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## TEACHING FRENCH LITERATURE IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: A GAP STORY

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A starting point: an example of cultural and/or geographical gap, the meaning drift.

At the very beginning, there is surprise, the confusing experience of reading literature in a foreign language: giving to read to foreigners texts belonging to one's own literature, those with which one was raised and structured, and finding that like continents texts are crossed by faults and gaps and that readings can go adrift.

And rising from this bewilderment, the decision to try and understand and above all to do something. It is within the framework of the institution to which I belong, the CIEP, and inside it the BELC, that with the numerous colleagues teaching French as a foreign language and coming from all over the world, we carry out research in order to try and build training modules for teachers, and whenever possible, teaching tools.

A few years ago, a Seoul university professor staying in France came to the lecture I was giving on French contemporary novel. Amongst all the authors I had mentioned, a name had struck him, that of an author hardly known abroad at the time - and may be today still - Annie ERNAUX, a female writer who had produced *La Place*<sup>1</sup> a few years before. This Korean professor had come across the text through a friend who had sent it to him. Undersheer fascination he had put it on his students' reading list, and was willing to write an article and translate the book into Korean. I introduced him to the author

Direct contact between an author and a reader is always a difficult exercise; when the reader is a professor, he becomes provoking: the author finds drifts in meaning.

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<sup>1</sup>Ernaux, Annie 1984. *La Place*. Paris: Folio Gallimard.

"Why choose my book, *La Place*, to include it in the university curriculum?" asked the author that day. "Because it goes against the image we have of France: everybody says that in the western world family structure is gone, that there is no more respect for the father and your book shows that it is not true". Surprise on the part of the author confronted to a reading which seems strange to him, even foreign to his own goal. "Yes, of course, my purpose was to write about my father's life, about someone I was very close to in spite of a different education and culture. My purpose was to write about a cultural gap only. Through this book my intention was also to rehabilitate a world who was not given access to a certain cultural level. If my book was a success, it is because it tells of a drifter, a social dropout, and calls for identification." Most critical analysis published in France when the book came out go along the same line, interpreting the book on the basis of a language lowering and breakdown in communication: *La Place*, it's at the same time the father - a publican - standing in great fear to be out of place, to fail to stay where he belongs, and the difficulty of his daughter, once she had become a teacher, to hold her own ground. Family wise, the book is mostly seen as an example of the gap which the access to education/culture introduces within a family. When Annie Ernaux mentions an identification phenomenon, it is because numerous readers, disqualified because of their cultural background, their age, their nationality, their ethnic origin, and having difficulties finding their bearings in between two cultures, recognized themselves in the story.

Should we then come to the conclusion that our Korean reader's interpretation is "wrong"? How could this be appreciated? Who should we ask? The author, the work, the reader? All three levels can be tackled. Roughly speaking they correspond to a recent evolution in critics' approach who, as Umberto Eco<sup>2</sup> shows it, have operated a translation from the interpretation of the text as a means to identify the author's, to interpretation as a means to identify the text's intentions, then to interpretation as a projection of the reader's intentions. In the example we were referring to, the author is living and can testify; the text can be investigated, following reader response criticism theoreticians as Jauss<sup>3</sup>, for structural reasons which make this or that interpretation possible, one may want to identify the water-marked silhouette of the reader locked in the textual frame; the reader can be interviewed in its cultural and sociological

<sup>2</sup>Eco, Umberto. 1992. *Les Limites de l'interprétation*. Paris: Grasset, traduction.

<sup>3</sup>Jauss, H.R. 1978. *Pour une esthétique de la réception*. Paris: Tel. Gallimard, traduction.

diversity: a well read foreign reader - our Korean professor for instance - well read French readers, ordinary readers, would provide as many testimonies of real readers.

This anecdote is no surprise. It brings forward very simple things: the reader approaches the text through his own culture, the values of his time, his character, his experience, his tastes, his unconscious. According to the culture he identifies himself to, not only will he interpret the texts in a different way, but his reading techniques will be different. This anecdote gives an idea of these "gaps in interpretation" we find regularly in the work we are carrying out on the reading of literary text in a foreign language with teachers of all nationalities. Are they geographical gaps? Are they cultural gaps?

Simple questions which compel one to wonder how does the reader structure the meaning of the text and, symmetrically, how can the teacher imagine learning situations through which these mechanisms inherent to the cultural experience of reading may be visible, practised and mastered.

#### **A point of observation: the French (as a foreign language) literature teacher**

From this observation point, what emerges first, what is obvious and urgent, is related to questions raised by training. In such a situation, any theoretical work is based on experience, as Michel Foucault puts it, "it is because I thought I could identify cracks, muffled blows, operational breakdowns in things I saw, in the institutions I had business to do with, in my relationship with others, that I undertook such a work" It is because everyday, I am amazed, bewildered, puzzled at my students' readings that I am looking, through theory, for means to think before drawing from them means to communicate.

