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Can "Contemporaries" Know How to Read?

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Abstract: In order to respond to Kyoo Lee's theses on reading, this essay focuses on obscurity and difficulty, terms often associated with modernism. Moving from a controversy opposing Mallarmé and Proust in the last decade of the 19th century to Lacan's use of a Mallarmean language when he describes how symptoms can be read, that is not by thinking naïvely that we are "poets" but by understanding that we are unconsciously scripted "poems," the essay posits a mediation provided by Ezra Pound when he invents both Comparative Literature and Translation Studies.

Keywords: Modernism; obscurity; difficulty; poem; comparison

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标　题: "当代人"能否知道如何阅读?

摘　要: 本文探讨与现代主义相关的"晦涩"和"难题"两个概念,以回应李圭的阅读理论。本文从19世纪末针对马拉美和普鲁斯特的一场争议出发,谈到拉康在描述如何阅读症状时是如何使用马拉美式的语言——即并非单纯地想象自己是诗人,而是认为我们在无意识层面都是被书写出的诗歌——并借此思考埃兹拉·庞德在发明比较文学和翻译研究时的基本观点。

关键词: 现代主义; 晦涩; 难题; 诗歌; 比较

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I will respond to Kyoo Lee's exciting meditation on reading by linking two passages from her essay:

> (1) Further along, if "everything in the world exists to end up as a book" (Mallarmé 226) as Stéphane Mallarmé is often quoted as saying, there will be a reader or two — another and maybe another set (in case the first disappears). (162)
>
> (2) Such an interfacial, elastic radar-reader arriving expectedly "unexpectedly" (Liu) in and out of "the scene in which every scene has its origin in

> languageless invisibility" (Quignard 7), such "a ceaselessly active actuality" itself as a kind of self in itself — still tied to the micro-humanoid called homunculus once entertained in the Cartesian theatre of solo-rationalism now seemingly back in the newly (i-or-U-) masked forms and figures of the AI, android, avatar, meme, Siri, Sophia, etc. — can become a transmitter for bi-directional power flow, generating and regulating a "quotological" (Regier 10) shock, "you dear reader [...], the target" (Regier 10) as George Sand is heard saying. (166)

To be responsibly responsive to a thoughtful and playful essay that stages and consumes so many references at once in such a short space, going from Charles Bernstein and Robert Bolaño to Hito Steyerl, Mark Twain, Rosemarie Waldrop, Lindsay Waters and Maryanne Wolf, via Paul de Man and Jacques Derrida, I will begin by focusing on the allusion to my favorite poet, Mallarmé. Reading is a topic he tackles many times, but I'll start from an anguished reproach he made to his "contemporaries" in 1896, namely that they did not know how to read any longer: "[...] *des contemporains ne savent pas lire*" (*Divagations* 234). My investigation will then lead me from Mallarmé to Lacan via Pound.

In 1896, Mallarmé was responding to an essay by Proust who had just published "Against Obscurity" ("Contre l'Obscurité") in the Symbolist magazine *La Revue Blanche* a witty and scathing attack on the style of Symbolism. Investing the literary organ of the very movement he was attacking, Proust took to task the devotees of the new school for their habit of writing incomprehensibly. He dismissed the idea that obscurity could be justified because a new mode of expression had to be invented. Hugo and Racine had been accused of being obscure in their times, which, he argued, had little to do with the kind of stylistic obfuscation and circumlocution that he found everywhere in symbolist texts. Symbolist obscurity did not stem from the depth of thought, as with Heraclitus or Hegel: a poet who stuffs his works with philosophical reflections errs since he or she chooses the wrong genre (Proust, "Contre l'Obscurité").

