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On Implicit Metafiction

The future of the discipline called "comparative literature" is obviously linked with the way in which the notion of "literature" is itself defined. It is well known that this definition is permanently changing. Today, the classic boundaries between "high" and "low", national and international, canon and minority practices, word and image, print and screen, etc., can no longer be maintained: "anything" can be studied as "literature", which makes the practice of comparative literature both more challenging and more necessary. An interesting perspective may be the study of transversal topics, that is of questions and structures that are not directly linked to specific forms of literary expression but that run through any form of it. The question of fiction and nonfiction is a good example of such an approach. It is timely, certainly in our era or fake news and post-truth ideologies, and capable of bringing together a wide range of works and traditions. In the following pages, I would like to make some comments on a topic that has longtime been seen as typically postmodern, but that is currently making an astonishing come-back: metafiction.

Should we still read metafictionally?

Reading metafiction, that is reading metafictionally, is no longer self-evident today. There is no real sense of urgency to do so, as used to be the case in the 1960s and onwards. Nor is there any vital link with the cutting-edge literary production of our times, at least in the French context (which is mine). New priorities have emerged, and although metafiction, and more particularly the autofictional mode of it, has not disappeared at all, it is no longer at the heart of our literary and extraliterary concerns, which go in different directions:

- Issues of *inter-* and *transmediality*, as part of the expanded field of reading and writing.[1]
- The rise of *documentary* as a full-fledged form of literary writing, beyond the well-known examples of literary journalism.[2]
- Social and political *commitment* of texts and authors,[3] also reflecting the increasing reluctance to separate writing and writer and the "post-post-modernist" ethics of *authenticity* and *sincerity* - and thus the growing suspicion toward fiction.
- The blurring of boundaries between production and reception, not only due to the explosion of creative writing courses and self-publishing but also and more generally to the new culture of *participative culture* and *appropriation art*.[4]

The hype of the literary "performance" is a good example of the convergence of these different orientations: these public readings, quite different from those in previous periods,[5] tend to become multimedia events, they are closely connected with the creative reuse of discourses in the public sphere, they are overtly politically committed, and they bridge the gap between producers and consumers, being examples of a direct interaction with a living audience and low thresholds for participation.[6]

Literary studies obviously follow these tendencies. They also introduce or reintroduce new stakes, often linked with the notion of the archive and its relationships with cultural heritage,[7] and new forms of book history as a form of material history.[8]

The limits of metafictional reading

This new context forces metafictional criticism to question its tenets and to find new ways to make itself relevant again – a gesture that is, I think, not only possible but necessary, since metafiction remains an important tool in the permanent rediscovery of what makes literature properly literary, even in a historical period where, for good or bad reasons, we do no longer believe in the possibility to establish an "essence" of literature. Metafictional reading should be capable of facing the skeptical reaction of "so what"? A skeptical but always useful reaction, which may bring us back to what is at the heart of the literary matter, namely rhetoric, the verbal as well as extraverbal art, first to raise and maintain interest and second to persuade of a certain point of view.

It may be a good point to start with some reflections on the state of the art, as exemplarily presented in Yaël Schlick's *Metafiction*.[9] This interesting and well-documented overview also reveals a certain number of problems, that can be the starting point of new directions. More concretely, the problems I see are the following ones:

A first problem is the gap between the often very subtle readings and the overgeneralizing lessons or conclusions that are drawn from these efforts. More particularly, some of these lessons prove quite dissatisfying –for instance, the idea that metafiction helps raising the awareness of the fictionality of fiction, thus calling our attention on the dangers of the so-called "referential illusion". Such a lesson is disappointing, not only because of its vagueness, but also because of its misinterpreting what actually happens during the reading of a fictional text, as if our "suspension of disbelief" were the same as the already mentioned "referential illusion". In practice, readers never stop being aware of the fact that they are just reading a fiction, not even in the most immersive of experiences. They only do "as if" fictions were real.[10] A more rewarding outcome of our interest in metafiction would be to supersede the vague and somewhat bloodless statement that when reading fiction we should not forget the fact that we are reading fiction. It should deliver a more precise and inspiring lesson, not on the fact that we are reading fiction, but on the way in which this fiction has been made and how readers can process it. For this reason, metafictionality should be considered a subfield of the larger domain of *metatextuality*, that

is those elements and mechanisms of the text that hint at the structures and properties of the text itself.

