

I

What is literature thinking about?

Literature and philosophy entwined

Philosophie dürfte man eigentlich nur dichten: ‘Philosophy ought really to be written only as a poetic composition.’¹ Heidegger could have written that sentence, and perhaps he did write it. It appears in a collection of fragmentary notes drafted by Wittgenstein, and if we read it in a critical perspective or look, so to speak, beneath the surface, it has an ironic ring to it. In another of these notes, Wittgenstein playfully recalls the example of Pascal admiring ‘the beauty of a theorem in number theory; it’s as though he were admiring a beautiful natural phenomenon’.² The truth is so beautiful, and it is still more beautiful to be recognized as true! In what appears to be the same vein, Wittgenstein also points out ‘the queer resemblance between a philosophical investigation (perhaps especially in mathematics) and an aesthetic one’, and adds, presumably in order to distance himself from the trustingly naive attitude that he elsewhere ascribes to Pascal, ‘E.g. what is bad about this garment, how it should be, etc.’³ Writing philosophy as a poetic composition would reduce philosophy to solving the problem of ‘how it should be’, and that problem is ‘aesthetically’ subordinated to judgements of taste.

To pursue this type of approach further, we might say that philosophy is mere literature, or that the truth about philosophy will ultimately be found in literature. It will be a silent truth that is relegated to the margins of its text. This is the thesis argued by Derrida: ‘Metaphysics has erased within itself the fabulous scene that has produced it, the scene that nevertheless remains active and stirring, inscribed in white ink, an invisible design covered over in the

1 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, tr. Peter Winch (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), 24e. The comment is dated 1933–34. 2 *Ibid.*, 41e.
 3 *Ibid.*, 25e.

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palimpsest.⁴ We might also say that the philosophical element in philosophy, or in other words its critical reflection on its own discourse, is in the last analysis a matter for literature, which in some sense defines the limits to which philosophy returns, as though to a secret origin where the speculative pretensions of pure and absolute thought founder.

To see literature as the repressed of philosophy is to invert the traditional hermeneutic position which sees literature as the site of an essential revelation, and which therefore assumes philosophy to be the unthought, or not-yet-thought, element in literature. This is a way of exorcising, by recalling its fictional nature, the myth that literature is filled with a meaning-content that has only to be grasped or unveiled for it to blossom, as though in the bright morning of its primal truth. It is also an admission that literary texts are so rarely traversed by allusive thought that it seems to be absent from them, to have been erased. To what extent can such thought figure in the discourse of literature as something incidental that can remain unnoticed without causing any major problems? Or does it necessarily contribute to the weaving of its texture? What form of thought is contained in literary texts, and can it be extracted from them? For if we recognize the truth of philosophy in literature, we must also find some truth, in the philosophical sense of the term, in literary writings.

'The clash between philosophy and literature does not need to be resolved. On the contrary, only if we think of it as permanent and new does it guarantee us that the sclerosis of words will not close over us like a sheet of ice.'⁵ The debate between literature and philosophy seems always to have been circular. According to Diogenes Laërtius, the Pythagoreans accused the philosopher-poet Empedocles of having divulged the secrets of their sect by using poetic forms borrowed from Homer to make them public. Yet in his life of Plato, where he reports that, according to Alkimos, Plato derived 'much assistance' from the comic poet Epicharmus, Diogenes Laërtius himself cites these lines from Epicharmus: 'Another man will come, who'll strip my reasons/Of their poetic dress, and, clothing them/In other garments and with purple broidery/Will show them off; and being invincible/Will make

4 Jacques Derrida, 'White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy', in *Margins of Philosophy*, tr. Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 213.

5 Italo Calvino, 'Philosophy and Literature' in *The Literature Machine* (London: Picador, 1989), p. 40. This essay first appeared in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 28 September 1967 (special issue entitled 'Crosscurrents').

