# The Material of Literature

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Let us presuppose that reading a literary text consists in the execution of a sequence of predetermined acts of understanding and imagination. My question is: what are the materials processed by the reader in his reception of the literary work? Many will be inclined to say that those materials are words, or sentences, that the stuff of which literature is made is the language of the text. The following remarks are intended to suggest that this answer is ambiguous and, in a sense, false.

It is ambiguous because 'word,' 'sentence,' and 'language' (as well as 'text' and other related expressions) refer to a *necessarily* confused field of human experience. They sometimes refer exclusively to the signs of communication (as in, 'He does not pronounce the words properly'), and sometimes to both the signs and their meanings comprehended as one piece of information (as in, 'His words were outrageous'). Sign and content are effectively fused in communicative action. Their conceptual separation has been a burdensome and unsolved task of philosophy through the centuries. Peirce's, Frege's, Husserl's, and Saussure's terminologies (to name those still today most considered) can be seen as evidences of this inconclusive analytical struggle: especially if one observes that their triads (sign-interpretant-object, sign-sense-meaning, expression-meaning-object, signifier-signified-object) are topologically identical with the traditional distinction of word, concept, and thing, as well as with the Stoic's triad of signifier, signified (*lekton*), and thing.

What do we, then, process when we read words? Graphemes? Phonemes and meanings? Things? All of this together? The complex composite of communicative action functionally tends to appear, I said, as a homogeneous unit of information. Saussure may have tried to account for this smooth and useful collapse of heterogeneous pieces into one entity when he created his concept of 'sign' as the unity of 'signifier' and 'signified' (a homogeneous compound, as he pointed out, because both parts should be considered as psychic in substance). He further assimilated 'signifier' and 'signified' by conceiving both as configurations of distinctive traits engraved upon a matter that is itself formless. Some

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of his followers have maximized this assimilation by reducing the field of thought to the signifier. Is reading, and understanding in general, nothing else than mobilizing signifiers? I suppose that everybody will acknowledge that there is a difference between merely seeing graphic signs (or hearing language sounds) and understanding what they mean; but many will pretend nowadays that to understand a text is nothing but to associate it to other texts, and that such an operation is a play of chains of signifiers.

Some of us are unconvinced by this thesis because (among other things) we believe that the experience of literature (as that of reality in general) gives us something more than configurations of distinctive traits and chains of signifiers, something more than *writing* (using this word in one of its recent catachretic senses), to wit: images of life. Thereby I understand that images and experiences of life are *full*, and cannot be exhausted by a number of abstractive traits. If this is true, we must admit that the elements mobilized in reading are, at least partly, of a nature different from signs. But the texts we take in our hands contain signs alone. *Signs can evoke life and world only if the reading subject carries within* himself a kind of non-linguistic store of imaginary matter. Living images of things must be thought of as associating themselves, in the process of understanding, to words and concepts. What I postulate is that there is an order of experience (and of reality) that is no less original than the order of language (with which it interacts); that the elements of this order are ready to be used by the subject as his knowledge of the world; and that the elements of this order are not forms (configurations of distinctive traits determined by an abstractive system) but substances (conceptually inexhaustible plenitudes).

Let us take for example the word 'cat.' Its phonological description is relatively brief. The concept, or signified, can also be reduced to a few traits (say, 'feline,' 'domestic'), but these definitory traits are not simple elements like the phonological differences; rather they are in their turn conceptual compounds susceptible to definition, through new sets of elements. Clearly, further analysis will also deliver analysable elements. The analytical regress in the definitions of the signified does not seem to have an end. This observation shows that the Saussurean assimilation of signifier and signified is misleading. The principles organizing the structures of the signifier and the signified are of a radically diverse nature. (The signifier as such — that is, as a Saussurean 'acoustic image' — cannot subsist beyond the level of the differences which are perceptible in the communicative exchange; and this puts a limit even to the most minute analysis. That acoustic phenomena can be subjected to unending physical, and psycho-physiological, examination is something entirely

different, which, according to Saussure himself, does not belong to the field of language proper.) We may add, as another radical difference between signifier and signified, that the thesis of the 'arbitrariness' of the linguistic sign can only be sustained with reference to the signifier.

