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Some Remarks on the Foundation of Literary Rhetoric

Jean Bessière's work in literary theory is a landmark in the field. No one has better brought to the fore the paradox of literature: how can any literary work be at the same time a world in itself and rely on the outside world that it often describes or presupposes as shared, through a language that is not even referential? Reference is here a fiction, because fiction relies on the illusion of speaking about some external reality. The way such an illusion is generated is due to *rhetoric*. Hence, our question here: what does literary rhetoric consist of? In order to delineate the specificity of literature, we should consider 1) the nature of rhetoric in general and 2) look into what makes literature a certain kind of rhetoric, different from the everyday one.

1. What is Rhetoric?

Many definitions of rhetoric have been given in the past. Some have favored the manipulative aspect, as found in politics or advertising. The emotions aroused by discourse have been the fulcrum of their analyses. Plato held such a view a long time ago, anticipating the major role played by influence in mass democracies. Other authors have preferred to lay stress on the nature of discourse when it is used to please, to move or convince people. *Logos*, and not *pathos*, was their main concern. A third group of definitions has focused on the character — and virtues — of the speaker, the *ethos*, subordinating once again the two other dimensions to the one privileged. Aristode has been a strong upholder of the *logos*, as Cicero has been of the *ethos*, when he put emphasis on the virtue of the orator.

In the twentieth century, we have observed a renewal of those three privileged and nonetheless complementary orientations: Habermas has

focused on the *ethos*, the constraints of the speaker being ethical and universalisable; Perelman and Toulmin have developed a view of the *logos* that went beyond, if not beneath, the realm of logic; and Gadamer has put the emphasis on the *pathos* and the reception of works, that he called *hermeneutics*.

But the truth of the matter does not lie in the privilege granted to either one dimension against the other: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* should be considered on equal footing, since rhetoric is a relation between a speaker (*ethos*) and her audience (*pathos*) through some language (*logos*), that could be visual, written, or simply heard.

As a result, we can define rhetoric, as I have done¹, as *the negotiation of the distance (or difference) between individuals (ethos for the locator, pathos for the receiver) on a given question (logos)*. If people speak and write, it is because they have a question in mind. Without such a question, that in some way "measures" out their distance and can even oppose them, nobody would speak but remain silent. On the other hand, if everything were problematic, nobody could agree on anything. Rhetoric deals with the intersubjective problematic. Individual try to resolve it by relying on *what* is non-problematic for the locator, and more especially for her audience. That relationship between the problematic and the non-problematic is called an argument. When the question is not explicitly put on the table but remains *under* the table, we have a pure rhetorical discourse, whereas rhetoric becomes argumentative when the question is explicitly raised, and even embodied in an alternative, as it is done in court, during trials. But in everyday life, our problems are often vicariously treated and do not lead to open confrontation. We debate them in a mild way and no transcendent judge is available in order to provide the solution.

As to *ethos*, it is the word the Greek used to denote the locutor or the speaker, but in contemporary English, it is associated with *ethics*. There is a good reason for that, and it deserves to be recalled. When a question is at stake, one cannot, as children usually do, indefinitely ask "why?" and go back to the very first principles of everything. One has to stop somewhere. But where? And why should we "admit any stopping-point in particular as the just answer i.e., as valid? The reason is that we usually trust the speaker. We believe in what she says. We have confidence in her, just like the child wants to be able to trust his parents when asked to answer a chain of why-questions. This where the *ethos* becomes associated with *ethics*: someone trustworthy,

competent, and reliable will more easily elicit our assent. We stop our questioning process when such a person gives us her answers. We accept them. Competence is essential: if I feel some pain, I shall rather accept my doctor's view than my neighbor's, who is not a doctor and has simply an opinion on what I might have. Ethics is therefore *economical* in the treatment of our problems. As to *pathos*, it is the originary locus of our questions. They usually express what we want and do not want, what we expect and what we wish to avoid. The audience can be defined by a wish to get answers, even if it begins with questioning the speaker or what she says, before being offered a more or less satisfactory solution. As to *logos*, it is really the medium of exchange between questions and answers, and that explains why it can deal and express them both. Form demarcates interrogativity from assertivity, but also enables us to refer ourselves to the external context that it presupposes as known or that it defines, if necessary. External reminders permit us to play on the forms, in order to gain a higher degree of liberty as to the translation into discourse of what is the problematic. The difference between what is problematic in someone's mind and what is not is therefore less linked to sheer form when the context is rich in information on that difference. This is what we mean when we say that we "know" what someone thinks or hopes, and what motivates her in general.