A second problematic critical output of traditional metafictionality is the emphasis on the blurring of boundaries between fiction and reality.[11] The problem with this argument is not that it is false, for metafiction definitely explores the tensions between fact and fiction, but that it perpetuates a dichotomy between fact and fiction that is too rigid. There is a part of "fiction" in any form of factuality and vice versa. Besides, recent studies like Jean-Marie Schaeffer's *Les Troubles du récit*,[12] strongly emphasize the need to start disclosing "contact zones" between both, where the reflection on "fact versus fiction" does not depend on metafictional mechanisms but is rooted in deeper and more general cognitive mechanisms of "imagination".

A third problem is the observation that metafiction enables literature to ask philosophical questions. This as well is an obvious fact, which nobody can deny. However, it becomes a problem when it is suggested that starting to ask philosophical questions is something that literary fiction is in need of in order to become really serious or adult. On the one hand, such a claim is, from the point of view of literary fiction, an admission of weakness. We should continue to put clearly and loudly that fiction, even if it is capable of asking serious questions as well, does not depend on that kind of horizon to be worthwhile and rewarding. Fiction for fun, for instance, is no less valuable than "serious", that is philosophically oriented fiction. Moreover, we should never forget the dangers of category mistakes, think of Paul Valéry warning against the confusion between poetry and philosophy ("*To practice philosophy in verse was, and still is, like trying to play chess with the rules of draughts*"; "Philosopher en vers, ce fut, et est encore, vouloir jouer aux échecs selon les règles du jeu de dame.") and inviting philosophy to get inspiration from writing, and not the other way round ("*Advice to writers: The less said, the better. (But this little piece of advice should be heard by philosophers too..)*"; "Conseil à l'écrivain: entre deux mots, il faut choisir le moindre. (Mais que le philosophe entende aussi ce petit conseil)". In other words, there is no need for literature, be it poetry or prose, to take philosophy as its role model.

Fourth and finally, the study of metafiction is also suffering from a more general problem, that of the "usual suspects corpus". The set of examples used to support the theoretical and interpretive claims tends to be quite narrow. The book by Schlick pays great attention to broaden this corpus, and this is one of its many qualities, but I would like to make here a more radical proposal and to open the corpus of metafiction to the domain of *implicit* metafiction, even if I am well aware of the fact that the difference between explicit and implicit is relative. By implicit metafiction I refer to a type of metafiction that is not explicitly signposted by the narrator or the text but that is disclosed by the hermeneutic effort of the reader who is sensible to the metatextual properties of writing. Readers of Georges Perec, for example, are quite familiar with this way of writing, since this author often gives a metatextual twist to much of his fiction in order to guide the reader to layers of the text that do not only build a fiction but subtly disclose most of the constraints that have shaped it.[13] To give an utterly simple example of implicit metafiction, which also shows that implicit is not synonymous of *covert*: the title

of his novel *La Disparition* ("El secuestro") is an implicit reference to a textual void, that of the letter "e", and for some readers any element in this remarkable work can be read in such a metatextual perspective, which is far from being isolated from nonfictional elements ("e" being a homonym in French of "eux", in this case referring to the absence of the author's parents, who were imprisoned and eventually killed by the Nazis).

Some methodological caveats

Before discussing in more detail another and often quoted as well as studied example of metafictionality, it is necessary to formulate a certain number of methodological caveats. After all, reading in a metafictional mode is no longer a self-obvious choice and it is safe to anticipate eventual disapprovals. In this regard, I would like to lay down four questions, which it is important to approach in an order that is not arbitrary.

Question One: in order to launch an implicit metafictional reading, it is imperative to be confronted with a certain type of lack or obstacle. In a text that can be smoothly processed, there may be no need to include such an implicit metafictional dimension, whereas in a text that resists fluent reading or meaningful interpretation, in any way whatsoever, the relevance of moving to another type of reading is at least worth trying. And if this type of reading is supposed to become an implicit metafictional one, there should of course be some more or less readily available elements to encourage the reader to pursue her efforts in that sense.

