

LITERATURE AND PHILOSOPHY

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Summary

Ever since the beginnings of speculative thought, the relationship between literature and philosophy has been so close, that one can speak about it in terms of a parental relation, even though Plato condemns literature, to which he attributes in his ontological chain, the position of a copy of a copy. Aristotle reasserts literature's value, assigns a moral effect to it, even a certain philosophical dimension, and at the same time subjects it to the speculative discourse. For nearly two thousand years, this judgment on literature guides the theoretical preoccupation about the relation between these two domains, from the philosophers' side as well as from the literary side. It is only the emphasis that changes over time. From a balance between 'prodesse' and 'delectare' in Horace, the accent shifts towards the demand for a literature of strong Christian morality, which is then replaced by the didactic spirit that imposes itself at the beginning of the Modern Age, which again has to give way to the demand for a philosophical and moral literature that can be traced back to classical humanism, i.e. to the moral act of free man that, according to philosophers and poets, can only be articulated in the sphere of fine appearance and the "free play" of art. It is this demand for an autonomous art that leads literature to liberate itself from the guardianship of philosophy. From the Classic Age on, philosophy itself supports this process that leads to the absorption of philosophy by the literary in the Romantic period and to the consecration of poetry as the "paradigm of Modernity" (Iser). During the same era, Schleiermacher establishes the philosophy of hermeneutics, which his student Dilthey uses as a basis for a modern theory of comprehension. Under these auspices, philosophy re-negotiates its competences in relation to the modern literary imagination, well-separated from a systematic discourse, even though hermeneutics has not ceased to assimilate the new discourse of knowledge, which has also left its mark on literature. Heidegger plays a crucial role in these efforts. Other philosophers after him move away from the hermeneutic method in order to point to the work of the literary itself which strips bare speculative language in the philosophical texts. At present, there is a willingness on the part of philosophers to look

for a mutual basis of literature and philosophy that would involve a similar discourse. Poetry, however, paradigm of literature in general, commits itself to a journey without a destination.

1. Literature under the Tutelage of Philosophy

For more than two thousand years, literature has been regarded as the *ancilla philosophiae*, as the servant of philosophy. This conception reveals the close link between these two disciplines, but it also indicates the inferior position that philosophy has given to literature since the beginnings of European thought. In order to find the reason for this, one has to go back to Plato, who, in his *Republic* (Book X), went as far as chasing the poet out of the city. Even if, afterwards, the philosopher appears to be more conciliatory, he still assigns an inferior rank to literature. In his ontological chain, the “idea”, to which the real thing refers to, is at the top of the ladder, the objects in nature are only its poor copies, so that art in general and literature in particular, who both refer to reality, are only the copy of a copy. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle gives credit back to literature. In the fragment that has reached posterity, the philosopher focuses on the connection between tragedy and reality. In the coming centuries, his reflections function as a point of orientation for literature in general in its relation to nature. In comparing tragedy with history, and with the help of the theory of catharsis, Aristotle demonstrates the superiority of tragedy and its moral use for the citizen. Tragedy is more real than history, because it lifts itself above the particular historical fact in order to extract the universal meaning; it is moral because it purifies the passions of the spectator. It is, however, still subordinate to mimesis. Aristotle adopts his instructor's term in giving it the general meaning of imitation of nature, which has sustained its position to this day. Thus, he suppresses the distinction made by Plato between diegesis, the indirect representation of reality through a narrator, and proper mimesis, or direct imitation of nature, an example of which is the dialogue in epic poetry. According to Aristotle, literature in general, without distinguishing between its modes of expression, is a result of representation. This definition of literature in terms of a universal mimesis has not only prevailed to this day, but the philosophic reevaluation of literature in comparison to reality has, for centuries, determined the superiority of philosophy to literature in such a manner that it was customary to consider philosophers more suited to talk about literature than literary scholars. In addition, Aristotle delineated the mode of thinking in literary representation. Being a natural imitation of reality, literature is at the same time understood as a sense producing activity. Far from being a pure copy of nature, it represents the particular in order to reveal the essence. Thus, catharsis is the means by which to arrive at a state of peaceful contemplation about the pure essence of things.

These two aspects of the mode of literary representation unite the philosopher's didactic desire and the pleasure of reading. In the poets' terminology, they have found their connection in the notions of *docere* and *placere*, or as Horace puts it in his *Ars Poetica*, of *prodesse* and *delectare*. Literature must instruct and please, must unite the useful and the pleasant. This transposition of the principles of literary thinking to the poetic practice shows that even the poets, in spite of their individual authority, have followed in the footsteps of the philosopher.

