the particular, as its supreme value, and refuses to admit the existence of transcendental forms (to oversimplify enormously). Poetics implies a recognition of differences free of any value judgements; at the same time it requires awareness of the unanalysability and irreducibility of the particular. Is it not precisely these two features which characterize our present-day mental universe, which refuses both naive universalism and extreme individualism, in the hope of attaining a way of thinking that is *typological*?

On the other hand, I do not find that there is much to say about the relation between poetics and structuralism; none of the texts gathered here mentions this. Particularly in France, it was under the influence of structuralism that literary studies became open to theory; however, poetics is not a method – structuralist or other – but rather a way of looking at the facts. So, since that creates the facts, it is both an object and a discipline. The concepts and hypotheses to be found in the texts presented here are not themselves what constitutes poetics, and they are destined for obsolescence; this is not true of the *orientation* they represent, which is that of the practitioner of poetics.

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2 The process of literary creation

We now turn from the discipline – poetics – to its object – literature. Not that the texts grouped under this heading explicitly ask the question ‘what is literature?’, but that they raise the problem of what are the essential determining factors of the literary text. The answers which they offer, reduced to their common denominator, may be expressed in the form of a sentence with two clauses: a text is not determined by those things which it evokes, it is governed by relations which are invariably textual already. Of the three authors represented here, Roland Barthes comments on the first proposition: the fact that a thing exists does not of itself explain why it will be noted down; the ‘unnecessary detail’, dear to Orwell’s heart, far from directly denoting the real, *symbolizes* the realist’s *parti pris*. Laurent Jenny spells out the second, proposing one, or even several, typologies of intertextual relations. Michael Riffaterre, one might say, puts the comma between the two clauses, that is, articulates them.

Such a position implies two refusals. On the one hand, there is a refusal of the immanent study of the text (but this, as we have seen, is a consequence of the definition of poetics); on the other hand, there is a refusal of exogenesis, of the study of extratextual relations, and, in particular, of the representation of reality. This latter choice is unambiguously romantic (we know independently of the romantic origins of all twentieth-century formalist criticism, which is the immediate predecessor of poetics): the opposition between the classical and the romantic aesthetic might be characterized summarily as this eviction of *mimesis*, and its replacement by *poiesis*, as the most elevated of the notions describing artistic activity.

Here again, we are faced with a feature that is at once characteristic and contingent. Such a hypothesis concerning the functioning of literary discourse is not implicit in the principles of poetics, and it is easy to conceive of the appearance of a different one. At the same time, its existence is not the result of chance, but is due to the cultural and historical context in which poetics developed in France.

3 Analytical categories

Here we move into the kitchen of poetics (assuming that discussions about the grand principles take place in the drawing-room), since we must deal with the particular notions and hypotheses elaborated in poetics in order to account for the working of literature. The selection presented here, as in the following section, is more arbitrary than it was for the first two: this is because we are now in direct contact with the concrete matter of literature,

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and all that is possible is to sample from among the many problems that have been discussed.

I have above all tried to illustrate the variety of these problems. Two of the studies below concern units smaller than the sentence which are particularly relevant to the understanding of poetry: rhetorical figures in the article by Jean Cohen, and grammatical and phonetic parallelisms in the study by Nicolas Ruwet. The connection with the descriptions proposed in linguistics is obvious, and inevitable. The other two selections deal with units that are transsentential, and which are of more relevance to fiction: the motif, studied by Claude Bremond, and the description, treated by Philippe Hamon. These two pieces have other particularities: that by Bremond is essentially critical in nature (it demonstrates clearly, I believe, that current studies in poetics are not, as is sometimes alleged, mere paraphrases, in pseudo-technical language, of long-familiar observations and hypotheses); that by Hamon is noteworthy in that it is a 'physiology' rather than an 'anatomy' of the literary text – in spite of its title, it asks less what a description is than how a description functions.

