# Experimental Writing, Experimental Reading

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The notion of "experimental writing" is difficult to define with any kind of precision. Most of the time it is invoked in a largely offhanded manner, as if its meaning were immediately clear to everyone, obviating the need for further discussion. That assumption is a matter of expediency rather than anything else, for even a cursory glance at the way people use the term quickly reveals that the way we understand it varies extravagantly. It is surely not the only slippery signifier in literary studies; the term "popular literature" comes to mind, for instance, as does the term "postmodernism," to name just a couple. Yet the issue is still more complicated because the phenomenon that "experimental writing" is usually taken to describe is itself so very mutable, changing both swiftly and radically over both time and cultural space. Moving targets are of course the hardest ones to hit. All the more reason, thus, to take very close aim at them—and to strive for as much mobility as one can muster. In what follows, I shall consider some of the distinctive characteristics of experimental literature and then reflect upon the ways in which texts conceived in the experimental tradition oblige us to rethink the way we read.

For Gerald Prince, experimental texts share three principal traits. First, they usually focus on form rather than on content. Second, the sites they explore are typically textual sites rather than those of the phenomenal world; in other words, they are primarily concerned with writing itself. Third (and perhaps most crucially), they are programmatic. That latter consideration leads Prince to invoke the idea of the recipe in order to characterize experimental writing, suggesting that "it connotes systematicity, programming, control, continuity (it is etymologically linked to 'receive'), and reproducibility. The experimental text is the production and product of a retrievable recipe" ("Recipes" 211). Though one may identify a variety of other ingredients in any given recipe, those three are fundamental to the genre, Prince claims. More than any others, they are essential to the concoction of a literary dish in which "the being of writing" (as Prince puts it) assumes priority over "the writing of being" ("Recipes" 212).

For my own part, I have argued in the past that experimental writing is historically bounded and essentially metadiscursive (Motte, "Experimental Writing" 214). It is undoubtedly true that the will to innovate can be identified in almost any literary text at almost any time; it is equally true that certain texts display this feature far more prominently than others, quite regardless of period. Nevertheless, the notion of "experimental writing" as a recognizable and systematic literary tendency is doubtless a construction of our own time. Though I realize that the term "our own time" which I used so blithely also demands further nuance, for

it, too, can be understood in several different ways. So, to be more precise about it, allow me to suggest that experimental writing (from which I shall now remove those pernicious quotation marks) is an emanation of the literary avant-garde. In the French tradition (which is the one I know best and the one I will mostly cite in what follows), the rise of the avant-garde is a matter of debate. Some people see its birth in Baudelaire; others contend that Mallarmé inaugurates it; still others point toward Dada and Surrealism, two decades into the twentieth century. I have always thought that 1896 is a pleasing date, because in that year Alfred Jarry's *Ubu roi* was first performed, with astonishing results. One will recall that there were fistfights and full-blown melees in the theater itself and that William Butler Yeats expressed his own bewildered reaction in five pithy words: "After us, the Savage God" (qtd. in Genet 20; my translation). Beginning with the magnificent solecism "Merdre!" 'Shitr!,' *Ubu roi* retains its power to shock a century after its appearance—and how many cultural artifacts of any sort can claim that distinction? (*Tout Ubu* 33). Indeed, it was not until 2009 that the play was admitted into the hallowed repertory of the Comédie Française (Simon).

