

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN AFFECT THEORY  
AND LITERARY CRITICISM

Series Editors: Adam Frank and Joel Faflak

palgrave▶pivot

# THE SEDUCTION OF FICTION

A Plea for Putting  
Emotions Back into Literary  
Interpretation

**Jean-François Vernay**



Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and  
Literary Criticism

Series Editors

Adam Frank

University of British Columbia  
Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada

Joel Faflak

Western University  
London, Ontario, Canada

The recent surge of interest in affect and emotion has productively crossed disciplinary boundaries within and between the humanities, social sciences, and sciences, but has not often addressed questions of literature and literary criticism as such. The first of its kind, *Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism* seeks theoretically informed scholarship that examines the foundations and practice of literary criticism in relation to affect theory. This series aims to stage contemporary debates in the field, addressing topics such as: the role of affective experience in literary composition and reception, particularly in non-Western literatures; examinations of historical and conceptual relations between major and minor philosophies of emotion and literary experience; and studies of race, class, gender, sexuality, age, and disability that use affect theory as a primary critical tool.

More information about this series at  
<http://www.springer.com/series/14653>

Jean-François Vernay

# The Seduction of Fiction

A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary  
Interpretation

Translated by Carolyne Lee

palgrave  
macmillan

Jean-François Vernay  
Noumea, New Caledonia

Translated by Carolyne Lee

The original edition of this translation was published by Complicités in Paris, in 2013, under the title: *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature*

Palgrave Studies in Affect Theory and Literary Criticism

ISBN 978-3-319-39452-7 ISBN 978-3-319-39453-4 (eBook)

DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-39453-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016950033

© The Editor(s) (if applicable) and The Author(s) 2016

This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use. The publisher, the authors and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, express or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made.

Cover illustration: © Melisa Hasan

Printed on acid-free paper

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by Springer Nature  
The registered company is Springer International Publishing AG Switzerland

Desire is the engine of life, the yearning that goads us forward with stops along the way, but it has no destination, no final stop, except death. The wondrous fullness after a meal or sex or a great book or conversation is inevitably short-lived. By nature, we want and we wish, and we assign content to that emptiness as we narrate our inner lives. For better and for worse, we bring meaning to it, one inevitably shaped by the language and culture in which we live. Meaning itself may be the ultimate human seduction.

Siri Hustvedt, "Variations on desire: a mouse, a dog, Buber and Bovary"

## AUTHOR'S PREFACE TO THE ENGLISH EDITION

When given the opportunity to express himself on the fate of literature, Jonathan Coe's character—Professor Leonard Davis, author of *The Failure of Contemporary Literature*—does not mince words:

“The older one gets,” said Davis, with his mouth full of cake, “the less useful critical theory seems.”

“You mean one should go back to texts?” asked Hugh.

“Yes, perhaps. But then, the more one reads them, the less interesting the texts themselves appear to become.”

“This essentially is what you've been arguing in your new book,” said Christopher. “It's a radical and provocative viewpoint, if I may so.”

Davis nodded his acquiescence.

“But does this mean,” Hugh asked carelessly, “the end of literature as we know it?”

“As we know it?”

“As it is taught in our schools and universities.”

“Ah! No, no ... indeed not. Far from it. In fact I think—” here, there was an almighty pause, far surpassing any that had gone before “—I think ...” Suddenly he looked up, the gleam of insight in his eye. The tension in the air was palpable. “I think I'd like another macaroon.”<sup>1</sup>

Beyond the jocular note, this excerpt from *A Touch of Love* (1989) illustrates how the demise of literature and the uselessness of literary criticism regularly emerge as prime concerns in controversial debates. Completed in 2011, *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature* (Plea for a renewal of emotion in literature) was first published in 2013 in France,

at a time when the community of French theorists and academics was publishing prolifically in order to sound alarm bells about students' peculiar estrangement from Literary Studies, to the point where the usefulness of academic courses and training over the last two decades was even called into question.<sup>2</sup>

To account for such an estrangement, Jérôme David<sup>3</sup> has listed three major stances:

1. Tzvetan Todorov puts it down to a kind of rigid formalism, essentially enshrined in schooling, whereby pupils are expected to be technical readers rather than passionate interpreters of fiction;
2. Jean-Marie Schaeffer feels that the evolution of literary studies over the last 20 years has generated a form of self-containment dictated by a set of fictional traits—such as the lack of extralinguistic referential properties or the absence of truth.<sup>4</sup> As a result, Schaeffer observes that literature has grown in isolation from other forms of discourse;
3. In line with reader-response theory, Yves Citton contends that students are being forced into a state of passive reading when they should be encouraged to become far more inquisitive about the texts under close scrutiny so as to form an “interpretive community” (Stanley Fish) of readers.

