

## Anne-Marie Picard

### THE READING BODY:

### Psychopathology, Magical Thinking & Literature<sup>1</sup>

Que nous disent les enfants incapables d'apprendre à lire sur l'effet même de la lettre ? Quels rapports peuvent être établis entre la psychopathologie et la démarche même de l'écrivain ? La figure iconique de *la Lectrice* lovée autour d'un roman nous permettra de penser le lien entre la pensée magique à l'œuvre chez l'enfant qui « préfère » ne pas savoir et l'écrivain qui voudrait *dé-lire*, défaire les implications psychiques de l'advenue au symbolique alphabétique et à ses lois, une initiation humanisante parce que critique de la jouissance incestueuse.

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### Why the reading body?

I shall speak about women's writing: about what it will do. Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement . . . . I wished that woman would write and proclaim this unique empire so that other women, other unacknowledged sovereigns, might exclaim: I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of songs. (Cixous, trans. Cohen, 875)

Like an old song indeed, Hélène Cixous and her *Laugh of the Medusa* resonate still, thirty five years after they have torn the sky of literature departments of North America.

In the late 80's, bathed in the anxiously pleasurable overflow of *écriture féminine* and looking for a PhD thesis *problématique*, I naturally turned to the question of the body and writing. That was THE question of the moment. A little embarrassed by what I felt was an exhibitionist parading, and armed with my training in structuralism and linguistics, I started analysing texts closely, especially those of Marguerite Duras to try to pinpoint precisely how this poetic although somewhat hysterical feminine writing could be translated into the discourse of the university.

What I found were words, strange words: the pseudo-autobiography of the so-called heroine Lol V. Stein, escaped the rational form of analysis I was using ; narratological concepts such as homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrators, time and space deixis, structural narrative schema, were utterly insufficient. Women in the field and in the institution were screaming at me through their courses, books, articles, papers, screaming that one could not approach women's texts with our fathers' tools, that *new* tools were necessary, that these must be refashioned, stolen, hijacked from the workshops of History, philosophy, sociology and, in particular, psychoanalysis. I had to discover how to explain why I had been affected by the writings of Duras, without falling into what I sensed was the impasse of *écriture féminine*. But how does one transform an "effect of reading" into an epistemological object... with only a theory of language handy? I needed a theory of the subject of reading which linguistics could not provide. The Body! The body! The body! Alright! An embodied subject of reading!

What I found in the books and scholarly articles on Gender and Reading, on feminist criticism sounded too positive, too essentialist for my structuralist mindset. If a 'Female Aesthetic' was to arise, we were told, it had to express a hidden but "unique female consciousness", "a feminine tradition in literature". This new feminist criticism was thus meant to "celebrate an intuitive female approach in the interpretation of women's texts", by speaking" of "a vanished nation, a lost motherland; of a female vernacular or Mother Tongue"; of a "powerful but neglected women's culture" (Lee).

I had left my own 'motherland' and mother tongue for complex reasons that I was going to discover much later but there and then in Toronto, I knew only that I could not partake completely in the feminist dogma that delineated a virtual feminine paradise, chanted a communion of meaning, through the writing and reading of our "sovereign" female ancestors' and each other's bodies.

How could this transparency of meaning be acceptable to someone who had been taught by linguistics about polysemy and homonymy, by Roland Barthes about "the effect of the real", the fake reality of novels that were but a "mass of words" (E. M. Foster) to be analysed scientifically, until they were reduced down to basic, universal irreducible narrative elements. Wladimir Propp (1895-1970) and Claude Levi-Strauss (1908-2009) had done the same to fairy tales and myths. The author, like God, had definitely disappeared from the French sky. Body and all! The reader was left with only textual machinery and the tools to start unravelling some of its complex mechanisms. But another type of reader was thinkable in America since the early 1980's thanks to the English translation of Wolfgang Iser's *The Implied Reader & The Act of Reading*. There, the German's phenomenological approach which focused literary studies from the author's intention to how it affected the reader, found a fertile terrain.

Very early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, George Herbert Mead had already imagined language as a "conversation of gestures". The pragmatist approach to language prevailing since John Austin's 1955 famous *How to do things with words* meant that writing itself, just like Cixous' invitation implied, was "a necessary step in the process toward intelligent action in the world" (Bushman). Stated in a nutshell, the approach of the English philosopher of language is as follows: words do not simply state facts; they perform a certain kind of action. They certainly do not have any freedom or autonomy of their own. It is just a matter of will, to want and to state what you want!

"And why don't you write? Write! Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it" (Cixous, 876) incites Hélène Cixous with a telling metonymic slippage between WRITING – YOU – BODY which sums up an act of faith: words will build the self ; the self is a body. The body is writable...

