

ALL MY LITERARY and theological experience, as well as my sinological studies, have encouraged me to reflect on the role of the literary text as guide, as mystagogue, to the grace residing within the lexical contingencies of the “creative words” (*Urworte*) that Karl Rahner spoke of.⁽¹⁾ While belonging to diverse and yet complementary cultures, I found my own identity in the reality of words and language. With the passing of time, these two phenomena of human nature were expressed in my field of research, which is literature. The experience of Polish culture had taught me that every word was sacred, a morsel of bread thrown onto the pathway of life, to be gathered up with reverence and gratitude. The experience of French culture opened up for me the expressive capacity of words, their formidable power demonstrated by the riches of French literature. Lastly, the Chinese experience has reminded me that each word is an imperishable gift of communication, set to the rhythm of presence and absence, of fullness and emptiness, that can raise us to the heights of our being.

Accordingly, the book—the home of words—is for me almost like a person, brought to life by the freedom created through the shared commitment agreed between writer and reader. To name, Jean-Paul Sartre reminds us, is to choose.⁽²⁾ Similarly, the fact of writing or reading is the ultimate manifestation of human freedom. This freedom is expressed in various ways, among

them is the effect on the reader. Thus, the literary genius of Balzac will seek to improve society by influencing his readers, casting a purifying light on the social malaise of the times. Like Proust, he directed his efforts towards the ultimate aim of all art, which is to illuminate through rapture all that lies hidden in the everyday lives of men and women in society.

Literature, and especially the novel, reflects the essential relationship between the creator and his creature, a relationship governed through the mediatory text, which regenerates the life-giving flow of the creative words as bequeathed to the living beings that he created.

Every text is the *sine qua non*, the indispensable outlet for the author’s creative invention, the place where the drama of mankind unfolds. It is a drama visualised through the medium of narrative; the drama of man in search of his origins and his future; the drama of language, and of words; in short, the drama of communication between the fellow-creator and his creature.

The writer and the reader meet on the terrain where the drama unfolds, that is, in the setting of the mediatory text conceived in mutual interaction between author and reader. The text, a place of potential grace where can be sensed the breath, the resonance of the creator’s word, has the capacity to transform the inner lives of the author and of his readers. It is Rahner’s creative words, the component elements of the text, which confer that grace.

The text, in view of its provenance and its content, is intended to offer the reader a truthful light, leading him to fulfil his destiny as a human being, wanted and loved by God the Creator.

1. *Urworte*: original words, or creative words, is an essential term in *Prêtre et poète*, which speaks of the original source of the Word. See Karl Rahner, *Elements of Spiritual Theology*, French transl., Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1964.

2. See the lecture he gave at the Sorbonne in 1946, published in *La responsabilité de l'écrivain*, Ed. Verdier, Paris 1998.

This parallel between the work of the reader and that of the writer leads me to a long-held conviction, namely, that each and every literary text is Christlike: it is born of the passion (the love and the suffering) both of the author and the reader. Each book sees the light after the long, laborious night of writing. The text is, in a sense, crucified, fixed, by the author's signature and the reader's welcome. This crucifixion, endowed by the author's genius and creative intuition, enables the text to live on among its chosen readership, to be a spiritual and conscience-forming food for mankind. The literary text, like a faithful mystagogue, actualises in mankind the traces of the presence of the Being and accompanies each one of us throughout our earthly journey towards the Father's House where resides the Eternal Word, a pronounced Word that still resonates across the world.

Lastly, I seek to add my essay to the voices of all those who defend the special status of the literary text, the unchallengeable space wherein we mortals may reflect on our destiny and vocation. It is a matter of urgency to halt the present trend in literature and post-modern linguistics towards disembodiment of the language to the point of sacrificing all meaning. Confronted as we are by this destructive tendency, we should strive to bring contemporary literature back to its poetic and allegorical origins, back to its intrinsic clarity and to the transcendence of the creative words: thus, we might confer on humankind a salutary pause and the taste for regenerative words and silence. In this context, I shall portray the role of theology, not as the place where we risk being dazzled by contact with the

Absolute, but rather as the anthropology of the Revelation translated into everyday words, the words of fiction, narrated by the literary text.

