



**HAL**  
open science

# Never for Granted: Literary Texts and the Power of Words

Daniel Thomières

► **To cite this version:**

Daniel Thomières. Never for Granted: Literary Texts and the Power of Words. *Imaginaires*, 2014, Les mots: entre pouvoir et puissance. Literary texts: the power and the possible, 18, pp.9-30. hal-02488438

**HAL Id: hal-02488438**

**<https://hal.univ-reims.fr/hal-02488438v1>**

Submitted on 26 Feb 2020

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution - NoDerivatives 4.0 International License

## Never for Granted: Literary Texts and the Power of Words

DANIEL THOMIÈRES

Université de Reims Champagne-Ardenne, France

“Je croyois entrer dans le port ;  
mais [...] je fus comme rejetté en pleine mer.”<sup>1</sup>

This volume offers new interrogations on literary texts. Will we ever understand all the possibilities they possess? Spinoza’s celebrated question will perhaps spring to the minds of some of our readers: “*Quid Corpus possit? Nemo hucusque determinavit.*” “What can the body do? As yet, no-one has fully ascertained it” (*Ethics*, Book III, scolium of proposition 2). We believe that it is legitimate to entertain a similar ambition about texts. A number of tentative answers is provided in the essays that follow. They represent a selection of the papers given at an international conference organised by the CIRLEP (*Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches sur les Langues Et la Pensée*) and held at the University of Reims Champagne-Ardenne in May 2013. This conference is the latest in a long series devoted to the interpretation of literary texts and more generally to the question of whether the ancient art of hermeneutics still possesses some relevance today. Without any doubt, the problems discussed

---

1. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Système nouveau de la nature et de la communication des substances, aussi bien que de l’union qu’il y a entre l’âme et le corps*, 1695, 483. “I thought I was entering the harbour, but [...] I found myself thrown back into the open sea.” (*A New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances, and of the Union of the Soul and Body*, 1695, 142).

reveal 21st century preoccupations, if only because our attitude towards literature was considerably altered in the last century. Writers and artists like Marcel Proust or Paul Klee urged us to think differently about the meaning of writing and especially about the implications of the reading activity. Their intuitions were later developed by a number of influential philosophers, among others Maurice Blanchot (who was also an important novelist in his own right) and Gilles Deleuze.

### **The word and the plague**

“*In the beginning was the Word.*” It certainly is unfortunate, but we have to admit that John did not understand language correctly, or, should we say, that he wanted to submit Christians to the power of his (religious, political and philosophical) beliefs. Contrary to the first words of the 4<sup>th</sup> Gospel, we prefer to claim that, when we talk about literature, words should come at the end, when readers proceed to construct their own interpretations, that is when they become, as it were, writers themselves, making use of all the wealth of potentialities contained in the texts they read, and transposing it into the many contexts which make up their lives. John’s namesake, the one from Patmos, was also unquestionably wrong when he maintained:

*For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, If any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book: / And if any man shall take away from the words of the book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things which are written in this book,*

these words being symbolically the very end of the Book of Revelation (22:18-19), and consequently of the Bible.

The two Johns believed that the God they celebrate invented the Word, all the words and all their meanings, and that, when He was done, the process was irrevocably finished. All that mortals like us today have to do is discover the significations hidden behind or beneath texts (religious or other). In other words, for us, life need only consist in repeating and imitating models, or, at least it should (on pain of the plagues...) We will

therefore now forget these two Biblical writers, and, for those of us who insist on the authority of Scripture, we will take the liberty of suggesting that it far more preferable to follow into the steps of Jesus Christ when He proclaimed: “*I make all things new*” (*Revelation 21:5*), that is to say that, even if we are not Christian or even religiously minded, maybe we can look upon the future as fundamentally open and as something that is always to be “written.” Finally, for readers who favour a more secular approach, we will recall Friedrich Nietzsche who spoke of “*possibilities of life*” (*Möglichkeiten des Lebens*) in connection with literature:

*Hier ist alles so erfinderisch, besonnen, verwegen, verzweifelt und voller Hoffnung, wie etwa die Reisen der größten Weltumsegler und auch in der Tat etwas von der gleichen Art, Umsegelungen der entlegensten und gefährlichsten Bereiche des Lebens. (1875 Introduction, Die Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen, 345)<sup>2</sup>*

The question raised in this volume is how we should approach literary texts. In this respect, Richard Rorty<sup>3</sup> is undeniably right when he unfolds the implications underlying the way literature is usually studied in universities, where students and scholars are expected to arrive at a scientific body of knowledge about texts more or less in the same way as a biologist tries to discover facts about germs in a test-tube. Their conclusions must be as objective as possible. (Said in passing, very few scholars do so, as those of us whose job it is to read books and articles on literary texts know very well. Most of the time, it is always the same details that are commented upon). This approach could

---

2. “There is as much invention, reflection, boldness, despair and hope here as in the voyages of great navigators; and, to tell the truth, these are also voyages of exploration in the most distant and perilous domains of life.” (translation borrowed from Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 101).

