

## IN PRAISE OF MISREADING

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1. The second sentence of Harold Bloom's *A Map of Misreading* bluntly states: "Reading, as my title indicates, is a belated and all-but-impossible act, and if strong is always a misreading<sup>1</sup>." And almost immediately he adds: "These relationships [of influence, between texts] depend upon a critical act, a misreading or misprision, that one poet performs upon another, and that does not differ in kind from the necessary critical acts performed by every strong reader upon every text he encounters<sup>2</sup>." I am intrigued by the pervasiveness of misreading, and by its relationship, which seems to amount to quasi-identity, with strong reading. It would appear, such is the anxiety of influence, that in order to produce a strong reading (and which reader would be content with a reading that might be called "weak"?), one must indulge in misreading. Althusser claimed that his master, Jean Guilton, had bequeathed him, as he puts it, "one fundamental concept," formulated thus: "Si tout est rose, rien n'est rose" ("If everything is pink, nothing is<sup>3</sup>."). If every reading is a misreading, none is, and the distinction between a strong and a weak reading consequently disappears. We must start again.
  
2. In 1999, in a book entitled *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, I defended the following set of theses: (1) All interpretations are possible; (2) No interpretation is true; (3) Some interpretations are just; (4) Some interpretations are false<sup>4</sup>. Taken together, theses 1 and 2 seem to sketch a permissive, or relativist theory of interpretation, where anything goes: so that every interpretation, not being subject to any constraint or *garde fou*, may well go mad, and count as a misreading. If we add thesis 4, we are only extending the scope of misreading, by introducing a distinction (for it would appear that everything is pink, but some shades of pink are pinker than others) between creative misreadings that exploit the worlds of possibility, the proliferation of virtual meaning, and vulgar ones, which belong to the realm of error or falsity. Such permissiveness however is limited by the appearance of thesis 3: there may not be any true interpretation, but there are just ones. The question, of course, is: what is the difference between the just and the true? The distinction comes

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1 H. Bloom, *A Map of Misreading*, 3.

2 *Ibid.*

3 L. Althusser, *Psychanalyse et sciences sociales*, 64.

4 J.-J. Lecercle, *Interpretation as Pragmatics*, 31.

from Althusser, who contrasts the propositions of science, which are true, and the theses of philosophy, which are never true but may be just. And he adds that the French term he uses, “*juste*,” is not the adjective for “justice,” but for “*justesse*,” to be understood in the sense of “adjustment”: a just interpretation is one that is well-adjusted<sup>5</sup>. The term has political connotations: the line of the revolutionary party must be just if the revolution is going to succeed, by which we understand that it must be adjusted to the conjuncture and, more precisely, to the exact moment in the conjuncture. In July 1917, Lenin wrote a pamphlet on slogans, devoted to the question whether the main slogan so far, “All power to the soviets,” was still “just,” that is adequate to the changing situation<sup>6</sup>. The contrast between the true and the just, therefore, is one between theory and practice: the “true” reading would be one that, etymologically, contemplates the text of which it is the “theory,” and passes judgement on it in the form of its interpretation, whereas a “just” reading is one which engages the text in a form of practice, adjusts itself to the text as it adjusts the text to the situation, and constructs an interpretation which, being deciduous like the situation to which it adjusts both itself and the text, is part of a potentially unlimited set of interpretations. We understand why a strong reading has to be a misreading: the process of adjustment, in which the practice of reading consists, requires an active, and potentially violent, attitude of the reader towards the text, what the French language captures in the phrase “*un coup de force*.” And we understand why misreadings are always taken in the plural: the process of misreading is never fully achieved, as the conjuncture in which it is practised changes, and a just or correct reading, like a just or correct political slogan, must be adjusted (discarded, improved, metamorphosed), as the moment of the conjuncture passes. The opposition between the true and the false is clear-cut: between the two opposite poles of the false and the just, we can plot readings on a gradient, and assess their degree of adjustment, of justness and falsity. It is a constitutive characteristic of literary texts that they take full advantage of this structure of reading and demand to be re-contextualised in a new conjuncture, to be incessantly re-interpreted. The gradient on which we may plot our readings goes from the vulgar misreading of false interpretation to the creative misreading, or misprision as Bloom calls it, of a strong reading. Let us consider one such gradient.

