

Literary Studies and Literary Experience

Jean-Marie Schaeffer

A crisis of literature?

WE LIVE IN AN ERA THAT LOVES TO LAMENT, and countless texts repeat the same refrain: a death notice for literature, condemned to decline in a world which, we are told, is becoming more and more hostile to culture in general and to literature in particular.¹ If we are being honest, the complaint is not unique to our time: it has long been an obligatory gesture in the humanities. This is certainly not enough to disqualify such a complaint. What does disqualify it, however, is that it is false.

Perhaps it is banal to observe that the future of literature is *not* threatened. Never in the history of humanity have people read as much as they do today. The first reason for this is that never before has so large a proportion of humanity known how to read and write. This is especially true in “developed” countries. Although a few pockets of illiteracy exist in our societies and there are a few localized eruptions of ignorance, we should not forget that today’s literacy rate is far superior to what it was at the end of the nineteenth century. This is even more true at the global level: since the middle of the twentieth century access to writing has grown exponentially in all regions of the world. The current expansion of the internet is part of this progression. It is at once an effect and a cause: an effect because mastering the use of online information presupposes that one can read and write; a cause inasmuch as technical access to the internet is itself a catalyst for learning to read and write. Thus, if reading and writing do not have the *same* place in cultural life that they did a few generations ago, this does not mean that they have a *lesser* place. Their places have simply changed.

However, those who bemoan the decline of literary culture—and in the same breath, sometimes, decline of culture in general—do not necessarily deny the existence of a global rise in the practice of reading and writing. Rather, they maintain that this development, “driven” by technology and “massification,” far from benefitting literature, abandons it. That the new readers, according to this vision, do not read “real”



but ersatz literature is but one of the signs of the generalized lack of education that characterizes contemporary societies. Instead of Joyce or Musil, they read superficial and stereotypical best sellers. Instead of reading and learning by heart the verses of Walt Whitman or Mallarmé, they listen to and learn by heart the songs that stream out of the radio and the television.

It is, alas, undeniable that every society is threatened by ignorance. But a good deal of bad faith is needed to claim that ignorance is encouraged by the political and social democracy in which the populations of certain societies, among them Europeans and Americans, happen to live. Comparison with the experience of totalitarian or even “merely” authoritarian regimes should encourage us to refrain from such assertions. It is true, however, that the democratizing dynamic that has characterized our societies since the nineteenth century has ceaselessly reconfigured the relationship between high culture and vernacular culture. Over time, the two have become so permeable in both directions that any such distinction becomes useless, if it were not already, to describe the relevant practices when we ask not only about the modalities of cultural transmission, but also their creation.

From “Literature” to the crisis in literary studies

The supposed crisis of literature hides another crisis that is quite real: that of literary studies. It is in fact a triple crisis, affecting at once the transmission of literary values, the cognitive study of literary phenomena, and the training of students in literature. Where does it come from? I hypothesize that this crisis results from our tendency to reduce “literary culture” to one of its established representations, namely “Literature”—precisely that which is said to be in crisis. This vision of the literary was established by the *separatist* educational model of the nineteenth century and it continues to shape our current ideas. It would be better to begin with a more charitable notion of the literary, one which corresponds first and foremost to a specific use of texts—their aesthetic use. It might be objected that such a category, defined functionally (by use), groups together heterogeneous elements in terms of their success, ambition, depth, power of representation, and so on. But it is precisely here that the advantage of the nonseparatist definition can be found, for at least three reasons.

First, and this alone would be reason enough to prefer it to the separatist conception, a functional definition brackets the literary values of the investigator. It does not deny that literature is a thing of value—which



it is intrinsically—but from a descriptive point of view, the relevant object of study is now the field where these values are constructed and enter into conflict. Second, it is easy to show that a normative perspective on literature (that of a segregationist) is meaningful only if it is formulated by starting from a nonsegregationist definition of the literary. It is uncontroversial that the logic of normativity presupposes that literary “taste” can be cultivated—a norm has no meaning unless one can move away from it or come closer to it. But if there were a difference of nature between the forms of sophisticated literary culture and its more vernacular versions, it would be impossible to understand how individuals could move away from the norm or come closer to it, except by some mysterious act of conversion. To put it in concrete terms: if we assume an ontological rupture between the vast field of the literature of “entertainment” and “serious” literature, it is hard to see how a child could pass from childhood to adult readings (something which is done, nonetheless, by all the children of the world).

