

What is Literature for?

By Judith Lyon-Caen

How can literature construct politics? How does it configure the social world? To understand what makes literary works effective, Florent Coste explains that we must understand them as attentiveness to the world.

Reviewed: Florent Coste, *Explore. Investigations littéraires* (Explore. Literary Investigations), Paris, Questions théoriques, 2017, 368 p., 20 €.

At first glance, the object is intriguing. The cover photograph shows an abandoned building on a beach, along the sea, perhaps a former resort, a waterfront restaurant on stilts. The rails of the outside staircases are rusty, as is the old pergola covering the deck on the building's roof. Along the blue sky, one reads the author's name in red and white letters, as well as the book's title: *Explore. Investigations littéraires* (Explore. Literary Investigations). A strange cover for a work of literary criticism, written by a young specialist of medieval literature,¹ a member of the French School of Rome. Explore? It takes a moment to realize that the first word is in the imperative: explore! Or, rather, it was easy to confuse with the English homograph and homonym: "explore." Go figure: we associated this abandoned building on the beach, to which a gate seems to bar access (though one glimpses, on the first floor, between pilasters receding into the shadows, the silhouette of a man), this derelict building, with the name of the series, indicated on the cover's lower righthand side: "Forbidden Beach."

¹ Florent Coste, *Gouverner par les livres. Les Légendes dorées de Jacques de Voragine, de la compilation à l'action pastorale, en France et en Italie (XIII^e – XV^e siècle)*, Ph.D. thesis, the University of Burgundy, 2013. A summary by the author can be found in: "Florent Coste, *Gouverner par les livres. Les Légendes dorées de Jacques de Voragine, de la compilation à l'action pastorale, en France et en Italie (XIII^e – XV^e siècle)*," *Perspectives médiévales*, 36, 2015.

Explore the forbidden beach? Yet “forbidden beach” is the name of a “series devoted to poetics, in the broadest sense,” edited since 2010 by the poet and theorist Christophe Hanna, whose work “explores the possibility of new modes of functioning and the social inscription of creative objects.” Alright, then: explore. Finally, we understand. We can begin.

Literature as exercise

The book unfolds as a series of exercises – seven in total – from a “portrait of the reader as an ethnographer” to “true literature.” Seven exercises, and not seven chapters, for we will often find ourselves starting over, but taking different paths. Each exercise is addressed to the reader, in the second person singular, often in the imperative: “imagine,” “remember,” “you see.” Sports metaphors are ubiquitous: preliminary warm-ups, stretches, “re-energizing limbering-up,” diets, “sessions” (workout sessions, not therapy) – all the way down to the last exercise, which speaks quite frankly of races, commitments, effort, asceticism, solitude, breakaways, and self-overcoming. Is this what literature looks like in the age of generalized coaching? In 2012, Joshua Landy, a professor of comparative literature at Stanford, proposed, in *How to Do Things with Fictions*,² that literature – and particularly the most difficult works of fiction – be used as a training ground that is uniquely suited to strengthen and expand our cognitive abilities. In contrast to the “ethical turn” in literary criticism, which primarily emphasizes the formative power of literary works and the kinds of moral experience made possible by acquainting oneself with worlds of fiction, Landy offered a pragmatics of literary reading oriented entirely towards mental exercises of decoding and interpretation. His primary goal is to free literary pedagogy from an obsession with the text’s message and to insist on the cognitive value of the simultaneously formal and spiritual experience of reading a text, even when it is paradoxical, immoral (and even immoralizing), contradictory, and plurivocal.

The literary coaching proposed by Coste is not – or at least not only – cognitive. *Explore* is a political book on literature and contemporary literary theory: “This book asks how literature – and, at the same time, literary theory – could construct politics;

² Joshua Landy, *How to Do Things with Fictions*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012.

in other words, how it could reengage us in public space with greater capacities for action" (p. 14).

It seeks, in this way, to break with various reading habits and disciplinary “cramps” and to guide us towards a “literary pragmatics,” a use of literature that is open to the world, and which depends, on the one hand, on a revalorization of the reader, and, on the other, on a re-inscription of literature into “civil society,” and, subsequently, of literary studies into the social sciences.

Against literary hermeneutics

This concern with breaking down disciplinary boundaries is not unique to Coste: in recent years, numerous works have sought to extract literary studies from a domain that is still limited to interpreting canonical texts. The previously mentioned reflections on the ethical implications of literary experience suggest the overtures that literary criticism could make to moral philosophy, based on an understanding of the reading of literature as a conceptual, intellectual, affective, and sensitive adventure.³ In her 2016 book *Lire dans la gueule du loup* (Reading in the Wolf's Mouth), H  l  ne Merlin proposed a "transitional" approach to literature, as something that makes it possible to forge bonds 'for ourselves' and to connect 'intimacy at its most inviolable' to "the horizon of commonality."⁴ The horizon of commonality or, in this case, the possibility of preserving a common world is what defines the question of transmission and the transmissibility of works as a political question. In Marielle Mac  's most recent books, literature is once again summoned to teach us how to sharpen the attention we give to the world, our multiple commitments, and forms of life.⁵ Stylistics, as a kind of knowledge, can be viewed, in this way, as a critical tool for the social sciences.