3. A nonsense text is famously a text which, because it resists meaning, incites a multiplicity of readings, not all strong. The very emblem of such nonsense is the poem *Jabberwocky*, in Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*. Here is the celebrated first stanza:

5 L. Althusser, *Philosophie et philosophie spontanée des savants*, 56-9.

6 G. Deleuze, and F. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux*, 105-6; J.-J. Lecercle, *Deleuze and Language*, 169-72.

'Twas brillig, and the slithy toves

Did gyre and gimble in the wabe:

All mimsy were the borogoves

And the mome raths outgrabe<sup>7</sup>.

4. We note that this text is eminently readable: it is not a form of word salad, it conforms to the phonological, morphological and syntactic framework of the English language (those words may be coinages, but they are possible English words; I can decide that “brillig” and “slithy” are adjectives and “borogoves” is a noun; and “the mome raths” is a noun phrase, the grammatical subject of a clause the predicate of which is “outgrabe”, an intransitive verb in the past tense). But it is not semantically readable, in that most of the non-grammatical words, being coinages, have no literal meaning, and because of this it demands a form of misreading in the guise of an interpretation, which will be all the more imaginative as it is not constrained by the banality of a literal meaning. A nonsensical text is a text that invites, nay demands misreading as the only possible form of its interpretation. And interpretations of this text there have been, whole cohorts of them, beginning with the most famous, within Carroll’s text, by Humpty Dumpty, a paragon among interpreters (“I can explain all the poems that ever were invented — and a good many that haven’t been invented just yet<sup>8</sup>”). And a highly creative interpretation it is, as well as a blatant form of misreading, since he uses some of the rules of word formation in English (the English language has portmanteau words, like “scurry” — Humpty Dumpty claims that “slithy” means “lithe and slimy”; and it also has words produced by truncation — Humpty Dumpty duly claims that “mome” comes from “from home”). Thus, Humpty Dumpty’s misreadings are highly constrained, except when he indulges in wild flights of fancy, and decides that a “rath” is a sort of green pig. Perhaps we catch a glimpse of what a strong reading consists of: a reading inspired by the imaginative exploitation of linguistic constraints.

5. But Humpty Dumpty’s reading, albeit imaginative, is still literal: he gives the meaning of each of those “hard” words, but leaves the heroine, Alice, the reader, and even Tenniel, the illustrator, to construct a global reading of the text (and Tenniel duly obliged with a picture illustrating this stanza). Alice is easily satisfied (“‘That’ll do very well,’ said Alice<sup>9</sup>”), but not all readers have such

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<sup>7</sup> L. Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, 191.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 270.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

a mild temper, and the text has become the favourite playground of *fous littéraires*. Let us, therefore, decide that Humpty Dumpty's reading, which is both literal and imaginative, both creative or exploitative and respectful of the constraints imposed by the structure of the English language, occupies the middle point, the point of separation, on a gradient of misreadings, which goes from weak readings (or misreadings) to strong readings (or misreadings).

