

{CARAC TERES}

Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

En este número participan ■ Elvira Blanco Santini, Sébastien Doubinsky, Daniel Escandell Montiel, Rosana Fuentes Fernández, Beatriz Garrido Ramos, Jan Gregor, Jindřiška Kračková, Darío Lanza Vidal, Alejandro Lozano, Miguel Ángel Motis Dolader, Daniel Raušer, Petr Sádlo, Karim Sidibe, Věra Sládková, Libuše Turinská.

Dossier: Current Research Approaches in Humanities through the Eyes of Czech Linguists (1)

Caracteres. Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

Caracteres es una revista académica interdisciplinar y plurilingüe orientada al análisis crítico de la cultura, el pensamiento y la sociedad de la esfera digital. Esta publicación prestará especial atención a las colaboraciones que aporten nuevas perspectivas sobre los ámbitos de estudio que cubre, dentro del espacio de las Humanidades Digitales. Puede consultar las normas de publicación en la web (<http://revistacaracteres.net/normativa/>).

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INTERSECCIONES

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Research and essays regarding the disciplines that comprise the Digital Humanities. Articles are double peer reviewed with a double-blind system.

READING, WRITING, REBELLING. PROPOSITIONS FOR A RENEWED CRITICAL STANCE

LEER, ESCRIBIR, REBELARSE. PROPUESTAS PARA UNA NUEVA POSTURA CRÍTICA

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RESUMEN:

¿Qué es leer? ¿Qué es escribir? ¿Qué conecta a ambas acciones? Estas preguntas han sido terreno fértil para múltiples teorías literarias y filosóficas, desde la Nueva Crítica hasta la Deconstrucción. Este ensayo no pretende responder a esas preguntas, sino cuestionar esas mismas preguntas e intentar arrojar una luz diferente a este problema esencial. Al escoger no considerar la literatura como un concepto estable, sino como uno ontológicamente no permanente, intento reflexionar sobre los términos que condicionan nuestra aproximación a las obras y su creación. Desde una perspectiva mayor, las nociones de “lectura” y “escritura” son examinadas a través del prisma de sus encarnaciones como “obras”, y las consecuencias que esta identidad tiene en nuestro discurso crítico. Para leer críticamente, debemos reconocer la inestabilidad inmanente de nuestras nociones y definiciones y *empezar* desde ahí en vez de *terminar* ahí. Dicho de otra manera, la inestabilidad de la lectura es la única forma de reflejar la inestabilidad de las obras y reconocer su forma en cambio constante. Lejos de ser inocente, la lectura crítica parece por tanto ser una acción radical, pero necesaria; una rebelión contra las definiciones obvias y aceptadas a las que las obras son unidas con demasiada frecuencia.

ABSTRACT:

What is reading? What is writing? What connects the two? These questions have been the fertile ground for many literary and philosophical theories, from

New Criticism to Deconstruction. This essay does not pretend answering to these two questions, but rather to question the question themselves and try to shed a different light of this essential problematic. Choosing not to consider literature as a stable concept, but rather as an ontologically impermanent one, I try to reflect upon the terms that condition our approach of works and of the creation of these works. In a large perspective, the notions of “reading” and “writing” are examined through the prism of their incarnations as “works”, and the consequences of this identity have on our critical discourse. In order to read critically, one must thus recognize this immanent instability of our notions and definitions, and *begin* from there instead of *ending* there. In other words, the instability of the reading is the only way to mirror the instability of the works, and to acknowledge their ever-changing form. Far from being innocent, critical reading therefore appears as a radical, but necessary action, a rebellion against the obvious and accepted definitions to which works are too often attached.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Crítica, lectura, escritura, rebelión, no permanente

KEYWORDS:

Criticism, reading, writing, rebellion, impermanent

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1. Introduction

“What is happening when we are teaching our students how to read?” This simple question was the trigger of the short essay that follows, as I realized that it wasn’t a simple question, but, on the contrary, the most fundamental question one could ask himself/herself in these troubled times. The position of humanities having been “fragilized”, to say the least, in the past decades, it has become essential to stop and ponder about the very essence of our role and duty. The old argument to explain our role (“To teach our students how to become autonomous thinkers” and so on) has become obsolete in times when every political decision concerning academia precisely tends to its exact contrary: The dominant ultracapitalistic ideology (I refuse the term “ultraliberal”, which is pure newspeak aimed at hiding the real nature of this economic thought) does not need critical thinkers - on the contrary.

The act of presenting texts to students today can therefore be roughly classified into two main possibilities: submission or resistance. To submit is to refuse asking yourself the opening question, and to confront the students with accepted readings and analysis - that is to say to have them conform to the leading ideology.

To resist is therefore not only to ask yourself this crucial question, but trying to answer it the best you can: what I am modestly trying to do in my essay.

As you will see, I do not consider critical reading as a benign action - quite the contrary. The position of the reader I defend is an uncomfortable position, a relative position that will paradoxically enable him/her to assume his/her reading.

As a fiction writer and poet myself, I felt that this essay would be incomplete if I didn't plunge into the act of writing itself, not as a narcissistic study, but as a critical object. What is at stake when fiction or poetry is written, what is happening behind, under or over the very act of constructing worlds or images, what is actually being given to the reader beyond the story or the poem?

