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Mobile Criticism: Pierre Bayard's Irreverent Hermeneutics

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After decades of critical inquiry it seems as if nothing could possibly have escaped being “interrogated”, “unpacked”, or “renegotiated” – that literary criticism has long since slaughtered its last holy cow. If this is not the case, it is not simply due to the fact that even the most subversive criticism is a breeding ground for new orthodoxies, nor is it because insights are paid for with new blindnesses. Just as importantly, modern criticism, for all its radicalism, has generally remained committed to a set of assumptions that might be summed up as “textualism” – a critical position centred on the text understood as a decodable linguistic structure, a medium of communication between authors and audiences, or a cultural artefact determined by historical and ideological “contexts”. These discipline-founding assumptions, however, which are closely associated with a broadly defined concept of literary interpretation, have recently come under attack from various sides by critics such as Rita Felski, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, and Franco Moretti,¹ and it is now possible to discern the outlines of a critical practice that is not predicated on the authoritative power of the literary text.

French critic and theorist Pierre Bayard belongs squarely to this group of critical non-conformists, if only because of his systematic questioning of the ideologies of the text. A professor of literature at the University of Paris 8, a practising psychoanalyst, and the author of more than twenty monographs, most published by the prestigious Éditions de Minuit, Bayard is a unique figure in French literary criticism, having as little direct association with the luminaries of poststructuralism as with the established tradition of *explication de texte*; as Philippe Roger notes, “it would be hard [...] to enroll Bayard in any school or even trace an intellectual genealogy for his œuvre, which stands alone as one of the least ‘aligned’ and most unclassifiable on the whole French scene”.² In recent years, his critical writings have garnered increasing attention internationally. First came English translations of *Qui a tué*

¹ Rita Felski, “After Suspicion”, *Profession* (2009), 28–35; Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004); Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, “Response: An End to Literary Theory”, *Journal of Literary Theory*, 1: 1 (2007), 212–216; Franco Moretti, *Distant Reading* (London: Verso, 2013).

² Philippe Roger, “Five French Critics”, *New Literary History*, 44: 2 (2013), 205–211 (p. 205).

Roger Ackroyd? (1998) and *L’Affaire du chien des Baskerville* (2008), his “counter-investigative” readings of classic detective stories which call into question the authoritative solutions provided by master sleuths Poirot and Holmes.³ Later, his provocative defence of “non-reading”, *Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus?* (2007), has become a major bestseller both at home and abroad and has so far been translated into more than twenty-five languages.⁴ Incisive and complex as these books are, however, they offer international readers only a snapshot of Bayard’s large and diverse critical production. Discounting its relatively conventional beginnings at the close of the 1970s, this corpus of criticism has a decidedly experimental flavor: bearing the mark of the author’s witty yet unflinching iconoclasm, it systematically challenges the established wisdoms of literary studies in a bid to open up new and more dynamic pathways for engaging with literature.

In this essay, we present a synthetic account of Bayard’s recent work in literary theory and criticism, arguing that it comprises a systematic and highly idiosyncratic attempt to dismantle the dominant textualist paradigm of literary studies. Bayard’s basic assumption is that conventional literary criticism is a set of rules that keep the reader’s hermeneutic creativity in check and ensure that interpretations conform to canonical perceptions. Accordingly, his project is one of critical emancipation, combining a destructive impetus aimed at mainstream criticism and a creative impetus seeking to envision new styles and objectives of critical practice. We pursue this project across three clusters of experimentation in Bayard’s critical writings, each of which focuses on a prevalent methodological constraint: the authority of standard interpretations, the limits of comparability, and the perceived sanctity of the literary text. What unites these experiments is a desire to reimagine the politics and practices of literary hermeneutics. By insisting in this way on the continued relevance of a hermeneutical, meaning-centric approach, Bayard is at odds both with the anti-hermeneutical tendencies that arose out of poststructuralist and deconstructive theory and with the contemporary preoccupation with post-hermeneutic approaches that no longer privilege meaning as the key object of literary analysis.⁵ Yet, Bayard’s approach is far removed from standard hermeneutical practices. Having little regard for interpretative guidelines and rules of thumb, his is an irreverent

³ Pierre Bayard, *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?* (Paris: Minuit, 1998); Pierre Bayard, *L’Affaire du chien des Baskerville* (Paris: Minuit, 2008).

⁴ Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus?* (Paris: Minuit, 2007).

⁵ Gumbrecht, *Production of Presence*.

hermeneutics, marked by a will to experimentation which persistently tries to open up new interpretative possibilities – even when this means engaging in paradox and transgressing against logic and common sense.

