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Politics of Remediation: The Renewed Commitment of Contemporary French Literature. Critical Issues and Societal Debates¹

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate several issues related to the renewed social and political commitment of contemporary French literature. The article considers literature's ability to oppose societal normativity as political storytelling through entrusting both individuals and the community with increased acting power, as well as through challenging critics and academics to take part in current debates. Showing that literature can become a tool of individual reconstruction and can recreate social links, or a remedy against various forms of individualism and tendencies towards commodifying the world, the article presents several types of contemporary French works of fiction whose main goals are theorizing, describing, expressing empathy towards those who are confronted with illness, death, exile or terrorism. Several literary works that contest identity or societal labels are added to these, since they help us debate upon and stand up against inequalities or normativity.

Keywords: contemporary French literature, remediation, resilience, ecology, feminism, politics of writing, social issues, terrorism, illness

In the classical age, the fine arts used to be closely linked to moral thinking, proposing examples and counter-examples, raising questions and providing solutions. Truth, beauty and the good were synonyms, and literature contributed directly to the education of young minds, while participating, through its rhetorical devices, in public life. Because they were supposed to convey knowledge, literary works did not differentiate themselves clearly from philosophy or history, and were part of the realm of 'sciences' – the difference of meaning between 'the hard sciences' and 'the humanities' that we use nowadays did not exist before the 1830's.² Astronomical observations could be written in verses, and so could historical chronicles, a way of thinking that culminated with Diderot and d'Alembert's *Encyclopaedia*; at the same time, ancient narratives were sources of positive knowledge, their value being impossible to be dissociated from their rhetorical qualities. Both this moral fecundity and this cognitive utility were put aside for two centuries by the idea of a purely aesthetic, disinterested work of art, before they

¹ Translated from French by Ioana Galleron, with the help of Arleen Ionescu. All translations from French authors are ours if not stated otherwise.

² See Philippe Caron's conclusions to his study *Des 'belles-lettres' à la littérature – Une archéologie des signes de savoir profane en langue française (1680-1760)* (Louvain-Paris: Éditions Peeters, 1992). On the resistance to the movement of autonomization in literature, see José-Louis Diaz, 'L'autonomisation de la littérature (1760-1860)', *Littérature* 124 (December 2001): 7-22.

made a spectacular come back in our contemporary world with its remediation projects and its new literature policies.

Works of art that theorize, describe, build resilience when one is confronted to illness, death, exile or terrorism, works contesting identity or societal labels, those that stand up against inequalities or normativity, on behalf of ecology or feminism, are gathering in our libraries nowadays, inviting us to debate upon and to act about these issues. As numerous invitations to reading and Calls for papers during the COVID-19 pandemics have shown, it is time literature became a remedy, an instrument bringing comfort in these troubled times, a tool helping to heal individual and collective traumas, a counter-power to the neo-liberal world and to the catastrophes which affect our ecosystems.³ The literary posturings of resistance and resilience describe the contemporary geometry of a literature urged to act, able to transform reality and to emancipate human beings, a literature whose literary forms are just a means to an end. Through equipping the individual and the community with increased acting power, through urging critics and academics to take part in current debates, literature could oppose to societal normativity as well as to political storytelling; conceived as a means and as a device in its authors' hands, but also in the hands of all those who read and write, literature tends to become a tool of individual reconstruction and allows us to recreate social links, counteracting contemporary forms of individualism and the commodifying of the world. It is this new public commitment of literature that I would like to describe, looking at the case of French contemporary literature and to the debates it has recently stimulated.

The renewed commitment of contemporary authors, not on the side of ideologies, but on the side of discourse analysis, and that of the work on social inventory, sometimes tied to relational practices aiming at strengthening democracy and at producing new civilities, is clearly marked in France through the stances taken by contemporary writers, as well as in the multiplication of interventionist forms of writing. In his account on literary commitment, which has the merit of re-valorising authors eclipsed by the aesthetical doxa (for instance, Jules Vallès), and the public commitment of writers otherwise known for their aesthetic experimentations (such André Gide), Benoît Denis equated the end of the Cold War in the 1980's with the end of the very notion of commitment.⁴ Conversely, in France, one may be tempted to see in this caesura the moment when authors found themselves free from grand ideological matrices, while nevertheless being confronted with an economic crisis that neither the state nor traditional social structures were capable to respond to. The manner in which the writer is mobilized, implicated,⁵ summoned by the real is a characteristic feature of an era which breaks with the Mallarméan principle of 'restricted action' [*action restreinte*].⁶

³ Mention should be also made of already known and older uses of literature for confronting historical traumas; see on this topic, amongst many other titles of a rich bibliography on critical trauma studies, Annette Wieviorka, *L'Ère du témoin* (Paris: Plon, 1998), Anne Whitehead, *Trauma Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004), Dominick LaCapra, *Writing History, Writing Trauma* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁴ Benoît Denis, *Littérature et engagement: de Pascal à Sartre* (Paris: Seuil, 2000), esp. the last chapter.

⁵ Translator's note: in French, *impliqué*. For the use of this term, see Dominique Viart, 'Terrains de la littérature', in *ELFe XX-XXI*, special issue: 'Extension du domaine de la littérature', 8 (2019); available at <http://journals.openedition.org/elfe/1136> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁶ See Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Restricted Action', in *Divagations* [orig. 1897], trans. Barbara Johnson (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 215-19.

‘Your act is always applied to paper’ [*Ton acte toujours s’applique à du papier*],⁷ insisted the author of *Un coup de dés* and, if, with some notable exceptions such as that of the Invisible Committee, a small neo-situationist group of the extreme left, part of the ‘zadist’ movement⁸ that promotes the revolutionary romanticism of another time,⁹ the writer does not get involved in struggles, henceforth, he/she perceives his/her work as a performative device that influences the construction of social reality as a hermeneutical game which is centred on the text and its enigma. It is his/ her contemporary way to go on believing in social progress through literature.