The power to shock, the iconoclastic impulse, the resistance to recuperation, the obdurate and aggressive rejection of the old in favor of the new: all of these are hallmarks of the nascent avant-garde. They find expression in texts as otherwise dissimilar as Raymond Roussel's *Impressions d'Afrique* (*Impressions of Africa*, 1910), Guillaume Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* (*Calligrammes*, 1918), Tristan Tzara's *Manifeste dada* (*Dada Manifesto*, 1918), André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme* (*Manifesto of Surrealism*, 1924), and Paul Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin* (*The Satin Slipper*, 1929). One other feature that gradually becomes apparent as the avant-garde launches itself onto the cultural horizon and gathers a good head of steam is the impulse toward systematic experimentation, or, in other terms, an organized and programmatic process targeting specific goals. Claudel's *Le Soulier de satin*, to which I just alluded, is a fine early example of that kind of text. It is a play intended to be performed over four days, running to some five hundred pages in its printed version. It includes fifty-two scenes situated on three different continents and more characters than one can shake a stick at. Its author was well aware that he had created a monster, and indeed the play was not performed in its entirety until 1987, by Antoine Vitez at the Festival d'Avignon. Yet Claudel's gesture is demonstrably programmatic in character, involving the systematic exploration of the limits and possibilities of theater. Moreover, Claudel thematizes that formal quest massively in the play, and anyone who reads it or sits through it in its entirety quickly understands that one of its principal concerns is the nature of theater itself.

Claudel's text is not the only experiment in literary maximalism at the time, for other people were testing the limits of other genres in the early years of the century. In the domain of the novel, one might point to the roman-fleuve and

prodigious texts like Romain Rolland's *Jean-Christophe* (*Jean-Christophe*, 10 vols., 1904-1912), Roger Martin du Gard's *Les Thibault* (*The Thibaults*, 8 vols., 1922-1940), Georges Duhamel's *La Chronique des Pasquier* (*The Pasquier Chronicles*, 10 vols., 1933-1941), and Jules Romains's *Les Hommes de bonne volonté* (*Men of Good Will*, 27 vols., 1932-1946). Yet it is legitimate to point out a significant difference between Claudel's play and the roman-fleuve, I think. If both are undeniably maximalist in nature, maximalism expresses itself in the roman-fleuve mostly as a matter of length, while in *Le Soulier de satin*, the urge to totalize becomes apparent on a variety of textual levels: the vast array of characters, for example, or the fifty-two different scenes, or the bewildering leaps in time and space. In short—in short!—the experimental character of Claudel's play declares itself systematically.

When Samuel Beckett proposes his play *Breath* in 1969, some forty years after *Le Soulier de satin*, his approach is likewise systematic in nature. On the face of things, it would be difficult to name two texts as apparently dissimilar as those two. *Breath* lasts merely thirty-five seconds, after all; there are no actors on stage, no changes of scene, barely any decor. It presents a world stripped of incident and denuded of possibility. Yet one might argue that *Breath* takes its place in the tradition of *Le Soulier de satin* and that it is animated by largely the same experimentalist impulse. Where Claudel seeks to question theater and its potential from the maximalist end of its range, Beckett seeks to do the same from the minimalist end. His posture is just as uncompromising as Claudel's; his gesture is just as interrogative; his play is just as impossible. Furthermore, just as Claudel puts on display a fine sense of small detail in the vast panorama of *Le Soulier de satin*, so too does Beckett evince a concern for totality in the very exiguous world of *Breath*. He borrows his title from no less a figure than William Shakespeare (Hutchings 86); his purpose is a reconsideration of the entire theatrical tradition; and his theme is life itself, from birth to death, with everything in between.

In arguing the case for the historically bounded character of experimental writing, I have already touched on my second claim about it, involving its fundamental metadiscursivity. I would now like to examine that feature more directly, taking Alain Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* (*Jealousy*, 1957) as an exemplary experimental text. Along with people like Michel Butor, Nathalie Sarraute, Marguerite Duras, Robert Pinget, and Claude Simon, his stablemates at the Éditions de Minuit, Robbe-Grillet practiced the so-called New Novel, which called the tradition of the genre dramatically into question and proposed new possibilities in narrative prose fiction for writers and readers alike. Now, it should be noted that that sort of gesture is typical of the avant-garde. Whatever else may be involved in the avant-gardist artifact, it always involves a critique of the very notion of art and of its fundamental premises. Think, for instance, of Marcel Duchamp's readymades and of the way they put the idea of the aesthetic object on trial. Their mass-

produced, industrial quality, their very banality mocks certain enshrined assumptions about art: its uniqueness, the inspiration of its conception, the singular, inimitable vision that creates it, and so forth. Think, too, about the manner in which Claudel's *Soulier de satin* and Beckett's *Breath* encourage us to imagine theater in new ways or about how Apollinaire's *Calligrammes* adumbrate new possibilities for poetry.

