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► **To cite this version:**

Daniel Thomières. Beyond interpretation: from the missing kernel to the missing people. *Imaginaires*, 2010, Le noyau culturel, 14, pp.9-20. hal-02488313

HAL Id: hal-02488313

<https://hal.univ-reims.fr/hal-02488313>

Submitted on 26 Feb 2020

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Beyond interpretation: from the missing kernel to the missing people

This issue of *Imaginaires* is a selection of papers from our 2008 yearly conference on the interpretation of literary texts. As was the case with the previous volumes, the problems that were raised deal once again with questions of semantics and hermeneutics. This year, a new dimension has been added: a hypothesis about a cultural component as part of the meaning of texts.

The idea behind the conference was what is basically a naïve question: can we understand everything in a literary text? What are we supposed to do with those areas of the text that resist, especially those that are linked to a culture that is not our own, something we have called “the cultural kernel”? Can we crack the cultural kernel? The question obviously has an element of positivism about it and the debates in the workshops very quickly demonstrated that the way we relate to texts is somewhat more complex.

One of the first conclusions arrived at was that there are two “cultural kernels.” This has probably to do with the fact that both reading and interpreting texts constitute an activity that takes place at least at two levels: we have to consider separately both the book and the reader’s mind. The first kernel can be said (metaphorically) to be “inside” or “behind” the literary text. In this case, the question is: how do we make sense of a text? How do we produce interpretations? Kernels are what resists in the text, what makes it illegible or unreadable, and part of these kernels

may be said to be cultural by nature. As French specialists of literature written in English, for instance, we constantly encounter this old, familiar problem. We study and teach literary works which were obviously not written for us. If you are Irish, it is (fairly) easy to make sense of a novel written by an Irish writer and describing Irish realities. On the other hand, Irish novels prove problematic for most French readers. We are outsiders. Can we understand everything that is in a text or should we consider that there will always be a remnant, a gap we will never be able to bridge, or, if one prefers, a kernel that will always elude us? We posit here that this kernel is at least partly made up of something that is really specific to the foreign culture.

This first type of cultural kernel is probably made up of at least four types of ingredients. 1. Exotic realities: what is the meaning of peanut butter for a French person? You have to have been an American kid to be familiar with the mythological dimension of peanut butter. 2. More generally, every culture looks at reality in different ways. Human beings make sense of the world through lenses which are very often made up of binary oppositions: profane *vs.* sacred, good *vs.* evil, male *vs.* female, etc. The frontier between the two terms of the opposition varies a lot across cultures. Let us think of the way these oppositions are used, for instance, to define — and sometimes impose upon other people — cultural attitudes towards food or clothing. 3. Cultures imply a shared memory. For instance, it is impossible to grasp a number of important implications of John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* if one is not familiar with Jefferson. These small farmers from Oklahoma have of course probably never heard of Thomas Jefferson, but Jeffersonism is something which is in their blood: their ideal is a small farm as well as close links to the earth. In the

1930s, this ideal belonged to the past, and yet it was still an ideal that united them. 4. A future which is probably a fantasy, that is to say some sort of dream toward which a large number of members of a given culture aspire. These fantasies raise the question of values. For a long time, for American people for instance, the future consisted in a vision of the West as the promise of a better life, and that vision persisted long after the West ceased to exist as an actual possibility. (The farmers in *The Grapes of Wrath* still share such a conception of the West).

The papers which follow contain in-depth analyses pertaining to that problem. As Laurence Chamlou who studies a novel by Salman Rushdie clearly shows, texts belonging to foreign cultures are made up of a multiplicity of layers of meaning which are inextricably linked. It is often extremely difficult to try to reconstruct their logic. It would thus be wrong to superimpose on a foreign text — or on a foreign culture for that matter — our own cultural logic, something that could be called the Gulliver syndrome as it is analysed by Anne-Laure Fortin. Jonathan Swift knows what Gulliver does not: cultures are anything but transparent. Texts are usually filtered by our cultural contexts, and more specifically by what should be called a political agenda. In this respect, Serena Dal Maso's study of Italian translations of Flaubert shows the importance of the historical moment when the text is received, as does Aurélie Thiria-Meulemans who advocates a perception of Wordsworth free from the simplifications of the Victorian era. The same is also true of Bernard Malamud's reception in post-Communist Romania which is analysed by Mihai Mîndra.

