

THE STELLIFEROUS FOLD



The Stelliferous Fold

TOWARD A VIRTUAL LAW OF
LITERATURE'S SELF-FORMATION

RODOLPHE GASCHÉ

FORDHAM UNIVERSITY PRESS

New York 2011

Copyright © 2011 Fordham University Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopy, recording, or any other—except for brief quotations in printed reviews, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Fordham University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party Internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Fordham University Press also publishes its books in a variety of electronic formats. Some content that appears in print may not be available in electronic books.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Gasché, Rodolphe.

The stelliferous fold : toward a virtual law of literature's self-formation / Rodolphe Gasché.—1st ed.

p. cm.

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-8232-3434-9 (cloth : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8232-3435-6 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN 978-0-8232-3436-3 (ebk.)

1. Literature—Philosophy. 2. Literature—History and criticism—Theory, etc.I. Title.

PN45.G326 2011

801—dc22

2011009669

Printed in the United States of America

13 12 11 5 4 3 2 1

First edition

For Bronia Karst and Alexandra Gasché

CONTENTS

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	ix
Introduction	I
Part I. Scenarios for a Theory	
1. Un-Staging the Beginning: Herman Melville's Cetology	27
2. Autogeneous Engenderment: Antonin Artaud's Phonetic Body	49
3. Onslaughts on Filiation: Lautréamont's <i>Chants de Maldoror</i>	64
4. Celestial Stars/Water Stars: Gérard de Nerval's <i>Sylvie</i>	87
5. The Stelliferous Fold: Villiers de l'Isle-Adam's <i>L'Eve Future</i>	112
6. The Falls of History: Joris-Karl Huysmans's <i>Against Nature</i>	146
Part II. Parting with the Paradigms	
7. Beginnings and Endings	173
8. On Aesthetic and Historical Determination	210
9. Hegel's Orient, or the End of Romanticism	231
Part III. Light Motives for a Critical Journey	
10. Of Goats, Caves, and Cannibals: Daniel Defoe's <i>Robinson Crusoe</i>	247
11. Kafka's Law: In the Field of Forces Between Judaism and Hellenism	269
12. The Deepening of Apperception: On Walter Benjamin's Theory of Film	298
13. Accompaniments for a Title	310

14.	The Imperative of Transparency: Maurice Blanchot's <i>the one who was standing apart from me</i>	316
15.	The Veil, the Fold, the Image: On Gustave Flaubert's <i>Salamambo</i>	337
	<i>Notes</i>	357
	<i>Selected Names Index</i>	393

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book, which contains all the essays that I have written on literary works and literary criticism, would not have seen the light of the day without a Humanities Institute Fellowship at SUNY at Buffalo, which in Fall 2009 exempted me from my teaching duties. My first acknowledgment therefore goes to Tim Dean and Carrie Bramen, without whose support this project would not have been completed so soon.

Although most of the essays reunited in this volume have been published previously, I have retitled some of them to reflect the overall concern of the volume. In addition, the first three essays, written during the first years after my arrival in the United States—in short, while I was still learning to write in English—have also undergone minor rewriting and improvements in style. I wish in particular to thank Nathan Gorelick for his professionalism in going over some of these studies and urging me occasionally to clarify some points, or to slow the pace with which I arrived at my conclusions.

Chapter 1, “Un-Staging the Beginning: Herman Melville’s Cetology,” was published in *Glyph* 1 (1977): 150–71 under the title “The Scene of Writing: A Deferred Outset.” Chapter 2, “Self-Engenderment: Antonin Artaud’s Phonetic Body,” appeared first under the title “Self-Engendering as a Verbal Body” in *Modern Language Notes* 93, no. 4 (1978): 667–94, © 1978 The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press. Chapter 3, “Onslaughts on Filiation: Lautréamont’s *Chants de Maldoror*,” was previously entitled “Onslaughts on Filiation: Lautréamont and the Greeks” and was first published in *Genre* 11, no. 4 (1978): 479–504. I thank *Genre* for the permission to reprint this essay. Chapter 4, originally titled “The Mixture of Genres, the Mixture of Styles, and Figural Interpretation: ‘Sylvie’ by Gérard de Nerval,” appeared in *Glyph: Textual Studies* 7 (1980): 102–30, © 1978 by The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press. Chapter 5 was published in *Studies in Romanticism* 22 (1983): 293–327. Chapter 6 was first published in *Yale*

