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EROTICON – A COMPARATIVE APPROACH OF VISUAL POETICS IN AMOROUS FICTION

Abstract: The paper proposes the concept of *eroticon* in order to better define the unique nature of love fiction. Unlike other forms of prose, erotic or amorous fiction use the impact of visual poetics in order to describe the love situation. The demonstration first states the presence of a recurrent scene (the scene of the two lovers contemplating each other from a window), and then develops a detailed analysis of the scene in Chrétien de Troyes' *Lancelot or the Knight of the Cart*. With arguments from narratology, reading-response theories and theories of fictional worlds, the paper investigates the potential of amorous fiction in visual communication.

Key words: erotic fiction, possible worlds, narrative theories, the philosophy of "as if", useful fictions, *Lancelot*, Chrétien de Troyes, Guinevere, Tiresias, Ovid, *Metamorphoses*.

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When asked to choose which one is better than the other: to be a man or a woman, the old prophet Tiresias, hardly done experiencing both genders, has to select the best nature. European cultural history is filled with references to the figure of the great blind prophet, but it rarely says much about the fact that his ailment comes as a punishment bestowed upon him by a mad Juno, "out of spite" for his taking the side of Jupiter in a bet over the intensity of female orgasm. Ovid tells us in the *Third Book* of his *Metamorphoses* that, in a swift moment of Bacchic joy, Jupiter and Juno bet "that women get more pleasure from making love than men do." (Ovid 2001, 52), calling upon Tiresias to decide, since he is the one who "knew lovemaking from top to bottom, so to speak, for he had once seen two huge snails copulating in a green wood, struck them with his staff, and, amazingly, was changed from a man to a woman. He lived for seven years that way." In this perspective, "the science of the future", the much valued divination, is nothing but a compensation

Zeus provides for the “punishment” of mastering the art of sexual pleasure. The feminine and the masculine appear to Tiresias (as in innumerable further examples of literature, philosophy, visual arts) as structural principles, fixed data of the two genres, relentless *universalia*. Still, when he thinks he can see his adored lady at the tower window, Lancelot of Chrétien de Troyes’s romance, the knight of the chariot caught in a mortal battle against the despicable Meleagant, does not contemplate a reality, but an illusion. Fiction shows its head instead of truth, a stranger speaks as a substitute for the queen, in a voice on which depends the very resolution of love and of the progressing battle.

The literary projections of great literary themes such as “love” or “woman” are nothing but unreliable windows to a nature that, in itself, is impossible to know, that is to attach to a certain truth-value. Instead of fake certainties on the historical woman and her “reality” or – ironically – on “true love” and her “only” definition, these fictions open up before our eyes as both partial and meaningful answers. When treated as hypotheses to be demonstrated (as “representations”), they lead only to more partial truths, since their theoretical value is null¹. Who in their right mind can claim that they know and are able to define “the antic woman”, or “medieval love” or “modern woman or

love”? Even so, we keep on learning how to love from the least reliable love-teachers: literary characters. It cannot be any other way: without my leap into fiction, the book I’m reading does not come to life. Without the character’s rise from her pages until I can feel her breath, my reading fails to catch me, to cross me over in its particular realm. There is a scientific stake hidden behind this oracular and metaphorical vocabulary: “love literature”² is, among other fictional categories, one with a huge potential for identification, that is one favorite “pleasure reading”. We should not read this as a deprecation: the reasons why amorous fictions³ is among the most widely read type of literature are not entirely populist. They have to be investigated from a narratological point of view⁴, at least for the potential this kind of fiction has to immerse the reader into

1 This is the value that Hans Vaihinger gives to fiction in his seminal work entitled *The Philosophy of “What If”*.

2 The concept is hardly appropriate since it lacks precision and notional intension. Still, I use it in its popular sense, in order to conventionally name the “literature on love”.

3 This is the concept I propose instead “love literature”, as one that describes with greater accuracy the fact that we deal with the construction of a fictional project.