Bayard's reimagining of interpretation raises the question of how his own work should be read – in fact, his critical position is inextricably bound up with its style of presentation. Saturated with irony, it typically provokes one of two responses. The first is one of incensed rejection. In this vein, Jack I. Abecassis claims in a review article on *Comment parler des livres que l'on n'a pas lus?* that Bayard's arguments suffer from "a heavy dose of hyperbole, circular logic, false implications, rhetorical questions, amalgams, and a torrent of truisms"⁶ and concludes with this acerbic flourish: "Never has romanticism, literary theory and do-goodism been concocted into such a toxic brew."⁷ The second reaction is one of infatuation. Warren Motte, for instance, offers a *précis* of some of the underlying claims of Bayard's criticism, yet seems to take him entirely at face value, regarding him simply as the latest in long line of literary theorists.⁸ In both cases, one senses that Bayard is sniggering from his place of hiding, thrilled to have caught two such eminent commentators in his web of irony. Determined to respect both the earnestness and the humour of Bayard's works, we conclude by analysing their ironic tonality and suggest a third way of reading as more appropriate – one that questions the soundness of Bayard's experiments at the level of logic, yet accepts and embraces them as a means of stimulating our hermeneutic imagination.⁹

Interpretation and authority

A first cluster of experiments in Bayard's critical work concerns the interpretation of literary texts and specifically the constraints imposed on interpretation by authorities both internal and external to the text itself. Bayard engages with this problem in a trilogy of essays dedicated to detective fiction in the broadest sense of the word: *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?*

⁶ Jack I. Abecassis, "Pierre Bayard and the Death of The Reader", *Modern Language Notes*, 125: 4 (2010), 961–979 (p. 979).

⁷ Abecassis, p. 977.

⁸ Warren Motte, "Pierre Bayard's Wormholes", *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature*, 35: 2 (2011), 268–94.

⁹ Bayard is an extraordinarily prolific writer, and new monographs appear on an almost yearly basis. While still drawing in part on literary examples, his work since 2010 – *Comment parler des lieux où l'on n'a pas été?* (2012), *Aurais-je été résistant ou bourreau?* (2013), and *Il existe d'autres mondes* (2014) represents an effort to expand the counterfactual style of thinking beyond literature and these studies are therefore not considered in this essay.

(1998), *Enquête sur Hamlet* (2002), and *L’Affaire du chien des Baskerville* (2007).¹⁰ Focusing respectively on Agatha Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (read here as a murder mystery), and Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, Bayard sets out to demonstrate that the solutions provided by the protagonist sleuths are unconvincing, and that the cases must therefore be reopened with a view to identifying the true culprits. This project is both ironic and serious: saturated with the author’s trademark anti-authoritarian playfulness, it also produces a sustained and highly original meditation on the problem of literary interpretation.

Classic detective fiction is particularly instructive in this regard because it constitutively revolves around a dual process of interpretation: the investigation undertaken by the detective protagonist is clearly a hermeneutic endeavour aiming to adduce the meaning of a given set of clues, and this endeavour is mirrored in the role intended for the reader, which is one of active scrutiny rather than passive absorption. Importantly, these interpretative tracks are not simply parallel, but in competition with each other and even latently antagonistic, insofar as readers are encouraged to engage in their own detective work and form their own hypotheses concerning the identity of the killer – before ultimately deferring to the authoritative solution provided by the protagonist. This hermeneutical activation of the reader, however, produces a genre-defining ambiguity: wavering between deference and dissent, the reader of detective fiction always has the option of dismissing the detective’s reconstruction as unsatisfactory and insisting that the murder case be interpreted differently.

It is this potential gap between the interpretation of the detective hero and the interpretation of the reader that Bayard exploits in articulating the principles of his “critique policière”¹¹ – an against-the-grain reading practice that insists on the interpretative freedom of the reader against what is seen as authoritarian attempts to curtail it. Initially, this detective criticism is simply an exercise in close textual analysis that reads the text with a care equal to that of the detective’s reading of the clues. In each of the three cases, Bayard reveals grave logical problems in the seemingly unimpeachable solutions offered by the master detectives. In his detailed discussion of *The Hound of the Baskervilles* Bayard points out that Jack Stapleton, whom Sherlock Holmes identifies as the killer of Sir Charles

¹⁰ Bayard, *Ackroyd*; Pierre Bayard, *Enquête sur Hamlet* (Paris: Minuit, 2002); Bayard, *L’Affaire*.

¹¹ Bayard, *L’Affaire*, pp. 61–70.

Baskerville, lacks the required motive and mental disposition for murder and further argues that Holmes's fixation on the narrative of the giant dog leads him to overlook the outlandishness of this explanation; in fact, the choice of a dog as the instrument of murder is at best risky (requiring that Sir Charles obliges by having a heart attack) and at worst self-defeating (it would be easy to trace the dog back to its owner). The analysis of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* follows the same template. Christie's novel famously transgresses against the detective fiction ideal of "fair play" by having as its murderer the narrator himself, Dr Sheppard. Highly effective in terms of duping the reader, this ploy would appear to make the novel an unlikely candidate for a Bayardian "contre-enquête"; since the narrator explicitly confesses to the crimes, there seems to be little basis for challenging Poirot's conclusions. Yet, as Bayard shows, the solution is in fact riddled with improbabilities relating both to the alleged sequence of events and the many psychological and material clues; most damaging is the implied chronology of the murder which assumes that Sheppard would have been able to invent a timer-activated Dictaphone – a major technological breakthrough in 1926 – in the space of just a few hours in the afternoon before the murder.