Such were the conflicting beliefs and questions at work as I started writing my thesis:

- What does one actually read when one reads? What tools are needed to forge and objectify “the effect of a literary text”?
- What is a reader? Iser’s abstract agent? Feminist criticism’s no less abstract gendered body?
- What is gender? What is feminine or masculine? *If a woman and a man do not read the same way, which part of the body does one read with?* I wondered, tongue in cheek, probably protecting my structuralist secularism

Needless to say, I could not answer these complex questions there and then. But entering the fascinating house of Lacanian psychoanalysis at first only to steal some useful notions, I was able to mark a field of investigation which has finally born fruit this year. The result is entitled: *Lire délire. Psychanalyse de la lecture* (perhaps translatable as: *Dys-reading*).

Why was it so complex? Well if you are talking about the effect of reading on a subject, and if you take into account the complexity of the human psyche, its conscious and unconscious workings, which psychoanalysis allowed me to do, you first have to know what this subject is! What led her to take such a subject of inquiry? On what imaginary, what fantasy is her theoretical endeavour grounded? How can one render self-conscious the literary critic’s, the theorist of reading and writing’s positioning without making her neurosis the very object of the search?

### **Sainte Anne’s Non-Readers: a portrait**

It is by stepping out of the university’s political hysteria - and magical linguistic thinking - into the respectful silence of a psychiatric hospital, more precisely the Unit of Psychopathology for Children and adolescents of Sainte-Anne’s Hospital in Paris, during a sabbatical, that the abstract body of the reading subject found a paradoxical incarnation: the anguished and apathetic bodies of children who “would not learn” to read. In spite of their lack of serious cognitive disabilities or important pathologies, the 9 to 11

years old children who had been coming *en masse* to the unit for the preceding ten years, could not, after several years of schooling, read, write or spell even very simple words.

I had come across the work of the team of researchers while writing my thesis: *Le Corps Lisant/The Reading Body*.

In their book, *Des Enfants hors du lire (Children outside reading)*, the psychologists and researchers of Sainte Anne's unit had defined the very strict criteria which had led, in their research, to the constitution of a particular group of children they had chosen to call *non-lecteurs*<sup>2</sup>, a name which seems but a euphemism but is preferable to the one used elsewhere 'dyslexics'. I was also going to understand the force of words as they are applied to a suffering subject's 'condition'. The label 'dyslexic' precludes a medical approach to the symptom. This branding of the child's ego might then work as an identity card preventing the caregivers from taking a respectful step back and listening to the child: what is he or she saying by way of this mute speech, this silent anguish? What paradoxical unconscious benefits are actually obtained by holding on, by dwelling on this peculiar impossibility to learn? For theirs, I discovered are not disabilities but incapacities which play a different part and are differently structured in every child; too quick a diagnosis might have a negative effect, the labelling rendering the symptom strangely all the more meaningful for the subject.

Let us note that :

- those children came mostly from the middle layers of society (only a few were from working-class or intellectual *milieux*, executives or teachers, etc.);
- the father's level of schooling was often inferior to that of the mother;
- the history of their early childhood was recounted as eventless (Kugler, Meljac, Picard, *et al.*, 488).

However in a certain number of cases, the arrival of the children within the learning institution "had coincided with traumatic events or, even more troubling for the researchers, with the lifting of family secrets (such as the death of a twin, a brother or a sister abandoned to social services, the possible diagnosis of a genetic disease concerning the child, etc.)" (*Ibid*). The entrance of the child into the schooling system, compelled the family to en-

ter the social sphere and abide by its conventions, prompting the disclosure of these secrets, very well guarded secrets, unknown to the child.

It was easy to imagine how the discovery or the safeguarding of family secrets might have something to do with a child's relationship with the deciphering of a complex code, that of written language: if the function of language is to lie, its ultimate referent hidden or unknowable, what dangerous truth may be revealed by acquiring literacy?

Following the Sainte Anne's team, let us note that even though the non-readers' personalities "did not reveal a psychopathologic structure" (which would have put them in another research category), these young boys (mostly) proved to be very inhibited, their imagination processes very limited<sup>3</sup>: what anguish were they hiding by their atonic and apathetic bodies, their "all's well" attitude, their general lack of interest in what was happening around them or to them? What about the learning process made them so troubled?

During their consultations for the specific research or later their remedial sessions, these children manage to articulate their own theories of reading, for after years of struggle, they have to have one: *how do you think one learns how to read?* They are asked. Their answers vary, sometimes echoing the theories of the benevolent adults' that surround them; for example:

- You put two letters together;
- You say all the words,
- You learn the words by heart;
- You have to say all the letters...