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all rivals bow the knee to him.⁶ In the great debate between the exoteric and the esoteric, between the revealed and the hidden, philosophy and literature are caught up in a circular argument, rather as though one were constantly giving the other the initial impetus that set it in motion, and vice versa. By tracing the figure of 'Socrates as musician', Plato himself plunges *mythos* and *logos* into the same primal element.⁷

Literature and philosophy are inextricably entwined [*mêlées*].⁸ Or at least they were until history established a sort of official division between the two. That occurred at the end of the eighteenth century, when the term 'literature' began to be used in its modern sense.⁹ Diderot witnessed the turning point, which saw the disentanglement of literature and philosophy, and gave a nostalgic account of it, rather as though he himself were standing on a ledge that had been cut off by the break:

The wise man was once a philosopher, a poet and a musician. Those talents degenerated when they were divorced from one another; the sphere of philosophy became narrower; ideas deserted poetry; songs lost their force and energy; and, deprived of these organs, wisdom could no longer speak to the peoples with the same charm.¹⁰

- 6 Diogenes Laërtius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, tr. C. D. Yonge (London: George Bell & Son, 1905), pp. 360, 119.
- 7 Plato, *Phaedo*, 60d-61c in *The Last Days of Socrates*, tr. Hugh Tredennick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1959).
- 8 *Littérature et philosophie mêlées* is the title of a collection published by Victor Hugo in 1834. Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe and Jean-Luc Nancy adopt it as the general title of an issue of *Poétique* (No. 21, 1975) devoted to that very connection.
- 9 The moment occurred between 1760, when Lessing began to publish his journal *Briefe die neueste Literatur betreffend*, and 1800, which saw the appearance of Mme de Staël's *De la littérature considérée dans ses rapports avec les institutions sociales*. On this point, see Escarpit, 'La Définition du terme littérature', Communication au IIIe Congrès de l'Association internationale de Littérature comparée, Utrecht, 1961.
- 10 Denis Diderot, *Entretiens sur le fils naturel* (1757), 'Troisième Entretien', in *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1970), vol. 3, p. 198. Elsewhere ('Refutation suivie de l'ouvrage d'Helvetius intitulé *L'Homme*', *Oeuvres complètes* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1971), vol. 11, p. 533), Diderot's conception of genius seems to lead him to advance the thesis of the primacy of poetry over philosophy: 'Poetry presupposes an intellectual exaltation which is almost like divine inspiration. Profound ideas come into the mind of the poet, and he knows nothing of their principles or implications. The astonished philosopher, for whom they would be the fruits of long meditation, cries out: "What inspired so much wisdom in that madman?"'

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Kant, who stood on the other side of the same divide, legitimized the division it had introduced by locating it within a radical evolution in thought that precluded any return to an earlier state: 'There is no ... elegant [*schöne*] science, but only a fine [*schöne*] art ... A beautiful science – a science which, as such, is to be beautiful, is a nonentity. For if, treating it as a science, we were to ask for reasons and proofs, we would be put off with elegant phrases [*bons mots*].'¹¹ It would therefore be preferable for the truth to be ugly. By rejecting the classical identification of truth with beauty, Kant established between them 'a limit that cannot be transcended' and argued that to submit speculative discourse to a judgement of taste would be to weaken its rational content: 'Genius reaches a point at which art must make a halt, as there is a limit imposed upon it which cannot be transcended. This limit has in all probability been long since attained.'¹² Here, Kant seems to be anticipating the Hegelian conception of the death of art: once art reaches the limit imposed on its pretensions, all it can do is step aside and leave the field open for other forms of intellectual production that are irreducible to its criteria. Ultimately, this idea results in an aestheticism of the type professed by Croce, for whom the aesthetic phenomenon represents, by virtue of its pre-rational character, an immediate intuition free of any dependence on ideological or theoretical allegiances: the creative act expresses itself directly in the pure totality of the work of art, where, in the absence of any distinction between form and content, the reign of intuition and emotion is absolute. Freed from any rational concerns, art can then assert its independence from ethics, politics and philosophy, which inevitably exploit it for their own ends.

The conditions in which this schema of separation was traced demonstrate that the encounter which constitutes Literature and Philosophy as autonomous essences confined to the respective fields

11 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement* ...44, tr. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), p. 165. This idea, which seems to be echoed by the comments from Wittgenstein that were cited above, may have provided the starting point for Kant's speculations. It was outlined in an earlier text, added to the *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* of 1764 where Kant remarks: 'Taste can be an obstacle to understanding. I have to read and reread Rousseau until the beauty of his style is no longer disturbing; only then can I grasp it rationally.' (French translation R. Kempf (Paris: Vrin, 1953), p. 65.) All these passages from Kant, and those that follow, are cited in Jean-Luc Nancy's study 'Logodaedalus', *Poétique* 21 (1975).

12 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, §47 p. 170.

