

Jacob Bittner, *The Emergence of Literature. An Archeology of Modern Literary Theory*, Bloomsbury Academic, 2020, ISBN 978-1-5013-5424-3, 248 p.

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At a time when literary research topics glide towards environmental issues, digital immersion and other subjects closely related to the reality of our times, works such as Jacob Bittner's *Emergence of Literature. An Archeology of Modern Literary Theory*, published with Bloomsbury in 2020, seem to go against the trend, scrutinizing the literary-philosophical thought of the past century. Bittner's most recent work proposes new modes of looking at literature by retrieving and problematizing constructs such as the literary absolute, writerly intransitivity, or the death of the author. To achieve this, it builds upon the groundwork laid by Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe and is guided by the theoretical constellation of Foucault, Agamben, Hegel, Blanchot, Barthes, and others.

The main area of interest resides in the notion of writerly necessity, construed as a paradigm in humanities, to be more exact, its emergence and its later reverberations on the critical rhetoric. In order to question the question of literature, the study takes quite a wide scope, addressing the post-Kantian philosophical period, respectively the changes in criteria of "true" poetry from the Early German Romantics up until the present day. This conceptual renegotiation is an extremely ambitious project for a young scholar like Jacob Bittner, as far as his "archeology" is intended as "a history of the emergence of the literary subject and the object of literature" (4). Hence, the focus is two-fold: on the one hand, the (post-)Romantic subject delineated as the writer who cannot not-write and on the other hand, the fluctuating criterion of truth at play when postulating literature as an object of knowledge. To put it simply, the book reassesses the position(s) assigned to the subject-object dyad within the modern imaginary, particularly the paradoxical nature of the two components, issued within history, yet involving the very conditions that occasioned its emergence.

Within this notional framework, *The Emergence of Literature* disentangles the complex issue of the necessity to write intransitively which brings about multiple interpretative options, so that the major objective of this volume is to elucidate “whether literature is the production of the dialectical Subject, of an absolute positing (Hegel), or the very interruption of the dialectical production, the suspension of absolute positing (Blanchot)” (7). After considering all three, the dialectical hypothesis is quickly abandoned in favor of the remaining two, as the arguments brought into discussion will tip the scales towards either the creation of an incomplete work or the absence of one, the revitalization of the paradigm or its dissolution altogether.

As a matter of fact, similar interests lead Bittner’s previous publications, so that this volume is the fruit of the author’s past research endeavors. Incorporating the conclusions thereby reached, yet extending the field of reference, here the stakes are much higher: to describe the mechanisms involved in the emergence of literature as absolute, intransitive writing, the writer who *cannot* not-write, the critic who *can* not-write and the amateur who *loves* to (and *can*) write. Even though it is not an easy read, full of esoteric references, the dense information is compensated by the structure which is kept as clear as possible. The twelve chapters are symmetrically organized into four parts (“The Emergence of Literature as Absolute,” “The Paradigm of Writerly Necessity,” “Literary Criticism,” and “Aesthetics”) and naturally enclosed by an introductory section and the reprise of the results. Also, each part ends with a “Threshold”, to ensure the logical transition from one topic to another. More than that, a key aspect of Bittner’s writing is its punctiliousness, given the persistent repetition, summarization and reformulation of the previously presented aspects within each chapter, which then serve as a starting point for the next hypothesis, this way enhancing reader engagement through concise language and coherent structure.

With such an approach, a hybrid methodology is a must for rethinking the literary agents and object and for that, it takes its cue from multiple directions, including disciplines such as literary historiography and (post)Kantian philosophy, proof that other domains of knowledge can indeed be correlated with the field of poetry. Martin Heidegger, Michel Foucault, Maurice Blanchot, Giorgio Agamben are some of the most eminent names that constitute the theoretical scaffolding on which Bittner’s new theory rests.