4 Mary-Laure Ryan insists on the relativism of fictionalist perspective over the literary text: “The recent emergence of other analogies for the literary text, such as the text as game, as network (Landow, *Hypertext*, Bolter, *Writing Space*) or as machinic assemblage (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*) should remind us that the text as world is only one possible conceptualization among many others.” (2001: 90)

its world: love fiction closes really fast the fictional pact, persuading its reader to let go reality and give in to the laws of its particular worlds. Should one suspect a sort of structural naivete? Or a sudden jam in the way of our critical thought? Not at all: "love", "the lover", "desire" are – in literature – useful fictions in the way Hans Vaihinger defined them as a product of logic similar to hypotheses, but having exclusive instrumental value, not a value in themselves. In order to function without getting stuck inside an "impossible problem" (such as the definition of love), a certain train of thought, a certain development of both reason and imagination chooses to work with a fiction "as if it were true", since this is the only way one can reach her imaginative or intellectual goal. The offer amorous fiction has to make supplements the lack of a fixed truth discourse on love (the lack of scientific definition or even of a universal or majority definition) by increasing the pleasure one gets from reading it. In a way, the lack of explanation is compensated by explanatory metaphors. Love narratives represent favorite textual shelters, because they offer – with minimum interpretive effort⁵ – hedonistic immersions, the satis-

faction of expectations connected to one's own emotional fulfillment. After experiencing textualisms of different colors, narratological theories come back to the exploration of the immersion potential of possible worlds of literary fiction.

What is it that triggers the experience of reading turning it into a sort of captivity in another world or into a travel to a virtual reality? What is it that facilitates – as far as amorous fiction is concerned – readers's passage over to the side of the textual world? There are multiple answers from multiple directions: cognitive psychology (metaphors of the "transported" reader or of the reader "caught" in a book, mental simulations by means of "what if" mechanisms etc.), analytic philosophy (especially theories of possible worlds), phenomenology (assuming the illusion) etc.

Hypothesis or fiction?

Following the logic of "as if", "strong" (and conflicting!) concepts such as that of "woman" or "man" are fully functional as *fictions* (in the sense they have inside the discourse of logics: rhetorical, summative, neglective or heuristic), continuing to serve a cultural project that would get

5 Associating immersion to easy-reading should raise objections from elitist literary critics, for whom aesthetic success is guaranteed by the amount of hermeneutic effort involved in its reading: "Sophisticated readers learn to appreciate a wide variety of literary experiences, but they never outgrow the simple pleasure of being lost in a book. This pleasure is limiting only if

we take it to be the only type of aesthetic gratification. /.../ But immersion can also be the result of a process that involves an element of struggle and discovery. How many of us, after finally turning the last page of a difficult novel, compulsively return to the first page with the exhilarating thought that deciphering is over and the fun can now begin?" (Ryan 2001, 96-97)

stuck, without them, in aporia. Therefore, literature about women begins as soon as the investigation on the “natural” female ends (the claim must be understood dialectically, rather than historically). As long as the anti-feminist insists to define “what is woman”, in order to further demonstrate why she has no soul or, as in the fifteenth century, why she is not human, the concepts of “woman” or that of “love” are arrested in the hypothetical domain, where they subsist as a provable hypothesis, with arguments related to cultural policies. As long as the feminist, in return, is interested in the same investigation, only this time to demonstrate why woman is equal or superior to man, the same concept of woman still gets the hypothetical treatment, just with the opposite result. *La querelle des femmes* is productive for so many centuries (from the Middle Ages to modernity) precisely because it is based on the debatable character of the woman-hypothesis. Once the discussion moves on to the ground of fiction⁶, the system of projections about woman becomes relevant for a particular cultural order. Most of these projections are, of course, of a countervailing value. The more they try

to supplement an unreality, an absence, the farther away from truth they end up, in the name of a utopian impulse. Others are rather completive, adding phantasms of literature to that of genetics, of physiology, sociology or other disciplines of the humanities. Either way, I am interested in regarding these phantasms as fictions, and not mere hypotheses, because of their unusual power in actual demonstrations: what cultural dreams they unveil, towards what objects they open, what are their contours, what kind of scenes they paint and how they record the distortions of the amorous gaze.

The investigation of love fiction has to benefit from the fictionalist perspective: the love-construct communicates less about “the nature of love” (just a sweet conceptual evasion!), than it does communicate about those who design it or contemplate it in this form. Therefore, the morphology of this literature can only take part in the larger morphology of the cultures it analyzes.