6. On the weak side of the gradient, we shall find misreadings that must be called false interpretations, such as the interpretations of Carroll's tales in general, and of *Jabberwocky* in particular, by *fous littéraires*. Thus, it has been suggested that Lewis Carroll was Jack the Ripper, and this extravagant claim was supported by a form of close reading<sup>10</sup>. The same author, in a previous book, and with the help of the same techniques, had suggested that Lewis Carroll was a closet gay<sup>11</sup>. One example will be enough: the complete title of the second tale, *Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There* contains the following anagram: "Look with a lens through the cute darling: he's a fag don". Of course, in a sense, the anagram *is* there, even as all the anagrams that the third Saussure found actually were in the Latin odes where he found them. Nevertheless, it is equally obvious that such presence can only be meaningful, the material of a just interpretation, if it can be adjusted to the conjuncture, that is, to the totality of Carroll's writings (not to mention what we know of his life) — and in the case of the interpretations of *fous littéraires* they clearly cannot. Such interpretations, therefore, are plainly false. But that is not their most interesting characteristic: what is interesting is the fact that they are *possible*, not merely because they actually exist, but because they are constructed using techniques that the text itself provides. Wallace can be granted extenuating circumstances, because Carroll himself was fond of anagrams, and of all types of word play, including cryptograms. Another *fou littéraire*, Abraham Ettleson, who attempts to prove that Carroll was a secret Jew, uses exactly the same techniques as Humpty Dumpty in his reading of *Jabberwocky*<sup>12</sup>. He cuts the title into two separate words, "jabber" and "wocky" (no doubt the fact that "jabber" is a respectable English verb allows such a move) and he reads them in a mirror (as indeed the whole poem in first read by Alice in the mirror world of *Through the Looking-Glass*). The result is edifying: "Rebbaj yckow", which he immediately, and triumphantly, interprets as "Rabbi Yacow, or Jacob", the name of the Baal Shem Tov, the founder of the Jewish sect of Hassidism. His interpretation of the bulk of the poem uses the same techniques as Humpty Dumpty's (and at the point, of course, you have guessed that those slithy *toves* can only be

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10 R. Wallace, *Jack the Ripper, Light-Hearted Friend*.

11 R. Wallace, *The Agony of Lewis Carroll*.

12 A. Ettleson, *Lewis Carroll's "Through the Looking Glass" Decoded*.

a direct allusion to the Baal Shem *Tov*)<sup>13</sup>. In order to be just, however, the interpretation ought to be adjusted to the conjuncture, which it clearly is not (it is in no way corroborated by what we know of Lewis Carroll, of his origins, of his religious beliefs, and the undoubted presence in the text of the anagrams Ettleson claims to find is no corroboration: using the same techniques, I should be able to prove that Carroll was a secret Corsican nationalist or an early Marxist-Leninist). So this reading, like all readings by *fous littéraires*, is plainly false. But it leaves us with the uneasy suspicion that the frontier between the false and the just may be blurred, that the weakest of readings may have characteristics of strength.

7. Let us, however, try to cross the line and consider, on the right side of Humpty Dumpty's reading, another interpretation of the text, in the guise of a translation (I think we may take it for granted that a translation is always an interpretation). *Jabberwocky* has been translated into Latin under the title *Taetriferocias* (a title which is more evocative of the dangerousness of the monster than the English title). Here is the first stanza:

Hora coctava per protiniam teremeles

Limagiles teretant et quoque gyrotitant;

Sunt tenuiscopi macrilli ; saepeque virci

Edomipali etiam vocibus eruditant<sup>14</sup>.

Humpty Dumpty, or rather Ovalius Crassus, duly interprets this fine piece of Latin poetry (perhaps more reminiscent of school exercises than of Virgil). Thus "hora coctava" is, as may be expected, the eighth hour (hora octava), which is the time for cooking meals ("qua cenam *coquere* incipias<sup>15</sup>"), whereas "limagilis" is a true portmanteau, being made up of the words "limosus et agilis," not so very far from "lithe and slimy". So Alice is convinced: "'Nunc intellego,' Alicia cogitans dixit". The translation, by an emeritus professor of classical languages at McGill University, is faithful to the original text, as faithful, that is, as is possible for a translation, as it adjusts itself, by moving into another language, to another world, the world of Ovalius Crassus, a Roman senator, where "eruditatio" is indeed a strange noise ("inter rudendum et clamitendum, sternutamento quodam interiecto<sup>16</sup>"), but with erudite connotations that take it a world away from

13 For a more extended reading of Ettleson's misreading, see J.J. Lecercle, *Philosophy of Nonsense*, 6-20.

14 Ludovici Carroll, Clive Harcourt Carruthers, *Aliciae Per Speculum Transitus*, 13.

15 *Ibid.*, 72.

