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LITERATURE, CRITICAL THEORY, AND POLITICS

MUTE SPEECH

JACQUES RANCIÈRE

TRANSLATED BY JAMES SWENSON
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY GABRIEL ROCKHILL

Columbia University Press New York

to work through the material on their own. However, I also recognize the profound nature of his contribution: he has attempted to more or less single-handedly dismantle what is arguably *the* dominant historical paradigm for thinking the history of the arts. This is no small task, for it not only requires developing alternative historiographical and interpretive strategies, but it also necessitates a close and detailed analysis of the major (and minor) works of the European tradition. If the reader is reticent to embrace his novel account of the arts, let it not be because of the ways in which it distances itself from the art historical narratives that have become so familiar. Rancière has provided an extraordinary service to all of those who seek to critically engage with the arts by stalwartly rejecting the complacent imagery of the modernist mirror, which serves to reflect the narcissistic image of those who would like to see themselves as standing at the end of a historical progression leading directly to themselves. In return, we can, at the very least, recognize the unique nature of Rancière's undertaking and heed his call to move *through the looking glass*.

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INTRODUCTION

FROM ONE LITERATURE TO ANOTHER

THERE ARE some questions we no longer dare pose. Recently an eminent literary theorist said that one would have to have no fear of ridicule to call a book *What is Literature?* Sartre, who did write a book with that title in a time that already seems so far from us, at least had the wisdom not to answer the question. For, as Gérard Genette tells us, "a foolish question does not require an answer; by the same token, true wisdom might consist in not asking it at all."[1]

How exactly should we understand this wisdom in the conditional mood? Is the question foolish because everyone has a pretty good idea of what literature is? Or on the contrary, because the idea is too vague to ever become the object of a determinate knowledge? Does the conditional invite us to free ourselves from yesterday's false questions? Or does it rather wax ironical about how naive it would be to consider ourselves free from it once and for all? In fact this is probably not a real choice. Today's wisdom happily combines the expert's practice of demystification with the Pascalian twist that denounces both deception and the illusion of not being deceived. It renders vague notions invalid in theory but reestablishes them for practical use. It derides questions but still offers answers. It shows us that in the end things cannot be

anything other than what they are, but also that we can do no less than add our own illusions to them.

This wisdom nonetheless leaves many questions unanswered. The first is why some ideas can be both so vague and so well known, so easy to make concrete and so likely to engender haze. Here we might propose some distinctions. There are two sorts of ideas that we think we understand why they must remain indeterminate. First, there are commonly used ideas whose precise meaning depends on the context in which they are used and which lose any validity when separated from that context. Second, there are ideas concerning transcendental reality that are situated outside the field of our experience and that refuse to submit to either verification or falsification. But "literature" does not seem to belong to either of these categories. It is thus worthwhile to ask what singular properties affect this idea to the point of making it seem either desperate or ridiculous to ask what its essence is. Above all, we must consider whether this assertion of futility is not itself a consequence of the presupposition that the determinate properties of a thing can be separated from the "ideas" people have about it.

A convenient solution would be to say that the concept of literature does not define any class of constant properties but is instead subject to the arbitrary character of individual or institutional appreciations. As John Searle affirms, "whether or not a work is literature is for the readers to decide."[2] But it might turn out to be more interesting to investigate the conditions of possibility of such a principle of indifference and recourse to conditionality. Gérard Genette responds quite rightly to Searle that *Brittannicus*, for example, is not part of literature on account of the pleasure it provides me or that I attribute to its readership and audience. Genette proposes a distinction between two criteria of literariness: a conditional criterion, which resides in the perception of a particular quality of a piece of writing, and a conventional criterion, which resides in the genre of the piece of writing itself. A text belongs to literature in a "constitutive" way if it cannot belong to any other category of beings: This is the case for odes and tragedies, whatever their quality. On the other hand, a text belongs to literature in a "conditional" way if all that distinguishes it from the functional class to which it belongs—such as memoirs or travel narratives—is the perception of a particular quality of expression.

