

Against Political Literature: What's Next?

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This article aims to critically examine a certain definition of political literature deployed in the French literary field, which considers it only, or overwhelmingly, under the prism of the 'distribution of the sensible' theorised by Jacques Rancière. With the aim of defending literature on the grounds of its social utility, many writers and critics assign it a duty of representativeness: the political role of literature is to make the invisible visible, in a language as transparent as possible. The article draws on a whole range of contemporary French literature that challenges this assignment and looks differently at the relationship between literature and politics, inviting to make literature politically rather than political literature. Examining in particular some of Nathalie Quintane's and Sandra Lucbert's texts, we shall see what this shift implies, both literarily and politically. The rejection of a literature functioning as a multiplier of visibility and accomplishing a social duty in no way implies the mourning of a political action proper to literature—but it does place it on the side of radical formal invention. What prospects does this redefinition open up?



Introduction

Contre la littérature politique [*Against Political Literature*] (Alferi et al., 2024): under this provocative title, six authors who are among the most far-left writers on the French literary scene have expressed their distrust of an adjective that has become ubiquitous in academic and media criticism.¹ In recent years, a remarkable reversal has taken place. The ‘political novel’ is no longer the one that ‘dares not speak its name’, in the words of Suleiman about what she called the ‘ideological novel’ (1983: 4), but, on the contrary, the one that proclaims itself and is widely praised as such. The ‘distribution of the sensible’ [‘partage du sensible’], which Rancière has placed at the centre of his *Politics of Literature* (2010), has become a new mantra.² Making the invisible visible, giving a voice to the inaudible, reporting on more or less marginal experiences—these are all actions, indeed tasks, that literature would or should fulfil, which would be suddenly justified in return by this representative function. In an age increasingly plagued by the question of utility, the answer seems obvious. The novelist’s *raison d’être* would be to represent those who are precisely not represented in the political, institutional or media spheres, and to make their voices heard. Fictional representation would be the first step towards taking the marginalised into account and reintegrating them into the political community. In this way, the aim of literature is not so much to change the world or to extract itself from it, but rather to make its margins visible, to reweave its history(ies) and to repair its broken communities.

This article aims to critically examine this new omnipresence of the injunction to the political—or rather, to question this definition of political literature, which seems to consider it only or predominantly in terms of the distribution of attention. The idea that the political dimension of literature consists above all in making the invisible visible will be discussed from both a literary and a political point of view. The reactions of writers who refuse this definition while claiming a political practise of literature are also analysed. Once one has claimed to be ‘against political literature’, what comes next? How can literary proposals be shaped that are more radical, but perhaps also

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of French texts, both critical and literary, are my own. With the exception of Rancière, these texts have not been translated into English. In order not to interrupt the reading, I have decided to leave only the English translation in the text. Only the longer quotations are also given in French. Even if this choice is sometimes frustrating, I hope it will make the reading more fluid.

² The poet Nathalie Quintane is amused by this: ‘J’ai pas bien compris ce qui lui est arrivé, au ‘partage du sensible’, mais c’est devenu le concept social-démocrate de base; tout le monde s’y retrouve (un peu comme dans le *care*). Étonnant d’ailleurs que Blanquer (ministre de l’Éducation nationale) ou Castaner (ministre de l’Intérieur) ne l’aient pas déjà sorti au détour d’un discours : la BAC dans les quartiers, c’est le partage du sensible en somme !’ [‘I don’t quite understand what happened to the ‘distribution of the sensible’, but it became a basic social democratic concept; everyone can relate to it (a bit like care). It’s amazing that Blanquer (Minister of National Education) or Castaner (Minister of the Interior) haven’t already used it in a speech: the BAC [the French crime-fighting unit] in the problem areas, that’s the perfect distribution of the sensible!’] (2021: 417; quoted in Huppe, 2023: 119).

more modestly disruptive? As this article will argue,³ these writers call for the term ‘political literature’ to be abandoned in favour of the act of making literature *politically*. This is not just a rhetorical game or a sleight of hand, but another way of looking at the relationship between literature and politics, turning it into an ever-new gesture aimed at disrupting the world rather than repairing it. This paradigm shift implies the invention of new forms, not for the sake of novelty, but to respond to the need to find a relevant and powerful expression for current social and political issues. These are forms that question the obvious and open up new frameworks of perception and cognition, offering new political possibilities.

What can literature do?

This question is as old as literature itself, and we will not answer it here (or elsewhere). However, it seems to be posed with new acuity by some protagonists of contemporary French literature who seem anxious to justify their activity by a usefulness that can be described as political in the broadest sense, that gives it weight and even makes it necessary.⁴ This preoccupation is part of a broader movement that many academics refer to as a ‘return to the real’.⁵ Since the turn of the 1980s, large parts of French

³ This article owes much to the work of Justine Huppe, who will be quoted extensively in the following developments.

⁴ The question of the usefulness of literature and literary studies was raised particularly vividly in France in 2006 when Nicolas Sarkozy, Minister of the Interior and later President of the Republic, criticized the inclusion of Madame Lafayette’s *La Princesse de Clèves* (1678) in the curriculum of an administrative exam and more generally questioned the relevance of literary studies in general curricula: ‘L’autre jour, je m’amusais – on s’amuse comme on peut – à regarder le programme du concours d’attaché d’administration. Un sadique ou un imbécile – choisissez – avait mis au programme d’interroger les concurrents sur *La Princesse de Clèves*. Je ne sais pas si cela vous est souvent arrivé de demander à la guichetière ce qu’elle pensait de *La Princesse de Clèves*? Imaginez un peu le spectacle’ [I was looking at the syllabus for the administrative assistant exam the other day. Some sadist or moron–take your pick–had included a question on *La Princesse de Clèves* in the programme. I don’t know if you’ve ever asked a clerk what she thought of *La Princesse de Clèves*? Just imagine the spectacle] (Fabre, 2011). Not only did Madame de Lafayette’s novel sell magnificently as a result, but many academics and writers defended literature by defending its ‘usefulness’, particularly in social terms. On this topic, see William Marx (2015) and the overview of reactions in literary studies in Annick Louis (2021).

⁵ The expression ‘retour au réel’, widely used in academic literary studies, refers to art critic Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real* (1996). Yet the label ‘retour au réel’, meant to describe the way in which literature renewed its ambition to speak about external reality, is problematic in the eyes of the academics who helped coin it. First, it caricatures the decades before the 1980s by reducing them to formal experiments concerned only with themselves; second, it presents contemporary literary production as a ‘return’ to earlier forms of representing the real, inherited from 19th-century realism. This is anything but an accurate representation of the texts produced since this supposed turning point. For a critical approach of the expression, see Tiphaine Samoyault, who denounces the return to the real as ‘threefold deceptive: firstly, because it defines the real only by reality, [...] secondly, because this reality has the existence of a simulacrum [...], and thirdly, because the return is tantamount to a restoration’ (2004: 84–85). See also Mathilde Roussigné (2022) who emphasises the academic context of the expression ‘retour au réel’ and suggests that it refers more to a need for self-justification in literary studies than to the works themselves: ‘The call to restore the transitivity of literature is not based on objects of research that are inherently transitive and that suddenly challenge the researcher. Rather, it is a reaction to a crisis in literary studies, to the end of the exuberance that flowed through the discipline in the 1960s and 1970s, and to the difficulties of the many colloquia, seminars and literary studies journals in finding an echo outside

contemporary literature have demonstrated an interest in the social world, having previously indulged in more experimental ‘formal games’ (Viart and Vercier, 2008: 78). The awarding of the Nobel Prize for Literature to Annie Ernaux in 2022 would confirm this new interest in the ‘real world’, focusing in particular on what is wrong with it: environmental, social, political, religious problems, the list goes on. In response to this desire to grasp the world in all its social complexity, the investigative form has asserted itself as a new matrix that ‘profoundly influences the forms and imaginaries of contemporary literature: at the crossroads of social sciences, journalism and the noir novel, the investigation is once again an important form and imaginary’, as Laurent Demanze notes (2019: 11). It marks the claimed proximity between literature and the social sciences and humanities. Freed from any entertainment mandate, literature is considered a serious matter, a ‘partner in the elucidation’ of the world, according to Dominique Viart (2012: 78). Under the pen of the writer and poet Olivier Cadiot, this observation takes an ironic turn:

Pendant mille ans on s’est tapés l’irréel, maintenant c’est parti pour le *réel*. Voilà la nouvelle rumeur. Ça commence, ouvrez les yeux, soyez réalistes : on est enfin dans la vraie vie. [...] La littérature transcrit enfin la réalité telle quelle. On installera partout d’immenses miroirs pour refléter le monde – on n’a plus qu’à recopier pour s’engager.