Temperate languorous harmonies and songs

Reflecting on the most suitable methodology for such research, I found that

6 In the sense of Hans Vaihinger. This is the meaning which has been generalized here as work-hypothesis. Here, fiction is a specific product of human logic, a “useful instrument to help us find our way more easily in this world” (Vaihinger 2001: 65), a mental structure entirely different from the hypothesis (which is provable) by the fact that it is impossible to validate theoretically,

although it has great practical use in “fictionally” solving “impossible problems”. With the help of fiction thus understood, epistemological systems can “take for granted” impossible terms, using them in further projects of maximum practical importance (i.e. the definition of the “atom” as a useful fiction makes possible the entire discourse of mechanics, relativity etc.).

my entire intellectual training so far has led towards the objectification of the reasoning judgement and the impersonalization of sentences, towards the search of the most harmonious geometric rationalist argument. The methodological answer I was looking for came to me in the form of a metaphor: that of a "courtisan song". One should not read it, here, as a lyrical figure, but as a quasi-conceptual and figurative one. For me, it meant giving up my masculine discourse of rationality and my habitual manly voice of science, seeking for unity and harmony. The expression comes from a book on taboos and tabooizations, specifically from a section dedicated to the analysis of how the early Christian church repressed heterophonies along with any form of polyphonic singing, so that any song builds up the symphony of harmonized voices corresponding to the harmony of souls in liturgy. Clement of Alexandria recommends prohibiting any form of music "with chromatic harmonies", including songs of the lyre, zither and flute: "But we shall choose temperate harmonies; we shall keep far away from our virile minds all liquid harmonies which by modulating tones lead to a dangerous art which trains to effeminacy and languor. Austere and temperate songs protect against wild drunkenness; therefore we shall leave chromatic harmonies to immoderate revels and to the music of courtesans (*Paidagogos*, 2.4)" (Clement 2.4) Thus, the search for liquid harmonies, colors and extravagant courtisan voices has become

my auxiliary purpose and feminizing my mind and discourse in the demonstration – one of the foreseen results. Seduction instead of induction and free associations from reading psychology joined – without replacing or excluding anything from the still precious arsenal of rationalist approach – the other tools in my working studio.

Eroticons

The term "eroticon" should be read as a concept, since it is more than a play of words inspired by the abuse of emoticons on the internet. Also, it has no connection with the *Satyricon* of Petronius. If the "emoticon" is an emblem of a state of mind, instantly rendered by short-circuiting an entire explanatory speech, that would only slow the pace of communication, the "eroticon" is a similar summative fiction. Smilies users save an entire duration of emotional speech in which - for instance - classic epistolary devotes itself to the explanation of discursive *attitude*. In immediate communication, face to face, body language doubles the linguistic speech with an arsenal of strategies for receiving the message: intonation, facial mimicry, posture, conversation breaks, breathing. All of these tell me what my dialogue partner *feels* and *how I am supposed to understand her*. Communicating in writing, we need further explanations: Should I believe what you wrote? Should I understand that you are kidding? Should I understand that my remark hurt your feelings? Love fiction exquisitely supplements pure linguistic discourse

when it uses the seductive power of a single nuclear visual scene.

The scene is displayed visually, like a picture or a painting, compensating for the missing explanation that would kill all fascination. I understand the eroticon as a concentrated, dense visual image, that we access through the available literary discourse, but in the understanding of which verbal discourse disappears, it becomes invisible in order to allow visual poetics to guide the reading. In other words, love fiction compels us *to see* rather than *to read*, which is not as much a prerogative (as long as any successful fiction results in a picture of one kind or another), as a clearer (and faster) communication success than in the case of other forms of narrative. Fictionally speaking, in the multiperson worlds of the novel, for example, erotic motivation is one of the most powerful generators of narrative seduction. In addition, it must be said that any eroticon is marked by a certain artificiality, that it is necessarily cultural, not natural. Even in the most naive possible cases, amorous contemplation seems to take into account a third gaze, a third perspective of sight. Just as well, lovers of Renaissance paintings or of Romantic painting seem to be caught in the unnatural twisting of passion, when in reality they line up to make sense as a picture to the hidden view of the observer. It is no accident that very often the eroticon is - to the limit - a scene of the window, a painting in itself, in which the exteriority and the interiority communicate via a frame, a

filter that invents a viewer or a lecturer. Erotic literature, like fantasy or detective adventures are among the privileged literary forms of the reading public. In their case, immersing the reader into the world of the book may be more easily accomplished and it is often instantaneous: it is no accident that the fallen princess, reading in a romantic trance, sensually lingering on the couch is one of the iconic images of the reader of all times, whether it is the Flemish masters of painting, the Impressionists or pre-Rafaelites, Dimitrie Bolintineanu, Mircea Cărtărescu or Laurence Sterne. The reader who forgets that she has a book in her hands, being “transported” as she is to another world, where she can “see with her own eyes”, leaving to the “real” world just an inert body, unresponsive to stimuli, is the first recipient of the eroticon, for she has long ceased to see letters, words or phrases and has begun to see the film, as directed by the very discourse that was removed from her sight. It is not a matter of shallowness, but one of *immersive* reading: the first would be interested in facts and events, the second in the coherence of images in a consistent project of a possible world.

