

PLURAL READINGS AND SINGULAR SCIENCES OF LITERATURE

No one would think of denying that literary texts lend themselves to “plural” readings, as we say today: the studies collected in this issue are one more proof, as is the title of the collection. Tens of thousands of pages have already been written on Shakespeare and on Montaigne, which does not preclude the enjoyment of those that are offered us here; and the idea would not occur to anyone that this process of re-writing could ever come to an end, aside from the apocalyptic end of all human things, written and unwritten.

There is nothing wrong in this, as long as the authors and the readers of these essays understand the nature of the exercise: the function of authors is to disclose resonances heretofore unperceived in the literary work, while readers are expected to show sufficient interest in these new interpretations to assure *hic et nunc* their success, in whatever sense of the word.

Here and now: it would be contradictory to claim both the infinity of possible metamorphoses of the literary text and the permanence of the memory one should keep of each one of them through space and time. No one can claim to know the totality

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of the innumerable commentaries on Shakespeare's theater published in dozens of countries and languages for three centuries; and the most knowledgeable specialist in this regard is not necessarily the most fitted nor the most inclined to himself conceive a new view of the matter. Conversely, examples are not lacking of readings that were particularly noted, in their time, due to commentators whose erudition was not however the major quality.

All of this is commonplace and would not deserve to be recalled if a relatively recent phenomenon did not seem to put into question such basic truths with which we were once silently in agreement. I am referring to the emergence of a *science* of literary texts, known by this name or others, considered to be more reliable than the traditional art of criticism or the construing of texts. The event is so well known that it is enough to recall at random some of its more brilliant manifestations, without trying to put them into order: structural analysis, applied to all sorts of writing, literary, mythological or narrative; linguistic analysis, long considered in human sciences as the indispensable model; semiological analysis, with all its variants according to countries, schools or years; "textual grammar," or "textanalysis," which is perhaps only another name given to the same project of a universal science of "all abstract objects called *texts*,"¹ etc.

The works produced during the last twenty years under the sign of one or the other school are legion. This overabundance does not facilitate the understanding of what is truly distinctive in each school, especially since the modalities of analysis normally vary from one expert to another. Moreover, it is improper to even speak of a method of analysis with regard to interpretative exercises evidently conducted according to ways that differ from pure reason, whatever other virtues may be found in the resulting discourse. However, the most troublesome question, it seems to me, is not that one: variability and indistinctness could, as some claim, be merely the expected attributes of a movement of thought that has not yet found its way. The reflection that I would hope to arouse bears rather on the very project of a *science* of literary

¹ J. S. Petöfi and C. Reiser, *Studies in Text Grammar*, Dordrecht, Reidel, 1973, p. 1.

texts as it is explicitly mentioned in the various manifestos of this movement.

Let us first emphasize this common aspiration to scientificity, or at least to a greater scientificity than that of the traditional exegesis of literary texts. Those who favor a “new” criticism or a new way of reading literature often refer to this objective; others, more modest, are content to pronounce some principles of a finer or more knowing view of the literary work, the affirmation of this superiority constituting in its turn an implicit reference to the *progress* of knowledge in matters of *belles lettres*. In both cases, there seems to be a tacit agreement on an assuredly new conception of literary studies, according to which our way of reading Shakespeare or Montaigne *hic et nunc* would be more scientific or in some way “better” than that of our predecessors, thanks to the use of an analytical apparatus to which they did not have access. Obviously, from this proposition follows another, namely that our present way of reading Shakespeare and Montaigne, here and now, is doomed to be replaced or complemented by others, more scientific or in some way better than ours, insofar as they will call on an analytical apparatus to which we do not as yet have access.

It suffices to make these two presuppositions of the science of texts explicit, especially the second, to feel or to arouse a certain embarrassment. Let us however give justice to the advocates of literary science: most of them would dislike this presentation of things—rightly regarded as too simplistic, and it is true that in spite of their disagreements the Moderns rarely push their faith in the new science to the point of taxing the Ancients with error or heresy in the manner of the Inquisition. It remains that the very way in which the alternative is presented raises an epistemological problem that is not easily dismissed. The new fact, as we have seen, is the reference to methods of analysis that are more articulated than the rather lax rules of criticism or traditional construing of texts. The literary work becomes “this abstract object called text” whose essence or meaning could not be understood except through a procedure of transformations founded on successive operations of re-writing leading from the source-text (the literary work) to the target-text (its commentary). All sorts of analogies come to mind to bear out the relative banality of such

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a project, and consequently its apparent acceptability; is this not the way in which the science of all sorts of objects is built, from the initial formulations under various names (descriptions, perceptions, representations, hypotheses) to the terminal constructions of the moment, always provisional (interpretations, concepts, explanations, theories)? And should we not regard the care taken to specify the mechanisms of reasoning that relate the ones with the others, up to the point of making this reasoning repeatable by others, as nothing more than the oft-repeated demand for “rigour,” only taken at last seriously?