Fiction and poetry, I argue, like art, are a direct attack on materiality. Reading and writing are thus connected through this common reality. They both have to build up on what is denied and reconstructed differently. When Honoré de Balzac speaks of "realism", he speaks of his own vision of what he calls "reality", in order to explain the formidable construction of his *Human Comedy*. It was written *against*, and he has to be read *against*. To only read or teach Balzac as a "realist" without its deep-reaching consequences is completely missing or evacuating the point. The specificity of the intention (conscious or not) that leads to the creation of the text can be traced by the very existence of the work itself. To write (or to create) is to deny the sole reality of the material.

And this is why, as academics, we have to reflect upon what we are teaching when we are teaching literature (and arts). It is no innocent task, and it implies a conscious position, as well as conscious decisions. Rebelling, which constitutes the last part of this essay, is therefore a political action, understood in its broader sense. It implies "going against" the obvious, the imposed, the comfortable. It implies becoming "critical" in the dangerous sense of the term, and setting yourself against the accepted grain. Not necessarily to radically change things, but at least to move them (or try to move them) a few inches, so you can see them better.

2. Reading

Reading: so many things behind this verb. An action so simple and yet so complex to define. A work on time, perhaps, for the main part. A window that you first open for yourself alone, before eventually sharing it with others. An action set in the length of time. And sometimes, but sometimes only, dealing with its depth.

*

We do not learn anything about the world when we read, or very little. We mostly learn, through the game of reflections, that we always knew who we were, and could not express - Ulysses, Don Quixote or Emma Bovary. This is a retrospective process, and in this sense only, a constructing one.

*

What readings construct is the possibility of the multiple. Or rather, the absolute right to be multiple. The male reader becomes a heroin, the female reader a hero. For example.

*

The self is built like a fictional character. Affinities of the artificial. We are what we want to be, though often we think we want to be someone else. But this other is also a fictional construction, a game of possibilities or desire. And materiality is what separates us from our dreams, like the patched shoes of Rastignac remind him of his stressed material condition while leaving the palace of Anastasie. It is not success that makes us believe in the reality of fiction - it is, on the contrary, failure.

*

The time of reading is the time of poetry or fiction. It is also that of art. It is a cultural time, that is to say, outside of natural time. It is a purely human time.

*

Reading is to insert another time in time. The narrator of Proust's *A Remembrance Of Things Past* has understood that well, and seeks to make up for this lost time, because this is a time that does not lead to anything except unfaithful memories. It is luxury time, and therefore suspect. A time to oneself, then doubly suspect. The time to read is a doubled time – the one of the book and the one of the reader, thus doubly impermanent and relative. And it is in this fertile impermanence that the reading sets in.

*

Emma Bovary was unable to read, because she was a literal reader. She died, as Don Quixote, wanting to be a character. Tintin almost never read a book. He is immortal. Reading is to accept – or even anticipate – one's failure.

*

Learning to read is more than learning to decipher - or rather, no, it is perhaps exactly just that - moving from sign to meaning, never to go back.

*

The self-love that co-exists with the love of reading is both that of the child-narrator of Proust, that projects himself into fabulous dreams of historical tales, and the narcissistic exaltation Emma Bovary, who vibrates to the false keys of bad romantic

novels. It is not a question of the value of love here, but of self-worth.

*

We are always childish when we read. It is our guilty need for innocence.

*

According to some studies in cognitive theory, reading is similar to the playing games, and of equal importance. To play is to project yourself into another world, built from scratch, which we invest in empathy. It is both a pleasure and a suffering, because at some point you unfortunately have to stop playing and let the other reality (The "real" one) resume its rights. It is also to understand that this separation is necessary and that it occurs in the most sensitive and vulnerable area, that is, within yourself. But reading (or playing) is also seeking this separation, which, basically, is reassuring. Because, through this separation, I am in many places at once, I am all I can/could be, simultaneously. In that single special moment.

*

This "I" who appears in the game, is the fictional "I". Rimbaud's "Other", who reads as well as he writes. Who exists and does not exist at the same time. In reading, this "I" splits into several simultaneous entities - conscious, subconscious, projected, remembered, etc. It is the vertical "I", made of transparencies and opacities stacked upon one another. An unstable and transforming tower. And there is also the horizontal self, which is the one that moves in split-time of personal history and general History. Two unstable and changing "I", creating the reader at the specific time of his/her reading.

*

But the work itself is made of a dual identity, like a false mirror. Vertical, it contains all of the inherent possibilities of meaning, its message, its images. Horizontal as it also moves in a split time - that of the reader and of its own history.

*

However, none of these times fit perfectly - it's the drama of Don Quixote, who lives in the wrong century, and of *A Remembrance Of Things Pasts'* narrator who cannot find anymore the passage so loved by Gilberte in Bergotte's book. It is a relative time that sets in, temporarily determined by the combined position of the reader and the work.

*

Reading is always deformed and deforming, such as when light moves through water. But far from being negative, this deformation must also be considered as being part of it. As Merleau-Ponty explains in *The Eye And The Mind*, comparing the artwork with a mosaic that can be seen at the bottom of a swimming pool, reflections are an integral part of its perception, they participate in its effect.

*

The effect of the work is through what one reads it. It is what conditions the reading of the naive and intrigues the critic. Because the effect can be misleading – and it is often the case. This is what causes affect and determines our reaction. But this effect is always consciously constructed and independent of meaning. Linking effect to meaning is one the most common mistakes of reading, such as identifying the narrator to the author. Confusion of spaces, confusion of intentions.