In such a context, the literary work is no longer a remote description of reality, but rather a form of unveiling, following Sartre’s assignment, expressed in well-known formulas: ‘The “committed” writer knows that words are action. He knows that to unveil is to change and that one can unveil only by planning to change.’¹⁰ Literary writing becomes thus an endeavour to pursue critical analysis and to re-elaborate on the notion of reality. To take some French examples, neo-realistic novelists¹¹ such as Michel Houellebecq or Aurélien Bellanger aim to write the chronicle of or to draw the map of the profound anxieties that affected France during the last decades; these are related to the economic crisis, symbolical rejection or cultural insecurity. ‘I want to account for the world... I simply want *to account for the world*’,¹² insists the protagonist of *The Map and the Territory* by Michel Houellebecq, a writer whose policy is to enlarge upon the negative side of contemporary experience, to express the uneasiness of the white male, to reproduce the discourse of populist ideologues, as if readers have to be rid of it in a cathartic manner.

These pessimist realists lie diametrically opposite to writers who seek more directly to counteract nationalist discourses through deconstructing, often via polyphonic works, various forms of French identity, seen as various forms of domination. In these cases, counter-narratives are used intentionally,¹³ and the diffracted identity is rebuilt in a welcome speech, open to multiculturalism, or at least to values of hospitality whose importance is underlined by writers such as Marie Cosnay.¹⁴ Other examples may include: *Le Ventre de l’Atlantique* (2003) by Fatou Diome, *Eldorado* (2006) by Laurent Gaudé, *Douce France* (2007) by Karine Tuil, describing the life of an illegal Romanian immigrant woman in a detention centre, *Trois femmes puissantes* (2009) by Marie Ndiaye, *Lampedusa* (2012), *Indétectable* (2014) by Jean-Noël Pancrazi

⁷ Mallarmé, ‘Restricted Action’, 216.

⁸ Translator’s note: ZAD is a recent French acronym for *zone à défendre*, meaning ‘zone to be defended’. In the last decades, it has been popularized by the strong opposition of a community to the implantation of a new airport in Nantes area.

⁹ See my essay on this topic, “‘L’insurrection qui vient’: de quelques manières contemporaines de rêver au Grand Soir”, *Publif@rum*, forthcoming, 2020.

¹⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, ‘What is Literature?’, trans. Bernard Frechtman, in *What is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 37; translation slightly modified.

¹¹ See Christy Wampole, *Degenerative Realism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020). I do not share all the conclusions of the book, especially those articulated around the ‘degenerative’ concept.

¹² Michel Houellebecq, *La Carte et le Territoire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2010), 420, original emphasis.

¹³ See Raphaëlle Guidée, ‘Le gentil récit littéraire et le grand méchant storytelling: anatomie d’un conte contemporain’; available at

https://www.academia.edu/36858528/Le_gentil_r%C3%A9cit_litt%C3%A9raire_et_le_grand_m%C3%A9chant_storytelling_anatomie_d_un conte_contemporain [accessed 8 September 2020], initially published as ‘Littérature contre storytelling avant l’ère néolibérale’, in *Raison publique*, eds. Danielle Perrot-Corpet, and Judith Sarfati-Lanter, June 2018 (archived).

¹⁴ See Marie Cosnay, and Mathieu Potte-Bonneville, *Voir venir: écrire l’hospitalité* (Paris: Stock, 2019).

or *L'Art de perdre* (2017) by Alice Zeniter, *Frères migrants* (2017) by Patrick Chamoiseau, *La Mer à l'envers* (2019) by Marie Darieussecq. All these novels pose the question of immigration; they remind us about colonial crimes and they bring to light contemporary societal tensions, with the scope of warding off the dangers of an identity conceived as an eternal essence, and of bringing to the fore, thanks to literature, another French identity, made of a republican humanism embodied by the example of Ernest Renan, and expressed nowadays by Édouard Glissant: 'the nation is reconsidered by literature as being visible and invisible at the same time. All the great literary works of the nation handled the passage to Relation with care.'¹⁵

This revival of public commitment asks for a representation of reality which is both ambitious and precise, irrespective of the literary tools which the writer chooses in order to give us an account of the world: the neorealist novel, the 'collective autobiography' practiced by Annie Ernaux, who intends to rediscover 'the memory of collective memory in an individual memory, [and] to render a lived dimension of History',¹⁶ the polyphonic literature of voices or documentary exploration. In all these cases, the goal is to reshuffle the cards and to rethink the very idea of France at the time of globalization. This involves tempering with and questioning all cultural evidences, either through the cartography of a territory surveyed by boat or on foot by Jean-Christophe Bailly,¹⁷ Sylvain Tesson¹⁸ or Pierre Patrolin,¹⁹ through the sociological or ethnographic approach adopted by Aurélien Bellanger²⁰ or Éric Chauvier,²¹ or through the historical frescoes of Hédi Kaddour,²² Alexis Jenni²³ or Alice Zeniter.²⁴ It is true that some writers, such as Pierre Guyotat²⁵ or, more recently, Nathalie Quintane²⁶ continue to adhere to the Barthesian project of a political experimentation with form,²⁷ but, on the whole, the tendency is rather to return to larger tableaux, to panoramas, to 'long histories' and to grand narratives.

The political dimension of these inventories is all the more evident as the questioning of social, economic, sexual and even environmental inequalities becomes central in these works. Looking at what the novels written by Michel Houellebecq, Éric Vuillard, Leïla Slimani or Nicolas Mathieu have in common, one is forced to answer that all these writers who have received the Goncourt Award in the recent years are

¹⁵ Danielle Perrot-Corpet, and Lise Gauvin (eds.), *La Nation nommée Roman: face aux histoires nationales* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2011), 36.

¹⁶ Annie Ernaux, *Les Années* (Paris: Gallimard, 2008), 56.

¹⁷ Jean-Christophe Bailly, *Le Dépaysement: voyages en France* (Paris: Seuil, 2011).