3. See Richard Rorty’s famous paper delivered at the occasion of the Tanner Lectures held in Cambridge, Britain, in 1990, under the tutelary figure of Umberto Eco. The seven texts were published under the general title *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* by C.U.P. in 1992. Rorty’s text, which is unquestionably the one possessing the most far-reaching implications for the problem at hand, bears the title “The Pragmatist’s Progress.”

be called the point of view of God: An object is analysed from the outside and the student's goal is to discover the truth about it by means of induction and/or hypotheses and deductions. Such an activity is obviously valid in itself, and interpretative semantics in particular has made a lot of progress over the last twenty years<sup>4</sup>. Texts are made up of words (should we say *semes*?) and of a host of complex relationships between them. A good interpretation will encompass as many details as possible. Conversely, the author of a good interpretation must not project himself or herself upon the text. His or her reading is to be as objective and unbiased as possible. In other words, the interpretation arrived at must be deemed true, and truth in this respect means an exact correspondence between the text and what is said and conceptualized about it.

Such will not, however, be the approach favoured by the contributions contained in the present volume, if only because something essential seems to be missing in that way of considering literary texts. It simply ignores the question why in the first place people read books, and why they think, talk, dream, possibly quarrel about them. Books, and literary texts in particular, 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 ourselves.

As a matter of fact, there is one thing that we should always bear in mind: we will never know everything about a text, or its author, or the reality it is supposed to be about. As Maurice Blanchot pointed out in his tribute to George Bataille on the occasion of his death:

*C'est le moment des œuvres complètes. On veut « tout » publier, on veut « tout » dire ; comme s'il n'y avait plus qu'une hâte : que tout soit dit ; comme si le « tout est dit » devait enfin nous permettre d'arrêter une parole morte : d'arrêter le silence pitoyable qui vient d'elle et retenir fermement dans un horizon bien circonscrit ce*

---

4. An excellent example of this approach can be found in François Rastier's own brand of interpretative semantics which incorporates a full consideration of the cultural components of texts and of course of their fundamental ambiguity. See his *Sens et textualité*, Engl. transl. *Meaning and Textuality*.

*que l'équivoque attente posthume mêle encore illusoirement à nos paroles de vivants. ("L'amitié," in L'Amitié, 327)<sup>5</sup>*

A book is not a whole (organic or not...) It doesn't possess a unity, it will never be pure (it should be self evident that the word *purity* is a word devoid of meaning whether it is applied to a text, a human being, a piece of land, or of course a people, a nation, a human group), and there will never be anything sacred about a book (unless we want that book to alienate our freedom, or to alienate that of our neighbours...) It is far more honest to recognize that all texts are basically mixtures, that they are made up of a indefinite number of heterogeneous fragments. It follows that a text doesn't have one single meaning and that its signification is not something which has been fixed for all eternity. It changes over time, depending in part upon the infinity of contexts in which it is read. Homer or Shakespeare certainly did not foresee the implications that are today found in what they wrote. (Well, after all, who knows...?)

### **The bomb and the scandal**

Admittedly, no-one will deny that texts are determined by the history and the culture in which they appear, but it is equally extremely important to stress that a number of these texts in turn deconstruct their history and their culture, revealing their contradictions as well as the possibilities which there silently, unconsciously encompass. It also happens that these texts often deconstruct their readers's own cultural contemporary assumptions. In other words, the function of literary texts should not be seen as providing forms, norms, or models to imitate.

*Écrire comme question d'écrire, question qui porte l'écriture qui porte la question, ne te permet plus ce rapport à l'être – entendu d'abord comme tradition, ordre, certitude, vérité, toute forme*

5. "One wants to publish "everything," one wants to say "everything," as if one were anxious only about one thing: that everything be said; as if the "everything is said" would finally allow us to stop a dead voice, to stop the pitiful silence that arises from it and to contain firmly within a well-circumscribed horizon what the equivocal, posthumous anticipation still mixes illusorily with the words of the living." (Maurice Blanchot, "Friendship," in *Friendship*, 290).

*d'enracinement – que tu as reçu un jour du passé du monde, domaine que tu étais appelé à gérer afin d'en fortifier ton « Moi », bien que celui-ci fût comme fissuré, dès le jour où le ciel s'ouvrit sur son vide.* (Maurice Blanchot, *Le Pas au-delà*, 8-9).<sup>6</sup>

We need to look for something else in that most human activity which we call literature. Its rôle is rather to displace our perceptions and to uncover possibilities in ourselves and in the social contexts of which we are part more or less willingly. Put another way, reading an ambitious text is synonymous with looking at the future, at my future, at our future.

Can we then imagine another manner of approaching literary texts, something beyond interpretation, that is something that would not give itself the objective of establishing a correspondence or a mirror reflection between the text and the reader's mind? In this respect, Gilles Deleuze often said that our relationship to literature would be richer if we stressed experimentation rather than interpretation: "*Remplacer l'anamnèse par l'oubli, l'interprétation par l'expérimentation*" (*Mille Plateaux*, 187).<sup>7</sup> What we should understand is that reading a book ultimately means connecting the assemblage of singularities it is made up of, the patterns that can be discovered in it, with the numerous contexts of our lives. Let us add, if it is accepted that texts possess some value, that reading them means turning them into questions whose answers are not already ready-made. A good book should be like a scandal (and that could very well be our working definition of what is a really good book is...) The word *scandal* originally meant a stumbling block. A scandal is what urges readers not to take anything for granted. In other words, what is essential about a literary text is that it should

---

6. "To write as a question of writing, question that bears the writing that bears the question, no longer allows you this relation to the being – understood in the first place as tradition, order, certainty, truth, any form of taking root – that you received one day from the past of the world, domain you had been called upon to govern in order to strengthen your 'Self' although this was as if fissured, since the day when the sky opened upon its void." (Maurice Blanchot, *The Step Not Beyond*, 1-2).