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that both define them and establish their limits, is a product of history. Its production corresponds to a very particular moment in the development of philosophical and literary work, to a precise moment when both become subject to independent and contrasting rules. That moment sees the simultaneous emergence of two 'modern' paradigms par excellence: the realm of Literature and speculation about the end of Philosophy.¹³

Could the moment of that division have passed? That is what we are not allowed to say, unless we prophesy, which is another way of remaining modern. But it must be possible to look again at the distinction it establishes, and to strip it of the essentially determinant character it has had for almost two hundred years. Disentangling what, in a certain number of texts, belongs to the philosophical and what belongs to the literary then becomes a matter of unpicking, in order to reveal how it was woven, the complex web in which the threads cross, entwine and interweave to form the differentiated network in which they combine without merging as they trace configurations of singular, enigmatic and hybrid meanings. In a way, I am proposing here to defend literature's speculative vocation by arguing that it has an authentic value as an intellectual experience; in that sense, we can speak of a 'literary philosophy'. At the same time, we avoid having to choose between a 'literature' which is either empty or full of 'philosophy', and a 'philosophy' which is either full or empty of 'literature'. For whilst, as I have suggested, literature as such exists only by virtue of a philosophical concept, that concept does not exhaust the complex reality of literary texts.

Rereading works that are considered to belong to the domain of literature in the light of philosophy must not become a way of making them admit to having a hidden meaning that sums up their speculative purpose; it is a way of revealing the pluralistic constitution that necessarily makes them amenable to differentiated modes of approach. For there is no more a pure literary discourse than there is a pure philosophical discourse; there are only mixed discourses wherein language games that are independent in their systems of reference and their principles interact on various levels. It is also impossible to

13 This modernity is illustrated perfectly by the mythology of the absent Book (or the 'book to come') which, from the poets and theorists of the Athenaeum to Mallarmé and then Blanchot, commemorates the lost community of literature and philosophy.

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establish once and for all the relationship between the poetic or the narrative, and the rational; that relationship always manifests itself in the figures of its variability. It thus becomes clear that the philosophical intervenes in literary texts at several levels that must be carefully dissociated in accordance with the means they require and the functions they fulfil.

At the most elementary level, the relationship between literature and philosophy is strictly documentary: philosophy shows through the surface of works of literature either as a cultural reference that has, to a greater or lesser extent, been worked into the text, or as a mere quotation which, thanks to the ignorance of their readers and commentators, usually goes unnoticed. At a different level, a philosophical argument can play the role of a real formal operator with respect to the literary text; this is what happens when it sketches the character of a protagonist, organizes the overall shape of a narrative, sets the scene for it, or structures the mode of its narration. The literary text can, finally, also become a support for a speculative message whose philosophical content is often reduced to the level of ideological communication. If we are to answer the question 'What is literature thinking about?' we must take into account all these orders of consideration without, at least to begin with, privileging any one of them. That is the precondition for the eventual emergence of philosophical lessons from a reading of literary texts.

Exercises in literary philosophy

Take a more or less random corpus consisting of:

- Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* (Sade, 1784)
- Corinne, ou de l'Italie* (Mme de Staël, 1807)
- Spiridion* (Sand, 1839)
- Les Misérables* (Hugo, 1862)
- The Temptation of St Antony* (Flaubert, 1874)
- Documents* (Bataille, 1930)
- Pierrot mon ami* (Queneau, 1942)
- Entretiens avec le professeur Y* (Céline, 1955)
- Death and the Labyrinth: The World of Raymond Roussel* (Foucault, 1963)

One is immediately struck by the disparate character of this list, which juxtaposes narrative texts like *Corinne* and *Pierrot mon ami*, texts

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belonging to the genre of the literature of ideas like *Spiridion* and *The Temptation of St Antony*, and the theoretical reflections on the nature of the literary phenomenon contained in the articles published by Bataille in *Documents*, in Céline's *Entretiens avec le professeur Y* and in the study Foucault devoted to Raymond Roussel. *Les Cent Vingt Journées de Sodome* and *Les Misérables* are unclassifiable because all these categories are equally applicable to them, and because they transcend them all: they are monuments isolated in their exceptional singularity, which seems to be the incarnation of a sort of absolute.