¹⁸ Sylvain Tesson, *Sur les chemins noirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 2016).

¹⁹ Pierre Patrolin, *La Traversée de la France à la nage* (Paris: P.O.L., 2012).

²⁰ Aurélien Bellanger, *L'Aménagement du territoire* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), or *Le Grand Paris* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017).

²¹ Éric Chauvier, *Anthropologie* (Paris: Allia, 2006).

²² Hédi Kaddour, *Waltenberg* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005).

²³ Alexis Jenni, *L'Art français de la guerre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2011).

²⁴ Alice Zeniter, *L'Art de perdre* (Paris: Flammarion, 2017).

²⁵ About this heritage, see my paper 'Responsabilités de la forme. Voies et détours de l'engagement littéraire contemporain', in *L'Engagement littéraire*, ed. Emmanuel Bouju (Rennes: PUR, 2005), 75-84.

²⁶ Julien Lefort-Favreau speaks about a 'politics of textualism' in 'D'Éden, Éden, Éden à Littérature interdite. Pierre Guyotat et les politiques du textualisme', *Figura* 35 (2014); available at http://oic.uqam.ca/fr/system/files/garde/59218/documents/politiques_de_la_litterature_08a.pdf [accessed 20 August 2020].

²⁷ See Justine Huppe, 'L'insurrection qui vient par la forme. Politique des styles chez Nathalie Quintane', *COntEXTES* 22 (2019); available at <https://journals.openedition.org/contextes/6975> [accessed 20 August 2020].

thinkers of contemporary social inequalities. The same stands for those, such as Philippe Vasset²⁸ or Virginie Despentes,²⁹ who give a voice to the invisible and the rejected: homeless people, office employees, commuters. Fictional novels dramatize and analyse a tensed economic world. Without any *a priori* moral judgement and, as it were, level with man, Karine Tuil³⁰ or Éric Reinhardt³¹ scrutinize the mechanics of labour in a managerial era, environmental crises, territorial vulnerabilities and the dependencies produced by our globalized economies. In the 19th and the 20th centuries, the novel of the democratic era served various emancipatory struggles; devoid of any doctrine and without any great solutions to offer, contemporary literature nonetheless carries on with this role of unveiling and alerting, by scripting the new power struggles and the new class struggles brought about by liberalism.

Engaged in an endeavour of sensitizing and educating by means of the modern vocabulary of inequality, conducting an analysis of the lower classes which have undergone transformations since Western de-industrialization, these writers aim at endowing their readers with an appropriate heuristics; their work is in close connection with the realities described, involving the very person of the narrator in an empathetic transfer that privileges the micro-analysis to the detriment of an exhaustive narration, and the emotion over theory. The keywords are thus to render reality closely, to propose a description that is analogue to the one practiced by anthropologists who pay an infinite attention to ordinary practices. Whether they pertain to the category of ‘non-fiction’ or adopt a form of empathetic writing, the immense wave of remembrance narratives, the craze for ‘biographical fictions’,³² the passion for surveys³³ inspired by Carlo Ginzburg’s micro-history, narrative sociology, ethno-methodology or sociology,³⁴ as well as the revival of autobiographies and diaries, they all promote forms of attention to realities of life. Their political scope must not be underestimated, since they defend such a variety of lives paths, as well as original manners of relating to others, through associative or metaphorical projections.

Refusing to look down on people or to pretend to cover everything,³⁵ these writings that pay a keen attention to concrete details practice a democratic, not to say a ‘communist’ politics, by manifesting a universal care for the other. The point is to ‘institute new forms of symbolization in order to *act* politically’ and ‘to disturb the symbolic order’,³⁶ or, as Maria Kakogianni and Camille Louis, two of the authors of the

²⁸ Notably Philippe Vasset, *Un livre blanc* (Paris: Fayard, 2007).

²⁹ Virginie Despentes, *Vernon Subutex* (Paris: Grasset, 2015). Translator’s note: *Subutex* is the name of a substitution medicine for treating substance abuse.

³⁰ See for instance Karine Tuil, *La Domination* (Paris: Grasset, 2008).

³¹ Notably in Éric Reinhardt, *Le Système Victoria* (Paris: Stock, 2011).

³² See my essay *Inventer une vie: la fabrique littéraire de l’individu* (Bruxelles: Les impressions nouvelles, 2015).

³³ See Marie-Jeanne Zenetti, *Factographies: l’enregistrement littéraire à l’époque contemporaine* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2014) and Laurent Demanze, *Un nouvel âge de l’enquête* (Paris: José Corti, 2019).

³⁴ One can mention here the surveys by Ivan Jablonka, conducted in *Laëtitia ou la Fin des hommes* (Paris: Seuil, 2016), by Philippe Artières, *Vie et mort de Paul Gény* (Paris: Seuil, 2013) or, more recently, Didier Fassin, *Mort d’un voyageur: une contre-enquête* (Paris: Seuil, 2020).

³⁵ I follow here the excellent analysis by Morgane Kieffer, ‘La possibilité du monde: fictions critiques et réalisme adressé dans le contemporain français’, *RELIEF — Revue électronique de littérature française* 13.1 (2019): 13-27; available at <https://www.revue-relief.org/articles/abstract/10.18352/relief.1029/> [accessed 20 August 2020].

³⁶ Maria Kakogianni, and Camille Louis, ‘Diction des places / places des fictions. Place Syntagma, Athènes’, in Collectif Inculte, *Le Livre des places* (Paris: Éditions Inculte, 2018), 156.

