

# Science, Philosophy, Literature<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** The aim of this article is to clarify, in the case of France, the unique nature of the relationship between philosophy and literature, particularly in light of the introduction of these two activities in the context of educational institutions.

**Keywords:** Barthes, philosophy, literature, knowledge, science

In his inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*, Roland Barthes defined literature by referring to three “forces” designated by the concepts *mathesis*, *mimesis*, and *semiosis*.<sup>2</sup> And, in order to characterise, what, from literature, falls under a *mathesis*, he argued both that “literature accommodates many kinds of knowledge” and that “literature works in the interstices of science.”<sup>3</sup> This was tantamount to saying that the relation of literature to knowledge, a relation which perhaps draws its strength from being divergently and inconsistently connected, is not a straightforward relation, but flawed:

literature [...] displaces the various kinds of knowledge, does not fix or fetishize any of them; it gives them an indirect place, and this indirection is precious. [...] Because it *stages* language instead of simply using it, literature feeds knowledge into the machinery of infinite reflexivity. Through writing, knowledge ceaselessly reflects on knowledge, in terms of a discourse which is no longer epistemological, but dramatic.<sup>4</sup>

It seems that, through this practice of staging, or textual situatedness, rather than reflecting on knowledge, literature, as Barthes says, makes knowledge “reflect on knowledge.” Knowledge itself reflects on knowledge: of those rays that are caught, some are returned by virtue of a selection process that remains mysterious, and which is perhaps arbitrary in the sense that the rules of a game are arbitrary, so as to give, or rather to show, to exhibit, a certain idea of knowledge. Thus, according to Barthes, knowledge, as the production of utterances, is inserted and relaunched into an enunciating dynamic: and it is this, which, in a certain

1 This text was first published in *Textuel* n. 37 (“Où en est la théorie littéraire?”), *Revue de l’UFR de Lettres de L’Université Paris-VII*, 2000, p.133-142

2 Barthes 1979, p. 6

3 Ibid. pp. 6-7

4 ibid. pp. 6-7

way, is situated at a distance from itself that grants it the means for its paradoxical reflection.

This conceptualisation of literature, as a reflection of knowledge, raises the following question: is literature that which produces this reflection or is it the product of it? In the first hypothesis, knowledge is thought [*est réfléchi*] by literature, which remains outside of itself, whereas, in the second, knowledge thinks itself [*se réfléchit*] in literature. As a result, it is situated as both its outside and its limit; which would then be the non-knowledge, or the meta-knowledge of this knowledge. Let us pose this question in a more general way: taking into account its relation to reflection which links it to knowledge, does literature preserve its autonomy with respect to knowledge? Or is it doomed to heteronomy, being itself then nothing other than the heteronomy of knowledge? That is to say, that necessity that projects an interiority attributed to discourses of knowledge in the form of an exteriority, by simply offering a different reading, and by showing in this way the exteriority that haunts their alleged interiority? Well, it is clear that this question has little chance of being settled, nor even to begin to be explored until the notion of “discourses of knowledge” has been clarified, this being the condition for understanding how this type of discourse is thought within, or by, this other type of discourse that would take place in literary texts.

In the expression “discourse of knowledge,” knowledge can be understood both in the sense of the sciences and of theory or, if you like, of philosophy, depending on whether there is a knowledge of something, relative to determinable conditions. Or, if there is, in the absolute, a Knowledge, whose form, strictly speaking, has only itself as the object, which amounts to situating it on a horizon of infinite generality. Why does a single word, that of “knowledge,” refer simultaneously to these two meanings? Because, while consisting of two different meanings and not one and the same sense, these never emerge independently of each other, but form a loop. The distinctive feature of scientific-knowledges, along with their objects, cannot be given without the generality of knowledge-theory, which itself is without object insofar as it takes itself for object, and vice versa. Thus, the intransitivity of pure knowledge must always be combined with the transitivity of special knowledges which they themselves call for. This explains the privileged relation that philosophy, from its inception, maintains with the sciences: in the same vein, it appears rather absurd that today, in our neck of the woods, it is taught as a “literary” discipline.

Building on from this previous remark, let us ask in what sense, then,

would it be possible to speak of “literary philosophy.” In reference to the state of affairs just mentioned, this expression would refer to a practice of philosophy leaning towards the literary form of discourse, and favourably so; electing it as an exclusive normative reference. In this case, the notion of literary philosophy is to be understood as an alternative to other conceptions of philosophy, such as that understood for instance under the heading of “scientific philosophy.” And it seems that the debate that has taken place in recent decades between “continental philosophy” and “non-continental philosophy” has partly been fought on this terrain. Depending on whether it looks for its models on the side of literature or that of knowledge, philosophy would turn towards different, even radically separate, forms of speculation and concerns, in relation to other approaches to the general problems of thought. From this perspective, a philosophy would be ‘literary’ insofar as it would be distinguished from other approaches connoted as non-literary, who do not pose philosophical questions from their field as such.

