

## Introducing Jean Bessière — Beyond and Around Paradigms — A New Cognition of Literary Work

The mosaic of essays published in this issue of the *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* treats the critical work of the French comparatist and literary scholar, Jean Bessière. All the essays present various aspects of Bessière's critical work ever since the 1990 publication of the first text, *Dire le littéraire*, of a long series, the last volume of which, *Principles de la théorie littéraire*, appeared in 2005.

The critical project of Jean Bessière may be defined as a systematic exploration of the cognitive process related to literature. Thanks to Bessière's theorizations, anyone dealing with literature will gain a better understanding of literary facts. In fact, what makes Jean Bessière's work so striking is a systematic and progressive approach to literature understood as a coherent yet fragmentable reality. Over the past few years Jean Bessière has published a series of books dedicated to literature. They constitute a rethinking of multiple critical and theoretical problems. Their titles are quite clear: *To Say the Literary (Dire le littéraire)*, *L'enigmatité de la littérature (Enigmativity of Literature)*, *La littérature et sa rhétorique (Literature and Its Rhetoric)*, *Quel statut pour la littérature? (What Status for Literature?)*, *Principes de la théorie littéraire (Principles of Literary Theory)*.

Towards the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century, we can better grasp various developments of the theoretical discourse on literature. In that context of belatedness, Jean Bessière's vision of what he calls the "literary" may be seen as a remarkable enrichment of the cognitive horizons of literature. To account for the innovation, originality and contribution of Jean Bessière's analyses, I feel that the cognition of the literary work is a good starting point.

Let us imagine the theoretical stage of the twentieth century as a succession of paradigms which, as though they were dancers, emerged and brilliantly performed their dances and postures of the intellect and then waned. We know that the past twentieth century has given us the successive emergence of the following paradigms: formal, phenomenological, hermeneutical, sociocritical, structuralist, semiotic paradigm, aesthetic reception and post-structuralist. For the sake of economy I omitted some other paradigms. I will make some specific observations on the formal and phenomenological paradigms in order to show how Bessière's critical project establishes what should be legitimately called a *meta-paradigm*. As far as the formal and phenomenological paradigms are concerned, they allow us to demonstrate how the twentieth century strove for autonomy, ontology and cognition of literature.

Historically speaking the issue of the cognition of literary work emerges during the early period of Russian Formalism in the critical works of Potebnia and Vesolovski and crosses various currents and movements ("new criticism") of literary theory until Northrop Frye (1950 and on) and the so-called poststructuralism. It is, however, in Roman Ingarden's writings from 1931 (*Das literarische Kunstwerk / The Literary Work of Art*) and from 1937 (*The Cognition of the Literary Work*) that cognition of literary work becomes a true and specific field of philosophical research on the cognition of literature. In the case of Ingarden, the phenomenological approach to literary work gave valuable and solid results. We need only recall such categories as "intentional object," "stratum/strata," "quasi-judgments," "places of indeterminacy" and above all the idea of "concretization." Of course a retrospective look at the literary theories of the twentieth century implies some sort of assessment of the most operational categories established by different formalisms to account for the cognitive dimension of theoretical approaches to literary work.

Coined respectively in 1917 by Victor Shklovsky and in 1942 by Bohuslav Havranek, the categories of "ostranenie" (estrangement, defamiliarization) and of "aktualizace" (foregrounding) point to the autonomous status of literary language. The link concepts of "Artfulness," and of "literariness" account for that autonomy.

What the Russian formalists put forward is a self-contained study of literature which could not legitimately overlap into other disciplines. Shklovsky expresses his basic principle of autonomy of literature by saying that art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of the object; the object is not important.

In literature the artfulness of art means distance between the way of representing and deforming the so-called real. Havranek thus opposes "foregrounding" to "automatization." Foregrounding means the use of the devices of language in such a way that this use itself attracts attention and is perceived as uncommon, as deprived of automatization, in other words, deautomatized such as a live poetic metaphor.

Throughout the twentieth century the problem of the cognition of literature arises as the question of understanding a literary language as either a strategy of using specific formal devices or means of representing reality by more or less aesthetic deformation. Admittedly, the cognition of a literary work can be characterized as a clear and systematic definition and understanding of the critical object named literary work. However, such definition and understanding must take into account the specificity of the literary work's ontological status.

The theoretical elaborations of Ingarden, the Russian formalists, and Czech structuralists do not integrate into their understanding the totality of literature understood as the autonomous and heterogeneous complexity of social interplay between a literary work and its various readings. However, what Czech structuralists have theorized in terms of the social background of literature constitutes a valuable contribution to knowing literature as a richly multifaceted and complex reality.

From this perspective what I find particularly valuable in Jean Bessière's ample critical project is the successful attempt to dialogue with various (if not all, equally important) literary theories. This man is an exceptional reader. While reading his successively published four or five books one has the feeling that this critic has read all that is necessary to achieve a total vision of various understandings of literature. Jean Bessière enters into a dialogue with all significant theories. I define his style and his method as a meta-reflexive, Socratically maieutic and cognitively oriented. This way of interpreting and knowing literature implies a constant parallax view in thinking about literature. *Dire le littéraire (To Say the Literary)* is based on an assumption that interrogating literature can generate an infinite number of sentences. These sentences statements may be observations, analytical visions, synthetic proposals, etc. In this respect, the kingdom of the critic may rightly be called the multiplicity of relevant sentences about literature. And these sentences corroborate the inquiry which attempts to prove that identity of literary objects is unattainable. Between fiction and the world, between doing and saying the literary, one

never touches the same page. Consequently, Jean Bessière speaks about the unavoidable otherness of literature.