Livre des places,³⁷ claim, to criticize the dominant forms of storytelling and to inaugurate a controlled vocabulary in order to serve an ‘improper people’.³⁸ Taking another example from a very different cultural field, one may draw a parallel with Arundhati Roy’s works, whose political power is based on her writing manner, focused on discrimination and paying attention to the ‘lesser existences’,³⁹ to ‘small things’ that ‘insist on being narrated’.⁴⁰ The choice of a detailed description of minute life is not antagonistic with the inscription in larger frameworks and debates, such as the class struggles, the environmental feminism, etc.⁴¹ Thus, colonial fights are mixed with what the South-African writer Njabulo S. Ndebele calls a ‘rediscovery of the ordinary’.⁴²

The same texts pay an equal attention to communities. The other side of this political turn is represented by a new type of literary sociability, with its convivial⁴³ and relational practices. Beyond the contemporary writers’ commitment, well described by critics, beyond their ‘field work’ inspired by social sciences and, therefore, closer to ‘case study, “acquaintance with” and “qualitative sociology” more than to “knowledge about,”’⁴⁴ one needs to consider the large array of interactive social practices, often close to social interventions, that promote transfer of experiences, a collective or shared reflexivity in reading or writing workshops, carried out by writers who sometimes take up residence and invest in a specific place (prisons, old people’s homes, schools, shelters for the unemployed, etc.) – I’ll return to this later on. One recognizes here Wittgenstein’s influence, as well as John Dewey’s political and social approach to art, in his foundational text *Art as Experience*, dated 1915, and, thus, exactly contemporaneous with utopias and avant-gardes that looked for rebuilding social practices on an artistic basis. Both are opposed therefore to the ‘aesthetics issued from Kant, or even from Hegel’, ‘with a view to uprooting their shared presuppositions and, in a way, to put paid to the *very notion* of aesthetics’,⁴⁵ and refuse a ‘separated art, dedicated to its own cult, which would carry away with itself class oppositions and antidemocratic forms of discrimination.’⁴⁶

According to Richard Shusterman, ‘[t]he historicists point to the fact that our current concepts of fine art and aesthetic experience did not really begin to take definite shape until the eighteenth century and achieved their present “autonomous” form only

³⁷ *Le Livre des places* is a collection of literary surveys about citizens’ mobilization during the 21st century.

³⁸ Kakogianni and Louis, ‘Dictions des places’, 139.

³⁹ I use here the elegant phrase coined by David Lapoujade when writing about Souriau’s aesthetic philosophy: *Les Existences moindres* (Paris: Minuit, 2017).

⁴⁰ Quoted by Claire Gallien, ‘Arundhati Roy, ou l’engagement du littéraire’, *La Vie des idées*, 3 January 2020; available at <https://laviedesidees.fr/Arundhati-Roy-ou-l-engagement-du-litteraire.html> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁴¹ See Ranjan Gosh, and Antonia Navarro Tejero (eds.), *Globalizing Dissent: Essays on Arundhati Roy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁴² Njabulo S. Ndebele, ‘The Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Some New Writings in South Africa’, *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12.2 (April 1986): 143-57.

⁴³ The term belongs to Shannon Jackson in *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁴ Dominique Viart, ‘Les Littératures de terrain’, *Revue Critique de Fxixion Française Contemporaine* 18 (2019); available at <http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx18.20/1339> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁴⁵ Jean-Pierre Cometti, ‘Politiques de l’art’, in *Après ‘L’Art comme expérience’: esthétique et politique aujourd’hui à la lumière de John Dewey*, eds. Jean-Pierre Cometti, and Giovanni Matteucci (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2017), 203, original italics.

⁴⁶ Cometti, ‘Politiques de l’art’, 203.

through social developments of the nineteenth century that culminated in the notion of “art for art’s sake”.⁴⁷ Taking into consideration the relative and historical dimension of art, this influent pragmatist promotes the so-called ‘somaesthetics,’ an aesthetic experience considered in its relation to the body and inscribed in the ordinary behaviours as an ‘experiential’ process.⁴⁸ Abandoning the ‘modernity’s compartmentalizing ideology,’⁴⁹ that ends in separating art and life, and in rendering art as ‘its own subject,’⁵⁰ the idea is to revalorize popular art and individual expressions articulated around the notion of ‘art of living.’⁵¹ Rejecting the very idea of ‘œuvre,’ making and making together become as important as the result, while artistic production appears as an ordinary way of living.⁵² These ‘targeted’ [*adressées*]⁵³ politics of proximity, often leading to works that prove to be less descriptive than relational, interactive and performative, are well-identified in the Anglo-Saxon art field as forms of local politics of inclusiveness.⁵⁴ They propose a large array of pedagogical and creative activities, valorising individual and communal knowledge for their capacity to produce inhabitable worlds.⁵⁵ The genealogy of these practices is still to be written: while inviting to ‘consider the literature not as a thesaurus of “texts”, but as a series of “activities”’,⁵⁶ Jérôme Meizoz reminds us of the major role of orality during the 19th century, as well as the case of the shows of ‘boxer-poet’ Arthur Cravan in 1913. Patrick Boucheron goes back to the ‘interactive’ fiction of Boccaccio’s *Decameron* in order to reflect upon politics today in connection with the notion of experience.⁵⁷ One might equally recall that the genre that came back in fashion with the slam of the poetic ‘battle’⁵⁸ finds its origins in the ‘flying’ practice dating back to the 5th century⁵⁹...

⁴⁷ Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives for the Ends of Art* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), 5-6.

⁴⁸ Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 152. Starting from the familiar term of neurophysiology, Shusterman proposes that ‘[s]omaesthetics can be provisionally defined as the critical meliorative study of one’s experience and use of one’s body as a locus of sensoryaesthetic appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning. It is therefore also devoted to the knowledge, discourses, and disciplines that structure such somatic care or can improve it.’ Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 19.

⁴⁹ Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 7.

⁵⁰ Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 6.

⁵¹ Shusterman, *Performing Live*, 7.

⁵² See for instance the anti-aesthetic petition of the conference ‘Trésors de l’œuvrement: la pratique artistique comme mode de vie et manière de réfléchir le monde’; available at https://www.fabula.org/actualites/tresors-de-l-oeuvrement-la-pratique-artistique-comme-mode-de-vie-et-maniere-de-reflechir-le-monde_91642.php [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁵³ I borrow the expression from Morgane Kieffer’s ‘La Possibilité du Monde’, *passim*.

