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Rewriting Flaubert in the 1960s

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In French 1960s' literature, the strategy of re-writing is associated with the New Novel and the ideological *Tel Quel* movement. However, a more ironical poetics of the novel can be found in *Blanche ou l'oubli* (1967) by Louis Aragon[1] and *Les Choses* (1967) by Georges Perec.[2] Both novels are rewritings of Gustave Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale*, with particular attention to that novel's main theme of 'illusion'. The interesting question then is how literary tradition becomes a part of the meta-fictional interrogation of human experience in a particular historical context. Perec uses the rhythm of Flaubert's sentences to draw attention to the story as a construction and to his characters' lack of significance. Aragon foregrounds the novel's capacity of holding on to experience as such, with autobiography (Flaubert's as well as his own) linked to materialistic-historical conditions. Ultimately, in following the writer's reading of the historical work, the reader must seek what literature offers him or her the opportunity to apprehend his/her own conditions for experience.

Within the French literary tradition, one of the important aesthetic principles consists of using the works of others as models. Classicist imitation is very much a French specialty. Pastiche too obtained a privileged position with Balzac's *Contes drôlatiques* and Proust's famous treatment of 'l'Affaire Lemoine'. This is probably one of the reasons why Alain Robbe-Grillet, in a more ironic and iconoclastic way, talks about his first novel *Les Gommes* (1955) as a rewriting of the Oedipus myth. His ideas about a '*New Novel*' during the 1950s and 1960s resonated in the harsh criticism of traditional narrative plot structures and psychological representation, and refocused attention on the more technical aspects of prose as auto-representation; that is, to say fiction about fictional representation. In many ways, rewriting in the following decades became part of an ideological project centred on the journal *Tel Quel*. Still, not all practices of rewriting fall under the avant-garde perspective of 'anonymous textual productivity'. For other writers, the literary tradition on the contrary becomes a part

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of their individual literary practice in that it allows them to explore new forms of literary expression. This is very much the case with complex novels such as Georges Perec's *Les Choses* and Louis Aragon's *Blanche ou l'oubli*.[1,2] Both are rewritings of Gustave Flaubert's *L'Education sentimentale* (1861).

Les Choses and *Blanche ou l'oubli* have been read and commented upon as part of the '*New Novel*'. Still, it is necessary to consider that the literary values of the past could, even in the 1960s, become a part of an author's own contemporary literary activity. Thus, the practice of rewriting that might – that *should* according to *Tel Quel* – undermine the status of the author as an individual at the same time becomes an efficient positioning of the individual, evocative even of his or her emotional and intellectual facets. Although one cannot speak of imitation in the classical sense, then, for both Perec and Aragon, Flaubert becomes a kind of 'modernist model' for the exploration of his various ideas of the novel. It is well-known, for instance, that Flaubert intended to include a 'Dictionnaire des idées reçues' in the unfinished *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. One could see this book as a conceptual novel playing ironically with the boundaries of fiction and the real.

Now why do Aragon and Perec seize upon *L'Education sentimentale*, then, for their rewritings, and not some other Flaubert novel? They do so mainly because they both want to deal at one and the same time with the illusion of human existence and with 'existential models' as an integrated part of human experience. In Flaubert's famous novel, the protagonist Frédéric Moreau seeks to imitate the lifestyle of the Paris bourgeoisie. He falls in love with the married Madame Arnaud but end up spending most of his time with her vulgar husband. The whole project of the protagonist is thus based on the illusion of a more sophisticated lifestyle. Furthermore, the novel's historical background of the revolution of 1848 reflects the loss of illusions at the level of society, the working class having been defeated and a new emperor coming to power. Ultimately, the illusion also extends to the narrative and its lack of dynamics and evolution. In the end, the reader should consider that the protagonist is nothing but an invention of the author interrogating simultaneously his own feelings for the mature woman Elisa Schlésinger and the society of his time.

The autobiographical aspect plays an important role in *Blanche ou l'oubli*. Like Flaubert, Aragon writes a love story set in a historical frame. The fiction is situated in Aragon's present. He overtly integrates – and insistently repeats – quotations from Flaubert's novel and names a whole chapter 'Une mèche de cheveux n'est pas une hypothèse' after the famous scene of the last encounter between Frédéric Moreau and Mme Arnaud, who cuts off some of her hair only to make the young man understand that she has grown old. When it comes to Perec, we find the same combination of autobiography and historical framing in his 'histoire des années soixante' in *Les Choses*. The couple Sylvie and Jérôme,

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who are also the protagonists of the story, also dream of a bourgeois life style (inspired by that of the British gentleman), but they mainly simply dream of being rich and being able to purchase precious objects. Ultimately they are, like Frédéric, and like Flaubert's anti-hero, the victims of images, in their case those created by advertising and publicity, and of their own lack of consistency. Perec uses *l'Education sentimentale* in a more covert manner.

