

An Interview with Jean Ricardou: "How to Reduce Fallacious Representative Innocence, Word by Word"

Answers to a Questionnaire by Michel Sirvent

1. Doesn't *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* explore the practical consequences formulated by Barthes when he concluded that "the theory of the text can only coincide with a practice of writing" assuming that a "theory of the text cannot be satisfied by a metalinguistic exposition" ("From Work to Text" 164)?

Allow me a preliminary remark. The trouble you take to approach certain aspects of my work by calling forth an opinion that is supposed notorious by Roland Barthes presents an advantage and a disadvantage. The advantage? This is, of course, in establishing what is known in order to go towards what is supposed to be less known. The disadvantage? Through this premise, one is led to presume a type of origin. I must therefore avert any possible misunderstanding without delay: none of my books, and in particular, *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses*, is of a Barthesian obedience.

Undoubtedly, from a distance, various indications can point to a sort of concordance, relatively speaking, of course, between the appealing essayist and the minimal writer I happen to be: they are deceptive. Here are two of them.

The first, how might I put it, belongs to a literary milieu: we are familiar with Barthes' closeness to *Tel Quel*, a review on whose editorial committee I sat until my departure in 1971. Yet it is worth simply understanding that my thought, then in the process of being formed, at that time was not consolidated enough to allow me to enunciate several disagreements which were then growing.

The second sign is, if you will, of a lexical order: the sentence you recall includes the occurrences "text," "écriture," that are found no less frequently beneath my pen. But it is preferable to grasp that they are far from bearing the same concepts in both cases. I have the

fault of thinking that these notions in Barthes—which are often claimed in an openly metaphoric status—are too fleeting to serve as precise instruments of examination, and that they tend to possess, on the contrary, a certain operational vigor in my work, especially my most recent, because they are articulated in an analytical ensemble where their metaphorical tenor dwindles. Thus in the article that you quote, Barthes affirms that “the text must not be understood as a computable object,” whereas for Textics—this discipline that today I am elaborating with an informal group of a few other researchers—the text understood technically, which is something a little bit different, pertains to what is calculable in its structures and their effects, even if it is difficult to control it completely from this angle.

The experimentation of *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* comes, to tell the truth, from further away: from an effort, apparent in my first volumes, to problematize fiction by confronting it in various ways with an emphasis on the *écrit* that permits it. To be brief, let us say that this approach is indicated in the title itself of my second novel, 1965, which divides itself, on the one hand, *La Prise de Constantinople* and on the other *La Prose de Constantinople*, as well as the third, 1969 (*Les lieux-dits*) which is accompanied by a subtitle “little guide to traveling through the book.”

Yet the attempt to include, through roundabout ways, that which, in order to complete itself with apparent candor, fiction represses, led me also to observe that which, in order to complete itself with similar conspicuous innocence, reflection on fiction represses. For, among the different procedures in fiction capable of bringing to light the *écrit* that permits it, one must consider the passages that could reflect themselves to the point of taking up the *écrit* as a theme in a certain way. However, except for introducing them in my novels in the form of pure reflexive sequences that would have bluntly analyzed such active mechanisms on the page, it was necessary to blend these passages as much as possible in the ensemble, in short to inflict upon them the very rules that invested fiction obeyed. It is this effort to subject similar reflections on the *écrit* to these particular rules which made me realize, word by word, in an eminently practical manner, at what point my articles, elsewhere, on various *écrits*, constantly eluded all contamination by their object in order to establish themselves. Questioning a first sanctuary (the sanctuary of the fictional *écrit* preserved from reflection on itself) surreptitiously led me to challenge a second

one (the sanctuary of the *écrit* reflecting on fiction while protecting itself from its mechanisms).

Even if this criss-crossing of fiction and its reflection never completed itself for me without the receding of a certain overall picture, even if I think I may say today that they form the jolts tied to what I could call a new understanding of the "text," still I would not know how to overlook the role of practical experimentation in this type of boomerang effect.

Consequently *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* is less an exploration of the practical consequences of Barthes' judgement than an experiment risked within the internal process of a somewhat reflected work.

2. With the 1982 publication of Le Théâtre des métamorphoses we could say that its "mixed" mode of exposition was the result of the coincidence of a double interactive practice, one implied in the writing of fictional works, the other in the theory of the artistic text. Said differently, isn't this mixity (of discursive regimes, registers of language, intertexts, representative supports) also the outcome, at the time, of your double activity as novelist and theoretician of the Nouveau Roman?

What I have just called "a certain overall picture," is, among other things, the "materialist" concern (if one wishes to understand this word not in a common sense but in its philosophical usage) with shielding my work, at least from the too much established specializations of today, and, notably the one which separates a practice from its theory. Similarly for "literature," a term I use in order to go more quickly. Doubtless some literary hacks have enjoyed reflecting with care on literary mechanisms through writing. Doubtless some professors have risked creating works by themselves. Yet they constitute, these and others, but a tiny minority. Generally we are not surprised that literature is made by persons who seemingly do not find it too useful to reflect about it profoundly in the open, nor that reflection on literature be carried out by people who apparently do not consider it a point of honor to produce it. My work, I admit, goes firmly against this division, more accepted than thought out, and this may be seen, notably, in the alternation of my novels with my theoretical works. Thus my double effort as novelist and theoretician of the Nouveau

Roman seems to me to have been the crucible of this encounter of fiction and its reflection, finally, on the very same pages. Insofar as they were already accomplished by the same operator, they found themselves, how could I say, psychologically and technically less foreign to each other.