From this reading, man should emerge like Jacob after wrestling with the Angel, as a reader enlightened by a mystagogic otherness inviting him attentively to read himself.

The Reader: (Re-)creator of Reality

When I look back to my first experience of reading, I realise, with surprise, that it was preceded by familiarity with musical notation and scales on the piano. In my life, without question, it was music and the keyboard of an old piano belonging to my grandfather that pointed the way towards letters and writing. I clearly remember that, one day, bored by scales and by idly tinkling on the piano, my eye fell on a metronome. I took it in my hands and, sliding my fingers up its graduated scale, I began deciphering one by one the vowels and consonants. Reading through them more quickly, I noticed that the sounds were familiar: an-dan-te, an-dan-ti-no mo-dera-to, al-le-gr-o, allegro vi-va-ce, and so on. On the other hand, I looked in vain for words like legato, staccato, portatto, which were not there. As I made sense of these familiar words, I was filled with joy. Suddenly, even though I was alone, I could feel my piano teacher's invisible presence: in his clear, well-articulated voice, he was guiding me while I played; and this reassuring presence made me long to resume practising my set pieces. Today as I reflect on the gift of reading, of listening, of receiving, I understand all the better the words of Italo Calvino: "Reading is going to meet

something that will exist in the future.”⁽³⁾ My burlings in Italian, sparked off by the musical terms written along the metronome scale, had conjured up for me the person to whom I owed that first experience of musical language which, as it chanced, had been in Italian. With that first reading, that deciphering of the letters, I had been granted access to a presence other than physical, but no less relevant or sensitive. Reading had introduced me to the society of man, to humankind. Thanks to reading, I could enter the community of people whose physical presence was familiar to me or form relationships with people who were unknown to me but whose existence was revealed to me in their writing. With time, reading became a part of my being, lending savour to meditation, sense to solitude and, at the same time, nurturing in me a real passion for the text and its philology. The more often I returned to particular books, the more I appreciated the internalising effect that they had upon me. Ever afterwards I carried them inside myself, in my thoughts and in my being. The poetry and the great novels of the nineteenth century sharpened and enriched my sensitivity and my knowledge. Having a free choice as to the time and place for my reading, I knew the joy of discovering the author’s thinking and his characters. I could say, with Marcel Proust, that reading was for me a disinterested friendship that I truly valued and could not leave without regret.⁽⁴⁾

Reading Suppressed: The Stunned Silence of the Creative Words

My childhood and part of my adolescence were spent in Poland. In that country, I had to learn how these two vital yet humble activities, writing and reading, happened to be risky, and were jealously guarded by the political authorities who, when it suited them, could withhold them from thousands of people. Under the totalitarian Marxist regime, the masses, thirsty for literature, were every day torn between emigrating or suffering an inner death. To survive, they embarked upon a ceaseless and unappeasable hunt for books, for reading matter. The spiritual and intellectual famine drove them to go even without food and to wait in queues several hundred metres long for the chance of finding just one copy of Sienkiewicz’s *Trilogy* or Czeslaw Milosz’s translation of the *Psalms*, all printed on the lowest quality paper and, on some pages, hardly legible. In this quest for good writing our need was to find the nourishing presence of an invisible author who, with the power of his mind, might give us direction, a path through the despair of everyday existence, who could help us to survive and to build better lives for ourselves. Often, a piece of paper bearing a free and human message used to escape censure—much to the alarm of a regime that, behind all its weapons and its apparatus of oppression, trembled for its survival. It was obvious that the regime required all of us to live without recourse to reading, completely oblivious to creative or vital thinking, which was available only to the select few. In place of introspection the regime had imposed the word of authority, bereft of any real

3. Italo Calvino in *Si par une nuit d’hiver un voyageur*. It is a romantic reflection of a “reading” of a dozen novels in their early stages, each carried on in all the others while containing all of them. Translated from the Italian by D. Sallenave and F. Wahl, Editions du Seuil, Paris, 1982, p. 276.