French Studies 74 (1988): 183–204. Portions of Chapter 7 were presented in 1980 at a conference at the University of Minnesota at Minneapolis on “Writing Literary History,” and also in 1981 at the occasion of a conference on “The Institutions of Historical Criticism” at McGill University in Montréal. Chapter 8 entitled “Of Aesthetic and Historical Determination” appeared in *Poststructuralism and the Question of History*, eds. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 139–161. Reprinted with permission. Chapter 9 was included in an issue of *History and Mimesis. Occasional papers III by Members of the Program in Literature and Philosophy*, ed. I. J. Massey (Buffalo: SUNY Buffalo, 1983), 17–29. Chapter 10 was published in *Verschlungene Grenzen. Anthropophagie in Literatur und Kulturwissenschaften* (Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 1999), 33–53. Chapter 11 appeared under the title “Kafka’s Law: In the Field of Forces between Judaism and Hellenism,” in *Modern Language Notes* 117, no. 5 (2002): 971–1002, © 2002 The Johns Hopkins University Press. Reprinted with permission of The Johns Hopkins University Press. Chapter 12 was published in *Mosaic* 41, no. 4 (2008): 27–39. Chapter 13 appeared in a Festschrift for Werner Hamacher entitled *Babel*, ed. A. Fioretis (Basel/Weil am Rhein: Urs Engeler, 2009), 180–87. Chapter 14 was first published in *Clandestine Encounters: Philosophy and Literature in the Narratives of Maurice Blanchot*, ed. Kevin Hart (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 216–40. Finally, a first draft of Chapter 15 was delivered in January 2009 at a conference organized by the center “Eikones” in Basel, Switzerland, entitled “Der Grund. Das Feld des Sichtbaren.”

THE STELLIFEROUS FOLD

Introduction

The essays collected in this book were written over the last three decades as a counterpoint to my philosophical work and, as part of a long-standing subgenre of my interests, are divided into three parts. Part I comprises interpretations of literary texts that, instead of bringing a ready-made critical methodology to them, try to find in each of the texts both the directives for how to approach them interpretatively and the means for accounting for their uniqueness. Part II consists of essays involved in a critical debate with certain trends in literary criticism, especially those that emerged during the 1970s and 1980s and that oppose historical interpretation to text-immanent readings, or rather to certain forms that such readings took on in the wake of the New Criticism movement as a result of the contemporary reception of French thought. Finally, in Part III I have assembled more recent work on literary texts that are primarily “thematic” in nature, singling out particular topics within literary works or in the corpus of a literary critical author in order to subject them to an in-depth analysis.

I believe that it is only appropriate to argue that all literary research that seeks to establish anything of worth about literature must justify its interpretations on the basis of a fundamental reflection on literature and poetics. At first such a reflection must address the issue of the singularity

of literature—of its difference from the other arts, no doubt, but especially from its principal other—philosophy. Yet, merely to point out that literature encompasses and “overflows” philosophy insofar as it also includes or frames philosophical topoi—either to further them or to “deconstruct” them—will not suffice to establish literature’s difference from philosophy. As the so-called philosophical novels demonstrate, by illustrating philosophical themes literature more often than not *loses* its specificity. Something similar can be said of the claim that literary texts dismantle or “deconstruct” philosophical claims. Literature that consists primarily of undoing philosophical claims is neither autonomous nor relatively independent from the order of discursivity.

All the analyses of literary works included in this volume therefore proceed from the recognition that literary works are irreducible to any other discourse, especially philosophical discourse. At the same time, however, it almost goes without saying that literature’s irreducibility does not imply that literature entertains no relations to its other. As highly cultivated individuals embedded in a tradition, literary authors cite, question, and respond to issues with which they are familiar from their encounter with philosophical works. But the relation of literature to its other that I wish to highlight is of a different kind than that by which it merely borrows or illustrates philosophical themes. It is the relation to its other that is, in fact, necessary to differentiate literature to begin with. Indeed, to make a case for the singularity of literature, and thus for its thorough difference from its other, is to read traces of its other that inhabit it. These traces of philosophy within literature—which are not to be confused with thematic or formal devices borrowed from philosophy and featured in a work—are precisely that with respect to which any independence of its own becomes possible. These traces presupposed by all self-identification, self-differentiation, or self-demarkation are, first of all, of a structural nature. The specificity proper to literature is commonly considered to consist in a use of language that is not exclusively logical—that is fictional rather than discursive, and that invests itself in images rather than concepts. Yet, any such characterization structurally inscribes within itself, in the shape of a trace, a reference to its opposite from which it distinguishes itself.