This analytical part of Bayard's argument remains relatively conventional in terms of methodology, and the claim that the authoritative solutions are implausible and logically inconsistent is hardly controversial given the famously contrived nature of detective fiction plots of the "Golden Age". His subsequent manoeuvres, however, are decidedly experimental and centre on the question of whether it makes sense to look for more likely suspects within the texts. Notwithstanding the apparent flippancy of this question, what is ultimately at stake here is the hermeneutic scope that text allows: must the reader defer to narratorial authority, or is it possible to read these – in Roland Barthes's terminology – "readerly" novels in "writerly" ways, that is, arguing on a strictly textual basis that the narrators and even the authors are mistaken in their conclusions, and that the story should in fact be interpreted differently?

In *Qui a tué Roger Ackroyd?*, Bayard attempts to answer this question by articulating a theory of the unintended and uncontrollable polysemy of the classic detective story. Drawing on S.S. van Dine's classic rule set of detective fiction, which embodies the notion of "fair play", Bayard argues that in the detective novel the truth must be both accessible to the reader and hidden from view. Accordingly, this genre stages a cat-and-mouse game where the author employs a range of deception tactics, each increasing the number of

possible endings, before finally closing down all but one of these possibilities, which is then backed by the authority of the protagonist. Accordingly, detective fiction can be seen as constituted in two opposite movements: one of “ouverture du sens” and one of “fermeture du sens”.¹² In the course of the narrative, the detective story presents a multiplicity of signs and clues, thereby creating a large number of latent meanings designed to mystify and intrigue the reader. In the final chapters, however, the detective hero reveals his authoritative solution, effectively privileging one set of clues while brutally reducing all others to the status of “red herrings”. Yet, as Bayard argues, this process of elimination carries with it the risk of leaving some of the possibilities intact even after the detective’s final reckoning. This in turn allows for alternative interpretations, capable of reactivating latent narratives and assembling the puzzle differently through the selection and combination of different clues.

These genre-specific points are embedded in a broader theory of literary interpretation. Bayard’s contention – one that reappears across his critical œuvre – is that our understanding of a literary text is predetermined by prior expectations deriving from our familiarity with the genre, the author and authorial intention, and with a critical tradition that privileges certain “standard” readings while ignoring or outlawing others. In the case of classic detective fiction, the overawing intelligence of the detective protagonists, and the shamelessness with which they flaunt it, leads readers to grant them an arguably undeserved authority, thereby selling short their own interpretative abilities. When looking past these institutionally sanctioned frameworks, it becomes evident that there is no such thing as a final, authoritative interpretation: the clues that the detective “reads” are not stepping stones towards an incontestable answer, but “se constitu[ent] après coup dans le mouvement herméneutique de l’interprétation”,¹³ and this movement necessarily cancels out other possibilities, implying that “l’indice, avant même d’être un objet de sens, est un processus d’exclusion”.¹⁴ This logic is seen to apply to interpretation in general, which always relies on a decision, conscious or unconscious, to highlight certain textual features as relevant to the overall meaning while discarding others as insignificant. What this means, according to Bayard, is that different readers never read the same text. As he points out in

¹² Bayard, *L’Affaire*, p. 87.

¹³ Bayard, *L’Affaire*, p. 89.

¹⁴ Bayard, *L’Affaire*, p. 113.

Enquête sur Hamlet, the selection of salient features are determined by the reader's individuality as well as a range of historical, social, and theoretical factors, and it is improbable that two readers would ever make exactly the same interpretative choices. Literary interpretation consequently results in a "dialogue de sourds" – a breakdown of communication surrounding the literary work that manifests itself with particular force in the extensive scholarship on *Hamlet*.¹⁵

Bayard's notion of detective criticism appears to amount to a philosophy of interpretative and communicative scepticism, yet this is embraced with exuberance rather than anguish. In this, he differs both from poststructuralist anti-hermeneutics and contemporary post-hermeneutics. Whereas the former revels in the infinite "deferrals" of meaning and the latter bemoans literary criticism's obsession with the category of meaning, Bayard remains sympathetic to the hermeneutic project, albeit only when it transgresses against the rules, releases the interpretative freedom of the reader, and engages in a playful exploration of semantic possibilities. When conceiving of the work in this way, not as a stable text to be decoded, but as a playground for hermeneutic interventions, it is no longer unreasonable to challenge the narrative and enunciatory logics of the work and thereby to allow other textual latencies to emerge.

Comparability

A second set of experiments in Bayard's critical writings concerns the limits imposed on the ways in which literary works can meaningfully be compared for the purposes of interpretation. Jonathan Culler refers to this theoretical issue as the "problem of comparability".¹⁶ Traditionally, Culler argues, comparative literature was centered on the study of sources and influences – that is, on modes of connectedness that assumed a "direct link of transmission".¹⁷ In the post-war period, however, the discipline gradually increased the scope for possible comparisons by transitioning to an intertextual conception of literature whereby relations between different works no longer had to be direct and biographically traceable, but could take a range of forms from allusions to pastiche and parody. Yet, in spite of this broadening of the field, and *pace* pragmatic critics such as

¹⁵ Bayard, *Hamlet*, pp. 39–50.