Let me give an example of this mechanism, which combines the two elements of a *trigger* (there must be something that "forces" the reader to change her way of reading) and a *reward* (there must also be enough material to justify the shift to a metafictional reading).

La Bibliothèque de Villers ("The Library of Villers") by Benoît Peeters[14] is a thrilling detective story, which reclaims the heritage of both Hergé and Agathe Christie. On the one hand, the book is a classical whodunit. On the other hand, the emphasis on a well-built narrative also makes it a real page-turner. Yet at the end of the book, the narrator informs us that he has unraveled the mystery and knows who is the murderer, but the name of this murderer is nowhere revealed, for the narrator suggests that it suffices to reread the story in order to establish the truth. However, many readers have failed to find the name of the culprit, sometimes in spite of repeated readings, while the author has nowhere specified any external "key", in an interview for instance, to solve the mystery. At the same time, however, the text is full of metatextual allusions that, once the reader acknowledges the necessity of reading in an implicit metafictional mode, are clear enough to spell out the name that the narrator refuses to communicate.[15]

Question Two: trigger and reward should be structured in such a way that the implicit metafictional reading exceeds the mere practice of cherry-picking but gives access to a more general or global aspect of the text. In other words: the metafictional principle should not be episodic but systematic; it should not be limited to certain details of certain fragments only. Moreover, the perspective of the metafictional reading should be as precise and specific as

possible and thus go beyond mere general observations on something like fiction versus faction, etc.[16]

In the already quoted example by Benoît Peeters, this is clearly the case. The implicit metafictional mode can be applied to virtually every sentence of the text, while it rapidly appears that all metafictional lessons tend to highlight the basic material and semantic parameters of a given word as well as the fundamental features of the act of reading and writing. Reading *La Bibliothèque de Villers* while ignoring or obfuscating the metafictional dimension is deeply frustrating.

Question Three: If it is necessary to carefully motivate the "beginning" of a metafictional reading, it is also important to know how to "end" it. Indeed, one of the major problems of metafictional reading is that it is difficult to answer the question how and when to stop. In every implicit reading, metafictional or not, there is a real danger of "paranoid" reading,[17] that is a reading that continues endlessly to disclose new secrets behind the explicit as well implicit meanings and structures of the text. Anything can be metafictionalized in a text, and some readers can feel tempted, perhaps even obliged, to do so with a degree of sophistication that may have no boundaries.

This remark raises the more general question of how to define "good" reading. Since there are so many different answers to this question, all of them claiming to be at least as good and convincing as all the other ones (and why not?), it is probably more efficient to address the issue from a different angle, namely by asking what to do with "bad" readings.

Question Four: Is implicit metafictionality a form of "bad" (paranoid, irrelevant, biased, etc.) reading? In *Éloge du mauvais lecteur* ("In Praise of the Bad Reader"),[18] Maxime Decout elaborates an intriguing yet powerful praise of "bad reading". For Decout, bad reading does not mean lazy or sloppy or eccentric misreading, but an explicit attempt to read against the grain, that of the serious, socially and academically accepted and promoted way of reading. Bad reading is therefore not structurally different from good reading: it is active, systematic, original, etc., although not always following the usual paths.

The stubborn focus on implicit intertextuality is a good example of such an inspiration, which is far from being a detail in the history of reading and readers. In certain cases, initially bad readings eventually become well accepted reading strategies, such as the generalized use of "anagrammatic" reading, first discovered by Ferdinand de Saussure in his posthumously debated analyses of Latin poetry,[19] later enthusiastically embraced by the French avant-garde of the 1970s.

From explicit to implicit metafictionality

Let us now turn to the analysis of a full-fledged example, one that is often used as a typical representative of contemporary metafiction, more particularly *historical* and *autofictional* metafiction: the work by W.G. Sebald, whose four major novels, From *Vertigo* to *Austerlitz*, were published in German between 1990 and 2001. In this analysis, I will limit myself to the first

chapter of his first novel, *Vertigo*[20] – a strategically crucial text for it signifies the appearance of the author on the international literary scene –, which I hope will allow me to make a certain number of key points on implicit metafictional reading.