Such a cautionary reminder was not heeded by Proust himself only two decades later when he composed his magnum opus of *La Recherche*, which can appear as a medieval Summa doubling as a philosophical novel. Debunking the wish of Symbolist poets to reach the Absolute in verse, Proust opposed to their convoluted prose or verse the unaffected simplicity of a prose writer like Anatole France. France's elegant prose and linear plots kept alive a sense of fiction that symbolist poets had forgotten: universal truths must first be embodied in the particularities of characters or situations. Stung by a criticism that he took as an "aggression," Mallarmé replied that his contemporaries had forgotten how to read:

> I prefer, faced with aggression, to retort that contemporaries don't know how to read —
>
> Anything but a newspaper [...] (*Divagations* 236)

He goes on and evokes the practice of reading in those exquisite and precious terms:

> To bring to bear, according to the open page, one's own ingenuity to the blank space (*au blanc*) that makes it possible, forgetting even a title that would speak too loud: when chance, aligned in the least breaks all disseminated, is conquered word by word, a blank space returns (*le blanc revient*), before unjustified, now certain, to let us conclude that nothing beyond, authenticated silence reigns — Virginity that solitarily affronts the transparency of an adequate gaze, and has as it were divided itself into its fragments of candor, both being nuptial

> proofs of the Idea. ("Le Mystère dans les lettres" 234)

One finds in these dense and suggestive lines a poetic program that was partly realized by *A Throw of the Dice*..., which means that reading a poetic text that plays on mysteries, one will abolish chance and give a rationale even to silence. Reading allies the virginity of a gaze that cannot profanate the text because it is attentive to its "candor", a word combining the white expanse of the page and the virtue of purity. At the same time, one can be tempted to grant Proust that he had a point in deploring "obscurity".

"Obscurity" was indeed an insult for Mallarmé. At the same time, it seemed to make things too easy for readers because they were told that they "didn't have to understand" (*Divagations* 235). For him, any true text will have to keep a share of mystery or secret, and to remain true to the essence of writing, the Night that he sees condensed in the black ink used to write. As he writes, the poet is able to see the mistakes of short-sighted contemporaries: "[...] they draw from an inkwell with no Night the vain layer of intelligibility that he, too, observes, but not only — they act indelicately to foment the Crowd (which contains the Geniuses) to let loose waves of vast human incomprehension" (*Divagations* 232).

This debate has marked the turn of the century, and it cannot be reduced to an opposition between poetry and the novel or to a clash between experimental writing and realistic fiction. It betrays more than a generational divide. Proust was attacking less Mallarmé, whom he respected, than his younger epigones. The debate has impacted prose fiction written in French in the last decade of the 19th century and continues today. Proust's objection was triggered by the wish to continue writing readable novels after the radical breaks in language, the experimentation with syntax and imagery one finds in poets like Rimbaud and Mallarmé.

It was a key issue for the group of writers and artists we lump together as being "modernist" that they had to create their audience by forging new protocols of reading. In that sense, they were disciples of Mallarmé, not of Proust. One of the first American poets who understood this need was Ezra Pound who in *The Spirit of Romance*, presented an impressive synthesis about a European tradition going back to Homer and Sappho, and admitted that it was not such a given that we were all "contemporaries". He sketches the issue in his 1910 Preface:

> It is dawn at Jerusalem while midnight hovers above the pillars of Hercules. All ages are contemporaneous. It is B. C., let us say, in Morocco. The Middle Ages are in Russia. The future stirs already in the minds of the few. This is especially true of literature, where the real time is independent of the apparent, and where many dead men are our grandchildren's contemporaries, while many of our contemporaries have been already gathered into Abraham's bosom, or some more fitting receptacle. (*The Spirit of Romance* 6)

Pound did not choose these locales at random: the Pillars of Hercules, the straits of Gibraltar, mark the Western limit of the Mediterranean world. Gibraltar, which Pound had visited, faces the coast of Morocco just a few miles away, offering a vista of another continent, a darker Africa. Jerusalem stands for an antithesis to Athens in Pound's view of the Classical world. And most of Russia was in 1910 a truly medieval society. The statement that all ages are contemporaneous should not be taken to mean that time does not count in history. On the contrary, Pound argues that we live in different times and periods.