The use of the Foucauldian theoretical instruments is more than evident, given the subtitle of the book, *i.e. An Archaeology of Modern Literary Theory*, as a tribute to Foucault's "(philosophical) archeology of history" (5), respectively the analysis of the modern Western episteme, marked by irreconcilability, discontinuity. Far from a simplistic, monographic, monodisciplinary approach to the subject who cannot help himself but write, Bittner's work tackles this writerly compulsion in a wider sense, as an actual paradigm of modern thought in the age of plurality of modes of writing, reading, and interpreting. Point often overlooked, yet crucial to Bittner's matrix, the desire or urgency to write does not automatically guarantee that the act of writing will be actualized and this is what further complicates the issue at hand, as detailed in the second part of the book.

Along with the "subject" understood as a mode of being – here best personified by Rainer Maria Rilke, *i.e.* the writer who needs to write, but cannot truly produce anything–, another terminological choice worth mentioning is the notion of paradigm. It is rather used in a Foucauldian sense of "the historical *a priori*" than pertaining to Kuhn's theory on scientific revolutions, as one might be tempted to assume, and it refers to "an a priori condition [that] instantiates itself as a historical subject-object relation" (5). The ambiguous temporality poses serious methodological problems, bearing on the conceptualization of writerly necessity, chiefly on the position of the poet and his poetry, which are understood as suspended somewhere between the need and the inability to write, between transitive and intransitive writing.

As far as the premise is concerned, it is derived from Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's literary absolute, sharing a common thread with the way in which the question of literature is posed: the target is not only Romantic philosophy, but also the metaphysics of will (Heidegger, Agamben), the findings of Blanchot, Barthes, Derrida. Moreover, when dealing with twentieth century literature, intransitivity arises as another concept of paramount importance, after sincerity is abandoned as a poetic criterion and the subject cuts the chord with an object.

In sum, the study assimilates – either reaffirming or amending– these theoretical views which collectively form the literary and philosophical ideas on which our entire perception and understanding of literature hinge on. These are some of the things outlined in the introductory portion of the volume, which commences with fragments

from Rilke's letter to a young poet, claiming that the ontological essence of the poet resides in writing poetry. Regardless of what the title of the volume seems to insinuate, the first pages readily announce the impossibility of pinpointing exactly the spatiotemporal coordinates of the actual emergence of literature. Instead, the objectives of this volume surpass such simplistic and unproductive interests by discarding the question "what is literature?" in favor of problematizing the very question of literature.

The first part sets the point of departure of this critical enterprise in the Kantian problem of philosophical presentation. In a comparative analysis of Kant's and Heidegger's descriptions of imagination, cognition, and time, post-Romantic thought appears to be haunted by this discordance with no view on possible conciliation and Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe attempt to connect the missing dots between these divergent theories via the literary absolute. Contrary to the scientific discourse of mathematics, philosophy, can never reach the highest discursive level, that of "pure writing: an intransitive writing (...) understood as a writing without anything *actually* written that would thus constitute a *pure* presentation" (23). The search for an alternative form of presentation stops due to the emergence of post-Kantian intransitive writing, namely the literary absolute as written by a poet-philosopher.

Nonetheless, the issue of presentation is not so easily solved, seeing how the literary absolute actually interrupts its own presentation, which opens up two other possibilities. In a Hegelian reading, it does not have any positive content, so it negates the dialectical system or, on the contrary, it effectively interrupts the entire dialectic. This is where Blanchot's *désœuvrement* comes into play. In a series of complex retrospective-prospective influences between the event of Kant, Romanticism, and Hegel, positing the literary subject who cannot not-write intransitively as that "which embodies the unthought non-romantic essence of Romanticism" means that "the question of intransitivity emerges as the question of literature" (45).

The third chapter of this section brings Hölderlin in the limelight, as an edifying example to better understand the suspension of the Hegelian reasoning, advanced by Blanchot and sustained by Bittner. Despite remaining in the shadows, in the margins of Nancy's and Lacoue-Labarthe's research on the Early German Romantics, Hölderlin is the very embodiment of the paradigm of writerly necessity. For him, writing constitutes an a priori condition of life, yet which is revealed as such only in retrospective, so that

the two, *i.e.* life and work, are indeed inseparable, undistinguishable. With literature being regarded as absolute, his poetry can never fully actualize itself or in Bittner's words, "writerly necessity produces a subject who cannot not-write the pure intransitive absence of work" (62).