Of course, some of these theories do contain a little bit of truth, while others are merely erroneous (Rose, 178). The problem is that they are not the subject to any doubts in the child's mind, they constitute a petrified system, a religious system preventing the child from accepting the arbitrary rules of spelling – especially in French where, as we know, "l'exception confirme la règle!" (How impossible to accept this must be for a boy with phobico-obsessional tendencies!).

It is one particularly strange theory of reading that, in fact, opened me the tragically magical world in which these children live. Some examples will give a very quick inkling of

- 1) the complexity of the psychical path that must be followed in order

to accept the autonomy of the symbolic and the arbitrariness of its laws;

- 2) the difficulty involved in deciphering learners' resistances and incapacities; the degree to which pedagogical or familial discourses reinforce symptoms by endowing them with an affective charge, thus allotting meaning to them.

What then are these children saying with their non-reading? Why this unconscious choice which leads them to actually succeed in NOT learning to read anything?

### **Erroneous theories and beliefs: how to *not* accede meaning**

Sonia<sup>4</sup> is a ten year girl when she arrives at Sainte-Anne's for a consultation. She and her Portuguese family have been in France for four years. They all speak Portuguese at home. Sonia cannot read: "but, says her mother, "*elle a la force*", she has the power, the will to learn". She continues: "but she is like my husband, he also needed help in school". Then she adds: "Sonia is everything to her father". This will be confirmed when both are seen sitting side by side in the waiting room, the girl's head leaning against her father's shoulder. Mrs M. has had two miscarriages, she reveals: one before and one after Sonia was born, miscarriages which have been kept secret from the child.

During the different psychological tests that Sonia undergoes in the unit, we notice her exaggerated attention to the presentation of objects, their placement: everything has to be beautiful, organised in perfect rows.

- What do you want to be when you grow older, Sonia?
- A hairdresser, like my mother, before...
- What do you expect from us? How can we help?
- I wanna be taught those words I don't know » [*Je voudrais qu'on m'apprenne les mots que je sais pas*].

True enough, when she reads, she simply drops those words she does not recognize.

- How do you think one learns to read, Sonia?
- A *Monsieur* had taught my father all the words. He had learned them in a great big History book" [*Un monsieur avait appris tous les mots à mon père. Il les avait appris dans un gros livre d'histoire*]
- And how can one find this book ? [*Et comment fait-on pour trouver ce livre ?*]
- Don't know [*Chais pas.*]

Thus, to her "all the words" are not only contained in one single book but they can be learned at the same time. Reading is then imagined as an epiphany, a moment when the meaning of words and things is revealed in one wave of the magic wand. To Sonia, this ungraspable Big mythical Book provides a form for "the impossible" at work in her imaginary; in other words, the metaphorical figure of the "far away book" plays a particular role in her conscious and unconscious imagination: it provides her with a "theory" of reading, a belief which clears her of any desire to attain literacy. For, Sonia cannot imagine an entry point into this WHOLE-ONE ("TOUT-UN" as Lacan says) which does not in fact concern her, does not belong to her reality. The *monsieur* in Portugal, like an omniscient God Reader plays the part of the excluded third term between her and her father. As the treasurer of all-written words, he dwells in an elsewhere with no path leading to it, no signs for directions: this elsewhere is the place of the Fairy Godmother, that also of the Lost Paradise where things are simply created by their being named; it is also the mythical home land of the exiled, the Mother- or Fatherland of Œdipus.

Acquiring this Book is not conceived or conceivable for Sonia: for it does not symbolize knowledge (*le savoir*) but the Truth that the mythical mother tongue conveys within the home. The mother tongue functions as a dialect spoken in secret, *un corps-à-corps avec le père*, a dance with the body of the father, a musician. Language has thus become a family secret. It is not surprising therefore that Sonia cannot make up her mind as to whether, later, she wants to live in France or in Portugal.

Let us try to unravel this tying together of the belief in a Big Book and a strange incapability to learn in normally intelligent children.

We will then have to speak of sex. Not gender, sex. I found it quite interesting to note that the non-reader boys not only did not know about



the birds and the bees, but did not seem at all curious to find out.

