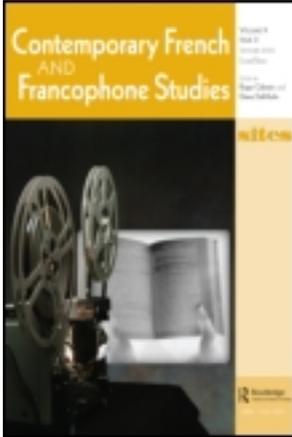


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Questionnaire

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QUESTIONNAIRE

Robert Harvey

« Il n’y a pas, il n’y eut jamais de littérature que pour la philosophie », proposait Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe dans *Le Sujet de la Philosophie* (1979).
Que vous inspire cette proposition?

The proposition driving your question is deceptively simple. We read it once through and we think we understand—Literature, that long maligned mode of discourse: it’s all philosophy and always has been.

To respond properly, however, to begin to respond more carefully, we must point out an all too apparent anachronism inflecting the boldness of Lacoue-Labarthe’s assertion. Surely if he meant this to be true for all time, we tell ourselves, he should have written the term “poetry” and not “literature.” Plato, Aristotle, Horace, and Longinus all spoke far more generally of *poets*—those miracle makers of mimetic art. But by framing *literature* as the mode of discourse that stands in some fundamental relationship to philosophy, Lacoue-Labarthe has radically modernized an ancient debate.

This declaration appears to take position within the oldest chicken-and-egg story circulating among the civilizations that grew out of classical Greece. But rather than foreground a reproductive quandary—poetry could no more have existed without having been conceived in the body of philosophy than philosophy without having matured and complexified from the poetic ovum—Lacoue-Labarthe forces the question of hierarchy. In a sentence that at first glance appears to position metaphysics as a mere subset of creative writing, the author is, in fact, saying quite the opposite.

Still, we must reread the statement more carefully, parsing it in a first attempt at translation: “There is no literature—nor has there ever been—except literature for philosophy.” In our first reading, we were indeed

deluding ourselves: “Literature exists and has only ever existed,” insists Lacoue-Labarthe, “*for* philosophy.” The subsumption of literature to philosophy is patent and irremissible. The very existence of literature *for* philosophy, in the service of philosophy is reinforced—as if reinforcement were necessary—by Lacoue-Labarthe’s confinement of literature to the “only ever,” “*jamais . . . que.*”

Now, to treat this apparent generalization in its proper context, we also need to recall that the “literary” figures closest to Lacoue-Labarthe are, amongst others, but principally, tellingly, Georg Trakl, Friedrich Hölderlin, Paul Celan—all *poets* (now in the modern sense). These are modern poets who wrote quite obviously and sometimes even explicitly, on the cusp of philosophy. They are *philosophers’ poets*. I myself would refrain from ever claiming that poetry is always the handmaiden of philosophy, as I think Lacoue-Labarthe’s “*for*” infers, but *these* poets—Lacoue-Labarthe’s featured poets—are literary figures who deploy poetic language almost exclusively for ends heretofore reserved for philosophical inquiry.

It would be easy to repeat the well-worn observation that the history of philosophical discourse is punctuated by an endless parade of crypto-literary texts: the Socrates staged by Plato is a master storyteller, gaily wielding metaphors while blithely barring poets from the republic to come, Hegel’s *Phenomenology* is a vast saga of consciousness, and even the dauntingly logical *Ethics* of Spinoza reads like an abstract fable of the inadequacy of emotion (Deleuze, who crowned him the prince of philosophers, noticed his other-worldly poetics).

But the apotheosis of what Lacoue-Labarthe’s deceptively simple statement claims came when philosophy shed its poetic shyness, descended from its metaphysical pedestal, and outed itself as what it always was. For Lacoue-Labarthe (and, indeed, for the history of philosophy, so far, since then), this unmasking came with Nietzsche. Only when the pseudo-Polish Prussian philologist began to pit the Plato of the *Ion* and the *Phaedrus* against Plato of the *Republic* had philosophy acquired the double dose of irony sufficient to herald Siegfried Kracauer, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin . . .

To this extent, then, Lacoue-Labarthe is right. But alongside this rule there is an overpowering exception at the heart of his work. And that is Heidegger. Heidegger is indeed the great big ugly note in the music philosophy has played since *Ecce homo*—Heidegger whose writing and thought Lacoue-Labarthe all too abidingly defended. Heidegger who also took literature as a discourse and practice *for* philosophy but, in doing so, took his own fable of *Geist* so seriously as to turn it into the spirit of a people, a nation, a “civilization,” an empire, a *Reich*.

Robert Harvey's latest publications are *Witnessness* (Continuum, 2010) and major portions of the Pléiade edition of Marguerite Duras's complete works (volumes I and II, 2011). He is currently writing a book on Duras and the sublime, entitled *Un chantier du désir*. He teaches at Stony Brook University (New York), and was a Program Director at the *Collège International de Philosophie* from 2001 to 2007.