Teaching literature in a foreign language implies accepting to work according to two different points of view; firstly that of theoretical approaches to literature and the text which, in their diversity create patterns and put what happens between the text and the reader under scrutiny, but each of them in an incomplete way without any science of the text being able to federate them, and secondly that of language teaching/learning theories in a communicative perspective, which today appraises anew the place of the written form, the way in which reading competences fall in place as well as the way knowledge and know-how are built.

Teaching literature in a foreign language also implies accepting to speak in an "impure", eclectic and synthetic manner which borrows concepts from different origins, causing sometimes unexpected parallels and methodological jumps which are sources of intuitions

Uncomfortable position, relentlessly buffeted by the supporters of theoretical research.

The teacher has real readers in front of him, but all reading theories define the reader as "fictitious, ideal, virtual, implicit, abstract, exemplary" or "archreader"<sup>4</sup> - who is part of the text itself. They do not take into account outside informations and variations in receiving conditions. If the way in which the text tries to reach the reader by means of patterns can be theorized today, the way in which each reader reacts to this cannot be theorized.

Whenever a student-reader produces a reading which appears to be "wrong", what may the causes be? Are these "misreadings" we notice to be seen as organized by the author himself when he introduces scores of ambiguous points in his text, are they to be put on the every reader's account? After all, what is a misreading? How does one "pick a meaning within polysemy" (Picard)<sup>5</sup>? What are the limits of interpretation (Eco)? To answer these questions, one should be able to take to pieces the meaning process, to reestablish the itinerary through which meaning is constructed, to show the way each reader builds up his meaning.

On the teacher's side, it implies a clear view of the variables which determine the reading conditions. It also implies looking for teaching situations in which reading could be brought to light as in a developing bath. Making reading "traces" come out clearly is related to strategies which are also part of our research.

Our point is that the teacher should certainly not try and reassure, that is to say pretend to believe that the text has a meaning that he, the teacher, knows, and is expecting the student to disclose. Instead, he should help the reader position himself, define his reading behaviour, that is to say understand what happens when one reads and understand that every reading is well-founded.

The following thoughts will tackle in succession the three dimensions of what may be called the reading paradox: firstly cultural, social and historical components which determine the reading conditions, then textual components and finally the reader as an individual. This itinerary, from the impersonal to the personal, from the group built up by the institution, its culture and its social forms, to the individual, makes it compulsory to isolate, for the sake of clarity, components which in fact are in constant interaction. For each of them we will present the pedagogical hypothesis we use to build up training modules for teachers together with classroom teaching sequences.

<sup>4</sup>Jouve, Vincent. 1993. *La Lecture*. Paris: Hachette

<sup>5</sup>Picard, Michel. in *La Lecture*, op. cit.



All along we shall keep in mind that our purpose is not to try and stop at all cost these "drifts in meaning" we were mentioning at the beginning but to understand their causes and great value.

### The reader paradox 1: the reader as part of history

#### 1. The literature institution

##### *°Oral and written phenomena*

Of all wide components which determine reading conditions, the first, historically speaking is probably the relationship there is between a given culture and both oral and written phenomena which belong to a different type of reality. For a westerner whose culture is based on logocentric values, writing and the book are put forward, oral language is defined negatively as the absence of a written form. The etymology of the word "literature", made up from the word "letter", illustrates this biased attitude which rejects oral language toward "primitives". Since this logocentrism often goes with ethnocentrism, a western reader will find it difficult to understand and accept that he has another type of relationship with memory, wary, cautious as he is. He will also find it difficult to accept that the active memory has been lost, turning the book into "the symbol of a civilisation panic-stricken by oblivion"<sup>6</sup>. And again he will find it difficult to accept that he has another relationship with space. Most of the time, western tradition ignores the dynamism of the written language in its visible dimension, the resources of graphical space. Locked up in his ethnocentrism, even within a written culture, this reader will give little response to the visual-graphical base of the written language, as well as to other modes of transcription, rather than react to the alphabet to which he is accustomed to.

#### Which pedagogical suggestions?

In a very down to earth manner, we start working on the spatial and physical dimension of the written language, on the copying activity. An activity which is very poorly thought of in the French education system where it is a symbol of punishment and boredom. Yet it is present in the French literary tradition, in the middle-ages for instance,

<sup>6</sup>Dupont, Florence. 1991. *Homère et Dallas, Introduction à une critique anthropologique*. Paris: Hachette, coll. Les essais du XXe siècle.

before being rejected later under the accusation of plagiarism. It is the first step towards written language awareness. Let us listen to the sinologist, Viviane Alleton, "(In China) copying a beautiful calligraphy is not the dull task it means to us (westerners). Copying for us is a tedious activity. We think of the pages we had to copy in the past, when we were little. For a Chinese, copying is entering the author's bodily movement, and this physical communication is as direct as what you can experience with the tessitura of a voice. It is probably one way of explaining the social power of the written language in China." The second stage, is work on the written material, on modes of transcription for instance. There is a text by Michel Tournier, in one of his latest novels, *La Goutte d'or*, in which he mentions Arabic calligraphy and shows how Arabic writing can express silence.<sup>7</sup> French literature offers a few examples of specially organized texts, either with the author himself designing his text, such as Apollinaire in *Calligrammes* or certain texts by Georges Perec, or with a directed text - as one says directed for a play - such as *La Cantatrice chauve* by Ionesco in the typographic interpretation which the graphist Massin<sup>8</sup> came up with. Specialized, voiced, it will be possible to gather a number of texts in which the link with the oral dimension be observable because the text belongs to a period in which links between oral literature and written literature were not yet clearly defined. Or else gather texts in which the relationship with voice be observable, for instance when there is an esthetic will, and work on the material of this language: Flaubert for example, or very recently Robbe-Grillet explaining that sentences and words were like flesh.