After the reformulation of the question of literature from multiple standpoints in the first part, it remains unclear the manner in which writerly necessity engenders the literary subject and the types of positions the latter receives, which are explored in the second part. Rather than dealing with the relations between man and language, it focuses on the Subject and intransitivity, in line with Foucault's findings, tackling especially the points of change, better said, of interruption between modes of thinking throughout the Western episteme. In opposition to previous forms of writing, modern literature is marked by the absence of the divine (and writerly) absolute, literature exposes its own fragmentation and contingency, and the criterion of truth becomes intransitivity itself. An interesting chapter is the one that draws parallels between madness (as the Other) and the alternative kind of writing hereby discussed, due to the fact that madness represents the suspension of reason insomuch as intransitive writing, too, interrupts the Work, deconstructs the Hegelian dialectic and exposes the unthought. In any case, much of this section is dedicated to a series of subject positions (man, dying, death doubled) emerging within this theoretical frame of reference and later correlated with three psychic forms (neurotic, perverse, psychotic).

First, self-recognition through art brings into centre the writer who cannot not-write the absolute work, the thetic Being, the self-proclaimed Sovereign of the text. Second, within this paradigm, intransitivity becomes the very essence of the writer, which is thereupon construed as absent, the death of the subject being another enunciative position. Third, the literary absolute escapes the dialectical system and exposes the very contingencies that served as prerequisites of writing or, to bring them all together, "It is thus precisely the inability to not-write (necessity) that is also the inability to write any actual work (impossibility) that, exposing itself as the ability to not-write (contingency), produces the ability to write (possibility) the absence of work" (85).

Pivoting towards psychoanalysis, the desiring subject is filtered through Lacan's theory and applied to Hölderlin's letters, a process which results in an impossible work,

more accurately, a lack of literary object, and a fractured literary subject. In the first instance, the neurotic writer refuses to acknowledge the lack that defines both his (his death, his absence) and his work's (the lack of object, the absence of the absolute work) ontological essence. In the meantime, dying plus perverse equates the writer who recognizes and even flaunts his own constitutive lack (but not of his work), prides himself with being split. Finally, the mad, psychotic subject exposes his disappearance, but is defined by an impossible enjoyment, as he anticipates and even pursues *jouissance*, but knows that this *jouissance* is denied to him by law and will remain outside his reach.

The question then naturally arises as to what forms of literary truth emerge, complementary to these enunciative positions, and the third part of the book, "Literary Criticism," offers potential responses in this sense. Regarding the criterion of the literary "truth", there is a major shift in perspective brought on by the twentieth century, when authorial self-expression and authenticity are displaced for the sake of authorial death and intransitivity. Rather than diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive, both literary standards facilitate writerly necessity – as stressed by Bittner. Orienting the attention towards the age of the sincere author, the epitome of writerly necessity was the poet who cannot not-express himself, the born poet, in line with John Stuart Mill's natural poet. Later, authenticity is not discarded by twentieth century New Criticism, but its sources are moved from the exterior to the interior, so that instead of the poet's idiosyncratic background or intentions (outside the text), the truth of literature resides in the work expressed absolutely (inside the text).

However, with Barthes, Foucault, and Agamben, we enter the realm of intransitivity and the paradigmatic mutation entails the death of the author as the ultimate criterion of "true" literature. The author, defined by Barthes as the empirical subject who writes, with his cultural and biographical baggage, is declared dead once transposed in the work for the writer, the literary entity, to emerge as "nothing but the very act of writing" (112), comparable to the shifter in Jakobsonian linguistics. Taking it one step further, the gestural understanding of the author, as theorized by Agamben, conceives the writerly subject as pertaining neither to the text nor the empirical author – as a response to Foucault's thesis question: "what is an author?." As such, the gesture is

concretized at the intersection between the subjective and the impersonal, ultimately between life and art.