The naysayers and other doomsayers are doubtlessly right on one point: if “Literature” means the representation of literary phenomena that was a strategic piece of the educative model of the humanities—the study of antique languages, philology, philosophy, the history of art, and literature—as it was constituted throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries, then yes, literature is indeed in a shaky state. It is worth adding that this is hardly new: “Literature” has been in crisis since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, thanks to the triple pressure of the development of the social sciences, the effects of literary creativity itself, and general cultural and historical evolution. The salient point here is that, inasmuch as the segregationist representation of “Literature” continues to ground in large measure the self-legitimation of literary studies, the so-called crisis of “Literature” is in fact a real crisis in literary studies.

We can hardly dispute that literary studies are in crisis. One piece of evidence among others is the declining social standing of the literary track in high schools. We can lament the situation, but it is pointless to do so, because this decline is nothing more than the mechanical translation of the disjunction between literary study and society, whether in terms of professional skills or cultural appeal. This is not surprising: after all, this literary model was established within a society that was much more hierarchical than ours, the field of aesthetic conduct included. It is moreover regrettable that literary studies have so little to say on the question of the historic invention of their object and their discourse of self-legitimation, because “Literature” is first and above all a scholarly notion, and it is through the system of education that it is implanted and maintained.²



In any case, this society that instituted “Literature” is no longer ours. Literacy was a relatively rare commodity, often a privilege, and at times an opportunity for social mobility. This is no longer the case today, and it would be naïve to think that such changes would not have consequences at the level of cultural transmission and especially the definition of literary culture. Literary studies are in crisis because they are incapable of mourning this past, by which I do not mean the works of the past—works that ask only to live, even at school, where little enough space is left for them—but the past of their *own* scholarly and institutional traditions. One sometimes gets the impression that this past—“Literature”—remains infinitely more precious to some people than the reality that corresponds to it: which is to say, the creation and use of works from the past and present, whether they are important or not, successes or failures, present in collective memory or long forgotten. And yet it is these works that have contributed to tracing out the contours of literary phenomena, including that of “Literature,” if one is willing to admit that a canon is defined as much by what it excludes as by what it includes. In other words, the crisis is directly linked to a questioning of the *legitimacy* of literary studies. What use can they have now that their supposed object—“Literature”—has lost its capacity to function as the organizing vision of literary phenomena and their place in contemporary culture?

The two functions of literary studies

Reduced to its core, the crisis of “Literature” is thus nothing other than the collapse of the imaginary object that literary studies constructed to legitimate their own existence. This collapse has produced two very different reactions, which attest to two divergent conceptions of the stakes and goals of the study of “literary phenomena.”

There are those who think that the proper task of literary studies is to construct a socially normative account of literary phenomena. Thus the crisis of “Literature,” in this line of thought, requires us to construct a different conception of the literary, which could propose an alternative to the no-longer-compelling norm. This is the path chosen by many programs in literary studies today, notably feminist studies, postcolonial studies, gender studies, and so on. I do not deny the importance of these new programs. Indeed, proposing a new norm also means making changes at the level of the object that is being described, at the level of the corpus: every norm is correlated with a description. Changing the object that is described opens up new fields of inquiry,



while revealing the previously invisible biases of older paradigms. It is nonetheless true that the central concern of these new approaches is normative, because their goal is to propose a countercanon to the “humanist” one, one that is “more fair.” It is therefore not surprising that their analytic methods remain fundamentally the same as those of the approach that they reject—broadly, a critical reading combining close reading and symptomatic interpretation, often in its deconstructionist or Foucauldian variants.

This is certainly a possible response to the crisis of social legitimacy in literary studies, but not to their epistemological crisis. Here, the problem is not the *content* of the norm, but the very constitution of the object of study on the basis of a norm. More precisely, the problem is that this norm, far from being recognized as such, was “naturalized.” It is as though “Literature” were a natural species, and literary studies were limited to discovering it and providing its inventory—whereas in fact, they constructed it.

To formulate the problem in a different way, if the crisis of the segregationist model of literary studies translates into a crisis in literary studies as such, is this not because the latter is unable to distinguish between norm and fact in interpreting this crisis? A positive response to this question would allow another way out of the crisis. Instead of “re-norming” at every opportunity, we could take seriously the distinction between the two options (normative *versus* descriptive): in other words, admit where we stand.

Let me be clear: the fact that we find ourselves before two options that must be *differentiated* does not imply that the future of literary studies will be played out between mutually exclusive choices. Literary study, as we know and practice it, fulfills two different functions *in terms of its own statutes*, both equally legitimate and surely indispensable. It would be impossible to eliminate one in favor of the other. On the other hand, it is important to distinguish between them and draw the conclusions that flow from this distinction.