The application of these criteria, however, is not self-evident. *Britannicus*, says Genette, belongs to literature not on account of a judgment about its value but simply "because it is a play."[3] But the self-evidence of this deduction is false. There exists no criterion, whether universal or historical, that provides a foundation for the inclusion of the genre "theater" in the genre "literature." Theater is a kind of spectacle, not a genre of literature. Genette's proposition would have been incomprehensible to Racine's contemporaries, for whom the only correct inference would have been that *Britannicus* is a tragedy, which obeys the laws of the genre and thus belongs to the genre of which the dramatic poem itself is a subdivision, namely poetry. But it is not part of "literature," which for them was the name of a field of knowledge and not an art. We, on the contrary, consider it part of literature for two closely connected reasons. In the first place, Racine's tragedies have taken a place, between Bossuet's *Eulogies*—which belong to the genre of oratory—and Montaigne's *Essays*—which have no identifiable generic nature—in a pantheon of great writers, a canon of selected works constituted not by the stage but by the book and the classroom. They are moreover examples of a very specific theatrical genre: theater of a sort that is no longer written, a dead genre, whose works are for that very reason the privileged material for a new artistic genre called "mise-en-scène" and whose labor is commonly identified with a "rereading" of the work. In short, it is part of literature not as a play but as a "classical tragedy," according to a retrospective status that the Romantic period invented for it by inventing a new "idea" of "literature."

It is thus quite true that it is not our individual and arbitrary choice that decides that *Britannicus* is "literary." But neither is it its generic nature, insofar as it guided Racine's work and his contemporaries' judgments. The reasons *Britannicus* is part of literature are not the same as the reasons it is part of poetry. But this difference does not leave us with something arbitrary or unknowable. The two systems of reasons can be reconstructed if only we give up the convenient position that so easily separates positive properties from speculative ideas. Our age gladly takes pride in the relativist wisdom it thinks it has wrested from the seductions of metaphysics. We think that we have learned to reduce the overburdened terms "art" and "literature" to the empirically definable characteristics of artistic practices and aesthetic behaviors. But this relativism may in fact be short-sighted, and it would be worthwhile to invite it to continue on to the point where it would itself be relativized, that is, reinscribed in the network of possible statements belonging to a system of reasons. The "relativity" of artistic practices is in fact that of the historicity of the arts. This historicity is never simply that of modes of doing, but rather that of the link between modes of doing and modes of saying. It is convenient to oppose the prosaic practices of the arts to the absolutizations of the discourse of Art. But this respectable empiricism's self-limitation to the "simple practices" of the arts has only been possible since the absolute discourse of Art leveled them when it abolished the old hierarchies of the *Beaux-arts*. The simple practices of the arts cannot be separated from the discourses that define the conditions under which they can be perceived as artistic practices.

Rather than abandoning the phenomenon of literature to the relativism that notes the absence of a certain type of properties and concludes that humor and convention reign, we ought to ask what conceptual configuration of the phenomenon makes this sort of inference possible. We must diligently reconstruct the logic that makes "literature" a notion that is both so obvious and so poorly determined. Thus we will take "literature" to mean neither the vague idea of the repertory of written works nor the idea of a particular essence that makes these works worthy of being called "literary." Henceforth, we will use the term to designate the historical mode of visibility of the works of the art of writing that produces this gap and, as a consequence, the discourses that theorize it: both those that consecrate the incomparable essence of literary creation and those that deconsecrate it in order to reduce it to either arbitrary judgments or positive criteria of classification.[4]

In order to bring the question into focus, let us begin with two discourses on literature, composed two centuries apart by two men of letters both of whom combined a practice of the art of writing with a philosophical reflection on its principles. Voltaire, in the *Philosophical Dictionary*, already castigated the indetermination of the word "literature." It is, he says, "one of those vague words so common in all languages" that, like "spirit" or "philosophy," can be given the most diverse meanings. But this initial reservation does not prevent him from advancing, on his own behalf, a definition that he declares valid for all of Europe, that is, for the entire continent of thought. Literature, he explains, is the equivalent among the Moderns of what the Ancients called "grammar": "in all of Europe it designates a knowledge of works of taste, a smattering of history, poetry, eloquence, and criticism."[5]