*

Effect and intent are indeed two separate things. It is the same for the intent of the author and intent of the work. The effect often seems to cover both, but it is rarely case. The intent of the author is a mental projection, embodied in his/her work, which is both material (text) and immaterial (effect). A pastry chef who wishes to create a chocolate cake will be limited by the taste of chocolate. The writer or poet is not limited by anything. It's the difference between a craftsman and an artist, although this is not a matter of value. It is only a matter of material limit. But because of its immateriality, effect is harder to control. To provoke laughter, tears, anguish, desire – if the palette seems limited, the nuances are infinite and made to be discussed.

*

Any effect is ambiguous. Swann's regrets at the end of *Swann in Love* are as sincere as staged. Baudelaire's *Carrion* is both disgusting and funny. It is impossible to choose. Everything is true, nothing is false. To search for univocality means seeking the impossible, the elusive. The only place where fiction and poetry are not.

*

The equivocality of the effect is the guarantee of the eternity of the work. Or rather, of its fertile impermanence.

*

It is the effect that temporarily conditions the reading, and that allows to (falsely) categorize the work. It is both a key and a trap, a door and a cage.

*

The effect is also not the exclusive domain of reading - one might even say that is the distinctive trait of any work of art. This is what unites hearing, reading and seeing – what renders them equivocal.

*

The effect is not a dialectic. It is the starting point of two monologues, the one of the work and that of the reader that meet through it. There is never any dialogue with a work or with a writer through his work, but rather a desire for dialogue. And it is, once more, an uncertain dialogue, since the voices change over time.

*

The space of fiction is the space of desire. Chivalric romances allow Don Quixote to follow his madness, as they are written and published, and because their physical existence proves the reality of what they express. His opponents see these stories as fiction for exactly the same reasons. The space of desire is embodied in the book-object that proves both its existence and its non-existence. An infinite mirror-image of Don Quixote's reader.

*

This desire of reality projected onto fiction can be translated in two ways: identification and adherence. Identification plays on affect, and adherence on the intellect (although, as in the Yin and Yang, the two are in fact inseparable.) Rejection is the failure of identification; indifference that of adherence. It is, for example, Madame Bovary in the court of justice and Rimbaud ignored. Both are determined by their effect - or, at least, the effect as it is perceived during the reading. It is the same, it should be noted, for

poetry, for music, for art, even if the projected desire is not, in essence, the same.

*

Identification is linked to empathy, to movement within the fiction. It is the game of the “other reality”, and of the feelings we choose to endorse. It is the existence by proxy, as in *A Remembrance Of Things Past*, which seeks to become eternal, through the familiar and the exotic. It is, for example, the porticos of Baudelaire, Flaubert’s “Comices”, Perec’s apartment in the Rue de Quatrefages. It is the madness of King Lear, the laughter of Rameau’s nephew, Kerouac’s daydreams. It's the same with classical poetry: the anguish of Villon, the loves of Ronsard, the grief of Hugo. It is the game of feelings, the personal parenthesis, the familiar universality.

*

Adherence stays on the surface. It acknowledges the impossible reconciliation. It is, to use the beautiful words of Arnaud Rykner, to accept the text in its resistance to meaning. It is both the songs of *Maldoror* and Charles Bovary’s cap, the colors of Arthur Rimbaud’s vowels and the killing of an Arab on the beach by Meursault. This is the moment when reading is forced to change position and the reader must change the nature of his/her desire. When *within* becomes *in front of*.

*

Why do we read, listen to, or watch what we cannot understand? Adherence is the pleasure of abstraction, of enigmas, the acceptance of nonsense. It is the search for discomfort - limited, as in identification - by the separation that lies ahead. It is testing

the limits of the fictional and/or poetic game, admitting that the "other" will always remain the "other." Surface against surface.

*

The search for discomfort is the desire to acquire a difficult, if not impossible, knowledge. There are two reasons for this desire: one related to the feeling of superiority offered by this effort and participating in the *illusio* mentioned by Bourdieu, as a symbolic social value; the other for the pleasure of the game, which only leads to the satisfaction of accepting the world in its various expressions. An Inuit mask, a verse from Mallarmé, an improvisation by Coltrane, a painting by Jackson Pollock.

*

The danger of identification is to mistake effect for meaning. The danger of adherence is to try to transform the surface into depth. It is to fall into the trap.

*

All works are traps, objects created to deceive. Their reality is already problematic. Where to start? How to define them? The draft, the manuscript, the typescript, the first edition, the revised and expanded edition? All together? But we never read everything all together - or rather yes, we do, but without perceiving it as overlapping identities in the instant of the reading. Works are objects that are both real and virtual. Real because of their physical presence, virtual because of their multiple position in the unstable fields we call "literature"¹, "art" or even "culture".

¹ I consider literature here within its largest possible definition, just as "Fiction" covers both fiction and theater.

*

Works (literary, visual, acoustic or art objects) belong to a special category, not being limited to that in which they are embodied, and representing / symbolizing a network of meaning in constant flux. They are quantum objects, superimposed in space. Unstable objects in an unstable field, they cease (artificially) to move though our desire to read, as the property of light (wave or particle) is chosen by the physician who will attempt to study it. We move thus temporarily and relatively from a quantum object - the latent work, presents in N places - to a local object - material or materialized - but still maintaining all its properties of ubiquity. You can indeed scribble all over your copy of *Madame Bovary*, but you will never touch the work itself. This object is therefore ambiguous and this ambiguity will be revealed through the reception(s) of the effect(s) it produces, such as, for example, the chivalric romances in *Don Quixote*.

