

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN AFFECT THEORY
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THE SEDUCTION OF FICTION

A Plea for Putting
Emotions Back into Literary
Interpretation

Jean-François Vernay



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Translated by Carolynne Lee

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Noumea, New Caledonia

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Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and
Literary Criticism

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The recent surge of interest in affect and emotion has productively crossed disciplinary boundaries within and between the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, but has not often addressed questions of literature and literary criticism as such. The first of its kind, *Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism* seeks theoretically informed scholarship that examines the foundations and practice of literary criticism in relation to affect theory. This series aims to stage contemporary debates in the field, addressing topics such as: the role of affective experience in literary composition and reception, particularly in non-Western literatures; examinations of historical and conceptual relations between major and minor philosophies of emotion and literary experience; and studies of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and disability that use affect theory as a primary critical tool.

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Desire is the engine of life, the yearning that goads us forward with stops along the way, but it has no destination, no final stop, except death. The wondrous fullness after a meal or sex or a great book or conversation is inevitably short-lived. By nature, we want and we wish, and we assign content to that emptiness as we narrate our inner lives. For better and for worse, we bring meaning to it, one inevitably shaped by the language and culture in which we live. Meaning itself may be the ultimate human seduction.

Siri Hustvedt, "Variations on desire: a mouse, a dog, Buber and Bovary"

AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

When given the opportunity to express himself on the fate of literature, Jonathan Coe's character—Professor Leonard Davis, author of *The Failure of Contemporary Literature*—does not mince words:

"The older one gets," said Davis, with his mouth full of cake, "the less useful critical theory seems."

"You mean one should go back to texts?" asked Hugh.

"Yes, perhaps. But then, the more one reads them, the less interesting the texts themselves appear to become."

"This essentially is what you've been arguing in your new book," said Christopher. "It's a radical and provocative viewpoint, if I may so."

Davis nodded his acquiescence.

"But does this mean," Hugh asked carelessly, "the end of literature as we know it?"

"As we know it?"

"As it is taught in our schools and universities."

"Ah! No, no ... indeed not. Far from it. In fact I think—" here, there was an almighty pause, far surpassing any that had gone before—"I think ..." Suddenly he looked up, the gleam of insight in his eye. The tension in the air was palpable. "I think I'd like another macaroon."¹

Beyond the jocular note, this excerpt from *A Touch of Love* (1989) illustrates how the demise of literature and the uselessness of literary criticism regularly emerge as prime concerns in controversial debates. Completed in 2011, *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature* (Plea for a renewal of emotion in literature) was first published in 2013 in France,

at a time when the community of French theorists and academics was publishing prolifically in order to sound alarm bells about students' peculiar estrangement from Literary Studies, to the point where the usefulness of academic courses and training over the last two decades was even called into question.²

To account for such an estrangement, Jérôme David³ has listed three major stances:

1. Tzvetan Todorov puts it down to a kind of rigid formalism, essentially enshrined in schooling, whereby pupils are expected to be technical readers rather than passionate interpreters of fiction;
2. Jean-Marie Schaeffer feels that the evolution of literary studies over the last 20 years has generated a form of self-containment dictated by a set of fictional traits—such as the lack of extralinguistic referential properties or the absence of truth.⁴ As a result, Schaeffer observes that literature has grown in isolation from other forms of discourse;
3. In line with reader-response theory, Yves Citton contends that students are being forced into a state of passive reading when they should be encouraged to become far more inquisitive about the texts under close scrutiny so as to form an “interpretive community” (Stanley Fish) of readers.

But my aim is not to discuss “the end of literature as we know it”; otherwise, I would have titled my book “A Farewell to Literature” as William Marx did.⁵ My manifesto does not seek to mourn the causes of the alleged death of literature which, according to Marx, has been consistently self-proclaimed since the end of the nineteenth century. His view spanning three centuries of literary history and divided into three stages—namely expansion, autonomization, and devaluation—is self-explanatory enough not to need any further elaboration.