There is, however, just so far we can go in reconstructing the foreign logic and systems of references. Cultures are basically heterogeneous and fairly often they contain what could be called “crypts” (to use Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok’s phrase in *Le Noyau et l’écorce*). Daniel Thomières and Yannick Bellanger analyse a number of such examples in connection with N. Scott Momaday and Washington Irving. We will never “crack” the kernel, if only because there are some members of the foreign culture who do not have access to the kernel, or the crypt. In psychoanalytical terms, that is not their own unconscious. In other words its content has not been repressed by them, but it affects them all the same. Often, as the authors of the articles show, it concerns problems which have to do with fatherhood, and, it follows, identity. In these novels, the characters’ identity has become problematic. We can only reconstruct some elements of meaning by studying the margins of the text without ever hoping of reaching (mastering?) a supposed centre.

The limits confronting us perfectly bear out what Jean Piaget said about the way knowledge is constituted, whether by babies, great scientists, or just ordinary academics specialised in literary texts... We make use of two successive mental operations: assimilation and accommodation. Confronted to a new object, or to a problem, we try to resort to concepts (or sensor-motor mechanisms, in the case of babies) which we have already developed successfully for other objects and which seem to work for some time at least partially. We look upon the new text, its logic and its textual referents in terms of other texts we are familiar with. When however we encounter a kernel resisting us, we have to develop entirely new concepts through an operation of accommodation. Put it differently,

with assimilation, the new object is forced to conform to a ready-made frame of reference of mine, whereas with accommodation it is I who changes and adapts to the new object. It is thus clear that, when it comes to interpreting foreign texts, accommodation implies a process of evolution in the subject.

That necessity is due to the way our minds work. It is also due, as far as cultural kernels are concerned, to the way cultures are structured and interact with each other. In this respect, Tzvetan Todorov in his book *Nous et les autres* is perhaps the theoretician who has developed the clearest implications of these assumptions. Todorov shows that, when we look at cultures — our own and others' —, we should adopt a twofold approach: there is something universal about man (in other words, no-one is inferior or superior to the others) and at the same time all cultures are different and specific. If we separate these two considerations and ignore either of them, we run the respective risks of ethnocentrism and racism. Todorov concludes that mankind is the one species that arrives at an understanding of all the other cultures. To do so however, the only possibility offered to us is to start from inside our own culture, using the only categories at our disposal, but using them in a critical way. A consequence is that it is important for us to be confronted to other cultures — or documents coming from other cultures — to be able to understand a little better our own culture, or rather all the (often contradictory) sub-groups and sub-cultures we are part of.

The problem with interpretation is that the word “interpretation” is perhaps not the right term. Or maybe, after all, it is... It all depends on the way we look upon it.

Specialised dictionaries do not seem to agree about its etymology. *Inter* of course means *between*. The rest of the word either comes from the Latin *pretium* (price) or from the Sanskrit *prath* (to spread about). If we adopt the Latin origin, we are right to look for the “value” of the text inside it. That is the traditional conception of interpretation. On the other hand, it is possible to follow the suggestion from the Sanskrit: the text disseminates into new contexts which its author could not have foreseen. It is now read in other cultures, in new historical periods which are sometimes very far from its original context. What happens when a text is grafted upon a new context? What do readers do? It is in this respect that it becomes necessary to speak of a second cultural kernel. This one is not situated in the foreign culture but in my mind. And in this case it could perhaps be found a better term than the word *interpretation*. “Remplacer l’anamnèse par l’oubli, l’interprétation par l’expérimentation”, wrote Gilles Deleuze (“Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation,” *Mille Plateaux*, 187). Will we say that we read literary texts not to discover some truth (in the author’s mind? in his or her society?), but to discover something about ourselves, and to construct new manners of being, new possibilities of life?