7. "Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation." (Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 167).

bring about a crisis in its readers' minds. (Etymologically, the word "*crisis*" signifies a distinction: There are now distinctions where none seemed to be present before. In plain English, it is a case of two instead of one, or even perhaps more than two. New possibilities, roads not yet taken, appear where previously there apparently was only one road...) The poet Stéphane Mallarmé was even more forthright in his famous answer to a journalist asking him about anarchists in Paris: "*Il n'est d'explosion qu'un livre*" (There is only one [type of] explosion [possible], and it is [that produced by] a book). If these notions look too hazy or ambitious, maybe we could 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 he puts it, with literature, we discover "*the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic.*" (168)<sup>8</sup> One way or another, we all intuitively know that, when, for instance, we read a poem or a novel, we vicariously share in something that its words imply (fantasies, epiphanies, revisions of values and above all of habituses<sup>9</sup>, as well as the sudden discovery that some things are possible, etc.).

8. See Stanley Cavell's *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. Cavell refers to his adaptation of Sigmund Freud's conception of "*das Unheimliche*" (usually rendered as the "*uncanny*" in English).

9. The concept of habitus refers to Pierre Bourdieu's seminal work, *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique*, Engl. transl. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, as well as to "Habitus, code et codification." Values – as opposed to habituses – are only mental representations in people's minds and, apart from Shakespeare's Iago, very few people would own that their values are questionable. The problem with values is that they are – by definition – abstract(ed) and usually have very little bearing upon reality. People just don't do what they say – or what they believe in, or say they believe in. Literature presents readers with characters, that is with people caught in concrete situations. Admittedly, we often learn about what they believe in, but we also discover how they act, or react in these situations, which is more often than not in contradiction with the values they proclaim. John Donne was right, no man's an island, and no-one is entirely individual. We act and react according to patterns, we are like the others, or more precisely like some others, since a given community can be characterized through several (often conflicting) patterns of behavior. These patterns are commonly called *habitus*. A habitus consists in a scheme which is both objective and subjective at the same time. It helps us adapt to new situations and enables us to anticipate what turn events will take. In addition – that is what is especially important for



If one cannot say, express, let alone discover “*Tout*” or even “*le Tout*” (with a capital letter) about a text, let alone about its author or the reality s/he purports to be writing about, what should we consider that literature’s special potential consists in? Following on Stanley Cavell’s suggestion, it seems possible to offer a first series of indications: a text can enable us to catch a glimpse of a number of new relationships with the unknown, the radically unfamiliar, that is to say something essential and very often indirectly linked to what is changing in the world in a manner not yet readily apparent to most of us. In other words, at one point, we separate ourselves from the text in order to plunge into a complex process of becoming : “*cette séparation fondamentale à partir de laquelle ce qui sépare devient rapport.*” (“*L’amitié,*” in *L’Amitié*, 328).<sup>10</sup> Reading is thus constructing, not repeating. It would in fact be an illusion to believe that a text will give us ready-to-use answers. There are no answers. There are only questions, and to question is proper to man. (For once, a well-known proverb is not a cliché!) In addition, literature, especially in its experimental kind, helps us discover gaps in reality, contradictions, impasses, intolerable scandals. At one point, beneath what we usually take for granted without giving it too much thought, the time is always more or less out of joint.

[...] *Changement tel que parler (écrire), c’est cesser de penser seulement en vue de l’unité et faire des relations de paroles un champ essentiellement dissymétrique que régit la discontinuité : comme s’il s’agissait, ayant renoncé à la force ininterrompue du discours cohérent, de dégager un niveau de langage où l’on puisse gagner le pouvoir non seulement de s’exprimer d’une manière intermittente, parole non unifiante, acceptant de n’être plus un passage ou un pont, parole non pontifiante, capable de franchir les deux rives qui séparent l’abîme sans le combler et sans les réunir (sans référence à l’unité).* (Maurice Blanchot, *L’Entretien infini*, 110).<sup>11</sup>

the questions raised here – a habitus is transferable from one field of our experience to another. It follows that habituses are generally unconscious and characters often are not aware that their actions follow established social patterns.

10. “the fundamental separation on the basis of which what separates becomes relation.” (Maurice Blanchot, “Friendship,” in *Friendship*, 291).

11. “[...] A change such that to speak (to write) is to cease thinking solely with a view to unity, and to make the relations of words an essentially dissymmetrical

As will be immediately clear, the question raised in this volume is not of an empirical order and does not concern readers in their endless variety. There is no denying that a masterpiece like, say, *The Tales of Canterbury*, can be read in an infinity of contexts ranging from the 14th century to the 21st, and from England to China or Paraguay, involving all sorts of readers endowed with all kinds of education levels, reading habits, conceptions of literature, political opinions, and of course a complex individual unconscious. Some will more or less be willing to transpose what the text reveals to them into their own lives and their environments. Others will not be moved. The ways in which and the reasons why humans change, the subtle and complex processes that take place when they begin to change, all these things remain extremely mysterious, even to sociologists. The following essays have, instead, chosen to focus on the inherent properties of literary texts. In what way can it be said that a text constitutes a potential? In this respect, it is of course beyond question that all texts are not equal. Some of them, for instance, are very conventional and rely on clichés or stereotypes. (This remark should not be taken as negative. A lot of us, including this writer, enjoy reading a good detective story now and again, if only because a scholar's mind can occasionally be tired and definitely requires some form of relaxation. Perry Mason always wins his cases and it does us good somewhere...)