This first chapter is a concise rewriting of Stendhal's autobiographical texts and manuscripts. Chapter 1 of *Vertigo* ("Beyle, or Love is Madness Most Discreet") can be defined as a literary biography. Sebald's text certainly accentuates the impossibility of really knowing the past and the inevitable mix of fact and fiction in human memory, but this observation is not related to the actual writing of the author himself, but to what the text's model, namely Stendhal (pseudonym of Henry Beyle), is itself saying on this point: it is not Sebald who draws our attention to the fact that he is not capable of telling fact from fiction in Beyle's life, but Stendhal/Beyle himself who foregrounds the imaginary dimension of his own life writing. From that point, Sebald's text is only indirectly exemplifying the genre of historical metafiction. To put it more bluntly: what is metafictional here is not Sebald's text, but the historical documents and testimonies that he rewrites (in the third person; in the whole chapter there is only one short mention of a first person pronoun – in the plural). Sebald is thus not playing metafictionally with Stendhal's text, which sets this chapter somewhat apart from the rest of his work, where the metafictional character is systematically taken for granted. And since there are good reasons to consider the Stendhal chapter a strategically positioned piece of writing – a kind of forecasting *mise en abyme* – the first chapter of *Vertigo* encourages the reader to question the generally accepted but perhaps oversimplifying claim that Sebald equals metafiction.

Yet as we all know, there is not just a text, there are also images, and Sebald's fame depends as much on his use of images as on his writing. Here as well the metafictional reading seems to function as a default option: it is widely accepted that Sebald's use of images, more particularly of the word/image combination, is what makes his work a typically metafictional play with fact and fiction. *Vertigo*'s first chapter does however not support such an interpretation. There is nothing in these images that really surprises the reader – except of course the fact of their very presence, still quite unusual in serious fiction in these years –, and there is even less that seems capable of creating a real confusion between fact and fiction: the images are informative as well as illustrative and there is never any tension between what we see and what we read.

However, something very different is happening here, which forces the reader to stay on these images, more precisely on the material aspects of their spatial inclusion in the text. At first sight, the somewhat ghostly or floating status of the images is due to the absence of any caption, but this may be a misleading impression. First of all, captions, even seemingly traditional ones, are not automatically guaranteeing a smooth "anchorage" or "relay" of the visual elements (it suffices to think of what happens in Breton's *Nadja*, which contains powerful "détournements" of the classic caption formula. Second, the images are always placed very closely to the verbal fragment they accompany, which tends to domesticate their virtual multilayeredness. And there are other features that suggest new types of combination of texts and images: just like the texts, the images are "recycled" (they are not original

creations, but existing images rearranged in a new context), and just like the texts, which are borrowed from different genres, the images also belong to different media (engravings, paintings, photographs), one of them being handwritten and self-illustrated manuscripts by Stendhal himself. All these techniques bring words and images even closer together in a way that is no longer that of the conventional "illustrated text" structure.

All these analogies and differences are part of a larger framework, that of the text as one large flow (even if there are once in a while paragraph breaks, but they not really interrupt the verbal flow), while the images systematically appear on other places on the page. This layout principle, very different from what one finds in the two major historical forerunners of photographically illustrated fiction, namely *Bruges-la-Morte* and *Nadja*, highlights the importance of the page, no longer as the formal container of a sequence of lines and paragraphs, sometimes interrupted by images, but as a surface having an internal structure of its own.

This structure seems very simple, but its use is complex. First of all, the justification of the images, which tend to fill the complete breadth of the printed block, tend to present this block as a superposition of horizontal strata, that can be filled by either lines or images. The vertical division of the page is nearly absent, except perhaps in one specific but vital moment, that of the female portrait overwritten by a grid that automatically reminds us of Dürer projection's grid.[21] The consequence of this organization is far-reaching: it invites us to *spatialize* the unfolding of the text, and to superpose the *linear* unfolding of the text as well as the linear alternation of texts and images in a *tabular* way. In a similar vein, it is now possible to read the female portrait no longer as the fictional equivalent of a factual woman – a little bit the way Swann tends to see Odette as the return of Botticelli's *Zephora* –, but as the implicit metafictional marker of specific composition feature: it hints at another way of reading the page (regardless of the content). The grid does not tell us something on the treatment of the female character, it offers a key to a better understanding of how Sebald has approached the surface of the page.