#### \*The literary field

The way in which a society defines the literary field, that is to say activities and institutions involved in literature and people taking part in it, have also an influence on the behaviour of the readers. We shall turn to sociology for "the notions of field, of usage, of institution, of agents (writers, booksellers, critics, readership...), of literary and cultural goods, of value (economical and symbolical), of position (avant-garde, legitimacy, non-legitimacy), or networks (of limited

<sup>7</sup> Alleton, Viviane, quoted in Duchesne, A. & Leguay, Th. 1984. *La petite fabrique de littérature*, p. 14. Paris: Magnard.

<sup>8</sup> Tournier, Michel. 1985. *La goutte d'or* - Paris: Folio Gallimard.

<sup>9</sup> Ionesco, Eugène. 1972. *La cantatrice chauve*, anti-pièce, suivie d'une scène inédite. Interprétations typographiques de Massin et photographique d'Henry Cohen d'après la mise en scène de Nicolas Bataille et avec le concours des comédiens du Théâtre de la Huchette. Paris: Gallimard.

legitimacy conflict, etc.”<sup>10</sup> Cultural distance is another reason to incorporate this social functioning of literature in the teaching process. We have no intention here to go into the whole of these notions, we shall simply take an example. In western culture, a concept such as that of author is familiar. In other cultural systems, in French speaking Afrika for instance, it has but very little meaning. Although in a western culture the author is defined according to an individual self, in black francophone literature, the person who speaks does so in the name of a collectivity. Is he a story teller, a griot, a narrator, a novelist, an author? Other places, other cultural systems, other rationalities which cannot be brought down to French literary production for instance.

Analysing pedagogical suggestions in this field has become easier since these investigations have gone beyond the circle of theoreticians and teachers and since this line of speech is now admitted inside the French education system. Articles are now written on the literary institution and on the necessity to integrate its study to the history of literature. More recently, literary history textbooks have appeared, offering activities based on those notions.

#### Which pedagogical suggestions?

We shall borrow our example from an Indian colleague of Jawaharlal Nehru University

institution exists in India but does not follow the western model: “There are two coexisting systems opposing tradition to modernity, the use of spoken language to the use of written language. Tradition recommends the imitation of a sacred literature, whereas modernity, in turn, draws on a foreign model”<sup>11</sup> This is why she has chosen to work not on French texts but on texts written in French, belonging to francophone literature. Inside what is usually called “francophonie”, she suggests giving special attention to texts the authors of which “claim a difference in the use of the written language by resorting to an oral tradition and a discourse strategy which constitutes its specificity” Other elements of choice apply to possible differences between mother culture and the social functioning of literature: a common history which implies a reference to a colonial situation; a common theme, the tracing of sources; a correspondence between two systems about to break up.

<sup>10</sup>Reuter, Yves. 1992. “Enseigner la littérature?” in *Recherches* no16, 1er semestre.

<sup>11</sup>Saravaya, Gloria. 1988. “La littérature française en Inde: objectifs et finalités” in *Le Français dans le monde*, Bertrand, D. et Ploquin, F.(dir.) Littérature et enseignement: la perspective du lecteur. Paris: Hachette.

## 2. Cultural territory and common

### \*Reciprocal representations

In order to understand better how foreign a foreign literature is, not only in one's own language but in the values it has in trust, in the banking sense of the term, one must probably start off with by working on the reciprocal representations, the opinions or the beliefs built around the other. Discovering the complex relationships, real or imaginary that your country has with the country of which you are learning the language. Making people become aware of the distance and of the "exoticism", but also of everything the other has brought of his won culture in the interpretation of yours. Understanding how opaque we are to one another and even more to ourselves.

### Peagogical suggestions:

It is a work we had undertaken with teachers from India who had come to France for the first time to spend one year at the university. month, we were given the task to help them find their way in the French culture, in everyday life tribulations as efficiently as in the intellectual functioning modes of university life. In order to help them evaluate the cultural gaps, we had looked for and read with them European literature texts giving a point of view on India, accounts of travellers, explorers of the second half of the nineteenth century, more contemporary narrations, Hermann Hesse, Alain Danielou, Jack Thieuloy, Pasolini, Tabucchi, more recent still, Catherine Clement, Danièle Sallenave or the testimony of a theatre director J.-C. Bailly who had come to stage *Phèdre* by Racine in Hindi in Bhopal<sup>12</sup>. Literary texts were intermingled with interviews and articles from the press. A recent interest for these types of converging view is now acknowledged by the editorial policy of publishing firms which in ever growing number launch collections along those lines.