Freud has explained how, very strangely, some children stop being curious and making inquiries about what the French call *les choses de la vie*:

It seems to me to follow from a great deal of information I have received that children refuse to believe the stork theory and that from the time of this first deception and rebuff they nourish a distrust of adults and have a suspicion of there being something forbidden which is being withheld from them by the 'grown-ups', and that they consequently hide their further researches under a cloak of secrecy. With this, however, the child also experiences the first occasion for a 'psychical conflict', in that views for which he feels an instinctual kind of preference, but which are not 'right' in the eyes of the grown-ups, come into opposition with other views, which are supported by the authority of the grown-ups without being acceptable to him himself. Such a psychical conflict may soon turn into a 'psychical dissociation'. The set of views which are bound up with being 'good', but also with a cessation of reflection, become the dominant and conscious views; while the other set, for which the child's work of research has meanwhile obtained fresh evidence, but which are not supposed to count, become the suppressed and 'unconscious' ones. The nuclear complex of a neurosis is in this way brought into being. (Freud 1908, 213-214)

In order to remain a good boy or a girl in the eyes of its parents, the child sacrifices curiosity and gives up on truth. It submits "to grown-ups' opinion" and thus avoids possible punishment or disapproval. Even or because the discovery of "sexual things" is always charged with forbidden excitement, children will repress the unveiling of the truth that was formerly made possible by their investigations in order to protect their bond with their imaginary parents. The knowledge that they could have gained by themselves does not count any longer: they thus stop investigating because what they could find out would jeopardize their "family romance", the tale created by children to try and make sense of their place in the family, a very elaborate tale of in which the child, of course, is the star.

Children only risk *unsatisfying* their parents with great reluctance. Psychoanalysis shows that continued belief (in the stork theory or any other) permits them to remain good boys and girls. Faithful to the status quo, some refuse to do without their parents' approval and choose not to

work through the distress caused by the discovery of sexuality. Holding on to erroneous theories of reproduction, preserves the child from a horrible anguish that would be brought about by the following realization: *when my parents made me, I did not count at all. I was not there! Something happened between THEM! I am but a stranger, a foreigner to my own parents!*

“How does one learn to read, David? – It was the storks who brought the books to mummy”, answers a 9 year old non-reader, whose mother is... a librarian. His theory of language, anchored to the myth of the Magical Book, is here clearly concurrent with the primary scene of his conception. In it, the mother is desexualized, free of any desire for another.

The desire to know, epistemophilia, is interwoven with the knowing about desire. If non-readers show little curiosity about the birds and the bees isn't it simply because they already know? Their hunch has acquired the force of a dogma.

What place has David granted himself in the rows of books which so preoccupy his mother? He was brought by the stork as well after all. Why does she care for them more than for him? Have books then become his love rivals? His theory of language is masked under a kind of loin cloth (*un cache-sexe*) covering the scandal of his mother's sexuality: the closed book, the organized books that his mother obsesses over. It allows him to avoid asking 'the' question: *why did she make me?* i.e. *from what desire do I proceed?* What risk is there in finding out? It seems, anyway, less dangerous to Not know.

Children's theories of language, in the manner of infantile sexual theories partake of the same narcissism as the family romance: they conveniently answer the impossibly hard WHY question: *why me?* Not knowing how to read could then permit them to *not* find out what their parents wanted, what they did not want, what they are hiding from each other and from themselves.

Such is the benefit drawn by the subject who renounces the pursuit of knowledge, and curtails the epistemic drive (Freud 1909, 158). The child therefore becomes a true “believer” in its new dogma, effectively resisting the drive to know (*Wissensdrang*), remaining “a good boy or girl”, not shattering the illusion of domestic tranquillity by her approaching the

truth, the dark crypt, under the house, full of monsters and skeletons! Not knowing how to decipher the entry code is the safest thing for the child in the same way that it is safer to put a eunuch in charge of a harem! Both, indeed, have done away with a forceful instinctual drive in order to keep the structure of the house standing and their sacrificial role central in the domain; this, of course, *à leur corps défendant*, unwillingly... but with secondary benefits.

### **The space of the reading body, the liberty to 'be'**

Then which part of the body do we read with? I think we read with the body of desire. To become subjects of desire, we have to sacrifice the megalomaniac wish of being all-satisfactory to our parents, which our young non-readers have not done yet. Wanting to be good boys or girls is very inhibiting and tiring. To support the subject, the 'I', the body image needs to be constituted in a separate sphere outside, away from the parents' gaze and their obscure wishful thinking. Before starting remedial work or psychotherapy, non-readers go through what is called in Sainte-Anne "analytical relaxation" (Bergès & Bounes) in order, so to speak, to "own" their bodies.