Just so, in *La Jalousie*, Robbe-Grillet offers a meditation on the novel and its horizon of possibility—and that meditation is massive, sustained, and systematic in character, pursued on a variety of textual levels in mutually complementary ways. First and most obviously, he does this by embedding a novel within his novel, using the technique of the mise-en-abyme to redirect his reader's attention from the textual to the metatextual level—or, more simply put, from the written to the writing. Like any other experimentalist text, *La Jalousie* invites us to read doubly. On the one hand, it is a story about a man who suspects that his wife is having an affair with a neighbor; on the other hand, however, it is a story about the novel as a cultural form and about the way its terms must be renegotiated. Gradually and as if ineluctably, Robbe-Grillet presses the former story into the service of the latter. Throughout *La Jalousie*, the narrator is obsessed by the fact that his wife and her neighbor are reading a novel together, an activity from which he is excluded. From time to time, he reproduces their comments upon the novel and their readerly reactions, adducing them as evidence of their lack of literary sophistication—and also of their adultery. Yet we read those passages, inevitably, as indictments of the traditionalist novel, that is, as metacommentary. Let me put one of those passages in evidence, a passage where the narrator reports the discussion his wife and their neighbor have about the novel they have both read:

> Le personnage principal du livre est un fonctionnaire des douanes. Le personnage n'est pas un fonctionnaire, mais un employé supérieur d'une vieille compagnie commerciale. Les affaires de cette compagnie sont mauvaises, elles évoluent rapidement vers l'escroquerie. Les affaires de la compagnie sont très bonnes. Le personnage principal—apprend-on—est malhonnête. Il est honnête, il essaie de rétablir une situation compromise par son prédécesseur, mort dans un accident de voiture. Mais il n'a pas eu de prédécesseur, car la compagnie est de fondation toute récente; et ce n'était pas un accident. Il est d'ailleurs question d'un navire (un grand navire blanc) et non de voiture. (*La Jalousie* 216)
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> The main character of the book is a customs official. This character is not an official but a high-ranking employee of an old commercial company. This company's business is going badly, rapidly turning shady. This company's business is going extremely well. The chief character—one

> learns—is dishonest. He is honest, he is trying to re-establish a situation compromised by his predecessor, who died in an automobile accident. But he had no predecessor, for the company was only recently formed; and it was not an accident. Besides, it happens to be a ship (a big white ship) and not a car at all. (*Two Novels* 137)

The contradictions here are unbearable. One can try to rationalize them by imagining, for instance, that the narrator's wife and her neighbor read the novel in very different ways; but such attempts quickly founder on the very literalness of their accounts. Clearly, another game is afoot here, one that engages fiction and what we expect of it.

I have said that Robbe-Grillet's reflection on the novel and its uses is systematic rather than anecdotal, and I would like to point out two or three other sites in *La Jalousie* where he pursues it in different ways. On several occasions in the novel, the narrator mentions a song that the natives sing in the distance that perplexes his European ear. On one occasion, he describes it thus:

> Le poème ressemble si peu, par moment, à ce qu'il est convenu d'appeler une chanson, une complainte, un refrain, que l'auditeur occidental est en droit de se demander s'il ne s'agit pas de tout autre chose. Les sons, en dépit d'évidentes reprises, ne semblent liés par aucune loi musicale. Il n'y a pas d'air, en somme, pas de mélodie, pas de rythme. On dirait que l'homme se contente d'émettre des lambeaux sans suite pour accompagner son travail. (*La Jalousie* 194-95)

> The singing is at moments so little like what is ordinarily called a song, a complaint, a refrain, that the western listener is justified in wondering if something quite different is involved. The sounds, despite apparent repetitions, do not seem related to any musical law. There is no tune, really, no melody, no rhythm. It is as if the man were content to utter unconnected fragments as an accompaniment to his work. (*Two Novels* 127)

The narrator's bewilderment when faced with the native song mirrors our own bewilderment with *La Jalousie*, and everything he says about the one may be said about the other. In that manner, Robbe-Grillet coaxes us to examine the terms of the novel and also the terms of our reading.