Here now are a few lines drawn from a contemporary author, Maurice Blanchot, who for his part takes care not to "define" literature, since he understands it precisely as an infinite movement of reversion upon its own question. Let us thus consider the following lines as one of the formulations of this movement toward itself that constitutes literature: "a literary work is, for one who knows how to penetrate it, a rich resting place of silence, a firm defense and a high wall against this eloquent immensity that addresses itself to us by turning us away from ourselves. If, in this imaginary Tibet, where the sacred signs could no longer be discovered in anyone, all literature stopped speaking, what would be lacking is silence, and it is this lack of silence that would perhaps reveal the disappearance of literary language."[6]

Are Voltaire's definition and Blanchot's sentences, however minimally, talking about the same thing? The first gives an account of a form of knowledge, partly erudite and partly amateur, that allows one to speak as a connoisseur of belles lettres. The second, under the heading of stone, the desert and the sacred, invokes a radical experience of language that is pledged to the production of a silence. The only thing these two texts, which seem to belong to separate and non-communicating universes, have in common is their distance from what everyone knows perfectly well: literature as the collection of the productions of the art of speaking and writing, which includes, following the subdivisions of historical periods and linguistic domains, the *Iliad* and *The Merchant of Venice*, the *Mahabarata*, the *Niebelungen*, and *Remembrance of Things Past*. Voltaire speaks of a knowledge that allows normative judgments of the beauties and defects of existing works, Blanchot of an experience of the possibility and impossibility of writing, to which works are only the testimony.

It might be said that these two gaps are not of the same nature and should be explained separately. Between the common definition and Blanchot's text, there is the gap between the ordinary use of a broad notion and the particular conceptualization grafted onto it by a personal theory. Between Voltaire's definition and our ordinary usage or Blanchot's extraordinary usage, there is the historical reality of a shift in the meaning of words: in the eighteenth century, the word literature designated not works of art but rather the knowledge that appreciated them.

Voltaire's definition is indeed inscribed within the evolution of the *res litteraria* that signified, during the Renaissance and the century of Louis XIV, the scholarly knowledge of the writings of the past, whether poetry or mathematics, natural history or rhetoric.[7] The *littérateurs* of the seventeenth century may well have disdained the art of Corneille or Racine. Voltaire pays them back in kind by distinguishing the *littérateur* from the poet:

> Homer was a genius, Zoilus a *littérateur*. Corneille was a genius; a journalist who writes reviews of his masterpieces is a man of literature. The distinction of the works of a poet, an orator, or a historian is not conveyed by the vague term literature, even though their authors can display the most varied learning, and posses all that is understood by letters. Racine, Boileau, Bossuet, and Fénelon, who had more *literature* than their critics, would be very improperly called men of letters or *littérateurs*.[8]

On the one side there is the ability to produce works of belles lettres, the poetry of Racine and Corneille, the eloquence and history of Fénelon or Bossuet; on the other side, there is the knowledge of authors. Two traits give this knowledge an ambiguous status: it oscillates between the scholarly erudition and the taste of connoisseurs who distinguish the beauties and defects of the works

presented to the judgment of the public; it also oscillates between a positive knowledge of the norms of art and a negative qualification in which the *littérateur* becomes the shadow and the parasite of the creator. As a *littérateur*, Voltaire judges, scene by scene, the language and action of Corneille's heroes. As an *anti-littérateur*, he imposes the viewpoint of Corneille and Racine: Let the amateurs experience their pleasure and leave the task of working out the difficulties of Aristotle to authors.