### \* Shared visions of the world

The universal and abstract reader as assumed in the reader response criticism has an undissociable double in the form of a real reader directly influenced by history and culture. Every minute we are witnessing that the "others" have of ourselves a strange vision which appears foreign to us. But isn't it possible to make the assumption that there are, within a given

<sup>12</sup>Bailly, Jean Christophe. 1990. *Phèdre en Inde*. Paris: Carnets, Plon.



cultural area, if not of a given country, "groups of common interpretations", to employ the expression of cultural practices historians, who would share a common idea of the world in a kind of cultural complicity? L'École des hautes études en sciences sociales (EHESS) and the Council of Europe, with Jacques Leenhardt and Martine Burgos<sup>13</sup> have carried out a survey in 1989 on the following theme: is there a European reader? As sociologists, they tried to *identify* the inherent mechanisms of reading as a cultural experience, and reach a few structuring principles of the European systems of values.

The situation they had created reads as follows: give the same contemporary novel to read to a sample of readers of three countries, Germany, Spain and France, belonging to three groups, high school students, 25 to 45 year old readers of an important daily, 45 to 65 year old readers attending regularly a public lending library. Three countries, three generations, three types of interaction between the book and the reader, one and only book, the same procedure to gather commentaries and reading "traces", as many parameters for a situation of experimental type. The suggested book for reading, *Le grand cahier*, by Agota Kristov<sup>14</sup>, a Hungarian author living in Switzerland and writing in French, chosen because he was staging characters who were in a war situation which is never defined neither in time nor space, as in a tale. The characters don't even have a name and are only designated by their profession, their family link or a specific feature. Reading "traces" have been obtained avoiding too direct a questioning which can induce the reader to give an answer out of context, an answer based on opinion rather than interpretation. Consequently, the questions have been set on ambiguous episodes, either for excess or lack of possible meanings, which, as soon as they were read, became part of a logical chain of representation of the world unique to the reader.

Does a European reader exist? "Reading is peoples' memory indicator, every inch of the cultural memory is put into motion"<sup>15</sup>.

Compared to a narration about a war in which a foreign and imaginary world is invented, readers from countries which have all been involved in the second world war, have reacted differently, with different reading behaviours, investing different values.

<sup>13</sup>Leenhardt, Jacques et Burgos, Martine. 1989. "Existe-t-il un lecteur européen?, rapport rédigé dans le cadre du "Carrefour des littératures européennes de Strasbourg", le Conseil de l'Europe.

<sup>14</sup>Kristov Agota. 1986. *Le grand cahier*. Paris: Points Seuil.

<sup>15</sup>Leenhardt, Jacques et Burgos, Martine, *op. cit.*

The first observation, is that different reading attitudes exist: symbolical indications of the text while refusing to give a universal meaning, linking every event to the person or the characters' psychology.

The second observation, is that this survey shows, amongst other things, different narrations and moral conceptions.

When the readers are asked whether, according to them, the story calls for a follow up, three national positions emerge: the French do not imagine a follow up because they consider it is a novel on education and that the death of the father means, for the twins, the end of their apprenticeship; the Germans also think that the book is finished not only because the apprenticeship of the two children has come to an end, but mainly because the war is over; the Spaniards ask for a follow up because they would like the story to end well, a happy end.

Differences too in the conception of morals. The children are led to do a number of things which could be considered immoral. For the French and Spanish readers, the moral act is measured according to the coherence of a line of conduct. To have morals, is according to principles one has set for himself, to be coherent in his action. Hence, surviving, can justify actions which go against conscience. To this, the Spanish readers add feeling morals based on the idea of natural morals. For the German readers, it has nothing to do with circumstantial matters but relies on a universal and transcendental rule bearing no compromise. It is the nature, the "quality" of the moral principle which matters.

One can imagine what is at stake in this kind of survey out of a supposedly homogeneous cultural area and whatever the chosen point of observation may be; reactions with regard to morals or other elements we have no space for here, such as the conception of emotion/feeling. When the readers are asked, for instance, to identify the most moving scene, it is an entire conception of emotion which looms, exteriorized or interiorized, with all the reader's values attached.

We therefore see that "reading modalities" which are categories of relationship to literature vary according to groups and nations. "Each culture signals a relationship to literature, which means that a different use may sometimes reasonably be made of foreign literatures"<sup>16</sup>

Researches in this field are more and more numerous, probably underlined by the quest for a European identity which would go hand in

<sup>16</sup>Leenhardt, Jacques et Burgos, Martine, op. cit.

hand with the construction of Europe. Along those lines, the CIEP in 1992 has organized a seminar on "European humour"<sup>17</sup> in Lublin, Poland, considering that laughter, humour, irony are particularly interesting points of observation in terms of cultural differences and that it is important to describe these manifestations to facilitate the comprehension of very different cultural architectures on a homogeneous conceptual basis.

