

Panel

Department of French and Spanish  
Memorial University of Newfoundland

**PHILOSOPHY AND LITERATURE :**  
**Convergence and/or divergence ?**

**January 26<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

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**CONSTRUCTION, DECONSTRUCTION, RECONSTRUCTION**

I do not have an original or particular thesis about the ambiguous and ambivalent relationship between Philosophy and Literature or between Religion and Art. I know that there are links between them and that frontiers between both are blurry or vague, especially if one distinguishes, Literature from Art, as does Régine Robin. But Philosophy and Literature can be complementary if Philosophy is on the side of the scholar and not that of the master... I will describe what, I think, is the construction of a relationship, its deconstruction and then address its reconstruction; I hope that you will understand my point, even if I do not manage to explain it to you.

**Construction** is in three steps.

First, amongst the Greeks: Plato wanted to expel the poets from the City ("*Polis*") because they favour *mimesis* or imitation, but at the same time they are not good enough imitators, and because they lie or are against the Gods. Plato is suspected to have written tragedies, just as Socrates composed Music, and Plato's dialogues are constructed upon a theatrical model. Plato was on the side of *diegesis* or narration, if not narrative. Aristotle was a defender of *mimesis* and of the *catharsis* of tragedy; for him, *physis* or nature is perfect and Art is an imitation of it; but more importantly, Art can be a way to make nature more perfect, as in Greek sculpture, which Hegel considered to be the Classical Art.

The second step in the construction of a relationship between Philosophy and Literature involves a big leap to the Seventeenth Century in France. (This ellipsis is perhaps due to my ignorance

of the Middle Ages.) Within the classical period, Descartes is a philosopher who can be considered as a writer - you will find his name in any textbook of the Literary History of France - and Pascal, a writer who, like Montaigne can be considered as a philosopher; for them, Philosophy or Literature is between Theology and Science. At the same time, the abbey of Port-Royal, an important learning institution, was a centre of Philosophy, Logic, Grammar, as well as Theology. In the French Eighteenth Century or the Age of Enlightenment, Philosophy is Literature and Literature is Philosophy with Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, who were writer-philosophers. This does not even take into account *The Encyclopaedia* of Diderot and d'Alembert, which combines Literature, Philosophy, Science, and Technology.

The third and last step in the construction of a Philosophy-Literature relationship is with the Germans: Goethe, the Schlegel brothers, Kant, Hegel, Hölderlin, and Schelling. With regards to Kant, I

will only talk about the *sublime*, which is different from what it is pleasant (or agreeable), good or beautiful. The sublime is that which is "absolutely great", without comparison; it is related to the infinite and it cannot be quantified or measured. It is a matter of analytical or dialectical relation and of imagination. Imagination is the anticipation of death and the faculty of *presentation* by *schemes* (or images) and not of *representation* by *concepts*, like understanding. Genius is a middleman between nature and Art and not between nature and Science; Art is imitation of nature; but the rule of Art is given, by nature, through the genius. Poetry is the Art of arts, above Music. Finally, the sublime can be lucid (a source of fright), noble (a source of admiration, the ultimate passion for Descartes) or magnificent (a source of beauty). Intelligence and friendship are sublime; spirit or mind and love are beautiful. The sublime is source of tragedy.

With Hegel, there is a rift between nature and Art or between nature and spirit. Art itself is surpassed by religion, which itself is surpassed by Philosophy (absolute Spirit or Knowledge); for Hegel, Art is finite, as is intelligence (the classical) and the sublime (the symbolic). In short, for German Idealism, realized in Romantic Drama or Romanticism, Poetry still stands at the pinnacle of the arts, because it is the most spiritual and the furthest from the material.

[I don't have the time to speak about Hölderlin nor about the Absolute Idealism of Schelling - for that, you can read *L'absolu littéraire* by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe.]

I believe that we can include Marx and Marxism in this last step of construction of a relationship between Philosophy and Literature. Basically, there are two theories around the concept of alienation or reification. The first one was developed by Lukacs and later Goldmann, who believe

that Literature is conceptual: it is a conception of the world, like Philosophy. The second theory maintains that Literature is mimetic and Art is an utopia and an aporia between its essence in liberty and its existence in cultural industry: this is the position by the School of Frankfurt, mainly with the negative Dialectics and Adorno's Critical. The Philosophy of History of Benjamin is something different, as it does not deal with Aesthetics as Adorno does.

**Deconstruction** of the relationship between Philosophy and Literature is associated here with three names: Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida (followed by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe and many others). For Nietzsche, Music is the source of tragedy, by means of the dithyramb (the lyric hymn of praise to Dionysos) and tragedy is the source of Philosophy; tragedy is related to myth, the sublime symbol, but is already finished with Euripides and because of the teaching of Socrates. Tragedy is mythic, mystic, and mysterious; it is Metaphysics.

For Heidegger, as for Hölderlin, there are two paths of thinking: Philosophy and Poetry; in our words, the philosopher is a "savant" (as in Ducasse) and the poet is a "voyant" (as in Rimbaud). Art is not aesthetic; it is *praxis* and *poiesis*: *tekhne*. Aesthetics, as a form of Metaphysics, is the forgetting of the essence or truth of Art. The essence of Art is in its origin: the beginning and the end; this origin is extremely violent.

With Derrida, there is a constant to and fro between Philosophy and Literature, Phenomenology and Hermeneutics, Husserl and Heidegger. You can find his articles and books about many writers: Rousseau, Baudelaire, Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Artaud, Bataille, Genet, Jabès, Ponge, Cixous, Blanchot (as Lacoue-Labarthe does), Defoe, Poe, Joyce, Kafka, Celan, etc. Derrida's writing is in itself a performance; it is performative [see his long and virulent debate with Searle and Pragmatics]: Derrida is a great writer



carrying the deconstruction of Philosophy, Literature, and Freudian and Lacanian Psychoanalysis.

Examples that demonstrate the **reconstruction** of a Philosophy-Literature relationship are as follows: Breton's Surrealism, Debord's Situationism, Sartre's Existentialism, Irigaray or Butler's Feminism, Perniola's Radical Criticism, Lyotard's Postmodernism, Althusser and his disciples Marxist Theory of ideology, Deleuze, Rancière or Agamben's Philosophy of Literature, Badiou's "Inaesthetics", Laruelle's "Philo-fiction", without forgetting the Lacanian theory of four Discourses... With reconstruction, the old question reappears: "What is Philosophy?" "What is Literature?" And the main consideration is the introduction of a third part or party - Politics, in relation with the Capitalist Discourse...

To conclude, I would like to mention a book by Meillassoux which deciphers *Le coup de dés* by Mallarmé; it is entitled *Le Nombre et la sirène*: Meillassoux is a philosopher who reads Poetry like a grammarian. A natural language is a theory in itself; Literature is the art of language, the art of grammar: of signification or *semiosis*. Grammar is a science, as old as the Philosophy of the Greeks; Rhetoric was already grammar. Textual or Proprioceptive Grammar is the grammar, not only of *semiosis* but also of *deixis* as enunciation and punctuation of sense as "sound and fury" of life and death.

Thank you very much for your listening.

JML

Small Point

December 18-20, 2011

Saint John's

December 25-30, 2011

(with the help of Danielle Lemelin)

January 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012

January 22-25, 2012