Illusion and images in *Les Choses*

Considering the strong rhetorical tradition in France, it is very interesting to note that Perec took his point of departure in a reflexion on what – probably inspired by Roland Barthes – he called 'lieux rhétoriques,' a kind of intertextual framework on which Perec commented explicitly at the University of Warwick in 1967.[3] This formal principle could be considered as a kind of pre-*oulipo* (a 1960s group of writers of which Perec was a member and which strove to write according to mathematical of other formulae constraining text production) constraint that helps him avoid doing what others have already done and to respect at the same time the idea of 'traditional' models. In the novels under discussion, this means that Perec more or less forces himself to take into account the way in which others have written on themes he wants to explore on his own. Examples are *indifférence* in *Un Homme qui dort* and *la fascination* in *Les Choses*, in both of which he explicitly refers to his readings on these subjects. It is not enough for the writer just to represent the essential aspects of a contemporary theme. Perec is aware of the danger connected to any ideological 'predetermination' of signification.

Now how does Perec use Flaubert in his own *Les Choses*? This question has already been raised by critics such as C. Burgelin[4] and J. Neefs[5] and the writer himself explicitly mentions different borrowings[3] like the pictorial representation of 'un navire à aubes, le Ville-de-Montereau' (Ref. 2, p. 11), the ship from the first passages of *l'Education sentimentale*. He explicitly mentions different borrowings from Flaubert and the first pages of the book offer a pictorial representation of 'un navire à aubes, le *Ville-de-Montereau*' (Ref. 2, p. 11), the ship from the first pages of *l'Education sentimentale*. Another aspect that he emphasizes is the rhythm of Flaubert's sentences. But it seems necessary from the reader's point of view to go even further in considering the illusionary life of protagonists that are totally unable to imagine how to make their dreams come true. One of the very disturbing aspects for the reader of this book has to do exactly with this double exposure of the two figures Sylvie and Jérôme. If, in fact, they look and act very much like Perec and his friends at the time, they seem at the same time incapable of any kind of initiative and somehow lifeless and without depth.

Thus, the different phantasmagoric and exotic representations of wealth (the ultimate dream of the two characters) appear all the more simply 'written' and

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imagined by another, more creatively combinatory mind. Thus, the reader is led to consider the distance between the poor existence and the efforts of this couple and the writing in which they figure. Actually, Perec's techniques evoke different (Parisian and foreign) private dream-spaces that trap the reader in ways similar to how the book's characters are caught by the exotic and inescapable images that surround them. In many ways, the book tells us that thinking takes a lot of courage and that originality requires lucidity and a lot of reading.

In much the same way as does *l'Education sentimentale*, *Les Choses* too denounces the illusion of an imagined happiness as abstraction. The big difference between the two books has to do with the clone aspect of Perec's characters. As Burgelin has already noted in his book *Georges Perec* (1988),[6] these characters remain 'a-sexués.' Perec is clearly very conscious of the anti-narrative aspect of *L'Education sentimentale*. Perec suggests that a choice on the part of the protagonists, such as moving to Tunisia, might imply a change of life conditions, but the exotic idea (or image) of North Africa becomes a concrete expression of his characters' alienation and cruelly exposes the incapacity of these 'non-characters' to evolve as individuals.

Fascination, one of the main aspects of Perec's first novel, becomes an essential part of the attitude of a whole generation nourished on the live images of the cinema, with its immanent illusion composed of 24 stills a second. When Sylvie and Jérôme in the *Epilogue* watch the French countryside from the train, the question to ask is what one actually sees in a world that is constantly moving, constantly rolling by. The reader is left with no clear answers, while observing the couple bound for jobs in the south of France, resembling the ideal couple from an advertisement in which they are holding drinks. Meanwhile, what Sylvie and Jérôme are having for dinner is described as 'franchement insipide'. In fact, one could read this passage as an ironic commentary on their entire existence. They are without any kind of relation to the world of simple things and situations that they watch just as in the movies. You even wonder whether words like 'grands camps de vacances' and 'Wagon-Lits' (Ref. 2, p. 130) are there to suggest the Jews' destiny in the concentration camps. Such an autobiographical dimension with its human or humanitarian concerns is also suggested through historical elements such as the war in Algeria and the failed political engagement that remind us of Frédéric Moreau's attempt to go into politics during the 1848-crisis and that is an essential part of the historical frame in *L'Education sentimentale*.

