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Chance Encounters and the Limits of Textuality

Bernard Schlurick

... je parle de l'aventure dans le langage
aussi bien que de l'aventure dans la rue ou
dans le rêve.

(André Breton)

To begin this paper, I intend to produce an instance of what I consider to be a purely formalistic approach to textuality.¹ Whether one calls it a pastiche or a parody, I will bring this operation to bear on "A Sort of a Song" by William Carlos Williams – more exactly, on the first of the two stanzas making up the poem. The fact that each one enjoys a remarkable degree of autonomy with respect to the other authorizes, I believe, my cavalier exclusion of the second one:

Let the snake wait under
his weed
and the writing
be of words, slow and quick, sharp
to strike, quiet to wait,
sleepless.

While this whole stanza is devoted to likening the act of writing to a snake, the first thing which should strike a reader more alert to the strictly phonetic register is that most initial consonants fall into one of two groups, containing respectively "wait," "weed," "words," "wait" on the one hand and "snake," "slow," "strike," "sleepless" on the other (visually reinforced by the additional presence of "writing" and "sharp"). Furthermore, these two groups

¹ I am very grateful to Simone Oettli for the helpful suggestions she made upon reading a first draft of this article.

allow for a division of the stanza in two half-way through the fourth line, whereby all but one of the occurrences of the first group are scattered among the first four lines, while all but one of the second group appear in the last three lines. Moreover, the division of the fourth line intervenes after “words” and before “slow,” that is, after a word having “w” as an initial consonant and “s” as a final consonant, and before another word having conversely “s” as an initial consonant and “w” as a final one.

All this does not only consolidate the central simile of this stanza comparing writing to a snake. In addition, with a snakelike slyness, if I may say, it literally inscribes the name of the writer within the poem. Indeed, the initial of his first name (William) is a “w,” the last letter of his middle name is an “s” (Carlos), and both “w” and “s” are brought together in the family name (Williams).

Both the rigor and the inventiveness displayed in this stanza imply on the part of the poet what Jean Starobinski calls, in his brilliant essay on Ferdinand de Saussure’s theory of anagrams, an “extreme attention to the phonetic substance of words” [une extrême attention à la substance phonétique des mots (40)], pointing as it does to a “cryptographic anagram” by which the signature of the text finds itself included within that text, as its “pre-text.”² In the absence of any extra- and/or meta-textual evidence, this theory could not be proven, *a fortiori* falsified, to use Karl Popper’s terminology in *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*. Indeed, this is the main reason why Saussure never published the results of his fascinating inquiry into the “hypogrammatic practice” of Latin authors, a research on which he had worked from 1906 to 1909.

Since the topic to be addressed in this volume is the limits of textuality, I think that I have just shown these limits *a contrario*. For the pertinence of a purely textual approach is not in doubt. More dubious on the other hand is the overall result. In other words, where does this fine analysis lead us to? We will not be able to give a satisfactory answer without having first examined an alternative approach. For in my view, there can be no fruitful debate over the vexed and vexing problem of textuality’s limits, unless the notion of text be re(de)finéd.

With this end in view, I suggest that André Breton’s definition of “le hasard objectif,” “objective chance,” may provide an inspiration which could prove crucially convenient in helping us to grow out of a crisis to which our heading bears sufficient testimony, functioning as it does as a most eloquent

² Unless otherwise stated, all translations are mine.

symptom. In the thirties, André Breton had grown somewhat dissatisfied with the very “automatic writing” with which he had hoped to renew literature altogether in founding the Surrealist Movement a decade earlier. As a result, he chose to reorient the attention of the fellow members of his group (the bulk of which was composed of writers and painters, in addition to a couple of photographers and film directors) by focusing their attention on what I would like to call “chance encounters”: “Once chance has been defined as ‘the encounter of an external causality with an internal finality,’ it is a question of knowing whether a certain kind of ‘encounter’ . . . should not be envisaged from the angle of chance.”³ To this he added: “chance would be the form of manifestation taken by exterior necessity clearing its path in the human subconscious (to attempt a bold interpretation and conciliation of Engels and Freud on that score).”⁴

With such a definition, he intended to denote any chance encounter which involved the coincidence of desires, fantasies, obsessions on the part of the subject with objects likely to support with him or her a yet unrevealed (unperceived, unfamiliar, unacknowledged, uncanny) elective affinity. All of a sudden, the world became inhabited by haunting tenants: André Breton’s imperious imperative to impassion the world (“La vie humaine est à repassionner” [*Arcane 17* 140]) proved fruitful in writing as well as in life, in art as well as in love. Reality had become a volume in which to decipher the lineaments of one’s desire.