On this point, one must be clear: philosophy, in this sense, is structurally integrated literary studies in contemporary French society. This, since it defines its own position within the disciplinary separation between the “literary” and the “scientific.” The two great divergent networks that traverse our educational system are constituted on this basis, the decisive moment of which was the implementation under the Second Empire of what was then called the “bifurcation.” We can say that, when philosophy began to be included in the French public education system during the last years of the eighteenth century - with the exception of the atypical experience of the *écoles centrales* who were assigned to what was then called “Ideology,” an interim hybrid function between grammar and the natural sciences – the terrain in which philosophy preferentially situated itself, so as to assert its exclusivity or at least to exert on it a kind of sovereignty, has been that of the study of rhetoric and the classical humanities. The claim of dogmatic spiritualists of the University, led by V. Cousin, to inaugurate a “science of the mind” built around the fiction of “spiritual facts,” a science whose form was that of a psychology and not that of a logic or theory of knowledge, has merely provoked a caricature of the scientific practice. For the activity, and the culture, of professional philosophers, obsessed in the first instance by political preoccupations and by their great conflict with the Catholic church, remained predominantly marked by references borrowed from the field of the “Arts,” in which was included the History of philosophy, and not that of the Sciences. It is what enables us to understand the virulence of the debate initiated by Durkheim at the end of the nineteenth century, in his accounts

on the teaching of philosophy. A debate that continues today around the question of the “human sciences,” and their vocation or capacity to re-orient the work of philosophy in the direction of a more objective treatment of the problems of the human world with which it deals in a privileged way. Other aspects of reality become the exclusive domain of the specialised sciences whose treatment is assumed to be positive.

Therefore, we can say that from the perspective of the introduction of philosophy in France, philosophy, in so far as it defines itself by the position to which it has been assigned, or that it assumes within the educational system, leans favourably on the side of literature. In any case, this is how it is perceived from the perspective of other national traditions, for whom this assimilation of philosophy as a literary “subject” may not appear so self-evident. In no way does this dominant trend preclude it from being met with internal resistance, the effects of which are more or less obvious. This explains the divergence, throughout the nineteenth century, between the two great traditions: that of the philosophers from the literary section of the Ecole Normale, and that of the philosophers graduating from the Ecole Polytechnique, with their two leaders, Victor Cousin and Auguste Comte. The latter has no doubt failed in his effort to promote “scientific” philosophy, or at the very least based on a scientific culture, but whose final orientations have taken a more political, and an especially moral, turn. While the former has done rather well in his endeavour, organising a curriculum for philosophy and situating it as an extension of the study of the humanities, to which it supposedly gives its crowning achievement. A hundred and fifty years later, this plan still largely functions, the “class of philosophy,” taken by those in the Literature section of their final year of High School, constitutes its survival.

Perhaps it would be possible, nevertheless, to take the expression “literary philosophy” in an entirely different sense. By rupturing with an institutional conception of philosophy, defined exclusively by the privileged bond it maintains with literary subjects or disciplines, and thus is situated in opposition to a philosophy of the scientific type, one can imagine a practice of philosophy that integrates literary questions into its field of thought. In this way, literature would no longer be an object over which philosophy simply reflects, as its universal vocation propels it to do with regards to any other type of object (logical forms, numbers, matter, life, law, society, religion, art, etc.), but it would represent a form of thought not entirely foreign to philosophical reflection, and may even serve as a reference for it. In other words, the idea of a literary nature of philosophy being disqualified would render possible a literary interest in philosophy;

in the dual meaning of an interest as both an interest of literature for philosophy, and an interest of philosophy for literature.

So let us ask the following brutal question: what if the opposition between literature and science, which controls most of the choices to which the programmes of our educational network condemns its users, was partly artificial? Or at least only presented one aspect of the institutional character, without any referent being able to be objectively found on the side of the very things that are supposed to be concerned by these categories, “literature” and “science”?

It seems that this question was asked at the very beginning of the history of philosophy itself, by Plato, who, in the dialectical form of dialogue, wanted to maintain both ends of this chain, reconciling the art of literary storytelling and the demonstrative or argumentative practice of scientific discussion, without ever giving preference to one at the detriment of the other. From there emerged this astonishing revelation: the true man of letters is perhaps the philosopher, from which the proper practice of the philosopher creates a new type of literature. Obsessed by the question of his relation to the truth, he situates himself as an alternative to the other literature, that of poets like Homer or Hesiod, whose literature is, from Plato’s perspective, only literature. Or, more exactly, is only bad literature, because his non-philosophical practice of Simulacrum has, from the outset, loosened any close relation to the question of truth and to the speculative tension that this induces. But, from this perspective, whose normative aspects are obviously debatable, we must remember this: in the perspective thus outlined, the notion of truth cannot have two meanings; one “literary” and the other “scientific.” The aim of the philosopher being precisely to hold a discourse of truth which has value on both planes simultaneously.