For a thousand years it’s been all about the unreal, now it is time for the *real*. That is the new buzz. It is just starting, open your eyes, be realistic: we have finally arrived in real life. [...] Literature is finally transcribing reality as it is. Huge mirrors are being set up everywhere in which the world is reflected – all we have to do is copy and commit (2017: 59–60; author’s emphasis).

In the no less ironic words of Nathalie Quintane, it goes like this: ‘Question : est-ce que vous vous rendez compte des efforts collectivement faits par la corporation depuis deux générations pour rendre la littérature simple, lisible, claire comme de l’eau de roche, transparente comme une source traversée de soleil jusqu’au fond ? De droite comme de gauche, nous nous y sommes tous mis. [...] plus on progresse dans l’attribution des prix Nobel français, plus ils sont clairs, transparents comme de l’eau de roche ou une source traversée de soleil jusqu’au fond’ [‘Question: are you aware of the collective efforts the corporation has made over the last two generations to make literature simple, readable, crystal clear and as transparent as a spring through which sunlight shines to the bottom? Right and left, we’ve all done it. [...] the more progress we make in awarding the French

the universities. The transitivity of literature, a theoretical bias that makes it possible to question its relationship to the field, has less to do with the supposed nature of the objects studied than with the critical approaches themselves.’

Nobel Prizes, the clearer they become, crystal clear or transparent like a spring through which sunlight shines all the way to the bottom'] (Quintane, 2024: 28).

The unified, one-sided nature of this 'grand narrative of a contemporary literature anxious to reconnect with the world and act humbly in it' (Huppe, 2023: 42), which does not encompass the whole of French literary production and therefore offers a truncated view of it, could be questioned.⁶ But what interests me more in this article is to examine how this literature claims its political dimension, an adjective that is systematically attached to it in a suspicious automatism that Sandra Lucbert mocks in her energetic manifesto *Défaire voir* [*To Undo Seeing*] (2024). She denounces 'the stalemate that is now called The-political-literature', which she describes as 'words glued together by it-goes-without-saying gathering: message-driven-literature, social-subject-literature, edifying-literature' (12). The hyphens that the author of *Personne ne sort les fusils* [*No One Takes Out the Guns*] (2020) frequently uses emphasise the fixed, mechanical character of this new category in order to question its self-evidence. 'The word 'politics' is omnipresent in literature today, perhaps to the point of diffusing its meaning and attenuating its scope', observe the authors of the small volume mentioned in the introduction, *Contre la littérature politique* (Alferi et al., 2024: 7)—'omnipresent', i.e. in the literary texts themselves, in the commentaries of their authors and in the critical and media reception of these texts. So, the question arises: to what extent is this literature, which aims to capture 'the real world', political? On what basis does it claim to be? What does this 'panpolitics' (Huppe, 2023: 107) testify to?

Making visible

To put it briefly, it is in the name of its ability to redefine the Rancièrian distribution of the sensible that many contemporary writers claim that 'literature is a political affair'.⁷ By separating the politics of literature from 'the politics of writers and their commitments', but also from 'the modes of representation of political issues and struggles of their times', Jacques Rancière states that literature makes politics by overturning the configuration of the given, by creating a new 'distribution of the sensible' (2004: 10). Thanks to this ability to disrupt the established division of the sensible and the hierarchies of subjects that deserve attention and interest, literature reaches the heart of politics as Rancière understands it, as opposed to the police. Like politics, it 'makes visible what had no business being seen, makes understood as

⁶ In this regard, we refer to Anne-Sophie Donnarieix's *Puissances de l'ombre. Le surnaturel du roman contemporain* (2023), which examines how the irrational and the strange permeate an entire field of contemporary French literature, which does not hesitate to strike a supernatural tone inclined towards the unsettling. If there is a return to reality, it is through a certain prism that destabilizes it and makes it unstable.

⁷ This is the title of Alexandre Gefen's collection of interviews with 26 contemporary French writers: *La littérature est une affaire politique* (2022).

discourse what was once only heard as noise' and shifts 'a body from the place assigned to it' (1999: 30). Many contemporary writers have taken up this approach to literature, seeing it as a means of drawing attention to the most humble and inaudible. Literature would bring subjects and objects onto the public stage that are usually excluded from it. It would redefine what is important and what is not, and place at the centre what has been marginalised. 'Where does this desire in the cultural world to save humanity, the poorest, the most neglected, the most clearly stigmatized, come from?' asks (with feigned astonishment) Olivier Neveux (2019: 77). This attention to the margins is a way for those involved in the literary field to justify their existence through an immediate social benefit. Literature is not gratuitous. As Morgane Kieffer points out: 'if there is indeed a politics of fiction, it is linked to the act of publication, which is literally an operation of visibility' (2021: 33). Literature acts 'as a multiplier of visibility' (33).

In so doing, contemporary literature renounces 'the heritage of the universal writer à la Hugo, who speaks to all, for all, in the name of all' (Servoise, 2022). The more modest approach of giving a voice to the voiceless to ensure that they are finally heard and considered is preferred to the attitude of speaking in the place of, which is perceived as too paternalistic. The 'mirrors' of today are no longer those that Stendhal (also ironically) claimed were carried 'on a high road': they are now broken, fragmented and veiled.⁸ The confrontation with the world takes on a more fragile form than in the writings of 19th-century realism or in the decades of flamboyant literary engagement. The narratives of the late 20th and early 21st centuries are largely short, fragmentary texts that are often hesitant and willingly flaunt their deliberate incompleteness. Understanding the world no longer means organising it into an encyclopaedic system of knowledge (think of the vast frescoes of modernism and its dreams of a total novel), but rather the assertion of a singular, vacillating point of view that is itself disturbed and struggles against silence in the face of the world, its injustices and inadequacies. Bruno Blanckeman characterises this situation as 'implicated' [*'impliquée'*] (2013: 3). The writing 'does not present itself, illusion or not, as outside the perceived phenomenon, but is immersed in it' (3). The 'overhanging effect' that once justified 'the committed writer's right to intervene' gives way to a position that is both more modest and more uncertain, characterized by doubts (including about one's own narrative enterprise) (3).

⁸ Stendhal's famous quote, which has served as an essay topic for every generation of French students, reads as follows: 'Eh, monsieur, un roman est un miroir qui se promène sur une grande route. Tantôt il reflète à vos yeux l'azur des cieux, tantôt la fange des borbiers de la route. Et l'homme qui porte le miroir dans sa hotte sera par vous accusé d'être immoral ! Son miroir montre la fange, et vous accusez le miroir ! Accusez bien plutôt le grand chemin où est le borbier, et plus encore l'inspecteur des routes qui laisse l'eau croupir et le borbier se former' ['Hey, sir, a novel is a mirror on a high road. Sometimes it reflects to your eyes the azure of the sky, sometimes the mire of the road. And the man who carries the mirror in his basket is accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shows the swamp, and you accuse the mirror! Rather blame the road where the swamp is, and even more so the road inspector who lets the water stagnate and the swamp develop'] ([1830] 1997: 362).