But where do we find such an external context in literature ? Does not literature embody its own context? We cannot question the author, nor the readers. To say that we dialogue with an author is only a metaphorical way of expressing answers. The author never responds, and even if she could, we all know that the written text embodies unintended answers which go far beyond the author's own intentions and problems at the time of writing. How could we ask Plato what he thought of totalitarianism (Popper) or of the theological impact of *the Republic* (Aquinas), since he lived long before those topics became real problems? How could his philosophy answer such questions, if they are not somehow embodied in his text, independently of the author's intentions, and unintentionally answered *in* the text? We can ask questions to a text and see which answers could be *drawn* from it, but the author has no role in that business, unless our query be biographical or narrowly historical. As a consequence, literature deprives us of any external context that would be relevant to interpretation and understanding. It must contain the information we usually have at our disposal from the external context when we speak with someone in everyday life. That may explain Balzac's long descriptions of what we usually perceive by ourselves. In sum, the effect of the

1 For instance, in my *History of Rhetoric* which is still not yet translated into English (see Works Cited)

text is due to the very text. Of course, I know this especially applies to great texts, those that survive their epoch. It is maybe less true of others.

2. The Rhetoric of Literature as a Self-contained Differentiation Process between Questions and Answers

Form, in literature, is therefore everything. We call it style. A literary work must embody its own context though presenting it as external or referentially characterized. This is what Bessière has rightfully called the paradox of literature. The task of a literary work is to make forget itself, to repress its literariness, in order to achieve the make-believe of some referentiality (Bessière 18).² But literature is not always referential, even if the question dealt with should be treated *within* the text itself, in contrast to everyday rhetoric, where questions precede discourse. *Literature creates its own problematic through form*. What does all this have to do with rhetoric? The epideictic genre has been characterized since Aristotle as dealing with pleasant discourse and is often associated with literary rhetoric. But equating the two, as it has often done, is a false conception of both. There is a difference between literary rhetoric and the epideictic genre. It lies in the treatment of the underlying questions they face. In rhetoric, one deals with questions that present themselves beforehand, and which therefore come first even if we are offered answers in such a way that those questions seem never to have arisen. In literature, on the contrary, literary answers posit their difference with questions through form and even bring to the fore those questions. Many texts are more or less problematic, enigmatic, a result that epideictic rhetoric, in advertising or politics among others, tries to avoid above all.

There is a law that stipulates all the possibilities of variations in enigmaticity, which I have called *the law of differential or inverse problematicity* (*Meaning and Reading* 130; *Rhetoric*, "Language and Reason 22). Some interesting consequences ensue from that law.

1. Literature auto-contextualizes the difference between questions and answers, that is, the text embodies them both, in contrast to everyday language, where the questions are external and contextual with respect to what is said. Literature creates its own context of questioning.

2. Form is the means through which texts mark the difference between questions and answers.
3. The more literal a text is, the more referential it is. The world which is described is shared by the text and the reader. It is made of everyday answers. Crime stories and love stories are based on such explicit questions. Those novels unfold themselves as the resolution of the initial problem, usually a marriage in the case of love stories and the discovery of the culprit in the case of mystery novel.
4. When the questions that are the object of the story are explicitly, i.e. literally, treated, the reader is more passive, and has to be captivated (or captured) by the story. The more a problem is literally present in a literary work of art, the less that work is figurative, the difference between the problematic and the non-problematic being itself the object of fiction under the form of a resolution. Conversely, the less explicit the problematic of that work, the more figurative literature is in order to express the problematological difference and the more the reader is asked by the text to provide a meaning in answer to the enigmatic figurativity of the text. The limit of figurativity, i.e. enigmaticity, is defined as the textuality whose meaning is the fact that the text has no meaning at all and therefore deconstructs any univocal answer. The enigma remains unsolved and that is the solution. But when the text is more enigmatic in form, it is as if that text was a question raised to the reader. He is less passive and has to respond himself in order to ascribe a meaning to the text, being given that the meaning of discourse, in general, is what is in *question* in that discourse. This "first" form of increased problematicity of literature in which the reader can supply a meaning that resolves it has received its theoretization under the name of Reception Theory (H.R. Jauss, W. Iser)
5. The less explicit the problem, the more the text has to express the problematic through figurativity. The limit is given by texts whose questions have no other aim and answer than to stipulate the problematicity of meaning. There is no other answer than the impossibility of having one answer as to what the text means. The theoretical expression of such an evolution correspond to Deconstruction (J. Derrida), and has been applied to all texts, even those of the past, when the historical context was less problematic than today's.

² This problematic is recurrent in the whole book *La littérature et sa rhétorique* by J. Bessière (see Works Cited)

The new analyses of literature now focus on the articulation of all those forms of problematological differentiation, as being historically linked and as forming an evolutive structure in itself. Jean Bessière has called that structure a rhetorical one in order to offer a synthetical view beyond the partial conceptions just recalled, hermeneutics, the reception theory and deconstruction that are historically conditioned and therefore, bound to be superseded. Rhetoric has enabled him to do so. It encompasses the various theoretical standpoints in a curiously Hegelian approach, which is not devoid of verisimilitude.

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