¹⁶ Jonathan Culler, "Comparative Literature, at Last", in Haun Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), pp. 237–248 (p. 242).

¹⁷ Culler, p. 237.

Richard Rorty for whom any comparison is justified if it yields interesting results,¹⁸ the comparability of literary texts has remained subject to extensive disciplinary policing. Bayard's experiments with comparability aim to sidestep these institutional limitations and primarily target two concepts seen as exercising a stabilizing and restrictive function with regards to literary interpretation: authoriality and chronology.

The attack on the former concept is launched in *Et si les œuvres changeaient d'auteur?* (2010).¹⁹ In this essay, Bayard argues that the firm attribution of works to specific authors is a debilitating curb on the hermeneutic activity of the reader, and that mobile or even counterfactual attributions have the potential to uncover dimensions of the literary work that are hidden due to an exaggerated reverence for the author. These arguments resonate with one of the secular trends of literary studies, namely the resistance to intentional or biographical readings and the corresponding espousal of the "text" as the sole source of literary meaning. Yet the aim is not simply one of recycling the Barthesian trope of the "death of the author" as a readerly revolt against authors and authorities. Drawing on Valéry and Proust, Bayard argues that modern criticism has introduced a systematic distinction between the "auteur réel" as the psychological, historically situated individual and the "auteur intérieur" as the creative interiority that expresses itself in the work. Pursuing a phenomenological line of reasoning, Bayard contends that the reading process always leads the reader, even when explicitly disavowing both these author figures as ultimately inaccessible, to construct an "auteur imaginaire" as a point of confluence of factual knowledge, ideologies, and psychological as well as theoretical desires; as Bayard notes, "la part d'invention que comporte toute activité de lecture ne s'arrête pas à l'œuvre, elle s'étend jusqu'à l'auteur, qui est lui-même pris dans ce mouvement de création".²⁰ Far from being a hermeneutic stimulant, this imagined author is a restriction, serving as a self-imposed limitation on the reader's interpretative freedom. However, if it is true that "tout nom d'auteur est une fiction",²¹ it follows that this fiction can be manipulated so as to allow for other readings. Serving by default as a means of keeping the hermeneutic imagination in

¹⁸ Richard Rorty, "Looking Back at 'Literary Theory'", in Saussy (ed.), *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalization*, pp. 63–67 (pp. 65–66).

¹⁹ Pierre Bayard, *Et si les œuvres changeaient d'auteur?* (Paris: Minuit, 2010).

²⁰ Bayard, *Et si les œuvres*, p. 28.

²¹ Bayard, *Et si les œuvres*, p. 27.

check, the imagined author also makes it reasonable to reimagine the author and thereby open up new vistas of interpretation.

As a practical solution to this problem Bayard advances the idea of “l’attribution mobile”.²² This thought experiment, which is argued with characteristic tongue-in-cheek seriousness, is designed to reinvigorate literary studies by releasing readers and critics alike from the constraints imposed by imagined authors; as Bayard argues, “[r]ien n’est plus nocif à une œuvre que d’être de manière répétitive attribuée au même auteur, sans espoir d’en changer et, inscrite dans une nouvelle filiation, de connaître de nouvelles lectures.”²³ The aim is to regain a sense of the polysemy and virtual significance of the work. Thus, reading *The Odyssey* as if written by an anonymous Sicilian woman, as originally proposed by Victorian novelist Samuel Butler, foregrounds the status of femininity in this work as well as the fact that women are generally represented here as positive agents who come to the aid of the male characters rather than the other way around.²⁴ Similarly, reading *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* as if written by T.E. Lawrence while conversely attributing *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* to D.H. Lawrence, enables readers to appreciate how the ostensible hypersexuality of the former and sexlessness of the latter are in fact parallel manifestations of “l’angoisse archaïque devant la sexualité et le féminin”.²⁵ Each of Bayard’s test cases introduces in this manner an alternative, often seemingly absurd, perspective that, as he claims, will effect fundamental changes in our perception of the work in question. This manoeuvre produces a range of different outcomes: highlighting an underappreciated theme, demonstrating the modernity of an older work, releasing works from received ideas and standard interpretations, repositioning authors deemed to be secondary, or even creating a dialogue across different art forms. Whatever the specific effect, mobile attributions are seen as stimulants for the hermeneutic imagination with the potential to re-boot our understanding of literary texts.

Bayard’s experiments with chronology are similarly aimed at rejuvenating comparative literature by broadening the scope for comparative analysis. Even when not limiting themselves to tracing direct influences, comparative studies almost invariably heed a unilinear conception of literary history whereby older works are regarded as sources and

²² Bayard, *Et si les œuvres*, p. 152.

²³ Bayard, *Et si les œuvres*, p. 151.