It might be argued that Voltaire's definition, in the very restriction it gives to the term, by centering literary knowledge on the works of belles lettres, testifies to the slow shift that leads literature toward its modern meaning, and that it participates in the valorization of the creative genius that will give Romanticism and a "literature" emancipated from the rules its slogan. For the superiority of genius over the rules is not the discovery of the young men of Victor Hugo's day. The "old dunce" Batteux, who symbolizes for Hugo the dusty norms of yesteryear, had established it clearly: The work exists only through the fire of enthusiasm that animates the artist, by its capacity to "pass" into the things he creates. And at the dawn of the Romantic century, the exemplary representative of the past century and the poetics of yesteryear, La Harpe, explained without any difficulty that genius is the instinctive feeling for what the rules command, and the rules simply the codification of what genius does.[9] Thus the passage from belles lettres to literature seems to occur through a revolution slow enough to have no need of being noticed. Batteux already did not think he needed to comment on the equivalence he established between a "course of belles lettres" and a "course of literature." Neither Marmontel nor La Harpe were to feel any more need to justify the use of the word "literature" or to specify its object. La Harpe began his Lycée courses in 1787 and published his *Cours* in 1803. Between these two dates Voltaire's disciple was a revolutionary, a Montagnard, a Thermidorian, and finally a Catholic reactionary; the *Cours* bears the traces of events and his recantations. But at no moment does it discuss the silent revolution that occurred in the shadow of the political one: Between the beginning and the end of the *Cours de littérature*, the very meaning of the word changed. The publishers who interminably reprinted Marmontel and La Harpe during the age of Hugo, Balzac, and Flaubert were no more concerned with the problem. But this is equally true of the writers whose books chart the new geography of the literary domain in the first years of the new century. More than the criteria by which works are appreciated, Mme. de Staël and Barante, Sismondi and August Schlegel overturn the relations between art, language, and society that circumscribe the literary universe; they expel yesterday's glories from this universe and include forgotten continents. But not one of them thinks it of interest to comment on the evolution of the word itself.[10] Not

even Hugo in his most iconoclastic declarations. The posterity of both writers and professors of rhetoric and literature will follow them on this point.

This argument would see, between Voltaire's definition and ours, only a lexical shift accompanying a silent revolution. As for Blanchot's metaphors, they stem from a different gap, the reasons for which the positivism of our age has no trouble whatsoever diagnosing. The wall and Tibet, the desert and the sacred spoken of in our text, like the experience of night, suicide, and the concept of the "neutral" set forth in so many others, have entirely identifiable sources. They refer to the consecration of literature whose great priests, in France, are Flaubert and Mallarmé, to the desertification of writing implied by the Flaubertian project of a book about nothing, to the nocturnal encounter between the unconditional exigency of writing and nothingness implied by the Mallarméan project of the Book. They express, in this account, the absolutization of art proclaimed by visionary young German thinkers around 1800: Hölderlin's mission of the poet as mediator, Schlegel's absolutization of the "poetry of poetry," Hegel's identification of aesthetics with the unfolding of the concept of the Absolute, Novalis's affirmation of the intransitivity of a language that is "only concerned with itself." Finally, through the mediation of Schelling's philosophy of the indeterminate, they would reach back to Jacob Böhme's theosophy and the tradition of negative theology, pledging literature to testimony of its own impossibility, just as negative theology was dedicated to expressing the ineffability of the divine attributes.[11] Blanchot's speculations on literary experience, his reference to sacred signs, and his decor of deserts and walls would be possible only because, two centuries ago, the poetry of Novalis, the poetics of the Schlegel brothers, and the philosophy of Hegel and Schelling irremediably confounded art and philosophy—together with religion and law, physics and politics—in the same night of the absolute.

Whatever insights they may allow, these arguments always and in the end leave us with the rather hasty conclusion that people get illusions into their heads by virtue of the human predilection for illusion and, particularly, the affection of poets for sonorous words and of metaphysicians for transcendental ideas. It would perhaps be more interesting to try to understand why people—and what sort of people—get these illusions "into their heads." Even more, we ought to question the very operation that separates the positive from the illusory and the presuppositions of this operation. We cannot but be surprised by the exact coincidence between the moment when the simple shift in the meaning of the word "literature" is completed and the moment of elaboration of the philosophico-poetic speculations that, all the way to the present, will sustain literature's claim to be an unheard-of and radical exercise of thought and language,

perhaps even a social calling and priesthood. Unless we are willing to give in to the currently widespread paranoia that sees, in the final years of the eighteenth century and the first years of the nineteenth, the complicity of French revolutionaries and German dreamers in overturning everything reasonable and ushering in two centuries of theoretical and political madness, we must seek a little more precisely what links the quiet shift in a name to the installation of a theoretical decor that permits an identification of the theory of literature with the theory of language and its practice with a production of silence. We must see what renders simultaneously possible the silent revolution that changes the meaning of a word, the conceptual absolutizations of language, art, and literature that are grafted on to it, *and* the theories that oppose them to one another. As a historical mode of visibility of the works of the art of writing, literature is the system of this simultaneous possibility.