The first function is the mission of reproducing and promoting the cultural values that society, or its dominant members (who are themselves dominated), thinks it necessary to promote and develop. From this perspective, studying literature and the arts more generally means taking part in a *normative project* founded on a dialectic of consensus and dissensus. Since schools are among the central places where societies reproduce their canonical cultural values, it makes sense that this approach is privileged in schools. This implies, of course, that one will not study, or that one will, at least, criticize as symptoms of an undesirable state, those works, genres, practices, and so on that are found to be deficient



according to such values. When we study literary works *in this way*, our ultimate goal is to promote values that we deem it necessary to defend, or alternatively to subject to critique those we find dubious or secondary. Studying a literary object *in this way* is the equivalent of constructing or deconstructing values, which implies a vision of what literature should or should not be. This normative vision often remains implicit—even invisible—when it is identified with the “nature” of the studied object. It is nonetheless a structuring function that delimits the object.

The central characteristic of this type of endeavor, it seems to me, is the particular relationship that it maintains with its objects. To “study” a literary work, in this sense, is to participate in the deployment (or the historical construction) of the object that one is also studying. Such work begins within the studied object, but as the study proceeds, it changes, and means to change, its object. To put it another way, studying transforms its object to the degree that the object is studied: it participates in the reflexive self-construction of the field of study defined as a norm-bearing social object. In more technical terms, this is what is called a “self-referential” relationship. In such situations, belief “creates” its object. To the degree that a culture transforms itself by regarding itself as an object, through a process sometimes termed “autopoetic,” this self-referentiality is the basis of the dynamic of culture as such. “Literature” and the various countercanons that have followed its dissolution is (was) a reality of this kind, and to choose a normative approach to literary phenomena is to inscribe oneself within this self-referential dynamic.

I would insist that this way of understanding the study of cultural and particularly literary phenomena is not only a respectable but a socially indispensable endeavor, at least if we want cultural gains to be passed on and developed from one generation to the next. Artistic and aesthetic culture does not evolve by self-replication, it is reproduced and developed only by individually incarnated forms of social transmission. A self-reflective programmatic and critical practice plays an important, sometimes indispensable, role in this dynamic. Another key point: that self-referential research takes a normative perspective, that it wants to promote certain kinds of objects or attributes, by no means prevents it from having recourse to analytic or descriptive procedures. This descriptive dimension, however, will always be more or less skewed because pre-existing evaluative norms determine the field of study. So, although the social mission of teaching literary phenomena as a worthwhile cultural ideal is an important one, this mission must not be confused with the descriptive study of literary realities, of which “Literature” and various opposing countercanons are but one aspect.

We arrive here at the second function of literary studies: the strictly cognitive. Wanting to understand literary realities implies a willing-



ness to engage in a *descriptive project*. Here our ambition is not to put descriptive tools in the service of a given cultural ideal, but to treat the descriptive program as the real goal of the investigation. In other words, the goal is to identify, in the most neutral manner possible, pertinent facts for a given line of questioning, to understand and describe them as adequately as possible, and, perhaps, to propose explanations. The question of the value of the practices being studied (compared to other practices), along with a comparative hierarchy of the products of these practices in terms of the researcher's norms, ought to be bracketed. By contrast, understanding, describing, and explaining the practices of evaluation that are inherent to the object of study is, of course, a pertinent exercise. When a given reality includes regulative norms—which is true of literary practices—it stands to reason that a description of this reality includes a description and analysis of its mechanisms of evaluation and hierarchization. But when we study cultural reality in this way, the point is not to approve or reject the specific values that it exhibits, but to describe it from an axiologically neutral perspective, in which the values established by this reality are part of the object being studied.³

On the possibility of a descriptive study of the literary

But is such a descriptive approach even possible? We know the famous counterargument: in the domain of intentional facts, to describe something as this or that means that the thing *is* this or that. Philosophical hermeneutics formulated this principle most radically: the very being of Man, as a being of language, has a self-referential structure. In fact, this self-referential relationship has two aspects. The first is that all understanding rises from pre-understanding and anticipation (this is classically called the “hermeneutic circle”). It is never self-founding. The second aspect is properly ontological: every cognitive act is first and foremost a self-interpreting event of *Dasein*,⁴ an event which transforms this *Dasein*, because its very being is founded in the act of posing questions about being and of serving, therefore, as both the question and its answers. The relationship between the interpretive act and the *interpretandum* is therefore never an external relationship between an act of understanding and a “fact” which would precede and be independent of this act. It is an internal relation between two moments of the same reality. Due to this radical self-referentiality, it has often been concluded that the project of a purely descriptive human science is doomed to fail because every description would be, in reality, a transformation of what it believes it is only describing.