But my aim is not to discuss “the end of literature as we know it”; otherwise, I would have titled my book “A Farewell to Literature” as William Marx did.<sup>5</sup> My manifesto does not seek to mourn the causes of the alleged death of literature which, according to Marx, has been consistently self-proclaimed since the end of the nineteenth century. His view spanning three centuries of literary history and divided into three stages—namely expansion, autonomization, and devaluation—is self-explanatory enough not to need any further elaboration.

By articulating the three key components of literary interaction (i.e., the writing, reading, and interpreting processes), the wager of writing my book lay not so much in the capacity to take stock of the crisis sweeping through the beleaguered humanities, as in the ability to seek new directions and offer new tools that would do justice to the values of literature. Hence, my attempt at exposing the outline of what I call the psycholiterary approach. Another difficulty in the course of writing *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature* lay in the choice of words: “Fiction and literature are not synonymous,”<sup>6</sup> as Terry Eagleton boldly declares after he himself



uses literature and fiction as interchangeable terms for a few chapters. Clearly, these words are not to be conflated but have nevertheless been used more or less synonymously in my original French edition for stylistic purposes. This is because authors who wish to write elegantly in French are tacitly expected not to repeat words within at least a couple of lines. This stylistic requirement can become an issue when words such as fiction and literature, though quasi-synonymous in meaning, are *sensu stricto* non-interchangeable concepts. In contrast, the translator of *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation*, Carolyne Lee, is able to use repetitions more freely in English, and has aptly taken the liberty to reinstate the most apposite concept wherever possible.

It is of utmost importance that we, human beings, whose emotional intelligence still gives us the edge on artificial intelligence, make good use of our advantage by exploring it to the full. In its 2010 benchmark statement defining the nationwide framework for senior high school teachers, the French Ministry of Education for once acknowledged the crucial role emotions play when reading fiction. As I have stated in a *Vox Poetica* interview,<sup>7</sup> even if the scientific approach to the humanities partakes of a need to objectify the assessment criteria within the educational sector, turning critical practice into some form of science will surely result in an asymptotic enterprise in which professional readers will systematically miss the goal, no matter how close they manage to get. And close enough will never be good enough. Clearly, the objectives of science and those of the humanities are as polar as those of the brain's left and right hemispheres: While the left hemisphere, like science, aims at thinking about our world as analytically and objectively as can be, the right—very much like the arts—favors a synthetic perspective based on intuition and emotions. The challenge is therefore to solve the paradox which aims at acknowledging and reinstating the subjectivity of reading practices by taking into account the plasticity of interpretation and its emotional aspects within secondary and tertiary education, systems that for the most part still require objective analyses.

Having said this, a great deal of European university-affiliated research centers and groups, having jumped on the “affective turn” bandwagon, are waking up to the interdisciplinary potentialities of investigating affective and cognitive sciences in the humanities. The Swiss Réseau Romand de Narratologie (federated under the twin aegis of the European Narratology Network and the International Society for the Study of Narrative), and the French Pouvoir des Arts project could be regarded as two telling examples

of the fruitful interimplication of science and the arts. The three key components of literary interaction can largely benefit from the advance of neuroscience research which, someday, might well end up pinning down the much discussed singularity of literature through concepts such as mirror-neurons, brain plasticity, Theory of Mind (that is, the capacity to imagine and appreciate other people's mental states), the reconfiguration of memory, fantasizing, altered states of consciousness, embodied cognition, cognitive simulation, motor cognition, as-if body loops, and emotions like empathy. On another level, the study of emotions in fiction will emphasize the notion that writing is an embodied act whose corporeality is now the subject of many academic investigations through a range of buzz themes such as gesture, embodiment, body language, kinesia, just to name a few. Examined through a scientific lens, emotions will even confirm the argument that literary fiction has a shaping influence over readers, as tested by two teams of researchers from New York and Toronto.<sup>8</sup> Results of a study conducted by Emanuele Castano and David Comer Kidd, published in *Science* on 18 October 2013, concur with the view that reading literary fiction improves empathy, social perception, and emotional intelligence—albeit temporarily.