### **Chaos and glasses**

Most of the texts discussed in this volume belong, however, to literary works that, to some extent, involve a certain amount of experiment with style and content, which is another way of saying that these texts suggest new relationships between

---

field governed by discontinuity; as though, having renounced the uninterrupted force of a coherent discourse, it were a matter of drawing out a level of language where one might gain the power not only to express oneself in an intermittent manner, but also to allow intermittence itself to speak: a speech that, non-unifying, is no longer content with being a passage or a bridge – a non-pontificating speech capable of clearing the two shores separated by the abyss, but without filling in the abyss or reuniting its shores: a speech without reference to unity.” (Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, 78).

words, meanings and the world (including myself). Often, their authors have endeavoured – more or less unconsciously – to convey to their readers the feeling that something is changing – more or less imperceptibly – in reality. It is as if, when they started writing, they apparently believed that they were faced with something that is in the nature of a problem like a feeling of uneasiness or possibly of wonderment. What we are then supposed to discover in a text is not a discrete item or a series of items that we can identify precisely because we possess preconceived assumptions about them, be it a plot, a vision of a stable world, a character with a fixed identity, commonly held values, etc. On the contrary, the revolutionary potential of a text – the bomb in the text – is of the order of discontinuity (or “intermittence,” as Blanchot would say), of (often invisible) change, of latent potentials. It is a regrettable fact that we still look at things in the light of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*: the world is seen in terms of genus and species by means of categories such as essence, quantity, relations, time, space, action, passion or cause. In short, every thing has its “proper” unity and identity. All truly creative literary works, however, are literally inhabited by a sort of chaos. Chaos is originally what is not (yet) defined, what we have to start from in order to construct our own vision of reality as it really is in all its complexity and its unceasing transformations, more or less in the same way as God created the world (His world!) out of primordial chaos.

It follows that we have to admit that the world is not to be taken for granted and it is true that a great many literary texts can be seen as so many invitations to look at it anew. It would then seem that, one way or another, the richness of a text is in a position to increase the semantic richness of its readers who “accommodate” to the text, instead of “assimilating” it to their ready-made intellectual schemes.<sup>12</sup> Put differently, we start

---

12. A passing reference to two key concepts put forward by Jean Piaget seems unavoidable, in spite of the fact that these days some people strangely tend to find this great thinker slightly out of fashion. Very early in his career, Piaget had read Bergson and William James, and, to a large extent, he never abandoned the ambitious philosophical and epistemological tradition to which they belonged. Whatever the problem confronting us, it is always essential to return to Piaget,

thinking with the text and thanks to the text and what matters is cognition, not just recognition. It goes of course without saying that, in the case of these ambitious literary works, reading means re-reading. We all know Vladimir Nabokov's remark: "Curiously enough, one cannot read a book; one can only reread it. A good reader, a major reader, and active and creative reader is a rereader." (*Lectures on Literature*, i).

These considerations will possibly sound extremely abstract and, in all humility, they most certainly could and should be expressed in more simple terms, which we will now try to do – with a little help from Marcel Proust. In a famous passage from the end of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the narrator remembers that, when he was a child at Combray, he had seen ready-to-use spectacles in the window of an optician's, the sort of glasses which do not require a doctor's prescription and can indeed still often be found today in our supermarkets. You have to try on quite a few of them before you find the one that fits your eye-sight. Literary texts are a great deal like these glasses. They enable readers to look at the world and at themselves a little better. In other words, they provide them with a framework that leads them to discover distinctions and patterns of which we had not been aware before. They see things that were there outside or inside themselves but which they had not noticed. What is important here is the notion of interaction. What I now see depends on the world of course, on the text obviously, but also on that great mystery which is myself, my consciousness and above all my unconscious.

---

if only to be reminded that, in all physical or intellectual activities, such as, for instance, reading and interpreting a text, there are always two operations coming into play – *assimilation* and *accommodation* – and these operations cannot be separated. At some point, when a text starts to resist, readers have to stop assimilating it to what they already know. They then have to accommodate (in the optical sense) their minds, that is develop new schemes, not to say new concepts, in order to make sense of the specific difficulties raised by the text. In so doing, readers slowly begin to change. They remain the same, but, at the same time, they become other. It is also crucial for our purpose to add that, incidentally, what Piaget's constructivist approach (indirectly...) shows us is that there is a case to be made for reading difficult literary texts which enable us to develop a richer, more complex semantic universe.