The constitutively self-referential nature of cultural phenomena cannot be denied. But does this self-referentiality vitiate in advance any descriptive knowledge of human and therefore also literary phenomena?

First, the impossibility of a descriptive approach cannot be stated as an absolute, because otherwise the project of a hermeneutic philosophy undermines its own claim to be a “descriptive phenomenology” (*deskriptive Hermeneutik*). Indeed, if all speech is caught in the circle, then the phenomenological affirmation that proposes this thesis is also caught in this circle and therefore would not be able to enunciate a general thesis about it. Such a performative contradiction renders inoperative any claim to the absolute relativity of conceptual (or linguistic) schemas, including the claim of absolute cultural relativism. As Quine notes, one “cannot proclaim cultural relativism without rising above it, and [one] cannot rise above it without giving it up.”⁵

This risk of a performative contradiction can be neutralized in two ways. The first solution is a logical one and takes the form of a “theory of types”; the second involves a deflationist interpretation of the hermeneutic circle in terms of a historicized theory of pre-understanding. I will limit myself here to the second, which offers a two-part solution for escaping a performative contradiction.

First, it does not conceive of the ontological circle as a closed circle, but as a spiral. In this, it is inspired by classical formulations of the hermeneutic circle, which is indeed a spiral, because in the back and forth between the pre-understanding of the whole and the understanding of the parts (of a text), each passage between the two poles affects and therefore transforms the other. Pre-understanding of the whole at moment t affects my understanding of part n at moment $t+1$. In turn, my understanding of part n at moment $t+1$ (thus the understanding that ensues from the first passage via the whole) affects my understanding of the whole at the moment $t+2$, and so on. Hermeneutic philosophy enlarges this conception to include the historicity of *Dasein* (of mankind) as such, thereby transforming the circle of understanding into an ontological circle. The spiral is only an image, but it shows how the thesis of ontological self-referentiality which is the basis of the self-referentiality of textual understanding can escape performative contradiction. In fact, the image of the spiral refers to the constitutively temporal (and therefore historical) nature of *Dasein*'s process of self-interpretive performativity: since the self-interpretive dynamic has an intrinsically temporal nature, there can be no circle closing on itself. All interpretation is relative to a context, and context is an intrinsically temporal reality. The ontological circle, even if it is universal, is thus not a vicious circle.



Second, hermeneutics also accepts *in fine* a distinction between two ways of being in the world. One is the mode of *Befindlichkeit*, a term that designates the way that one “feels in the world,” and that refers to a practical and affective, and therefore evaluative, engagement. The other is a neutral and detached mode. This neutral mode, according to hermeneutics, is derived from our engagement in the lived world and is ultimately contained within it. The difference between the two is nonetheless real. Interpreted in this deflationary way, the thesis of self-referentiality is perfectly compatible with a distinction between normative and descriptive approaches, because it only claims that, whatever the functional status of a discourse, it is always *also* a tradition of thought thinking itself, a moment in the self-explanation of *Dasein*. One could thus say that Newton proposed a descriptive theory of the universe, but that this theory, in describing the universe, was also a moment in the history of physics (and it could only accomplish what it did because this history existed and it was a moment within it).

Another problem remains: if a descriptive approach is possible in the domain of the human sciences, can it be truly *explanatory*? In other words, can the human sciences, and therefore also literary studies, really go beyond a “mere” description of our ways of understanding? Isn’t explanation forbidden to them? A common way of formulating this argument is to say that the phenomena of intentionality build on the understanding of reasons and not the explanation of causes. This issue is not incidental. If explanation were impossible in the domain of human phenomena, this would be the death knell of a large number of descriptive projects in literary studies, namely all those that claim to take into account explanations of intentional facts that include nonintentional causes.

We can respond, first of all, by noting that reasons are obviously themselves also causes, particularly causes for action. Studying the way in which they produce effects is thus to enter the field of causal explanation. The objection raised in the name of the distinction between (intentional) reasons and (nonintentional) causes only holds if we posit that intentional facts are *ontologically* closed onto themselves. Indeed, it is only under such conditions that it can be argued that reasons are *epistemically* closed onto themselves. But such an ontological closure seems empirically very questionable. Intentional proficiencies are founded on nonintentional proficiencies and the latter have a causal effect every time that there is intentional behavior (what John Searle calls the nonintentional “Background” that makes intentional actions possible). For example, our visual experience, as an intentional experience, is prefaced by an important pre-attentional processing of the visual signal. This processing



is radically inaccessible to conscious experience but nevertheless causes it. This holds true for all basic forms of sensory perception (such as, for example, the innate perception of the spatial location of sounds). Thus, a part of our intentional behavior is involuntary, which is to say that it results from a nonconceptual content that does not act like a reason. The situations in which this nonclosure shapes our intentional behavior are numerous, all the way from the effect of organic brain lesions on perception to our instinctive behaviors, including cognitive or emotive biases caused by hormonal imbalances or psychotropic substances—all these factors act on our perception at the causal level, and not at the level of reasons.