From here, we can come to a hypothesis of a philosophical nature concerning literature’s own project, by revisiting its own substance. And if this project, rather than being definitively external to the order of knowledge, belonged constitutively to it? What if literature was itself a form of knowledge, if not “the” form of knowledge? The properly theoretical function of literature could be to rid us of the irrational adherence to a certain mythical representation of “the” knowledge, of “the” science, and of knowledge in general. Understood as an exclusive form, closed in, once and for all, on its own models and systems that cut it off from any literary virtue, and even defines itself by rejecting it at the cost of an epistemological break. Bachelard perfectly represented its parameters: on one side, the downward slope of poetic reverie with its lazy

archetypes, and on the other the conquests of the scientific spirit with its laborious certainties. These two orders maintain their purity by preserving the imperviousness of their respective operations.

Therefore, to speak of literary philosophy, would be to envisage a new approach to literature, to cease regarding it as definitively cut off from the general problems of knowledge, and therefore as being completely indifferent and external to the question of truth. Perhaps a philosophical reading of literary texts would be possible, would reveal the forms of a cognitive apprehension of reality, also obsessed, in its own way, by this question of truth. But this reading replaces another, one that we can call aesthetic or aestheticizing, the term understood in the precise sense of that which emerged at the end of the eighteenth-century. A time when, by extraordinary coincidence, philosophy in France became “literary” in the institutional sense. This concept of aesthetics was formulated to create the conditions for a strict demarcation between the realm of knowledge and that of taste; which critical thought designates as completely separate intellectual interests. However, to speak of a literary philosophy in the new sense envisaged here would be to precisely question the principle of this demarcation, and to remove literature from the exclusive jurisdiction of judgments on taste, and thus, in a way, to de-aestheticize the process.

The following question then arises: how to understand literary works by refraining from referring them to “aesthetic” norms, such as those of beauty or pleasure, and to take seriously, outside of any normative perspective, the calling of these works, that is, to enunciate a certain form of relation to the world and to reality that is not completely foreign to the general concerns of knowledge? It is thus a question of returning to the relation which, traditionally, passes between literature and philosophy. Rather than going from philosophy to literature, constituting it as a theoretical object and uncovering the elements of a philosophical analysis of the literary phenomenon, we would initiate the opposite movement. One that moves from literature to philosophy, by uncovering schematics of thought in literary texts and not simply behind them. One could almost speak of philosophemes [*philosophèmes*] which are not theoretical objects already constituted, but theoretical forms in the making, and at work, which philosophy must learn to be interested in as such. In this way, we would begin to recognise literature’s own speculative function which has been obliterated by a whole tradition, locked in an alternative that makes of literature a model, or an object, for philosophy.

This amounts to recognising a philosophical value of literature and its

works. Understanding that, through this literary form, philosophical thought functions in a specific way, by means of figures that are not those of the concept, which, however, doesn’t mean that they do not engage with real experiences of thought. Let us say that literature opens a new space of play for thought, corrupts its fixations, de-systematises its procedures, and ironically submits itself to a kind of generalizable critique. This is precisely why philosophers would do well to listen to literature talk to them about philosophy too, in a way that is not quite what they have grown accustomed to. If there is a philosophical function of literature, it would be a properly de-structuring one. By considering literature as a form of thought, philosophy can be freed from some of its systematic illusions, practice to read itself at a distance, detached, with a certain irony. And so, if there is a speculative power of literature, it would mainly have to do with the division, the rupture, the surprise tied to the feeling of incongruity and strangeness culminating in incandescence: access to the unthought, that is to say, the very opposite of a reduction to the known. In a nutshell, literature is of interest to philosophy in that it disrupts legitimised programmes.

And, it is in this way that it destabilises the order that an aesthetic theory claims to have imposed upon it. On the horizon of aesthetics, we find religion is frequently masked or bare faced, with its evocation of absolute values, which, in themselves would be beyond all suspicion. But the literary experience of thought is not one of sanction or legitimation: it is rather a controlled vertigo, because it has its rules harbouring first of all the value of challenge and provocation. In saying that literature is not indifferent to truth, but maintains a certain relation with it, we must be careful not to substitute the criterion of the beautiful for that of truth, with a view to integrate it into a new system of legitimation. The relation that literature has with truth is a critical relation, an aggressive relation, which takes the form of questioning and a putting into question. Literature is not a well-formed set of answers to questions that have already been posed and can thus claim to be recognised as having truth in itself: but rather it consists of asking questions, inasmuch as those ones are the real questions. That is, unanswered questions, at least without presupposed answers, questions that are worthwhile independently of the fact of providing answers of a certain type. And, to repeat, this type of activity can only interest philosophy.