The writer-mage is no longer; she sees herself more as an amplifier of voices, effacing herself in front of her object and regularly exposes the flaws in her project. This is confirmed by the importance of polyphonic narratives in contemporary production. Sylvie Servoise, attempting to identify the ‘democratic stakes of narrative polyphony’, emphasises the extent to which these narratives are capable of assuming ‘a truly democratic representative function’ (2022):

La polyphonie permet de représenter la pluralité comme fabrique du social, au sens où elle en tient lieu (représentation-substitution) ; elle contribue à rendre visible ce qui ne l’est pas ou pas assez (représentation-monstration) ; elle participe à l’effort d’intelligibilité du social, à la clarification des enjeux et modalités des débats et des conflits (représentation-élucidation).

Polyphony makes it possible to represent plurality as a factory of the social, in the sense that it takes its place (representation-substitution); it contributes to making visible what is not or not sufficiently visible (representation-demonstration); it participates in the endeavour to make the social intelligible, to clarify the stakes and modalities of debates and conflicts (representation-elucidation) (Servoise, 2022).

Even if they do not adopt a (uniquely) polyphonic narrative, many contemporary narratives aim to fulfil this triple task: to give substance to social plurality, to make visible what is not visible enough, to make reality (more) intelligible. This should guarantee them a political function or even effectiveness, for by forcing the voice of the voiceless into the public arena, this literature aims not only to break the political and media silence surrounding certain groups and individuals, but also to ‘repair the world’ (Gefen, 2023). The title chosen by Alexandre Gefen to describe ‘French Literature in the 21st Century’, summarises the (good) intentions of the literature in question:

I will argue that the beginning of the twenty-first century has seen the emergence of a notion of writing and reading I would describe as ‘therapeutic’ –of a literature that heals, that cares for, that helps, or at least that ‘does good’. It appears to me that, in our democracies lacking in major collective hermeneutical or spiritual frameworks, literary narrative holds the promise of considering the singular, of making sense of pluralized identities, of reweaving geographies through the formation of communities: these programs are not so much emancipatory as reparative (2024: 1).

Ideally, the act of making people visible and audible would extend to the rebuilding of a broader community in which all voices are finally heard. Exposing the ignored parts of French society would not only arouse interest in them, but also even greater empathy

for them. The ‘other’ would no longer be a stranger or an unknown, but would enter a world permeated by new ties. The political is thus separated from the ideological: the aim of storytelling is not to interpret the world according to a particular theory or even to put this theory to the test of reality, but to expand the boundaries of what is represented in order to include as many groups and individuals as possible, so that no one feels left behind. The challenge is no longer to shock or disturb the readers ‘with poetics that overturn the logic of perception and representation, [but] to grab their attention so that they feel as affected as others’, emphasises Catherine Grall (2014).

The ‘distribution of the sensible’ redefined by this literature operates, in fact, on the scale of the sensible and even of sentiment. Its driving force is empathy. The apparatus it deploys aim to put readers in the shoes of others, to make them participate in unexpected experiences, to arouse empathy for ‘other lives but theirs’, to allude to the book by Emmanuel Carrère (2009), a milestone in the French literature of care.⁹ Gefen adds:

If it refuses to be mere entertainment, contemporary French literature strives to take care of ordinary life, vulnerable individuals, those forgotten by history, ravaged communities, and our restless democracies by offering readers its capacity for thinking about the imperative of individuation, commemorating the dead, sharing difficult experiences, and inventing possible futures: this is how it takes on the world (2024: 2).

From then on, it’s less a question ‘of reflecting and modelling but feeling and connecting; and it is less about describing and informing than of sharing a sensitivity to the precariat, to victims’ (5).

⁹ In *D’autres vies que la mienne* (2009), Emmanuel Carrère portrays, as the title suggests, several people who, as it turns out, are connected. The French back cover announces: ‘À quelques mois d’intervalle, la vie m’a rendu témoin des deux événements qui me font le plus peur au monde : la mort d’un enfant pour ses parents, celle d’une jeune femme pour ses enfants et son mari. / Quelqu’un m’a dit alors : tu es écrivain, pourquoi n’écris-tu pas notre histoire ? C’était une commande, je l’ai acceptée. C’est ainsi que je me suis retrouvé à raconter l’amitié entre un homme et une femme, tous deux rescapés d’un cancer, tous deux boiteux et tous deux juges, qui s’occupaient d’affaires de surendettement au tribunal d’instance de Vienne (Isère). Il est question dans ce livre de vie et de mort, de maladie, d’extrême pauvreté, de justice et surtout d’amour. Tout y est vrai’ [‘A few months apart, I witnessed the two events that frighten me the most: the death of a child for its parents and the death of a young woman for her children and husband. Someone said to me: You are a writer, why don’t you write our story? It was an assignment, and I accepted it. That’s how I came to tell the story of the friendship between a man and a woman who had both survived cancer, were both crippled and were both judges who dealt with over-indebtedness cases at the district court in Vienne (Isère). This book is about life and death, illness, extreme poverty, justice and, above all, love. Everything is true’].

This empathic attention to others, whose unworthy living conditions or invisible suffering are revealed through literature, implies an individualised approach, because empathy presupposes an intersubjective relationship. Individualisation seems to be the prerequisite for harnessing the restorative power of literature, which gives body and flesh to statistics, embodies pain and suffering and thus enables the reader—a privilege compared to the more rigorous social and human sciences—to experience what they experience, to feel what they feel. This leads to a narrowing of focus. In order to create a common ground, this literature opts for the singular. This is particularly evident when it deals with the past. It then prefers to recreate the depth of personal (often family) lives rather than deal with collective destinies. The temporal distance is pushed into the background by emotional empathy.¹⁰

‘What is the point of literature?’ asked Antoine Compagnon in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France back in 2006. Almost two decades later, an answer has crystallised that is expressed both in the texts themselves and in their commentaries: literature uncovers, bears witness, brings people together; it repairs torn or broken social bonds. It is useful in every respect, because it not only helps to understand the world, but in return also boasts of ‘having effects in and on the world’ (Huppe, 2023: 77)—positive effects, because ‘the revelation of a reality would be enough to provoke (or at least hope for) effects of empathy, indignation, revolt, etc.’ (91). It defines itself as ‘a weapon against social invisibility’ (Huppe, 2021), a means of reconciliation and not of conflict, of consolation and not of anger. Its political effectiveness lies in its ability to pay attention to the groups that are deprived of it and, through its representation, to contribute to creating a community in which no one ignores anyone. In this way, it participates in the great enterprise of recognition, the importance of which is at the centre of the social philosophies that Axel Honneth has been developing since his work *The Struggle for Recognition* (1995) and, in the French context, Guillaume Le Blanc (2009).

Associating the word ‘political’ with this reparative literature implies a double redefinition: a redefinition of literature, which is no longer seen primarily as a linguistic operation with an aesthetic aim, but as a social and transitive act with a consolatory aim, ‘a mode of action and a form of insertion into contemporary society’ (Grall, 2014); a redefinition of politics understood as a redistribution of attention and as the social recognition of marginalised individuals or groups who are silenced—not in the sense

¹⁰ The works of the historian Ivan Jablonka are particularly revealing. Since his book *A History of the Grandparents I Never Had* (2012), he has been writing a highly personalised history, with himself very much present in the narrative of his historical investigations. His books have enjoyed a level of success that is unthinkable for research that adheres strictly to historical methodology.

of a collective emancipation project, but in the sense of an awareness of otherness aimed at consolation, coexistence and reconciliation. I want to explore this double redefinition of literature and politics by drawing on the texts of some contemporary writers and theorists who criticise it and suggest a different answer to the question ‘what can literature do?’.¹¹

‘Beaucoup d’intentions, assez peu de crimes’ [‘Many intentions, few crimes’]¹²

The idea that literature fulfils a political function *mainly* by ensuring the representation of ‘the poorest, the most neglected, the most visibly stigmatised’ (Neveux, 2019: 77), thus achieving a new distribution of the sensible and of attention, seems questionable from both a literary and a political point of view. In an article dealing with the relationship between the Gilets jaunes movement and the contemporary writers who took an interest in it, Justine Huppe identifies three problematic points that need to be clarified:¹³

Le premier repose sur ses conditions de possibilités (est-il si simple de voir les dits ‘invisibles’), le deuxième fait partie inhérente de ses moyens (y a-t-il une forme—récit, montage, fiction—évidente pour opérer ce travail de reconnaissance par la littérature) et le dernier concerne sa portée et ses effets (donner une ‘image de’ suffit-il à réaliser un travail de représentation au sens politique du terme?)