Second, the fact that the images have never the same dimensions, while always appearing at a different place on the page – there are no two similar spreads in this chapter – makes that the underlying horizontal and vertical division of the page becomes even more outspoken: we do no longer see a printed block, we see an implicit structure that can be completed in any possible way, yet always respectful of the fundamental horizontal slicing of the page. These characteristics incline to a visual reading of the page as a kind of *musical score*, that is a surface horizontally divided in equal strings and occupied by various types of visual signs. The comparison with the score – and I insist on the fact that it is a *hermeneutic comparison* – resonates of course with Stendhal's passion for music (and to a lesser extent of painting). At the same time this structure is totally different from Stendhal's own occupation of the writing page in his manuscripts, as one can see in various illustrations. The transformation of the printed block into a score and grid is definitely a creation by Sebald — or his typesetter and designer, for a comparison with some translated versions of the same text demonstrates the importance of typography in the literary communication. This leads us to a second implicit metafictional lesson: the author of a text is a "multiple", an agent combining various functions, not just that

of writer and illustrator, but also typographer and editor/curator, working in the materially expanded field of textual production.[22]

Third, the work on the verbo-visual montage at the level of typography has a great impact on the semiotic status of this material dimension of the work. Even if we still make a distinction between the mechanically reproduced version (*allographic*) and the handwritten manuscript (*autographic*),[23] literature is considered an example of "allography". In the current literary culture it is the text (the words) that has all priority, not the materialized version of it (the handwritten or printed or spoken words). In the case of *Vertigo*, however, one may have the impression that, not at the level of the letter, but at the level of the *page*[24] is becoming autographic: we see the *hand* of the writer/designer, one of the many forms that the collective agent of textual production can take, and its intervention in shaping and composing the pages. To a certain degree, Selbad's novel is autographic, not allographic: the material organization of the page can be compared to what a painter is doing with lines and colors on the canvas, as shown by the resistance of *Vertigo*'s layout to be modified in its translations.

In a famous 1936 essay on Nikolai Leskov, "The Storyteller",[25] Walter Benjamin has argued that literature in print has lost any material or indexical connection with the narrator's embodied presence (a text "loses" the narrator's voice, for instance), and other critics have made similar observations.[26] In an important continuation on the specificity of comics, "Storylines", Jared Gardner made the provocative claim that in the modern context of print culture comics are the only literary form that continues to give access to this physical presence, for the printed version of a comic maintains a direct link with the drawing gesture of the artist.[27] Granted, the collective literary and typographical agent of the book, that is Sebald and his designer, does not "draw" the pages of *Vertigo*, but the specific form of the page layout introduces in the allographic art of the novel an autographic aspect that cannot be overlooked.

As a matter of fact, the implicit metafictional moments in the book refer to in a way that foregrounds the specific materiality of the work. Texts and images, although hardly startling in themselves (Sebald is a "classic" writer), are rearranged into a new totality that redefines our ways of reading. In *Vertigo*, the notion of "print" has once again to be taken in the strong sense of the word, as the result of a material contact between a master form or template and another surface (generally a sheet of paper, but many other forms are possible). Something else emerges, that has to do with the material composition of the work, not with the ontological or referential status of either the text (a biography, not a biofiction) or the images (illustrations). In that sense, the work by Sebald confirms the metatextual orientation of implicit metafiction: no longer a metafiction aiming at raising general questions (on fact versus fiction, on truth, on memory, etc.), but a metafiction or *self-representation* focusing our attention to the partial becoming autographic of an allographic work of art.