In this respect, nothing can be more telling than some of Breton’s major works, I mean those which are neither books of poems nor collections of essays. *Nadja* (1928), *L’Amour fou* (1937) and *Arcane 17* (1944) are strange products indeed, unidentified published objects, if I may say. For they do not fit any recognized genre of literature. Standing half-way between fiction and autobiography, poetics and politics, these narratives baffle the common reader’s expectations and throw the current critic off the scent. They achieve this by blurring the established borders between objective (outside) reality and subjective (inside) awareness.

From the start, the decisive (and deciding) element of the surrealist game – where the rules, so to speak, invent themselves, step by step, inasmuch as the players unwittingly require them – is that of surprise: “surprise ought to

³ The original reads: “Le hasard ayant été défini comme ‘la rencontre d’une causalité externe et d’une finalité interne,’ il s’agit de savoir si une certaine espèce de ‘rencontre’ . . . peut être envisagée sous l’angle du hasard” (*L’Amour fou* 23).

⁴ “Le hasard serait la forme de manifestation de la nécessité extérieure qui se fraie un chemin dans l’inconscient humain (pour tenter hardiment d’interpréter et de concilier sur ce point Engels et Freud)” (*L’Amour fou* 25).

be sought out for itself, unconditionally," says Breton in *L'Amour fou*.⁵ Clearly, it is this element of surprise which is the common denominator accounting for André Breton's exalted celebration of works as eclectic as the speculations of Sigmund Freud, the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico and the poems of Guillaume Apollinaire.

As a matter of fact, Breton devoted one of his earliest essays (dated 1917) to Apollinaire, praising him as "curieux toujours d'inéprouvé" (*Les Pas perdus* 36), as "always probing into the untested": "Apollinaire's heart is set on satisfying this *Desire for the unforeseen* which is the token of the modern taste."⁶ At the time not yet a surrealist, Breton came up with the word "surnaturalisme" (31) to define the poetry of the one he saw as a harbinger of modernity, quoting with high regard an observation he had made that, in his view, witnessed a prophetic understanding of the coming revolution: "in order to picture the inescapable nature of modern things, *surprise* is the most modern of the motives one can appeal to."⁷ And indeed, Apollinaire it was who had challenged his reader in the following line of one of his last poems: "Rivalise donc poète avec les étiquettes des parfumeurs" (10).

This prompting to match up to the commercial advertisements which were starting to invade the public space of the city at that time manifests a decisive orientation towards the outside world and away from the romantic soul of the poet. It appealed immensely to André Breton, who read into it the very element of surprise he was so keen on, presiding as it does over the encounter, whose figure he understood as a way of superseding both the objective descriptions of naturalistic prose and the subjective lyricism of poetry. In this context, surprise must be appreciated as Maurice Blanchot expounds it in *The Infinite Conversation*:

The encounter: what comes without advent, what approaches face-on, and nonetheless *always by surprise*, what requires waiting and what waiting awaits but does not attain. Even at the innermost heart of interiority, it is always irruption of the outside, exteriority shaking everything. (italics mine, 414)

In other words, the practice of surrealism invites the subject to a disconcerting "concertedness," living up to the sole great expectations of the unexpected. As a result, Breton could write in *Nadja*: "I don't know why it

⁵ "La surprise doit être recherchée pour elle-même, inconditionnellement" (97).

⁶ "Apollinaire prend à coeur de toujours combler ce *Voeu d'imprévu* qui signale le goût moderne" (italics mine, 29).