The difficulties begin here; the first one is that we do not yet have a single example of an analysis of text conducted in this fashion. Even more, the most celebrated masters of the science of literary works—written or oral—are strangely enough those whose approach seems the least apt to be repeated by others than themselves... The marvelous commentaries with which Roland Barthes charmed us not so long ago, with regard to all sorts of objects, did not contain recipes that would have enabled anyone to compete with him, as is proven, alas, by *Le Roland-Barthes sans peine* by Burnier and Rambaud²—even when such recipes were supposed to form the subject of academic courses in which the reference to a *method* of analysis was not lacking, under whatever name (linguistic, structural, semiologic). Likewise, it has never been sufficient to read the mythological analyses of Lévi-Strauss, although admirably “explained,” to be able to produce construing of other myths that would have the same success. The lessons to be drawn from such statements are so obvious that the reader will be grateful if I leave them to him.

The inverse phenomenon is no less instructive, namely the rare cases where one seeks less to produce an original commentary than to reproduce in a quasi-algorithmic way a specific interpretation the scientific virtues of which are taken for granted. Let us consider, for example, a set of texts “T” and their interpretations according to an established specialist, as found in a scientific publication, viz. “construction C”: the exercise consists in trying to define a series of discursive operations that, applied to T, engender C, in the hope that the knowledge thus obtained will

² M. A. Burnier and P. Rambaud, *Le Roland-Barthes sans peine*, Balland, 1978.

clarify the formal foundations of the analysis, as well as the empirical limits of its validity. Studies of this type are just beginning, in relation with research on artificial intelligence. They point out the essential role played in the process $T \rightarrow C$ by underlining encyclopedias indicating all kinds of possible relationships between words or groups of words, without which it is utterly impossible to justify or even to understand the passage from T to C³.

The elucidation of these “local” encyclopedias—that is, underlying each a unique construction—does not aim at revealing the nature and extent of the knowledge handled by our most pretigious commentators. The goal is only to obtain in this way a convenient base of reference for comparing interpretations that are otherwise so boneless: differences between the one and the other can then be expressed by the unique characteristics of the underlying encyclopedias from the point of view of their semantic content and logical structure (we call “logico-semantic organizations” or more briefly, LSO, the encyclopedias thus reconstructed). Further, one may choose to merge these local encyclopedias into a broader one particularly when they are derived from interpretations that refer to the same work; a more general LSO is thus obtained in which all these interpretations are contained, plus others engendered by new combinations of elements borrowed from different constructions. The construing of comments then appears clearly for what it is, namely, a series of choices within the set of possible inferences or derivations beginning with T, and ending in a construction C among others, of which these choices ultimately constitute the unique foundation.

³ For the analysis of literary texts, one of the most instructive studies is that of J. Natali, “Sesat et l’analyse poétique: à propos des critiques des ‘Chats’ de Baudelaire,” in J.-C. Gardin *et al.*, *La logique du plausible*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l’Homme, 1981, pp. 95-145; however, for various historical reasons, it is in the field of archaeology that this type of exercise is most advanced today, the descriptions of material objects (sites, monuments, art vestiges) playing the role of the initial texts “T”, while the interpretation of these objects corresponds to construction C. One will find in the above-mentioned work an over-all view of work carried out over the past 10 years on the $T \rightarrow C$ process in this field. M-S. Lagrange, *La systématisation du discours archéologique*, pp. 239-303. On the relation between the analysis of constructions thus understood and artificial intelligence on the one hand, literary analysis and semiologic analysis on the other, see J.-C. Gardin, *op. cit.*, pp. 59-85.