*En réalité, chaque lecteur est, quand il lit, le propre lecteur de soi-même. L'ouvrage de l'écrivain n'est qu'une espèce d'instrument optique qu'il offre au lecteur afin de lui permettre de discerner ce que, sans ce livre, il n'eût peut-être pas vu en soi-même. La reconnaissance en soi-même, par le lecteur, de ce que dit le livre, est la preuve de la vérité de celui-ci et vice-versa, au moins dans une certaine mesure, la différence entre les deux textes pouvant être souvent imputée non à l'auteur mais au lecteur. De plus, le livre peut être trop savant, trop obscur pour le lecteur naïf et ne lui présenter ainsi qu'un verre trouble avec lequel il ne pourra pas lire. Mais d'autres particularités (comme l'inversion) peuvent faire que le lecteur ait besoin de lire d'une certaine façon pour bien lire ; l'auteur n'a pas à s'en offenser mais au contraire à laisser la plus grande liberté au lecteur en lui disant : « Regardez vous-même si vous voyez mieux avec ce verre-ci, avec celui-là, avec cet autre » (Le Temps retrouvé, 911).<sup>13</sup>*

A second metaphor used by Proust refers to the paintings of Auguste Renoir. When they were first exhibited, a lot of people judged them outrageously 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.

*Les gens de goût nous disent aujourd'hui que Renoir est un grand peintre du XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle. Mais, en disant cela, ils oublient le Temps*

---

13. "In reality, every reader, as he reads, is the reader of himself. The work of the writer is only a sort of optic instrument which he offers to the reader so that he may discern in the book what he would probably not have seen in himself. The recognition of himself in the book by the reader is the proof of its truth and vice-versa, at least in a certain measure, the difference between the two texts being often less attributable to the author than to the reader. Further, a book may be too learned, too obscure for the simple reader, and thus be only offering him a blurred glass with which he cannot read. But other peculiarities (like inversion) might make it necessary for the reader to read in a certain way in order to read well; the author must not take offence at that but must, on the contrary, leave the reader the greatest liberty and say to him: "Try whether you see better with this, with that, or with another glass.'" (Marcel Proust, *Time Regained*, 266).

et qu'il en a fallu beaucoup, même en plein XIX<sup>e</sup>, pour que Renoir fût salué grand artiste. Pour réussir à être ainsi reconnus, le peintre original, l'artiste original procèdent à la façon des oculistes. Le traitement par leur peinture, par leur prose, n'est pas toujours agréable. Quand il est terminé, le praticien nous dit : Maintenant, regardez. Et voici que le monde (qui n'a pas été créé une fois, mais aussi souvent qu'un artiste original est survenu) nous apparaît entièrement différent de l'ancien, mais parfaitement clair. Des femmes passent dans la rue, différentes de celles d'autrefois, puisque ce sont des Renoir, ces Renoir où nous nous refusions jadis à voir des femmes. Les voitures aussi sont des Renoir, et l'eau, et le ciel : nous avons envie de nous promener dans la forêt pareille à celle qui le premier jour nous semblait tout excepté une forêt, et par exemple une tapisserie aux nuances nombreuses mais où manquaient justement les nuances propres aux forêts. Tel est l'univers nouveau et périssable qui vient d'être créé. Il durera jusqu'à la prochaine catastrophe géologique que déchaîneront un nouveau peintre ou un nouvel écrivain originaux. (*Le Côté de Guermantes*, 623).<sup>14</sup>

The implications to be derived from the Renoir metaphor is the same as that of the spectacles sold by Proust's optician. One doesn't interact with the world directly, and texts – and, more

---

14. "People of taste and refinement tell us nowadays that Renoir is one of the great painters of the last century. But in so saying they forget the element of Time, and that it took a great deal of time, well into the present century, before Renoir was hailed as a great artist. To succeed thus in gaining recognition, the original painter, the original writer proceeds on the lines adopted by oculists. The course of treatment they give us by their painting or by their prose is not always agreeable to us. When it is at an end the operator says to us: "Now look!" 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. Women pass in the street, different from what they used to be, because they are Renoirs, those Renoir types which we persistently refused to see as women. The carriages, too, are Renoirs, and the water, and the sky: we feel tempted to go for a walk in the forest which reminds us of that other which when we first saw it looked like anything in the world except a forest, like for instance a tapestry of innumerable shades but lacking precisely the shades proper to forests. Such is the new and perishable universe which has just been created. It will last until the next geological catastrophe is precipitated by a new painter or writer of original talent." (Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way*, 375-376).

generally, works of art – help us build new relationships with ourselves and the world.

### **The power and the possible**

In this respect, speaking of the power of words may lead us understand a little better the interactions taking place between text and reader. Like all concepts, *power* is made up of an articulated assemblage of notions which account, in its case, for processes taking place between two opposed poles. Friedrich Nietzsche's use of the word *Macht* in the phrase *Der Wille zur Macht* ("The Will to Power") will here prove of some assistance. (One remembers that it was made famous by the posthumous publication of a series of the philosopher's notes under that title, but the concept was already largely present in many of his works, notably in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*). Interestingly, foreign translators of Nietzsche usually find the word problematical as it may refer to anything in-between the two poles we have mentioned. In French, it is usually rendered by the opposition between *pouvoir* and *puissance*, two words which can be understood as a sort of echo of *potentia* and *potestas* as used by Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, and then in *Ethics*. In Italian, in his *L'Anomalia selvaggia: Saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza*, Antonio Negri opted to speak of *potere* and *potenza*, and, in the English translation of his book, the words are respectively spelt *Power* and *power*. Power is thus an extremely complex concept inscribed in a critical tradition going from Spinoza to Nietzsche and then Gilles Deleuze. Can we speak of a power of words, not present in texts obviously, but coming into being in the interactions between texts and readers? A conservative text meeting a conservative reader will create a situation of *pouvoir/potestas/Power*, whereas, at the other extreme, *puissance/potentia/power* will characterize a progressive attitude, with the polar contrast allowing for all kinds of combinations in between the two poles. The contributors of the essays of this volume have placed themselves in the context of that opposition and they have thus chosen to speak of the power and the possible. In point of fact, to express what we

understand by the power of words in even more simpler terms, let us suggest that Spinoza would probably have argued that the power we are speaking of has to do with what he called sadness, whereas the possible is obviously a matter for joy (and glory?)