²⁴ Bayard, *Et si les œuvres*, pp. 22–24.

²⁵ Bayard, *Et si les œuvres*, p. 112–113.

influences of more recent works. In *Demain est écrit* (2005) and even more so in *Le Plagiat par anticipation* (2009), Bayard turns this logic on its head by highlighting the potential of reverse chronologies.²⁶ The former essay focuses on author biographies and makes the surrealist claim that fictional works sometimes prefigure future events in the life of the author. The latter, more substantial book controversially argues that certain writers of the past can be seen as being guilty of “anticipatory plagiarism” of more recent writers. In both cases, Bayard insists that the relation between past and present is dynamic, and that the past is shaped to a significant extent by present concerns and interests.

In terms of its basic logic, this idea is not new. Students of British literature will recognize elements of Bayard’s argument from T.S. Eliot’s “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919).²⁷ In this influential essay, Eliot advances the view that an artwork, rather than being absolute, acquires meaning and significance through its relations to other artworks – and, in the specific case of literature, from the “ideal order” of the literary canon. Whenever a new work is admitted into this canon, it not only modifies the network as a whole, but also the value of each individual component. Accordingly, it is not unreasonable to claim that “the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past”.²⁸ However, just as Bayard’s experiments with authoriality are set apart from commonplace critical invectives against the author, his theory of anticipatory plagiarism is not just a matter of dressing up well-known theoretical memes in new, provocative terminology. Once again, the aim is one of unfixing the automatisms of interpretation, and the method is the surrealist strategy of engaging in counterintuitive and illogical speculation as a means of bypassing preconceptions deemed to have gone stale. Unconvinced by the tendency to cast literary “untimeliness” in terms of prefiguration, Bayard challenges the logic by which we exalt similarities found in anterior works as influence and inspiration while admonishing similarities in posterior works as plagiarism. As he argues, the temporal structure of literary history is more complex and multilinear than that, and it therefore makes sense to conceive of “classical” plagiarism and anticipatory plagiarism as symmetrical concepts, albeit with opposite temporal orientations. Inverse plagiarism occurs when an

²⁶ Pierre Bayard, *Demain est écrit* (Paris: Minuit, 2005); Pierre Bayard, *Le Plagiat par anticipation* (Paris: Minuit, 2009).

²⁷ T.S. Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent” (1919), in Vincent B. Leitch (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, 2nd edition, (New York & London: W.W Norton, 2010), pp. 955–961.

²⁸ Eliot, p. 957.

older writer makes use, typically in an incomplete form and without full integration, of a literary device or theme that only finds its mature form in the works of a later author whose works tend to be associated with precisely this device. Thus, the instances of rational analysis of clues in Voltaire's *Zadig* (1747) can be regarded as plagiarizing the abductive detection method of Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Since these instances have little bearing on the overall plot of the tale, which is not that of a detective story, and furthermore seem not to have exercised any discernable influence on future writers, we are justified in speaking of plagiarism by anticipation. In Bayard's usage, the term refers to literary strategies that only become noticeable through the lens of a later author.

What ultimately justifies this paradoxical concept is the contention that literature is subject to a "double chronology": belonging inextricably to its historical moment of production, the literary work also partakes in a distinctive and autonomous chronology of literary history. In this sense, a work can be anterior in the conventional historical sense, but posterior in the sense of coming later within a process of literary evolution. Bayard bears this point out analytically across a range of examples. Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, for example, can be read as incorporating elements of the detective plot and psychoanalytical thinking, yet since both detective fiction and psychoanalysis only came into being in the nineteenth century, it makes sense to analyse these elements as instances of anticipatory plagiarism – we only perceive them because of the way in which they resonate with modern sensibilities and concerns. Similarly, Guy de Maupassant's *œuvre* largely predates that of Marcel Proust. Yet, as Bayard demonstrates, his writings offer multiple examples of the *mémoire involontaire* normally associated with *À la recherche du temps perdu* – even if the tone tends to be dysphoric rather than exuberant. Since these examples are marginal in Maupassant while being a key literary strategy in Proust, Maupassant can be seen as having committed plagiarism by anticipation.

Based on this logic of dual chronologies, Bayard takes the argument one surrealist step further and advocates an "histoire littéraire mobile" based entirely on the internal chronologies of literature itself.²⁹ This mobile literary history would involve assigning new dates to authors and works that better reflect their relative position within an achronological network of literary texts – Laurence Sterne, for example, could best be

²⁹ Bayard, *Le Plagiat* p. 113.

moved forward by two centuries, so that his major works are placed *after* the modernist writers that he (anticipatorily) plagiarizes. Even more controversially, Bayard even goes on to suggest that a mobile practice of this type would allow for a “critique d’anticipation”³⁰ that studies the influence of future events and writers on existing literature; reading Kafka as having plagiarized an as yet unborn author in this way becomes a means of making informed guesses about the literature of the future.