⁷ "[P]our dépeindre le caractère fatal des choses modernes, la *surprise* est le ressort le plus moderne auquel on puisse avoir recours" (italics mine, 37).

should be precisely here that my steps take me, here that I almost always go without specific purpose and without anything determining it other than this obscure clue: namely that *it* (?) will happen here.”⁸

No wonder Blanchot refuses to see *Nadja* merely as a work that “opened a new path for literature” (419). He rightly stresses that “it is not an aesthetic concern that André Breton wishes to respond [sic]; it is rather a much more decisive mutation he has in view” (412): “the grand adventure that we are far from having considered in all it asks of us, and in all that it promises” (412). Indeed, if any, this book steps beyond the limits of textuality, inviting the reader to an experience which disrupts the received opposition of art and life. As Blanchot puts it, “the surreal radically [changes] the meaning of . . . the *experience* in which it is in play, not only separating it from all empiricism, but leading it to touch on everything at once: life, knowledge, thought, speech, love, time, society, and the whole itself” (419).⁹

At this stage, my contention is that Breton only needed to broaden the avenues opened up already by automatic writing to develop this novel notion of experience leading to what Maurice Blanchot sums up as “neither a system or a school, nor a movement of art and literature, but rather a pure practice of existence (a practice of the whole bearing its own knowledge, a practical theory)” (407). This way of writing, precluding as it does any kind of moral and/or esthetic judgement about its outcome, and leaving its own progress entirely to chance, contains virtually the ethics of encounter described as drawing the figure both familiar and uncanny of the writer’s unknown desire.¹⁰ “Chance is desire” (415), as Blanchot observed aptly, echoing in advance Jacques Lacan’s view expressed at the close of his seminar

⁸ “Je ne sais pourquoi c’est là, en effet, que mes pas me portent, que je me rends presque toujours sans but déterminé, sans rien de décidant que cette donnée obscure, à savoir que c’est là que se passera *cela* (?)” (36).

⁹ Michel Foucault confirmed the privileged part played by experience in an interview he gave on the occasion of Breton’s death: “ce qu’on lui doit vraiment en propre, c’est la découverte d’un espace qui n’est pas celui de la philosophie, ni celui de la littérature, ni celui de l’art, mais qui serait celui de l’expérience. . . . Cette découverte du domaine de l’expérience permettait à Breton d’être complètement hors de la littérature, de pouvoir contester non seulement toutes les oeuvres littéraires déjà existantes, mais l’existence même de la littérature” (556-57) [“what we really owe him is the discovery of a space which is neither that of philosophy, nor that of literature or art, but which is that of experience. . . . This discovery of the realm of experience allowed Breton to stand completely outside literature, challenging not only all existing literary works, but the very existence of literature”].

¹⁰ Years later, Georges Bataille’s remark “[é]crire est rechercher la chance” (*Le Petit* 37), “to write is seeking chance,” could be considered a truly surrealist motto.

Encore: "Love it is, which comes to approach being as such in the encounter."¹¹

No wonder *Nadja* starts with the words "Qui suis-je?," as any automatic poem could indeed. A few years later, *L'Amour fou* presented its reader with the accomplishment in real life of a textual program provided by an automatic poem Breton had written long before. In fact, the book relates how, following unaware the nocturnal itinerary prescribed by this poem, Breton happened to meet the woman who was to become his wife and with whom he was to have his only child.

The state of readiness implied by such receptivity to chance encounters of all kinds was cultivated at first only by the practitioners of automatic writing, which Blanchot relevantly describes as "a writing without anyone writing, passive; that is to say, a writing of pure passion" (412). But with time, it gave rise to a great array of techniques developed by such painters as André Masson and Max Ernst. Among those included in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* are "frottage" ("pencil rubbing of such things as wood grain, fabric, or leaves"), "grattage" ("scratching the painted surface of the canvas with pointed tools to make it more tactile"), and "decalcomania" ("transferring paint from one surface to another by pressing the two surfaces together"). Let us add Masson's projections of sand on canvases previously smeared with glue and his invention of what was to become known in the art world as Jackson Pollock's "dripping," Wolfgang Paalen's "fumage" (a candle is brushed against the canvas on which it eventually leaves spots of slight burning) and even Salvador Dali's "méthode paranoïaque-critique" (the systematic exploitation of visual chance resemblances), which he expressly referred to Breton's theory: "The paranoiac-critical activity is a force organizing and producing objective chance."¹² Yet, it looks as if the all-encompassing procedure of collage encloses all these techniques as the paradigm of chance encounters. For the collage presents one with the penetration of art or literature by reality, as when John Dos Passos includes a real advertisement in one of his novels, or as when Picasso pastes a page from a paper on his canvas.