Lack of space has forced me to exclude other examples of such descriptive work: for example, the studies of metrics from a group inspired by Jacques Roubaud; other studies of rhetoric, notably those of the 'Mu' group at the university of Liège; of poetic onomastics, by François Rigolot; of reflexive narrative, by Lucien Dällenbach; of narrative techniques in general, with an especially large number of studies, of which Gérard Genette has given a synthesis in his 'Discours du récit' (*Figures III*); my own work on the symbol; etc.

The concepts and hypotheses which have been developed in this domain are no doubt fated to be replaced by others, as a result of the process of discussion already begun, but is this regrettable? The reader will notice, in fact, that even among the studies in this book there remain disagreements on certain points. Thus Cohen tends to interpret parallelisms as attenuated deviations, while Ruwet treats deviations as a preliminary stage of parallelisms: a difference which is clearly due to different choices within the ideological frameworks of the authors, 'classical' in the first case, 'romantic' in the second. Curiously, however, this impulse to illustrate an *a priori* thesis deprives neither study of its descriptive interest.

4 Genres and models

What we have said about poetics so far has not distinguished it in any way, as far as its structure is concerned, from the general theory of discourses of any type, and there was no reason to make such a distinction. Nevertheless, from an alternative point of view, a difference does appear, and an important

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one. If I develop a theory of everyday discourse, for example, what I have available is not a corpus, but a capacity to produce and recognize the utterances which belong to this type of discourse. That is not the case with literature: literary works exist, and those existing works are what we want to understand, even if understanding them requires imagining works which are merely 'possible' or 'virtual'. For this reason, poetics is never free of its relationship, stronger here than in any other area, to description and to history. This interaction with the history of literature and interpretation is mediated especially through the notion of the *genre*. If we wanted to continue to spin out the domestic metaphor, we could say that, after the drawing-room and the kitchen, we now come to the bedroom, where the really important things happen, and we are face to face with Literature herself.

A genre is a class of texts which has a historically attested existence. It is an ambiguous entity, on the level of analysis: on the one hand it is empirical, since it can be situated in space and time, its exemplifications can be listed, testimony as to its relevance for producers (writers) and receivers (readers) of texts can be collected; on the other hand it is theoretical, because it should be possible, ideally (that is, if the descriptive apparatus of poetics were rich enough), to deduce the genres from the combinatory possibilities of the characteristic features of literary discourse. The current notion of genre is, thus, rather different from preceding ones: with the classics, it was a norm invoked to condemn deviations; for the romantics, each work had its own genre, and the notion was thus deprived of all interest. A modern theory of genres refuses both a rigid hierarchy based on *a priori* value judgements and a blind empiricism which fails to recognize, behind the particular historical instances, the transcendent categories of literary discourse.

Discussion and debate concerning the genres has been abundant in France in recent years, and will continue. I have chosen as an illustration the study of autobiography by Philippe Lejeune, which is an example, rather than a theoretical discussion; but it is, so to speak, an exemplary example. It will be seen how he establishes a balance between historical and theoretical requirements, and also how the theory of the text in itself spills over into pragmatic considerations.

The other two texts presented here have a more limited goal. They adopt an inductive approach, focussing on the stylistic or thematic procedures of two limited sets of texts: the *chanson* of the *trouvères*, in the case of Paul Zumthor, and the poems making up the *Illuminations*, in my own case. These articles also illustrate the constant, and indispensable, back-and-forth movement between down-to-earth empirical work and speculation. For although both are essentially descriptive, the first points towards a conception of literature itself, and the second towards a theory of interpretation. This is the reason why I have left them in the position of a conclusion.

III

I must now make a few more technical remarks on how this collection is made up.