[T]he first point refers to the conditions of possibility (is it so easy to see the so-called ‘invisible’?), the second is an inherent part of the means (is there an obvious form—narrative, montage, fiction—to carry out this work of recognising through literature?), and the last concerns its scope and effects (is it enough to give an ‘image of’ to perform a representation in the political sense of the term?) (Huppe, 2021).

¹¹ ‘Explore’ is the title chosen by one of these theoreticians, Florent Coste, for his literary essay: *Explore. Investigations littéraires* (2017).

¹² This is the title of Quintane’s contribution to *Contre la littérature politique* (2024: 11).

¹³ It is difficult to give a neutral overview of the Gilets jaunes movement, which emerged in France in October 2018 and whose name refers to the high-visibility yellow vests worn by the demonstrators. Refusing to draw up a catalogue of demands or even claim allegiance to a particular political side, it is characterised by a ‘radical and generalised critique of all forms of representation and delegation’ (Jeanpierre, 2019: 14). It was an unprecedented phenomenon due to its forms (weekly demonstrations, blockades of countless roundabouts throughout France, far more than one-off marches in major cities), its duration (several years, despite the interruption caused by the COVID epidemic) and the (highly partisan and controversial) media coverage it received. It has also been subject to violent police and legal repression. Amnesty International (2020) estimates that 40,000 people have been wrongfully convicted in connection with the movement since the end of 2018.

First point: is it enough to *want* to see the invisible in order to see them? Is it enough to open one's eyes or go out into the 'field' ['terrain']?¹⁴ To think so would be to misunderstand the deeper levers of social invisibility. 'Attention is not a transparent frame that obeys the movements of individual intentionality', warns Huppe (2021). The inaudibility of the subaltern is less due to a lack of voice than to economic, material and symbolic configurations that prevent them from being heard.¹⁵ A literary 'politics' defined by the desire to 'make the invisible visible' would benefit from a reflection on the deeper causes that keep certain groups away from the representations circulating in the public arena. It would also be necessary to ascertain whether the invisible are willing to be represented, and if so, on what terms and under what conditions. In her analysis of the encounters between writers and *Gilets jaunes*, Justine Huppe clearly shows that trust in literary representation can be shaken by the very subjects that one actually wanted to represent:

En prenant la parole, en investissant l'espace public, en condamnant l'expertise, la commisération et l'intellectualisme des professionnels de la représentation, les *Gilets jaunes* ont, plus que jamais, montré qu'ils avaient des voix, qu'ils n'avaient pas besoin qu'on leur donne la parole pour la prendre, et qu'ils n'avaient pas attendu que les écrivains s'intéressent à eux pour produire leur propre poétique.

By taking the floor, by occupying the public space, by denouncing the expertise, convenience and intellectualism of the professionals of representation, the *Gilets jaunes* have shown more than ever that they have a voice, that they do not need to be given the floor in order to take it, and that they have not waited for writers to take an interest in them in order to develop their own poetics (Huppe, 2021).

To 'see the invisible' thus implies a double precaution: to reflect on one's own position (the social anchoring, the prejudices that distort one's own perception) and not to consider one's own gaze transparent, but also to reflect on the desire of others to be seen

¹⁴ The term '*terrain*' has become central in contemporary literary studies. Dominique Viart proposes the category of 'field literatures' ['littératures de terrain'] to describe works that 'borrow some of their practices from the social sciences: surveys, archival excavations, interviews, *in-situ* research, [and] initiate a new kind of relationship with the social sciences, based on what the latter call 'fieldwork', whose difficulties they narrate and report rather than deliver or fictionalise' (Viart, 2019).

¹⁵ See Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988). The philosopher focuses in particular on the women of the 'Third World', the subaltern figures par excellence, and shows that although the subalterns speak out, their words are neither heard nor answered: they are not considered (inter)locutors. The representations that others make of them do not contribute to making them autonomous subjects.

and represented. At the end of her aforementioned article, Servoise asks, without giving an answer, ‘How can we contribute to the recognition of certain people or groups that we feel are poorly represented without maintaining an asymmetrical relationship between those who grant or allow recognition and those who are supposed to expect it?’ (2022).

Secondly, what form should the representation of the invisible take? If one is too quick to praise the attempts of literature to achieve a new distribution of the sensible, one runs the risk of overlooking the essential question of how. How does this division take place? By what syntactic, lexical or linguistic means? By mobilising which emotions? ‘What is the difference, in concrete terms and not just in posture, between ‘making someone speak’ and ‘speaking for’, ‘in the place of’, in a literary narrative?’ asks Servoise (2022). What means are available to narrative literature to make a word resonate without giving it away? Even the cut-up process involves choosing from the spoken words, erasing some in favour of others. On a broader level, the narrative form is not neutral; it reformulates experiences and inscribes them into specific frames. Narrative is inevitably about organising things. The words of others are then placed within a framework of intelligibility that favours their dissemination, but which can also obscure their meaning by truncating and simplifying them so that they are heard. What degree of distortion is acceptable?

Finally, can it be assumed that the literary representation of the marginalised contributes to their better political representation? Would this not be a confusion of the two meanings of the word ‘representation’ that the German language distinguishes between: ‘Darstellung’ and ‘Vertretung’? Does representation [Darstellung] necessarily extend to the mandate [Vertretung] and political recognition? This is doubtful, and not only because of the extremely low status of literature in the public sphere and in the media.¹⁶ Indeed, to deliberately confuse the two meanings of the term ‘representation’ is to postulate that injustices in the distribution of attention, indeed injustices in general, could be resolved simply by becoming aware of their existence. It means suggesting, like the political theatre denounced by Olivier Neveux, that ‘suffering has no other reason than the ignorance of the legislator and the voter’ (2019: 28). Suddenly becoming aware of the existence of an otherness to be pitied through (theatrical, literary, artistic) representation would be the necessary first step towards reparation. However, when we consider the number of works that have dealt with such representations for decades, works that are read and, by their own admission, appreciated by political leaders, and the policies pursued by those same leaders, the progression we would like to see as

¹⁶ Still it is worth remembering that while the literature discussed in this article is the subject of a great deal of academic research and reviews, it occupies a very small place in the media flow.

logical from exposure, awareness, to more just political action falters.¹⁷ The profound injustice in the distribution of attention, and by extension wealth, is not explained by ignorance, but by structures that are maintained in full knowledge of the facts.

This raises the question of the political reach of a literature that redistributes the sensible by focusing on individual scale and empathy, while more or less ignoring the causes of active invisibilisation that keeps certain groups and individuals on the margins of attention. Howard Zinn defined protest literature as follows: ‘The most obvious contribution to social change that literature can make is simply to inform people of something they know nothing about, to startle them with new information into reaching for something that was previously beyond their vision’ (2006: 515). But this information must not be limited to evoking deplorable or undignified conditions. It should also include the structures that maintain them. Otherwise, it risks reinforcing the established order rather than challenging it. As Lucbert states: ““denunciations”, “outrages”, “outpourings” are not political. Or they are political in the sense of a paradoxical adherence to the existing order’ (2024: 16–17). The simple attempt to bring about a new distribution of the sensible proves to be not only inadequate, but downright harmful, as it contributes to appeasement rather than anger and functions as an outlet for the established powers:

Au moins la célébration par les institutions du *statu quo* a-t-elle un mérite : faire voir que La-littérature-politique est une composante du *C’est ainsi*. En vérité, la position *contre* a sa place (de choix) dans le système de liaison hégémonique. L’ordre capitaliste a la libéralité d’aménager une vacuole pour la plainte : on peut pleurer sur l’ordre des choses, c’est même de bonne hygiène. *C’est comme ça mais c’est bien triste*. On remercie les auteurs pour leur participation à l’écrasement bien déploré – La-littérature-politique est l’asile du mécontentement.