Two passages which I borrow from *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust will, I believe, help us see things in a somewhat different light. Proust’s narrator remembers that, when he was a child at Combray, he had seen ready-made spectacles in the window of an optician’s. In fact, that sort of glasses which don’t require a doctor’s prescription can still be found today in a lot of our supermarkets. Of course, you have to try on a lot of them before you find the one

that fits your eye-sight. Literary works are like these glasses. They enable readers to look at the world and at themselves a little better. In other words, they offer a sort of framework that leads readers to discover distinctions and patterns of which we had not been aware before. They see things that were there outside or inside themselves but that they had not noticed. What is important is the notion of interaction. What I now see depends on the world of course, on the glasses obviously, but also on that great mystery which is myself, my consciousness and my unconscious. The second metaphor used by Proust refers to the paintings of Auguste Renoir. When they were first exhibited, a lot of people judged them very modern. They constituted something to which they were not used and the general public accordingly found it difficult to accept them. Indeed some people said that they were shocking and, worse, that they had nothing to do with reality. Then, gradually, they became accepted. Today — says Proust — we tend to look at the world as if it were a painting by Renoir. “And, lo and behold, the world around us (which was not created once and for all, but is created afresh as often as an original artist is born) appears to us entirely different from the old world, but perfectly clear.” (*Du côté de Guermantes*). The idea is of course the same as that of the spectacles. One doesn’t interact with the world directly.

Interpretation becomes here pointless. Richard Rorty is probably right when he says that our approach must be first and foremost pragmatic. His argument points out that, if our objective is the traditional one of interpretation, we will only arrive at a scientific body of knowledge about the text, in the same way as a biologist tries to discover facts about the germs in a test-tube. Our conclusions must be as objective as possible. That approach could be called the

point of view of God. An object is considered from the outside and our goal to discover the truth about it by means of induction and/or hypotheses and deductions. Such a thing is unquestionably legitimate, and interpretative semantics especially has made a lot of progress over the last twenty years. As mentioned earlier on, texts are made up of words (should we say *semes*?) and of a host of complex relationships between these elements. A good interpretation will cover as many details as possible. Conversely, the author of a good interpretation — a student or an instructor — must not project himself or herself upon the text. One has to be as objective and unbiased as possible. In other words, the interpretation arrived at must be deemed true. Truth in this respect means an exact correspondence between the text and what is said and conceptualized about it. Something essential, however, seems to be missing in such an approach of literary texts. The problem is that it simply ignores the question as to why in the first place people read books, and why they think, talk, dream, possibly quarrel about them. Books and especially literary texts have something to do with us, with our bodies, our minds, our desires, our violence, our unconscious, about what is most individual, personal and specific in us. Besides, a book doesn't have one single meaning. Its meaning is not something which has been fixed for all eternity. It changes over time. Homer or Shakespeare certainly did not foresee the implications that are found today in what they wrote. (Well, after all, who knows ...?) As a consequence, if we choose to follow Rorty's invitation, rather than an interpretive method, what is needed is a pragmatic approach.

If these notions look too hazy and ambitious, maybe we could after all content ourselves with a suggestion made by

Stanley Cavell who more modestly maintains that literature permits us to experience the “uncanniness” of daily life. As Cavell puts it, with literature, we discover “the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic” (168). Obviously, we are not so ambitious with all the books that we read. We sometimes read just for relaxation. At other times, we are looking for self-knowledge and/or for a deeper vision of the world and the great questions connected to man’s estate. Let’s put it this way: in that case, we do not read to find something that we already know, or to comfort our narcissism. And, of course, all readers are different. Be that as it may, we build a sort of bridge between the semantic possibilities of a text and some of the infinite contexts in which it can be read and make sense. The result we achieve (or that we do not achieve) depends, it goes without saying, upon the ideological position we occupy in our society, as well as upon our needs, our desires and our dreams, our culture and our abilities as readers.