16 *Ibid.*, 74.

outraging. The same experience can be had with French or German translations of the poem. Jacques Papy's translation ("Tout flivoreux allaient les borogoves/ Les verchons fourgus bourniflaient<sup>17</sup>") is situated in a different world from the first German translation, as early as 1872, by the Greek scholar, Robert Scott, who was, with Alice's father, the author of the celebrated Greek dictionary (known as the Liddell and Scott): "Es brillig war. Die schlichte Toven/ Wirrten und wimmelten in Waben<sup>18</sup>". The elegant French decasyllabic verses are a far cry from the ponderous alliterative language of the German ballad. Yet both are, in their respective ways, perfect: they are at the same time misreadings (neither the French poetic idiom of Victor Hugo nor the German idiom of the folk ballad feel like the Victorian English of Lewis Carroll) and just interpretations (the French version is a poem in its own right, in its own language).

8. If we move one step further on our gradient, in the direction of a strong reading, we shall meet another translation, but not of the poem *Jabberwocky*. Here are the first sentences:

Nah sithi, thuzzer booergy-mister mouchin un botherin awl oer place — units booergy mister uh kommunism. Allt gaffers errawl Ewerup's gorrawl churchified t'bootitaht: thuzimmint vatty unt king unawl, unner jerry unner frogunt froggy bother-mekkers, unt jerry plain cloouz bobbiz<sup>19</sup>.

9. It would be impossible, were we not told in an introductory note what this is a translation of, and in which language, to guess that it is a rendering of the *Communist Manifesto* in the dialect of West Yorkshire. So the translation is an explicit misreading of the translated text: an icon of our intellectual canon is mocked, with flippant mischievousness; the universalism of the call to arms ("Workers of the world, unite!") is cut down to size by being formulated in the dialect of a small provincial community; the highly cultivated idiom of the middle class revolutionary is made unintelligible by being phrased in the language of an actual working class; the expectations of the reader faced with a text which is so well-known that it is no longer read are de-familiarised in a process of recognition or reconstruction that is both protracted and painful. In this case, translation is indistinguishable from pastiche or even parody (and what is parody if not an explicit, a blatant form of misreading?).

10. Let us, however, return to *Jabberwocky*. So perfect are the French and German translations I have quoted that one feels inclined to suggest that they are original works in their own language, and that Carroll's text is a translation in anticipation, and perhaps even a parody, of a French or

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17 L. Carroll, *Alice au pays des merveilles, De l'autre côté du miroir*, 199.

