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ABSTRACT: Until half a century ago, the question "what is literature?" was common in literary studies. Today such questions have something naïve, especially in a time that has become sceptical towards theories. This article tries to avoid this naïve side starting from two books that have enquired into the question 'what is literature', in an analytical and genealogical way (*Die Logik der Dichtung* by Käte Hamburger and *Fiction et Diction* by Gérard Genette) and going back to the ancient theories of *poiesis* and *mimesis.*

KEYWORDS: Literature, Philosophy, History, Morphology, Literary genres, Plato, Aristotle, Käte Hamburger, Gérard Genette.

1. Literature

The word *literature*, such as we use it today, is the result of a cultural turn that took place during the eighteenth century. Before that, as we know from Quintilian's *Institutio oratoria* (II, 1, 4), the term *literatura or ars literaria* was the Latin for the Greek *techne grammatike*: it pointed to whatever was said or written with *techne* with *ars*, or with a specific technique. Only afterwards it became what in Latin and Greek was called 'poetry' and then, during the eighteenth century, *belles lettres* (Caron 1992 and 2016, 123-139). This transformation is part of a greater metamorphosis affecting the whole western system of the arts, and dividing the fine arts (poetry, painting, sculpture, music; architecture had an ambiguous status) from the mechanical arts[1] following Charles Batteux's distinction (1746), which the *Encyclopédie* spreads all over Europe. The *Critique of Judgement* and the aesthetics of Romanticism are based on this distinction.

In Italian culture, we find an allegorical example of this transition. Two works by the same title were published a century apart: *Storia della letteratura italiana,* by Girolamo Tiraboschi (1772-1782) and *Storia della letteratura Italiana* by Francesco De Sanctis (1870-71). For Tiraboschi, 'literature' covers the whole of written culture (poetry, but also history, philosophy, eloquence, the natural sciences, mathematics, astronomy); for De Sanctis, literature is first of all *belles lettres*: poetry, narrative prose, theatre. Nevertheless De Sanctis keeps including philosophers, historians, scientists

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[1] See Kristeller 1951, 496-527.

in the realm of literature. Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, Giordano Bruno, Tommaso Campanella, Galileo Galilei, Paolo Paruta, Paolo Sarpi, Ludovico Antonio Muratori, Giambattista Vico are still part of his history of Italian literature. We find the same ambiguity in the histories of all western literatures: Robert Burton, John Bunyan, Edward Gibbon or John Ruskin belong to the history of English literature, exactly as Michel de Montaigne, François de La Rochefoucauld, Jules Michelet, Roland Barthes are part of the history of French Literature.

What's the common ground for the thing we call 'literature' today? Such questions have something naïve, especially in a time that has become sceptical towards theories. I would try to avoid this naïve side starting from two books that have enquired into the question 'what is literature', in an analytical and genealogical way: *Die Logik der Dichtung* by Käte Hamburger (1957, 1977) and *Fiction et Diction* by Gérard Genette (1991). I will start from Genette's book, because Genette includes a survey of Hamburger's theses.

2. Fiction and Diction

Literature is made with language, writes Genette, and the search for the essence of literature is the search for what Roman Jakobson (1960, 350-377) called "the poetic function of language." According to Genette, this question has two possible answers: we can think that literature has an immanent essence or we can think any text may become literature according to context. In the former case, we have what Genette calls an *essentialist* or *constitutivist* idea of literature, in the latter, a *conditional* idea of literature. The former is older, goes back to Greek and Latin poetics and answers the question, *what is art?* The latter is recent and answers Nelson Goodman's question *when is art?*[2]

In order to tackle the former question, Genette starts form the text that has embodied this standpoint in the most influential way — Aristotle's *Poetics*. Aristotle distinguishes between two different ways of using language, *legein* and *poiein*: language as ordinary medium of communication, and language as instrument of *poiesis*, of creation. What allows language to become poetry is what Aristotle calls *mimesis*, using a concept that exists since the V century BCE. What defines poetry, we read in the *Poetics,* is not the mere use of metre or merely telling a story. Empedocles uses verses but is not a true poet because in his work there is no *mimesis*. Likewise, Herodotus is not a poet because he tells stories, like poets do, but his stories lack the structure and the themes poets should use (*Poetics*, 1, 1447b; 9, 1451b).