The fact that the institutions celebrate the *status quo* has at least one merit: it shows that The-political-literature is a component of *That’s the way it is*. In truth, the position *against* has its place (of choice) in the system of hegemonic entanglement. The capitalist order has the permissiveness to create a vacuole for complaints: you can cry

¹⁷ Advisors to the presidential palace have revealed that Emmanuel Macron has read Édouard Louis’s book *Qui a tué mon père* [*Who Killed My Father*] (2018a), in which the author lists those he holds responsible for the damage done to his father’s body—naming all those in political power who have implemented reforms that impact the lives of the most disadvantaged. The author reacted very strongly and published this message: ‘Emmanuel Macron, mon livre s’insurge contre ce que vous êtes et ce que vous faites. Abstenez-vous d’essayer de m’utiliser pour masquer la violence que vous incarnez et exercez. J’écris pour vous faire honte. J’écris pour donner des armes à celles et à ceux qui vous combattent’ [‘Emmanuel Macron, my book is against what you are and what you do. Do not try to use me to disguise the violence you embody and practise. I write to shame you. I write to give weapons to those who fight you’] (2018b).

over the order of things, it's even good hygiene. *That's the way it is, but it's sad.* We thank the authors for their participation in the much-lamented crushing—The-political-literature is the asylum of the discontent (Lucbert, 2024: 18; author's emphasis).

By engaging in a non-confrontational redefinition of the political, by suggesting that marginalisation can be resolved through representation, which would itself entail a degree of reparation and consolation, what Lucbert calls 'La-littérature-politique' would be the agent of a definitive depoliticisation of the social issues it seeks to explain. One could therefore surmise that 'behind the apparent omnipresence of politics [...] perhaps lies the symptom of its eviction' (Huppe, 2023: 106), or disarmament. Lucbert concludes: 'to cling to misery and dubious successes *cut off from what causes them* is to gain moral support but to kill all literature—and indeed all politics' (2024: 16–17; author's emphasis). And here, a literature of distribution and consolation is accused of a double murder, and immediately dismissed. The criticism is directed less against the politics of literature as Rancière defines it than against what could be called a weak interpretation of it. It is *not enough* to give a voice to the unheard in order to function as political literature or to make literature politically. Redefining the distribution of the sensible requires not only a shift in the gaze, but also a redefinition of the gaze itself and the way we perceive the world and its beings.

Where does this leave us? Since her book *Tomates [Tomatoes]* (2014), the writer Nathalie Quintane has been dreaming of her books being read by the secret services responsible for internal and external security:¹⁸

- Franchement, il y a longtemps qu'on n'avait pas eu affaire à un lectorat aussi attentif.
- Ça, c'est pas faux. De toute façon, les seuls livres vraiment intéressants, c'est ceux qui sont lus par la police.
- En plus, ça fait exploser les chiffres de vente !

- To be honest, we haven't had to deal with such an attentive readership for a long time.
- Yes, that's true. In any case, the only really interesting books are the ones that are read by the police.
- And it also boosts sales! (Quintane, 2014: 65)

¹⁸ Here is how she fills the Biography section on her publisher's website (2022b): 'Je m'appelle encore Nathalie Quintane. Je n'ai pas changé de date de naissance. J'habite toujours au même endroit. / Je suis peu nombreuse mais je suis décidée' ['My name is still Nathalie Quintane. My date of birth hasn't changed. I still live in the same place. / I am not many, but I'm determined'].

The fantasy continues in her contribution to the collection *Contre la littérature politique*:

Oh, que mes livres soient lus par la DGSI [Direction générale de la Sécurité intérieure] !
Qu'ils soient stabilotés par la DGSE [Direction générale de la Sécurité extérieure] !

Oh, that my books would be read by the DGSI! May they be annotated by the DGSE!
(Quintane, 2024: 23)

It would be a recognition of the subversive, revolutionary potential of literature to be investigated by the police and categorised as dangerous.¹⁹ But the poet soon has to face facts:

DGSE, DGSI, hélas ! Je ne suis qu'une formaliste ! Trois fois hélas ! Votre budget est insuffisant à vous payer des études de lettres ! Quatre fois hélas ! les facs de lettres sont en pleine déshérence !

DGSE, DGSI, alas! I'm just a formalist! Three times alas! You don't have enough money to study literature! Four times alas! The humanities universities are in total decline! (Quintane, 2024: 23)

In our latitudes, books are rarely censored by those in power; literature does not worry them (much).²⁰ 'Most of the time, literature is harmless, it reveals nothing (because it doesn't want to reveal anything) and books often fall out of our hands', argues Florent Coste (2019). This observation is not a reason for despair or resignation, but shifts the terrain of the debate. By leaving aside the question of the usefulness of literature, it frees it from any political or social mission and invites a renewal of the link between literature and politics. The renunciation of a 'look-horizon, lesson-giving' literature, which strives for a fantasised effectiveness, does not mean resigning oneself to a 'harmless literature' (Lucbert, 2024: 17). It suggests that literature acts in its own way and with its own means. 'It is one thing to say that literature should provide us with useful *services*, quite another to say that it offers *resources* that we use more or less appropriately', insists Coste (2019; author's emphasis). It is one thing to criticise the journalistic and academic category of political literature; it is quite another to make literature politically.

¹⁹ *Tomates* (2014) refers to the so-called Tarnac affair, which followed the arrest of the anti-capitalist activist Julien Coupat in 2008 for acts of sabotage on a TGV railway line. During the investigation, anonymous political texts (which the courts suspected might have been written by Coupat) were presented to the courts as evidence and preparatory acts for the sabotage.

²⁰ Current events in the United States (and in some European countries) and the many cases of censorship of books in schools cast a shadow over this confidence, which could prove to be more optimistic than factual.

‘Faire politiquement de la littérature, pas de la littérature politique’ [‘make literature politically / not political literature’]

In ‘Donnez-moi un mot, juste un mot’ [‘Give me a word, just a word’], her contribution to the collection *Contre la littérature politique*, Leslie Kaplan calls for ‘making literature politically / not political literature’ (2024: 108, author’s emphasis).²¹ Far from being just a play on words or a poetic device, the abandonment of the adjective in favour of the adverb represents an important change, as it turns the articulation between literature and politics into an act that is never given as such, but must always be performed anew. The use of the verb ‘faire’, which is very broad and not very noble, emphasises the fact that writing politically is a concrete gesture that must be repeated again and again. The political dimension of literature lies less in the choice of certain themes than in the way it is practised. Neveux makes this very clear:

plutôt que de considérer que ‘tout est politique’, n’y aurait-il pas quelque intérêt à considérer que ‘tout peut être politisé’ et à faire de cette opération l’objet d’une difficulté plutôt que d’une évidence : inscrire la politique dans *l’inconfort d’une pratique*, d’une métamorphose, d’une traduction dans des rythmes et des imaginaires différents ?

Instead of assuming that ‘everything is political’, would it not be better to assume that ‘everything can be politicised’, and to make this operation the object of a difficulty rather than an obvious one: to inscribe politics in *the discomfort of a practice*, a metamorphosis, a translation into other rhythms and imaginaries? (Neveux, 2019: 11; emphasis my own)

To ‘make literature politically’ means to ‘displace the obviousness of the signifier *political*’ (Huppe, 2023: 108), not to try to (pre-)define it by themes or even by intentions, but to make it emerge unexpectedly through a certain relationship established with the world, language and readers. This makes literature an agent of disturbance and disquiet (which need not be agonising), actively and effectively disrupting what is taken for granted and presented as unchangeable. In this way, everything can actually be politicised, i.e. called into question—including the purchase of a tomato plant and the narrative that goes with it. The narrator of *Tomates* (Quintane, 2014) hesitates between unusual tomato seeds and plants with safer outcomes, wondering how she can be consistent with herself and her beliefs:

²¹ Kaplan paraphrases Godard inviting ‘to make cinema politically, not political cinema’ (1992: 20). The wording is slightly different in other interviews, for example: ‘It’s not about saying, for example, I’m a filmmaker, I’m going to make political films, but on the contrary, I’m going to make politically political films’ (1972).