It is in a similar vein that Robbe-Grillet uses the word *maintenant*, or "now," over and over again in his novel. It's a deictic of course, a very slippery word indeed, one that is utterly dependent upon context. Yet that context is sorely inadequate in *La Jalousie*, and the "now" continually escapes from us—that is, from our efforts to rationalize and stabilize it. As it does so, it tells a parable about

literary representation, I think, and about the dubious assumptions that typically subtend literary representation. It is surely not the only parable on display in *La Jalousie*, and I will mention one more. The narrator returns repeatedly to a centipede which appears in the dining room, frightening his wife. The neighbor kills it by crushing it on the wall, an incident that the narrator takes as evidence of a more general usurpation. Yet the stain that the smashed centipede leaves upon the wall is perhaps more indelible still. For it is in the shape of a question mark, a mute signifier that points directly toward the manner in which this novel interrogates the tradition of the genre, toward the way that it obliges us to question our readerly protocols, and toward the moments when it proposes the principle of perplexity as an alternative to positivist strategies of interpretation:

> Pour voir le détail de cette tâche avec netteté, afin d'en distinguer l'origine, il faut s'approcher tout près du mur et se tourner vers la porte de l'office. L'image du mille-pattes écrasé se dessine alors, non pas intégrale, mais composée de fragments assez précis pour ne laisser aucun doute. Plusieurs des articles du corps ou des appendices ont imprimé là leurs contours, sans bavure, et demeurent reproduits avec une fidélité de planche anatomique: une des antennes, deux mandibules recourbées, la tête et le premier anneau, la moitié du second, trois pattes de grande taille. Viennent ensuite des restes plus flous: morceaux de pattes et forme partielle d'un corps convulsé en point d'interrogation. (*La Jalousie* 56)

> The details of this stain have to be seen from quite close range, turning toward the pantry door, if its origin is to be distinguished. The image of the squashed centipede then appears not as a whole, but composed of fragments distinct enough to leave no doubt. Several pieces of the body or its appendages are outlined without any blurring, and remain reproduced with the fidelity of an anatomical drawing: one of the antennae, two curved mandibles, the head and the first joint, half of the second, three large legs. Then come the other parts, less precise: sections of legs and the partial form of a body convulsed into a question mark. (*Two Novels* 62)

Having argued that experimentalist fiction is both historically bounded and fundamentally metadiscursive, let me now take a rather different tack and suggest something else about it. Allow me to postulate, and then attempt to defend, a proposition that may seem positively indefensible, and that I will formulate thus:

> Experimental writing is just like any other writing, only more so.

By that I mean that experimental writing is mainly a matter of exaggeration. In other terms, experimental writing typically selects certain recognizable writerly gestures, topoi, or strategies, and heightens them, often to outlandish proportions, in order to make a statement about literature. In arguing that point, I would like to adduce the most profoundly experimental piece of writing that I know, Raymond Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*, or 'One Hundred Thousand Billion Poems,' which appeared in 1961. Queneau's text presents itself merely as a series of ten sonnets. But each sonnet has been constructed such that any of its fourteen verses may be exchanged with the corresponding verse in any of the nine other sonnets. Thus, to each of the ten first verses, the reader may add any of ten second verses; to those first two verses he or she may add any of the ten third verses; and so on. There are ten possibilities for the first line alone, one hundred different combinations for the first two lines, a thousand for the first three, and so forth. Since a sonnet has fourteen lines, there are ten to the fourteenth power, or one hundred trillion possible combinations. In other words, Queneau's collection contains—if "contains" is quite the right word, and I'm not sure that it is—one hundred thousand billion sonnets.