18 L. Carroll, *The Annotated Alice*, 193.

19 S. McCaffery, "The Kommunist Manifesto or Wot We Wukkerz Want", 171.

German text. This is, perhaps, another definition of a misreading: one that turns the text into a plagiarism in advance of another text, the text of the poetic ephebe, to speak like Harold Bloom, or the text of the strong reader<sup>20</sup>. In the history of the readings of *Jabberwocky*, this stage is reached with the version of the text, hardly a translation, given by Artaud under the title: “L’Arve et l’Aume, Tentative anti-grammaticale contre Lewis Carroll<sup>21</sup>”. In this “translation,” the “anti-grammatical” character of which is immediately apparent, the poem’s very title is afflicted with phonetic proliferation: it starts as “NEANT OMO NOTAR NEMO,” goes on with six lines of similarly meaningless word salad reminiscent of *lettriste* poetry (“Jurigastri — Solargultri”) and ends with a footnote which states that “if one is not satisfied with all this, one may chose one among the preceding formulations,” whereby it proceeds to choose two<sup>22</sup>. And the body of the text is subjected to the same meaningless phonetic proliferation, beginning with what appears to be a possible translation, for all translations are possible, like interpretations, but not all are just (“Il était Roparant, et les vliqueux tarands”) and, as early as the second line, moving away from words, into the direct expression of affect, in a series of screams (“Allaient en gibroyant et en brimbulkdriquant / Jusque-là où la roughe est à rouarghe à rangmbde et rangmbde a rouarghambde”), where we recognize the inarticulate but all the more intense language of madness. With Artaud, it would seem, we have reached one extremity of a gradient — certainly an extremity of misreading. But is such extreme misreading an instance of a just interpretation, of what I have called a strong interpretation? To decide that it is would be to indulge in paradox: the just interpretation, the strongest reading, would be an utterly meaningless one. Such a paradox is at the heart of Deleuze’s theory of sense (as opposed to doxic meaning). His own reading of Carroll, in his *Logique du sens*, which will count as a fine example of a strong reading (and it puzzled orthodox specialists of Carroll to a considerable extent), is based on a philosophical problem, the problem of sense, that is the problem of the emergence of meaning out of a form of nonsense, of the deep-seated complicity between sense and nonsense (in other words, Deleuze takes the usual interpretations of Lewis Carroll *à rebours*: nonsense is not the dissolution, but the condition of possibility of meaning); and this complicity is demonstrated through the association between sense and event — the event in Deleuze is not so much the brutal emergence of the radically new as the circulation of sense<sup>23</sup>. This is what Deleuze’s strong reading consists of: the extraction of a problem from the works of Lewis Carroll, the problem of the emergence of meaning out of nonsense, and the

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20 P. Bayard, *Le Plagiat par anticipation*.

21 A. Artaud, *Œuvres complètes* : IX.

22 *Ibid.*, 165.

23 J.-J. Lecercle, *Deleuze and Language*, chap. 3.

creation of two concepts to formulate it, the concepts of sense and event. The word “creation” is apposite: it signals an interpretative *coup de force* that is the mark of a just interpretation and a strong reading. But the exertion of force is not one sided: the strong reading expresses the mastery of the critic over the text (the text is made to read as the reader wishes to read it), but also, conversely and paradoxically, it expresses the mastery of the text over its reader: the text reads the reader who reads it. The *coup de force* of strong interpretation marks the imposition of sense on to the text’s nonsense, but also the imposition of its nonsense by the text on to the reader’s reading. This dialectic, a paradoxical answer to Humpty-Dumpty’s famous query (“Who is master?”) characterizes a strong reading.

11. Here is, tongue in cheek, an illustration of this dialectic of the false and the just, of the mastery of the text in both the objective and the subjective sense of the genitive, of Deleuze’s theory of sense as a theory of misreading. The English humorist, Paul Jennings, in his weekly column in the *Observer*, had a piece called “Psychotyping<sup>24</sup>”. In it, he claims to be fascinated by the fact that professional typists type without looking at the keys. In an attempt to emulate them, he embarks on the blind typing of the sentence “The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog”, a favourite of apprentice typists, as it contains all the letters of the alphabet. After several failed attempts (“th quoci / The quick briwn fox jiumoec the quock bobrow”), he decides to type a real text, decides on a nursery rhyme, “Mary Had a Little Lamb” and, in a burst of mingled enthusiasm and rage, produces the following sequence:

matu laf a lyttle lamv

id gleece was qgite as sbei

abd evertwhere that maty wabt

that lamh was stee to ho

maty gas a lyyrrlr lavm pamb lanm

labm lamn lamh ba blast

utd forrcr aa waa whire as svie

abt everytgwee ygar maty webt

<sup>24</sup> P. Jennings, “Psychotyping”, 9-11.

yaht la, j waa sure yo go

kank lamj nub b b b lamn lamb

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12. He is, naturally, inordinately proud of having produced such a fine poetic text and concludes that he is a poetic medium, that the spirits type through him, hence the title of his piece. But this is how he accounts for his production:

How *European* this is! What lyrical variations are called up by the tender associations of “little” — the charming Anglo-Saxon *lyttle*, the April, Chaucerian bird-song of *lyrrlr!* Observe the Romanian *sbei*, the Germanic *stee to ho* (compare Siegfried, at the end of Act One, singing to Tolstoy’s disgust, *Heiho, Heiho! Aha! Oho! Heiaho!* You could easily add, *stee to ho*). And then we come right into our own dialects with *yo go*, which, of course, is pure Birmingham<sup>26</sup>.