Mimesis is specifically based on *mythos*, and *mythos* is not any kind of narrative, but narrative carried out in a certain way. It must show characters

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[2] See Goodman 1978, 57ff.

acting "according to verisimilitude and necessity" (*Poetics*, 9, 1451a 37) – in other words, it must show what a certain category of human beings are expected to do – and the plot must follow a certain order, have a beginning, a middle, and end. History tells what is contingent, poetry's *mythos* tells what is universal; history can narrate anything, poetry cannot. If narrative is not structured according to certain laws, there is no *mimesis*, therefore no poetry. Genette, like Hamburger, insists on the constructed nature of literary narrative and translates *mimesis* with *fiction*.

This essentialist idea of poetry or literature did not resist the impact of what it had kept out of the field. The most evident rejection deals with what, starting from the 16th century, was called *lyric poetry*. The modern idea of lyric comes up when poetry/literature started being divided into three great genres: narrative, drama, and lyric. This idea doesn't exist in classic and classicist poetics. It is found for the first time in Minturno's *De poëta* (1559) and *Arte Poetica* (1564) and spreads in the second half of the sixteenth century, above all in Italy.[3]

It was a dubious partition, because in ancient poetics the word lyric had a different meaning. According to those who invented this new concept, lyric has to do with the imitation of inner passion, while for ancient poetics *mimesis* was imitation of actions, *mythos*, plot. But lyric poetry, as it was defined in the 16th century, had no plot – and this was a problem for classic and classicist poetics. For two centuries, European classicism was sceptical about the notion of lyric; only with Romanticism, the new concept of lyric and the tripartition of literature in narrative, drama and lyric prevailed everywhere. In the modern, romantic idea, three were the most important features of the lyric as a genre: the presence of a first person speaking, the fact that this first person is expressing, in theory, his or her inner life, and the fact that this expression is affecting and changing the style of the text, making it different and subjective.

Genette ignores the novelty of lyric as far as subject matters are concerned and focuses on form, on style. While the core of narrative and drama lies in the presence of *fiction*, the essential core of lyric is style: the idea that subjectivity takes shape through style seen as a "way of looking at things," as Proust (1988 [1920], 261) says when he defines Flaubert's style. According to Genette, this idea is born with German Romanticism and, going through French symbolism, it lands on Russian formalism. Ordinary language cancels itself qua *medium*, literary language never does. It rather highlights itself as language, playing up its form. This is what Jakobson calls "poetic function of language." Genette calls it *diction.*

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[3] See Behrens 1940; Croce 1958 [1945], 108-117; Fubini 1956, 143-274; Guillén 1971, 375-419; Michałowska, 1972, 47-69; García Berrio 1977, 94-109; Genette 1992 [1979]; Johnson 1982; Guerrero 2000 [1998].

The essentialist idea of literature is therefore made up of two parts: *fiction* and *diction* – texts that narrate a plot, and texts one reads because of style. Yet, Genette maintains that the sum of mimesis and diction is not enough to cover what we call literature today. They do not explain why literature also includes works of history, essays or autobiographies. A further idea of literature is therefore to be introduced. Genette calls it conditionalist. According to this poetics – I quote – "any text stimulating an aesthetic experience can be called literary." As a conclusion, Genette (1993 [1991], 22-23) suggests that essentialist and conditionalist poetics must overlap in order to have a full-fledged idea of the literary field. This is Genette's final diagram ("rhematic" means "formal"):

Régime　　　　Criterion	Constitutive	Conditional
Thematic	FICTION	
Rhematic	DICTION POETRY　　　　　　　PROSE	

What is the common element of literature in its entirety? For Genette, it is *intransitivity* (1993 [1991], 25-26). This is an idea coming from Russian formalism and French structuralism. Diction talks about its own form; fiction is a kind of pseudo-objectivity talking first of all of itself, of its own mechanism.

3. Some Remarks on Fiction and Diction

Before coming up with an alternative answer to the question "what is the common element of literature," I would like to dwell on some aspects of Genette's theory which are historically imprecise.

1. The idea that literature is diction beside fiction is not born with lyric poetry. It is much more ancient than that: it goes back to the pre-modern

notion of *ars literaria*, to the idea that any text written with *ars*, is part of literature.[4] We insert works of science, philosophy, history into literature because such notion survived up to now; it is because of this notion that we keep finding Machiavelli, Galilei, or Vico in our histories of Italian literature. The idea that the essence of *res literaria* is style qua *ars* arises along with the tradition of rhetoric. It is not by chance that the first extended study of the idea of style can be found in Aristotle's third book of *Rhetoric*, not in his *Poetics*. There is a long-standing theory of eloquent diction which is rooted in our cultural history. It doesn't need conditionalist poetics in order to explain why Machiavelli, Montaigne, Ruskin or Nietzsche are parts of our histories of literature.