⁵⁴ See Adam Michael Krause, *Art as Politics: The Future of Art and Community* (Porsgrunn: New Compass Press, 2018); Alice Fox, and Hannah MacPherson, *Inclusive Arts, Practice and Research: A Critical Manifesto* (New York: Routledge, 2015), or Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁵⁵ See the works by anthropologist Tim Ingold, especially his book *Making Anthropology: Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁶ Jérôme Meizoz, ‘Extensions du domaine de la littérature’, *AOC*, 16 March 2018; available at <https://aoc.media/critique/2018/03/16/extensions-domaine-de-litterature/> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁵⁷ Patrick Boucheron, ‘Les inventions du politique’, 2018-2019 seminar; available at <https://www.college-de-france.fr/site/patrick-boucheron/course-2018-2019.htm> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁵⁸ See the Call for Papers for *Itinéraires. Littérature, textes, cultures* 2 (2020): ‘Le rap, une poésie de performances’; available at https://www.fabula.org/actualites/le-rap-une-poesie-de-performancesappel-contribution-pour-le-numero-2020-2-de-la-revue-itineraires_90399.php [accessed 20 August 2020].

In the contemporary field, these varied practices are equally identified in relation to the ‘post-dramatic’⁶⁰ theatre which is conceived as a collaborative project with a social mission and as a space where innumerable interactional experiences can invent themselves.⁶¹ Better understood in Europe, notably thanks to Rita Felski’s work on the social uses of literature, and especially on narrative medicine,⁶² they are less known in France, in spite of the magnificent examples given in the work of François Bon, whose handbook for workshops of creative writing, *Tous les mots sont adultes*, is a reference book when organizing such meetings in prisons or factories. Another example is the work of Mathieu Simonet, who promotes various collaborative projects, whose ‘collective autobiography’ makes notebooks written by patients who narrate their adolescence circulate through hospitals.⁶³ Poets like Christophe Hanna or Franck Leibovici have attempted to recreate ‘poeticity’ in performances, ‘collage’ practices or documentaries adopting an ‘operationalist approach’⁶⁴ by creating a public discourse rather than praising a private language. For Jean-Pierre Cometti, ‘[t]he major benefit of an attention to devices and displacements, or to the recontextualizations they involve, is to defuse the presumed *autonomy* and *autotelia* of the poetic text, by showing how the contributing factors fed on the presuppositions of a subjectivist aesthetics as much as on the elevation to the rank of criteria of reputedly intrinsic properties which merely recapitulate a set of features inherited from the previous uses.’⁶⁵

Breaking with the principle that art should not ‘make anything happen’,⁶⁶ the influence of philosophies of ordinary language is visible in these approaches that hold back the importance of the ‘perlocutionary’ force of action and language; they are sensitive to the ‘tactical’ dimension of language, as Michel Foucault called it,⁶⁷ even if Stanley Cavell’s sceptical lesson draws our attention on how it exposes our vulnerability.⁶⁸ This trend sees literature as a place where the influence of language games is rendered visible, where the inaccessibility of the ego is underlined, where the illusions of reflexivity are defused. Against a romantic reading, promoting the idealism of representation and the transparency of art as an expression of the self, the Proustian

⁵⁹ See Ward Parks, ‘Flying, Sounding, Debate: Three Verbal Contest Genres’, *Poetics Today* 7.3 (1986): 439-58.

⁶⁰ The term is notably used by Hans-Ties Lhemann in *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. and Intro. Karen Jürs-Mungby (London and New York: Routledge, 2006 [1999]).

⁶¹ Jackson, *Social Works*, *passim*. See also Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso, 2012).

⁶² Rita Felski, *Uses of Literature: The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015), as well as the project of the Danish Centre ‘Uses of Literature: The Social Dimensions of Literature’, Department for the Study of Culture University of Southern Denmark, 21.11.2018; available at https://www.sdu.dk/en/om_sdu/institutter_centre/c_uol [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁶³ Pascal Santi, ‘Mathieu Simonet, avocat de l’écriture à l’hôpital’, *Le Monde*, 4 December 2014; available at https://www.lemonde.fr/sciences/article/2014/12/08/mathieu-simonet-avocat-de-l-ecriture-a-l-hopital_4536801_1650684.html [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁶⁴ Olivier Quintyn, *Implémentations/implantations: pragmatisme et théorie critique. Essais sur l’art et la philosophie de l’art* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2017), 8.

⁶⁵ Jean-Pierre Cometti, ‘Foreword’ to Christophe Hanna, *Nos dispositifs poétiques* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2012), II.

⁶⁶ Arthur Danto, *The Philosophical Disfranchisement of Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 6.

⁶⁷ Michel Foucault, ‘Le discours ne doit pas être pris comme...’, in *Dits et écrits II, 1976-1988* (Paris: Gallimard, 2001), 123.

⁶⁸ See Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

novel questions and problematizes the very notion of a common language, according to Vincent Descombes. This is how one can go beyond the ‘aesthetic reading’, in other words the ‘interpretation motivated by personal pleasure,’ thanks to a philosophical reading⁶⁹ that takes stock of the ‘speculative dimension’⁷⁰ of the novel.