In the same vein, the concept of the poetized (*das Gedichtete*) links the two dimensions of the “dead” author in accordance with Walter Benjamin’s literary criticism. Returning to the *Anthenaeum* and rereading Hölderlin, the paradigm of writerly necessity recognizes and underscores the political nature of the artistic task, so that any piece of literature can constitute a critical act and with this idea in mind we transition towards the next point of Bittner’s demonstration.

The fourth and last part the volume offers an in-depth investigation of the writer-critic in the context of literature as theory, by rehashing Hegel’s aesthetics, then redrawing the portrait of the Romantic genius and eventually making some predictions regarding the future of the paradigm. In fact, within Hegelian thought, art in general is conceptualized as the philosophical reflection on art insofar as it instantiates the absolute at a certain point in time, albeit discussed dialectically. By way of example, symbolic art (and implicitly, the symbolic subject) is characterized by content without form, since it is not endowed with subjectivity and in contrast, Romantic art is form without content. Be that as it may, classical art is frequently deemed the highest form among these due to the harmonious co-existence of form and content. Rather than this rapprochement, what is more relevant to the study of writerly necessity is the Romantic subject in the modern age, who epitomizes precisely the inner paradox above debated: inherent writerly necessity confronted with the impossibility of concretizing the work. Referencing Agamben once again, not only is the writer who cannot not-write a subject devoid of his essence, but his art, too, expresses this lack and escapes actualization, becoming “the locus of inoperativity insofar as this inoperativity is understood as pure potentiality” (137).

As for the other half of the dyad, the critic is apparently alienated from the work of art he criticizes, his existence does not depend on it and he practices a kind of disinterested “aesthetic judgement” (140), which prompts the following conceptual label: “the subject who *can* not-write,” in an evident antithesis with the writer. Through literary history there are various critical instances worth pointing out: the connoisseur of the age of writerly sincerity, *i.e.* Romanticism, the author-critic, and the critic who is the writer who can not-write intransitively. Dissociating itself from Hegelian dialectics,

the last portion of the study turns to Barthes in order to find an answer to the main thesis question, namely whether the act of writing – issued by the will to write of the writer-critic – is to be understood transitively or intransitively. The analysis is brought full circle to Rilke's letters, reinforcing the fact that for this type of literary subject writing is a matter of survival, which is why, when reading Rilke, Barthes seems incapable of distinguishing the writer from his writing, because the two fuse into one another – basically, you *cannot* tell the dancer from the dance.

The volume ends with a reflection on the future of literary and critical thought, whether *to write* will be conjugated transitively or intransitively. At the end of the day, the solution to the central dilemma of this study cannot be formulated in black and white terms, as initially expected. Instead, the paradigm of writerly necessity renders intransitivity in more than one way: “it is never possible to decide whether intransitivity is the interruption as the negativity of the Subject or the interruption of the Subject. Rather, this suspension of an answer (...) arises as the truth of literature” (149). It is the amateur that can solve the seeming tension between the ontological need to write and the inability to actually produce something. Neither transitive, nor intransitive, the new kind of writerly matrix proposed by Bittner here – and referencing Barthes – is *intransitive* and although apparently excluded from the paradigm, the amateur is more than just the antithesis of the subject who cannot not-write. Etymologically, this subject “writes with an ability to love” (151), which shifts the act of writing from necessity (the will to write) to pleasure (the love for the very act of writing): “where there is somebody who loves writing, there can never be a will to write. Only when there is no will to write is it possible for the writer to love writing” (157).

All things considered, the reinterpretation of the idea of writerly necessity within modernity is one of the most notable feats of *The Emergence of Literature*, with attention given to both the literary object (poetry as an object of knowledge) and the literary subject (the writer who *cannot* not-write, the critic who *can* not-write, the amateur who *loves* to write). By questioning the very question of literature in the post-Kantian period, the current study reunites numerous scattered literary practices and critical stances under the same umbrella-term, that of the necessity to write intransitively, which is a major contribution to the field, for it also exposes the conditions that issued this paradigm. Whether the necessity to write intransitively is

interpreted as the manifestation, negation, or interruption of the dialectical system, Bittner's book makes us reconsider some of the tenets of modern literature and criticism, proof that it is a domain where much remains to be studied.