As a matter of fact, never before had the texts and the works of art of a movement relied as fundamentally on chance, never before had their textual and formal constraints been so relaxed. One could even venture that the whole history of western civilization points to the accomplishment of Mal-

¹¹ "L'être comme tel, c'est l'amour qui vient à y aborder dans la rencontre" (133).

¹² "L'activité paranoïaque-critique est une force organisatrice et productrice de hasard objectif" (19).

larmé's cryptic line, "Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard," understood as the renunciation on the part of the poet of his early ambition to control chance. In fact, the twentieth century has seen the triumph of chance in such variegated fields as warfare (soldiers cannot determine in advance who exactly will be the victims of the shells or bombs they drop), science (never did "chance occurrences" play such a decisive part as in contemporary experiments in physics), love (chance encounters have become more and more popular among lovers, in a proportion unknown before), art (artists are the last ones to know what it is they are really doing) and literature (writers are conspicuously dispossessed of the meaning of their endeavors).

But to resist the temptation of such a totalizing view, let us rather focus on art and literature. The recent progress of art seems to follow an irresistible pull towards emancipation from all rules. Whereas artists had been chiefly intent upon taming the effects of chance in their productions, their work displaying an optimal mastery over its materials, Impressionism traced a line after which things never were to be the same again. It is no coincidence if, at about the same time, poets invented the so-called *vers libre*. No wonder such a rebellion against the very laws which artists had previously deemed a necessary check to their expression (Dante, for instance, writes in his "Purgatorio" of *lo fren dell' arte*, thus likening the formal constraints he imposed upon his art to the *bridle* without which a rider cannot guide his horse) was perceived by the ruling class as a political subversion. In reality, however, modern artists rather seem to follow Nietzsche's prompting to be a "redeemer of chance" ("Erlöser des Zufalls"), as it is voiced in *Zarathustra* (296). Whatever be the case, I contend that the figure of encounter, understood as conjoining the contemporary external world and the intimacy of a subject of desire, plays a paramount part in the practice of modern artists. Conversely, postmodernity finds its faithful figure in the recent devising of computer programs implementing strict formal rules for the production of texts, as if an all-powerful nostalgia forced "writers" to revert to the tendency to domesticate chance which had reigned unchallenged before the end of the nineteenth century.

Having thus experienced the validity of the paradigm of encounter in the fields of literature and art, life and politics, André Breton could end his 1935 *Discours au Congrès des Ecrivains* with the following declaration of principles: "To transform the world," said Marx; 'to change life,' said Rimbaud: to us, both of these catchwords make one."¹³ Moreover, the resistance of

¹³ "«Transformer le monde,» a dit Marx; «changer la vie,» a dit Rimbaud: ces deux mots d'ordre pour nous n'en font qu'un" (*Position politique* 95).

surrealist texts to any maneuver tending to maintain them within the limits of sheer textuality is clear enough. Thus, thirty years after Breton's intervention, the Marxist philosopher Pierre Macherey could still state in a polemic article leveled at the then flourishing trend of structuralism: "the structural method . . . seems to have no hold on what still constitutes the essential event of our literary history, that is, surrealism."¹⁴

Let me come now to Manet's *Olympia* which is unanimously acknowledged at present as one of the thresholds of modernity in art. On 30 September 1876, Mallarmé published an article entitled "The Impressionists and Edouard Manet" in a British journal called *The Art Monthly Review*. There, he drew a parallel between Impressionism and "the participation of the people in political life, ignored up until now in France."¹⁵ On this occasion, he defends the scandalous *Olympia*, about which contemporary critics were saying that Manet had moved from painting ugliness to painting vulgarity.