We are now in a position to respond to the idea that the self-referential constitution of intentional facts or the hermeneutic circle's role in constituting human access to the world renders impossible a descriptive approach to cultural phenomena, and more specifically to literary phenomena. Such an idea depends either on an incorrect interpretation of the distinction between explanation and understanding, a misunderstanding of the consequences of the self-referentiality of intentional facts, or an erroneous interpretation of the hermeneutic circle. From an epistemological point of view, there is thus no decisive objection to the project of a descriptive approach to literary phenomena. Of course, literary studies deal with representations and the *sine qua non* of their project is the (correct) understanding of these representations. The text must be understood in order to be described. The ontology of the literary object is thus hermeneutic in nature. But understanding the intentional exteriorizations of our fellow humans, in the sense of *correctly identifying* their content, is among our basic forms of mental competence, just like correctly identifying "hard facts." We live in an intentional world as much as a physical one. In both, we can get it right or we can make mistakes. Moreover, the act of understanding can itself be described or even explained causally. Looked at this way, (and drawn in turn into a self-referential spiral!), understanding is opposed neither to description nor to explanation.

Literary reading as immersion: on the subject of fiction

But is the descriptive study of literary facts really desirable? I think that a cognitive inquiry offers its own justification. But obviously not everyone is required to share this view. I would like to defend this descriptive ideal from the point of view of the other "branch" of literary studies, that which aims to construct an educated human community



through the transmission of literary heritage. I am convinced that if we want an effective educational policy in the literary field—which is to say an education that makes readers—we must take into account the knowledge offered only by the descriptive approach.

Let us remind ourselves of the starting point for the reflection developed here: the widely held conviction that literary culture is endangered by the retreat from reading, or at least from reading high-quality texts. As I indicated, there is much to say about the reality, or lack of reality, of this retreat, but one thing seems established: middle- and high-school students are not, for the most part, enthusiastic readers of the literature that they are taught in class. The growing importance of other cultural products (notably the rise in the power of visual culture) is, without a doubt, partially responsible for this situation. I would like to submit an alternative hypothesis and explanation, certainly also a partial one, but one that takes into account an essential condition of access to literary works.

It is too often forgotten that the direct individual experience of a work of art cannot be replaced by an analytic shortcut. This is because the literary work gives us access to a *mode of experience* that is specific, and therefore (like most modes of experience) irreplaceable. This specificity is the only reasonable justification of the value we assign to it. With this in mind, it is impossible to place too much importance on reading widely. Schools too often (and in general too early) privilege the analytic approach, notably textual commentary. This is an illusion: competence in “literary” reading is first and above all procedural in nature—that is to say, it is founded on implicit learning processes inherent in the practice of reading. Just as one learns to walk by walking, so one learns to read, in the strictest but also the highest sense of the word, by reading.

The importance of an “incarnated” practical intelligence for the understanding of literary universes is especially apparent in the case of fiction. We now know (or at least should know) that fiction (narrative, dramatic, or lyrical, if this antiquated triad remains admissible) is ineffective from a cognitive and emotional point of view unless it is read according to the particularities that govern its functioning. These particularities have been brought to light by developmental psychology (since Jean Piaget), cognitive philosophy, and philosophy of mind. They taught us that the fundamental mode of being of fiction is a specific intentional attitude toward the use of certain representations, whether mental, semiotic, or in the form of acting. Treating a representation as a fiction is to bracket or neutralize its literal claims to denote something and to treat it instead according to the method of “acting as if.” In other words, the nature of fiction depends on a pragmatics of representations



and not on literary syntax. It is not an intrinsically literary reality, but the implementation of a mental ability that is part of the common stock of intentional human behaviors. Its acquisition is one of the major events in the psychological maturation of small children, and an important milestone in the development of the mental tools that permit them to manage things in the world around them.