Camelia Elias in her analysis of Lynn Emanuel’s poems in this volume is right to stress that reading involves a process of collaboration, so that, in the end, the text helps me change my perspective on myself and on the world, which will take us to our last question. We started with a naive question. We will end with a question which is just as naive: why do writers write? There are of course thousands of answers (and in the case of this or that particular author we will never know the intimate truth, what happened in the secret space between the mind of the writer and his or her text). There is, however, one reason for writing which a lot of writers share in addition to their personal and partly unconscious motivations. Camelia Elias reminds us very aptly of Gertrude Stein’s pronouncement, “I write for

myself and strangers” (*The Making of Americans*, 1925). Indeed our relationship to the writers of the books that we read, as it stretches across time and space, is not only complex but also paradoxical. What do I represent for someone who is writing a novel or a poem in a far-off society several centuries ago?

We could hazard that the answer to that question is: The writer does not write for me. (That stands to reason. He or she has never heard of me.) The answer is also: The writer writes for me... That seems to have been what Gertrude Stein meant. It is also impossible to forget the lines of Walt Whitman’s apostrophizing his future readers in “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,”: “Closer yet I approach you, / What thought of me now? I had as much of you—I laid in my stores in advance.” (l. 86-87).

More specifically, it is far from clear whether writers write for their own cultures. John Steinbeck did not write *The Grapes of Wrath* for readers resembling the characters in his novel. Migrant workers usually could barely read and, if they read anything at all, it was the Bible. Steinbeck wrote for educated people in California, and more generally in the East of the United States, hoping that the patterns they will discover in his book will make sense for them and perhaps induce them to act one way or another. He also wrote for readers in Europe, China, Africa, all over the world, and he certainly knew (or hoped) that he would still be read in the 21st century. Why do we read *The Grapes of Wrath* today?

No writer has at his disposal his or ideal reader, that is to say the reader who will perceive all the intuitions hidden in the text he or she has written, and who will also understand the far-reaching implications of these intuitions. Perhaps, what is important to note is that writers do not describe reality. Steinbeck’s novel is no more a description of

California (without Mexicans!) than *Hamlet* is a description of the kingdom of Denmark. Often, the writers of great books, that is the books we still read, re-read and analyse today, are at a very deep level interested in symptoms, in imperceptible evolutions that haven't yet received a name in their society, in what is lacking, or what is in excess, in what is intolerable, in "crypts" and "kernels" (of course) that do not make sense, which does not mean that they do not prevent us from living as we would like to live. Very often, writers see problems. They do not describe things or people. They do not represent (that is, repeat) the official view of their society as it is imposed by a ruling fraction of that society. (Even, official writers always go beyond the ideological conventions they choose to obey and, in spite of themselves, reveal much more than the official ideology). They invent "peoples," they convey to us their dream of a people who does not exist yet, but who might possibly some day embody the values that are sadly missing in their society. "*Uns trägt kein Volk.*" Paul Klee's statement is famous: A people is missing and we cannot live fully today. I write, I paint (in a non-"representational" way, in Klee's case...), I compose music for a people that is missing, but that may exist one day and find something in my artistic endeavour. In another country, in another century, someone will represent that possibility for another people. The process is never finished. Readers will go on building meaning and developing new visions around the kernels created by the problems and aporias they will come across in the books they read.

We will return to the question in our next issue of *Imaginaires* which will be devoted to "The representation of the people." How and why do texts construct discourses

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around people? What are the implications of these representations? In what way do they enable readers like us to understand the past? the present? the future? our future?

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