La perspective de ne rien voir venir, ou du rachitique, l'a emporté : je n'ai pas acheté de graines à Kokopelli mais des plants à Jardiland, ménageant ainsi une transition entre une vie sans tomates personnelles et une vie avec tomates rares. Je sais bien que ce type de précision amuse, pourtant le mot Tomate ne doit pas l'emporter sur les autres et leur gravité. Transposé, le problème du choix entre une graine non industrielle et un plant issu d'une graine industrielle équivaut au dilemme du militant se demandant s'il reste au Parti socialiste par fidélité pour un passé doux et s'il le quitte, et cela le violente.

The prospect of nothing to come or of stunted tomatoes prevailed: I did not buy seeds from Kokopelli, but plants from Jardiland, thus arranging a transition between a life without my own tomatoes and a life with rare tomatoes. I am well aware that this kind of precision is amusing, but the word Tomato should not take precedence over the others and their seriousness. The problem of choosing between a non-industrial seed and a plant derived from an industrial seed is akin to the dilemma of the activist who wonders whether to stay in or leave the Socialist Party out of loyalty to a beloved past, and it hurts (17).

This is a far cry from the justification of literature by its ability to 'compensate for the deficits of representative democracy' (Huppe, 2023: 120). Quintane openly questions the political effectiveness of her own practice and refuses to enter the predetermined terrain of a fixed definition of what political (literature) means. She represents no one but herself and is faced with a dilemma that is by no means tragic, but nonetheless important: which tomatoes should she choose? At the end of the text:

...les tomates, devenues entre-temps mes tomates, poussaient, c'est-à-dire que leur tige, surgeons ôtés, s'était dilatée et munie d'un duvet tout du long, et qu'aux fleurs de petites boules avaient crû, petits pois plus ronds de jour en jour, peau brillante et bien tendue. [...] C'est sûr que cela ne forme pas une communauté, encore moins un couple, mais une sorte d'art, l'art du toucher, du tâter, du cerner, du circonvier, de l'intellection sensible.

...the tomatoes, which in the meantime had become my tomatoes, were growing, that is, their stems, after the suckers had been removed, had expanded and grown all the way down, and small balls had sprouted from the flowers, small peas that grew rounder day by day, their skin shiny and firm. [...] It is certain that this does not form a community, still less a couple, but a kind of art, the art of touching, of feeling, of grasping, of circumventing, of sensitive intellection (Quintane, 2014: 96–97).

An art form that pays attention to contours and materials, processes and decisions, that proceeds according to the principle of trial and error and is firmly rooted in the sensitive world. The aim is not so much to depict the real world, but to make it the object/subject of a (more or less far-fetched) questioning and to provide it with the disturbance of attention and astonishment. The text does not necessarily reveal the magic of the world or the extraordinary dimension of the most everyday gestures. It simply invites us to take another look.

This is the approach taken by the texts that make up the collection *Contre la littérature politique* (Alferi et al., 2024). Apart from their remarkable heterogeneity, they overwhelmingly reject the essayistic form.²² The texts contained in the collection do not offer theories that question and then redefine so-called ‘political literature’. Without preface or epilogue to give a theoretical understanding of the issues at stake, each contribution shows in its own way what is raised, in practice, by reflecting on the two terms in combination. Each suggests ‘a way to avoid the individual literary manifesto as well as the unifying effect of supposedly univocal proposals signed by a collective’, as Cécile Chatelet points out in her excellent review (2024). We will not know what a ‘real’, ‘authentic’ political literature should look like once the book closed, but it gives a range of what it can achieve.

This way of practising literature is not based on the hope of fulfilling an important mission, revealing to the indifferent world a part of reality that has remained invisible. It takes note of the fact that literature ‘is undoubtedly not much and yet not nothing’ (Lucbert, 2024: 93), ‘[n]either demiurgic, nor heroic, nor rigorously worthless’ (105)—just like the choice of a tomato plant.

Maintenir que la littérature peut travailler le politique n’implique nullement que ses textes pourraient soulever le monde par leurs seuls pouvoirs. [...] Le soulèvement du monde est une œuvre collective : la littérature y prend sa place. Ni prodigieuse, ni nulle. Mais que du moins elle la prenne.

The assertion that literature can work on politics in no way implies that its texts could raise the world through their power alone. [...] The uprising of the world is a collective work: literature takes its place in it. Neither prodigious nor null. But it should at least take its place (Lucbert, 2024: 36–37).

²² There are six contributions: Quintane’s random and sharp remarks; the comments slipped into a rewriting of extracts from the Iliad in Louisa Yousfi’s powerful ‘Chant pour des armes splendides’; Pierre Alferi’s missives in which he dismantles the self-proclaimed celebrities of French intellectual life; poetic fragments mixing observations and collected words by Leslie Kaplan, who insists on the distance that literature allows from the dominant languages, especially when reflecting on labour; the reflections of Tanguy Viel, who dreams of a literature that reconciles individual poetry and collective utopia; and finally a ‘moral tale’ by Volodine featuring Bubor Schnulff, who is supposed to give a speech to an audience and does nothing but repeat ‘propagandistic nonsense’ (2024: 148).

Without believing in telluric powers of revelation and without the hope that it can change the world, this literature opens up the possibility of a different perspective, close to the ground and to the tomatoes that grow on it.

Undoing the obvious

How to proceed? How to create the conditions for this changed gaze, which is not simply directed at a less visible object that needs to be brought to light, but which engages our perception itself, undoing the obvious? The authors of *Contre la littérature politique* (Alferi et al., 2024) follow two inextricably linked paths: that of *rearrangement*, which rejects flat mimesis and aims to make it possible to see the world differently by combining elements that are not normally considered together and putting them in perspective; that of a *language* that devotes all its energy to distancing itself from hegemonic jargon in order to denounce it as an instrument of domination, but also to open up other possibilities of thought and reference. These proposals are not striking in their originality. The reminder that literature works above all with and on language, that it opens up other ways of expressing and relating to the world, such as the endeavour to reconcile the challenges of form and the urgency of content: none of this is new. It should also be noted that the desire to emphasise the specificity of literature over everyday language (which is seen as less interesting or blind to domination) certainly stems from a desire to preserve its distinctiveness and proclaim its own emancipatory powers.

Nevertheless, I find it noteworthy that some authors and critics consider this admonition necessary and urgent in response to the praise for transitive and restorative literature. What is remarkable about the works that denounce the blunting of the category of political literature is the political need they assert to forge a language that is different from the seemingly standard, transparent language that is anything but neutral. One of the battles in which literature has a particular role to play is to accurately characterise the words used by politics and the media and to propose other terms and expressions to describe and refer to the world. Leslie Kaplan emphasises this in her contribution to *Contre la littérature politique*:

c'est une langue très autoritaire
 cette langue du capitalisme actuel
 cette langue du 'management'
 ah, les 'objectifs à court, moyen, long terme'
 les 'coûts', les 'profits'
 on vit, on pense, avec ces mots-là
 dis plutôt qu'on vit, on pense dans ces mots-là

it's a very authoritarian language
 the language of today's capitalism
 the language of 'management'
ah, 'short-, medium- and long-term objectives'
'costs', 'profits'
 we live, we think, with these words
say rather that we live, we think in those words (Kaplan, 2024: 93; author's emphasis)

Since language is particularly effective in enforcing the 'systems of evidence' that need to be 'undone', since 'if there is a common seeing, it is because there is a common language adopted by all', since 'language is linked to the enforcement (or contestation) of a political order' (Lucbert, 2024: 19), literature seems ideally suited to play a (significant) role in the desired derailment. In contrast to the social sciences:

[la littérature] a les mains dans le langage et ses images, dans leurs concaténations, dans cette *matière qui fait le voir hégémonique* : elle peut y attenter, le démantibuler, ouvrir de nouveaux voir. S'il y avait une maxime de l'art, ce serait : *au revoir*.