*

It would be wrong, however, to assume that this ambiguity is a *result* of the work. It is, instead, contained *within* its genesis, in its intent. Any fiction or poem is an attack against reality. We must not forget that Stendhal's mirror "carried along a large road" is precisely - a mirror. An object (artificial, manufactured) whose edges limit what it reflects, whether the "azure" or the "mud." And we must also note that this mirror is not carried by the writer, but a man who carries it attached to his pack – an image of the writer, of course, but fictionalized. The reflection is also unstable, shifting according to the progress of the man. Nothing "real" here. We have, instead, an artifice, defended by Stendhal as such: "Ah, Sir, a novel is a mirror carried along a high road. At one moment it reflects to your vision the azure skies, at another the mire of the puddles at

your feet. And the man who carries this mirror in his pack will be accused by you of being immoral! His mirror shows the mire, and you blame the mirror! Rather blame that high road upon which the puddle lies, still more the inspector of roads who allows the water to gather and the puddle to form.” (translation: Scott Moncrief)
Fiction is only a reflecting surface, a trap for light.

*

We return here to our concept of trap. Every work is subversive, even the most mundane. Any fiction or poem tells what is not, investing the space of the possible, even of the impossible. That is why we like to read the unreadable, as we like to look at pictures that represent "nothing" or listen to music that is similar to "noise." This space of realized possibilities - because it exists, momentarily materialized in the work - defines the relative field (unstable, thus) of what we call reality, and which consists of the limits imposed by our physical reality. But this field of possibilities is recognized by us as detached from materiality, and it is a trap in which we fall with pleasure (or at least, with interest.) However, to believe that this non-existent field exists beyond itself, is only legitimate in the space of religion, psychosis or childish desire.

*

The work is therefore indeed a quantum object, and must be regarded as such in a critical perspective. It is essential at this point of our reflection, to specify our definition of reading and of the reader: It will now only concern *critical* reading (that is to say a reading that is fundamentally interested in the work) rather than recreational reading. It is an essential task of the intellectual, maybe his/her single task.

*

Essential because it defines the position of the critic in the social field to which he/she belongs, that both determines and surpasses him/her. It is the specific area he/she creates around a work - when he/she singles it out in order to connect it better to the fields to which it belongs, along with and in spite of his/her reading.

*

Unique, because it is both a radical and decisive task for the work when it is being read, and for the possibility of reading itself. It is a moment of truth where instability is no longer a problem, but a starting point as well as a point of arrival.

*

We must also, before proceeding further, remember that if the noun "critical" comes from the Greek *kritikos*, meaning "to discern" or "to judge", the word holds a secondary value which, in our opinion, is much closer to the role of the intellectual: "announcing a crisis. » To read critically, is to provoke a crisis, that is to say a transformation of the object, of the reader, if not of both at the same time.

*

The work, as an object, is an object of crisis and must be read as such.

*

The crisis is the transformation, the point of no return. The moment that makes sense beyond the tolerable sense - and where the split frees and transforms. A work in crisis takes its place in the exact moment where it has never been before, and will never be again.

*

To avoid the crisis is to avoid the work. It is to leave the object in its latent state in its (false) univocality, in a pseudo-fixed space/time. And this “fixed” is problematic. It's in its name that cultural and literary “canons” are created, and the set of values to go with them. To establish a canon is to try to avoid the crisis, or rather to pretend to go around it. Indeed, the canon is the manifestation of a crisis one seeks to avoid - it's a entropic reaction - and that is why all canons are basically reactionary. It also implies considering the work as a stable object, defining a stable culture. It's a fantasy that tends to the petrification of a national cultural identity, an exclusive identity, and therefore an incomplete one.

*

But the work, as a crisis object and as a quantum object, defies any fixed cultural identity. Or rather, it surpasses it. As an object in motion, a non-fixed object, located in a relative and multiple temporality, the work is an ongoing paradox. It can then be easily moved, replaced or left in its context. Being real and virtual at the same time, its moving does not cause a collapse of the cultural landscape to which it belongs, but a temporary reorganization of its perception. Culture is a rhizome, in the Deleuzian sense of the term, whose "centers" or "nodes" are largely symbolic and mobile. To read becomes a motion following motion.

*

This motion follows the effect, and is in constant danger of falling into the biggest trap: to allocate this effect a definitive identity. It is to mistake a desire for a need. Need leads to categories, desire calls for genres. It is a desire born of anguish, caused itself by this motion. But this movement is that of History, whose randomness can only be corrected by fantasies. The effect of

the work, however, will never be a definitive identity, nor its form can be associated with a “pure” species. Works, like culture, are always hybrids of hybrids.

*

It is not by chance that the classification of literature by "genres" is historically contemporary to the invention of "races." We are in the same movement, when Reason becomes infatuated with a desire for purity and “vital” divisions, to promote and defend Civilization, which will therefore closely associated with Culture. Values will hence be created, and considered not attached to, but contingent to the effect. This is the birth of ideology, as shown so well by Starobinski in *1789: The Emblems Of Reason*, that is to say when certain aesthetics (neo-classical, for the French revolution) will become a cultural value, then morph into a moral value, then into "Value" itself. The initial revolutionary and generosity will ossify into an identity mold, the Republic, to be later absorbed, after two imperial digressions, by the State, the usurper twin of democracy.