What is it Mallarmé meant in paralleling impressionistic painting with the people being let in on a stage that had largely ignored them before? Since Mallarmé does not elaborate any further on this remark, I propose to read it as an acknowledgement of the fact that the real people, as they dance and drink and doss in the real world, make up the main subject of impressionist paintings. But I must qualify this word "subject." In his audiovisual testament (*L'Abécédaire*), Gilles Deleuze upholds that "a writer writes for non-readers, not in the sense of writing for their sake, but of writing in their place."¹⁶ This being granted, it will be agreed that Impressionists make the people not only their subject-matter, but, so to speak, the agent of their paintings.

Thus, it will not come as a complete surprise that Manet was famous for being the first painter to have made a portrait of a real tramp, instead of that of a model paid to impersonate one. Of course, the painting was judged too coarse, and was refused at the *Salon*, like almost all of Manet's other works. As for the *Olympia*, it was considered an outrage in the public's eyes. In fact, Manet could very well have been charged with obscenity, as his two friends Flaubert and Baudelaire had been a few years earlier.

¹⁴ "[L]a méthode structurale . . . semble n'avoir aucune prise sur ce qui constitue encore l'événement essentiel de notre histoire littéraire, le surréalisme" (164).

¹⁵ "[L]a participation du peuple jusqu'ici ignoré à la vie politique en France" (1623-24).

¹⁶ "L'écrivain écrit pour des non-lecteurs, c'est-à-dire pas à l'intention de, mais à la place de."

What is the obscenity Manet presents us with in his *Olympia*? Here, I want to envisage this painting as a paradigm of textuality, with the associations arising in and around it. No need as a consequence to overanalyze the technique it displays, except to emphasize the positive lack of idealization of the feminine body resulting from the brutal strokes of the brush – turning out as something entirely different from the mellow feeling exhaling from Renoir's nudes, just to mention one of his "brothers in arms." Let me rather focus on the model: a *demi-mondaine* who cruised the bohemia of the period under a much less flamboyant name than Olympia (Victorine Meurent). In Manet's painting, she is posing on a bed stark naked, except for a thin black ribbon around her neck, presumably waiting for a client, and demonstrably enjoying the whole situation. Here lies what I call the *ob-scene* depicted in the *Olympia*: it shows a prostitute proudly parading her profane body, not in the least ashamed of being both an object of desire and a subject of pleasure. Whereas painters before had portrayed nudes mostly under the pretense of mythology, picturing academic models posing as if they had just come down from Olympus, Manet chose to place a real prostitute in a contemporary setting, leaving no doubt about the fact that she did not descend from a mythological background, and that moreover, his *Olympia* had come down a long way from the Olympus of dignified representations pertaining to goddesses and nymphs: "There is nothing in her that does not spell Beauty. But there is nothing either that waters down this Beauty, in removing it from its circumstances and in setting it at sublime heights."¹⁷

At this point, I cannot but disagree with Gombrich's reading of a similar work exhibited two years earlier by Manet, the famous *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*. Their similarity, to be sure, is not one of resemblance. Nonetheless, both paintings share several traits, among which first and foremost a gift which seems to be intimately linked with the painter's properly artistic gift, one which he possessed eminently: a gift for disturbing deeply his public. In addition, both paintings exhibit Victorine Meurent at the center of the composition, in both cases has she been felt to be outrageously naked – "Manet's nudes have an abruptness which is not veiled by the garment of habit – which depresses –, of convention – which suppresses"¹⁸ – and each time, she is staring straight at the onlooker.

¹⁷ "Rien, en elle, qui ne signifie la Beauté. Mais rien non plus qui édulcore cette Beauté en l'éloignant des circonstances et la situant à des hauteurs sublimes" (Leiris 39).

¹⁸ "Les nus de Manet ont une brusquerie que ne voile pas le vêtement de l'habitude – qui déprime –, de la convention – qui supprime" (Bataille, *Les larmes d'Eros* 111).