Since it was by definition impossible to be exhaustive, my primary concern was to bring out the variety of work being done, and it is not an accident that each author is represented by a single text. But this variety was limited, in the first place, quantitatively, because of space limitations (it has not been possible to include, for example, any of the studies, now numerous, bearing on the history of poetics); it was also limited qualitatively, because of the desirability of having a more coherent whole. I have left aside studies that have been quite influential, in France and abroad, both for the evolution of poetics, and more generally, because they were done with an outlook and with goals other than those of poetics.

The authors of the pieces to follow belong to three micro-generations, if we consider the date at which their research in poetics began rather than their date of birth: those who preceded, and laid the ground for the current renaissance in poetics (Barthes, Zumthor, Riffaterre), those who developed with it (Genette, Cohen, Ruwet, Bremond, and myself), and those who followed (Lejeune, Hamon, Jenny).

All the texts were first published autonomously: they are not extracts of larger works; nor have any been previously translated into English. Within each section, they are arranged in systematic rather than chronological order.

At the end of the book will be found a short biography of each author and a note of his other publications. For more extensive bibliographies, the reader might consult the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage* by O. Ducrot and T. Todorov (Paris, Seuil, 1972), and a more recent source, the review *Poétique*, 30 (April 1977), which contains three annotated bibliographies: 'Le texte poétique', 211–25; 'Analyse du récit', 226–59; 'Cinéma et narration', 260–2. Two surveys recently published in English may also be useful: R. Scholes, *Structuralism in Literature* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974); and J. Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975). A presentation of the field itself, rather than of the work done in poetics, and which was written before recent developments, is my *Poétique* (Paris, Seuil, 1968, second revised edition published separately in 1973).

Part I

1. Criticism and poetics

GÉRARD GENETTE

A few years ago literary consciousness in France seemed deep in a process of involution somewhat disquieting to observe – with skirmishes between the proponents of literary history and those favouring the ‘nouvelle critique’; obscure debates, even within the new criticism itself, between the ‘old new’, existential and thematic, and the ‘new new’, whose inspiration was formalist or structuralist; and an unhealthy proliferation of studies and surveys on the tendencies and methods, thoroughfares and blind alleys of criticism. From scission to scission, and from reduction to reduction, literary studies seemed to turn their observational tools evermore inward, to be immured in a self-examination that was narcissistic, sterile and ultimately destructive – doomed to realize the prophecy uttered in 1928 by Valéry: ‘Where is criticism headed? To its ruin, I hope.’

This unfortunate situation may, however, be more apparent than real. For, as Proust’s thought in *Contre Sainte-Beuve* demonstrates, any reflection on criticism that is at all serious necessarily sets going a reflection on literature itself. Criticism may be purely rule-of-thumb, naive, intuitive, and undisciplined, but *metacriticism* always implies some broader idea of what literature is, and this implicit conception cannot go for long without explicit formulation. In this way, perhaps, out of a kind of evil there may arise a kind of good: from a few years of speculation or ratiocination about criticism may come what we have so evidently lacked for more than a century – so that the consciousness of this lack seems itself to have abandoned us. An apparent dead end of criticism may in fact lead to the rebirth of *literary theory*.

It is indeed appropriate to speak of rebirth. Under the names of *poetics* and *rhetoric*, the theory of ‘genres’ and, more generally, the theory of discourse, go back, as we all know, to remote antiquity. From Aristotle to La Harpe, they occupied a place in the literary thinking of the Occident, down to the appearance of romanticism. But romanticism, by shifting attention from forms and genres to the ‘individual creator’, displaced general reflection of this kind in favour of a *psychology of the work of art*, and from Sainte-Beuve onward, through all his avatars, what today we call criticism has always been faithful to this. Whether this psychology is reinforced (or deformed) by historical perspective, by psychoanalysis – Freudian, Jungian, Bachelardian,

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or other – or by sociology, Marxist or not; whether it is oriented more towards the author or towards the reader (the critic himself); or whether it attempts rather to confine itself within the problematic ‘immanence’ of the work, the essential function of criticism is never fundamentally modified. It is always seen to be the maintenance of a dialogue between a text and a *psyche*, conscious and/or unconscious, individual and/or collective, creative and/or receptive.