13. The last line of the text, the sequence of numbers, is interpreted as the expression of ecstasy at the appearance of the word “lamb,” which has suddenly come out right.
14. Jennings’s text repeats the movement of the essay so far. The interpretation he gives of his psychotyping cannot but be weak, the figment of a *fou littéraire*’s imagination (except that Jennings is not a *fou littéraire* but a humorist and as such entirely conscious of what he is doing), because the text is utterly nonsensical and cannot be the locus of an interpretation, of whatever kind. But such obviously false reading is not so much imposed by the interpreter on the text as by the text on the interpreter, who cannot resist the linguistic connotations of his word salad, for a text *will* be interpreted. So that the constitutively weak or false reading cannot but be also a strong and just reading, the content of which, although explicitly and blatantly false is also engagingly convincing: the Chaucerian bird-song and the Wagnerian exclamation are indeed what the psychotypist claims they are, examples of an imaginative and just interpretation. A strong reading, therefore, is both a *coup de force* and the result of a dialectic of mastery and servitude that describes the relationships between the reader and the interpreted text.

15. It will be objected that, as my sample text is the work of a humorist, the theory cannot be serious but only tongue in cheek. Such, however, is not the case. All we have to do to realize this is

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

watch some entirely serious strong readers at work, for instance philosophers reading literature. Thus, when Badiou reads Beckett, he reads him for the event, that is he reads him in order to find in his texts the workings of the concept of event as defined in his own philosophy. And, inevitably, he finds what he is looking for — a blatant form of imposition of meaning on a helpless text. And in order to do this, he does not hesitate to quote selectively from the text he reads, keeping the segments that fit in with his reading and discarding those that seem to contradict it.

16. Let us, therefore, look at how Badiou reads one of Beckett's late texts, *Ill Seen Ill Said*. In a chapter of the book he devoted to Beckett<sup>27</sup>, entitled "The Event and its Name", Badiou reads the following paragraph:

Alone the face remains. Of the rest beneath its covering no trace. During the inspection a sudden sound. Starting without consequence for the gaze the mind awake. How explain it? And without going so far how say it? Far behind the eye the quest begins. What time the event recedes. When suddenly to the rescue it comes again. Forthwith the uncommon common noun collapsion. Reinforced a little later if not enfeebled by the infrequent slumberous. A slumberous collapsion. Two. Then far from the still agonizing eye a gleam of hope. By the grace of these modest beginnings. With a second sight the shack in ruins. To scrute together with the inscrutable face. All curiosity spent<sup>28</sup>.

17. Badiou gives a brilliant account of the movement of what might be called a phenomenology of the event. This movement goes through the following stages: 1) the "inspection" of the situation that serves as a starting point, through the normal activity of seeing; 2) in this situation an event occurs, whose presence is marked by a "sudden sound"; 3) "the mind awakes", as "thought is vigilant under the effect of an event"; 4) the reaction of the mind to the event is not one of understanding (the question of interpretation) but of naming: "how say it"; 5) the name, inscribed in two rare words, an "uncommon common noun", "collapsion" and the adjective "slumberous", bores a hole in ordinary language — and Badiou notes that the putting together of adjective and noun in a single phrase is paradoxical, as the adjective both "reinforces" and "enfeebles" the noun; 6) lastly, the naming of the event produces a "gleam of hope". Badiou concludes: "And though it is certainly nothing more than a commencement, a modest beginning, it is a commencement that comes to the thought that it awakens like an act of grace<sup>29</sup>." And he adds that such gleam of hope marks the hope of the advent of a truth:

A truth begins with the organisation of an agreement between, on the one hand, a separable event

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27 A. Badiou, *Beckett : l'incroyable désir*.