Some readers will find that some texts – in some contexts, at some moments in their lives – confirm their assumptions, their habituses, or more probably that reading these texts is not an obstacle, a scandal that urges them to think anew about the world and themselves. That is one of the two extreme poles we mentioned, that of power, *potestas*. These readers submit – usually without too much ado – to a power that mysteriously is brought to bear upon their bodies and their minds. That very often is the way religious texts function from a political point of view, but that is also true of other texts with nothing religious about them. Readers are more or less directly told what to eat or not to eat, how to dress and behave, and especially what and how to think. Anyone familiar with Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* will probably be reminded of Hester Prynne who was ordered by the clergymen/magistrates of Boston to carry a red letter A upon her grey clothes and to hide her hair under a cap. Hester's body literally became a text. She was meant to represent "a living sermon" for the inhabitants of Boston who met her in the streets and were supposed to infer from that spectacle a series of commandments to be applied to them.

It is thus easy to understand that these conservative texts entail a number of implicit manipulations of their readers's minds, which considerably reduces their sense of freedom. For instance, if one is a Christian, they usually imply a linear temporality necessarily inscribing subjects in a relentless progression from *Genesis* to *Revelation*. These texts practically always also entail a conception of space organised according to fixed territories, frontiers, centres, etc. where a proper place is "naturally" allotted to us, and of course a series of highly social codifications of what, not only our minds, but our bodies as well should or should not do.

There can however be other possibilities. Hester Prynne, for instance, starts embroidering the letter upon her chest. Writing / embroidering, the two activities bear a singular resemblance.



With her limited means, the young woman tries to “write” her own life and her identity. She makes something personal out of it, and, in the process, she discovers inside herself a potential she has not been aware of. She discovers the possible, *potentia*, no matter how limited it turns out to be in her case. Similarly, in our lives, there is always a certain amount of freedom, which means that, if we feel like it ever so little, and if of course we try very hard, we will find new possibilities of life open to us. It follows that, contrary to a well established cliché, *Macht* (puissance, *potentia*) has nothing to do with selfishness, as Gilles Deleuze rightly reminds us in the “Preface” to the English translation of *Nietzsche and Philosophy*: “This is why Nietzsche says that the will to power is not wanting, coveting or seeking power, but only ‘giving’ or ‘creating.’” (xii). Selfishness is indeed something extremely different. It implies that my personal identity is in possession of its definitive form (it possesses it? it is being possessed by it?). It may even be looked upon as an essence which I received when I was born. Nietzsche and Deleuze prefer, instead, to maintain that my sense of self is constituted by an endless series of processes of becoming: I change while I remain the same. In other words, it is only in Faulkner’s novels (and in some ancient tragedies... ) that a character’s life is his or her fate and that it is always already written. (Of course, a reader’s life is not necessarily the same as the life of a character’s life in a book s/he is reading). My identity is thus the sum of all the modes of becoming I go through. It is at the same time unity and plurality.

### **Joy and sadness**

It is time we returned to the quotation by Spinoza with which we opened this discussion: “*Quid Corpus possit? Nemo hucusque determinavit.*” What can my body do? What can my mind do too? The two are inseparable. And what can literature do, when it opens itself towards the possible rather than towards power? It would appear that it can help us understand that we must on no account let ourselves be deprived of our possibilities of life as we are always at the mercy of beliefs and illusions such as hope or fear whose power to enslave us is far stronger than all the chains

of the earth. Perhaps, there is one book which we should always remember and that is that half forgotten revolutionary masterpiece, *Le Discours sur la servitude* (1574) by Montaigne's friend, Étienne de la Boétie, who gave us the definitive demonstration of the way power is everywhere, in and around ourselves, and not just above us:

*Celui qui vous maistrise tant n'a que deux yeulx, n'a que deux mains, n'a qu'un corps et n'a autre chose que ce qu'a le moindre homme du grand et infini nombre de vos villes, sinon que l'avantage que vous luy faites pour vous destruire. D'où a il pris tant d'yeulx dont il vous espie, si vous ne les luy baillés? comment a il tant de mains pour vous fraper, s'il ne les prend de vous? Les pieds dont il foule vos cités, d'où les a il s'ils ne sont des vostres? Comment a il aucun pouvoir sur vous, que par vous? Comment vous oseroit il courir sus, s'il n'avoit intelligence avec vous? [...] Mais certes s'il y a rien de clair ni d'apparent en la nature, et ou il ne soit pas permis de faire l'aveugle, c'est cela, que la nature, la ministre de dieu, la gouvernante des hommes nous a tous faits de mesme forme, et comme il semble, a mesme moule, afin de nous entreconnoistre tous pour compaignons ou plustost pour frères. (Discours sur la servitude volontaire ou le Contr'un, Manuscrit de Mesmes, 138 / 141).<sup>15</sup>*