**About mediators:
Lancelot and Guinevere**

It is clear that Lancelot is not invincible as we would like him to be and that Guinevere does not always jump in to help him. Chrétien de Troyes tells us so, in the novel devoted to Marie de Champagne, who orders him to write and even, supposedly, gives him the

main guidelines. Devoted to Marie de Champagne as Lancelot is devoted to Guinevere, Chrétien puts the knight of the cart to pass not only the test of courage - the simplest one for him - but also that of humility. Only so, by symbolically dying, can he reach Meleagant's court, after crossing the sword bridge, where he gets severely wounded and bleeds heavily, to save the queen who is captive in the tower, together with her ladies. Provoked to battle by Meleagant, Lancelot agrees, but his warlike behavior is completely atypical. Instead of the invincible hero, Chrétien casts a weak Lancelot in this scene and makes him increasingly weaker. His companions do not know how to make sense of his weakness. This is why they understand it as a lack of virtue, and assist in despair to the progressive triumph of Meleagant, doubting the virtue of his opponent. In fact, they seem to waver in faith every occasion they get, once a certain distance comes between them and Lancelot, whom they have joined voluntarily. In the logic of romance, weakness in the order of heroic virility is primarily the sign of fault and fail from absolute virtue - by disregarding order and measure. The strongest ally of the noble knight is currently the most unlikely one: a "wise maiden" (Chrétien de Troyes 2007, 261) of the queen's suite, one who knows why Lancelot takes the fight with Meleagant ("either on his account, or for the sake of the common herd who had gathered about the list", but for the queen). The queen herself does not want to show herself to the lover who faltered to assume

the humiliation of becoming the Knight of the cart. So she keeps his name a secret, so that he cannot be encouraged, but she also keeps the love for him a secret, while at the same time testing his love in the worst possible moment. Other than Guinevere, only the maiden in the suite knows that the only thing which could restore courage and manliness in combat to the poor unfortunate knight would be a proof of love from the queen. This is why, as soon as she finds out his name after begging his augustan lover, who is disarmed by her lack of pretension, she comes at the tower window and encourages him with the ability of both a courtesan and a crusading virgin: "Lancelot, turn about and see who is here taking note of thee." (Chrétien de Troyes 2007, 262), cries the maiden pretending to be the queen. Lancelot, monoideistic as any crazy lover, turns away from his terrible opponent in order to catch a glimpse of the only image he is interested in, the live picture - albeit illusory - of his beloved, "standing in the lodge of the tower, whom above all he wanted to meet". Balance tilts even more visibly to give the victory to Meleagant, because Lancelot now is defending himself fighting backwards.

Let's take a longer look at this scene that constitutes the reference eroticon: a circular space, the public square, limited by the fortress wall and the two trenches that Lancelot and his companion have crossed over the bridge under water and over the sword bridge - concentric circles around the *axis mundi*. In the center, there is the fight, which configures a binary

unbalanced relationship: a more and more arrogant Meleagant on one side, a weaker Lancelot on the other, between his enemy and his beloved one, who acts herself like an enemy. The affirmation of virility on one pole and the overturned erotic desire on the other. By desire and motivation, Lancelot threatens to incline towards the love pole (i.e. the tower containing the object of his adoration) and withdraws from the pole of war, which has lost all meaning to him now. About to close the circular stage, Meleagant's companions exult, while Lancelot's supporters give in to despair.