28 S. Beckett, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, 55.

29 A. Badiou, *Beckett*, 44-6.

“shining with formal clarity” and, on the other, the invention in language of a name that from now on retains this event, even if — inevitably — the event “recedes” and finally disappears. The name will guarantee within language that the event is sheltered<sup>30</sup>.

18. Beckett is the poet of the event, as the chain of concepts, event, naming, truth, etc. can be extracted from his text, even if the nature of the event in question is not clear, and the name that Beckett has chosen for it, “slumberous collapsion”, is neither helpful nor hopeful: the name is both uncommon and common, and the common meaning it conveys, that of a collapse, seems to contradict that “gleam of hope” and “effect of grace” Badiou reads in the text. Besides, Beckett’s text is written in paragraphs, and I have quoted the whole paragraph. Badiou, however, does not. He omits the first two and the last two sentences, and it is easy to understand why: they hardly confirm his affirmative interpretation of the text, which is centred on that gleam of hope. The absent sentences provide a negative framework to the advent of the event: “alone”, “no trace”, “the shack in ruins”. And the *chute* of the paragraph, “all curiosity spent,” introduces a note of resignation if not despair, hardly conducive to the construction of a procedure of truth, with its eager enquiries and fidelity to the radically new. Badiou’s reading proceeds through a double extraction: of the passage from the text as a whole; of the core of the passage from the paragraph that frames it. As if the sole presence of the word he was looking for, “event” was sufficient to colour the whole paragraph and the whole text in the exact shade required. What disappears from Beckett’s text is its resolute ambivalence. What is gained by the *coup de force* of such a strong reading (and we must understand the phrase “*coup de force*” literally) is an interpretation of Beckett that, against the grain of the interpretative *doxa*, reads him as a profoundly comic writer (none of the absurdist clichés for Badiou: Beckett is a poet of joyful affects)<sup>31</sup>. A similar case might be made with Deleuze’s reading of *Bartleby*, based as it is on the statement that the character’s signature phrase, “I would prefer not to,” is a-grammatical, which in the strictest sense it is not<sup>32</sup>.

19. The time has come to summarize our findings and to construct a concept of a strong reading. I suggest a number of characteristics, inspired by my reading of Deleuze reading Proust<sup>33</sup>. The choice of this is determined by the fact that the very first page of the book makes it apparent that Deleuze’s reading of Proust is both an obvious misreading and a strong reading. As we know, the critical consensus has it that *La Recherche du temps perdu* is about memory. Not so for Deleuze, who strongly disagrees, and reads the novel against the *doxa*, as appears as early as the *incipit* of his

30 A. Badiou, *On Beckett*, 59 (*Beckett*, 46).

31 On this, see J.-J. Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze Read Literature*, chap. 5.

32 G. Deleuze, “Bartleby, ou la formule”.

33 G. Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*; J.-J. Lecercle, *Badiou and Deleuze*, chap. 3.

book:

What constitutes the unity of *In Search of Lost Time*? We know, at least, what does not. It is not recollection, memory, even involuntary memory. What is essential to the Search is not the madeleine or the cobblestones<sup>34</sup>.