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Our inquiry into the science of literary works finally leads through different paths to a unique conclusion: the methods followed in this science are amazingly *singular*, in at least two meanings of the term. First, they are singular in that they remain essentially unformulated, and undoubtedly difficult to communicate, considering the distance currently observed in this respect between masters and disciples, as against the broader sharing of methods in sciences that deal with other objects. These methods are also singular because of their results, as if their sole function was to provide a rational basis for as many particular readings of literary works as there are contributors to a science of texts. The case of *Les Chats* of Baudelaire is instructive in this regard: more than thirty studies have been devoted to this short poem since Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson signed the first one, twenty years ago.⁴ They all refer, in one way or another, to a scientific method of analysis, yet, the results of the analysis have nothing in common from one study to another. However, this plurality does not seem to worry our scientists: rival interpretations are rarely cited, much less discussed, so that it is finally up to the reader of these readings to decide which one seems to him “the best,” according to criteria kindly left to his judgment or his good taste.

Another difficulty then springs up, concerning the epistemological status of such constructions. The diversity of the theories or world views raised by a single object is not, in science, an anomaly; the difficulties begin when there are no means to test the relative validity of each one, nor consequently to decide which is “the best”, on a less variable basis than our good taste or our judgment. For better or for worse, such is the situation in which we find ourselves in the science of texts: we have no system of empirical evaluation to which we can refer in order to compare in all objectivity (in the experimental sense of the word) the scientific merits of rival interpretations. The reason for this has less to do with the *object*—human, literary—than with a property, also singular, of the science in question, namely, our ignorance of

⁴ R. Jakobson and Cl. Lévi-Strauss, “‘Les Chats’ de Baudelaire,” *L’Homme*, Vol. 2, 1962, pp. 5-21. In the study by Natali quoted above, a list is given of the “28 commentaries on ‘Les Chats’,” which appeared for the most part between 1962 and 1973; additions to his list are still being made (pp. 140-143).

its *objective*: what is the function of a scientific construction concerning Baudelaire's *Les Chats*? Clearly, we can say nothing about its value or its validity if we have not first answered this question.

A possible answer was suggested not long ago by G. Durand: a scientific commentary of a literary work should elicit distinctive constituents of the work, at whatever level (rhetoric, prosodic, semantic, phonetic), and the empirical verification of the result would consist in composing "artificial" texts made up of similar constituents, in the hope of finding therein some trace of the essence or specific virtues of the original text.⁵ In other words, the cognitive value of the construction would be measured by its generative power and the nature of its "effects," namely in this case imitations or fakes that it should be difficult to distinguish from the true texts, but which would be the product of an explicit theory instead of the incommunicable knowledge or art of the *connaisseur*, erudite or forger. The attempt that Durand made in this direction, beginning with the distinctive characteristics of *Les Chats* according to Jakobson and Lévi-Strauss, was a disaster... No one will be surprised, indeed no one was surprised: new readings of the poem were proposed later, based on other characteristics, which would not stand up any better under this type of test, and we see no reason why the competition should stop if not, eventually, for a lack of competitors.

To which most would object—and this is a second possible answer to the question posed above—that it is unfair to make such strong demands in the "particular" case of human sciences: our objects or phenomena are then held to be of a different type from those of the physical world, so that one should appeal in this case to different criteria in order to evaluate the cognitive virtues of scientific constructions. Why not, indeed? For it is not even necessary to share this dualist view of the ways of science to remain open to such a suggestion: if the usual tests of the

⁵ G. Durand, "Les chats, les rats et les structuralistes. Symbole et structuralisme," *Cahiers internationaux de symbolisme*, Nos. 17-18, 1969, pp. 13-38. A similar point of view was developed a propos of a more or less imaginary poem—"Les Rats" by Baptistin—in J.-C. Gardin, *Les analyses de discours*, Neuchâtel, Delachaux and Niestlé, 1974, pp. 18-38.

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“harder” sciences are deemed inapplicable, our only requirement is that someone should tell us how to replace them in the sciences of man in general and the literary sciences in particular, assuming at least that our insistence on this point is accepted. Unfortunately, the risk is that we shall be left unsatisfied: in spite of a considerable literature on the subject, the problem of the validation of literary interpretations has received only vague answers of a philosophical or rhetorical order rather than truly operative—by which I mean that it is difficult to go from the evoked *principles* to actual *procedures* of validation, as we need to do in the science of texts as in any other. Much more, this very prolixity is a proof, if one is needed, of our embarrassment: one would not continually bring up the same question if it had received answers that came anywhere near a definition of criteria or methods applicable “in the field” to handle specific cases of indecision between conflicting interpretations, as they arise in ever growing numbers in the science of texts.⁶