Closer to us, Pierre Bourdieu or Michel Foucault will not express things in a more radical manner, as Gilles Deleuze reminds us with all the clarity possible in the study he devoted to the latter:

---

15. "He who thus domineers over you has only two eyes, only two hands, only one body, no more than is possessed by the least man among the infinite numbers dwelling in your cities; he has indeed nothing more than the power that you confer upon him to destroy you. Where has he acquired enough eyes to spy upon you, if you do not provide them yourselves? How can he have so many arms to beat you with, if he does not borrow them from you? The feet that trample down your cities, where does he get them if they are not your own? How does he have any power over you except through you? How would he dare assail you if he had no cooperation from you? [...] Yet surely if there is anything in this world clear and obvious, to which one cannot close one's eyes, it is the fact that nature, handmaiden of God, governess of men, has cast us all in the same mold in order that we may behold in one another companions, or rather brothers." (Étienne de la Boétie, *Anti-Dictator: The Discours sur la Servitude Volontaire*, 42-43).

C'est pourquoi les grandes thèses de Foucault sur le pouvoir [...] se développent en trois rubriques : le pouvoir n'est pas essentiellement répressif (puisque'il « incite, suscite, produit ») ; il s'exerce avant de se posséder (puisque'il ne se possède que sous une forme déterminable, classe, et déterminée, État) ; il passe par les dominés non moins que par les dominants (puisque'il passe par toutes les fonctions en rapport). Un profond nietzschéisme. (Foucault, 78).<sup>16</sup>

Life, our life, stands thus on the frontier between the power and the possible and, in this respect, the same Gilles Deleuze sums up what is really at stake for us in his *Abécédaire* made for French television:

*Il n'y a pas de puissances mauvaises, pas de puissances mauvaises, ce qui est mauvais, il faudrait dire, c'est le plus bas degré de la puissance. Et le plus bas degré de la puissance, c'est le pouvoir. Je veux dire, la méchanceté, c'est quoi ? C'est empêcher quelqu'un de faire ce qu'il peut, la méchanceté c'est empêcher quelqu'un de faire, d'effectuer sa puissance. Si bien qu'il n'y a pas de puissances mauvaises, il y a des pouvoirs méchants. Et peut-être que tout pouvoir, tout pouvoir est méchant par nature. Pas forcément, c'est peut-être trop facile de dire ça... [...] Le pouvoir, c'est toujours un obstacle mis à l'effectuation des puissances. Je dirais, tout pouvoir est triste. Oui, même si ceux qui ont le pouvoir se réjouissent beaucoup de l'avoir, c'est une joie triste, hein, il y a des joies tristes, c'est une joie triste. En revanche, la joie, c'est l'effectuation d'une puissance. Encore une fois, je ne connais pas de puissances qui soient méchantes. (transcription from the oral of letter J for "Joie").<sup>17</sup>*

16. "Foucault's great theses on power [...] develop under three headings: power is not essentially repressive (since it "incites, it induces, it seduces"); it is practised before it is possessed (since it is possessed only in a determinable form, that of class, and a determined form, that of State); it passes through the hands of the mastered no less than through the hands of the masters (since it passes through every related force). A profound Nietzscheanism." (Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, 71).

17. "There is no bad power (*puissance*), what is bad, we should say is the lowest degree of the power (*puissance*). And the lowest degree of the power (*puissance*), it is the power (*pouvoir*). I mean, what is malice? Malice consists in preventing someone from doing what he can, malice consists in preventing someone from doing, from effectuating his power (*puissance*). Therefore, there is no bad power (*puissance*), there are malicious powers (*pouvoirs*). Perhaps

Literature is generally said to be a source of pleasure. Can it also be productive of joy? As we saw, Spinoza used the word in opposition to sadness, a most crucial distinction strikingly foreshadowing Nietzsche's contrast between acting and reacting. When I react, I depend on someone else's will or initiative. When I act, however, I am myself and the source of my desires. The question we ask in this volume is fundamentally political and, in the same way as Spinoza posited a link between philosophy and democracy, there definitely is a case to be made for linking literature and democracy. Democracy is still always "à venir," according to philosopher Jacques Derrida. Blanchot himself spoke of the book "à venir." If both book and democracy are still "to come," it can only mean that a number of literary texts – particularly, the more experimental sort, those that resist us at first reading – can help us apprehend how intolerable our world today is, if not directly to us, at least to a lot of our fellow humans. Such could be the essential function of art. It is difficult not to be reminded of Paul Klee's enigmatic pronouncement: "Uns trägt kein Volk" (We are missing a people). It is necessarily "a" people with an indefinite article, since it is in no way pre-defined. In other words, it would be wrong to look upon our future as something already written. When there is division and suffering, there is no people, no (true) community as yet. Perhaps (perhaps, because it is not determined, it is not the repetition of anything belonging to the present), a new people, a new sense of community will appear, with a responsibility to care for the others – all the others – that come across my path: responsibility, not power (*pouvoir/potestas*), "afin de nous entreconnoistre tous pour compaignons ou plustost pour frères," in order that we may behold in one another companions, or rather brothers...