What unites Bayard’s experiments with author-swapping and inverse chronology is not just their surrealist undertone, but above all a desire to expand the scope for comparative analysis and thereby broaden and rejuvenate comparative literature as an academic discipline. If the two essays both foresee radical consequences for the theory and practice of literary hermeneutics, it is because they question some of the foundational assumptions on which literary studies as a discipline is founded. Bayard’s arguments are not free from absurdity and hyperbole, yet they speak to his persistent endeavor to query the stabilizing and confining prejudices of the discipline – and thereby open up new paths of understanding.

The desacralized text

The third target of Bayard’s critical experimentation is the notion, integral to the mainstream of twentieth-century criticism, that the literary text is sacrosanct – that it forms the “data” of literary studies and consequently should be respected and left inviolate. The methodological primacy of close textual analysis is a corollary of this principle, implying in all its forms that the linguistic elements of the works themselves are the necessary and sufficient means of unpacking their semantic contents. As used in this context, the concept of analysis is refracted through the lenses of chemistry and psychoanalysis and signifies, respectively, the breaking down of a compound into its constituent elements or the teasing out of its latencies and foundational secrets. Bayard’s style of analysis reactivates instead the etymological, ancient Greek meaning of the word, namely to release something or, more specifically, to loosen the moorings of a ship. The question he asks is this: what happens if we abandon our commitment to an explanatory or reproductive criticism in

³⁰ Bayard, *Le Plagiat*, p. 133.

favour of a productive critical practice – one that actively interferes with the text so as to improve it, release its potentialities, and impregnate it with the reader's subjectivity.

A heresy of this kind is perpetrated in Bayard's bestselling *Comment parler des livres que l'on n'a pas lus?* (2007). While literary studies is currently engaged in a debate concerning the correct "reader distance", with advocates of close reading clashing with scholars seeking to enrich the field by means of quantitative and computational methodologies,³¹ Bayard characteristically moves against the current by proposing "non-reading" as an act of defiance targeted at the injunction to read that he considers to be fundamental to modern culture. Seeing this idea, as does Jack I. Abecassis, as a dangerous sanctioning of cultural illiteracy is clearly a mistake. Bayard is not advocating a philistine rejection of the written word; rather, he is interested in investigating non-reading as a specific way of engaging with literature. What is at stake is a phenomenology of reading that does not rely on the idealized situation of absolute concentration and retention, but takes into account the "faillies, manques, approximations" that characterize actual reading.³²

Bayard's basic claim is that the boundaries between reading and non-reading are not nearly as clear as the conceptual distinction implies. This argument can most obviously be crafted *ex negativo*. Books not only start to fade from the memory of readers the moment they are put down; the reading process itself is also shot through with forgetfulness insofar as the progressive taking-in of the text causes its earlier parts to recede from memory. In this sense, even the closest and most attentive reading is only ever capable of retaining a fraction of the text as a whole. However, according to Bayard, not having read a book does not preclude commenting on it intelligently, and this is the point where non-reading is transformed from a failure of application to a mode of understanding. Drawing on the critical habits of Paul Valéry, he argues that leafing through a book in a casual manner can be a means of grasping its core ideas while bracketing theoretical preconceptions and avoiding getting bogged down in textual details – a reading practice not unlike the "evenly-suspended attention" recommended by Freud as a mainstay of psychoanalytical therapy.³³ In a more general sense, Bayard contends that books make sense to readers by virtue of their

³¹ See, for example, Moretti, *Distant Reading*.

³² Bayard, *Comment parler des livres*, p. 16.

³³ Sigmund Freud, *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay (New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1989), p. 357.

position within a network of other books – a virtual “bibliothèque collective”.³⁴

Consequently, a working knowledge of this network and its structure will provide the non-reader with some degree of understanding of almost any individual book; Bayard himself, for example, has not “read” *Ulysses*, yet finds that he can nevertheless discuss it with relative precision in terms of its modernist aesthetics or mythological references.³⁵

Like the “detective criticism” trilogy, Bayard’s argumentation in *Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus?* amounts to a scepticism regarding the text as a linguistic fact that can be analysed and understood objectively. The “real” book is a construct and inaccessible inasmuch as it always needs to be actualized in the private act of reading. What we are occupying ourselves with when reading are “livres-écrans”,³⁶ that is, imagined books that “screen” the real books in the same sense as “screen memories” according to Freud serve to cover (in that double sense of “covering over” but also of “representing”) suppressed childhood experiences.³⁷ The radical conclusion that Bayard draws from this is that our understanding of the books we read is not only inflected by subjective factors, but, once again, that we are never truly reading the same book. If this is the case, there is no reason to think of individual interpretations, be they ever so scholarly, as authoritative. Nor do we have any reason to accept close reading as a prescriptive methodology that deals simply with the text as an unalterable given. Literary interpretation in this Bayardian sense is a matter of bringing out the hidden potentialities of the text rather than keeping them in check with unfounded claims to finality.