[literature] has its hands in language and in images, in their concatenations, in this *material that constitutes the hegemonic point of view*: it can attack it, dismantle it, open up new ways of seeing. If there were a maxim of art, it would be: *Goodbye* (2024: 20; author's emphasis).

Its most obvious political effect lies in its ability to detach itself from the prevailing language—or to blur it, to return it to its absurd cruelty. Literature is praised 'as a means of resistance against the overwhelming majority discourse' (Chatelet, 2024).

This is exactly what Lucbert achieves in *Personne ne sort les fusils* (2020). Based on the trial against France Télécom following the 19 suicides of several employees and the 22,000 'voluntary departures', the author puts the company on trial, in a text that mobilises the critical power of literature to express its anger. Faced with the inadequacy of official justice, the book conducts a trial within a trial, even a trial of the trial, because if the court does not formulate the indictment according to the gravity of the facts, it is above all because it speaks the same language as the defendants: 'The trial against France Télécom is the story of a grammatical stalemate', she writes (21). For a real trial to take place, it is essential to scrutinise the language of neoliberal capitalism, the 'Lingua Capitalismi Neoliberalis' ('LCN'), as Lucbert calls it in reference to Victor Klemperer's 'Lingua Tertii Imperii' ('LTI'). She manages to create an exteriority to this language in order to question its hegemony and to see it

for what it is—a tool of violent domination. By deconstructing and dismantling the grammatical means of its opponents, the author does not seek to repair anything but, on the contrary, to destroy, and above all the illusion of a common world. Lucbert refuses consensus and restores the violence of social relations, indeed ‘bringing out the guns’. Justice does not appear here as a balance to be achieved or restored, it does not even consist in acknowledging the injustice suffered, but in reigniting anger and giving it a form, not to channel it, but to multiply it tenfold and make it literally (and literarily) hard-hitting.

To play this role of derailer in the face of hegemonic language requires a constantly renewed power of invention. This questioning cannot be achieved with or limited to a transparent language or older forms. ‘Bringing ordinary language and ordinary life into literature’ is not only inadequate, but also politically questionable:

- Première nouvelle : les *gens* (le peuple, etc. – *les gens, c’est toi*) parlent une langue simple, claire, transparente comme une source traversée de soleil jusqu’au fond. Ça se voit que vous ne connaissez pas ma famille. Truffée de mots oubliés, étrangers (catalan, limousin), de cassures et de répétitions.
- Cette langue ‘ordinaire’-là, celle de la littérature à laquelle nous sommes désormais habituées, elle est spécialement confectionnée pour une petite bourgeoisie inculte-cultivée, celle qui adore apprendre plein de choses (il faut donc que ce soit *compréhensible*). C’est une langue qui n’a pas été déscolarisée.
- Elle peut exprimer la colère, d’ailleurs, la révolte, l’émeute, le meurtre, que sais-je encore, mais elle les exprime *sagement*.
- Elle exprime *sagement* la colère, *sagement* la révolte, et elle cadre l’émeute.
- First news: folks (the people, etc. – *you are the people*) speak a simple, clear language, as transparent as a spring flooded by the sun all the way to the bottom. It is obvious that you do not know my family. Full of forgotten, foreign words (Catalan, Limousin), breaks and repetitions.
- This ‘ordinary’ language, the language of literature to which we have become accustomed, is specially created for an uncultivated-educated middle class that likes to learn a lot (so it has to be *understandable*). It is a language that has not been deschooled.
- It can express anger, revolt, riot, murder, whatever, but it expresses it *obediently*.
- It expresses anger obediently, revolt obediently, and it puts limits on ruckus (Quintane, 2024: 31; author’s emphasis).

Polished language can only help to dampen anger and rage and maintain the *status quo*. It puts things in order at the very moment it expresses the desire for change. The challenge is to invent an unsettling language that understands what is at stake in the here and now—instead of repeating old models, even admirable ones like Victor Hugo:

- Mais pourquoi vous n’écoutez pas comme Victor Hugo ? nous lance à ce moment-là quelqu’un dans le public ; ou plutôt :
- Pourquoi n’y a-t-il pas de Victor Hugo aujourd’hui ?
J’ai failli lui dire : – Eh bien parce qu’il y a eu le vingtième siècle.
- But why don’t you write like Victor Hugo? someone from the audience throws at us; or rather
- Why is there no Victor Hugo today?
I almost said: – Well, because there was the twentieth century (Quintane, 2024: 27–28).

The challenge, as well as the power of literature, would be to find the right form for today’s revolts or, more simply, for today’s questions, using the countless resources of literature, among which Quintane is delighted to find ‘bad wit – satire, insolence, irony, nonchalance, humour’ (2024: 34); a language that thwarts habits, undoes automatism, multiplies detours.

The invention of such language, which denounces the ideological and hegemonic implications of so-called transparent language, as well as the associated endeavour to break habits and automatism, makes it possible to question the obvious and, even on a small scale, to influence our perception of the ‘real’. This is what Lucbert’s *Défaire voir* (2024) is about: ‘to undo seeing’, i.e. to break away from the usual way of seeing, shaped by words and structures of domination. She notes that description alone, the legacy of a 19th century that is still revered in France, is not enough. ‘The social world is an object-aspirator’, she writes, ‘that triggers sagas and evokes an eternal return: that of linear mimesis and its infinite detail’ (16). This type of representation does not question the established order either, because mimesis leads to ‘narratives that duplicate the situations described without the slightest *change*. [...] Everything on a flat surface. *Nothing is rearranged*’ (17; author’s emphasis). Lucbert intends to counter this necessarily smooth representation, not because of its object but because of its form, with what she calls a ‘figure’, which she defines as ‘another tailoring of the elements of the world and, above all, their arrangement, their presentation in another set of relations’ (18). We must insist here on what distinguishes this ‘other tailoring’ from the ‘distribution of the

sensible' as interpreted and practised by many contemporary texts: 'Re-arranging is not a matter of 'unravelling', 'revealing' or 'becoming aware'' (20; author's emphasis); it is not a matter of shifting the gaze towards objects previously ignored or kept invisible, but of reconfiguring frames of perception by constructing frames of intellection other than those proposed by the dominant narratives. The challenge is to 'form unheard-of chains' (90; author's emphasis) to counter the famous *There Is No Alternative*. Kaplan, again:

*la littérature peut questionner les discours
enfermants
réducteurs
elle peut montrer
à l'opposé des visions naturalistes
que ce qui existe
n'est pas nécessaire*

*literature can question the
confining
reductive discourses
it can show
in contrast to naturalistic visions
that what exists
is not necessary (Kaplan, 2024: 107; author's emphasis)*

This is true of Quintane's texts, to the last, *Tout va bien se passer* [*Everything's going to be fine*] (2022a). Novel, political fable, time travel, it doesn't matter: this walk through a barely futuristic Paris, empty but teeming with a thousand dangers, plays with genres, reviving the tradition of the *flânerie* while projecting it into a political and existential concern. The geography of contemporary French power (the Élysée Palace is never far away) is thwarted by the unexpected appearance of a real, if little-known, historical figure, the painter Lucile Franque (1780–1803), a renegade disciple of David who wanted to remain faithful to revolutionary ideals. We also witness the kidnapping of a minister who is obsessed with his torso by a group of revolutionary (bad) cooks. The script is extravagant to say the least, the topographical realism is shattered by improbabilities and the conflation of epochs, while themes such as the revolution, past and present, ideal and betrayed, the exercise of power and its theatricality, the relationship between art and politics, whether conflictual or propagandistic—in short, fundamentally (and

even classically) political concepts are explored here in a genuinely and radically new way, in the course of a whimsical and often hilarious dialogue. They are addressed not *in spite* of the story's weirdness or the author's capricious imagination, but *through* it. With all its peculiarities, the text raises a number of questions and reflections on political power (including the hyper-contemporary, even if President Macron is not mentioned once).