What Perec finds in Flaubert's universe is – beyond a certain style – very much related to the function of fiction as such. Talking about its characters' illusions *L'éducation sentimentale* must necessarily expose the artificial aspect of the narrative as such. What, in the terminology of the French critic and literary theoretician Gérard Genette, can be seen as the 'palimpsest quality' of Perec's text leads the reader to consider the nature of his own imagination with its own

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part of naive dreams. The fictional images and the characters should also be read as the result of the writer's own effort to deal with simple-mindedness. Perec as a writer was able to grasp the way Flaubert's work suggests a possible exploration of language and of various aspects of real life. In a paradoxical way, he understood that to avoid representation through stereotypes he had to take into account what others had already written on subjects close to those he had in mind. In many ways, the connection between Georges Perec and Gustave Flaubert is very logical. Both of them can be seen as formalist realists.

Living with illusion in *Blanche ou l'oubli*

For Aragon, *L'Education sentimentale* is an essential reference in both *Aurélien* (1944) and *Blanche ou l'oubli* (1967).[1] As Suzanne Ravis has demonstrated[7], in both cases the model of the main female character is Madame Arnoux. While *Aurélien* is part of the Aragon-cycle of 'Le Monde reel', though, *Blanche ou l'oublie*, just like Aragon's earlier *La Mise à mort* (1965), is an explicitly metafictional experiment. In many ways Aragon uses Flaubert in the opposite way from Perec. Aragon thematises the novel's use of language, and language as such, via his protagonist, the linguist Geoffroy Gaiffier. This character is not so much obsessed with things and images as he is with words and the way in which they determine his relation to the woman he loves. Actually, the whole narration is an attempt to grasp why Blanche has left him. To understand this painful part of his life he feels compelled to adopt the point of view of an imaginary woman called Marie-Noire. This figure is cast as reader of *L'Education sentimentale*. The narrator thus tries to reconstruct his own youth in the 1920s through a young woman of the 1960s reading the life of a young man in the middle of the 19th century.

Aragon's exploration of memory and the nature of time follows the fragmented logic of the *collage* techniques also found in Surrealism. In *Blanche ou l'oubli*, just as he did in his early surrealist novel *Le Paysan de Paris*, Aragon tries to capture 'éléments bruts' observed in urban everyday life. As a supplement to this 'hyper-realist strategy' he also uses *collage*-techniques to incorporate a number of literary quotations. As Maryse Vassevière has shown,[8] next to Flaubert Aragon also explicitly refers to Hölderlin and other poets. Still, *L'Education sentimentale* remains the most privileged reference, and therefore it is necessary to consider *Blanche ou l'oubli* a *lecture-écriture* of Flaubert. Aragon's book contains famous quotations from *L'éducation sentimentale* such as 'Il voyagea, il connut la mélancolie des paquebots…' (Ref. 1, p. 76), scenes such as that of Frédéric's visiting the *courtisanes* with M. Arnoux, the characters of Madame Arnoux and Rosanette, the two central female figures in the protagonist's life, but also Madame Arnoux's authentic model Elisa Schlésinger. Aragon even confronts the chronology of Flaubert's novel with Flaubert's 'real life chronology'

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(Ref. 1, pp. 92–93), and shows the importance of the Schlésinger family for the novel, and how both these items cruelly reflect Flaubert's own experience: 'L'imagination n'a pas grand jeu sur le temps réel, s'il lui est possible de tricher avec l'espace, faire de Bade à un détour de phrase une Rome d'amertume (Elle doit être à Rome avec son fils, lieutenant de chasseurs… oh ce verbe *devoir* banalement entendu!). La vie humaine à l'échelle romanesque est après tout aussi mesurée que dans la vie de Marie-Noire' (Ref. 1, p. 93).