*

Any classification by genre is therefore, unlike categories, ideological. Where categories provide a purely descriptive and informative identity, genres create imaginary and irrational identities which will be the basis for a scale of values, usually related to a social context (or projection) and thereby become political, in the most negative sense of the term.

*

Genre is an identification system that ranges from pure to impure, or rather applies only to the unclean, to the hybrid. It

implies a “scientifically” established “superior” and “inferior”, like "races."

*

But genre also logically implies a reading, which, as a cultural analysis, must necessarily involve the acceptance of a set grid of values. To accept this grid is therefore to accept a social and political position of the literature, based on a genericity, i.e. on an innate, atavistic quality of the work. It is a biological perspective of History, of which culture and literature are only the sublimated expressions.

*

Genre is typically the anti-crisis, or its denunciation. In both cases, it cannot make the reading “critical” because its position is one of power, which is precisely wary of crisis. To read through the grid of genre is to try to give literature a set of values and a "natural" identity, while literature is absolutely anything but natural.

*

Genre must be considered by the critical reader as part of the *illusio* defined by Bourdieu, that is to say as a social value that allows the reader to position itself in its own social field. This is not a critical position, but rather a position of power, or at least a conscious or subconscious desire for power.

*

The critic's *illusio* should be absolutely detached from any position of power in order to be valid. Bourdieu himself has been criticized enough on this point, and it is true that it is a seemingly untenable position. Thus, if the Cynics were feared by the citizens because they openly criticized society, we should not forget that they also called for the return of the Tyrant (symbolized by

"Virtue"), to stop the decay of democracy. Cynics were thus also on the side of power, even if they seemed to challenge it. The critical position is only tenable if one is aware of its limitations, i.e. its relativity. But it is an accepted relativity, set within the heart of the relativity of History.

*

It is in this assumed in this relativity that lies the greatest danger, both to the reader, and to the work. It was also here that the term "critical" makes sense, because reading is not an act detached from the world - on the contrary. It is an eminently social act, which defines the individual in his/her relationship with the reality that surrounds him. The reader is never isolated, contrary to what is often believed. The readings of *A Remembrance of Things Past's* narrator link him to his world, to his mother, to Gilberte, to Albertine, etc. It is one of the foundations, along with music and images, of sharing and identity. And it is obvious that neither sharing nor identity are or can be universal, albeit homogeneous. It is the illusion of both "dominant culture" and "counter-culture". Like culture, the social being is fragmented, compartmentalized, evolving - in short, relative. As we have seen, the concept of a "stable culture" is a political necessity, linked to notions of state and nation. Critical reading is therefore a social reading set against the alleged stability of literature (and culture, by extension): it is even a counter-affirmation, a constant questioning, because it is aware of its own relativity.

*

The first phase of this critical reading involves the identification of the reader - the anonymity of objectivity is indeed the best way to simulate the crisis without really provoking it. That's the difference between Blanchot speaking of Kafka and a

university professor hiding behind Blanchot to discuss Kafka. If the writer is at the forefront, voluntarily putting himself in danger, the university professor remains in his classroom. The identification of the reader is thus the first essential step of a true critical reading because it involves advancing in the open. A courageous way of thinking.

*

The second phase, equally vital, concerns the identity of the work and the refusal of any univocal definition. The work must be considered in all its possibilities and the necessary narrowing-down will become the path of the proposed reading – therefore a reading among an infinity of possibilities. The value assigned to the work must likewise be ignored – as the danger represented by the critical reading is not, in fact, based on the assumed value of the work, but instead on its identity precisely freed from this value. In a critical perspective, a cheesy commercial novel has as much "value" as a novel by Balzac, that is to say: none.

*

It is through this double identification that the field of the reading will be created and a meaning be allowed to appear - that is to say, not the meaning of the work, but a theoretical possibility of a meaning, and only a possibility.

*

To reject the univocality of the work and to define the identity of the reader are eminently political positions as they involve the denial of stable and/or "objective" values. The relativity of the work, and therefore of its reading, is neither a goal nor a means, but a starting point. It is the choice of perpetual discomfort, which questions its own comfort and that of others, to advance in the

present time, the only temporality that really matters because of its absolute relativity.

3. Writing

"Nothing is true, everything is permitted," Burroughs wrote. There is no better definition of poetry and fiction. Of course, the person speaking, Ibn Al-Sabbah, is speaking of "reality." But Ibn Al-Sabbah is doubly fictional, both as a myth and as a character in Burroughs's novels. It's a trap - the trap common to all fiction.

*

Ibn Al-Sabbah is a construction, a machine to trap the reader. It is an artificial creation that states the first rule common to both fiction and poetry. But he applies it to reality, reflected as a fiction within fiction. Roland Barthes "reality effect" inverted. The page talks - and a page cannot speak. It's a mock dialogue. Dynamics are set in motion, by the unique control of the manufacturer, i.e. the writer.

*

Writing is above all to construct. By constructing I do not mean to follow a specific plan, a sheet of IKEA instructions, but joining elements that will eventually become fiction or poetry. It's pure work, and "only work" as Baudelaire said, that sets the language in a different space than what we call reality.

*

All fiction, even autofictional - perhaps especially autofictional - participates in this process of detachment from reality, from the "natural". It is, like poetry, an artifice, and nothing but an artifice.

*

Through his/her work on the object in the making (a text or a book, but it can also be applied to any form of art), the writer detaches himself/herself from latency to temporarily invest himself/herself in a momentum. Indeed, for any writer, reality is fiction or poetry in latency.