3. *Once having established a structured tie, then having completed the complementary stimulus between the writing of fiction and its theoretical reflection in order to make them blend yet contest each other in the same work, why didn't you pursue this avenue (that of intratextual transtheory and transfiction)? Does the conceptual opposition between "theory" and "fiction" seem less pertinent to you today? Is it replaced by the opposition between "script" and "text"? How did you arrive at these distinctions, currently found at the beginning of the *Éléments de textique*, between "script" and "text," "scripture" and "texture," "representation" and "meta-representation"?*

Révélation minuscules, en guise de préface, à la gloire de Jean Paulhan, those one hundred pages or so added to the beginning of *Révolutions minuscules* in 1988 for a new edition is not so far in many respects from certain experiences of which you speak. But although I have not renounced this project, it is true that I have limited my work in this direction. I perceive two reasons for this.

One is external, if you wish. The singular animosity or the curious silence that critics showed regarding *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* confirmed my hypotheses, that, for the moment, an effort to mould these regions is liable to anathema. Assuming the situation might one day be less so in this regard, I consider it is presently a little too obtuse.

The other is internal. The relationship between my fiction and my theoretical works obeys a sort of alternation. First: an experimental volume, then a phase of reflection that attempts to grasp its implications and consequences, even if, for reasons I will not stop to consider here, other books besides my own shall eventually be solicited. *La Prise de Constantinople*, in 1965, then *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses*, in 1982, formed the two main experiences which each opened up a long theoretical period for me. It is in the phase thus allowed by *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* that I came to anticipate the possibility of this perhaps new discipline: Textics.

In particular Textics observes that fiction and theory, even though they might poorly accept their reciprocal contamination, are nevertheless, in a certain light, *écrits* of the same nature. According to its constitutive postulate, in effect, *écrits* can only accommodate two sorts of fruitful structures. On one hand, those which contribute to an *effect of representation*, that is, to quote an accepted definition, call "forth to the mind through the means of language" [langage] (we call *scriptures* those structures capable of an effect of representation, and *script écrit* that actually bears them). On another level, those which exceed this effect of representation and participate in an *effect of meta-representation*, that is, let transpire that which representation tends to obliterate within its mechanism (we then name *textures* those structures that bring about meta-representation and *text* the *écrit* when it respects this order). Insofar as *écrits* of fiction and theory essentially obey the pure representative regime, they are—beyond their differences—both scripts. However close they might be, fiction and theory do not present identical resistance, of course, to a possible meta-representative process. Inasmuch as fiction accepts a clear "imaginary" dimension, briefly let us say, allows a certain lack of being for what it represents, it poses less of an obstacle to an activity that exceeds representativeness itself. Insofar as theory, except for declaring itself fictive, claims the greatest accuracy possible concerning reality, if you wish, it could only offer active resistance to the operations that exceed its effort at representation.

If prolonging my brief deliberations in too simple a mode may be tolerated, I will retrospectively observe that in the background of *La Prise de Constantinople*, what always interested me in the Nouveau Roman volumes, perhaps somewhat gropingly, were meta-representative procedures. Consequently, to take up the passage from this novel to *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* succinctly but more technically, we can say that in the first, it is fiction, less restive, that undergoes meta-representation with its extreme rules and the intensification of a certain self-reflexivity, and that in the second, it is particularly theory, although more resistant, that receives in turn those two sorts of treatment. In short, the contamination of theory by fiction in this book is not a simple fictionalization of theory, which would become purely "imaginary," but rather a relativization, as calculated as possible, of that which theory asserts through the impact of meta-representative structures developed, so far, more easily within fiction.

4. With this new concept of "meta-representation" the concern is clearly no longer to challenge but to surpass representation. Is this a radical change of strategy?

Rather than a change of strategy, I prefer to speak of a broader perspective. To persist, as I have too much, in "challenging representation" could allow one to believe that it was useful to undermine representation because it was intrinsically ill-fated. What Textics assumes from now on, to get to the point, are the following three positions: on the one hand, representation is a primordial activity and there is no interest in directly attacking it in itself; on the other, representation constitutively makes one see only at the price of an eventual censure of that which allows it to take place. Finally, the patient bringing to light of what is thereby obfuscated should make it possible technically and intelligibly to reduce fallacious innocence, its way of showing and, as a result, what it shows, by making perceptible word by word and conceptually the hidden reasons that institute it.

5. I presume that it is because *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* pushes meta-representative work very far that it is, as you have told me elsewhere, "untranslatable." Would you care to clarify your remarks concerning this question?