This fictional competence includes at least three different mental processes: playful pretence, mimetic immersion, and analog modeling. The playful pretence realizes itself in the creation of mimetic starting points which represent one or another modality through which we gain access to reality. It proposes, for example, quasi-perceptual pretence in the domain of visual fictions, pretend acts of language in the case of verbal fictions, pretend actions combined with pretend acts of language in the framework of theatrical fiction. These modalities lead the receiver (reader, spectator) to treat the representational fiction "as if" it were a "factual" representation (the confusion between the two realms being prevented by the contract of the playful pretence) and makes the shift toward a process of mimetic immersion in the fictive universe easier.

The goal of the fictional process is thus not the pretence as such, but what it gives us access to: fictional universes.⁶ These universes form "cognitive analogic models." In contrast to the models that directly regulate our interactions with the real (for example in perceptual experience), fictional modeling *is not* constrained by a homologous relationship to its model, which is to say the world in which we live. It rests on a much weaker relationship. Fictional modeling simply conforms *in general* to plausible lines of force responding to the conditions of representability that all experience must conform to so that we are able to live it as "real experience." In other words, fiction is not an *image* of the real world. It is a virtual exemplification of a possible being-in-the-world.

Mimetic immersion in these fictional universes permits us to fashion cognitive models that are powerful precisely because of the distance they maintain from our lived reality. They do not feed directly into real-world knowledge or behavior, but rather make available to us loops of endogenous mental processes, consisting of scenarios, scripts of possible or conceivable actions, that we can run through in our minds before making practical decisions. These scenarios, fed by literary fictions (or, in our own time, cinematic ones) can be reactivated at will each time we are confronted with a domain in which they are applicable (whether a purely mental situation or a real interaction with the surrounding world). The detour through fictional models results in an "extension" of the inferential processing of information, which is to say of decision making, due to an increase in the range of imaginable responses.



We are talking here about purely virtual experiences that nevertheless can, as such, fulfill many functions: turning us away from short, intemperate reactive loops,⁷ leading us to suspend judgment, weigh evaluations, construct alternative worlds, and so on. In short, reading introduces us to the real and it even trains us to confront it, but without sanctioning our actions directly (or even dramatically). The imaginative immersion that is part and parcel of literary fiction is thus a specific and irreplaceable mode of understanding and experimentation.⁸ No *analysis* of a fictional work can give us this imaginative understanding. It is accessible only through the direct experience of immersion in its universe.

Literature and aesthetic experience: the case of poetry

The immersive experience of fiction is one example among others of a more general principle that governs our relationship to the literary: aesthetic behavior. We can take it as given that the aesthetic relationship is a form of human conduct in which the playing out of attention (perceptive, linguistic, etc.) is the central concern. The decisive factor in the success or failure of an aesthetic experience is not the characteristics of the object (real or represented), but whether or not the attention that we invest in this object is satisfying or not. This can be expressed by saying that attention is self-renewing (as long as the experience is satisfying). This was more or less the definition given by Kant. The properties of the object still play a role, but an indirect one: they are important to the extent that attending to them is satisfying. Aesthetic experience distinguishes itself from other human practices not by its object but by specific modalities of attention, here of reading.

What are these specific modes of attention? We can begin with the hypothesis that the default dynamic of the act of verbal understanding is based on a principle of economy. This explains why, in a situation of normal communication, our attention does not linger on the sonorous materiality of the signal, on its rhythm or its stylistic characteristics. We normally treat these elements only when they are indispensable to understanding the message or the nonexplicit intent of the speaker. In contrast, within an aesthetic frame, because attention itself, and therefore reading as an act, is the goal of our activity, the operative principle is no longer the minimization, but rather the maximalization, of our attentional investment.

It is poetry, without a doubt, that shows most strongly this transformation in the economy of information management, because it draws attention to properties that, outside of its field, have only a conventional



relationship to “content.” Paying close attention to its sonorous essence, to its rhymes or its rhythms, translates into an extension of cognitive processing that in turn results in an attentional overload (compared to a standard situation). The cost of this overload is, in general, compensated for by the pleasure taken in rhymes or assonance, the musicality of the rhymes, metaphoric games, and so on. This pleasure taken in language’s material characteristics is grounded in ontogenetic development: it plays an important role in the dynamic of infant language learning.