*

Narratives or metaphors gush out of reality, to immediately harden like pumice. The next step is to have the reader share a longing for the volcano.

*

If fiction and poetry are part of living, they are not alive. There is nothing biological there. They are necessary simulacra.

*

Any fiction, from the simplest to the most complex, includes an infinity of paradigms - the author, the period, the language, etc. It is the same with poetry. None of these paradigms are stable. This is how they reflect reality. And one might even say: this is *only* how.

*

Our desire to match reality and fiction is the fuel of writing. It's a game, but a fundamental one. One must shuffle the cards as the cards are shuffled in reality. This is where the true intent of the writer lies, which he/she will disguise behind the effect. This is the game that hides the "I".

*

For the poet, it is a question of changing the space of language, and thus to subvert reality as it subverts us. Plato rightly distrusted

poets - everything is false in a poem, as it reflects the falseness of reality expressed in language. Better still, it exacerbates it.

*

Any work, any text, even dematerialized, is an object just like a piece of art or a musical piece. These are quantum objects which are simultaneously present in different spaces. The purpose of writing is to help this quantum identity to remain and oppose the materiality of the world.

*

The materiality of the world: the designated target of all fiction and poetry.

*

Fiction is indeed a regular attack against reality. No love there, but only the intention of inflicting maximum damage. It is the same for poetry, which subverts the essence of what we mistake for expression of reality: language. There again: no prisoners taken.

*

Fictional and poetic objects give us the illusion of materiality through their physical presence, embodied in the book as object, but of course, this is again a trap. The book is not the work, even if the work is the book.

*

However, as Camus reminds us: "No artist tolerates reality," says Nietzsche. It is true; but no artist can do without reality." However, it is important to define what one means by reality - or rather the illusion of reality. Nietzsche attacks the dogma, the constraint imposed by its materiality. Camus speaks of existence, which is as hopeless as unavoidable. Both are right, but do not talk

about the same thing, the central point that nonetheless connects them: the reality that is of interest to fiction or to poetry, as to all art forms, is a non-natural reality, non-innate, non-living. It is a reality that is both non-dead and non-living, still always located in the margin, in the interzone of desire and anguish.

*

Blaise Cendrars has described, following Baudelaire and Rimbaud, the writer as an alchemist and Primo Levi, the writer as a chemist. It is the difference between the mystical writer and rationalist writer, one as honorable as the other. But the work is similar, if we subtract the ultimate goal - the reaction and/or transmutation are artificially induced effects in the laboratory. Both make use of alembics, both heat, reduce, combine, wait. And the result, whether a success or a failure, is still a hybrid and denatured object.

*

Writing is thus working on matter, but without matter, if we exclude the instruments used for writing. The Realists, Naturalists and even, in a sense, the Surrealists have tried, at some point or another, to reconcile the two, becoming the Don Quixote of their own fiction – something that Rimbaud strangely rejected in regards to poetry, unlike Baudelaire and Mallarmé. But this reconciliation is *de facto* impossible: poetry and fiction will never reach materiality other than through the book as an object (or as a film-object, if the fiction is adapted) – i.e. a relative materiality, which is only their incarnation, not their essence. It is a pseudo-materiality, whose impotence is paradoxically the source of its strength.

*

The writer faces every instant the triumph of matter. It is a defeat daily repeated. But unlike Sisyphus, he or she bears no rock on his/her back. He/she only bears himself/herself, and it is much, much worse. For, unlike Sisyphus again, he or she is not happy.

*

Matter is that we get to know through experience and we are forced to respect through education. It is undeniable, unavoidable and as fertile as it is sterile. It determines, through a conjunction of opposing forces, what we call existence. However we also know, as the saying goes, that "existence is elsewhere." It is of this elsewhere that the writer or artist speaks of, this anti-matter without which materiality is unaware it couldn't exist.

*

Fiction and poetry are the "dark matter" of existence, and existence, like the universe, is constantly expanding.

*

Writing is an act related to the hidden, to the invisible revealed, but this "hidden" is often something obvious rendered invisible by its materiality. The dramas that Balzac and Flaubert described were found in newspapers, but hidden in the paper.

*

To extract the obvious, the basic work of writing.

*

To work on the evidence always involves an extraction, some destruction and a reconstruction. That's why talking about "oneself" in a poem or fiction is also a trap for the reader - all is artifice,

especially anything that reminds of reality or of its possibility. It's a sham, a game to which one adheres joyfully.

*

To write is to provoke identification or rejection. Both are a success.

*

No writer can give advice to another writer on the writing process. Unlike boxing, there are no rules and all types of blows are allowed.

*

Can you teach writing? Yes, as you can teach someone to fish, to drive, to cook. Exactly the same. However, you cannot teach anyone to be a writer.

*

What is being a writer? A curse. An unquenchable desire. A fire that never goes out. Your own ghost. A mystery without a question.

*

Writing is a martial art such as Aikido, which uses the power of its opponent to defeat it. The writer uses the strength of the world against itself.

*

Writing is a struggle without a final victory, a failure always announced. As soon as the book becomes an object, as soon as it has become material, you must start all over again.

*

There are at least two projects in the writing: the book as an object and writing itself. If the book-object is always a Pyrrhic victory, the continuation of writing is a point-based victory.

*

There is neither happiness nor unhappiness in the act of writing: only a quiet despair. This is why one should never mix up the writer and the writing.

*

If writing is a struggle against materiality, it is not, however immaterial. It is material in another way, or rather, it suggests another materiality. Thus any writing (and I do mean any) is subversive.