By articulating the three key components of literary interaction (i.e., the writing, reading, and interpreting processes), the wager of writing my book lay not so much in the capacity to take stock of the crisis sweeping through the beleaguered humanities, as in the ability to seek new directions and offer new tools that would do justice to the values of literature. Hence, my attempt at exposing the outline of what I call the psycholiterary approach. Another difficulty in the course of writing *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature* lay in the choice of words: “Fiction and literature are not synonymous,”⁶ as Terry Eagleton boldly declares after he himself

uses literature and fiction as interchangeable terms for a few chapters. Clearly, these words are not to be conflated but have nevertheless been used more or less synonymously in my original French edition for stylistic purposes. This is because authors who wish to write elegantly in French are tacitly expected not to repeat words within at least a couple of lines. This stylistic requirement can become an issue when words such as fiction and literature, though quasi-synonymous in meaning, are *sensu stricto* non-interchangeable concepts. In contrast, the translator of *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation*, Carolyn Lee, is able to use repetitions more freely in English, and has aptly taken the liberty to reinstate the most apposite concept wherever possible.

It is of utmost importance that we, human beings, whose emotional intelligence still gives us the edge on artificial intelligence, make good use of our advantage by exploring it to the full. In its 2010 benchmark statement defining the nationwide framework for senior high school teachers, the French Ministry of Education for once acknowledged the crucial role emotions play when reading fiction. As I have stated in a *Vox Poetica* interview,⁷ even if the scientific approach to the humanities partakes of a need to objectify the assessment criteria within the educational sector, turning critical practice into some form of science will surely result in an asymptotic enterprise in which professional readers will systematically miss the goal, no matter how close they manage to get. And close enough will never be good enough. Clearly, the objectives of science and those of the humanities are as polar as those of the brain's left and right hemispheres: While the left hemisphere, like science, aims at thinking about our world as analytically and objectively as can be, the right—very much like the arts—favors a synthetic perspective based on intuition and emotions. The challenge is therefore to solve the paradox which aims at acknowledging and reinstating the subjectivity of reading practices by taking into account the plasticity of interpretation and its emotional aspects within secondary and tertiary education, systems that for the most part still require objective analyses.

Having said this, a great deal of European university-affiliated research centers and groups, having jumped on the “affective turn” bandwagon, are waking up to the interdisciplinary potentialities of investigating affective and cognitive sciences in the humanities. The Swiss Réseau Romand de Narratologie (federated under the twin aegis of the European Narratology Network and the International Society for the Study of Narrative), and the French Pouvoir des Arts project could be regarded as two telling examples

of the fruitful interimplication of science and the arts. The three key components of literary interaction can largely benefit from the advance of neuroscience research which, someday, might well end up pinning down the much discussed singularity of literature through concepts such as mirror-neurons, brain plasticity, Theory of Mind (that is, the capacity to imagine and appreciate other people's mental states), the reconfiguration of memory, fantasizing, altered states of consciousness, embodied cognition, cognitive simulation, motor cognition, as-if body loops, and emotions like empathy. On another level, the study of emotions in fiction will emphasize the notion that writing is an embodied act whose corporeality is now the subject of many academic investigations through a range of buzz themes such as gesture, embodiment, body language, kinesia, just to name a few. Examined through a scientific lens, emotions will even confirm the argument that literary fiction has a shaping influence over readers, as tested by two teams of researchers from New York and Toronto.⁸ Results of a study conducted by Emanuele Castano and David Comer Kidd, published in *Science* on 18 October 2013, concur with the view that reading literary fiction improves empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence—albeit temporarily.

When considering fiction through the angle of seduction, literary theorists might as well ask themselves the right questions. Rather than pointlessly wondering who, nowadays, would still show an interest—let alone a vested one—in fiction, it might be more worthwhile addressing ways in which fiction could be of interest to contemporary readers. Psychologists and neuroscientists exploring the social values of literature through Theory of Mind may hold the key to this fairly new field of research, but literary theorists may also have a say in this matter. For Swiss scholar Yves Citton, who developed a few leads of his own in his 2007 book *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Read, interpret, actualize: why study literature?), studying literature is a means to cultivate one's tastes, to shape one's sensitivity, to guide one's love, and to reassess one's priorities and ends.⁹

While it seems timely to reinstate the usefulness and varied virtues of reading fiction, more important perhaps is to find ways in which fiction would be made more interesting to contemporary readers. *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* specifically addresses these issues, among many others.