Either directly performative or simply politically sensitive because they are institutive and foundational, these writings mobilize a literary ethics of attention and of reparation that involve a politics of recognition, happy to be at the service of communities, as well as that of their disqualified lifestyles and of an active struggle against forms of domination. They promote an extended art of existing which is often accompanied by a certain radicality. Seen as inclusive by Dewey,⁷¹ whose classification already attempted to challenge the opposition between gratuitous and elitist arts of the free classes, and the practical arts of the servile classes, the performing arts act willingly as operators of cultural identities capable of expressing thinking through differences – cf. for instance the feminist or *trans* dimension of numerous performances in which the body is directly involved.⁷²

When they started to spread in the literary field, at first through the medium of theatre performances, these re-politized approaches aroused controversy. Two non-compositional paradigms collided, in the United States of America, for instance, leading to a ‘war’⁷³ between textual and cultural studies, opposing an elitist tradition to the rehabilitation of mass culture, and the dream of universality to the fear of instrumentalization. In France, this double bending towards performativity, and a public engagement in favour of particular communities and causes, scared the supporters of a literature conceived as abstract and universal, detached of any mundane needs. Isabelle Barbéris feels uneasy that the sublimation power might disappear with political art, and considers that the ‘destruction of representation’⁷⁴ in performance cannot be dissociated from the emergence of a victimization culture, centred on identities and communities. One cannot but doubly disagree with such assertions: if one becomes more sensitive to the reception and to the effect of representations on the public, to the detriment of concentrating on their production processes or their ontology, this does not mean that they are not complex models of the world. Also, even if writers embrace causes and defend political positions, this does not necessarily mean that they essentialize them. This may be the case of some contemporary art⁷⁵ and of certain theatrical performances, which are carried away by a specific need to militate,⁷⁶ but the major part of contemporary literature proposes ironic, polyphonic, deeply analytical representations, based on tight casuistry, including when they reactivate the old rhetorical functions of

⁶⁹ Vincent Descombes, *Proust: philosophie du roman* (Paris: Minuit, 1987), 10.

⁷⁰ Descombes, *Proust: philosophie du roman*, 12.

⁷¹ See Roberta Dreon, *Sortir de la tour d’ivoire: l’esthétique inclusive de John Dewey aujourd’hui* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2017).

⁷² See, for instance, Anne-Julie Ausina, ‘La performance comme force de combat dans le féminisme’, *Recherches féministes* 27.2 (2014): 81-96.

⁷³ Rita Felski, ‘The Role of Aesthetics in Cultural Studies’, in *The Aesthetics of Cultural Studies*, ed. Michael Bérubé (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 28, and *Beyond Feminism Aesthetic* (Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1989).

⁷⁴ Isabelle Barbéris, *L’Art du politiquement correct: sur le nouvel académisme anti-culturel* (Paris: PUF, 2019), *passim*.

⁷⁵ Carole Talon-Hugon, *L’Art sous contrôle: nouvel agenda sociétal et censures* (Paris: PUF, 2019), 133. Here the author denounces a potential ‘balkanization of culture.’

⁷⁶ See Olivier Neveux’s reflections in *Contre le théâtre politique* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2019). In spite of the title, the book promotes new forms of public engagement for the contemporary theatre.

demonstrating, refuting and denouncing, to the point that they become exposed to the juridical risks these acts may involve. In this respect, one may think of the societal agenda of *MeToo*, which triggered many a narrative highly refined and dense. The reflexive testimony by Vanessa Springora,⁷⁷ entitled *Le Consentement*, as well as the already classic novel by Karine Tuil, *Les Choses humaines*,⁷⁸ are thus capable of reproducing the opacity of an experience, the intertwining of the powers of the dominant and the dominated as well as the sometimes-inextricable conflict of values characterizing an unequal sexual relationship. Their demonstrative scope does not stand in opposition to the staging of the chiaroscuro nature of situations and feelings; the transparency of hearts is not incompatible with the opacity of behaviours.

To these stories of sexual violence, largely based on the traumatic experiences of their authors, one may add many other examples, more radical: a naturalistic story by Édouard Louis,⁷⁹ a *roman à clé* by Christine Angot,⁸⁰ *Fuck me*, a punk road-movie by Virginie Despentes, etc. In all these cases, the value of the texts comes from the fact they feed both on their authors' psychological experiences and on the social discourses in which the readers are immersed, creating a form of situated knowledge which is the way literature acts. It is seemingly the specificity of the literary know-how insofar as it is valorised by our contemporary societies: to become the means of extracting exemplary schemas and of decrypting motifs while embodying them in particular characters and situations, and to set up a new semantics in order to encourage the transformation of the world without denying its complexity or the pluralism of points of view.⁸¹ The 2015 attacks⁸² or the COVID-19 pandemics triggered instantly a recourse to literature: we witnessed the immediate appearance of the genre 'confinement diary',⁸³ and alternative forms of mourning,⁸⁴ and we repeatedly heard the recommendation to read in order to be able to carry on.⁸⁵ All these examples are the sign that literature has become nowadays the action mode by default when all other political or societal responses proved inefficient.

Irrespective of the theoretical frameworks through which it may be conceived – the political categories of pragmatism⁸⁶ or the notion of performativity,⁸⁷ the psychologies or the mystiques of reparation, anthropology or the naturalizing discourse

⁷⁷ Vanessa Springora, *Le Consentement* (Paris: Grasset, 2020).

⁷⁸ Karine Tuil, *Les Choses humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 2019).

⁷⁹ Édouard Louis, *Histoire de la violence* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

⁸⁰ Christine Angot, *L'Inceste* (Paris, Stock, 2009); *Une semaine de vacances* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012).

⁸¹ On this question, from a historical point of view, see Vincent Message, *Romanciers pluralistes* (Paris: Seuil, 2013).

⁸² See my paper 'Liens humains, liens textuels. Les écritures des attentats de 2015 en France', in *Le Pouvoir des liens faibles*, eds. Alexandre Gefen, and Sandra Laugier (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2019).