#### Pedagogical suggestions:

They are following two tracks: work on the reading "traces" and the building up of a text corpus enabling the comparison of values through interaction and identification of variations.

In the survey on the European reader, the reading "traces" were gathered while avoiding the direct questioning which all students know and are accustomed to. As a matter of fact, which literature textbook does not offer after each part of the anthology, a long series of questions, all in good faith, but which become awesome when they are all lined up in battle order? Which student has not invested more time and energy trying to guess the answer the teacher was waiting for, than read? All pedagogical strategies on which we are working follow this line of thinking: shunt the traditional series of questions in order to give way to each individual's reading hypothesis. In this perspective, the "wrong" readings, even the misinterpretations become interesting because they make it necessary to investigate the source. Wrong reading can add something to reading. Is not literature a tricked game which allows for reading strategies the author or the teacher has not thought of? In this respect, it is interesting to notice that the book by Agota Kristov we were mentioning earlier on has now a two volume follow up the titles of which are: *La Preuve* and *Le Troisième Mensonge*<sup>18</sup>. So much for critics and exegetists!

Acknowledging unforeseen interpretations does not mean acknowledging any interpretation. Umberto Eco<sup>19</sup> sets as a limit to interpretation what could be called in a rather simplified manner, the principle of non-contradiction. Nothing in the text should possibly contradict the suggested interpretation. Teachingwise, this statement is not entirely satisfactory. In a teaching situation, it is the group of students as much as the text which sets the limits. As a place of negotiation, the classroom is a place where various reading hypotheses

<sup>17</sup>L'humour européen, Textes réunis par Maciej Abramowicz, Denis Bertrand, Tomasz Stosynski, Université Marie-Curie-Sklodowska, Centre international Lublin, 1993. (2 tomes);

<sup>18</sup>Kristov Agota. 1988. *La Preuve* - Points Seul, 1991. *Le troisième mensonge* - Points Seul.

<sup>19</sup>Eco, Umberto, op. cit.

can be confronted, providing they emerge with their differences and are not steam-rolled in the name of literal meaning or time available. The classroom becomes the place where the itinerary of meaning, of utterance, as indicated before, becomes more important than the meaning which is produced.

As for the gathering of a corpus of texts, it is a preoccupation which is illustrated nowadays in the definition of curricula and in the production of books: in a number of firms, textbooks on European literature are published, organized according to a variety of criteria: investigation in common sources, investigations in parallelisms, in influences, evolution of ideas, juxtaposition of texts pertaining to each national literature, establishing connections by genres, themes and even "reading effects". What seems to me essential, in a teaching literature in a foreign language perspective, is to come up with text corpus which will put the reader in a position to establish

is investing through his reading. I shall give only one example of this: the rewriting of "western myths" which are literary "places of memory". For instance, we'll look into a French author already quoted, Michel Tournier, who states that "perverting the values" he is rewriting the great western myths. It is something he has done with the story of Robinson Crusoe twice rewritten under two titles, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique* and *Vendredi ou la vie sauvage*<sup>20</sup> where Robinson can be seen becoming the hero, eaten up with positive values. Michel Tournier did the same with the story of the *Petit Poucet* which every French child has heard, told in its traditional Charles Perrault version. He rewrote it under the title of *La fugue du Petit Poucet*<sup>21</sup> underlining in this way the manner in which he was reversing the values of the tale. The passive hero becoming active this time. Interesting lead which can be followed in the midst of other literatures, to study its variations as far as an African version, *Samba de la nuit*<sup>22</sup> by Birago Diop. Looking into this reversing of positive and negative roles, this "perversion" of values, a foreign reader can, when comparing the various versions, understand how it is possible for a culture to reajust, throughout history, its fundamental values.

### 3. Historical and social determinations

<sup>20</sup>Both sociologists and historians give us a better understanding of these social and historical determinations which mould our vision of the world. In France, a historian such as Roger Chartier<sup>23</sup>, who specialized in

<sup>20</sup>Tournier, Michel. 1985. *La goutte d'or*. Paris: Folio Gallimard.

<sup>21</sup>Tournier, Michel 1978. "La fugue du Petit Poucet", in *Le coq de bruyère*. Folio Gallimard.

<sup>22</sup>Diop Birago. *Les contes d'Amadou Koumba*. Presence africaine.

<sup>23</sup>Chartier, Roger (dir.). 1985. *Pratiques de la lecture*. Paris: Payot.



reading practices, a sociologist such as Pierre Bourdieu<sup>24</sup>, underline to what extent any act of comprehension of a cultural work from the past is paradoxical since it would request a reconstruction of the practical and sensorial representations the "contemporary native" has invested in his comprehension in a non-conscious way

Borrowing his examples from an English art historian Michael Baxandall, P. Bourdieu shows for instance how *l'oeil du quattrocento* is nothing but the system of referenced representation of perception, appreciation, judgment and of enjoyment which, acquired in everyday life practices(...) operate in all aspects of ordinary existence and also in the production and the perception of works of art.<sup>25</sup> This observation can be widened to reading in a foreign language. But having a knowledge of such determinants does not mean it is possible to correct the "accommodation errors" caused by geographical or historical distance. One may even experience areal pleasure with these mistakes.