NOTES

1. Jonathan Coe, *A Touch of Love* (London: Penguin, 1989), 58.
2. See Dominique Maingueneau, *Contre Saint-Proust. La fin de la Littérature* (Paris: Belin, 2006); Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2007); Tzvetan Todorov, *La Littérature en péril* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007); Antoine Compagnon, *La littérature pour quoi faire?* (Paris: Fayard/Collège de France, 2007); Yves Citton, *L'avenir des humanités. Économie de la connaissance ou cultures de l'interprétation?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010); Vincent Jouve, *Pourquoi étudier la littérature?* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010); or Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Petite écologie des études littéraires. Pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature?* (Paris: Thierry Marchaisse, 2011).
3. See Jérôme David, "Chloroforme et signification: Pourquoi la littérature est-elle si soporifique à l'école?", *Études de Lettres* 295, 2014/1, in Raphaël Baroni & Antonio Rodriguez (eds.), *Les passions en littérature. De la théorie à l'enseignement*, 19–32.
4. For a detailed discussion of heterorepresentation and truth-valuation, see Jean-François Vernay: "The Truth About Fiction as Possible Worlds," *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* 61: 2, August 2014, 133–141.
5. William Marx, *L'Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation. XVIIIe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2005).
6. Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2012), 108.
7. Raphaël Baroni, "Retrouver les émotions dans les études littéraires," *Vox Poetica*, 01 February 2015. Accessed on 10, 14 April 2015: http://www.vox-poetica.org/entretiens/intVernay.html?fb_ref=Default.
8. See Castano, Emanuele, and David Comer Kidd. 2013. Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind. *Science*, 342(6156): 377–380; and Maja Djikic & Keith Oatley, "The art in fiction: From indirect communication to changes of the self," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 8: 4, Nov 2014, 498–505.
9. "... étudier la littérature, c'est un moyen de cultiver ses goûts, de façonner sa sensibilité, d'orienter ses amours, de réévaluer ses priorités et ses fins," Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2007), 156.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The original French version of this book was published in 2013 in Paris, under the title *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature* (Plea for a renewal of emotion in literature). It was well received in France, with the author interviewed in the prestigious literary journal *vox-poetica*, and the book shortlisted for the French prize, *Le Prix Littéraire du Savoir et de la Recherche* (literary prize for knowledge and research), alongside books by Julia Kristeva and Alain Finkielkraut.

Jean-François Vernay outlines the cultural context of the original book in his author's preface, written in English especially for this edition. This was the only section of the book I did not translate, apart from some short quotations throughout the book from French authors, of which published English editions already existed; for quotations where published English editions do not exist, the translations are my own. The provenance of translations will be clear from their respective endnotes.

In his Preface, the author speaks of the condition of the "beleaguered humanities," a phenomenon known only too well in educational institutions in many parts of the English-speaking world. But what is not necessarily so well known are the French and European theorists closer to Vernay's own cultural situation, many of whom are not available in English. It is this synergy of known and unknown, of French/European and English/American/Australian traditions of scholarly criticism, that is so exciting about this book, that endows it with so much potential for intercultural insight. And it was in no small part for this reason that, from the moment I read the book in its original French, I felt an overwhelming desire to translate it.

But an equally important contribution to this desire was the book's argument for a new interdisciplinary approach, founded on advances in neuroscience, aiming to integrate psychology with literary analysis into the psycholiterary approach; in so doing, it opens up a space in which the formation of our emotions, our joys and sorrows, loves and hatreds, and everything in between, can be openly examined and discussed, potentially improving our capacities for empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence. This book is thus one of a small but growing number of theoretical works aiming to incorporate scientific findings into the humanities, a move that could help to ameliorate the ongoing polarization of the two academic cultures, an amelioration called for in the mid-twentieth century by English scientist and novelist (and staunch defender of the novel) C. P. Snow. As Snow argued then, science "has got to be assimilated along with, and as part and parcel of, the whole of our mental experience."¹ With his psycholiterary approach, Jean-François Vernay is arguing for precisely this assimilation, as necessary now as it was in Snow's time, if not more so.