This also applies to the six texts in the collection *Contre la littérature politique*, which all 'refuse the straight line' (Viel, 2024: 124) in favour of short circuits, unexpected montages, confusions that lead to re-examine the self-evident—above all the expected discourse on the connection between literature and politics, the tensions of which must be revived, not extinguished. Volodine's 'conte moral', for example, is about an unfortunate character who is asked to give a lecture on Lenin's *April Theses* to a large audience (2024: 133–154). The author pokes fun (another opportunity to emphasise the role of humour in the political production of literature) by portraying a character with a faulty memory who has died and finds himself outside any accurate historical situation. The proletarian crowd that stands before him is completely indifferent to his attempt to speak. Volodine plays with Soviet symbolism, explicitly displacing expectations of political discourse or literature that seeks to convey a political message. This does not mean, however, that his text is apolitical or rejects politics. Here, too, the focus is on fundamental questions such as the position of the leader in relation to the masses, the significance of rhetoric and revolutionary staging and the ghostly persistence of certain images, texts and speeches. Like this text, all contributions carry 'the idea of a political presence in literature that lies in the subversion of a language and in the invention of a form' (Chatelet, 2024).

Once again, this stance is not new. But it resonates with a new acuity, for example in Louisa Yousfi's 'Chant pour des armes splendides' ['Song for splendid weapons'] (2024: 35–62). By paraphrasing a fragment of the *Iliad*, the founding text par excellence, to describe the violence suffered today by immigrants or those identified as such, the author uses the most established literary tradition to express the very contemporary anger of a discriminated and violented population. Achilles, now the son of immigrants, wants to avenge Patroclus, now the victim of police beatings.²³ Punctuated by dialectal Arabic, the song reactivates the ancient form to forge an epic of contemporary struggles:

²³ Let us remember the words of French head of state Emmanuel Macron in March 2019: 'Do not speak of repression or police violence, these words are unacceptable in a state governed by the rule of law' (Franceinfo, 2019).

[...] voir soudainement leurs lèvres se desserrer
 pour dire
 quelque chose d'aussi grand
 '*Que je meure, moi qui n'ai pu empêcher que
 succombe mon compagnon !*'
 mais disent en ces temps
 Justice pour mon frère
 Justice et vérité !
 Tu la tiens ton épopée,
 poète qui cherche son souffle
 ne le cherche pas
 il te suffit d'égrener
 un à un
 du grand Catalogue des Achéens
 les noms inoubliés qui peuplent
 le deuxième chant,
 surnommé le chant des bataillons
 je te l'apprends
 et des soldats tombés
 là j'invente
 Ça donnerait
 Wissam, Angelo, Adama, Babcar, Amadou,
 Amine, Adoulaye, Lahoucine,
 Ali, Lamine, Nahel
 Et des pointillés

[...] to suddenly see their lips loosen
 to say
 something so great
 '*May I die, I who could not prevent
 my companion from dying!*'
 but then say
 Justice for my brother
 Justice and truth!
 There you have your epic,
 poet who seeks his breath
 don't look for it

all you have to do is to go through
 one by one
 from the great Catalogue of the Achaeans
 the unforgettable names that populate
 the second song,
 known as the song of the battalions

I am telling you

and fallen soldiers

I am making this up

It would be

Wissam, Angelo, Adama, Babcar, Amadou,

Amine, Adoulaye, Lahoucine,

Ali, Lamine, Nahel

And dotted lines (Yousfi, 2024: 45; author's emphasis)

The most classical form is reworked to record the names of today's warriors and, in a broader sense, to express once again the demand for justice and mourning for the dead. 'Tfou ahlik, Agamemnon!' (2024: 39): the appearance of Arabic terms in a text written in French, based on ancient sources, weaves a contemporary voice that says more than many speeches about contemporary France. These Arabic words are not printed in italics, which would distinguish them as foreign; they are simply part of a language that is one and whole in its openness and its multiple echoes. This intermingling is reminiscent of the multilingualism that exists *de facto* in French society as a result of its colonial and migration history. The many languages spoken in France are not mutually exclusive, they coexist and interact with each other—whatever those may think who long for a pure French language, which, obviously, never existed.

A final remark on the forms and language forged by the authors analysed here. It is hard not to notice that the proposed examples all depart from the novel form. Even stories themselves seem to be the object of suspicion. This rejection can be seen as a challenge to storytelling as it is used in politics. The term 'storytelling', coined in the 1990s, refers to a communication strategy—political, commercial, military, but also governmental—, based on the telling of stories to the detriment of arguments, figures or facts. Christian Salmon has clearly shown how this 'incredible hold-up on the imaginary' works and transforms the art of storytelling into an 'instrument of state lies and opinion control' (2008: 20). Faced with this political storytelling that 'sets in motion a narrative machinery in which individuals are made to identify with models and conform to protocols' (17), the authors mentioned above do not attempt to impose

a more truthful and less misleading narrative. Unlike many of their peers whose works are advertised as political and who mainly write novels or inquiries, they prefer to dispense with narrative per se, or at least the telling of coherent, linear stories. The renunciation of the classical narrative can thus be interpreted as a decisive political decision not to repeat the manipulations and distortions orchestrated by political power in the production of mass stories.

The authors analysed in this article rather make way for what might be called poetic speech, with its many gaps, interruptions and reflections. Poetry and prose are blended to the point of indistinguishability to create a language in an almost artisanal way that leaves room for surprises and disruptions and disturbs our perception of (social) reality instead of merely reproducing it.²⁴ The contributors to *Contre la littérature politique* (Alferi et al., 2024) are not inventing a new form that would definitively seal and model the right way to write political literature. They try and grope, break and explore, providing images and associations that open up possibilities indiscriminately political and literary. The very free forms they forge do not bother to suspend the disbelief of their readers. On the contrary, the proposed implicit reading pact is based on questioning and requires a non-passive relationship to the texts. The attempt to write literature politically, rather than to write political literature, extends to the invitation to read texts politically, rather than political texts that repeat previous convictions.

Much remains to be clarified, especially what is required of the reader in the face of these texts, which proclaim a kind of modesty and yet retain a certain confidence in the disruptive powers of formal invention. But I would like to conclude on the desire to reintroduce antagonism into both political relations and literary texts, by leaving the last word to Yousfi, who invites us to reconsider the *âgon* into the 'real world' we spoke of and aimed at since the beginning of this article:

aller toi-même au contact
 au front.
 Sans faire semblant
 tu pourrais éprouver par toi-même
 la loi interne de la nécessité

²⁴ The results of this approach are reminiscent of some of the slogans of the *Gilets jaunes*, who were remarkably inventive. As their movement was not led by trade unions or established organisations, the protesters were not bound by any slogans and invented their own, demonstrating a strong sense of humour and creativity. A few examples: 'Le gilet jaune sera le linceul du vieux monde' ['The yellow vest will be the shroud of the old world'], 'gilet jaune vs parachute doré' ['yellow vest vs golden parachute'], 'Enfin les ronds-points servent à quelque chose' ['At last the roundabouts fulfil a purpose'], 'On ne naît pas casseur, on le devient' ['You're not born a troublemaker, you become one'] (Crignon, 2019).

de la guerre
éprouver les coups
fais pas zaama
le besoin rigoureux
de ces armes qu'on te commande.
Qu'elles protègent la fureur d'Achille
comme la tienne.

go yourself
to the front.
Without pretending
you could experience for yourself
the internal law of necessity
of war
experience the blows
don't zaama
the rigorous need
of these weapons you are commanded.
May they protect Achilles' fury
as they do yours (Yousfi, 2024: 59; author's emphasis).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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