The notion of *habitus* is defined by P. Bourdieu as a "social structuration principle of the temporal existence, of all anticipations and presuppositions through which we effectively build our understanding of the world, that is to say its signification, but also, and at the same time, its orientation towards what is to-come"<sup>26</sup> Thus defined, the notion of *habitus* is essential to build in the teaching situation contexts of reception which will in no way be close to a "direct relation of familiarity or of ontological complicity" but will help the student place his own reading and understand how in a reversible process, literary texts, as Jauss shows it are the products of a culture and have an impact on "mentalities" in performing behaviours, in triggering a new attitude and in transforming traditional expectations.

#### Pedagogical suggestions:

Trying to reconstruct the reception and production context of a foreign text is illusory if not impossible, in as much as the *habitus* of a society are not registered in written down documents. However, it is possible to think of converging texts which, once brought together and compared, could facilitate the reading process. At the beginning of this talk we were mentioning Annie Emaux's book *La Place*.. It is interesting to submit to foreign readers two parallel passages drawn from another book by Pierre Bourdieu, *La distinction*..

<sup>24</sup>Bourdieu, Pierre 1992. *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*. Paris: Seuil.

<sup>25</sup>Bourdieu, Pierre. op. cit. p.438.

<sup>26</sup>Bourdieu, Pierre. op. cit. p. 450.

Annie Ernaux's father keeps a pub which the narrator describes as a working-class place, a place of regulars, a family on Sundays, a place of feast and liberty but "of course a "sleazy pub" for those who would have never set foot in it before" Pierre Bourdieu, on his side, comes up with a sociological analysis opposing middle or lower-middle class pubs and working-class pubs. In the same way, he reproduces in his work the questionnaire he used for the interviews. Let's imagine the narrator's father filling in the questionnaire. His answers will be given while reading *La Place* again, and compared with those which are analysed in *La distinction*.<sup>27</sup> It will then be easier to understand how literature states as an example what is elsewhere analysed in the light of sociological concepts for instance.

In this way, as far as I am concerned, I think I started reading Japanese literature differently, when I was introduced to *L'éloge de l'ombre* by Junichiro Tanizaki<sup>28</sup> in which the author opens his mind to us about the Japanese conception of beauty "As for me, I would like to bring to life again, at least in the fields of literature, this shadowy world we are blowing away. I would like to widen the verandah of this building called "literature", darken its walls, dip in shade what is too visible, and strip its interior of any unnecessary adornment" Literature as a space for resistance and rooting of cultural values, as a space for the acknowledgment of national values.

#### \*The teaching institution and the ways to read.

Amongst the orientations which determine the reception of the text but its production too, the teaching institution cannot be ignored, as a place of very strong cultural influence. French literature itself is shaped by school practices. It is particularly interesting to observe how French ethnocentrism is efficient when it comes to school practices. There are gestures we are so accustomed to perform that we see them as universal. Talk literature to a French student or teacher, the answer is bound to be "explication de textes" Introduced in the 1880's the text analysis, under scrutiny nowadays, is still unavoidable for any French student and is a testimony of a western attitude towards texts, inherited from the Greek and Roman tradition and the religious models of christian tradition. Vacillating between two opposed myths of meaning, transparency and secrecy, between the art of speech or the theory of interpretation, "l'explication de textes" has shaped the reading behaviour of generations

<sup>27</sup>Bourdieu, Pierre. 1979. *La Distinction*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

<sup>28</sup>Tanizaki Junichiro 1977 *L'éloge de l'ombre*. Publications orientalistes de France.

of readers. This is not the place to elaborate on what is a text analysis the French way, I'll refer to an issue of the journal *Textuel*<sup>29</sup> (1990) published by Paris VII university

### Pedagogical suggestions:

"Ways of reading" a text in a given culture, whether acquired at school or not, are a subject of curiosity and a way to penetrate a foreign culture. "L'explication de textes" French style, in its "exoticism", is one of its components and should find a place in a French literature programme to help the foreign reader organise his own reading modes and understand how the interpretation process functions in the French education system.

To figure out how reading goes outside school, we suggest working with texts which feature books and reading characters, reading scenes: Flaubert (*Madame Bovary*, *Bouvard et Pecuchet*, *L'Education Sentimentale*), Balzac (*Les Illusions perdues*, *La Peau de chagrin*), Gide (*Paludes*) Huysmans (*A Rebours*) Proust (*La Recherche*), Stendhal (*Le Rouge et le Noir*), Sarraute (*Les Fruits d'or*), Butor (*La Modification*), R. Jean (*La Lectrice*), P. Quignard (*La Lecteur*), most works by Oulien, Perec, Calvino (*Si par une nuit d'hiver un voyageur...*).<sup>30</sup>

It will be to the real reader, "to bring together his representation of the act of reading and his own reading".