Pound's idea had been expressed in a similar manner by Adolf Loos's 1908 provocative essay,

"Ornament and Crime". By comparing ornaments with the tattoos worn by criminals, Loos was presenting his utopia of a clean, pure and spare modernity, while allowing that there were people like the Tyrol peasants who did not live in the same historical moment: as he admits, it would be silly to try and make them abandon their love of kitschy ornaments. Loos's modernist manifesto also takes into account an uneven development of culture:

> I live in the year 1908, but my neighbor lives approximately in the year 1900, and one over there lives in the year 1880. It is a misfortune for any government, if the culture of its people is dominated by the past. The farmer from Kals lives in the twelfth century, and on the occasion of the jubilee Procession, tribes walked past which even during the period of mass migration were thought to be backward. [...] Even here we have people in the cities who are survivors from the eighteenth century, and who are appalled by a painting with violet shadows, because they cannot understand why the artist has used violet. To them, the pheasant which the cook has spent days preparing tastes better, and the cigarette case with Renaissance ornaments is more pleasing. And what is happening in the countryside? Clothes and household utensils belong to previous centuries. The farmer is no Christian, he is still a heathen. (3)

Pound's view of reading led him to imagine a global history while stressing the differential rhythms of a historical time that we have to learn if we want to read strongly, that is from our individual standpoints. Pound's "present" entails a critical task of reading that has nothing to do with the freezing of history into mythical patterns of historical returns. His "present" is a time when one has to make discriminations and distinctions — reading will thus have to be critical. These distinctions cross over long periods of time so as to multiply rather than erase differences. Indeed, Pound believed in a literary scholarship capable of weighing "Theocritus and Yeats with one balance" (*The Spirit of Romance* 6).

Let us ponder this claim; today few professors would feel up to the task. How to establish a "balance" capable of measuring the respective merits of these poets? What we can weigh is more than style or versification, more than the general impact on the ambient culture, the political ideologies, or common themes, for such balances entail taking into account the issue of translation, and for instance our ability to perceive the gap between Greek metrics and Yeats's tripping verses with a light Celtic touch. Pound's general position implies a huge task, a program of education — the education of the reader, by means of a set of formal criteria that also look at ideological bridges between different cultures and periods. One will multiply levels of relevance and technical definitions before establishing criteria that cannot be reduced to formalist measurements.

One of the thrills lying in wait for new readers of a modernist masterpiece like the *Cantos* is to live up to the expectations created by Pound whose home-made culture made up of scraps and fragments unfolds slowly in the text. Those who accept to be its true "readers" will agree to be enlisted in an educational process; the gain will be to have to re-read classics in a new way. We leave behind traditional concepts of culture defined as "that which remains" from an ocean of abstruse references "when all the rest has been forgotten." Culture should be enlivened by "biographemes" (as Roland Barthes would say) and personal conversations with the great minds of the past.

This process ushers in a cumulative discovery or, better said, an "odyssey" that forces readers to investigate language via serial encounters with its layers deployed in enmeshed historical styles. This

new sense of reading is emblematic of high modernism. The discovery that civilizations are mortal, as Spengler and Valéry argued, was accompanied by an awareness that civilizations only survive if they leave behind dense layers made up of stylistic sediments, intertextual echoes, etymological concatenations, thematic rhymes, allusive subliminal traces deposited in each of us. "Canto I" can be taken to illustrate this procedure. When we read Pound's English translation of a sixteenth century Latin translation of Homer's Greek lines calling up Odysseus's voyage to Hades, we realize that Odysseus's nekuia is ours: like the hero, we progress through layers of living and dead language in order to find our way home. To make his re-translation more foreign, Pound used strong-stress meter and the alliterative style derived from his previous translations of Anglo-Saxon poems like the "Seafarer". The superimposition of rhythms and devices imitating Anglo-Saxon poetry make us pass through the Latinate diction of a post-Virgilian Renaissance still alive in Divus's Latin before leading us back to Homer's archaic moment, when we encounter a world of shades, blood-rites, soothsaying and thirsty but talkative ghosts. In the end, what we have owned as readers is a mixture of archaic and contemporary references, hence a typically modernist palimpsest:

> And then went down to the ship,
> Set keel to breakers, forth on the godly sea, and[...] (Pound, *The Cantos* 7)

The stylistic odyssey sends us on new explorations while catching us in whirling eddies of texts that represent the equivalent of the spirals of historical times. The main gain is this: the scholarship needed to keep on reading is not thought of as a pre-requisite but is apprehended in the present of the experience and also projected in the future, as a desire never fully realized. It becomes something we want to acquire.

While enacting this radical historicity, Pound believed in its material, social, geographical determinations — it was still in the "real" world of news and newspapers, the world of the *grands faits divers* that inspired Mallarmé as well. One of its main determinations, Pound soon discovered, would be found in economics, but another in global politics, by which he designated the stability of kingdoms or empires founded on values and beliefs, whether moral or religious, as in Hegel's concept of *Sittlichkeit*. On these issues, Pound shared ideas with Hegel and Marx, going even further in the insight that he had to deal with a whole earth. His globe was a world in which globalization was not just a dream of the Spirit realizing itself but took a concrete starting point in a history made by men and for men. Pound agreed with the famous statements of the *Communist Manifesto*, when Marx and Engels wrote prophetically:

> The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world-market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. [...] And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature. (Communist Manifesto 16)

Marx and Engels were less completing Goethe's idealist project of a universal literature than showing how changes brought about by the material conditions had changed the market of ideas, the "republic of letters".

We now need to go further than the doomed utopia of Pound's modernism, not only because of its inevitably compromised reliance on the darker sides of last century's politics, but also because we have to question the dream of a universal reader competing with the poem to complete his Cantos. This is what I

find in Jacques Lacan, perhaps the most Mallarmean of French writers of the last century. Lacan understood the issue of the reader differently, which is why he would warn them repeatedly:

> Writing is in fact distinguished by a prevalence of the text in the sense that we will see this factor of discourse take on here — which allows for the kind of tightening up that must, to my taste, leave the readers no other way out than the way in, which I prefer difficult. ("The Instance of the Letter" 412)

Nevertheless, Lacan's difficulty has very little in common with the difficulty of Pound, but much more with Mallarmé's splintered "candor" and self-dividing "virginity" of the gaze.

Lacan summed up his position with the remark that one should not see oneself as a frustrated or successful writer, in a more or less dramatic pathos so prevalent in Pound, but as a reader of a text indistinguishable from one's unconscious. This is how he established the riddling formula of "I am a poem, not a poet", a sentence from the Preface to the English translation of Seminar XI, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (*The Four Fundamental Concepts* 572). Lacan developed the idea that psychoanalysts have to authorize themselves when they begin to practice: their true legitimacy comes only comes from them. However, a different principle obtains if one looks at birth certificates: "A certificate tells me that I was born. I repudiate this certificate: I am not a poet, but a poem. A poem that is being written, even if it looks like a subject" (*Lacan*, *The Four Fundamental Concepts* 572). Thus, if agency is required of psychoanalysts who should not rely on official papers given by schools, institutes or any institution, the reverse is true for human subjects when they are born: their very births, inscribed in archives by a birth certificate, will confirm that symbolic markers like family names and first names, along with all other administrative details, are all set down before any agency is possible. Hence, I am always a being that is "being written". My unconscious functions as a living text, even if it remains undecipherable — hence, I cannot claim to be the author of my fate.