Further, to understand the word 'cat' does not imply the possession of its definition, and, on the other hand, it is more than knowing the discrete traits of the abstract concept of cat. Rather, it means inexplicitly to know what a cat is; her shape, movements, postures, sounds and silences, her absent gaze, the character of her domesticity (which we will not confuse with that of other domestic animals, but which we could not properly define), etc. Cat (the notion we possess) is a substance, a concrete universal (if I may use this term in a sense different from that which has been traditional since Hegel's *Aesthetics*). It has to be so, I submit, because otherwise our knowledge of them would not be adequate to what cats are. Their reality (inexhaustible as any) demands that our knowledge be open to unending input. A systematically fixed, formal concept alone would be a risky connection with the world.

At this point we must distinguish the concrete universal operative in our everyday notion, not only from the abstract signified (that connects it to the signifier) but also from the scientific (or technical) notion. The latter is, in its turn, an abstract configuration determined by theoretical principles, which results from the exploration of the thing's reality beyond the limits of everyday experience. The interaction of these three entities – the formal signified, the everyday notion, and the technical concept – seems, at first sight, a complex one. Here we only need indicate its existence: everyday notions are the starting basis for systematic curiosity, and they can be modified by its results (our everyday relation to cats, for example, changes in some measure according to medical and behavioral discoveries). On the other hand, the linguistic, formal meaning of the word (the signified), which is more stable because it is more abstract and elementary, will change if the pertinent thing undergoes essential mutations in everyday experience (say, that cats would cease to be domestic animals).

Despite these relations, what the word evokes in daily use is not the available scientific knowledge about the object (which is not a knowledge common to all members of the linguistic community), but the full *thing*, the lived reality, the precipitate of ordinary experience that we have named a 'concrete universal.' This knowledge is adequate in a sense different from the scientific. What we know about the beings which constantly surround us is, as I said, appropriate, but only insofar they are part of the world we meet in ordinary experience and just as they appear therein. It may well occur that the thing's reality suddenly reveals itself as

something very different from our ordinary view. Moreover, it may be theoretically possible (although improbable) that all of our operative everyday assumptions are 'false' from the utopic point of view of a complete science. Nonetheless, this possibly delusive concrete world will always remain the world we live in, reality for us. And this is the world evoked by the non-technical words of ordinary language, which are the elements of literary texts. In this everyday knowledge the poet finds his material, a material whose nature he has to respect, according to Aristotle, if necessary at the expense of (scientific) truth, since, for the course and effect of a poetic work, 'a believable impossibility is preferable to an unbelievable possibility' (*Poetics* XXIV, 10).

Within its limits (those of the intersubjectively lived world) our knowledge about ordinary things is not only adequate but also complete. It is inexhaustible in the sense that it cannot be more than minimally expressed in definitions. It is at our disposition only as an inexplicit certainty. We can immediately assert that a cat is neither this nor that, but we cannot positively say what she is in such a manner that the totality of her experienced being can be objectified. It is, in a sense, a merely *negative* knowledge. We carry within ourselves the complete and, to a point, definitive notions of our life's ordinary circumstances, but as if they were intangible possessions that operate without showing themselves, like a transparent and therefore invisible medium. These unobjectifiable materials determine our expectations regarding everyday occurrences. They allow us to recognize the kind of particular things we meet for the first time, to judge their worldly nature, to anticipate their behavior. The reflexive analysis of this knowledge delivers unending truths *a priori* (mostly trivial ones, but occasionally profound and revealing insights into the character of human life). This is the prime material of philosophy and of literature. Philosophy abstractly objectifies parts of our negative knowledge by means of conceptual systems. Literature does it through singular embodiments: imaginary individuals whose conduct and properties evoke the concrete universal and partially expose it.

When the conceptual analysis or the concrete image are *right*, we *feel* that it is so, as if the stuff of our knowledge would accept, without resisting, the objective mould. How could we otherwise spontaneously assent to the sonnet that declares cats to be 'powerful and sweet,' 'sedentary,' 'friends of science and voluptuosity,' etc. (Baudelaire, 'Les Chats')? It seems to us that these poetic images hit the mark. But they do not receive their legitimation from the formal concept of a domesticated feline nor from zoological science. Their truth is that of our lived life: an illusion, a dream that contains within itself, replicated, the difference between illusion and reality, surface and depth, accident and essence.

(Bergson's well-known opposition of the practical impoverishment and typification of perception, on the one hand, and intuitive-contemplative grasp of reality, on the other, falls, in my view, within the life-world of 'ordinary' existence.)

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