Thus are the object and the order of this book defined. We will first seek to analyze the nature and modalities of the change in paradigm that ruins the normative system of belles lettres, and to understand, on this basis, why the same revolution can be both imperceptible and absolute. We will find the reason for this in the particular character of this revolution, which does not change the norms of representative poetics in favor of other norms, but in favor of another interpretation of the poetic fact. This new interpretation can be simply superimposed on the existence of works as another idea of what they do and what they mean. But it can also, and on the contrary, bind together in principle the act of writing with the realization of this new idea and define the necessity of a new art.

In a second moment, we will interrogate the coherence of the new paradigm itself. Emancipated "literature" has two great principles. In opposition to the norms of representative poetics, it proclaims the indifference of the form with respect to its content. In opposition to the idea of poetry as fiction, it proclaims poetry to be a specific mode of language. Are these two principles compatible? Both, to be sure, promote an art that is properly speaking an art of writing in opposition to the old *mimesis* of speech in action. But then the concept of writing is split in two: It can be orphaned speech lacking a body that might accompany it and attest to it, or, on the contrary, it can be a hieroglyph that bears its idea upon its body. The contradiction of literature might very well be the tension between these two ideas of writing.

We will then seek to show the forms this tension takes in the work of three authors whose names commonly symbolize the absolutization of literature: Flaubert, Mallarmé, and Proust.[12] Literature's contradictions are stripped bare by Flaubert's attempt to write a "book about nothing," Mallarmé's project of a

writing proper to the Idea, and Proust's novel about the formation of the novelist. But their necessary and productive character becomes manifest as well. The impasses of literary absolutization do not stem from a contradiction that would make the idea of literature incoherent; in fact they occur precisely at the point where literature affirms its coherence. By studying the forms of theoretical expression and the modalities of practical realization of this paradox, we can perhaps find a way out of the dilemma of relativism and absolutism, and offer, in opposition to the conventional wisdom of relativism, the skepticism in action of an art that is capable of playing with its own idea and creating a work out of its own contradiction.

51. Jean-Paul Sartre, "Sartre répond" in *La Quinzaine Littéraire* (1966, 15 October): 4.
52. See, for instance, *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 561–562: "the world of the *belles-lettres* was a world clearly in analogy with a sociopolitical world that was hierarchical: the hierarchy of genres was here the hierarchy of noble and lowly subjects; expression was guided by a principle of decorum that gave each person the language suitable for his or her condition; poeticity itself was defined as the elaboration of an action, that is to say, it was referred to a hierarchy between the men who act and those who simply live; the supreme model of speech was given by the speech that becomes act [*la parole qui fait acte*], the speech supported by a position of authority. [. . .] The literary revolution is the destruction of this edifice." Also see ibid., 64: "Literature, such as the concept of it emerges in the nineteenth century, is the art of speech without a place or a norm other than the common force of language [*la puissance commune de la langue*]. In this, literature is homogenous with the disorder of speaking beings characteristic of the democratic age."
53. Ibid., 584.
54. In addition to *Politique de la littérature*, see "The Janus-Face of Politicized Art: Jacques Rancière in Interview with Gabriel Rockhill," in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 49–66.
55. In the interview I conducted with Rancière for *The Politics of Aesthetics*, he fervently downplayed the opposition between body and spirit—which is undeniably a central element in *Mute Speech*—in favor of the distinction between incorporation and disincorporation. This is probably due to various criticisms of his work, such as Henri Meschonnic's piercing critique in which he claimed that Rancière had the "incarnation of the word" like "a communion wafer in his mouth [*une hostie à la bouche*]" ("Libérez Mallarmé," *Magazine littéraire* (September 1998). I do not find Rancière's change in vocabulary convincing because it appears to be nothing more than a very minor reworking of the opposition between body and spirit: *incorporation* corresponds to the unity of body and spirit, whereas *disincorporation* refers to the disunity between body and spirit, i.e. to a body without spirit (see *The Politics of Aesthetics*, 56–58).
56. This, of course, partially goes against the reading of Rancière that I have been promoting here. This is because I recognize that there are nonetheless certain elements in his work that are disturbingly close—too close for my tastes—to the classic division between classicism and modernism.
57. It is revealing in this regard that Rancière replied to my question of whether or not there are authors in the nineteenth century who escape the negative dialectic of incorporation and disincorporation with a concise "undoubtedly," but then went on to illustrate how non-French authors of the twentieth century are ensnared in the exact same "positive contradiction" as nineteenth-century French writers (*The Politics of Aesthetics*, 59).
58. I have examined in detail the case of the supposed birth of film in "Le cinéma n'est jamais né" in *Le milieu des appareils*, ed. Jean-Louis Déotte (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2009), 187–211 (also forthcoming in *Pour un historicisme radical*).
59. It is worth noting that Rancière himself insisted on the importance of institutional analysis in *La leçon d'Althusser* (Paris: Gallimard, 1974), notably 250–251.
60. *La fin de l'intériorité: Théorie de l'expression et invention esthétique dans les avant-gardes françaises (1885–1935)* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2002), 8–11.
61. See *Et tant pis pour les gens fatigués*, 436, for Rancière's response.