Yes, it is certainly the incessant meta-representative concern that renders this work "untranslatable." In effect, among the various procedures capable of calling forth, in a fiction for example, the *écrit* that permits it, one must not only consider, as I said earlier, passages that would in some way take up the *écrit* as a theme (which form those particular textures that Textics calls *catoptrottextures*) but also the bringing into play of added regulations (these in fact constitute all other *textures*) through which the *écrit* directly displays itself, one could say. However, in order to answer you with care, I would hope to proceed first with a schematic reminder of more or less accepted functionings.

If one calls *translation*, quite simply, the manoeuver that substitutes a given formulation, a certain identical other, or for lack of better term, a similar one on the level of meaning, then it is clear that this operation is indispensable (within an idiom), useful (between several languages) and . . . dangerous (in both cases).

Translation is indispensable within a language because it per-

forms a *constitutive* function: without it, meaning could never come about. From this angle, meaning is *virtual* in a well-formed oral or written statement. It only becomes *actual* upon being heard or read. This permanent deciphering, even if its mechanism for the person who performs it is largely unconscious, merely stems from an intra-linguistic translation. On the level of meaning, one only understands what one is able to formulate in a different way.

Translation is only useful when it occurs from one language to another, because it plays a *propagating* role. Meaning is *constituted* with an oral or written statement well-formed and well deciphered in a certain language. It is *divulged*, simply, by its transfer into a different language. To be less expeditious, we can say that the passage of meaning from one language to another supposes a minimum of three related translations: the possibility of intralinguistic translation in the original language, without which the formula to be translated would not have attained meaning (phase of *constitution*); the accomplishment of an interlinguistic translation that ensures the transfer of one idiom to another (phase of *propagation*); the possibility of an intra-linguistic translation in the target language, without which the meaning of the translated formulation would not be achieved (phase of *reconstitution*).

Since it is indispensable to the constitution of meaning (in a language) and useful to its propagation (among several), translation should not be refuted. But one would have to be naively dazzled by its considerable advantages to overlook its true drawbacks. In effect, if the constitution of meaning presumes at least two ingredients (the formula that virtualizes and the deciphering that actualizes it), then, in principle, translation, whether it be within one language or in between two, and since it always supposes, reversibly, the replacement of the emitted formula, inflicts on meaning, by making it seem autonomous, the effacement of the material bases of its coming about.

Yet this magic, in short, representative innocence, causes two very serious related faults with regard to meaning: one, impoverishment, is understood easily enough; the other, the restoration of innocence ("l'innocentement"), is generally less accepted.

There is always *impoverishment of meaning* because with the withdrawal of the initial formula, translation in its effect dissolves the added semanticism that material specificity had inferred. The assumption that the meaning of a formula usually goes beyond, often more than a little, that which is brought about by the simple exchange

with a different homosemic formula is indeed emphasized, however simply, by the classic division of the denoted and connoted (this, we insist if necessary, exceeds the particular instance successively blown out of proportion by Hjelmslev and Barthes).

Thus, to write with Baudelaire:

Mon enfant, ma soeur,
Songe à la douceur
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble. . . .

amounts to overstepping the meaning we obtain, either within a language and possibly from one language to another, by a homosemic exchange of words. We remark that the rhyme which according to Textics belongs to the category of *isochorotextures* (meta-representative structures by the allocation of elements specially tied to identical places), produces, in this case, its own supplementary effect on the register of meaning. Let us observe this more closely with other technical notions of *autochorotextures* (meta-representative structures by allocation of lexical elements in superposition) and of *metacratyism* (calculated semantic fruit which ensues from this constructed superposition). Here the lexical superposition obviously derives from the analytical virtue of the rhyme or, if one prefers a more technical enunciation, the isochorotexture in that it focuses on a semantized element, provokes an autochorotexture. On one level, because of isophonism (identical sound in both words), and because of isochorism (identical place of respective words in the two verses), the rhyme finds itself promoting, notably, the second syllable of the word “douceur,” or, if we prefer, it cuts the word in two segments “dou-ceur.” On another level, and because “ceur” was underlined only insofar as we again hear “soeur,” the rhyme brings the word “douceur” to import, we could say, the word “soeur” which produced its analysis. In short, when it mobilizes a semantized particle, the rhyme fabricates partial portmanteau words in filigree. Here: “dou-soeur.” Consequently, with such an arrangement, and whether this delights or distresses, the semanticism of “douceur” finds itself fraught with an insidious . . . sorority in this exclusive passage. It is here a matter of a metacratyism in that the extraordinarily calculated or, if one prefers, poetic etymology—the one we could explicate by daring to affirm that if we do believe these lines, the word “soeur” is at the origin of the word “douceur”—totally surpasses, which is not

without bearing, the principle of the much-doubted cratylan etymology. Fully occupied ideologically with trying to obtain an affinity between words and things, cratylism likes to see, often to the point of abuse, primary words within others, alleged bearers in the last resort, of their deepest meaning. Entirely dedicated structurally to making the materiality of words prominent, the machine of rhymes for example, traps with its mechanism—that makes it function in a conspicuous and regulated manner—the too unknown tendency of the mind to magically link two ideas on the basis of “their” words.