That's a lot of poetry. And undoubtedly enough to challenge the stamina of even the most enthusiastic, inveterate reader. By Queneau's own calculation, if one were to read a sonnet per minute, eight hours a day, two hundred days a year, it would take a bit more than a million centuries to finish the text (*Cent Mille*). In fact, he was off by an order of ten; if one does the math, one discovers that it would take a bit more than ten million centuries to read his book. But who's counting? Queneau's friend François Le Lionnais frames the issue a bit differently in his afterword to the collection: "Thanks to this technical superiority, the work you are holding in your hands represents, itself alone, a quantity of text far greater than everything people have written since the invention of writing, including popular novels, business letters, diplomatic correspondence, private mail, rough drafts thrown into the wastebasket, and graffiti" (*Cent Mille*; my translation). The least one can say is that any reader who attempts to come to terms with this work will quickly be confronted with a truth about aesthetics dating back to Hippocrates: art is long, life is short.

One may react to Queneau's work in a variety of ways. One may be tempted to dismiss it as an example of empty literary acrobatics—and indeed many people have done just that. One may see in it nothing other than foolish play, with no seriousness of purpose. One may imagine that Queneau is seeking merely to *provoke* his readers, rather than to please them or edify them. But anyone willing to consider the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* in a more sober light will quickly recognize its programmatic character. In fact, it is legitimate to conceive it not so much as a collection of sonnets, but rather as a laboratory of poetry, an experiment in literary form intended to shed light upon certain possibilities inherent to

literature, principally through the use of exaggeration. Let us examine some of the more salient points in its program.

First, Queneau's text serves as a manifesto of sorts, insofar as it may be described as the seminal text of the Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle ('Workshop of Potential Literature'), the Oulipo for short, a group of experimentalists that Queneau and Le Lionnais founded in 1960 (Motte, *Oulipo* 2-4). Most importantly for the group, the work serves as a material demonstration of the notion of potential literature, which constitutes the essential principle of the Oulipo's research and the privileged object of its interrogations. For, in Queneau's text, the vast majority of the sonnets must by necessity remain in potential state, rather than assume shape upon a page. The work is a smoothly functional machine for the production and dissemination of potential literature, and its mechanisms are such that that very process is displayed theatrically for all to see, right on center stage. It is an exemplary text, in the fullest sense of that word. And like any manifesto, it uses exaggeration for polemical effect.

Secondly, it is an eloquent illustration of Queneau's theory of formal constraint, his notion that the work of art must be very highly organized, and that such organization must be very systematic—even difficult and constraining—if the work is to be successful. Indeed, one can read Queneau's career over five decades as a sustained meditation on the uses and abuses of constraint. The import of his reflection went far beyond his own novels and poetry, moreover: for a wide diversity of writers from the mid-century to the present, his influence was both direct and determinative. Indeed, Quenellian theory of constraint resonates demonstrably in the work of such apparently dissimilar writers as Italo Calvino, Harry Mathews, Georges Perec, Walter Abish, Jacques Roubaud, and Jacques Jouet. Now, any writer works through some baseline constraints: constraints of language, of syntax, of genre, of convention, and so forth. Queneau's text amplifies that feature of literature to extravagant proportions, imagining and deploying a highly complex set of writing rules in order to suggest certain truths about writing itself.

Thirdly, Queneau's text puts poetry itself under the microscope and examines some of its most fundamental characteristics. Rhyme is the most obvious among these and whatever else one might say about the *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*, it is most certainly an experiment in rhyme. But that experiment is taken to very extraordinary lengths indeed. Certainly the rhyme schemes in the ten "master" sonnets are demonstrably taut and rigorous, yet each line of each poem must also "rhyme" with its opposite number in the other nine poems if Queneau's poetry machine is to work efficiently—and that kind of rhyme pattern becomes positively vertiginous if one imagines how it structures the trillions of "derived" sonnets.

Fourth, the combinatoric character of Queneau's text patently puts on stage the notion of literature as a combinatory, permutational system, an idea that enjoyed a great deal of theoretical currency at the time Queneau conceived his project, in the work of figures like Vladimir Propp, Italo Calvino, Umberto Eco, A. J. Greimas, and Tzvetan Todorov, among others. Calvino (who would join Queneau in the Oulipo in 1973) was particularly attached to the idea of combinatorics. In a piece entitled "Myth in the Narrative," he contended that "literature itself is merely the permutation of a finite set of elements and functions" (77). And indeed many critics believe that the combinatoric turn animates any piece of writing at all, from *The Three Little Pigs* to *Finnegans Wake*.