Other works by Sebald do not always have the same effect – and it is not even possible to suggest that they actually pursue the same goal. *Austerlitz*, for instance, generally considered the author's masterpiece, does not allow, I would like to argue, to make this type of metafictional reading, while a traditional metafictional reading focusing on fact and fiction, autofiction,

biofiction, and the unreliable character of memory fits this book very well. The opening chapter of *Vertigo* opens other perspectives, directing our attention to the materiality of the work, which we can now further test and explore in other forms of intermedial storytelling.[28]

NOTES

[1] The literature on this topic has become very large, but essential publications are the two special issues of the journal Littérature on "La littérature exposée" , both edited by Olivia Rosenthal and Lionel Ruffel (n° 160, 2010, n° 192, 2018), the collection *La Poésie délivrée*, edited by Stéphane Hirschi, Corinne Legoy, Serge Linarès, Alexandra Saemmer and Alain Vaillant (Paris: PU Paris Nanterre, 2017) and the book by Magali Nachtergael *Poet Against the Machine* (Marseille: Le mot et le reste, 2020). From an institutional point of view, it is vital to add the annual EXTRA festival in the Centre Pompidou in Paris (since 2018).

[2] See Jan Baetens and Eric Trudel, eds, "The Documentary Mode/Rhétoriques du document", special issue of *L'Esprit créateur*, vol. 61, n° 2, 2021.

[3] See the success of a publishing company such as "La Fabrique", trendsetting in this regard. Another example, more directly focusing on writing and aesthetics, is the company "Questions théoriques".

[4] See Heni Jenkins, *Convergence Culture* (New York; NYU Press, 20006) and *Abigail De Kosnik*, Rogue Archives (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press).

[5] See Jan Baetens, *Poetry Performed* (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2021; original French edition 2016) and Vincent Laisney, *En lisant en écoutant* (Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2017).

[6] See the exemplary work of the CiPM in Marseilles and Mac Val in Vitry-sur-Seine.

[7] See the work by the Rimell network (« Recherches Interdisciplinaires sur la Muséographie et l'Exposition de la Littérature et du Livre ») : https://www.litteraturesmodesdemploi.org/presentation-2/

[8] As inspired by the pioneering work of Robert Darnton, Roger Chartier, or Anne-Marie-Christin.

[9] New York: Routledge, 2023.

[10] The recent debate on fake news is, I think, a very different one, whose context and stakes, important as they may be, are not really those of the reading of literary fiction. Fake news is not news presented as fiction, but fiction presented as news, as a way of challenging the very possibility of objectively presenting facts (and truth).

[11] Which by the way will certainly not help us to solve the "fake news" or "post-truth" problem, but this is, once again, a different story.

[12] Paris: éd. Thierry Marchaisse, 2020.

[13] Countless examples of these metatextual procedures in Perec have been disclosed by Bernard Magné , but the literature on Perec and metafictionality has become "oceanic".

[14] Brussels: Espace Nord, 2022 (original edition : 1980).

[15] For more details, see my afterword to the 2020 edition of the novel.

[16] I am following here some general principles defended by Jean Ricardou in his essay "La revolution textuelle", *Esprit* n° 12, 1974, p. 927-945.

[17] See Chris Andrews, "Paranoid Interpretation and Formal Encoding", in *Poetics Today*, vol. 30, issue 4, 2009 ("Constrained Writing (I)"), p. 669-692.

[18] Paris: Minuit, 2021.

[19] Jean Starobinski, *Les Mots sous les mots. Les anagrammes de Ferdinand de Saussure* (Paris: Gallimard, 1971).

[20] I am using here the 2000 paperback translation of New Directions (New York). Typography is key to my analysis, and not all editions follow the same mould.

[21] I believe that it would be an exaggeration to establish here a link with Rosalind Krauss's essay on the grid as the Ur-form of Modernism, which is clearly not Sebald's primary aesthetic or ideological framework.

[22] I am following here the work by Emmanuël Souchier and others on the "énonciation éditoriale", see the special issue of *Communication et langages*, n° 157, 2007.

[23] In the sense coined by Nelson Goodman in his book *Languages of Art* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976).

[24] I am following here the fundamental distinction elaborated by Jean Gérard Lapacherie in "De la grammatextualité", *Poétique* n° 59, 1984, p. 283-294.

[25] For a recent English reprint see Walter Benjamin, *The Storyteller Essays* (New York: New York Review of Books Classics, 2019).

[26] See for instance Alain Vaillant, *L'Histoire littéraire* (Paris: Colin, 2017).

[27] *Substance*, n° 124, 2011, p. 53-69.