## The paradox of the reader 2: the reader as part of the text

### 1. Intertextuality

Whether it be understood in the broad sense of the word as in Julia Kristeva<sup>31</sup> and conceived as the relationship between a text and "the social environment seen as a textual entity" or in a narrower acception as in Gerard Genette<sup>32</sup> who defines it as "the effective presence of a text in another", intertextuality enhance culture/society/text interaction. "To read the present text according to former texts, and to read the present text under former texts", "to read the text on the screen of our former readings",

<sup>29</sup> Expliquer comment, L'explication de textes" *TESTUEL* no. 20, Revue publiée par l'UFR "Sciences des textes et documents" avec le concours du conseil scientifique de l'université Paris 7, 4e trimestre 1990.

<sup>30</sup> Gleize, Joelle. 1992. *Le double miroir, Le livre dans les Livres de Stendhal à Proust*. Paris: Hachette supérieur, coll. Recherches littéraires.

<sup>31</sup> Kristeva, Julia. 1969. *Semiotike Recherches pour un émanalyse* coll. Tel quel, Seuil.

<sup>32</sup> Genette, Gerard. 1982. *Palimpsestes*. Paris: Seuil.



what meaning emerges from all these formulas when the readings we did before belong to another cultural context?

**Pedagogical suggestions:**

The propositions on which we have worked also apply to the teaching of literature in a native language. As a matter of fact, the observation of a cultural gap between the experience of readers-students and the texts read in class is also true within the same culture. We had called this work "the impossible library" to underline the immensity of the task since it meant building up a kind of cultural encyclopedia which would facilitate the perception of continuity in the discontinuity of literary production.

We can only mention here a few subjects of investigation. This cultural encyclopedia embraces indications on mythico-religious references (biblical, mythical, greco-latin), what our "readers" know about the world, clichés, stereotypes and commonplaces, styles and forms and lexical exploration. For each of these subjects, we produce pedagogical situations in which specific activities give the reader a possibility of becoming aware of and grasp these notions or these fragments of culture. This is how we have worked on the founding scenarios of tales and their variation in time and space, on text simplification process and on the cultural (and not only linguistic) implications, which are related to them. We also worked on stereotyped texts and on the resources of translation.

**2. The styles and "the limit of expectation"**

The notion of "limit of expectation" feeds reading practices and guides writing as well as reading. With the very first line, a narrator indicates usually what type of work we are dealing with, "Once upon a time...", "In the year 2092...", "On January 2nd, 1857..." But the author or the publisher can also refuse to give those hints to the reader and choose to remain entirely non-committal. A. Ernaux, whom I was quoting earlier on, tells how she had asked the publisher to put on the cover of her book, below the title, the word "text", neither "novel", nor "autobiography" so as not to influence the reader and make him decide on the status of the text and on the reading behaviour he was going to choose.

The text can put the reader on a false track in jest. That is all the pleasure one can draw from reading detective or fantastic stories in which one is caught at first, knowing it is bound to happen even when trying to avoid it. Only a second reading with the eye of a learned reader will help to spot the "blanks" where we were made to cooperate, and fill in the gaps where we were puzzled by ambiguity. These texts are the joy of scholars



who find in the text the image of a reader looking very much like them, such as Umberto Eco reading Alphonse Allais, or Pierre Bourdieu reading Faulkner. A pact, apparently clearly established can also be modified afterwards. Characteristics of the kind can be found in novels such as those of Jean Echenoz who deceives his reader making him believe he is getting, in turn, into a detective story (*Lac*) or an adventure novel (*L'équipée malaise*)<sup>33</sup>. Obviously, there is a spy all right, a dangerous and far flung country, but the codes of the style are then systematically thrown overboard. This game involving duplication and transgression, acknowledgment and surprise, is part of the pleasure of reading, but can only reach its goal if the codes are shared. That is precisely the question in a foreign language. Cultural codes which govern the presentation of texts, the modes of argumentation, can be ever so different.

#### Pedagogical suggestions:

They follow two different orientations. The first takes into account the strong French inclination for identification and classification, and the representation they have of different types of texts. Work can usefully be done, for instance, on the sorting out operated in textbook contents. The second orientation is related to cultural stereotypes. In 1986, a strange novel called *Sphinx*<sup>34</sup> was published in France. It is strange because it stages two characters who are in love. Nothing too surprising so far. But the story is written in such a way that the reader never knows whether the characters are male or female. Is it a man and a woman, and in this case who is the man and who is the woman? Are we in the presence of two men, or two women? There is nothing to choose from. All linguistic marks attached to genre in French have been deleted, no past participle agreement, no adjectives in the feminine, no pronouns which could give us a hint. It's a perfect job: the author is a young grammar scholar! In the course of training sessions we each time do the same fascinating experiment. I give to read two pages in which the characters have a fight, without giving any indication on the writing rules followed in the book.