By dissolving the initial formula, *meaning* is also *made innocent* because the effect of translation eliminates the material arrangement responsible, at least in part, for the substance itself of discourse. Even if it seems a bit forced, it is perhaps useful, in matters of writing [“écriture”] to dramatically oppose two unequal points of view: the common opinion (that of Bœotians who are not attentive to these problems) and the technical judgement (that of writers when they think about what they are doing). According to common opinion writing is simply obtaining certain arrangements of words based upon a certain meaning. According to technical judgement writing is also obtaining meaning based on certain arrangements of words. And this concern, which gives an actual role to consonances, among others in the issuing of meaning, appears with two contrary perspectives: not only that which is apparent, with their regulated research, but also what is less visible, with their methodical refusal.

When Baudelaire, in order to achieve rhyme, places the two words “douceur” and “soeur” in certain calculated parts of the *écrit*, not only does he provoke the supplementary issue of the semantic effects sketched earlier, but he also makes one grasp that, far from being a pure innocent assertion, what he enunciates has been obliquely governed by the materiality required to say it. In effect, let us first suppose, with perhaps a grain of salt, that the poet previously wrote:

Mon enfant, **ma mie**,
Songe à la douceur
D’aller là-bas vivre ensemble. . . .

Let us suppose that he then realized that the rhyme fell short. Let us suppose that finally, to obtain the desirable prescribed consonances, he consented to one of these transformations:

Mon enfant, **ma soeur**,
Songe à la douceur
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble. . . .

Mon enfant, ma mie,
Songe à l'**alchimie**
D'aller là-bas vivre ensemble. . . .

There is no difficulty in seeing that with each of these solutions, he would have accepted a semantic displacement: in the first case, from a harmless tenderness to an incestuous affection; in the second, from a sensitive well-being to a profound metamorphosis. Or, if one prefers, the concern with obtaining regulated consonances is not insignificant in the meaning that results.

And the same phenomenon is found, no less, with the systematic refusal of the proximate return of the same sounds. When Flaubert, in a letter on his work as a writer, shows himself "discovering in all sentences words to be changed, *consonances* to be removed," he does not fail to make known that he proceeds to the final choice of words on the basis of their sounds—after the fashion of the poet, and even if, reversely. Let us once more suppose, to preserve the example, that Flaubert first wrote the beginning of Baudelaire's poem. Let us then suppose that he observed the consonance of "soeur" and "douceur," and that he later realized that in this manner he failed to repeat his proscriptive writing rule. Let us finally suppose that in order to abolish the repetition, he accepted, according to the substitutive interplay of approximate synonyms, one of these changes: "Mon enfant, ma soeur, songe au *bien-être*," "Mon enfant, ma *mie*, songe à la douceur. . . ." No difficulty, of course in comprehending that with each of these solutions, he would have consented to a semantic shift: from the sensitive "douceur" to the more abstract "well-being", from the incestuous "ma soeur" to the harmless "ma mie." Or, if we prefer, the concern with abolishing the consonances discovered is not insignificant either in the meaning that arises.

These examples, one will object, are too schematic and imaginary to contain probing force. Yet this is far from certain. In truth, except for the naïveté of believing that *écrits*, for many writers, appear out of the blue, beyond reproach beneath the flow of the fountain pen, who could ever conceive poem or prose writers working more or less in another way? Therefore by severing meaning from the

material conditions of its issue, translation ineluctably obliterates various dominant aspects of the intelligibility of the *écrit*.

One can say that this cruel fundamental situation is subjected to two contrary agents. On one hand, the informed translator [*translateur*] who attempts to *translate what is problematic* tries as much as possible to restore, despite everything, that which the inevitable change of formulas statutorily dissolves in the target language, supposing that he perceives it. On the other hand, the informed writer who ends up *problematizing translation* mobilizes to the highest point the material resources of its formulas through his specific work (and all the more clearly if it is meta-representative). Actually in the case of meta-representation it is easy to understand that the special supplementary regulations (the *textures*, I recall, according to Textics) form two unequal ensembles: some of them, of course, because of their peculiar nature (those, notably, that play on the numbers of elements mobilized), can be, to a certain extent, transposed in another language, but many others are refractory, which prevents the transfer of the overall structure in which they are involved. Insofar as the process that shaped it pushes far, very far, the meta-representative concern, *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* therefore seems to me, superlatively, an "untranslatable" work.

That is not to say, however, that its translation, at least in part, may not be attempted. In my view it is possible, but by making prominent one of the translator's efforts which remains too unknown: like a *reading machine*. In effect, to become aware of *translating the problematic* with an *écrit* that, in itself, systematically *problematizes translation*, to me, could hardly be imagined except in the resolute course of a *translation itself problematic*: an activity which would assume the task of seeking *ways out only to find dead ends*, the structures in certain places which would rebel against transfer. Consequently, what, at best, takes refuge at times in minimal intrapaginal remarks with the title *Notes by the Translator*, would open up into a minute critical discourse as much on the pages to be translated as on the gesture attempted for their translation, and would contribute through this precise device to a theory of the text.