INTRODUCTION: FROM ONE LITERATURE TO ANOTHER

1. Gérard Genette. *Fiction and Diction*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 1.
2. John Searle. *Meaning and Expression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 59.
3. Genette, *Fiction and Diction*, 19.
4. The sense of the quotation marks around "literature" thus established, we will henceforth spare the reader their repetition.
5. Voltaire [François-Marie Arouet], "Littérature," *Dictionnaire philosophique*, in *Œuvres complètes de Voltaire* (Paris, 1827), vol. 10, 174.
6. Maurice Blanchot. *The Book to Come*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 219–220.
7. See Marc Fumaroli, *L'âge de l'éloquence: rhétorique et "res literaria" de la Renaissance au seuil de l'époque classique* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994).
8. Voltaire, *Dictionnaire philosophique*, 175.
9. See Charles Batteux, *A Course of the Belles Letters, or the Principles of Literature* (London: B. Law, 1761), vol. 1, 5–26; Jean-François de La Harpe, *Lycée ou Cours de littérature* (Paris, 1840), vol. 1, 7–15. Hugo calls Batteux an "old dunce [*vieux cancre*]" in the poem "Littérature," in *Les quatre vents de l'esprit*, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Club français du livre, 1968), vol. 9, 619.
10. See Anne-Louise-Germaine de Staël, *The Influence of Literature upon Society* (London: Henry Colburn, 1812 [1801]), and *Germany* (London: John Murray, 1813); Jean-Charles-Léonard Simonde de Sismondi, *Historical View of the Literature of the South of Europe*, trans. Thomas Roscoe (London: Henry Bohn, 1846 [1813]); Amable-Guillaume-Prosper Brugière, baron de Barante, *A Tableau of French Literature during the Eighteenth Century* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1833 [1814]); August Wilhelm Schlegel, *A Course of Lectures on Dramatic Art and Literature*, trans. John Black and A. J. W. Morrison (London: Henry Bohn, 1846 [1814]).
11. For the development of the various arguments synthesized here, see in particular the critical analyses of Tzvetan Todorov, *Literature and Its Theorists: A Personal View of Twentieth-Century Criticism*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987); Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age: Philosophy of Art from Kant to Heidegger*, trans. Steven Rendall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000); or, from a completely different perspective, Henri Meschonnic, *Poésie sans réponse: pour la poétique V* (Paris: Gallimard, 1978).
12. All three authors are French: This book has no claim of encyclopedic scope. Nor, however, is its goal to analyze a French specificity in the elaboration of the norms of *Belles-Lettres* or of the ideals of literature. It advances a few hypotheses and seeks to test them with respect to a relatively homogeneous historical sequence and sphere of reference.