My fifth point (if I'm counting properly, no mean feat while these hundred trillion poems occupy my mind) hinges on the idea of the experiment. Contrary to what one might imagine about a poet, Queneau was gifted with a scientific mind, and the idea of the experiment, that is, of a test, a heuristic procedure, a deliberate and rigorous process of discovery, was a very appealing one to him. And as much as we might find ourselves bemused by the fact that the object of experimentation should be poetry, it is certain that Queneau himself felt no such scruple. In fact he once famously remarked, with tongue firmly in cheek, that Mallarmé's sonnets were very high-grade experimental material, comparing them to the fruit fly in genetics (Queneau, *Bâtons* 340). In short, this is an experiment that puts the very principle of literary experimentation on display, in a discourse as abundantly metadiscursive as any one might hope to find. Yet we should also recognize that any act of writing involves experiment at some level, be that level a very modest one, and that any writer at all tests the possibilities of literature, however unwittingly and unsystematically.

A reader might reject Queneau's text out of hand, seeing in it nothing more than otiose play utterly denuded of serious intent. Here is the sixth point in Queneau's program. The *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes* presents a very compelling, sustained, and rigorously argued brief for ludic literature, that is, a literature characterized by playfulness both in the process of its production and in that of its reception. It stands as a shining counterexample to the hoary notion that "play" and "work" are mutually exclusive, a prejudice that has colored most of Western thinking on ludics since Plato. It contends instead that one can play very earnestly indeed; that play is in fact fundamental to culture; that the gestures, attitudes, and expectations we bring to play are the same ones we bring to aesthetics; and that in certain instances—in certain experiments—play and work may become virtually indistinguishable. "All poetry is born of play," argues Johan Huizinga (129), an assertion about art and its fundamental nature that Queneau's text plays out with a great deal of pageantry.

The seventh and last element of Queneau's program that I would like to invoke points directly and inevitably to us, as readers and consumers of literary

culture. More precisely stated, Queneau's text involves us, enrolling us willingly or unwillingly in the process of textual production, and enfranchising us in that process as full partners. In the first instance it may shock and bewilder us, insofar as it beggars—exhausts in fact—the notion that we might read it in its entirety. Yet by the same token it grabs us and demands a reaction from us; it engages us and insists that we do something with it; it rejects outright a passive reception in favor of an active, articulative one. Briefly stated, it makes us part of the deal whether we wish (and seek) to be enlisted, or not. It brings me moreover, conveniently if not subtly, to my second (and final) proposition:

Experimental writing obliges us to read experimentally.

For in point of fact, we can read it no other way. We grope around the experimental text, seeking points of ingress. We test this strategy of reading, then that one, in order to make sense of the thing. We try this interpretation on for size, then reject it in favor of another that promises to make more sense. We go at the experimental text hammer and tongs, gradually realizing that the text has been conceived with that very process in mind and that in fact it anticipates our interpretive efforts. In other words, whatever else the experimental text may speak about—a young man coming of age in Dublin, for instance, or the difficulty of waiting for a person named "Godot" who never arrives, or the fact that the letter E has disappeared from the alphabet—it also (and crucially) speaks about us and about our efforts to come to terms with it. Moreover, it addresses that speech directly to us, in an unmediated manner—just as if it were inviting us to engage in a conversation, a conversation that is potentially infinite in its dimensions, as Maurice Blanchot has pointed out (*Entretien* ix-xxvi).