---

that all power (*pouvoir*) is malicious by nature. Maybe not, maybe it is too easy to say so... [...] Power (*pouvoir*) is always an obstacle to the effectuation of powers (*puissances*). I would say, any power (*pouvoir*) is sad. Yes, even if those who "have the power" (*pouvoir*) are very joyful to "have it", it is a sad joy; there are sad joys. On the contrary, joy is the effectuation of a power (*puissance*). Once again, I don't know any power (*puissance*) that is malicious." [English transl. (modified) of this passage in *The Funambulists Pamphlets*, volume 01, <http://fr.scribd.com/doc/183628801/Funambulist-01-Spinoza-eBook>].

It may be bad (we all know that the Nazis were fond of the word “people” to which they supplied their own definition) or it may be good, which means that it is crucial for us to go on reading and rereading texts. Literature is interminable, as Blanchot used to tell us.

*Mais, précisément, l'essence de la littérature, c'est d'échapper à toute détermination essentielle, à toute affirmation qui la stabilise ou même la réalise ; elle n'est jamais déjà là, elle est toujours à retrouver ou à réinventer.* (Blanchot, “Où va la littérature ?” in *Le Livre à venir*, 293-294).<sup>18</sup>

### **Bibliographie**

BLANCHOT, Maurice. *L'Amitié*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971. *Friendship*. Collection “Meridian: Crossing Aesthetics”. Stanford: Stanford U P, 1997.

BLANCHOT, Maurice. *L'Entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969. *The Infinite Conversation*, Minneapolis: The U of Minnesota P, 1993.

BLANCHOT, Maurice. *Le Livre à venir*. Paris: Gallimard, collection « Idées », 1959. *The Book to Come*. Stanford: Stanford U P, 2003.

BLANCHOT, Maurice. *Le Pas au-delà*. Paris: Gallimard, 1973. *The Step Not Beyond*. Albany: The State University of New York P, 1992.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. “Habitus, code et codification.” *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, n° 64, 1986. 40-44.

BOURDIEU, Pierre. *Esquisse d'une théorie de la pratique, précédé de Trois études d'ethnologie kabyle*. Genève: Droz, 1972. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1977.

CAVELL, Stanley. *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1988.

---

18. “The essence of literature is precisely to escape any essential determination, any assertion that stabilizes it or even realizes it: it is never already there, it always has to be rediscovered or reinvented.” (Blanchot, *The Book to Come*, 121).

DELEUZE, Gilles et Félix GUATTARI. *Mille Plateaux: Capitalisme et schizophrénie 2*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, coll. « Critique », 1980. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia 2*. Minneapolis: The U of Minnesota P, 1987.

DELEUZE, Gilles. *Abécédaire*. 1996. Coffret 3 DVD. Paris: Éditions Montparnasse, 2004.

DELEUZE, Gilles. *Foucault*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1986. *Foucault*. Minneapolis: The U of Minnesota P, 1988.

DELEUZE, Gilles. *Nietzsche et la philosophie*. Paris: PUF, 1962. *Nietzsche and Philosophy*. London: Continuum, 1983.

HAWTHORNE, Nathaniel. *The Scarlet Letter*. 1850. New York: W. Norton & Co, 1962.

KLEE, Paul. “Übersicht und Orientierung auf dem Gebiet der bildnerischen Mittel und ihre räumliche Ordnung.” *Vortrag aus Anlaß einer Bilderausstellung im Kunstverein zu Jena*. 1924. Reprinted in *Über die moderne Kunst*. Bern: Bümplitz, 1949. 53.

LA BOÉTIE, Étienne de. *Discours sur la servitude volontaire ou le Contr'un*. 1574. Paris: Petite Bibliothèque Payot, 1976. *Anti-Dictator: The Discours sur la Servitude Volontaire*. New York: Columbia U P, 1942.

LEIBNIZ, Gottfried Wilhelm. *Système nouveau de la nature et de la communication des substances, aussi bien que de l'union qu'il y a entre l'âme et le corps*, 1695, in *Die philosophischen Schriften von Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz*. Volume 4, Berlin: Weidman, 1980. *A New System of the Nature and Communication of Substances, and of the Union of the Soul and Body*. *Philosophical Essays*, Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1989.

NABOKOV, Vladimir. *Lectures on Literature*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980.

NEGRI, Antonio. *L'Anomalia selvaggia: Saggio su potere e potenza in Baruch Spinoza*. Milan: Feltrini, 1981. *The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza's Metaphysics and Politics*. Minneapolis: The U of Minnesota P, 1991.

NIETZSCHE, Friedrich. *Philosophie im tragischen Zeitalter der Griechen*, 1873. *Werke in drei Bänden*. Band 3. München, 1954. *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*. South Bend: Gateway Editions, 1962.

PIAGET, Jean. *La Psychologie de l'intelligence*. Paris: Armand Colin, 1947. *The Psychology of Intelligence*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1951.

PROUST, Marcel. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. 1913-1927. Paris: Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque de la Pléiade », 1954. *Remembrance of Things Past*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1949.

RASTIER, François. *Sens et textualité*. Paris: Hachette, 1989. *Meaning and Textuality*. Toronto: The U of Toronto P, 1997.

RORTY, Richard. *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 1992.

SPINOZA, Baruch. *Ethica Ordine Geometrico Demonstrata*. 1677. *Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford U P, 2000.

SPINOZA, Baruch. *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. 1670. Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2007.