*

The materiality of writing, such as the work in which it will be embodied, is quantum, i.e. that it exists in several states at once, such as light, which is both wave and particle. You cannot touch the light, yet it exists. It is exactly the same for writing.

*

Like light, writing crosses the universe at a constant speed, but is distorted by the gravity of planets it meets along the way.

*

If the writer is trapped by his/her own materiality, writing is his/her quantum possibility. In this, writing and reading are the same thing.

*

The writer is first and foremost a reader. It is obvious and has been told before at least a hundred times, but that is primary to the founding act of writing, as it shares the same tragedy - that of the impossible reconciliation with the material world.

*

This is where reading and writing are two sides of the same fundamental social act - that of awareness.

*

The first truth of Buddhism is that the world is a great suffering, but you can save it through compassion. That is the beauty of Buddhism. The first truth of writing is that the world is a great suffering, and that you can never save it. That's the beauty of writing.

*

Reading teaches us one thing, which is that materiality as the only certainty of existence is an illusion. Writing teaches that illusion is the best weapon against materiality.

*

If the writer bangs against a wall, his knuckles will bleed and the wall will not move. If the hero of his fiction bangs his fist against a wall, he will also have bleeding knuckles, but those of the writer will remain intact. The fictional wall, however, might or might not collapse.

*

Writing and reading express the relativity hidden behind the logic of the world, even when defending it. This is the fundamental paradox that perpetually threatens reality. The enemy within. The most dangerous kind.

4. Rebellling

Reading and writing are subversive acts. All political systems know this, without exception. No power structure can afford an absolutely free literature.

*

Power is the political manifestation of the depressing materiality of reality.

*

This materiality is what we are taught in schools and in universities. It's not so much the social cohesion that is being sought, based on the respect of everyone, but rather the submission to an idea whose materiality is present daily. Nothing new here, except for the language used - which invariably change with a new era.

*

However, as we have seen, all literature is subversive, even the one that seems to lend itself so well to the needs of this political materiality (it is the same for the whole culture - literature is used here as an example and as a symptom). Even the most conventional literature unintentionally questions the statements expressed. Literary prizes, complacent TV shows, infomercials may be, finally, what literature can offer as the most subversive, in that they are absolutely limited by their material contingency. Nothing is more ontologically temporally limited than fashion and current discourses. Nothing is more ephemeral than the *zeitgeist*.

*

Teaching how to read literature is the first counter-revolutionary means of power. By installing "frames of reference," models to follow, answers to adequately crafted questions, power has two objectives: to consolidate the class he considers the most loyal in its support, and disgust the other of what will appear to it as a useless "luxury". The added-value for one class will serve as a repellent for the other. Divide and conquer – the usual old story.

*

To make freedom disgusting to the slaves, that is the old project of any intelligent tyranny.

*

Today in the West, we live in systems which are both and proto and crypto -totalitarian. Proto, because they are not yet fully formed, and crypto, because they try, somehow, to hide their intentions. They are truncated "democracies", where the security of the state (disguised under the names of "nation", "democracy" or "citizens") comes before the common good. In addition, their business model is a "natural" and "logical" partner. We are in a double materiality, that self-justifies its existence by its very existence, which legitimizes its value. We are locked in a tautology from which it is very difficult to extract ourselves, as material evidence is amassed to convince us. It is precisely this materiality that is denied by literature.

*

Literature claims that reality is just a word.

*

Literature deals with words - or rather with the word. It is its unicity that it addresses, since everything revolves around the meaning of these small units. In this, the fiction writer is similar to the poet. When discussing love, death, happiness, these are objects they toss and turn, break and rebuild, shattering the atoms to bring out the protons and electrons. Meaning, ironically, is secondary, because it is, like the word, relative.

*

Relativity of the word, relativity of meaning – the essence of literature.

*

It is in this non-material space, non-stable, non-predefined that lies the possibility of absolute freedom.

*

Power's existence is conditioned by its univocality. The multiplicity of parties is an illusion, a way to justify the unjustifiable - the social *status quo*, the petrification of roles, the consensualization of dreams. Bestseller culture is in this very symptomatic because it is doomed to perpetual repetition, self-imitation and finally, logically, to commercial failure, since it contains and produces the seeds of its own limits.

*

Voltaire was sent to the Bastille by the monarchy, Sade was imprisoned by the revolutionaries, Jean Genet censored by the Republic - power often knows better its own fault-lines better than its citizens.

*

Literature has no message, or rather, it contains all messages. It is the expression (with all the other arts) the most perfect of the ontological instability of reality, and thus, paradoxically perhaps, of its true richness.

*

It is both fun and terrifying to see that the sinking of the democratic West is largely caused by the inability to think about relativity other than on its own terms. But it is unable to grasp the essence of the polymorphic reality, trying to lock it down again and again in a fixed materiality, so reassuring and so wrong. Literature knows that. It has always known that, actually. Thus, we can read the Iliad as a gigantic epic and mythic fresco, or as the first pacifist and anti-religious text in the history of humanity, with its ridiculous *casus belli*, its tired heroes and cruel gods. Both readings are both true and false - at the same time. One can never exclude the other. The Iliad will remain the Iliad, although the text will continue to be transformed through its various readings. It will remain everywhere, both wave and particle.

*

Literature questions the legitimacy of matter under any form, while recognizing *de facto* its existence. You could say it recognizes it as a hollowness, investing all the flaws and cracks it can find. It is this hollowness that power cannot stand because it is there that true freedom can grow.