In fact, the interesting question is to what extent the subversion of the narrative's linear structure in *Blanche ou l'oubli* is meant to make the reader consider other aspects of literature than the simple hero-desire- (or project-) structure. Through an explicit reference to the reception of *Les Mots et les choses*, a famous book by the philosopher Michel Foucault (published in 1966), Aragon confronts philosophical reflexion with the novel's experience-based language. Evoking Foucault's book on Raymond Roussel, the eccentric and rich French writer who was a contemporary of the Surrealists, Aragon foregrounds his own actual lived experience of Roussel's theatre and thus confronts life and conceptual, philosophical reflexion. Such an intricate combination of the auto-biographical dimension with different types of discourses on how we conceive what is human is completed by the presence of Aragon's companion Elsa Triolet, her books and her writing. The Blanche-figure owes a lot to Elsa Triolet though it is not possible to consider her as a simple autobiographical key to the novel.

Within the fiction, the novel is presented as a 'game of masks', and, as the narrator Geoffroy Gaiffier is a linguist, he must trust someone else to write his own story, his 'idea of a novel' being based on his own reading of *l'Education sentimentale*. Neither the writer nor the narrator tries to escape illusion. Suffering and solitude are inherent in the human condition and the novel can only be an oblique expression of such existential themes. The scene of the last encounter that appears as an essential scene in Aragon's novel turns out very likely to have been a game of Gaiffier's imagination. One is led to wonder whether this final scene is the real end of the novel or if one should look for a different meaning, less psychological and individual. The fact is that in *Blanche ou l'oubli*, Aragon speaks of two different endings that he finds in Flaubert's novel: the false one at the end of the book, when the two friends dream of their youth, and the actual one: 'Le Second Empire commence à huit pages de la fausse fin dans *l'Education Sentimentale*, la vraie, c'est là quand Dussardier crie *Vive la République* et Frédéric Moreau reconnaît Sénécal (le gauchiste Sénécal), dans l'agent à tricorne qui transperce Dussardier de son épée' (Ref. 1, p. 438).

In the passage following that just quoted, the problem of ending the novel is discussed with reference to Stendhal's *La Chartreuse de Parme*. The idea of leaving to others the conclusion can be seen as a way of justifying the intertextual game and the principle of 'inachèvement' that characterizes *Blanche ou l'oubli*.

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In seeking to capture the remembrance of forgetting, Aragon documents a literary reflexion on feelings and on historical representation that finds its exemplary form in *L'Education sentimentale*. This formal exploration leads the reader to compare the novel with its 'real textual objects' and to ponder the effect of literary form. Fiction thus becomes a particular 'éclairage' or illumination of the real as a formal expression that also carries the traces of what we forget.

One of the most striking sentences in *Blanche ou l'oubli* reads as follows: 'il fallait les temps modernes pour créer l'absolu du désespoir' (Ref. 1, p. 80). This painful statement is closely related to the picture of Elisa Schlésinger. Following Maxime du Camp – Flaubert's close friend – Aragon offers the tormented picture of a woman having gone mad and ending her days in Germany after seven years without her wits. In this way, Aragon links the meta-textual reflexion with the biographical dimension of Flaubert's novel and, at the same time, writing to suffering. He also enters into reflexions on the age of Frédéric Moreau, the book's main character. Flaubert himself was 14 when he fell in love with the married woman: 'Parce que, lui, quand il a rencontré Élisa Schlésinger, en 1836, et qu'il en est tombé amoureux pour la vie, il avait quatorze ans' (Ref. 1, p. 87). The fiction's limitations do not only concern the metafictional aspect but also the more simple and human aspect of what is conceivable. Life very often turns out to be more improbable or unbelievable than fiction.

Written readings

In *Blanche ou l'oubli*, as in *Les Choses*, the meta-fictional dimension concerns the position of the reader and his or her capacity of observing others. The very tasting of words becomes a remedy to absent-mindedness. Perec uses his protagonists to grasp the absence of true desire and the individual's way of thinking through stereotypical images. In *Blanche ou l'oubli*, Aragon's protagonist's readings function as a substitute for communication and a shared life with the loved one. Modernity is very much linked to an understanding of individual experience and to a poetics of the novel as rewriting. Indirect literary communication to a large extent depends on the reading of Flaubert, a writer for whom the observation of real life defined his use of language and his writing in return helped him and his contemporary reader to a better understanding of the historical and social conditioning of existence. If the writer finds no solid ground for his own introspection and his analysis of society, he simply must turn to literary tradition and the exemplary fictional solutions of others. The very act of writing, that coincides with action as such, thus appears to be paradoxically linked to the testimony of the others' writing or the others' seeking a way of expressing exactly this kind of uncertainty. The challenge for the reader consists of consequently trying to understand what, in the text, concerns him or her, or how the

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text keeps stimulating new approaches by touching or activating our intimate relation to the words and the world.

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