The writer Nathalie Sarraute provides us with the representation of such a separate reading and writing body:

La maîtresse nous prend nos copies. Elle va les examiner, indiquer les fautes à l'encre rouge dans les marges, puis les compter et mettre une note. Rien ne peut égaler la justesse de ce signe qu'elle va inscrire sous mon nom. Lui seul fait apparaître cette trace d'approbation sur le visage de la maîtresse quand elle me regarde. Je ne suis rien d'autre que ce que j'écris. Rien que je ne connaisse pas, qu'on projette sur moi...à mon insu comme on le fait constamment là-bas...dans mon autre vie... je suis complètement à l'abri des caprices, des fantaisies, des remuements obscurs, inquiétants.... Et aussi il ne pénètre rien jusqu'ici de cet amour, de « notre amour », comme maman, l'appelle...qui fait lever en moi quelque chose qui me fait mal, que je devrais malgré la douleur cultiver...et qu'ignoblement j'essaie d'étouffer. Pas trace ici de tout cela. Ici je suis en sécurité.

Des lois que tous doivent respecter me protègent. Tout ce qui m'arrive ici ne peut dépendre que de moi. (Sarraute, 168)<sup>5</sup>

Little Nathalie, the future writer and theorist of literature, chooses the house of the symbolic, written language, over the imaginary, the disquieting imaginary born out of the complex relation to the mother's obscure, confounding demand for love. Where do I end? Where does she start? Between them, no space, no third space has yet been built to allow the child to think for herself. However in school, remembers the writer, "the only aim of the solicitude, the concern which surrounds me here, is to help me to possess, to accomplish, what I myself desire, what gives me, me first and foremost, such pleasure" (*Ibid*).

As it is often the case for girls, Nathalie understands very early on that she has everything to gain within the space of the classroom. By submitting to the rules of grammar and spelling, she becomes a subject of the law, by the law, equal to all humans, outside of her mother's disturbing demands. In school, "[the child is] nothing other than what [she has] written. Nothing that [she doesn't] know, that people project on to [her] [...] without [her] knowledge".

Thus, in so far as it accepts being subjected to the common rules of written language, the subject builds a space for itself, a space therefore of paradoxical freedom. Not curtailed by the child's wish to remain a good boy or girl, blind and mute, satisfying the "obscure movements" of others, the epistemic drive takes the helm, founds a symbolic space for a subject-in-becoming, a desiring subject. Hélène Cixous *was* right: this positioning within written language seems to define the very possibility of subjecthood. But if reading like writing mimes desire, let us not forget that there is no Fairy Godmother, that the object is always missing, always missed.

Psychoanalysis has taught us that the subject is to be conceived as a product of an alphabetical culture, a 'subject of the letter' (*un sujet à la lettre*). To approach illiteracy as a symptom, rather than as a syndrome or a disease, has allowed us to understand better the unconscious refusal of children who cannot read –15% of 11 year old children entering the 6<sup>th</sup> grade in France. Paradoxically, it has also allowed us to understand the nature of

what is opposite: the pleasure of reading and writing. Thinking the effect of the letter through the lens of reading pathologies has helped us to formulate a metapsychology of reading in general (Picard 2010).

For a child to become a reader, it must undergo the final initiation: it has to accept that the letter is *not* the drawing of a thing; it must understand that meaning is *not* magical but built, retroactively, from the end of the sentence; that one must work with the written material to be able, one day, to repress the alphabet in order only to see meaning. In order to take the melody of the mother's tongue to pieces (as Freud puts it), and to accept the phoneme and then the letter, the child will also have to separate language from the mother's body, from her voice and her gaze. That is to say, the child has to take 'her' to pieces as well. What is lived as an imaginary matricide, or at least as a *decompletion* of the mother, will be more difficult for boys than for girls.

Is it possible, then, to theorize the pleasure of reading as the retrieval of an originary space, a regression to the Paradise of the mother tongue, that mythical place where the word magically calls up a thing? The writer's blank page is a fantasmatic territory ... where one can make believe that language works like the Fairy Godmother's formulae which create the world, the self, and the object of desire, with one wave of the pen? This is what we have called *dé-lire* in the title of our book: the pretence that words are (still) pictograms stamped with the sacred value – or the evil spell – of our subjectivity. This erroneous theory of writing plays the role of an oniric solution shared by non-readers and writers, by all of us, subjects of an alphabetical culture as we are. This *dé-lire*, this *dys-reading* is the very birth-place of literature.

### **The Female Reading Body: an icon of literary pleasure**

“Dans chaque tableau qu[e les auteurs] nous montrent, ils ne semblent nous donner qu'un léger aperçu d'un site merveilleux, différent du reste du monde, et au cœur duquel nous voudrions qu'ils nous fissent pénétrer [...]” said Marcel Proust about reading (1905, 33).