⁸³ One can mention the radio program *Livres & vous* by Guillaume Erner, France Culture; available at <https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/livres-vous-le-podcast/coronavirus-la-litterature-au-defi-de-la-crise-sanitaire> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁸⁴ See the Belgian blog initiative *Fleurs de funérailles – Gedichtenkrans*; available at <http://www.poetenational.be/fleurs-de-funerailles/> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁸⁵ See Marie Telling, 'Ce que la littérature peut nous apprendre sur les épidémies', *Slate.fr*, 15 April 2020; available at <http://www.slate.fr/story/189363/coronavirus-epidemie-litterature-enseignement-camus-london-shelley-king-thucyde> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁸⁶ See the works of Florent Coste, *Explore: investigations littéraires* (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2019), and the already quoted book by Cometti and Matteucci, *Après 'L'Art comme expérience'*.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Culler, 'Philosophie et littérature: les fortunes du performatif', *Littérature* 144 (2006/4): 81-100; available at <https://www.cairn.info/revue-litterature-2006-4-page-81.htm> [accessed 20 August 2020].

of cognitive sciences – this model of reading art, which is all at once effective, emancipatory and inclusive as a principle, is dominant nowadays. Rejecting the artificial mediation of the feel-good books, these new uses of literature affect even the forms of writing that keep themselves at a distance from the reality, such as the “escapist” genres of the fantasy and the science-fiction. Precisely because they are so distant, they can be understood as attempts to model alternative worlds, utopic or dystopic, desirable or terrifying. In 2019, Léonora Miano, for instance, imagined in *Rouge impératrice*⁸⁸ a world in which Africa dominates the Western countries, while Laurent Binet proposed, in *Civilizations*,⁸⁹ a world in which Christopher Columbus would not have discovered America. The critical appraisal of popular books pursuing narrative agendas seemingly detached from any current topic all tend towards flagging up their hidden social and anthropological role, and especially their role, still decisive according to sociologists, in promoting and spreading new issues and values, for instance among a female readership. Such is the case with Thomas Pavel, who throws a diachronic light upon how the novel always stages contemporary axiological conflicts,⁹⁰ or in the most recent synchronic work by Eva Illouz on the *Fifty Shades of Grey* series,⁹¹ as well as in the readings of Balzac by Thomas Piketty who, faithful to Marx’s example, draws from novels in order to analyse inequalities: fictions ‘grasp the secret borders [of inequalities], know about their merciless consequences upon the lives of these men and women, their strategic alliances, their hopes and their misfortunes. They follow up their implications and depict them in truthful ways and with an evocative power that no statistics, no scholarly analysis could rival with.’⁹² The novel appears therefore as having not only the power to reflect, but also to inform and to reconstruct social realities.

Even in the literary works that steer clear of any relation to the real, actualized or potential, and defending an adventure in language, through language and for language, or the poetic or ironic contemplation of semantically distant realities, our contemporary societies underline psychological effects and what is at stake in fictions, perhaps because, in times of crisis, they have lost the gratuitousness necessary to aesthetic suspension. Let us consider the case of the novelists publishing with the Minuit Publishing House, and in particular that of Éric Chevillard or Pierre Senges, a major storyteller. Critics are either sensitive to their way of looking at the world sideways, or their playful writings are invested with the power and the role to offer a necessary escape, an alternative, or a retreat; in the same line of thought, Jean-Philippe Toussaint is seen as a thinker of globalization, while Jean Echenoz is considered a historian of the 20th century. Far from constituting a form of regression, these writings are deemed highly useful, because they complexify perspective, they allow a change of setting, they militate for the right to escape, the need to slow down⁹³ and to be absent to the world,⁹⁴

⁸⁸ Léonora Miano, *Rouge impératrice* (Paris: Grasset, 2019).

⁸⁹ Laurent Binet, *Civilizations* (Paris: Grasset, 2019).

⁹⁰ Thomas Pavel, *La Pensée du roman* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

⁹¹ Eva Illouz, *Hard Core Romance: ‘Fifty Shades of Grey’, Best-sellers, and Society* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

⁹² Thomas Piketty, *Le Capital au XXI^e siècle* (Paris: Seuil, 2013), 17.

⁹³ This very contemporary desire is described in Laurent Vidal, *Les Hommes lents: résister à la modernité, XV^e-XX^e siècles* (Paris: Flammarion, 2020). See also Hartmut Rosa, *Beschleunigung. Die Veränderung der Zeitstrukturen in der Moderne* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2012 [2005]).

⁹⁴ See Pierre Zaoui, *La Discretion, ou l’Art de disparaître* (Paris: Autrement, 2013), or Dominique Rabaté, *Désir de disparaître* (Québec: Tangence, 2016).

responding thus to a literary mission. Literature has in these cases a regulatory or even therapeutic role, and its value comes as much from this lack of productivity as from the appeals to act it launches otherwise.

Most certainly, theoretical analyses do not always converge in exposing this common denominator. Similar to writing manners, critical approaches are rooted in very different traditions. For Nelly Wolf, the modern novel is a ‘mimesis of the social contract, the one founding modern democracy’,⁹⁵ and therefore functions as a kind of simulator through which the reader experiments democratic postures and reflexes. This is different from Louise Rosenblatt’s approach, who sees literature as a reservoir of potential human experiences capable to foster an opening to the world, a willingness to meet the other and the emancipation of the individuals. For Jacques Rancière, the aesthetic proposition is essential, because its freedom reminds us that what makes sense can be reconfigured, as shown by the various descriptive formulas tested by literature, which prove to be in the meantime of equal validity and yet contradictory. Such a perspective has nothing to do with the pedagogical vision of literature as an empowerment of the reader through an affective learning, proposed by the neo-humanist Martha Nussbaum, whose theoretical framework is that of the American liberalism spanning from John Stuart Mill to John Rawls, having at its core the freedom of the individual and being interested in the juridical, legal and constitutional conditions for exercising this autonomy. In such a context, Martha Nussbaum underlines how the novel acts as an empathy device, allowing us to feel and to recognize the suffering of others.⁹⁶

A paradoxical sign of this operational power granted to the text and of the accelerated re-politicization of literature can be found in the newly manifested fear that some literary works may hurt sensitivities and convey reactionary contents. This has recently led in the United States to the emergence, in publishing houses, of *sensitivity readers* who screen texts for material that, however involuntarily, might offend minorities, by monitoring persisting cultural clichés at pre-publication stage, while in universities there are trigger warnings policies in place to warn students about potentially shocking contents in older works. This trend has also hit France lately, through the violent polemics set off by the inclusion of a poem by Chénier, *L’Oaristys*, which depicts a rape in a complacent way, amongst mandatory readings for the Agrégation examination.⁹⁷ The point here is less to decide if these prospective or retrospective trials are a necessary form of vigilance or rather a new form of censorship,

⁹⁵ Nelly Wolf, and Alexandre Pistojevic, ‘Roman, contrat et idéologie’, *Vox poetica*; available at <http://vox-poetica.org/entretiens/intWolf.html> [accessed 08.11.2020].