6. *Doesn't the fact that this meta-representative concern defines most of your fictional texts explain that in the United States your theoretical work is better known than your novels or short stories?*

Insofar as a writer systematically works the structures of meta-representation, and this is truly my principal effort in my novels and short stories, then undoubtedly they make that which some would call a sacrifice: that, to a very high point, of restricting the pertinence of one's work to the only language in which it took place. A sacrifice? This is far from certain for, as soon as it is understood, the game is perhaps worth the play. In effect, how much do the benefits of a readership possibly increased to the global scale, with the agreeable transfer of a book in several languages (all this comes under, how to put it, the economic, the sociological, the psychological for the writer) weigh when compared to the unappreciable intellectual gains that one can reap only through a certain "untranslatable" way of writing (they pertain to intellection of unknown functionings of thought)?

And to say a little more concerning this field, I consider, according to what texticians call a *scalar appraisal*, that one must know how to trace a line between two sorts of universality. A *low* universality: that of translation, which can only distribute a meta-representative work on a large scale by eliminating, in principle, some of its essential traits. A *high* universality: that of the untranslatable, which makes conceivable, not translation, but what must be called an *inter-linguistic correlation*: the bringing to light (should it happen to be more or less emphasized) or writing (should it occur that the work be more or less flawed) in the target language of a completely different work, at first sight, and close in depth because it obeys identical principles. In short, the restriction of a work to its own language, far from producing an enclosure, is what in relation to another language, makes possible a less naive communication, not that of such and such a meaning, but that of the machine that produces meanings.

7. *The preamble of Le Théâtre des métamorphoses, "Appreciation," sharply attacks the functioning of the press often with humor and sometimes with sarcasm. At the same time it dismantles its effects on our reading practices. This political and polemical dimension of the book is noteworthy. Your reader who is often led to develop plays on the signifiers in the wake of the text could see in this counter model a way of opposing that which the "press" favors: for example, "press" and "haste" in reading, "compression" or "stereotypical reduction of reality" (p. 23), "pressure" on our ways of thinking ("the regulation of readings," p. 14); therefore doesn't*

Le Théâtre des métamorphoses function as a sort of "anti-press machine"?

Yes, one can say *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* is a sort of "anti-press machine," but at the price of an initial precaution: that which distinguishes the two words which the utterance "the press" superimposes, at least in French. "The press"? This means haste. "The press"? This means the newspapers. Certainly on one hand, *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* is an "anti-haste machine." To be brief, all readers who read rapidly are unconscious illiterates. On the other, no less, *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* is an "anti-newspaper machine." Doubtless the two machines are related: "press" functions to "press" or, if one prefers, newspapers function to hasten. But to speak of haste is to aim at a *functioning* of representation and to speak of newspapers is to touch upon a *site* of representation. Allow me to pursue this last point.

Yes, we can say *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* is an "anti-newspaper machine," but at the price of a new precaution: the one stipulating that the offensive which in effect may be found, far from responding to an *objective* (the book does not progress in order to question the press), comes about, which is slightly different, as a *consequence* (the book, as it progresses, finds itself contesting the press).

This phenomenon springs from dissymmetry: that which characterizes the clash of representation with meta-representation. Representation, as a system of thought, *refuses* meta-representation because representation fears it (tending in practice to defend itself against the return of what it obliterates in order to come about). Meta-representation, as a system of thought, *considers* representation, because it surpasses representation (tending in practice to question, to take place, that which representation obliterates). As a result, meta-representative activity contemplates representative manoeuvres *from above* and it is *from below* that the manoeuvres of representation perceive meta-representative activity.

Meta-representative activity contemplates it *from above*? Practically concerned with obtaining mechanisms capable of disclosing that which representation dissolves and theoretically curious to understand the relevant procedures, as it progresses, meta-representative activity encounters representation in that it produces a

negative censorship. Subsequently, meta-representative activity is capable of exposing to what point the representative exercise commits, as much as it can, a double nullification: on one hand, the obliteration of all material means through which it represents; on the other, the eviction of all objects, or of all that which, in an object, resists representation. Yet, what characterizes the “press” could well be, on one hand, its hegemonic function according to representation (“universal reportage,” I believe, Stéphane Mallarmé said) and, on the other, today, its growing ascendancy (“journalism, outcome of philosophy,” I think Michel Foucault said). As a result, because it keeps losing all sense of proportion through arrogant expansionism, from the angle of its object, one can understand the double stereotype it inflicts on reality. On one level, a *conformity of selection* (which causes it to choose and promote what is representable) and, on another, a *conformity of behavior* (which brings some people, willingly, under such power, to conform in order to be confirmed, to become representable).