That literary works are not discursive, that is, conceptual, obviously does not mean that they are therefore inescapably of the order of the intuitive, as though, lacking conceptual argumentation, they speak primarily, if not exclusively, to our senses and that they do so by way of images or metaphors alone. If it is true that literary or poetic works do

not proceed in a discursive fashion and establish their specificity through a demarcation from philosophical argumentation, they nonetheless retain within themselves the trace of that from which they differ. The work that I present here is an attempt to flesh out, as it were, what remains of philosophy in literary works once they have distinguished themselves from it, or rather how that differentiating remainder positively contributes to their formation. The trace of philosophy that haunts literature's self-production is not merely a negative mark of differentiation, it also informs the whole literary enterprise in a constructive way, and provokes literature to establish itself as a response to philosophy by producing a wholly distinct equivalent to the discursive and the argumentative enterprise. The trace of philosophy in literature is the reason why the latter develops a use of language that is analogous, in a way, to what conceptual language seeks to accomplish. Therefore, literature, although emphatically other, is not in sober opposition to philosophy. Its building blocks are not simply images or metaphors, and it is not limited to playing on our emotions as opposed to our faculty of reasoning. All these notions still belong to the repertoire of philosophy. In short, this book represents an attempt to delve into the traces of the other that is philosophy and to draw out in each specific text the *analogon rationis*, as it were, of philosophical argumentation that these traces initiate within literature. But since the eighteenth-century rationalist concept of an *analogon rationis*—crucial to Alexander Gottfried Baumgarten's aesthetic—still suggests a subordination of these traces to philosophical discursivity, it would ultimately be desirable to develop a notion for this equivalent within a literary text that corresponds to reasoned speech while also maintaining its thorough difference from the latter.

Even though philosophical problems will be a constant reference point in the essays that follow, the essays themselves are not philosophical readings of literary works. Literary works will not be construed as illustrations of philosophical arguments, and the interpretations themselves will not be conducted along the lines of established philosophical problems. On the contrary, the guiding ethos of this book is to let the works speak for themselves, and to let them make their "points" in their own particular ways through the means that are proper to their own regimens—in conventional terms, through their images, plots, scenarios, and so on. Any resemblance to a philosophical problematic in these texts is drawn, primarily, from the literary texts themselves. At the same time, these literary "arguments" will overflow not only the strictly discursive problems of philosophy and the formal framework that gives a particular unity to a problem

and its solution, but also the methodologies of literary criticism based on certain assumptions—philosophical, psychoanalytic, semiotic, and so on—of what literature *is*.

As I stated above, any attempt to say something of worth about literary works must be connected to a fundamental reflection on the nature of literature. Traditionally, such a reflection consists in asking the question, “What is literature?” Yet, if the specificity of literature derives from the traces of its other within it, then such a reflection can no longer consist in identifying what literature properly is. To close off a reflection on literature by prescribing its essence or truth is to dictate to literature what it is, and what it has to be as long as it is literature, for all times past and to come. However, if literature acquires its own distinctness in response to the trace of an other that divides it from within, its essence is, in principle, never completed. In distinction from a reflection in search of the literariness of literature as the essence of literature, the reflection on the nature of literature that subtends the following interpretations asks what literary works demand in their glance at us, and in the response that they seek. In the face of a literary work of art, the appropriate attitude, as Jean Starobinski has noted, is to refrain from imposing one’s own gaze on the work and instead to let oneself be surprised by the work. He writes: “As a reward for thus forgetting oneself, one will see emerge within the work a gaze directed at oneself. This gaze is not a reflection of my interrogation. It is a foreign consciousness, radically other, which looks out for me, which stares at me, and which asks me to respond. One feels exposed to this question that thus comes toward me. The work of art interrogates me.”¹ Yet, whether the otherness of a literary work can be adequately thought in terms of a foreign *consciousness*, and whether one can truly do justice in this manner to the nature of the work as an entity that, precisely, is other in a radical sense, is highly questionable. Indeed, the ways in which a literary work calls upon its readers, and what precisely it expects as a response, is such that the model of a foreign consciousness is thoroughly inadequate to conceptualize it. By contrast, what is beyond any doubt is that, *qua* work, it is part of the nature of a work of literature to relate to us by calling upon us not merely as readers but above all as interpreters. Interpretation, however, ought not be understood here in the hermeneutic, that is, Schleiermacherian sense of reconstructing the work in reverse until its authorial meaning has been fixed (and at which point the otherness of the work would have been neutralized once and for all). Rather, if the interpretation is to respond to a demand made by the work, this must be of the order of a singular intervention in the work itself in accordance with