This Preface is dated from 17 May 1976. One year later, Lacan returned to the same idea in a slightly different key, and for this time he applied it to himself. It was the last session of the seminar entitled *L'insu que sait de l'une-bévue s'aile à mourre* (Seminar XXIV), a title in which one recognizes the influence of Joyce, the words calling *L'insuccès de l'Unbewusst c'est l'amour*, meaning that the failure of the Freudian unconscious is Love; they also say something like: "The unknown that knows of the one-error takes wings to die." Close to the end of the seminar, Lacan explains that poetry is necessary because is replenishes language with new meaning. Poetry helps a psychoanalyst in the interpretation of the slips of the tongue and other unconscious productions presented by patients: "Man's cunning has been has been to fill all this with poetry, poetry that is an effect of meaning, but also creates the effect of a hole. Only poetry, I have told you, makes interpretation possible, and this is why in my clinical practice, I am not able to make it cohere any longer. I am not enough of a 'poet', I am not 'Poetassé'" ("*Je ne suis pas assez poète. Je ne suis pas poâte-assez.*").[①]

Each transcript of the seminar has provided alternative forms for the last words ("Once They Were Poets").[②] Lacan was quoting a quatrain by French poet Léon-Paul Fargue, *Ludions*, set to music by his friend Erik Satie. The shortest of these poems, *Air du poète* ("The Poet's Tune") has four lines: *Au pays de Papouasie/J'ai caressé la Pouasie/La grâce que je vous souhaite/C'est de n'être pas Papouète.* Lacan alluded to these lines several times in talks and seminars.

Lacan's regret that he had not been "enough of a poet" sounds like an uncharacteristic admission of humility. A similar idea can be found in Freud who kept praising poets for their brilliant discoveries:

armed with their fervor and a sort of beginner's luck, they chance upon hidden mechanisms painstakingly described by psychoanalysis. He also berated them for some shortcomings, especially when Freud alluded to the fact that poets are judged as the most adequate to depict for us the "conditions of love." Here is his rebuke: if indeed "poets have certain qualities that enable them to solve such a task, in particular a great sensitivity in the perception of hidden mental impulses in others, and the courage to make their own unconscious speak;" however "they cannot represent the stuff of reality unadulterated, but are obliged to isolate fragments of it, dissolve obstructive connections, soften the whole and fill any gaps" (Freud 241). Lacan agreed, for he too would never "soften the whole" or "fill any gap".

If Heidegger repeated that man "dwells" poetically in language, Lacan teaches us to go further. He tells us that we are born not only in language but thanks to language.[③] Such a birth does not constitute a final event, but it continues being enacted throughout our lives. It continues as a dynamic reading thanks of our inner hieroglyphics, the coats of arms and the runes that are being written all the time in our psyches, those obscure signs inscribed in illegible scrawls in us because of our being rubbed and at times shaken by a harsh contact with reality. Psychoanalysts will know how to read these signs, hence will have first to be conversant with all sorts of poetic writing, but it does not follow from this know-how that they will know how to write.

The reading of poetry is indispensable for the practice of active interpretation, and more pointedly for the Lacanian practice of hermeneutic equivocation, an actively dialogic game-playing with the signifiers presented by analysands, but this does not mean that all psychoanalystswill have to turn into poets. Lacan knew too much about the inner workings of the unconscious to let himself go and play the game of poetry as a naïve creator. Too close to the "*insu que sait*" of the unconscious, his "non-knowledge that knows" led to his "un-success" as a poet. Here was the price he had to pay in order to be a good psychoanalyst, that is above all a good reader.

Notes

① See Seminar XXIV, session of 17 May 1977, on the website of Gaogoa 〈gaogoa. free. fr/Seminaire. htm〉.

② Dany Nobus analyzes these forms in "Once They Were Poets: The Function and Field of Sonority and Meaning in Psychoanalysis" a paper presented at the APW Study Weekend on Lacan's Seminar XXIV at Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, on 9 October 2011.

③ This is well expressed in relation to Heidegger. See Jacques Lacan. *Mon Enseignement*. Paris: Seuil, 2005. 39.

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