⁹⁶ See Émilie Brière, and Alexandre Gefen, ‘Fiction et démocratie’, *Revue Critique de Fixxion Française Contemporaine*, 2012; available at <http://www.revue-critique-de-fixxion-francaise-contemporaine.org/rcffc/article/view/fx06.01/732> [accessed 20 August 2020].

⁹⁷ See ‘Voir le viol. Retour sur un poème de Chénier’, on the blog *Malaises dans la lecture*, 10 April 2018, <https://malaises.hypotheses.org/242> [accessed 20 August 2020]; the nuanced analysis by Hélène Merlin-Kajman, ‘Enseigner avec civilité? Trigger warning et problèmes de partage de la littérature’, *Transitions*, 3 March 2018; available at <http://www.mouvement-transitions.fr/index.php/litterarite/articles/n-4-h-merlin-kajman-enseigner-avec-civilite-trigger-warning-et-problemes-de-partage-de-la-litterature> [accessed 20 August 2020]. Amongst the debates that followed, see for instance Marion Cocquet, ‘*MeToo*: faut-il reguillotiner André Chénier?’, *Le Point*, 26 October 2019; available at https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/metoo-faut-il-reguillotiner-andre-chenier-26-07-2019-2326968_23.php [accessed 20 August 2020].

but to observe that it proves difficult to attribute a therapeutic value to the literary *pharmakon* without transforming it, in the meantime, into a potential poison.

Critiques of language and of the neo-liberal forms of life, the presence of the writer in the field, projects of ‘reliance’⁹⁸ and to create virtual communities for the ‘missing people’,⁹⁹ in the context of a global appeal to an empathic society à la Jeremy Rifkin,¹⁰⁰ or of the ‘resonance’ argued by Hartmut Rosa:¹⁰¹ we are thus witnessing the birth of new ‘micropolitics’ of literature, to echo Félix Guattari. Whether its benefits are rather personal or collective, whether it involves distant simulations or direct empathic transfers, whether it manufactures conflicts or consensus, never since the humanist era has the faith in the powers of literature been stronger, and this in spite of a fading aesthetic religion. In fact, the ‘civic’ importance of literature and of its intermediaries – bookshop owners or publishers, teachers and researchers – is strongly acknowledged in all democracies. The aim of literature is to build up an ‘us’¹⁰² and a common world, to pave the way towards ‘a global citizenship’¹⁰³ and to fight the immense scepticism stemming from the two World Wars and the discredit of the political which marked the end of the 20th century. The aesthetic de-definition of literature is, thus, followed by multiple pragmatic re-definitions, within the context of a new re-politicization of writing leading to the re-politicization of criticism and, subsequently, of academia.

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⁹⁸ The term has been coined by Marcel Bolle De Bal in *La Tentation communautaire: les paradoxes de la reliance et de la contre-culture* (Bruxelles: Éditions de l’Université de Bruxelles, 1985), then promoted by Michel Maffesoli in *Le Réenchantement du monde* (Paris: La Table Ronde, 2007). See Marcel Bolle de Bal, ‘Reliance, déliance, liance: émergence de trois notions sociologiques’, *Sociétés* 80 (2003/2): 99-131.

⁹⁹ See my essay *Réparer le monde*, especially Chapter 12 (Paris: José Corti, 2017), and Aurélie Adler’s analysis of the Inculte group: ‘Fictions de la communauté: effraction, reconstitution, alteration’, in *Narrations d’un nouveau siècle: romans et récits français (2001-2010)*, ed. Bruno Blanckeman, and Barbara Havercroft (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2013); available at <http://books.openedition.org/psn/473> [accessed 20 August 2020]. The theoretical framework of these papers is that of Jean-Luc Nancy’s philosophy. See Jean-Luc Nancy, and Pierre Mesnard, ‘Autour de la notion de communauté littéraire’, *Tumultes* 6 (1995): 23-37.

¹⁰⁰ Jeremy Rifkin, *The Empathic Civilization: The Race to Global Consciousness in a World of Crisis* (New York: Penguin/Tarcher, 2009).

¹⁰¹ Hartmut Rosa, *Resonanz. Eine Soziologie der Weltbeziehung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2016).

¹⁰² See the suggestive analyses by Tristan Garcia, *Nous* (Paris: Grasset, 2016).

¹⁰³ A formula used by Mary Louise Pratt in ‘Comparative Literature and Global Citizenship’, in *Comparative Literature in the Age of Multiculturalism*, ed. Charles Bernheimer (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 58-65.

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Politici de remediere. Noul angajament al literaturii franceze contemporane. Mize critice și dezbateri societale

Rezumat

Scopul articolului este să investigheze problematica angajamentului social și politic în literatura franceză contemporană. Articolul pornește de la considerații asupra posibilităților literaturii de a se putea opune normativității societale ca narațiune politică, prin încredințarea unei puteri sporite de a acționa atât indivizilor, cât și comunității, precum și prin încurajarea criticilor literari și a universitarilor să participe la dezbateri contemporane. Demonstrând că literatura poate deveni un instrument de reconstrucție a individului și poate crea legături sociale sau un remediu împotriva diverselor forme de individualism și a tendințelor de a comodifica lumea, articolul prezintă o serie de lucrări ficționale contemporane franceze care teoretizează, descriu, exprimă empatie cu cei care se confruntă cu boala, moartea, exilul și terorismul. Acestora li se adaugă câteva opere literare care contestă etichetarea identitară sau societală, întrucât ele ne ajută să dezbatem și să ne opunem inegalităților sau normativității.