In order to illustrate my contention more precisely, allow me to call upon a moment in Jean-Philippe Toussaint's *La Salle de bain* (*The Bathroom*), a quirky and wonderfully idiosyncratic novel published in 1985. His protagonist is gazing out of his window into the rain-swept streets of Paris:

> Il pleuvait. La rue était mouillée, les trottoirs étaient sombres. Des voitures se garaient. D'autres, en stationnement, étaient couvertes de pluie. Les gens traversaient la rue rapidement, entraient et sortaient de la poste dont l'immeuble moderne me faisait face. Un peu de vapeur commençait à recouvrir ma vitre. Derrière la fine pellicule de buée, j'observais les passants qui déposaient du courrier. La pluie leur donnait des airs de conspirateurs: s'immobilisant devant la boîte aux lettres, ils sortaient une enveloppe de leur manteau et très vite, pour ne pas la mouiller, la jetaient dans une fente en redressant le col pour affronter la pluie. J'approchai mon visage de la fenêtre et, les yeux collés contre le verre, j'eus soudain l'impression que tous ces

> gens se trouvaient dans un aquarium. Peut-être avaient-ils peur? L'aquarium lentement se remplissait. (*La Salle de bain* 30-31)
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> It was raining. The street was wet, the sidewalks dark. Cars were parking. Other cars, already parked, were covered with rain. People were crossing the street quickly, going in and out of the post office in the modern building across from me. A little vapor began to cover my windowpane. Behind the thin coat of mist, I observed the passersby sending their letters. The rain gave them a conspiratorial air: stopping in front of the mailbox, they would draw an envelope from their coat and thrust it through the slot very quickly so as not to get it wet, meanwhile pulling up their collars against the rain. I put my face close to the window and, eyes against the glass, suddenly had the impression that all these people were inside an aquarium. Perhaps they were afraid? The aquarium was slowly filling. (*The Bathroom* 20)

The narrator's position is a curious one, if one stops to examine it closely. On the one hand, he is inside his apartment, gazing out at the street. But it occurs to him by fancy that the people outside are actually in an aquarium, and that notion puts him, virtually at least, in a rather different position, that of someone outside gazing in. Which perspective trumps the other, the literal or the figural, the rational or the fanciful, the pragmatic or the aesthetic? Is it possible to inhabit both sites simultaneously? Or can we imagine him oscillating between one and the other, attentive to both perspectives, learning the lessons that both put on offer, deciphering the world he inhabits doubly, rather than singly?

Not to put too fine a point on it, I am convinced that this passage contains a parable. A parable of writing and artistic creation, certainly, because it is clear that Toussaint is speaking about imagination and the way it can transform the most ordinary event into one worthy of narrative interest. Yet I believe that he is also speaking about reading here, because what is his protagonist doing, if not reading the street scene before him, as it is inscribed on the virtual page of the rainy window? If such is the case, what might this passage have to say about reading, and about readers? One idea it puts forward involves readerly mobility: it suggests that reading is fundamentally dynamic and that readers are neither definitively inside or outside, but rather inside-out and outside-in as it were, turn and turn about. That notion, which seems so scandalously metaleptic, is actually a venerable one that can be traced back to Aristotle's theory of catharsis, should one feel compelled to do so. I am not Oedipus the King, his problems are not mine, I neither killed my father nor slept with my mother—yet that does not prevent me from suffering right along with him for the space of two hours.

Examining the stances that we adopt as readers more critically than we usually think about them, it becomes clear that many dimensions of our readerly

behavior are a bit more fluid than we might have imagined them to be. When we read, we are neither subject nor object exclusively, but instead both subject and object in turn. Phenomenal worlds and textual worlds are never absolutely distinct, and we stride from one into the other as a matter of course. Imagination lavishly informs our experience of the real, while experience of the real necessarily structures our imagination—and it would be a real shame if such were not the case. Our position, in other words, is much like that of the writer, since we are always both in and out. The experimental text underscores that analogy heavily and plays upon it for effect, reminding us insistently of the collaborative, articulative character of literature and constantly urging us to play our part therein. The incessant mobility that it demands of us can seem like a curse at times, to be sure, but at others we may see it as a matter of privilege and favor. For my own part, I am persuaded that the way we are both here and there in literature constitutes one of the most reliable sources of a deep and abiding readerly pleasure.

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