Representative manoeuvres perceive *from below*? To be brief, here is what a funny example reveals: the slight misfortune which befell the newspaper *Le Monde*’s serial writer, Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, on the occasion of his harsh attack, of course, on *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses*. Wanting to show that I wrote badly, he quoted four sentences from this book and, consciously or not, one doesn’t know which is worse, he tampered with three of them. Must one add that among these sentences may be found precisely the one that evokes the . . . “stereotypical reduction of reality?”

8. What you described earlier as the “internal process of a somewhat reflected work” led you towards writing workshops, as you yourself recall at the end of “*Les raisons de l’ensemble*,” the complementary study you recently added to the new edition (revised and completed for *Seuils*, “Points” collection) of your best known work (*Le Nouveau Roman*, p. 248). In the United States writing workshops have for a long time been semi-institutionalized within the university while in France, where they are just beginning to be recognized, you today appear as one of their most fervent precursors. Marianne Alphant in a recent survey (“*Le mal des mots*,” *Libération*, 19 April 1990, p. 24) recalled your work as a pioneer in this field, notably in Paris at the Collège International de Philosophie and in certain symposia on text didactics at Cerisy-la-Salle. Today

how could you situate your conception of workshops in relation to other parallel currents?

In effect, it has certainly been an internal necessity for various aspects of my work which has led me towards the principle of writing workshops. I would rather not specify the ensemble of these operational obligations (deriving from the constructive principles of my work), but I would like to clarify at least two.

One could be called the *necessary collectivity*. In the study you mention, "Les raisons de l'ensemble," I tried to make clear how a writer becomes sensitive to the collective once he accepts himself as a scriptor instead of an author. However in this case the collective presents two modes of integration. *Gentle integration*, tied to grouping (one admits that one's personal work can be referred not to the standards of the person that supplied it, but rather, *compared* to the work of several others), and this is the reason I participated in the Nouveau Roman. *Strong integration*, tied to cooperation (one accepts that one's personal contribution finds itself *articulated* with the work of others) and this explains my recourse to writing workshops.

The other obligation could be titled the *fundamental triad*. According to my views an activity can not be integrally completed from the operational angle unless it is connected with a practice, a theory, didactics. It is not possible for me here to emphasize either the *deployed triad*, laying out the relations of each of its sub-activities to the others (how each helps the other and benefits from it) or *redeployed triad* arranging the insertions of each with the others (how each one is an intrinsic part of the other). However, since we are dealing with writing I can briefly make clear some rudimentary aspects of the deployed triad beginning with one of its three foci, that of didactics.

The didactics of writing supposes that the organizer possesses an effective practice of the act of writing. In fact, it is such a practice that allows her to say, with full knowledge of the practice: "here is *how* we must proceed." In short, the practice of the organizer gives force to the *example* in collectivity. Let us say that practice contributes *psychological* supports (the partners are less unwilling towards someone who has already proved her capacity with her works, or can put them right away to the test) and a *technical* assistance (when an example is taken not from another writer but from her own resources, or from her

own immediate improvisation, one presents it knowing whether or not the case is easy).

The didactics of writing presumes no less that the organizer has an explicit theory of the act of writing. In effect, this theory plays at least a double role. On one level, if its firmness and clearness are sufficient, this theory permits the organizer to say with all the required precision: "here is *what* must be done." In short, an explicit theory improves *communication* in collectivity. It brings a coherence and a rigor in specifying the work perspective, in the stipulation of the target structures, in the clarification of what must be accomplished. On another level, if its abstraction and elaboration are sufficient they guarantee that the organizer is less likely to surreptitiously impose, in total opposition of collective work, certain tastes that could be his own. Without an assiduous practice and elaborated theory of what we propose, we risk falling into the vague: inviting others to do what corresponds to one's own simple preferences, and which we perhaps do not know how to do very well, perhaps without being very capable of successfully inviting to perform. . . .

Without of course wishing to prejudice activities that are realized under the sign of writing workshops, the functioning that I advocate would induce me probably to ask straightaway, from the organizers' point of view, at least one of these two questions. To the literary hack, let us say, supposing that his writing appeared effective to me, "Where is your theory?" To the professor, let us say, assuming that he disposes of a theory: "Where is your practice?" I wonder if these two questions are not enough to define, without doubt in the company of a few others, a rather exclusive place. . . .

One last word. Although it seems improbable that I deserve them, to suppose the titles "precursor" and "pioneer" poses the risk of a double edge.