The nineteenth-century imaginary transformed reading into a *locus*

*classicus*, an icon of an inner life which, while remaining secretive, lets its existence and its necessity be seen from the outside<sup>6</sup>. In a century which valued action and social *engagement*, where the new paradigm put into place by photographic voyeurism and scientific positivism reigned supreme, intimacy was either hidden away or embodied by a vacant, hollow form, as though a *nature morte*, forgotten on a chair at the far end of the garden: a woman reader isolated from the turmoil of the world<sup>7</sup>. Her motionless abolition into the book (certainly a novel) is permission for the voyeur to watch, to transform her into a spectacle. However, even if the stillness of the subject gives us a glimpse of the back of her neck, allows us to contemplate her lost profile, the object of the painting is dissolved into a triangulated gaze structure which puts it to flight.

What is this *object*? The 'woman' reading? What is being read and gives pleasure, absorbs the subject, body and soul? Or the Other scene, the 'private theatre' on which stage the reader's blurred stare suggests she has been enticed? Are we not here before the very embodied answer to the Freudian *Was-will-das-Weib*? Isn't the reading body not only a figure of that Other *jouissance*, but its perfect effigy?<sup>8</sup>

Close to home and a thousand miles from a disappointing reality, *La Lectrice* (the Woman Reader) lets the painter dispose of her body so that she may abandon her soul to the author, the other invisible man of the picture. Between two men, motionless, she embodies the effect of reading<sup>9</sup>, its secret imprint, its clandestine nuptials with fantasy. This effect is played out through a process of *mise en abîme* (a frame within a frame). In its centre, traversed by the darting gaze of the reader, is a void: the open book where she sees herself, an idealized form in an enchanted mirror.

"Each tableau that [authors] display seems but a slight glimpse of a marvellous site, different from the rest of the world, into the heart of which we would like them to lead us" (our translation), said Proust. Leon, confirming Emma in her identification with the distressed heroines of her century, articulated his own theory of the literary effect:

- [...] quelle meilleure chose, en effet, que d'être le soir au coin du feu avec un livre, pendant que le vent bat les carreaux, que la lampe brûle ?...
- N'est-ce pas dit-elle, en fixant sur lui ses grands yeux noirs tout ouverts.

- On ne songe à rien, continuait-il, les heures passent. On se promène immobile dans des pays que l'on croit voir, et votre pensée, s'enlaçant à la fiction, se joue dans les détails ou poursuit le contour des aventures. Elle se mêle aux personnages ; il semble que c'est vous qui palpitez sous leurs costumes.
  - C'est vrai ! C'est vrai ! disait-elle.
  - Vous est-il arrivé parfois, reprit Léon, de rencontrer dans un livre une idée vague que l'on a eue, quelque image obscurcie qui revient de loin, et comme l'exposition entière de votre sentiment le plus délié ?
  - J'ai éprouvé cela, répondit-elle [...] j'adore les histoires qui se suivent tout d'une haleine, où l'on a peur. Je déteste les héros communs et les sentiments tempérés, comme il y en a dans la nature.
  - [...] Il est doux, parmi les désenchantements de la vie, de pouvoir se reporter en idée sur de nobles caractères, des affections pures et des tableaux de bonheur. [...]
- (Flaubert, 366-7)<sup>10</sup>

Thus, the reading body, locked in a motionless acting out, is the culturally acceptable figure of the hysteric. The unpunished sin (*le vice impuni*) which defines reading, is characteristically hers. Reading partakes in the self-hypnosis and self-mothering which is peculiar to the melancholic hysteric (of whom Emma is a paradigmatic figure). And reading undoubtedly belongs to the category of what XIX<sup>th</sup> C. French poetically called *ouvrages de dames* (*die weiblichen Handarbeiten*)<sup>11</sup>, those tedious occupations which led Breuer and Freud's hysteric patients to daydreaming, a preconscious motion which was consubstantial to their neuroses (Breuer & Freud, 1892, 9).

Those inveterate reading women and embroiderers will be the first to ask Freud to listen, their desire for verbalisation pushing him to abandon hypnosis as it could only reinforce their symptom, as their novel reading was doing. Painters and novelists become fascinated by the 'reading woman', this sitting odalisque taken by the words of another, at the very moment when the founder of psychoanalysis is starting to lie her down on his coach to better hear her words and entice *her* to become the author of her own life.

In the archetypal portrait of the *Lectrice*, the read book acts as a photographic developer, a projection screen for her 'secret garden'. It embodies an erroneous belief that writing magically *re-presents* the subject. But isn't this Reading Woman the very image of our subjugation to the letter of the

Other, of the sartrian “glorious body” in the “ether of things”<sup>12</sup>? As a symptom, reading feeds the structural melancholy of the ego as it searches in the names of things for the traces of a lost object which is but its self: a being, complete, uncastrated, bathing again in the melody of the mother tongue, this music of the gods and of paradise, where the ego, the other and language *were* One.