The structuralist project itself may have done no more than add a nuance to this picture, at least insofar as it consists in the decision to study ‘the structure’ (or ‘the structures’) of a work, considered in a somewhat fetishistic manner as a self-contained, finished, *absolute* ‘object’. This inevitably ‘motivates’ the closedness (by ‘accounting for’ it with the procedures of structural analysis) and thereby ‘motivates’ also the decision (which was perhaps arbitrary) or the circumstance (which was perhaps fortuitous) which established it. This is to forget Valéry’s warning that the idea of a literary work as something finished comes under the heading of ‘fatigue or superstition’. In his debate with literary history, the modern critic has for half a century been concerned to separate the notions of *work* and *author*, with the quite comprehensible tactical aim of opposing the former to the latter, who was responsible for so many excesses and sometimes pointless activities. We are beginning to perceive today that these notions are linked, and that any form of critical activity is necessarily caught in the orbit of their reciprocal attraction.

It is also becoming apparent that its status as a work does not exhaust the reality, or even the ‘literariness’, of the literary text, and that, moreover, the existence of a work (its immanence) presupposes the existence of a large number of phenomena transcendent to it, which are the concern of linguistics, stylistics, semiology, discourse analysis, narrative logic, the thematics of genres and periods, etc. Criticism is in the uncomfortable situation of being able, *as criticism*, neither to do without such phenomena nor to master them. It is thus required to admit the necessity, in order fully to accomplish its task, of a discipline dealing with these kinds of studies which are not connected with the idiosyncratic properties of particular works, and which can only be a general theory of literary forms – call it a *poetics*.

It is, perhaps, a secondary question whether or not such a discipline should seek to become a ‘science’ of literature, with the unpleasant connotations that premature use of such a word in such a context may have; but it is at least certain that it alone *could* claim to be such, since, as everyone knows (but as our positivist tradition, worshipping ‘facts’ and indifferent to laws, seems to have forgotten long ago), no ‘science’ is possible except a ‘general’ one. But what is in question here is less the study of forms and genres as this was understood by the rhetoric and poetics of the classical period, which

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were always inclined, from Aristotle onward, to set up tradition as a norm and to canonize what exists, than the exploration of the various *possibilities of discourse*, with respect to which works already written and forms already exemplified appear merely as so many particular cases beyond which loom other predictable, or deducible, combinations. This is one of the interpretations which can be given to the celebrated formulas of Roman Jakobson who proposes as the object of literary studies not literature but literarity, not poetry but the poetic function: more generally, the object of theory is to be not just the *real*, but the *virtual* – all that is potentially literary. This opposition between an *open* poetics and the closed poetics of the classical tradition indicates clearly that what is at issue here is not, as might perhaps be thought, a return to the precritical past: literary theory, on the contrary, will be modern, and bound up with the modernity of literature, or will be nothing at all.

When introducing his programme for the teaching of poetics, Valéry declared with a salutary, and, all in all, justified insolence, that the object of this teaching, 'far from being substituted for or opposed to the teaching of literary history, should be to give to the latter simultaneously an introduction, a sense, and a purpose'. The relations between poetics and criticism could be of the same nature, with the difference – capital – that Valéry's poetics expected next to nothing in return from literary history, termed a 'vast fake', while literary theory has much to learn from the specific studies of criticism. While literary history is in no sense a fake, nevertheless it is clearly, like the philological techniques of deciphering and establishing a text (and in reality much more so), an *ancillary* discipline for the study of literature, for it only explores (through biography, the study of sources and influences, of the genesis and the 'career' of literary works, etc.) the secondary aspects. Criticism, on the other hand, is and will remain a fundamental approach, and it can be predicted that the future of literary studies resides essentially in the exchange and the necessary cross-fertilization between criticism and poetics – based on an awareness and exploitation of their *complementarity*.