They can be useful if one considers them within the perspective of *intellection*. Not having been the last to grasp a certain thing means to find oneself with a title, in effect of the precise configuration of thought which made such an understanding possible. Thus for me, it is the fundamental correlating triad, practice, theory, didactics, always active in my reflection, that has allowed me, not only, the visible portion of the iceberg, if one may say so, to give, for example, in the middle of the eighties a seminar on writing workshops at the Collège International de Philosophie in Paris, but also, earlier in the sixties and seventies, to give an increasingly experimental form to my

teaching of writing at the high school level. In effect, the two questions that I always feel like asking others, I had of course asked myself first. In short: "You who claim to be a teacher of writing, how does your teaching imply your theory of the text, your practice as writer?" Consequently, with the utmost prudence, for unless one has an excessive tendency towards irresponsibility, students should never be considered mere guinea pigs, my teaching has incessantly evolved. I gave a minimal idea of this in my article "Ecrire en classe," published in 1978 in the pedagogical review *Pratiques*. Allow me simply to emphasize two aspects. On one level, concerning the structures of the *écrit*, the increasing bringing into play of parallelisms (notably since they allow a mechanism to be considered according to a plurality of integrated examples) and the concern with the articulation of the characteristic work of various students (each "essay" being personal at the base but capable of relating to the ensemble). On another, concerning the structure of teaching, the increasing integration of various disciplines, regarding language (grammar, vocabulary) and, to a certain extent, the rest (the other forms of knowledge) in the production of the *écrit* itself.

But the titles of "precursor" and "pioneer" could be misleading, no less in this case, for they could encourage two misunderstandings. One could come from the possible surreptitious shifting from one perspective to another: from *intellection* (having at last succeeded in understanding a certain thing) to *competition* (being one of the first to have succeeded). This could risk drawing more attention to the performance aspect of the novelty than to the instructive reasons which allowed it to take place in someone. The other, more serious, would lie in the creation of an *artificial homogeneousness*: the "pioneer" being s/he who cleared the way. To concede this role to such a person tends to imply the idea that s/he was eventually followed, in short that those who supposedly came behind accomplished similar tasks since they took the same route. If it is certainly not prohibited for anyone to exhibit the sign of the writing workshop, one should be careful to avoid all notions that could lead us to believe, on the whole, in an identical activity everywhere. "Precursor-ship" encourages this danger.

9. For you "writing" actually means "rewriting." "Workshop writing" implies more a sort of "trans-subjective" writing, that is, collective and interactive writing where each one in turn assumes the role of reader and writer of the other. In an important article on the

topic ("Pour une théorie de la réécriture," *Poétique* 77, 1989) you conclude with the following eloquent formula, "Be what in writing you become." Would you care to comment?

Assuming that writing is always more or less rewriting, we can, if we wish to go quickly, make this evident with a sort of paradox. How do most people operate with their missive? They write with the flow of the fountain pen, at best reread themselves without crossing out hardly anything and, even, simply avoid rereading. In short, and since they do not see any reason for perfecting their first version, they suppose, they who do not claim to be writers, that in fact they know how to write. . . . Inversely, those who call themselves writers, recognize themselves notably—oh profusion of drafts!—by the proliferation of their erasures. In short, and since they incessantly labor to improve their *écrit*, they in fact suppose that they scarcely know how to write. . . . But of course, the paradox is merely apparent: against the difficulty of writing, the gesture of crossing out betrays not a lack, but rather a knowledge: that of improving. Consequently, and except for inverting the roles, one must agree: the writer is s/he who crosses out, briefly rewrites because s/he has the aptitude. The others are those who exempt themselves because they are lacking in this respect.

If then writing specifically is supplying, not a first draft (since everyone is free to do so as long as he is not orthographically impaired), but rather through an interplay of erasures, an ensemble of improvements (since this, precisely is how the writer distinguishes from others), then to write, even though it might surprise, is to incessantly become someone else. Confronting his first version, he who leaves it as such assures that he has remained the same; he who transforms it thus attests that he has become different. He is the person who no longer accepts what he accepted before from his *écrit*. Yet this metamorphosis, made apparent by the erasure, has taken place slightly before. He who continuously leaves his *écrit* untouched is the one who, going over it, again finds what he meant to say (this what Textics calls *recouverte*). The person who resolutely transforms his *écrit* is the one, who, looking at it, perceives, at least in part that which he actually inscribed, (this is what deserves to be called, properly, *rereading*). The writer is he who, rereading himself with another eye, sufficiently avoids the hallucination of "something to say" in order to see "something written." The writer is therefore, not

he who, persevering in his being, expresses himself, but he who, crossing out, has transformed himself in his act.

Consequently I can answer two aspects of your question.

It is because a writer always proceeds as two (she who inscribes and she who making herself rather different knows how to reread herself) that it is possible to write as several. It is because writing always mobilizes another internal self that it can be accomplished in principle with another external self. But this is possible only on the condition that otherness truly takes place. This is what makes operational reversibility possible in a workshop: external otherness can be someone else's otherness only if she equally bears within herself another self whose otherness is the relay for the other. Briefly one must prevent *subjectivity* (maintaining a "self") from finding itself replaced by *neo-subjectivity* (the domination by one exterior "self" of the other) or through *inter-subjectivity* (the mutual transactions of the respective "selves" which leaves each one the same) and to attain a *trans-subjectivity*, as you put it well (the reciprocal attenuation of respective "selves"). What makes possible such a rapport is, of course, the presence in a workshop of a theory which is effective in the detachment of its abstraction and the precision of its concepts.

It is because a writer, perhaps in spite of himself, only operates while he continues accepting the activity of the other within himself—which is not without bearing—that I took the liberty of inverting the famous Nietzschean formula as an exhortation "Become who you are," which stresses the potentiality of being into "Be what in writing you become," which invites one to accept one's operational metamorphosis.