The figure of the Woman Reading captivates because it recalls a time when drives were not barred by the reality principle; the *reading scene* as icon represents a transitional space<sup>13</sup>, an intermediary zone between the inner psychic reality, and the outside world governed by the desire of the Other. What gets metaphorized thus in the paintings of women reading is the immobile motion of a subjectivity seeking an evanescent form: its mythical lost completeness.

This languid reader seems but the twin imago of this other figure of being which the novel hero is. Both acquire their mass appeal almost at the same time. In this sense, she can be interpreted as partaking of the desire of the (realist) novel, a desire which seeks to untie (*déliier*), to release the subject from the principle of reality, the necessary castration, the subjugation to the Other’s language and its arbitrary laws we accept when we learn to read, when we become subjects of/to the alphabetical sign. Completely *taken* by the Thing being summoned by those signs, caught up in the effect of reading, the *Lectrice* finds *jouissance* from her own abolition. She thus embodies an impossible ideal: a human being who could obtain *jouissance* from the Other without desire or castration and still decipher the written sign, a subject who does not have to pay its dues to the very Symbolic which has made it human.

Can literature somehow be articulated as the *délire* (delirium *and* dys-reading) that this impossible Reader represents? Furthermore, if one takes the word *dé-lire* (un-read) literally, can we thus envisage literary writing as a wishful flashback that could *un-do*, repair the traumatic exile from one’s self<sup>14</sup> that the coming to reading has imposed? The creation of a hero calls up the existence of its twin sister, the body of the reader, caught up in the *jouissance* of the letter’.



“Voyons si le livre pourra tracer de toi, Ludmilla, un portrait véritable, en partant du cadre pour se resserrer peu à peu sur toi, et déterminer les contours de ton image” (153) suggests the narrator of Italo Calvino’s meta-novel, *If on a winter’s night a traveller*. For him, the ideal book would be a portrait *en creux* of its desirable female reader. The fantasy gets further elaborated when the hero-writer envisions his text being read by his beautiful neighbour lying on her balcony with his book, at the very moment that he would write it. Now what a delight if he could transform his writing to see her react *in vivo* to his words! This daydream shows the act of writing as an erotic act, describes the effect of literature as a *dé-lire*, unravels writers’ magical thinking: “Je sens une foule de lecteurs qui regardent par-dessus mon épaule et s'approprient les mots au fur et à mesure qu'ils se déposent sur le papier” (183).

Like the holographic illumination of the *œuvre* in its entirety, in its desirability, Marcel Proust positioned the child reader that he was at the onset of his novel. Just as Calvino’s narrator fantasizes the Other *jouissance* through Ludmilla, Proust’s writing endeavour seems rooted in the following wishful thinking: that in the inaugural figure of the child reader who knows the meaning of his future words, the lost self of the author may be brought back from exile: *Je suis ce que je lis*, says little Marcel as he falls in and out of sleep<sup>15</sup>. By positioning an imaginary child reader as the ultimate – omniscient, all understanding – addressee of his *œuvre*, Proust gives us his metapsychological definition of literature: the recreation of the melodious mother tongue, a *dysreading* of referential language transformed ‘anew’ into the magical formulae of the fairy godmother, that mother who *always* grants the object of desire, that is to say, satisfies the lost and lonely child.

## Notes

1. This article is a presentation of the history and angle chosen by the author to approach literature with psychoanalysis. It sometimes translates and rewrites excerpts from her book *Lire Délire. Psychanalyse de la lecture*, published in June 2010.

2. For further details, see David, 41- 80. The following description of the criteria is borrowed from the introduction to: Kugler, Meljac, Picard, *et al.*, 487-88.