2. One cannot reduce the anomalous status of lyric down to a problem of style. In the theory of lyric developing between the second half of the 16th century and the Romantic age, the core of the poetic genre is the poet's self-expression, and self-expression deals both with contents and style. Lyric poetry deviates from the idea that literature is *mythos*, showing that literature encompasses one more element.

This element, however, is not just diction as Genette thinks: it is, first of all, the expression of one's inner life. On this point Hamburger is keener than Genette. A number of texts that belong to literature, are there for this reason. Hamburger (1993 [1957, 1977], 134ff.) then adds one main consideration: literature's ability to press out anybody else's inner world is a basic element of fictional narrative, not only of lyric. Literature allows what is impossible in life, as Proust (1992 [1913], 116) remarked, it allows us to enter other people's minds; Hamburger adds entering into a different person's mind and treating him as a subject, not as the object of an analytical discourse, that is as a *res* (1993 [1957, 1977], 134ff.).

3. My third point is the origin of conditionalist poetics. In Genette's view, this poetics consists of granting the poetic function of language to all texts. He maintains that the poetics of French symbolism marks a crucial step in this process. Actually, the rise of a conditionalist poetics is linked with a general shift in the Western conception of art. In this particular case, from the standpoint of historical significance, what happens in field of the visual arts is more relevant than what happens in literature. The situation is radically altered by Marcel Duchamp and the rise of Duchamp's paradigm – that is the idea that every object, if looked at in a certain way and in a certain context, can become and object of art.[5] The literary ready-made that are produced at the same time are not as powerful. Duchamp's paradigm prevails starting

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[4] See Fumaroli 1980.
[5] See Danto 1997, 84 and passim.

with the 50s and 60s of the last century, when the idea that anything can be art and that anything can be literature, as long as it is judged according to how it is written, becomes common knowledge.

What's the common ground for the thing we nowadays call "literature"? In the last two centuries and a half we have been counting as literature three types of texts:
- texts that tell stories (Hamburger and Genette would add "stories that are constructed in a certain way" but more of that later);
- texts that put into words what we normally do not see, what lies inside the boundaries of other people's bodies and faces, but it does so keeping on dealing with those people as subjects;
- texts that are read because they have a certain style, both according to the constitutive and the conditionalist standard.

Régime / Criterion	Constitutive	Conditional
Thematic	NARRATIVE SELF-EXPRESSION OF INNER LIFE	
Formal	STYLE	

What is the common feature of the texts that make up the thing we call literature? Is it intransivity? We could try to answer doing what Hamburger and Genette did, that is going back to Aristotle, but not only to his *Poetics*.

4. Aristotle

In the *Corpus Aristotelicum* we find a philosophy of language games far more complex than the one we find operating in the *Poetics* itself and based on the distinction between poetry and history. In Aristotle there are five different language disciplines: logic (Aristotle deals with it in *Organon* and *Metaphysics*) dialectic (*Organon, Metaphysics, Rhetoric*), rhetoric (the eponymous work), poetry and history (both are dealt with in *Poetics*). Each discipline allows for, or forbids, certain language games: logic deals with syllogisms, that is with necessary connections based on necessary premises; dialectic deals with necessary connections based on probable premises; rhetoric uses arguments based on dialectical devices (enthymemes) and mimetic devices (examples); poetry represents human beings acting according to universal patters; history represents human beings behaving in a particular and contingent way. It is a ladder: it goes from the universal to the particular and involves both contents and forms. In his *Organon*, Aristotle gives rise to formal logic: he tries to create a universal language for building arguments and for avoiding that idiosyncratic use of words that we call style; *Rhetoric*, on the contrary, offers the first extended reflection on the particular ways language follows when it is used in different contexts, for different aims, and by different people. Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is the first extended reflection on style and on the styles that Western culture has produced.