In all translations, certain changes are necessary, no matter how faithful one might wish to be to the original. Yet as Walter Benjamin has argued somewhat prescriptively, "a real translation ... does not cover the original, does not block its light," but nevertheless must be rendered in language that "can—in fact, must—let itself go, so that it gives voice to the intention of the original not as reproduction but as harmony."²

Harmony has been an overriding goal for me in the translation of this book, since it is also a strong element in the original, but this goal has often been in tension with fidelity. It has been fortunate, then, that from the outset, the author and I were able to discuss a good many words and phrases in the translation, learning more about them and about our own practices of translation and/or language use as we did so. The book has benefitted immeasurably from this process. For, in common with the translator of the 20th English edition of *Madame Bovary* (Lydia Davis), Jean-François Vernay and I share the view that a translation, "one that is worth taking trouble over, is always a work in progress: it can always be improved. The translator can always learn more that would make it better, or can always think of a better way to write a sentence."³

Readers can therefore be confident that all differences that exist—between *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature* and *The Seduction of Fiction*—have either been made by the author himself (he also made some small revisions to the original during the translation process), or have been approved by him as necessary to render the translation as

readable as possible in English, while still giving "voice to the intention of the original."⁴

There now follows a list of changes, made always in aiming for harmony, as well as for clarity and grace; these changes are also exemplary of the conundrums and compromises besetting all translation endeavours, and perhaps of most interest and salience, in this case, to those who read both English and French and wish to compare the two versions.

The epigraph by Siri Hustvedt at the beginning of the book was chosen by the author and replaces one by Umberto Eco at the start of the French edition. It is a most apposite choice, for Hustvedt's passage seems to me to signpost most pertinently the central themes of this book, and enjoys the advantage of having been written for an English-speaking audience.

In the opening sentence of the Introduction, the author expresses sadness at a view expressed by Tzvetan Todorov. The original French is: "J'observe avec tristesse que de nos jours, 'lire des poèmes et des romans ne conduit pas à réfléchir sur la condition humaine, sur l'individu et la société, l'amour et la haine, la joie et le désespoir, mais sur *des notions critiques*, traditionnelles ou modernes.'" I translated this as: "It saddens me to agree with the observation that today 'to read poems and novels does not lead to reflection on the human condition, on the individual and society, on love and hate, joy and despair, but rather on *concepts of critique*, whether traditional or modern.'"

The French verb "observer" is used in the original in the sense of the English verb "to note." The author was noting sadly that Todorov's observation was still valid. But the English word "note" does not quite convey the depth of feeling inherent in the original sentence. My translation, therefore, "It saddens me to agree with the observation that today ...", although explicitly referencing Todorov's quotation, permits me to highlight both the author's agreement with the observation, and his sadness (by bringing that word to second place in the sentence), and seemed to me to convey more accurately the feeling of the original, a view with which the author agreed.

We encounter a different form of compromise on the last page of the Introduction, where I translated "*la propriété fictive de la littérature*" for "the constructed nature of fiction." The explanation for this can be partially understood from the author's preface where he explains how the exigencies of formal French prose style in the original book compelled him to use the words "literature" and "fiction" "more or less synonymously." But it is obvious throughout the book that by "literature," Vernay means

literary fiction. For this reason, I translated the French word "littérature" as "fiction" when I felt that word was more apposite, given its particular context, and as "literature" if a more general nuance was required. In the sentence in question, then, discussing readers who are knowledgeable in literary theories that focus on—and here I present a literal translation of the French—"the fictive property of literature," we end up with a phrase that sounds somewhat tautological in English. I therefore chose to translate it as "the constructed nature of fiction." For, as argued so eloquently in this book, fictional works are, above all, constructed worlds that seduce us into crossing their thresholds. In the same sentence, discussing our compassion for the adventures of fictional characters, the original French was "personnage romanesque." The word *romanesque* can connote highly imaginative or fantastic fables, but in this context, simply denotes fictional characters in a novel. But as the author has so far been discussing our emotional responses to reading literature (his previous sentence was about fictional space), my choice of English term was "fictional characters," with the adjective here denoting by default characters in novels.