10. *Among your latest fictional texts, two in particular are not only delightful but also remarkable in that, pursuing the Théâtre experience, they inaugurate a new ricardolian "revolution." The rhythm, play with tenses, breaks, interpolated clauses, in short, how could I say, the manner, the spiraling art of "phrasing" today draw my attention with Révelations minuscules, en guise de préface, à la gloire de Jean Paulhan and the first short story from La cathédrale de Sens, Le lapsus circulaire. Would you care to say a few words about these texts?*

For thirty years now I have intensified my assiduous efforts on

the page and at the same time attempted to obtain a coherent and minute theory of *écriture*. Therefore, it is not impossible after such labor that I ended up succeeding, notably with these two texts, indeed the most recent, in various tiny things. Moreover it would be difficult for me to give an idea of them in a few words. To put it simply, I will merely oppose these two texts to my 1982 volume. *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* clearly displays an experimental status: it is on an immediately spectacular mode that it mobilizes one graphic and typographic diversity, as well as abundant structures established in excess. Thus, it happens that parallelisms overly develop in long series according to links and accumulations that border on frenzy. On the other hand, *Le lapsus circulaire* and *Révélation minuscules, en guise de préface, à la gloire de Jean Paulhan* on the whole obey a greater reserve. It does not mean that correlative oddities are fewer but, apart from crises here and there of elucidation, they tend to blend in a flow more smoothly although still pirouetting. I would prefer in this respect to speak of an underhanded classicism through which many traditional resources of *harmonious prose*, to borrow here the language of the Academy, are caught in structural interplays which surreptitiously overstep them.

What distinguishes *Le Lapsus circulaire* and *Révélation minuscules, en guise de préface, à la gloire de Jean Paulhan* from the mixt *Le Théâtre des métamorphoses* is not a strategical divergence: it is still a question of dismantling fallacious representative innocence through the virtues of meta-representation. Rather it is a tactical difference: the point is to restrict ostentatious permanent structural aggressivity in order to subtract the conspicuous support that it might give the reader and to diminish in this way the new intellectual comfort, to the second power in a certain sense, which as a result could settle into place.

11. *I gathered, in the course of your last seminar on Textics at Cerisy, that this discipline, according to you, aspired not only to explain theoretically different structures of the écrit, but that it involved a sort of combat, even a philosophical or ideological "mission." Could you clarify this stance?*

In its nascent elaboration, Textics encounters the three main concerns of all attempts at knowledge: the delimitation of its field, the efficiency of its analyses and the coherence of its concepts.

The delimitation of its field? From the beginning, Textics restrained its domain to the *écrit* (understood as an ensemble of marks associated with a language [*langue*] and left on a support by means of an adequate instrument), inasmuch as it can bear *scriptures* (structures whose effect is to represent) or *textures* (structures whose effect is to meta-represent). Textics may be therefore divided into two branches: *Scriptics*, which studies scriptures, and *Textics* proper, which studies textures.

The efficiency of its analyses? As it progresses, Textics applies itself to multiplying a large variety of examples—either of already admitted arrangements or of others that are less so and up to details at times minute—on which it tests the operational fecundity of its views; in short, it puts itself to the test through the field it has defined.

The coherence of its concepts? Its postulate, according to which the *écrit* can only be *representative* (that is, evidently with possible flaws in this register, *caco-representative*), or *meta-representative* (that is, of course, with its possible faults from this angle, *cacometa-representative*), seems to establish, at least for now, as it develops, an intellectual apparatus capable of *articulately conceiving all the structures of the écrit in their relationships*.

Thus Textics is at once *closed* (through the restraints of the specificities of its field), and *open* (because of the nature of its postulate). It operates around a specific scope and supposes an expansion. In effect, the *écrit* as we know is not the only means that allows representation. Therefore, through a first enlargement, and on the condition, of course, that one changes what must accordingly be changed, nothing prevents testing its postulate and methods through other fields. Eventually Textics' vocation is to expand into *pantextics*, general Textics including sectorial Textics: *scriptotextics* (applied to the *écrit*), *iconotextics* (applied to the image).

However expandable it may be, representation could very well present a part—misleading for the whole—of the intrinsic mechanisms of structural obfuscation. Likewise, an entity could very well—because it subordinates them like components—always weaken, more or less, the various elements that it involves. As a result, according to a second enlargement, pantextics would seek to expand into *metatextics*, all-encompassing Textics overstepping the minimal immense representative domain, and having as object *the possibility of structural disclosing of elements which every structure that organizes them obfuscates*.

It is therefore not impossible that one discipline concerned technically and up to a microscopical point with its own field may eventually foresee, in its possible extensions, *a questioning of any institution from the other end*. No longer by breaking ties according to a blind expeditious *destitution*, but rather, by increasing relations according to what would have to be called a—paradoxical—*transstitution*.

Translated by Barbara Carle and Michel Sirvent