*

Literature will never provoke a revolution - although some books can, like Marx's *Das Kapital*, for example - but it can certainly help to revolt. Camus understood the essential challenge

of the word, because it is based on a fundamental ambiguity, encompassing both the individual and the group - as opposed to revolution, which cannot occur without the masses. Revolt is the ongoing instability, which constantly fluctuates between enlightenment and destruction.

*

Revolt is not the *purpose* of literature (nor of art) but is *ontologically* linked to its nature, or rather, its artifice. It is at the heart of the trap built by the writer, in the quantum and manufactured object attacking the materiality of the world.

*

To read for one's enjoyment, to read to understand and to read to feel emotions are not different actions, even if we like to treat them as such. They all involve playing and accepting the artifice, and to temporarily separate oneself from the imposed logic of the material world. They all participate in the temporary insertion of another (personal) temporality in the common (social) temporality. They all involve a reaction to the effect of the work and taking up a personal position (taste, interests, opinions, etc.). Reading is independent from the genre or the category of the work. It is also an act that can be repeated, with different consequences. Finally, it is an action with infinite and rhizomic paradigms – i.e. interconnected elements without a value scale.

*

To establish a scale of values supposedly "objective" or "scientific" in literature (like culture) is, of course, an act of power. If society thinks it needs to a set of values around which to define itself (changing values, moreover, in the course of history, but always presented as "eternal" during a crisis), literature has none,

or rather cannot have any, due to its relative and constantly fluctuating position. Thus Sade, who was still banned in the 1950s, is now studied at the university. Literature is therefore, *de facto*, the most radical enemy of the norm.

*

To read is to get exposed to this anti-matter. To write is to create it. These are two eminently political acts, even if sometimes despite themselves.

*

Literature is a symptom of the culture and it reveals the political and social state of the nation that produces it. However it is never literature we talk about when we talk about the "crisis of literature," but of the image we want to give to it. Literature is *always* in crisis - or rather, it is crisis itself.

*

And it is when the reader perceives this crisis, when the book-object has truly become an object of crisis, that the revolt can happen, allowing the emergence of an "I" always in motion.

*

To read (or to listen or see or touch) is to become dynamic, just as to write (or paint, or sculpt, photograph, dance, music, etc.) is to annihilate the fixed materiality. It is also to be propelled somewhere else while staying here, to become quantum yourself and to understand that matter does not exist to limit or restrain us, but that it is only *here*. It's Sartre's *Nausea* reversed, transforming the disgust caused by the rotten root of the tree into its indifferent acceptance.

*

Likewise, the revolt caused by literature is not a revolt against death or the absurd, like in Camus, since literature itself is death and the absurd. Among other things. The infinite set of possible permutations, interpretations also contains its end, its limit - at the same time. Inseparably.

*

The revolt provided by literature is the realization that life is not only contained in nature but also in artifice. Or rather, that everything is an artifice, including what is presented as *only* living. Fiction and poetry proclaim a permanent equivocality, which is absolute freedom, and that meaning can only arise when this equivocality is absolutely accepted. Upstream, and not downstream.

*

To be, to reflect, to think are not actions but processes. It is the same for revolt. It is a realization, which is done both against and within the materiality of the world, like. One could even say that the process of literature and revolt is exactly the same as it comes from the same principle: the refusal of an univocal reality.

*

Reading, writing, rebelling are thus reaction processes, the scale of which will determine the need for emancipation from the imposed reality, from the supposed unavailability of matter. It is a liberation of the self that is not only personal, since we have seen that reading and writing are social acts. It is a radical and contagious awareness, absolute in its relativity.

*

Reading, writing, rebelling are inseparable. These are the Fates of power and the muses of true freedom, the freedom to live without illusions and without constraints in a world that seeks to impose both daily.

*

Literature offers no miracles, is neither sacred nor demonic. It is both paper and nothing, paper and everything. Real and virtual, tangible and intangible. It is certainly not natural nor alive - it belongs to what we call History or time or culture - which are all three metaphors of existence. It is our *other* existence, beautifully artificial, beautifully relative, beautifully human.

5. Conclusion

Reading critically is teaching critically. It is sharing the knowledge that what we call “relative” is actually what makes us human and gives us the possibility of expressing ourselves again and again on the same texts. It is where literature separates itself from religion and dogma - or rather, *should* separate itself. Faith and worship have nothing to do with the study of literature. Writers are not idols, and should never become so. Works of fiction and poetry are not sacred texts, and demand various interpretations.

The critical field is not a field of values, it is a field of permanent questioning, precisely *without* a setting of values. To read critically is to consider a work worth of being read in that regard, precisely whatever its accepted worth is - or lack of. The reading has therefore to justify itself through other means than classifying or setting on a scale, or accepting that others have done

so. The critical reader is a permanent rebel, also to his own accepted truths, allowing others to pursue on the dynamics he or she has set in motion.

Reading, writing, rebelling are the three connected legs that justify the role of literary humanities and allow them to separate from their allocated political frame. To question works is not only to deconstruct meaning, but also to rebuild the invisible, fragile and impermanent architecture of what holds our world together, the “Black Matter” of our identities we choose to call “culture”.

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<http://revistacaracteres.net/revista/vol6n1mayo2017/reading-writing-rebelling>

{CARAC TERES}

Estudios culturales y críticos de la esfera digital

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