The weakness and strength of contemplation

A disc rotated in a precarious balance at the top of Lancelot's sword – this is how his backwards battle looks like. A broken disc, broken into two unequal parts – this is how the body-discourse exposes these two lovers. While Lancelot turns his back on his heroic-self, the queen turns her back on her erotic-self, refusing to show herself to the impetuous knight who does not have the patience to finish the fight heroically. He has completely lost sight of the imperative of the right measure, of *mésure*, so critically important in understanding signs, while she has not understood that time has come to turn love into force and to become her beloved's encouraging daimon, for he is slowly dying. The entire situation depends on a fiction, namely the illusion that the smart young damsel stages to help both Lancelot and the queen. Her

first intervention has restored Lancelot his hope, but unbalanced both scenes. Her second intervention will balance both the warlike, manly fight and the fight of erotic passion. "Ah, Lancelot", says the lady again, "how is it that thou dost now conduct thyself so foolishly? Once thou wert the embodiment of prowess and all that is good, and I do not think God ever made a Knight who could equal thee in valour and worth. But now we see thee so distressed that thou dealest back – hand blows and fightest thy adversary behind thy back. Turn, so as to be on the other side, and so that thou canst face towards this tower, for it will help thee to keep it in view." (Chrétien de Troyes 2007, 262). Only from this point on the young woman's help has the desired effect.

Lancelot defeats his enemy, using desire as a supplementary weapon, which makes Eros work in the service of Ares, forcing love to feed his "hate of death". He is no longer amid the critical scene, but his enemy stays there in return, caught in the grip of a deadly tug between Lancelot's virtue and his love embodied in the voice of a virgin. From the queen's window, the maiden does not act only as a neutral mediator between the one who shuts up when she should speak and the one who needs to hear the words of love in order to win. She picks up – as a useful fiction – the encouraging role of the queen. Lancelot finds enough motivation and resources to fight only with this illusion in mind, which he considers the truth, for he does not know that someone else is speaking to him instead of Guinevere. Accustomed

to fight his battles one at a time, in the episode of his fight with Meleagant the knight of the cart is exposed to unequal confrontation. His enemy attacks from the front, but amorous grief grinds him from inside: an internal defect is associated to an outer obstacle. Bodily weakness and unhealed wounds, bleeding cuts on the bridge of the sword correspond to lovesick weakness. The virgin's logico-magical trick of throwing in the battle the net of fiction serves its purpose, keeping death at bay a second longer, in order to halt the fight of love. This way, Lancelot wins the other battle, misbelieving that he had already won the first one. Nobody mentions the maiden ever again in the story, once Lancelot wins. The novel is indifferent to what happens to her, her crucial discursive usefulness is temporary and it ends once it took effect. In addition, Lancelot - who extracts his power from love, performing acts of bravery that others do not dare to undertake - pays for his manic investment in love, by being forbidden to find access to the Holy Grail.

The scene of amorous contemplation (metaphored in the famous scene of the window) is perhaps the most common structure in erotic literature, regardless of colour, for the simple reason that it has a catalytic function. In this nuclear, fundamental scene, repeated in thousands of ways, lovers of world literature use the illusion of love as the only great truth that is able to extend an agony that none of them wants to miss or, conversely, to provide the sweet and fatal answer of love shared. Without knowing it, they proceed

according to the logic of useful fictions, sensing that no absolute truth might save them from anxiety, but only the play of "as if it were true". In the presence of a love whose truth is too "strong", boldly confirmed as a conclusion at the end of a problem of algebra, love literature can not find its meaning, its content and can not exist. In the absence of any possibility of confirming the truth of love, the lovers can not find enough breathing space in order to live as believable literary characters. The mutual contemplation of the two lovers becomes almost an archetypal canonic eroticon. In one form or another, its presence is almost mandatory in love fiction, both as a metaphor for the absolute fusion of one into the other, and as a metaphor for the maintenance of a distance and a duration which amorous tension require. Looking at each other, the lovers in literature already act out their erotic foreplay, intoxicated by the heat of the both separatory and unifying distance between them.

Therefore, the first eroticons are necessarily pictural and exhibit their poetics in a visual manner. In such a universe, to excessively psychologize means to fatally reduce love's wealth of expressions. As soon as love becomes a matter of self-suggestion, its potential to raise all souls and bodies from the dead is partially (if not entirely) destroyed in amorous fiction. A Lancelot who would use mechanisms of positive thinking, telling himself: "fight, do not give up, imagine that she loves you and that she deserves you to fight

for her, despite her dangerous whims” is unthinkable. It is equally hard to imagine that the love story of Lancelot and Guinevere would be such a strong cultural obsession in our erotic culture were it not for the visual solution of the eroticon.

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