Quick scanning reading, after which each individual is simply asked to give the characters a French surname. Once we establish together the list of the chosen surnames, the distribution is amazing, masculine and feminine surnames are intermingled and each participant is bewildered at the reading the other has done; but of course it's a

<sup>33</sup>Echenoz, Jean. *Lac* 1989. Paris: Editions de Minuit; 1986. *L'équipée Malaise*. Paris: Editions de Minuit.

<sup>34</sup>Garreta, Anne. 1986. *Sphinx*. Paris: Editions Grasset & Fasquelle,

woman (it's a man!)! It's obvious! In the fights it's always the woman (the man) who starts. The blame is always directed at a woman (a man): selfishness, narcissism, and so on...

The discussion becomes lively. Only the text could help sort things out. Haven't we taught our students that they must "stick to the text"? But the text is of no use, but rather the source of ambiguity, traces have been deleted, tracks covered. When things are clarified, it becomes obvious that the only things to remain are the stereotypes and the idea each one has of the parts played in a fight between lovers, according to his/her culture and ... his/her personal experience. Such an example shows clearly what is part of the "abstract" reader as constructed by the text and by the ambiguities introduced by the writer, and what is part of the "real" reader who introduces in his reading, his inventions, his personal experience and his culture.

### **The paradox of the reader 3: the reader as part of his own story**

We are dealing here, and we won't spend too much time on it, with the part of reading about which it is not possible to theorize. Mysterious part, "esthetic ecstasy" (Jauss) in which the reader, facing difference, can rediscover himself in a vertigo (interiorisation of the other who confuses and fascinates), participation or contemplation (depending on the historical distance there is between the work and the reader, contemporary work or far back in time). The text is not only a place of recognition which the reader invests with his own stereotypes but a source of knowledge, capable of modifying our representation and our life, a process Ricoeur calls "signification" as opposed to "meaning" which refers to the deciphering done while reading.

Awakening the affective past, "blurring memories", intimate images coming from childhood, literature brings to us what happens in other geographical and cultural locations and can awaken in ourselves sectors of our sensibility to which we would not call upon otherwise.

Paradoxically it is through reading that I can experience cultural distance, rupture. It is also through reading that I can interiorize another culture. That is what causes me to get away from myself when opening myself to the cultural experience of someone else, and, dazzled, I lose my way in the wanton exhibition of language.

### **Pedagogical suggestions**

To build up this happy and self-reliant reader, it is necessary to design an itinerary and imagine teaching situations starting off from the

"suggested meaning" linked to the personal activity of the reader, rather than the "literal meaning" (Besse).<sup>39</sup>

Above all it will be a matter of making visible what we called earlier on "traces" in order to follow the stages of individual and collective elaboration of meaning, so as to appreciate the reading impacts. Each of the structured situations whatever the chosen technique may be, to split the reading, to slow it down, to call upon association of ideas, memory, paraphrase etc., goes through a stage of verbalisation.

Let us take the example of a novel. We'll ask the students to read silently the first lines of a narration and ask each of them to write for himself the continuation of the sentence "It is the story of ...". We can even think of a still broader instruction "Write whatever you want about these lines". We shall never ask questions such as those to be found in literature textbooks: "Isn't there a noticeable importance conceded to the location in the first lines of this narration? Show in what respect it is attuned with the character described." When we compare the productions, various hypothesis surface. Each of the students becomes aware of his own reading behaviour (some stick to the text, others let their imagination free) but also of the fact that the beginning of the text is an ambiguous spot where numerous possibilities are latent.

If the continuation of the reading will lead to drop certain hypotheses, the reader will none the less realize that the pleasure there is in literary reading lies partly in this paradoxical tension between "one must read between the lines" and "one must not read between the lines". If our objective is to develop a reading competence using all of these activities, and then proceed to analysis, we suggest keeping traces of "traces" of this elaboration of meaning in a "log-book" kept individually by each student who enters his reaction, his reading satisfactions, his disagreements, his problems, his interrogations etc.. Testimony of an "active" reading as one speaks of an active volcano, it represents a means of evaluation in lieu of the traditional essays or exposés. Or else, all along the work it can well be a simple observation tool and in a second stage, an instrument of analysis.

We started off this talk with an example of what seemed to testify of a cultural and geographical gap, we have stressed a number of unsatisfactory functionings which any literary or foreign language teacher has come across. Should we then conclude to the indomitable singularity of literary experience?

<sup>39</sup>Besse, Henri. 1988. "Sur une pragmatique de la lecture littéraire, ou de la lecture qui est communication ausein de la solitude" in *Le Français dans le monde*, Bertrand, D. & l'loquin, F.-Littérature et enseignement, la perspective du lecteur. Paris: Hachette, pp. 53-63.

Between researchers who are striving for the more abstract and power models and those who are interested in the intersubjective part and nothing else, in the historical or personal reading variations only, what can the teacher's position be? Always hanging to his "impure" discourse, he must try and understand how literary reading, eventhough with faults running across it, eventhough drifting away like continents, recomposes its unity, supreme paradox, in the person of the reader.