While Coste is in dialogue with all this work, the radicalness of his gesture has much to do with his sustained refusal of the mode of reading that dominates all “literary” approaches to literature, however concerned it might be with questioning the world as it exists: a form of reading focused on interpretation, a hermeneutics that

³ See Sandra Laugier's illuminating synthesis, "Littérature, philosophie, morale," *Fabula-LhT*, n° 1, "Les Philosophes lecteurs," February 2006.

⁴ Hélène Merlin-Kajman, *Lire dans la gueule du loup. Essai sur une zone à défendre*, Paris, Gallimard, 2016, p. 271-272. Florent Coste wrote a review of the book, entitled "À quoi jouent les littéraires?," *La Vie des idées*, June 16, 2016.

⁵ Marielle Macé, *Styles. Critique de nos formes de vie*, Paris, Gallimard, 2017.

posits the text as an enigma to be deciphered and a meaning that must be discovered, deployed and redeployed, reinvented or transmitted. Hermeneutic strategies, from the most narrow-minded forms of philological erudition to the many ways of bringing the production of meaning back into play *in the present*, collude in closing the text onto itself, transforming it into a “pre-text” available to more or less virtuosic feats. Coste dedicates some of his most energetic pages to a critical description of literary studies’ more deeply rooted habits (which he characterizes as so many “cramps” and “theoretical fetishes”): tautological categorizations (what is one saying when a text is identified as “romantic”?), mythologies of authorial intention and interiority (“but who has seen the inside a text?,” p. 47) and, most importantly, the religion of textual exegesis and commentary (a “methodological drug with hallucinatory effects,” p. 101), which closes a text in on itself, slicing it up into bits and pieces that can be commented on and separating it from other possible uses that are living and not prescribed in advance.

To “romantic-formalist intransitivity,” commentary, and interpretation, Coste opposes practices “in the field”: the descriptions that we, the numerous and unequally qualified readers, make of what we read. How does a literary work “organize, inflect, and configure” the social world? Coste, in this way, defines a program for a pragmatic literary anthropology, attentive to “the social relations that are organized around literary works and that the latter rearticulate” (p. 59). Knowledge of this kind is not interested in literary works as a closed *opus*, but in the work *of* literature as a *modus operandi* (p. 60 and 386) and works in the world in which they are read, appropriated, put into play, and shared. This project is valid not only for the present: it is also an appeal to history, which is called upon to “reterritorialize” past works in the “cultural networks that brought them to life and in which they developed their performativity” (p. 12). Coste very convincingly emphasizes the extent to which a certain “sense of literature” (the kind he criticizes) condemns our considerations of past texts to being anachronistic. “The text locked into the literary absolute and surrendered, by our own will, to the free and never-ending play of decontextualizing commentary” (p. 120) – or, to say the same thing differently, the constitution of a classic text – is a refusal to open up literary studies to history or historical anthropology. Of course, literary history results in knowledge of contexts, but this achieves little more than reproducing or replaying – while projecting it onto the past – an ahistorical split between the text and what lies beyond it. But what is known of the cultural appropriateness of this split? Who produces it? Who transmits it? One should thus reverse the terms of the question, and seek how each text produces, sketches, and shapes its own contexts

(p. 91). It is precisely the efficacy of literature in the world that must be explored, observed, mapped out, and described.

Constructing politics, reengaging literature

But Coste's political project goes beyond this appeal for an enriched attention to the use of texts building on "reader-response" theories (which emphasizes the reader's role in the creation of meaning)⁶ and the history and sociology of reading practices. His project is not that of a survey – one that, incidentally, is barely defined – of the various ways of reading and acting with texts (in which case one could refund commentaries or explanations, since the point is that there is a way of doing things with texts⁷). What interests him is the point at which literature posits itself – and is used as – a "mechanism of knowledge, an instrument of exploration, examination, elucidation, and investigation of the real." In language and with language: the literature that concerns Coste produces critical knowledge of ordinary language, "works to build or to change our shared language games," and deactivates processes of domination that occur in language. It is on this point and this fact that the alliance between literary studies and the social sciences could be sealed. If literature can make itself the investigator of the social in language, if it is up to literature to invent, in language, "subversive practices," and literary theory must be that which "renders an account of it, makes it possible, by producing a theoretical atmosphere that ensures it is readable, that it is recognized" (p. 419). Language must decide if it will break out of the straightjacket of textual analysis, useless categorization, "to ensure the promotion of multiple figures of the reader," to expand research beyond the usual canons, to rethink literary history, to reveal literature's "multiple effectivities," "in connection with other graphic, verbal, and social creations," to take interest in the written world in its broadest sense, and so on.

At the conclusion of this book that adopts an unexpected form, that is alternately assertive, prescriptive, injunctive, programmatic, and undeniably reinvigorating, one realizes that it is a kind of reformulation of literature and literary

⁶ See Stanley Fish's classic work, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (1980), French translation, *Quand lire c'est faire. L'autorité des communautés interprétatives*, Paris, Les Prairies Ordinaires, 2007.

⁷ The knowledge of explanation can even, in some circumstances, have a genuinely political impact, when it is necessary to deconstruct fictions forged by particular power structures.

theory that is *committed*. We regret, however, that Coste is such a hurried runner – and that he crosses rapidly through landscapes where one would have liked him to stop, to stroll: rediscovered territories of ancient literature, or new forms of literary inquiry, as with Éric Chauvier or Nathalie Quintane, for example. Let us hope that this project promises us other books that adopt a calmer stride and are more receptive to readers averse to orders.

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