Failing which we shall have to return to the plurality of readings in literature but affirmed then as a necessity of principle, and with all the more vehemence since in doing so we renounce the hope once cherished of a method of scientific analysis whose results would be “better,” by definition, than those of the traditional exegesis. The debate should then shift to the tolerable extension of pluralism: is it “infinite” as some see it—in which case the project of a science of interpretation appears desperate—or only “limited,” as others would have it in order to save what

⁶ Essays having a bearing one way or another on the theme of validation in literary studies are countless. A convenient reference work is E. D. Hirsch, *Validity in Interpretation*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1967. The famous “hermeneutic circle” of Heidegger is obviously not foreign to the endless repetitions of the same considerations, in fact, circular, on the validation of the construing of texts by the “consciousness of their historical efficacy,” as proposed by P. Ricoeur (following H-G. Gadamer: “La tâche de l’herméneutique,” in *Exegesis: problèmes de méthode et exercices de lecture*, ed. by F. Bovon and G. Rouiller, Neuchâtel, Delachaux and Niestlé, 1975, pp. 179-200; or even simpler through the “experience” of the reader in which the “hermeneutic arc” of interpretation must finally be anchored, again according to Ricoeur (“Qu’est-ce qu’un texte? Expliquer et comprendre,” in *Hermeneutik und Dialektik*, Vol. 2, ed. by R. Budner *et al.*, Tübingen, Mohr, 1970, pp. 181-200). We are clearly far from the inter-subjective procedures of verification used in the natural sciences admittedly based also on “experience” and “consciousness of efficacy” only more widely shared.

they can of the project?⁷ In any case, we are far from the scientific ambitions that *les amoureux fervents et les savants austères* in the realm of textual analysis have been able to develop willy-nilly during the last twenty years: as Monsieur de La Palice would have said, the plural can only apply to singular objects, and it is difficult to see how to build a science of such objects unless we follow that other master thinker, Alfred Jarry, in the search for laws that govern exceptions.

It is however, strangely enough, what the last-born school seems to have in mind under the name of “pragmatics.” This outcome was inevitable: in their attempt to follow the tripartite division of the theory of signs according to Ch. Morris, our neo-semiologists⁸ successively discovered the shortcomings of the first dimension (syntactic), then of the second (semantic), as a way to account for the specificity of a literary work according to anyone’s reading. There remained the third dimension (pragmatic), that offered the signal advantage of including the “interpreter” of the work, that is, its reader, in the semiologic system. This concept of interpreter—due in fact to C. S. Peirce, who introduced it in 1905 in a famous definition of pragmatism⁹—consists in incorporating into the meaning of a text all the “effects” of this text on the thought or behavior of the people who happen to read it. Nothing could better serve the interests of our neo-semiologists: they are now entitled, or even enjoined, to take into consideration “the infinity of pluralism” evoked by Peckham (see Note 7), without having to pay for this liberality with any renouncement of scientific dignity, insofar as the semiosis of Charles Peirce and

⁷ See the discussion on “The Limits of Pluralism” in *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1977) and its follow-up in later issues, in particular M. Peckham, “The Infinitude of Pluralism,” *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1977), pp. 803-816.

⁸ Ch. W. Morris, “Foundations of the Theory of Signs,” *International Encyclopedia of Unified Science*, I, 2, Chicago, Univ. of Chicago Press, 1938. I have proposed to use the name “neo-semiologists” for our modern experts in all types of *human* objects or phenomena, when they refer themselves to semiotics or semiology, as opposed to the semioticians of the first half of the 20th century, who had in view the study of systems of signs developed in science (instead of studying the objects themselves), without this suspicious restriction to the human sciences only: J.C. Gardin, *Les analyses de discours*, Neuchâtel, Delachaux and Niestlé, 1974, pp. 48-55.

⁹ *The Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, Vol. 5, 434, ed. by Ch. Hartshorne and P. Weiss, 6 Vols., Cambridge, Mass (plus Vols. 7 and 8, ed. by A. Burcks, 1958).

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the semiotics of Charles Morris are themselves considered as the science of sciences, or “unified science.”