This situation did not change in the Middle Ages, during which the Church imposed itself as the guardian of knowledge and conscience. Under the influence of Saint Augustine, the Church not only assigned a Christian meaning to metaphysical thought, but also attributed a new function to literary practice. The knowledge of the essence of things was interpreted as knowledge of Christian truth, revealed by the words of God. During the Scholastic era, literature had the function of maintaining faith, glorifying God and his creation. This is why the poet, like all artists, was considered a servant of God. If, by the 12th century, literature, due to the reappearance of profane literature, succeeded in emancipating itself from the guidance of the Church, it was nonetheless indebted to the didactic principle and the standard of pleasing. Even Petrarch and Boccaccio who, two centuries later, defend poetry as autonomous “science” next to philosophy and theology, do not change anything about the Aristotelian principles.

Before them, at the dawn of the Modern Age, Dante was a striking example of the close relationship between literature and philosophy, even an example of their fusion. In his works, in particular in his *Divina Commedia*, Dante leads scholastic philosophy to its peak, while at the same time, he announces the new era of the *uomo singolare* proclaimed by Renaissance philosophy. Three centuries later, at the end of the Renaissance, this reciprocal entanglement is also exemplified by Giordano Bruno, with the small difference that he is a philosopher who, quite often, expresses his ideas in literary form. As such, he defends his pantheist philosophy against the scholastic dogma set forth by Oxford professors in the five dialogues of *La Cena de le Ceneri*, whereas his remarkable allegory *Spaccio de la Bestia Trionfante* highlights his ethic principles by describing a battle of stars before time. In other poems, the philosopher-poet is more openly didactic.

Thus, the beginnings of modern literature and thought are centered on the relationship between literature and philosophy and Giordano Bruno is a good illustration of the conditions under which the two meet. After Copernicus's discovery the whole universe is, for Bruno, thrown out of joint of the scholastic thought. This is precisely what characterizes his position in history. According to him, the universe bursts into endless “heavenly bodies.” In his work, he defends the undeniable immensity of the universe, which he cannot prove but which he concludes from the omnipotence of the divine. This means that at one moment the philosophical discursivity fails, and Bruno is driven to make use of poetical speech in order to imagine a new order for his orbiting worlds, surrounding and including mankind at the same time. He grounds himself on the principles upon which the voice of modern and contemporary poets that try to scrutinize man and his reality, are also grounded, for example the idea that oppositions can neutralize each other, that space is unlimited, or that death is a thoroughfare for new relations. These principles have carried him into the ethereal atmosphere of questioning the absolute, in which he rises above the pains of his body. It is the same place and the same self-conquest that the poets refer to in their search for the origin of the other, and the other of their origin. Drawing on images and metaphors, even drawing on the fiction of dialogue and the theatrical, Dante and Bruno, but already Plato himself, show that literature does not simply have an ornamental function which adds itself to the speculative content, that there is not even only a complementarity between literature and philosophy, but that literature replaces the faulty discursivity of philosophy.

Didactic poetry does not only prove that literature's principle of pleasure has been reduced to second rank by the desire to communicate the new knowledge for which man paves the way, but it also proves that literary mimicry offers a perfect form of expression for the didactic intention. It also maintains, even reinforces, the concept of literary imitation. This becomes especially apparent at the Age of European Classicism that prompts the poets to re-read Aristotle's *Poetics* under the influence of Cartesian rationalism. Thus, the concept of verisimilitude gains importance. True is that which, according to the good sense, appears to be. The two concepts of good sense and of verisimilitude are inseparably bound insofar as the good sense guarantees on the one hand credibility i.e. the truth of things, and on the other hand pleasure that the spectator or the reader can feel by discovering the logic of the possible. This is because "the pleasure of the text" (Barthes) has once again reclaimed its rights. In his *Poetics*, Boileau thoroughly shows to what extent literature has followed philosophy at the Age of Classicism: "Finally Malherbe arrived!" - the reference to Malherbe is an acknowledgment of the Cartesian order that was introduced by this poet in his literary practice. The mix of genres and styles, the marvelous, the comical interrupting a tragic action, and many other devices that indicated a rupture with the logic of reason and that dated from the Middle Ages, were forbidden.

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Biographical Sketch

Sieghild Bogumil-Notz. Dr. phil.; Docteur en Littérature Générale et Comparée, Paris III, Habilitée à Diriger des Recherches (HDR), Paris III. She has been associated professor at the department of Comparative Literature at the Ruhr-University of Bochum and co-opted at the Department for Theatre Studies of the Ruhr-University, professor at the university of Wuppertal and Kassel. Her research is centered upon the theory of poetry, history and poetics of French, German, and Spanish poetry of the 19th to 20th century, the intercultural and intertextual dimension of the poetics and poetry of Paul Celan, literary theory and theory of reading, contemporary German and French theatre, women's theatre, European and Indian intercultural processes. Beside numerous articles in various international journals and miscellanies written in different languages, she has published: *Rousseau und die Erziehung des Lesers* (1974) and co-edited: *Bernard-Marie Koltès au carrefour des écritures contemporaines* (2000).