But when we spend more time processing a linguistic signal, due to a maximizing of attention, this does not only produce an attention overload, but also a delay in categorizing, that is to say, a delay in the activity of hermeneutic synthesis. We accept the fact that we do not understand “right away.” This delay in categorization has a positive compensation: the longer we avoid categorizing (that is, the semantic processing of a message), the greater the increase in the quantity of precategorical sensory information, so that we experience sonorous form more fully.⁹ It has been noted that readers who pay only scant attention to phonetic coding in language processing and advance quickly to the level of semantic synthesis are not sensitive to rhymes and rhythms (and therefore also to poetry). Some readers invest their attention at the phonetic level and “descend” to the level of a nonencoded sonority, whereas others treat the phonetic level automatically in order to move up more quickly toward semantic categorization. Every delay in categorization leads to a situation of cognitive discordance. The more that people are able to tolerate a high degree of cognitive divergence, the more they will be able to draw satisfaction from poetry—in particular from the most complex poetic structures, those which maximize polyphony and the “difficulty of reading” and therefore delay the processing of the “message.”¹⁰

Here we find the same lesson that we derived from the analysis of fiction. All teaching of poetry that prioritizes the analytic approach encourages rapid categorization, because the student is encouraged to move quickly from the concrete experience of reading to its conceptualization. Schools naturally prefer this approach because it encourages cognitive convergence as the highest ideal of teaching. Unfortunately, such a cognitive convergence destroys poetry, among other things, because poetry’s wealth is drawn from divergence. What is lost is not merely the “formal” richness of poetry but also, and at the same time, its hermeneutic richness. And yet, if there is one point on which most of those who think about poetry agree, it is that the heart of every poem is found in its potential to evoke emotion, in its capacity to display the “existential possibilities of affective disposition,” or *Befindlichkeit*, to borrow a term from Heidegger. It is in this way that we experience



the different affective tonalities that express the way we have of being in the world. Poetry dramatizes this song of the emotions by deploying linguistic stratification (sounds, rhythms, syntax, semantics, images, etc.), working with the distinct possibilities of each stratum, and establishing polyphonic relationships between them. The poem activates the hermeneutic potentialities of sounds, rhythms, and images, multiplying them through echoes from one stratum to another. That the meaning of the poem always seems to exceed its propositional meaning, that the poem always seems to say more than it says explicitly, comes from this fact. Through the most refined art of language as form, poetic language puts us into contact with what is at the same time a more elementary and more fundamental understanding of our being in the world: an understanding that takes the form of an affective landscape sculpted by words, but that causes the (re)birth of the reader via a phenomenon of resonance, consonant or dissonant, that is inaccessible to analytic explanation.

Thus, the emphasis placed on the analytic path is based on a misunderstanding of what literary works can and cannot do. Their effectiveness lies only in the changes that they make in and for the lives of readers—for this or that reader in his (or her) individuality. This is not, incidentally, a sign of the specificity of literature (or of other arts), but an inevitable consequence of the distributed ontology of cultural phenomena. As derived intentional phenomena (to return to a notion developed by Roman Ingarden and more recently by John Searle), public representations, whatever they may be, do not achieve hermeneutic existence unless they are mentally activated by and in individual consciousnesses. Moreover, in the life of each person, the importance of reading literary works, whether they are narrative, lyric (poetic), or dramatic, is not found in inferences drawn reflexively from the work, but in the movement of our mental universe operated by the experience of reading itself. Once again, this efficacy is not due to some epistemic, even ontological, election of literature. It is rather an effect of the immersive procedures of the story, of the polyphony and polysemy of poetic enunciations, as well as the actantial simulation of theater. These procedures are not specifically literary but are also found in the discursive activities immersed in everyday life. Reading does not need to be connected a posteriori to life: it is a moment of life, a lived experience as real as any other.¹¹

The preceding reflections on the way literary representations work are partial and rudimentary. But if they are correct, at least broadly, then arguing for a literary education that prioritizes the practice of reading of works *in extenso*, and that begins with individual hermeneutic assimilation



(as idiosyncratic as it might be), is not a question of insisting on one option among others. It is rather a matter of drawing practical conclusions from what we know about the way representational devices work in literary texts. This is not to deny the utility (and even the necessity in certain cases) of a preparatory stage that would give readers the tools and information necessary to engage in the experience of reading one work or another. It is also not to deny the usefulness, at a second point, of a reflexive analytic stage. But if literary representations function essentially in the way that I have sketched out here, then it is only through direct (and individual) experience with them that we can access literary representations (rather than their substitutes).

I began by observing that, contrary to the recurrent complaint, literature is not in crisis, but that there is instead a real crisis in literary studies. I tried to show that this recurring crisis is due, at least in part, to the fact that we have difficulty in distinguishing clearly between two different functions of literary studies in contemporary societies. They have the role of transmitting certain values (of a canon, even if a shifting one), but their vocation is also to constitute themselves as forms of knowledge of literary phenomena, and therefore to develop in a genuinely descriptive (and eventually explanatory) vein. This latter vocation, like any cognitive enterprise, no doubt finds its ultimate justification in itself. A better understanding of the way literary mechanisms function is among the central goals of the descriptivist approach to literary phenomena. But it seems to me that it also has practical consequences: a better understanding of how literary representations behave would certainly allow us to teach literature in a more productive way. Indeed, one of the more troubling aspects of the crisis of literary studies is the fact that it is also linked to a crisis of reading in school. And in France at least, this last crisis is not unconnected to methods of teaching literature that our current knowledge of the effective functioning of works must lead us to question.