3. As their Rorschach tests demonstrated (Joubert & Pecquet, 315-343).
4. Names have been changed to protect identity. All examples are drawn from the consultations of Maïté Auzanneau, psychologist, and Dr. Lionel Bailly, former Head of the Unit of Bio-psychopathology of the Child & Adolescent of Sainte Anne's Hospital, in Paris.
5. "The mistress collects our papers. She is going to examine them, indicate the mistakes in red ink in the margin, then count them up and give the work a mark. Nothing can equal the fairness of the mark she will write under my name. It is justice itself, it is equity. It alone gives rise to that trace of approbation on the mistress's face when she looks at me. I am nothing other than what I have written. Nothing that I don't know, that people project on to me, that they foist on to me without my knowledge, as they are always doing there, outside, in my other life... I am completely protected from whims and caprices, from obscure, disturbing movements; suddenly provoked ... is it by me? Or is it by what they perceive behind me and which I mask? And also, nothing reaches me here of that love, "our love", as Mama calls it [...] which gives rise to something in me that hurts, which, in spite of the pain, I am supposed to cultivate, to nurture, and which, ignobly, I try to stifle... No trace of all that here. Here I am in security. / Laws, which everyone has to respect, protect me. Everything that happens to me here can only depend on me. I am responsible for it" (Sarraute, transl. Wright, 149).
6. "We can think of that locus classicus of nineteenth-century painting, the woman reading before a window, as a graphic illustration of the ambiguous role attributed to the novel, for the hidden world enclosed in the book (or perhaps in the woman reading the book) is projected outwards, reflected by the landscape represented on the other side of the window: a world that ought perhaps to have remained secret, and yet comes to light" (Beizer, 61).
7. See, for example, *Intérieur avec jeune fille en train de lire* by Peter Ilstead (1908), (Adler & Bollman 117) ; and *Roseraie (La femme du peintre dans son jardin de Skagen)* by Peter Severin Kroyer (1893) (*ibid*, 103).
8. See *La Lectrice* by Jean-Jacques Henner (1880-90), *Jeune fille lisant* by Théodore Roussel (1886-87), *Jeune fille lisant* de Lovis Corinth (1888) and *L'Arlésienne* by Vincent Van Gogh (1888) (in Adler & Bollman, 89, 95, 97, 100).
9. *La Lectrice*, by literary critic Raymond Jean (1986), played exactly that part in the novel and the eponymous film by Michel Deville (1988). It is no accidental that a theorist of literature would have recourse to the stratagem of creating a woman reader whose body is eroticized by her act to try to say what his theory could not.
10. "[...] what is better than to sit by one's fireside in the evening with a book, while the wind beats against the window and the lamp is burning?" / "What, indeed?" she said, fixing her large black eyes wide open upon him. / "One thinks of nothing," he continued; "the hours slip by. Motionless we traverse countries we fancy we see, and your thought, blending with the fiction, playing with the details, follows the outline of the adventures.

It mingles with the characters, and it seems as if it were yourself palpitating beneath their costumes.' / 'That is true! That is true?' she said. / 'Has it ever happened to you,' Leon went on, 'to come across some vague idea of one's own in a book, some dim image that comes back to you from afar, and as the completest expression of your own slightest sentiment?' / 'I have experienced it,' she replied. [...] I [...] adore stories that rush breathlessly along, that frighten one. I detest commonplace heroes and moderate sentiments, such as there are in nature.' / [...] It is so sweet, [observed the clerk,] amid all the disenchantments of life, to be able to dwell in thought upon noble characters, pure affections, and pictures of happiness.'" (Flaubert, transl. Marx-Aveling).

11. In the original German, which English can only translate by a periphrasis: 'needlework and similar occupations' (Breuer & Freud, Standard Ed., 12).

12. "J'avais trouvé ma religion: rien ne me parut plus important qu'un livre. La bibliothèque, j'y voyais un temple. Petit-fils de prêtre, je vivais sur le toit du monde, au sixième étage, perché sur la plus haute branche de l'Arbre Central . . . . Quand ma mère m'emmenait au Luxembourg . . . je prêtais ma guenille aux basses contrées mais mon corps glorieux ne quittait pas son perchoir. . . . Je refusais d'en descendre ; il ne s'agissait pas de me placer au-dessus des hommes: je voulais vivre en plein éther parmi les simulacres aériens des Choses" (Sartre, 52-53).

13. Notion borrowed to W. H. Winnicott; see Michel Picard's use of the concept of transitional space to theorize reading.

14 *Exil de soi* (separation from an originary, mythical self making one with language, the magic of the mother tongue, symbolic castration in Lacanian terms) refers to Sartre's expression in the famous scene of his mother's reading to him for the first time: "Anne-Marie me fit asseoir en face d'elle, sur ma petite chaise ; elle se pencha, baissa les paupières, s'endormit. De ce visage de statue sortit une voix de plâtre. Je perdis la tête : qui racontait ? quoi ? et à qui ? Ma mère s'était absentée : pas un sourire, pas un signe de connivence, j'étais en exil. Et puis je ne reconnaissais pas son langage. Où prenait-elle cette assurance ?" (Sartre, 41). For a close analysis of this scene, shortened here, see our first chapter: "Advenir à la lecture" (Picard, *Lire Délire*, 25-45, in particular).

15. "[...] je n'avais pas cessé en dormant de faire des réflexions sur ce que je venais de lire, mais ces réflexions avaient pris un tour un peu particulier : il me semblait que j'étais moi-même ce dont parlait l'ouvrage [...]" (Proust, 1913, 13); "I had been thinking all the time, while I was asleep, of what I had just been reading, but my thoughts had run into a channel of their own, until I myself seemed actually to have become the subject of my book [...]" (Proust, trans. Moncrieff).

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