As approaches, phenomenological or formal cognition of literature limited their horizons purposefully and attempted to account systematically for the autonomous status of literature. Jean Bessière integrates into his reflection on literature as many perspectives as possible thus giving us a very complete vision of such particular elements of literature as the "rhetorico-poétique" related to the common discourse but also determining the aporetic and the rhetoric (rhetoricite) understood as specificity and singularity of literature. By querying the basic concepts of literary theory, this critic proposes to replace the principal propositions of formalism, deconstruction and hermeneutics in order to examine the very reasons of literature. He goes beyond the exclusiveness of the various paradigms and beyond the conflict of interpretations to achieve a deeper explanation of literature. That explanation integrates and problematizes the enigmaticity, the aporetic mood as well as the inferential dimension. Without being prisoner of any specific paradigm, our critic establishes a sort of meta-paradigm which encompasses all the paradigms and their numerous avatars.

The predication of the literary becomes a critical object *per se*. The critic knows that the literary has been identified and said numerous times and in many ways. However, he also knows that there are many "new" things to be said about the literary: "The literary does not signify: it makes understood that it serves as testimony as signs of the community, of time and of the work itself as an interpretation of this community" (*Dire le littéraire* 296).

An anatomy of the twentieth century's fiction as it is conceived in *Enigmaticity of literature* relies upon the assumption that modern literature has constantly questioned itself, that it re-invented meta-representation and that it expressed its own *infracontextualization*.

The characteristic fecundity of Bessière's critical thinking impresses further as it is a well-structured whole which contemplates and represents literature from various perspectives and from an increasingly complex critical reflection. This entropy of critical thinking about literature is under control since Jean Bessière admits systematically and generously new elements of a never-ending vision. Undoubtedly, the critic is aware that literature has attained both an entropic dimension and acquired some virtues of encompassing and openness. Here we see his paradoxical way of understanding literature. On the one hand, it is a widely extended semi-artistic, semi-realistic domain in which interfere visions and ideologies, systems

of values and their specific acceptances and practices, readings and metareadings. On the other hand, literature in its very formal and reflexive praxis implies individual positions and collective play in terms of using literature as a mirror of the social and as a constant factor of tension between the real and the Utopian.

What arises from Jean Bessière's manner of reading and interpreting literature is a virtually never-ending understanding of literary enigmaticity and of a never-ending process of reading. That last crucial element, if not a basis of literary knowledge, presupposes above all the contact between the reader and a literary object be it a poem, drama or novel. Jean Bessière's way of writing is not an easy one. It stems from a rare symbiosis of an intellectually minded and highly cultivated critic, and a sensitive, empathic and imaginative reader.

The extraordinary dynamics of Jean Bessière's criticism is no accident, given his comparative education, culture and practice. As readers, we receive therefore not only a critical construction which may be regarded as an ontology and phenomenology of literature, but also what can be seen as lessons and consequences drawn from the idea and application of the comparative principle.

The metamorphosis of comparative literature which occurred recently in the United States seems to be a critical pole which Bessière not only adopted as a new stage of comparative literature but also anticipated and rethought in his own practice. This practice triggers the conviction that comparative literature is a multidisciplinary domain and that comparing means accepting growing complexities of what has been compared or of what gets compared as realities, structures, signs and their interpretations and re-interpretations.

Reading Jean Bessière is both a difficult task and a fascinating intellectual adventure. It is a difficult task since his critical work is a discourse of one highly reflexive mind that never renounces the principle of respect towards any, even the smallest, specificity of textual reality of literature. Hence, in his writing there are constant references to poems, metaphors, topoi, rhetoric, enigmaticity, and so on.

A long time ago the postulates of close reading emerged. Here, they have become the duty of thinking any text in terms of its irreducibility. The names of authors, poets and *prosateurs* that appear frequently in Bessière's books are respectfully treated as signs of complex grounds of literary discourse. At any rate, the process of reading necessarily implies stopping in

a specific *lieu* and returning to a remembered point, advancing and going back, joining a series of concepts to a global cosmology of literature, and thus it becomes more than just an intellectual exercise. Through the critic's readings, one discovers an increasingly deep metacritical vision of literature. This vision crosses life and society, but also, the hermeneutics of the other critics, as well as the critic's interpretation *in statu nascendi*. Jean Bessière's involvement in literary theory does not preclude him from being a historian and reader of literature which he seizes in its epochal and present immensity.

Having said all this, I ask myself what would be the best way of introducing Jean Bessière's critical thought and his way of approaching literature. I realize that the inherent complexity of his style and of his way of analysis may best be served didactically if one generates a series of practical questions in order to give an idea of what is what, why and how in literature as revisited by this untiring critic.

The second element that I decided to introduce is a glossary of recurring terms and concepts which constitute a sort of skeleton of atoms lying at the basis of Jean Bessière's metacritical vision of literature. The critic himself prepared the glossary by defining the concepts that I extracted from his books.

Finally, a series of articles by critics, theoreticians and comparatists present, discuss and revisit the extraterritorial land of literature. Their voices are rich and compelling insofar as they give us a wide critical perspective for reading and understanding literature as revisited by Jean Bessière.

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