What this desacralisation of the literary text ultimately amounts to is the notion that the text is not just an object of critical contemplation but a field of creative intervention. This idea permeates Bayard’s critical thought from his subversive exercises on detective fiction to his experiments with inverse chronology and author swapping, yet it finds its perhaps most radical expression in *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées?* (2000).³⁸ Drawing on an expanded *anti-pléiade* of failure, which includes thirteen works from Joachim du Bellay’s *L’Olive* (1549) to Marguerite Duras’s *L’Amour* (1971), this book explores the

³⁴ Bayard, *Comment parler des livres*, p. 27.

³⁵ Bayard, *Comment parler des livres*, p. 27.

³⁶ Bayard, *Comment parler des livres*, p. 52.

³⁷ Freud, *The Freud Reader*, p. 126.

³⁸ Pierre Bayard, *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées?* (Paris: Minuit, 2000).

phenomenology of literary miscarriage, aiming to catch “le génie au travail, et, pour ce faire, s’intéresser à ses moments de fatigue ou d’inattention”.³⁹

Bayard’s reflections comprise two parts. The first part is an exercise in textual analysis that singles out mismatches of themes, genres, and authors, breakdowns of compositional rhythm, excesses of conformity or originality in the use of figurative language, and the incoherence of fictional characters as the most common causes of literary failure. The second part reflects the author’s interest in Freudian-Lacanian psychoanalysis. Arguing that literature is ultimately the author’s attempt at “l’expression de soi”⁴⁰ and that this self-representation revolves around an unconscious “scénario imaginaire répétitif”,⁴¹ Bayard regards literary failure as an inability to express this phantasm with the right amount of distance. On this basis, it is possible to distinguish between two types of writing: an “écriture de l’hallucination” and an “écriture de l’isolation”. In the former, the phantasmatic affects have not been sufficiently processed by the literary text and therefore overwhelm it and make it hallucinatory; in the latter case, these affects have conversely been mastered to such an extent that they have almost disappeared, thereby rendering the work lifeless and cold.⁴²

Yet, as is often the case in Bayard’s critical writings, these relatively innocuous beginnings set the stage for much more radical forays into experimental territory. The type of criticism that is proposed here is decidedly interventionist. Not content with simply analysing and understanding failure, it actively sets out to modify, amend, and rewrite the failed work. While not actually performing these acts of revision in full, Bayard proposes a series of tactics that will enable the interventionist critic to improve on abortive works. As an overall proposal, Bayard advocates that instances of “hallucinatory” literature have their high degree of descriptive and narrative luminosity reduced, typically through discerning abridgements, so that the reader is activated and given a greater role in the realisation of the work. Conversely, literature of “isolation” should be rendered less opaque, typically by means of clarifying insertions, so that the reader is not deterred by the sheer impenetrability of the writing style. An alternative strategy consists in fostering creative exchanges between two failed works so as to improve one or both; this can be achieved by

³⁹ Bayard, *Comment améliorer*, p. 15.

⁴⁰ Bayard, *Comment améliorer*, p. 91.

⁴¹ Bayard, *Comment améliorer*, p. 92.

⁴² Bayard, *Comment améliorer*, pp. 95–96.

transplanting the fictional universe from a different work, changing the genre or the focalisation, or by granting fictional characters exile in works that allow them to realize their potential more fully.

What is ultimately at stake in these tentative suggestions is an idea of virtuality: the printed version of a literary work is seen only as the “realized” version, standing out from a range of potential texts that the author might also have written. Whereas genetic criticism sees the writing process as a teleological movement towards a more or less perfect “final” version, Bayard takes the opposite approach and asks whether behind an aesthetic failure we can discern virtual works of a greater quality. Like his advocacy of non-reading, which suggests that we exaggerate the integrity and authority of the literary text, his “ameliorative” criticism disregards the material text and aims instead to liberate the virtualities it contains.

Conclusion

Bayard’s critical essays are characterized by a strong undercurrent of dead-pan humour. Adopting the attitudes and rhetoric of rigorous scholarship, he presents his controversial conclusions, not only as resting on incontrovertible evidence, but also as having the potential to revolutionize the field of literary studies and open up entirely new styles of investigation. Irony – understood here as a permanent uncertainty about intentions – abounds in his writings, as when he re-opens detective cases, swaps around authors and inverts chronologies, or proposes to “improve” on literary works deemed to be less than successful. Frequently, this irony is impossible to miss. It manifests itself clearly, for example, when Bayard, in *Comment améliorer les œuvres ratées?*, reworks a long passage from Maupassant into three pithy sentences,⁴³ or when, in *Comment parler des livres que l’on n’a pas lus?*, he proposes to classify books into four basic groups: “*LI* désigne les livres inconnus de moi, *LP* les livres que j’ai parcourus, *LE* les livres dont j’ai entendu parler, *LO* les livres que j’ai oubliés.”⁴⁴ In other instances, however, it is much harder to determine where spoof begins and scholarship ends, and it often appears that Bayard is actively trying to unsettle the reader by means of provocative, counterintuitive, self-contradicting or plainly unreasonable claims.

⁴³ Bayard, *Comment améliorer*, p. 130.

⁴⁴ Bayard, *Comment parler des livres*, p. 17.