Gombrich's comment does not do justice, by far, to the intricacies of the *Déjeuner*: "this daring exploit of naturalism was based not on an incident in the environs of Paris as the scandalized public believed, but on a print from Raphael's circle" (273). As a matter of fact, the usually luminous art historian seems to misunderstand the point of the painting. From the Renaissance *Judgement of Paris*, Manet merely borrowed the disposition of the characters on the canvas. But the painting as such cannot be reduced to the influence which it betrays. Indeed, it could readily acknowledge its source, without dissipating in the least the fascination it exerts on the spectator. For Manet depicted a contemporary scene which was bound to shock: the naked body of a woman exhibiting her charms while sitting leisurely on the grass between two fully dressed men. This exhibition indeed verges on exhibitionism, thereby transforming its spectators into unwilling voyeurs.

Consequently, the reaction of the "scandalized public" appears more grounded than Gombrich's erudite analysis. The reason why his inquiry into Manet's provocative work seems beside the point lies, I believe, in his basic tenet, according to which we do not stare at a painting as we do at the world, but as readers confronted with a text. Hence the misreading, which brings to light the limits of (inter)textuality. For the striking resemblance of the Renaissance engraving to Manet's painting blinds us to their difference. Indeed, while the *Judgement of Paris*, as its title clearly indicates, represents a mythological scene, the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe* depicts a contemporary scene which could very well have been espied "in the environs of Paris." Moreover, the nakedness of the woman in the mythological representation is attenuated by the fact that the two men (gods?) accompanying her are equally naked. It may be added that the Parisians immediately recognized Victorine for the prostitute she was.

As a result of these converging traits, the painting was judged "indecent," in the words of the head of state, Napoléon III, soon to be relayed by critics and public alike. My contention here is that this so-called "indecenty" addresses the unmistakable quality of encounter which characterizes the relationship of this painting to its public. In other words, a distinct element of reality came through the door opened for it by the painting. As for this door, I believe it hinges on the collage, understood as the insertion of reality within textuality in a work of art or literature. Thus, analyzing the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, a clairvoyant art historian stresses rightly that it is a collage, which accounts for the fascination emanating from it: "The transformation [of the Renaissance engraving] performed by Manet is less a matter of pose

than it is a matter of cutting up or assembling, if not of collage."¹⁹ As a matter of fact, it is difficult not to feel that naked Victorine has been pasted onto a conventional bucolic scene. In this context, Gombrich's emphasis on the origins of the painting blots out its originality. Practically, reality had been so often repressed by art until Impressionism came along, that the *Déjeuner sur l'herbe*, as well as the *Olympia*, can be thought of as illustrating Freud's thesis of "the return of the repressed."

To conclude, I believe these chance encounters between reality and artistic creation are such stuff as modern art is made of. What I have in mind for instance, in terms of stubborn facts disturbing the strict amateur of pure textuality, is the interesting encounter between James Joyce's creation of Molly's inner monologue in *Ulysses* and the fact that his life-long companion and later wife Nora never punctuated her letters. In Manet's case as well as in Joyce's, we are supposed to believe, intertextuality *oblige*, that Manet's chief inspiration for his painting was Titian's *Venus of Urbino*, and that Joyce took the lead Edouard Dujardin's *Les Lauriers sont coupés* supplied him with. In other words, a pictorial or a literary tradition is systematically favored, whereas reality (Victorine's or Nora's) is just as systematically eluded.

Accordingly, I shall put forward that without encounters as I strove to define them, there can be no works of art. These chance encounters occur between two independent series: on the one hand, for instance, the numerous traditional mythological representations of nudes and on the other, the series constituted by the *demi-monde* of reality. But no one element is sufficient on its own. What makes up a literary text as well as a painting is the merging of both elements into one.

In consequence, literature and art should not be approached exclusively as pure products of a textual logic, more or less mitigated by intertextual games. On the contrary, we should let modernity teach us teachers of literature that it is the encounter of a causal reality with a formalistic finality which is decisive for the birth of a work of art. It is my contention that chance encounters as defined above provide us with a paradigm which allows for a better understanding of what is at stake in modern textuality: something dimly reminiscent of the "rencontre du réel" (*Les quatre concepts fondamentaux* 53), the "encounter with the real," which Lacan gives as his translation of the *tuchè*, Aristotle's word for chance.

¹⁹ "La transformation opérée par Manet serait donc affaire moins de pose que de découpage ou de montage, sinon de collage" (Damisch 175).

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