Having recognised this, it becomes possible to restore a certain relation of proximity between literature and philosophy, if only on the matter of the problems posed by a reading of their respective texts.

We read a philosophical text with a view to understanding it. But what is understanding a text? And are philosophical texts the only ones to necessitate such an operation? If to understand a text consists in bringing it back to its ideal content, it is clear that this kind of approach is not valid for the literary work which, in most cases, exposes itself to be denatured, to lose, as one says, its authenticity, when it is brought back to the bare level of a literature that conveys ideas, in the sense that we speak of a "literature of ideas." But it isn't clearer that this type of approach is any less worthwhile for the work of philosophy, whose true purpose is not to "convey ideas," in the sense of opinions concerning a number of major problems of general interest, problems for which every great philosopher would bring his own solutions, in such a way that we would only have to take note of them by reading his works. Thus, to read Spinoza's *Ethics* is not to inform oneself on what a certain Dutch philosopher might have to say to men of his time concerning questions on the existence of God, or of the reality of the outside world, or at least it is not only about that. Rather it is to assimilate the articulated system of arguments and concepts which, for us today still allows us to re-engage these themes in a perspective of a problematisation rather than that of a resolution. It authorises us, beginning from a careful reading of texts, to ask the same questions again, under a new light that modifies the point of application. For it is clear that questions, like that of the existence of God, or that of the reality of the external world, no longer hold the same importance for us as they might have done for men in the seventeenth-century.

What is proper to the philosophical approach, what would distinguish it from literature, is to conceptualise and argue. And this, by inventing modes of conceptualisation and argumentation that do not fit into a framework defined once and for all by a general logic, imposing on these modes a uniform structure. If philosophy reasons, it almost always dilemmatically [*dilemmatique*], which leads it to project its discursive productions in a space of dispersion, where philosophies play, in all senses of the word, with their concepts and their arguments. In the end, philosophy, as a global method of reasoning, that offers definitive solutions to a number of major problems, does not exist. Or rather, it exists only through the texts of philosophers, who in context, render operative the various articulated systems of arguments and concepts, from which, concerning these problems, their particular views emerge, posed again each time under different conditions. And that is why no rational constraint will ever force anyone to be absolutely Platonist or Aristotelian, Cartesian or Spinozist, Kantian or Hegelian, Russellian or Wittgensteinian. For if such choices are "rational," it is precisely to the

extent that they are undertaken without the need for constraint, but in a freely reasoned way. But yet, by reasoning freely, we learn to reject truth in the plural, that is to say, to understand that a problem can, according to the way it is approached, receive different types of solutions which, situated in their proper context, are all equally if not indifferently, acceptable, that is, not to blindly admit but at least liable to be discussed philosophically.

This is the reasoning to which philosophy refers and which constitutes its *raison d'être*, occurring only exceptionally as an inset, which takes place only if philosophers are called to confront one another in the field. One would almost be tempted to speak of an arena, a speech, and a debate, where they seem inseparable from the real presence of the protagonists who, to defend them, personally commit their responsibility. In that case, philosophy operates in the mode of dispute, where everyone defends their point of view on a question. This exposes it to a permanent downward spiral, because such a dispute takes place under the gaze of an audience, that each protagonist is willing to take as witness on the validity of his approach, which considerably complicates, even diverts, the stakes of the debate. While, in his text and at a distance, he attempts to outline the presuppositions of his approach, which makes it possible to question it. The philosopher-author is before anything in discussion with himself, by the intermediary of his text, where his manner of thinking is projected as in a mirror, and he calls on it to settle the debate with the philosopher-reader as judge, he does this by implicating himself in the unfolding of his own argument. There is no doubt that literary and philosophical texts are not constituted in the same fashion, and do not call for similar types of reading. But the problems that their understanding bring to the fore are not radically separated: they communicate with each other, they intersect and overlap. One fails to see how they could continue to be indifferent to one another. Experimenting with a philosophical reading of literary texts, so too with a literary reading of philosophical texts, does not inevitably bring literature and philosophy onto the same plane, which could only be done at the risk of minimising their respective dispositions. But it is open, for one, as for the other, new perspectives of apprehension, and, measuring them one to the other, rubbing them against each other, perhaps to make appear glimmers of truth.

Translated by Serene Richards

**Bibliography:**

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