Neo-pragmatic (by analogy) is thus nothing but a new way of giving an august name to current studies that are indeed perfectly estimable, but have no more chance of ever qualifying as a science of literary texts than had in their day structuralism and semiology, for the same reasons: one cannot embrace so many goals at once.¹⁰ In other words, the range of possible interpretations in literary analysis being unlimited—as is the semiosis of Peirce reviewed by Umberto Eco¹¹—the only form of science to which we can lay claim is a science that is in a way retrospective: we must wait until readers have done their job before we can begin ours... The stratagems imagined here and there to shun the Sisyphian torments of this position show that some have understood to what point it is untenable: in order to escape the obligation to reiterate the work with each new reader, we have to invent a sort of fictitious reader, under a variety of names, so that literary science can concentrate on the behavior of this particular reader only.¹² The weakness of such an artifice is obvious: it is lawful for anyone to declare a particular reading uninteresting, or antiquated, or erroneous in comparison with another that pleases him more, so that we are led back to that

¹⁰ The objects of pragmatism are innumerable. Beyond the texts themselves, there are all the “contexts” that the neo-semiologist is free to call upon in order to “explain” the literary work and its specific meaning or value to him (see for example H. Parret. “Le langage en contexte” in *Etudes philosophiques et linguistiques de pragmatique*, Amsterdam, Benjamin, 1980). To the extent that such exercises form the subject matter of academic presentations, we would be justified in believing that they obey some general principles, such as the “theory of discursive creativity” (*sic*) that Parret does not hesitate to put forward, (*op. cit.*, p. 189), unfortunately, the strangeness of this formulation, on logical grounds alone, is enough to raise doubts on the whole project.

¹¹ U. Eco, *The Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Text*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1979.

¹² See on the subject the edifying survey by Christine Brooke-Rose, *A Rhetoric of the Unreal*, p. 31 *et seq.* in which are mentioned successively the “involved reader” of W.C. Booth (1961)—also used by W. Iser (1974)—the “super-reader” of Riffaterre (1966), the “informed reader” of S. Fish (1970), the “qualified reader” of J. Culler (1975) and even the “real reader” to which this latter author returns (1980), in his plea for a transformational grammar of effectively proposed interpretations without however going so far as to undertake himself such a thankless task, as Ch. Brooke-Rose humorously notes (p. 32).

“hermeneutics of indetermination” in which G. Hartman rightly sees the true fate of literary criticism or science.¹³

Criticism (traditional) or science (modern), the distinction claimed by some with such vigor finally has no epistemological basis. The rhetorical liberties of the ones are neither better nor worse than the analytical outbursts of the others, and in the present state of things we have no reason to regard either as manifestations of an incipient science. For a science of texts to see the light of day and really *go beyond* all other types of literary commentary, we must first be able to explain what we mean by that, other than through the usual insufficient reference to the intrinsic values of a given analytic machinery. Earlier, I suggested a possible opening in this direction, provided that we accept a requirement that has hitherto been ignored or refused, namely validation through assessment of the predictive or generative power of the interpretative construction (see Note 5); but the price to pay in intellectual terms is higher, it seems, than we are presently accustomed or disposed to bear in this area.¹⁴ In this case, wisdom, economy and honesty would demand that we return or stick to the customary rules of literary interpretation, that require talents of a different order than the build-up of scientific constructions, though no more widely shared.

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¹³ G. Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1980, p. 41.

¹⁴ Putting aside wishful resolutions (for example Culler's, as quoted at the end of Note 12), I know of no effective works in this direction, in literary studies other than those of J. Molino *et al.*, “Sur les titres des romans de Jean Bruce,” *Langages*, Vol. 35, 1974, pp. 86-94; “Introduction à l'analyse sémiologique des Maximes de La Rochefoucauld”, in J.-C. Gardin *et al.*, *La logique du plausible*, pp. 147-238. Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1981. However, in the field of musicology, we must quote the parallel and historically connected program of J.-J. Nattiez, illustrated by the collection “Sémiologie et analyses musicales” that he founded at the University of Montreal: the first volume of the collection is an interesting attempt at a theoretical construction verifiable by its productions “in the style of” J.-S. Bach: M. Baroni and C. Jacoboni, *Proposal for a Grammar of Melody*, University of Montreal Press, 1978. These examples, added to the exercises in reconstruction quoted above (Note 3) are sufficient to point out the complexity of such undertakings, compared to which the usual commentaries of human productions—literary, material, musical—seem to suffer from a certain gratuity.