20. Having thus duly shocked us and jogged us into thinking anew, Deleuze proceeds to formulate the problem his strong reading has extracted from the text, the problem of *learning* — the *Recherche* is oriented to the future, not the past, it describes a process of apprenticeship, of learning, and the object of that learning is signs (the signs of fashion, the signs of love, the signs of art). The bulk of the book systematically develops this initial proposition, into an archetypal form of strong reading that has the following six characteristics.
21. The first characteristic is, as we just saw, that it goes against the grain of received *doxa*. Its aim is to force the reader into thinking. The insistence here is on the violence of the practice. This is not merely the rather trivial practice of reading the object of the strong reading anew, with different eyes, from another point of view, for that is true of any interpretation worthy of the name: this involves a form of violence done to the text as to the reader, and the practice has been called “an active dismantling of the text<sup>35</sup>”.
22. The second characteristic inscribes this forcing of thought in the shape of the extraction of a problem. Traditionally, the definition of philosophy is centred on the capacity of the philosopher for *étonnement*, for being astonished at what common opinion takes for granted. Such *étonnement* is expressed by formulating a problem in the very site where solutions have long been accepted. Although the Deleuzian definition of a problem is somewhat more complex, it is faithful to this traditional intuition. For Deleuze, therefore, reading Proust’s *Recherche* will centre on the extraction of a problem, which pervades the text but is not explicitly formulated, the problem of learning.
23. The third characteristic goes from the extraction of a problem to the construction of the concept that grasps it. The creation of concepts is notoriously the task ascribed to the philosopher by Deleuze. In *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?*<sup>36</sup>, such construction goes through the drawing of a plane of consistency, the description of a conceptual character and the formulation of a number of determinations of the concept. That such a construction is central to Deleuze’s reading of Proust is made apparent in the very title of the book, where the concept — the concept of sign — is named.

34 G. Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 3. (*Proust et les signes*, 9).

35 B. Baugh, “How Deleuze Can Help Us Make Literature Work”, 42-3.

36 G. Deleuze, and F. Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie ?*

That such a concept has to be constructed, and cannot be merely borrowed ready-made from the philosopher's predecessors will appear in the fact that Deleuze's concept of sign in this book has nothing to do with what we usually mean by sign, namely Saussurian sign.

24. The fourth characteristic of a strong reading is its persistence. The right problem, and the correct concept that grasps it, do not vanish once they have been respectively extracted and constructed: they persist (witness the fact that this early book was added to on two occasions, at a time when Deleuze's philosophical position had shifted considerably, so that the book in its final version contains two different layers of thought, if not three); but they also insist, as the problematic of the sign is taken up again, twenty years after the first publication of the Proust book, and considerably expanded in the *Cinema* books, where the semiotics of Peirce is exploited through the usual form of Deleuzian *bricolage*, and where the Saussurian concept of sign, based on the dichotomy of signifier and signified, is the object of an explicit critique.
25. The fifth characteristic is that the consequence of such extraction, construction, persistence and insistence is an intervention rather than an interpretation. Here we encounter a slight difficulty, as the rejection of interpretation (the question for him is not "what is the meaning of the text? but "how does it work?") is a central tenet of Deleuze's later philosophy, but in *Proust et les Signes*, signs are meant to be interpreted and we find a positive theory of interpretation. But apart from the deciduous character of such a theory, we already find in the book all the aspects of reading as an intervention, most explicitly of course in the second and later section, "The Literary Machine". The best test of the intervention that the reading enacts is its capacity to shock the critical tradition of readings of Proust.
26. There is a sixth characteristic of a strong reading: its very strength is a provocation for readers, in other words it calls for a *counter-reading*. It interpellates the reader into acquiescence, but it demands to be counter-interpellated by the reader, so that it becomes part of an endless chain of interpretation, as interpellation succeeds and is succeeded by counter-interpellation.
27. Although the six characteristics of a strong reading have been described by reading a philosopher reading a literary text, I believe they may be extended to all types of strong reading. And I believe we have reached two conclusions, at the end of this journey through the world of misreading. The first is that all readings are misreadings, but some misreadings are more just than others. The second is that the justness of a misreading, which is a question of adjustment, does not merely consist in an adjustment to the historical conjuncture (although the false interpretations of

*fous littéraires* are signally lacking in that respect), but in a reciprocal adjustment of the text and the interpreter, in a dialectic of imposition and liberation, which is the dialectic of the emergence of sense out of doxic meaning.

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