A word is needed here about the pluralizing of this and some other terms throughout the English version which were formerly singular in the French. The fictional characters we have just been discussing, for example, were in fact singular in the original French. If I had kept to a single character, I would have been forced later in the sentence to use the masculine pronoun "he" as if it were generic, representing all characters, male and female, a practice that has been outdated for some time in English writing. In French, as many readers will know, a language with gendered nouns, the pronoun must correspond to the noun, not to any person's, or character's, actual gender. In English, the third person pronoun "they" is commonly used as a *de facto* gender-neutral singular pronoun in speech and in informal writing, but is not yet accepted as correct practice in academic discourse. For this reason, I pluralized nouns whenever it was necessary to avoid using a masculine pronoun as a so-called generic, so that "they" could be used as a legitimate gender-neutral pronoun. Throughout my translation, the nouns I pluralized most commonly were "readers" and "writers," in contexts where it would otherwise be impossible to provide a gender-neutral pronoun to refer to them. This particular conundrum and its compromise is an illuminating example of what lies between the source phrase and the target phrase, a space that has been termed "interliminal."⁵

The interliminal space can be most hazardous to navigate in contexts of deliberately chosen ambiguity, such as the following: The phrase

“fabulation autorisée,” which I have translated as “licensed fabrication,” occurs four times in the book, first on the opening page of Chapter 6. The French word “fabulation” has several connotations: fantasizing, storytelling, lying, or telling a yarn or a tale. Although there is an English word “fabulation,” with *a priori* similar connotations to the French word, it is not in common parlance, and in any case was appropriated some time ago by Robert Scholes to denote a specific type of fiction.

The best choice of English word to cover the range of ambiguity of the French word is “fabrication.” It certainly covers deceptive utterances, which could include fantasizing, invention and faking, and since the author has taken great trouble arguing that storytelling is a mix of imagination and reality, this strengthens my choice of “fabrication” (for consistency’s sake, I was then compelled to use “to fabricate” as the English verb for the French “fabuler,” to tell stories, and “fabricated” as the adjective for “fabulé”). The only disadvantage of the English “fabrication” is that it carries a minor connotation of material production. Of equal challenge was the choice of accompanying adjective. The quite literal “authorized fabrication” is an unfamiliar collocation in English, except perhaps in manufacturing, and “licensed fabrication” shares this status. But the advantage of “licensed” over “authorized” is that it connotes entitlement and freedom, connotations most apposite in the context of storytelling. This particular interliminal navigation is an interesting example of how concepts will of necessity be mediated by the target language and culture.

This example also serves to highlight that any translation represents the limits of the translator’s own reading, so this particular translation is necessarily my interpretation of what the work means to me at this time, an element in the boundary⁶ that challenges all readers of writing that is not in their mother tongue. As translator, I was simultaneously the book’s first reader in English, an exciting and privileged position that served to motivate me throughout the long process of making this book accessible to interested English readers worldwide.

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March 2016

Carolyn Lee

NOTES

1. C. P. Snow, "The Rede Lecture, 1959," in C. P. Snow, *The Two Cultures: And a Second Look* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1959, 1964, 1-21.
2. Walter Benjamin, "The Task of the Translator," in *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. by Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Random House), 79.
3. Lydia Davis, "Some Notes on Translation and on Madame Bovary," *The Paris Review*, No. 198, Fall 2011, 88.
4. Benjamin, "Task of Translator", 79.
5. Marilyn Gaddis Rose, *Translation and Literary Criticism: Translation as Analysis* (Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishers), 1997, 7.
6. *Ibid.*, 2.