And yet all these texts are related by the fact of their belonging to the age of Literature, which began to unfold some two hundred years ago and which is still with us today. Together, they punctuate a specifically literary space. It has its peaks and its depressions. It has its broad perspectives and its very narrow paths, even its blind alleys, and they all result from the complex system of connections which relates apparently spontaneous and obviously reflective forms of writing, as well as 'great' and 'minor' literature, by establishing dialogues between Victor Hugo and Eugène Sue, Gustave Flaubert and Jules Verne, Raymond Queneau and Pierre Véry. At the same time it also blurs the frontier that seems to divide what may be said from what cannot be named. Leaving aside genre distinctions and the evaluative criteria that conventionally divide the 'literary' from what is not recognized as such, this corpus provides, because of its non-systematic character, raw materials that can be worked independently of any essentialist prejudices. The hypothesis on whose basis it is constructed is simply that a 'historical *a priori*' supplies conditions of possibility for a variety of experiences in which literature and philosophy become entangled and disentangled without there being any doctrinal form to stabilize relations between the two, or in other words to resolve the problem that results from their encounter.

The study which we are about to make of this corpus is based upon a postulate that might be formulated thus: the texts it brings together are, insofar as they belong to the historical field of 'literature', amenable to philosophical readings in which philosophy intervenes, in a non-exclusive way, as a system of reference and an instrument of analysis. Let us be quite clear about this: the point is not to offer a philosophical interpretation of these works which would relate them to a common intellectual core, of which they are different manifestations. The point is to suggest *readings* in which the philosophical mode of approach to literary texts will in each case be singularly

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implicated, in a determinate and differentiated manner. By adopting this approach, we will attempt to avoid a direct confrontation between literature and philosophy.

How are we to describe a study which elevates the disparate to the level of a principle? We began by listing some book titles in chronological order. It is, however, obviously impossible to leave matters at that, if only because to do so would give the illusion of a continuous line of evolution. It might then be thought that Literature, like the hero of one of its fables, is devoted to the gradual exploration of the space that defines it with a view to finally occupying it in its entirety and identifying itself through a gesture of appropriation resulting from a process in which philosophical thought intervened as a mediation. Nor will we retain a mode of classification of texts based upon a typology that categorizes once and for all the modes in which what we will finally term, when the time comes to propose a transversal reading of all these works, a 'literary philosophy' takes shape.

Chronological and typological modes of exposition having been ruled out, there remains only one other possibility. That is the mode we will adopt, even though it too has its disadvantages. It is based upon a thematic grouping organized around the three statements which give the three parts of this book their titles: 'Roads to History', 'Into the Depths' and 'All Must Pass Away'. The complacency of thematic criticism has led it into bad habits that have finally completely discredited the notion of 'theme', which is no longer recognized as having any validity. It is that notion that I propose to rehabilitate by displacing its field of application and modifying its working principles. 'Theme' is to be understood in the musical sense of the term. I propose to demonstrate that seemingly quite different approaches to literature are simply ways of playing variations on given themes and exploiting their various possibilities in a totally open-ended way.

Thus, Mme de Staël, George Sand and Raymond Queneau all, in their different ways, follow 'roads to history' by turning literature into a sort of machine for exploring the paths of human evolution, usually by adopting an anthropological point of view. By following a trajectory that takes them into the depths, Victor Hugo, Georges Bataille and Louis-Ferdinand Céline give literary writing an ontological dimension in the specific form of what might be called a negative ontology. In their reflections on the stylistic problems bound up with the experience of narrative, the Marquis de Sade, Gustave Flaubert and

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Michel Foucault outline, finally, the principles of a rhetoric which is equivalent to a general analysis of thought. It is as though one could find, thanks to a reading of these literary texts, elements of a logic, a physics and an ethics, to adopt the categories we have inherited from classical philosophy. Such might be the foundations for a literary philosophy: we will come back to them in the final chapter.

The following studies are 'exercises', as defined by Czerny rather than Saint Ignatius of Loyola. Rather than constituting successive moments in a three-point argument, the three parts of this study develop the themes on which they are based, and should resemble a sonata or symphony in which the interplay between the resonances and echoes both establishes a mysterious correspondence between the movements and brings out their individuality. By linking Mme de Staël and Raymond Queneau, Victor Hugo and Louis-Ferdinand Céline and, more indirectly, Georges Bataille and Gustave Flaubert or George Sand and the Marquis de Sade, we may be able to outline the general features of a form of thought which is neither philosophical nor literary because it is both, and to evoke it in the same way that the structure of successive 'movements' can be evocative. It is dispersed and concentrated, diluted and condensed in texts whose fabrics and margins were woven by the speculative issues that historically conditioned their production and their reception. From this point of view, it should indeed be possible to give a philosophical interpretation of literature; but that interpretation must proceed in the way that one performs a musical score.

Let us listen, then, to literature talking about philosophy.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-47678-2 - The Object of Literature
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PART I



Roads to history