Our contention in this regard is that Bayard should be seen as an ironic critic, the last of a line originating with Plato, encompassing Romantic and Post-Romantic thinkers Friedrich Schlegel and Søren Kierkegaard, and most recently being revitalized by Richard Rorty, Jacques Derrida, and others.⁴⁵ The distinguishing mark of this tradition is the unwillingness to deal in absolutes. Ironical critics do not present their findings as truths, but acknowledge the perspectivism of literary interpretation and ultimately aim to encourage the reader towards independent critical thought – even when this involves the rejection or surpassing of their own works. Irony therefore always involves ambiguity and, from the point of view of the audience, takes the form of a hermeneutical problem: how does one pinpoint the intended meaning? In the case of Bayard, the problem is whether or not his musings should be taken at face value. A literal-minded reader, taking issue with a perceived lack of scholarship in Bayard's works, risks placing him or herself at the receiving end of his jokes – as, for example, when Abecassis suggests that his theories of non-reading jeopardize “the very meaning of culture and, dare I say, the very meaning of higher education and, especially, the liberal arts”.⁴⁶ Conversely, an overly loyal reader – someone on the look-out for “another French Messiah”⁴⁷ – is always in danger of misunderstanding his writings simply as new instances of “theory”, ready to be applied across the literary canon. Both readers belong to the category of “agélastes” – a character type defined by Milan Kundera as “gens dont j'admire l'intelligence, estime l'honnêteté mais avec lesquels je me sens mal à l'aise : je censure mes propos pour ne pas être mal compris, pour ne pas paraître cynique, pour ne pas les blesser par un mot trop léger. Ils ne vivent pas en paix avec le comique”.⁴⁸

A third way of reading is called for here – one that transcends, like Bayard's work itself, the simple dichotomies of right *versus* wrong, rigorous *versus* lax, and serious *versus* humorous. The first step in this regard is to recognize that Bayard writes experimental criticism rather than traditional literary theory. His conclusions are not precepts but possibilities, and, as indicated by several of his titles, the favoured mode is either the interrogative or the subjunctive – the fictionalizing “as if” that targets the realm of the virtual rather than the real. Bayard's project adheres to a rule set altogether different from

⁴⁵ Kevin Newmark, *Irony on Occasion: From Schlegel and Kierkegaard to Derrida and de Man* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

⁴⁶ Abecassis, p. 963.

⁴⁷ Eric Hayot, “I Too Have Dreamed of Another French Messiah”, *English Language Notes*, 51: 2 (2013), 87–94.

⁴⁸ Milan Kundera, *Le Rideau* (Paris: Gallimard, 2005), pp. 127–128.

that of mainstream criticism. Having close and often explicitly acknowledged affinities to modernist strategies of defamiliarisation – from surrealism’s defiance of conventional logic via Jorge Luis Borges’s virtual worlds to the *littérature potentielle* of the Oulipo group – it aims to alienate the reader from the standard practices of the field and pave the way for critical innovation. Bayard’s experiments at times have a pragmatic feel, emphasizing the interest of a particular manoeuvre rather than its orientation towards a true conclusion. Yet, like the modernist literature that inspires them, they share a closer kinship with the phenomenological method of “bracketing” preconceptions so as to see the object with fresh eyes. Bayard wants to reinvigorate our perception, not of the “text itself” as a closed container of meaning, but as a field of limitless hermeneutic interventions.

The core value of Bayard’s experimental criticism is mobility – a concept that features most prominently in the concluding part of *Le Plagiat par anticipation*. The programmatic statements about literary history in this chapter may be taken as representative of Bayard’s critical project in general: “[L]a nouvelle histoire littéraire doit se garder de toute forme de rigidité. Elle doit bien au contraire [...] choisir résolument le parti de la mobilité.”⁴⁹ According to Bayard, the literary text itself is mobile; it is not a stable entity that lends itself to objectivist “decoding”, but a flux of real and virtual meanings, always capable of entering into new constellations and taking colour from the frameworks in which it is placed. Literary history and criticism have to be equally mobile. Rather than fossilizing into a set of prescriptive “truths” – rules, assumptions, doctrines, heresies – criticism needs to remain on the move, constantly challenging conventions and always aiming to release the potentialities of the literary text. Appearing at a time when literary theory is often seen as having lost its former inventiveness,⁵⁰ this call for mobility is both timely and thought-provoking.

Bayard’s writings will not be to everyone’s taste and are likely to remain a niche phenomenon, at least in academic circles, due to his departure from accepted standards of scholarly rigour. Yet, even if his experiments are not always convincing, or his ironies amusing, Bayard’s willingness to challenge the received wisdom of the field at the very least compels us to re-examine our own methodological precepts. If rejected, Bayard’s ironic experimentation may still assist us in probing anew the key questions of literary

⁴⁹ Bayard, *Le Plagiat*, p. 117.

⁵⁰ Gumbrecht, “Response”, 212–216.

interpretation and understanding. If accepted, even tentatively, it may lead us to cast off our critical moorings and engage in explorations of new territories of meaning.⁵¹

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