The field is vast, admittedly, but let us admit that "literature," here and now, certainly in forms that must include the vast continent of orally transmitted verbal creation, constitutes a significant reality in the life of *most* human beings in *all* human societies. Thus, a better understanding of literary phenomena can contribute to a better understanding of what we are and what we could be. But it can also help us to better fulfill the first function of literary studies (taken in their large sense) which is to cultivate and transmit a mode of access to our own being that is irreplaceable. It is at the same time a means to free ourselves of the phantom of the crisis, even the death, of literature.



NOTES

- 1 This text takes up some of the reflections developed in *Petite écologie des études littéraires: pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature* (Vincennes: Editions Thierry Marchaisse, 2011).
- 2 I set aside, in the French context, Antoine Compagnon's classic work *La Troisième République des Lettres. De Flaubert à Proust* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1983).
- 3 For a clarification of this question, see the work of Nathalie Heinich, in particular *La sociologie de l'art* (Paris: Editions La Découverte, 2004).
- 4 In French, Schaeffer uses "être-là" which is usually a reference to the Heideggerian concept of *Dasein*. In English, it is most common to use "Dasein" rather than a translation of the term. "Existence" would be the most likely English translation (translator's note).
- 5 W.V. Quine, "On empirically equivalent systems of the world," *Erkenntnis* 9, no. 3 (1975): 328.
- 6 On this subject, see Thomas Pavel's *Univers de la fiction* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1988).
- 7 A reactive loop is a causal relationship between a stimulus (somatic, perceptive, linguistic, etc.) and the reaction it provokes. We can distinguish between short reactive loops, often automatic (for example, the sight of a snake provokes an immediate flight reaction in most humans), and long reactive loops, which generally imply attentional processing (notably inferences and a conscious evaluation of the meaning of the stimulus for the receptive subject). An extreme case of the drawing out of the loop is the off-line treatment of a signal: this is what happens when we read a fictional story, because the information we receive is not immediately reinjected into the world.
- 8 This fictional immersion achieves what Roman Ingarden calls the concretization of the work (conceived as a schema). On the subject of the question of the resulting concretization of hermeneutic polyphony, see the important analysis by Ioana Vultur, "Structure et concrétisation dans l'esthétique d'Ingarden," in *Roman Ingarden: Ontologie, esthétique, fiction*, ed. Jean-Marie Schaeffer and Christophe Potocki (Paris: Editions des Archives Contemporaines, 2012), 95–106.
- 9 The precategorical level is the level of the processing of a stimulus or a signal where it is not yet analyzed according to a discontinuous system, which would classify it with other elements of the same type. For example, the sonorous flux of a statement is precategorical, its discontinuous division into phonemes transforms it into a categorized fact (phonemes define equivalent classes of sounds). In "standard" verbal communication, the precategorical sensory information of utterances is not the object of a specific attentional processing.
- 10 The question of the relationship between poetry, delayed categorization, and cognitive divergence is at the heart of Reuven Tsur's research, on which I draw here. See notably "Rhyme and Cognitive Poetics," *Poetics Today* 17, no. 1 (1996): 55–87.
- 11 On the function of the experience of reading, see Marielle Macé, *Façons de lire, manières d'être* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 2011).



roman (1986, 1990), and *The American Enemy: The History of French Anti-Americanism* (2005, 2007). He is the editor of *Critique*, founded by Georges Bataille in 1946.

JEAN-MARIE SCHAEFFER is Director of Studies at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (Paris) and Research Director at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (Paris). Trained as a philosopher, he works in the fields of philosophical anthropology, philosophical aesthetics, and literary studies. He is the author of, among others, *Qu'est-ce qu'un genre littéraire?* (1989), *L'art de l'âge moderne* (1992; translated as *Art of the Modern Age*, 2000), *Nouveau Dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, with Oswald Ducrot (1995), *Les célibataires de l'art* (1996; translated as *Beyond Speculation: Art and Aesthetics Without Myth*, 2013), *Pourquoi la Fiction?* (1999; translated as *Why Fiction?* 2010), *Adieu à l'esthétique* (2000), *La fin de l'exception humaine* (2007), and *Petite écologie des études littéraires* (2011).



Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.