the singular law that this work will have invented by integrating a variety of themes, plots, and scenarios into a single whole. In other words, what literature as a radical other demands of its readers is that it be interpreted in an always-singular fashion by being entirely re-written in strict conformity with the law of its composition. Such an approach alone leaves the work's otherness intact. Yet, such deference to the law of the work does not exclude a violent intervention in the work. On the contrary, the re-writing of the interpretive endeavor requires, paradoxically, that the interpretation that a literary work demands proceed selectively, thus violently privileging some of its threads over others. By choosing one thread in preference to another, an entirely other thread—a thread foreign to the work—is inevitably woven into its fabric. If the response to a work must be singular—that is, other—to be a responsible response to begin with, it follows that the work's otherness can only be honored fully when it is breached by an interpretation that, although in conformity with the law of the work, also risks a violent intervention.

If works of literature are there for us, address us, and call upon us to be interpreted, can such being-directed-toward-us be thought in optical terms, as a demanding gaze at us? It has been argued convincingly that works of visual art are “instruments that have been conceived to make us see what can be represented neither in words nor in images,” that is, to make us see “in the present what one does not see in it, but which is there nonetheless.” Rather than having to be interpreted, works of art would thus have a power of interpretation of their own. Their prime objective would be to “change the way we see the world, transform our vision, and make our vision see in the first place.”² To this power of interpretation of the visible that characterizes the visual arts, the only adequate response consists in an interpretation that realizes what the work of art asks us to witness each time it is beheld in a singular fashion. Now, if all objects of the visual arts want us to see something, something new and unexpected in or about the world as a visible world, and seek a change in the way we look at that world, then what is the exact mode in which literary works address us, and what do they ask of us? Can it be of the order of a gaze, and if so, in what sense is *gaze* to be taken here? Furthermore, what is it that literary works want us to “see,” so that we can respond to it in changing our “seeing,” and if it is not, strictly speaking, of the order of the visible, then what does “seeing” mean in this case? These are questions that will persistently arise in the readings that follow, not only when these texts explicitly reflect on the visible and the invisible from which the visible emerges into light—on what must not be seen so that one can see to begin

with—but especially when some literary works are shown to unfold within themselves, by way of what seem to be images and constellations thereof, certain scenes that are evidently staged to be “regarded” in a certain way. Furthermore, as these scenes with their specific spatiality and temporality will show themselves to represent a peculiar way in which literary works look at themselves, or “think” themselves, these questions will impose themselves even more. When it becomes clear that literary works, without being discursive, “think” about themselves by staging themselves in a setting that wants to be seen, the question regarding the pertinence of visual and optical conceptuality, whether proper or figurative, will make itself felt. *Qua* concept, the image as the opposite of the concept is still a philosophical concept. Yet, if images are to be found in literature, of what must they consist if the way that literature unfolds is not argumentative and conceptual? How is one to understand literary images if not in terms of what philosophy thinks of images, that is, as things of lesser being than what they copy? How do literary images, if, indeed, there are such things, differ from the concept of the image? And what do literary images do to the concept of image?

Certainly, all these questions will not receive satisfactory answers through all the concrete analyses of literary works included in this book. But if I nevertheless raise them at the beginning of this book, it is precisely in order to suggest that if interpretation is a response to a demand by the work itself, all available concepts are insufficient to meet this demand. In particular, concepts such as the “image,” “thinking,” or “argumentation through images,” as well as the spatiality and temporality that images seem to possess, need to be revised critically if they are to be put to work interpretively. Such transformation, however, cannot take place in advance of the attempt to answer the challenge of the literary text by subjecting it from the outside to a more or less finished methodological product—this, by itself, would already imply having judged beforehand the nature of the challenge—but must occur at the hands of the work itself, while one seeks to respond to its demand for interpretation. If interpretation is something that the text calls for in its gaze toward us, then interpretation must cede all prejudice and preformed conceptuality. The first notion that requires a reassessment after its exposure to literary works is none other than that of the text. Such a demand certainly seems counter-intuitive, for are literary works at their most elementary level not texts? And yet, even though *text* is a notion we cannot do without, this notion confers unity on the literary artifact only insofar as it is a unity of a very specific kind, one that needs to be revisited. Notwithstanding the previous use of the term