When considering fiction through the angle of seduction, literary theorists might as well ask themselves the right questions. Rather than pointlessly wondering who, nowadays, would still show an interest—let alone a vested one—in fiction, it might be more worthwhile addressing ways in which fiction could be of interest to contemporary readers. Psychologists and neuroscientists exploring the social values of literature through Theory of Mind may hold the key to this fairly new field of research, but literary theorists may also have a say in this matter. For Swiss scholar Yves Citton, who developed a few leads of his own in his 2007 book *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Read, interpret, actualize: why study literature?), studying literature is a means to cultivate one's tastes, to shape one's sensitivity, to guide one's love, and to reassess one's priorities and ends.<sup>9</sup>

While it seems timely to reinstate the usefulness and varied virtues of reading fiction, more important perhaps is to find ways in which fiction would be made more interesting to contemporary readers. *The Seduction of Fiction: A Plea for Putting Emotions Back into Literary Interpretation* specifically addresses these issues, among many others.

Noumea, New Caledonia  
March 2016

Jean-François Vernay

## NOTES

1. Jonathan Coe, *A Touch of Love* (London: Penguin, 1989), 58.
2. See Dominique Maingueneau, *Contre Saint-Proust. La fin de la Littérature* (Paris: Belin, 2006); Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2007); Tzvetan Todorov, *La Littérature en péril* (Paris: Flammarion, 2007); Antoine Compagnon, *La littérature pour quoi faire?* (Paris: Fayard/Collège de France, 2007); Yves Citton, *L'avenir des humanités. Economie de la connaissance ou cultures de l'interprétation?* (Paris: La Découverte, 2010); Vincent Jouve, *Pourquoi étudier la littérature?* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2010); or Jean-Marie Schaeffer, *Petite écologie des études littéraires. Pourquoi et comment étudier la littérature?* (Paris: Thierry Marchaisse, 2011).
3. See Jérôme David, "Chloroforme et signification: Pourquoi la littérature est-elle si soporifique à l'école?", *Études de Lettres* 295, 2014/1, in Raphaël Baroni & Antonio Rodriguez (eds.), *Les passions en littérature. De la théorie à l'enseignement*, 19–32.
4. For a detailed discussion of heterorepresentation and truth-valuation, see Jean-François Vernay: "The Truth About Fiction as Possible Worlds," *Journal of Language, Literature and Culture* 61: 2, August 2014, 133–141.
5. William Marx, *L'Adieu à la littérature. Histoire d'une dévalorisation. XVIIIe–XXe siècle* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 2005).
6. Terry Eagleton, *The Event of Literature* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2012), 108.
7. Raphaël Baroni, "Retrouver les émotions dans les études littéraires," *Vox Poetica*, 01 February 2015. Accessed on 10, 14 April 2015: [http://www.vox-poetica.org/entretiens/intVernay.html?fb\\_ref=Default](http://www.vox-poetica.org/entretiens/intVernay.html?fb_ref=Default).
8. See Castano, Emanuele, and David Comer Kidd. 2013. Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind. *Science*, 342(6156): 377–380; and Maja Djikic & Keith Oatley, "The art in fiction: From indirect communication to changes of the self," *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts* 8: 4, Nov 2014, 498–505.
9. "... étudier la littérature, c'est un moyen de cultiver ses goûts, de façonner sa sensibilité, d'orienter ses amours, de réévaluer ses priorités et ses fins," Yves Citton, *Lire, interpréter, actualiser. Pourquoi les études littéraires?* (Paris: Editions Amsterdam, 2007), 156.

## TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The original French version of this book was published in 2013 in Paris, under the title *Plaidoyer pour un renouveau de l'émotion en littérature* (Plea for a renewal of emotion in literature). It was well received in France, with the author interviewed in the prestigious literary journal *vox-poetica*, and the book shortlisted for the French prize, *Le Prix Littéraire du Savoir et de la Recherche* (literary prize for knowledge and research), alongside books by Julia Kristeva and Alain Finkielkraut.

Jean-François Vernay outlines the cultural context of the original book in his author's preface, written in English especially for this edition. This was the only section of the book I did not translate, apart from some short quotations throughout the book from French authors, of which published English editions already existed; for quotations where published English editions do not exist, the translations are my own. The provenance of translations will be clear from their respective endnotes.

In his Preface, the author speaks of the condition of the “beleaguered humanities,” a phenomenon known only too well in educational institutions in many parts of the English-speaking world. But what is not necessarily so well known are the French and European theorists closer to Vernay's own cultural situation, many of whom are not available in English. It is this synergy of known and unknown, of French/European and English/American/Australian traditions of scholarly criticism, that is so exciting about this book, that endows it with so much potential for intercultural insight. And it was in no small part for this reason that, from the moment I read the book in its original French, I felt an overwhelming desire to translate it.