Chaos and literature: twelve easy introductory propositions

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What's in a word? Chaos is a word we are all familiar with. Is there something hidden inside or behind it? Maybe there is nothing? Which does not mean that chaos does not exist... Maybe we should look at the word as an incentive, a catalyst causing us to think, to ask ourselves questions, to reject ready-made assumptions. We all know that the wise man never takes anything for granted. The wise man always sits on the brink of chaos. In other words, the way the word functions — if we choose to consider that the word chaos is indeed an important word for us — is that it represents a form of violence borne to bear upon our minds. Should we go so far as to say that chaos is first and foremost synonymous with a form of challenge?

The following papers all try in their own way to define to what extent chaos is necessary to read, re-read and interpret literary texts, and perhaps more generally to tell us why we need literature in our lives. In this respect, it is certainly possible to simplify things and consider that there are two main options. A first possibility is that we read as a means of escape, as a way of finding some pleasure that is not too demanding for us. We do not wish to make too many efforts and we apply to texts the codes that are already present in our minds. The second possibility is to try and read the way Michel Leiris wrote — always facing the horns of the bull. Reading is a dangerous, unpredictable activity. We read because we know that we will only have one life and that every second counts. We turn to literature as it contains something special that teaches us an essential truth about ourselves and our relationship to the world. In fact, we need literature to scratch the surface and see the chaos beneath it — indeed the chaos inside ourselves. Chaos is what tells us that everything in our lives is not already written.

This is a collection of articles about the implications of the fact that using the word chaos can be seen as a challenge. If we look at it with all the seriousness it deserves, a text will not leave us unscathed. Some of the studies you are about to read adopt scientific concepts,

others can be seen as examples of textual analysis. All stress the idea that it is through reference to chaos that we can have a better understanding of what we read and who we are.

At this point, we are tempted to suggest that chaos has something to do with those levels of reality about which we will never be able to say anything certain. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Immanuel Kant gave us his own short list with the three Ideas of Reason (which we adapt here for own purpose): God (if He does exist), the self (who can say that he has seen his or her self?) and our problematic relationship to the world. We could perhaps add a few items of our own: death, society and politics, the other (who knows exactly what love or friendship are, and indeed what that other human being that we meet by chance could represent for us?) We only have language to talk about reality, and at the same time we all know that words are not sufficient to exhaust reality — unless we stick to stereotypes. If we wish to do away with stereotypes, we need to confront chaos, that nondescript level that is beyond language. We will never see chaos, but maybe we should be able to understand something of it if we use words indirectly. In fact, one thing we could safely say about writers is that the best of them seem to be specially aware that life is a constantly changing mixture of chaos and order.

Chaos is a word with many synonyms as the papers published here will show. Below is a very brief list of them which our readers may find of some use as a starting point in order to reconnoitre the terrain. It is obviously incomplete. We all have our own favourites. We only hope that making use of these twelve magic synonyms may help us read better, that is, understand ourselves better and discover new possibilities in our lives. We have used only simple words. Chaos is a simple word. Everybody then, hopefully, will understand these simple words. The papers that follow will give the technical terms.

arbitrariness: We now know that there is no logical connection between words, ideas and things. We often dream that these connections still exist. That is a dream that is necessary to our daily lives, indeed to our sanity, but at bottom we know better. Could chaos be the realization that these connections are an illusion?

becoming: We also know now that identity is not an essence given at birth, let alone an essence that would have existed for all eternity. Where do we come from? Where are we going? Is not chaos the absence of a definitive answer?

chance: If anything can go wrong, it will. Or maybe not? Tomorrow is another day? Happiness is a new idea on earth? Who can predict what will happen to me? Is not chaos the name of my future?

complexity: It is unquestionable that what looks complex can surely be explained in a simple way however difficult the enterprise may look, but shouldn't we also say that even simple things are at bottom unbelievably complex? We can certainly find chaos at the core of every level of reality.

disorder: What is order? Probably we had better ask: where is order? In reality? In our minds? Shouldn't we say that we always simplify things, that we impose artificial structures upon them? Is not order is a schematization of chaos?

the eternal return: There are two conceptions of time. It has a beginning and an end, an Eden and a Revelation, with all the responsibilities that that involves for me. Alternately, it is purely innocent, unwritten, going nowhere. Chaos could be the name of my freedom if I decide to accept the second option.

experimentation: What do you do with a text? You interpret it, find out the truth about it? Or you start from it and experiment in your life, in the world? You then don't have the key, the directions for use. That means facing up to chaos in order to create your own temporary order.

metamorphosis: We all know the phrase : metamorphoses rather than metaphors. (Deleuze and Guattari for the *cognoscenti*). To put it differently, is my life my fate or is it my freedom? Have I lived yet, failed and/or succeeded? Will it be death in life or chaos in life?

openness: Is the rule of the game repeating what I have read elsewhere in a book, in the Book, "what was often thought"? On the other hand, we may prefer to open ourselves to the others, the world, chaos, the unwritten, the unlived, the undreamt-of.

the real: Each thing in reality is unique. Yet words can only generalize. It could be said that this paradox conceals chaos, that is what resists in reality.

singularity: The question is unavoidable. Is a thing a unity, a whole with its own identity? Maybe we could look at it as an assemblage of singularities each one independent of the others, each one moving in its own direction. Will it be unity or chaos? Or both at the same time? The choice seems to be ours.

trauma: The trauma is what returns when we least expect it. It was hidden, repressed, or maybe it never really existed, yet it returns all the same, revealing what can't be expressed though it is undoubtedly real.

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