in the hermeneutic tradition from St. Augustine to Schleiermacher, and in the philological subdiscipline of text criticism, the concept of text becomes a truly central concept in a number of disciplines, including literary criticism, only with the development of a linguistics of the text during the second half of the last century. In order to understand what *text* means in this context, it is worthwhile to recall that the term *text* originates in the Greek root *tex*, to built or construct, and the Latin *textere*, to weave or to plait. The term *text*, indeed, ineluctably denotes a woven artifact. Applied to literary works, the term thus suggests that such works have the unity of an artifact woven from linguistic elements. However, rather than engaging in a lengthy exposition of the history of the term, I refer to John Scheid and Jesper Svenbro for a more economic presentation of this point. They conclude their astute and witty investigation of the artisanal connotations of the term *text* in Greece and Rome by arguing that “the empire of the Roman *textus*,” as opposed to the Greek word for fabric, *buphos*, which, as they contend, is in all likelihood “a Greek translation of a Latin concept,” rests on “the presence of the letter *x* in the middle of the word.” They write: “Are we serious about this? Absolutely. The truth is that no letter more precisely suggests the myth of weaving better than the *x*, the crossing of opposing threads.”³ Even though the expression *textus* or *textum* is soon replaced by the rhetorical concept of *oratio* in the linguistic reflections of the Latin period, it is true that when the term makes a comeback it reappears precisely with these connotations of weaving and interlacing, which make the word *text* “the best designation for the thing designated.”⁴

But if I want to take issue with this venerable concept, it is first of all because of its association with the artisanal technique of weaving and interlacing. The latter, in my view, represents a significant obstacle to appreciating what happens in a literary work, and to meeting the demand that it imposes on us—and this for several reasons. Indeed, the definitely fascinating and seductive metaphor of weaving, and the interlacing of the woof and warp into a web, fabric, or tissue that in Greece and Rome determined the understanding of *text*, may fundamentally overlook the specific (ontological) level, as well as the very nature, of what constitutes a literary work. Is *text*, understood in light of the artisanal technique of weaving, not an image by means of which the literary work is made into a piece of equipment, thus occluding from the beginning its interpellative character? If the text is understood as a woven fabric, the work’s interpretive intervention and the challenge to our vision and understanding of the world that it presents are missed from the start. Reduced to a well-wrought artifact, the literary work is determined solely in terms of how it is worked,

and it offers to view mainly the artful skill with which its language was crafted. Of course, any work of art has *qua* art an artisanal character. But to conceive of a work of literature primarily as an artisanal product is to arrest it as an object dependent on a creator, and not to confront what it itself must be in order to relate to us, as any work does, in the form of an address and a demand for engagement. The artisanal metaphor covers over nothing less than the phenomenal nature of the work of art, that is, the “ideality” of its configuration, which is distinct from its empirical existence, and which is the infinite correlate of the reader whose finite interactions are called upon by this ideal configuration itself.

Moreover, the kind of unity that this notion confers upon a work of literature may utterly fail to do justice to a literary work since its unity may not be comparable to the product resulting from the interweaving of a manifold according to the artisanal praxis in question. Indeed, can any artisanal technique account for the complex structure that a literary text presupposes, when the text *itself*, free from the intentionality of the author, engages a reader to respond to it? Finally, should it be possible to show that an artwork is formed not only with opposing threads but also dissimilar and incongruous elements, fringes, and strands that escape binary classification, it will be necessary to think the work of literature’s unity in a different way. The rather oversimplified image of a fabric patterned after the technique of interlacing woof and warp not only suggest a thoroughly homogeneous fabric, but also models the work of art according to a limited number of dimensions. Such an image further imposes on the literary work an extremely crude conception of the referral function of a text.

If the notion of *text* needs to be reconsidered today, it is also because lately the notions of *text*, *textuality*, and *texture* have come to imply that the unity of a literary work is based primarily on its self-referentiality and self-reflexivity. *Text*, then, would designate a unity of a literary artifact that is interwoven with itself, a unity that is essentially speculative. Apart from casting this aspect of the literary work’s relation to itself in categories that remain of the order of consciousness and self-consciousness, a perspective that itself is problematic enough, the question to be raised is whether this is all there is to a literary work? Of course, I do not question the contention that a work of literature *also* relates to itself. It surely does. As will become manifest from several of the studies of fictional works included here, however, such self-referentiality and self-reflexivity is just one significant property of literary texts. After all, the text’s self-reflection or self-consciousness is only the correlate of its equally indisputable intentionality or “aboutness,” even if its intentional object cannot be fixed in a definite