If we now consider intellectual disciplines in the form they hold today, we may safely say that philosophy is located between logic, dialectic, and rhetoric, literature is set between poetry, history, and rhetoric, and historiography between history and rhetoric. The ladder we find in Aristotle is the last refining step in a process of policing knowledge which starts with Plato's *Republic* and establishes the way Western culture organizes its discourse on the world. Plato sets two families of disciplines apart – poetry and philosophy or, broadly speaking, *mimesis* and conceptual knowledge. The former deal with particular beings who are subjected to time, placed in space and apparent: it accepts the world-image which appeals to the senses and to *doxa*. The latter search for non-temporal, non-placeable, non-apparent universals which lie behind, beneath, or above the world open to the senses and *doxa*. The latter, therefore, endeavour to catch similitudes and causes connecting beings and particular events, which can be seen by the mind's eye alone. Behind this epistemological divide, an ontological conflict exists, separating two different ways of conceiving the world. It is a violent separation for two reasons: first, in Plato's time poets still are seen as masters of truth, they still are essential part of Greek *paideia*, while Plato advances a new cultural paradigm; second, because poetry and philosophy use the same medium, but follow different rules and play different language games. The "ancient quarrel" between poetry and philosophy, as the *Republic* (10, 607b5-

6) maintains, is actually a civil war, a brotherly struggle. What ontology is implied in the morphology of *mimesis* and literature?

5. Particulars

Hamburger and Genette translate *mimesis* with *fiction*. According to them, it is a neo-aristotelian stance. They translate *mimesis* as *ficton* in order to underline the difference between literary and historical narrative. In their view, literature constructs autonomous, intransitive verbal objects, far from everyday language, and embodying a universal significance. However, when the word *mimesis* comes up in the 5th century BCE, its first meaning is clearly imitation and not fiction. The words *mimos* (mime as genre and the mime as an actor), *mimeisthai* (to mimic), *mimema* (the result of the act of mimicking), and *mimetes* (he who mimics) can be found especially in reference to the genre of mime and dance. Initially the act of *mimeisthai* signified the effects of a performance that was more than an aesthetic representation. It denoted primarily the deception practiced by the *mimetes* vis-à-vis those who watched, in other words, the relationship that is established between the imitator, the person imitated, and the removal of identity that imitation entails. In the first half of the fifth century BCE, this set of words could denote poetic-musical works as well as visual ones; but as early as the end of the 6th century BCE, Simonides had associated painting and poetry.[6] In Plato's view, mimetic artists try to imitate reality through their body, their language or by using signs, images. They reproduce reality as it appears to the senses and to the realm of pre-reflexive beliefs that allows human beings to understand each other, that is, they reproduce reality as it appears to *doxa*, or to what it will be called common sense. The Latin equivalent of *mimesis* is *imitatio,* not *fictio.*

One of philosophy's tasks is to describe this territory, measure out its boundaries, and consider if it is anthropologically unchanging or historically changing. As it appears in the surviving documents of western culture, *mimesis* produces a certain ontology: according to this way of conceiving the world, reality is made up of particular, separate individual beings, who are thrown out into time and space. It focuses on the dimension of particularity and is linked with a pre-reflexive way of conceiving the world that Husserl (1936, §37) calls *Lebenswelt*, and Strawson (1959, 10ff.) *naïve realism*.

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[6] See Koller 1954; Else 1958, 73-90; Sörbom 1966; Vernant 1991 [1978], 164-185; Nagy 1989, 1-77; and especially Halliwell 2002, 15ff. In works by Plato, the term *mimesis* has many meanings, and the imitative activity is judged in different, sometimes contradictory ways (a detailed analysis can be found in Halliwell 2002, chaps. 1-4, in Büttner 2000, and in Guastini 2003, chap. 2).

Plato came first in shaping a new intellectual figure who thinks that this ontology is naïve – the philosopher. Philosophy begins when *doxa* and appearances are subdued by the intellectual act of reflection, which makes the ontology of the particular seem naïve. Philosophy subdues a whole range of particulars to a universal class and it searches after causes, it pursues the principle of sufficient reason asking itself "why?", transforming the events and individual beings into phenomena of a universal law. *Mimesis*, on the contrary, moves on a different plane of reality. When it uses words, and becomes the thing we call literature, *mimesis* does three things: it recounts the path that some characters follow in a particular world; it enters the inner world of a character, or it dwells on the style of discourses – that is on the means a human or anthropomorphic being uses to give shape to his or her world. Cutting very short, literature deals with particulars. If one wants to find a concise aspect of its nature, one can use the metaphor of the trace. Literature tells about the traces that particulars leave behind in the world: the path that characters follow in a plot, the mark of an inner world (etymologically *character* means imprint), it tells about style as imprint, as a *stilus* engraving a wax slab. Literature is not characterized by the intransitive, but by the particular. It aims at a *mathesis singularis*: particulars that catch universals without going through concepts. It works by projections, by thoughtless recognition, by all that one means in the sentence floating behind any aesthetic experience: "it is so."

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