4. Marcel Proust, *Sur la Lecture*, Ed. Mille et une nuits, Paris, 1994, p. 46.

doubt or silence; it had given totalitarian expression to a categorical message, one that deafened our inner ears.⁽⁵⁾

For many of my compatriots, the ban on reading caused greater hardship than that on writing or publishing as, in Poland, literature had always been charged with a noble mission: to nourish the soul, to preserve the nation's unity and its openness to the world of the Latin tradition. Throughout Poland's stormy history, literature had always been associated with the Christian faith, whose unity had proved salutary and redemptive for a country shared between three superpowers, who, between them, had ended by wiping it off the map of Europe for a period of 126 years. What was it that had preserved the soul and the spirit of the people? Primarily, it was the faith of their ancestors and the assiduous reading of the Romantics (Adam Mickiewicz, Juliusz

Slowacki, Cyprian Kamil Norwid); it was Chopin's Mazurkas and the patriotic *Trilogy* by the author of *Quo Vadis*. For all Polish people,⁽⁶⁾ the national language in its literary expression became a sacred treasure. Since then, literature has remained an inexhaustible source of vitality, unity and identity for generations of Polish people. In view of the union of Christian faith with my country's culture, and its attachment to poetry and to literature in general, I am convinced that no society could exist or survive without reading.⁽⁷⁾ Reading books teaches us that we have a duty to fulfil, the duty to look for the meaning of what "is". In this task, communication through words is more than an order, more than a logic, or an organisation: it is the very vision of resurrection. When we read, we are hoping that our bodies will be raised again.⁽⁸⁾

Reading as a Mirror-prism of Self-knowledge

The experience of living, like any human experience, is first and foremost a double experience: something between understanding and loving, between the philology and the allegory of the text, between the freedom and the constraint of thought, between attention to others and the concern for oneself. It is, indeed, a synthesis of perception and creation. Reading brings us to question the essence of the subject and the object. Fully to understand a text, the reader is not content merely to read it in the literal sense; he endows it with meaning. He creates images and verbal adjustments in order to make sense of it. In the course of reading, he takes in the meaning while forming relationships without being aware of them, relationships between

5. We should recall briefly a few dates from the history of humankind relating to the *martyrdom of reading*. In Athens, round about 411 BC, the works of Protagoras were burned. In 213 BC, the Emperor of China, Qin Shi Huangdi, ordered the burning of all the classical books in his kingdom. In about 168 BC, the uprising of the Maccabees destroyed the Jewish library of Jerusalem. In 303 AD, Diocletian condemned all Christians to the stake. The list might be extended much further.
6. Let us not forget that the first literary text was a poem-prayer, *Bogurodzica* or *Theotokos*, a patriotic hymn to the glory of the mother of God, a supplication that became the national anthem sung by all until the period of the Napoleonic Wars.
7. Reading, as the act of deciphering and translating signs, came before writing. Claude Lévy-Strauss (in *Tristes Tropiques*, Paris, Plon, 1955) describes societies without writing.
8. D. Sallenave, *Le Don des Morts*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 5. I shall quote a few fragments from his book. "The secret is hidden in ordinary life, a secret that escapes those who have not understood it, and have fled from it into amusements, honours and money. There is beauty in ordinary life, because it conserves for us a way to make contact with the silent world of tranquility." (p. 43) "Real life is not the great life, but it is life in truth, that is to say, in retreat and isolation, in the certainty of being a human being in silence and in the mute presence of things." (p. 46) "In books, one seeks less for dreams and joyfulness than for truth, the truth of actions, of beings, of words, of existence." (p. 55) "Life with works of art is a life of reconciliation, of consolation." (p. 91) "Literature is meditation on experience, which is accomplished through the mediation of words already fashioned into models of reflection and the deepening of life experience. To relate a life is to save a life." (p. 117)

memories of his own experience and phrases taken from the written words in front of him. Reading is a very complex process of reconstruction that is common to each and every one of us.⁽⁹⁾

The structure of a text or a picture responds to our expectations, to our needs, even if we remain unaware of it. It takes us over, bringing into question the principles of our consciousness. We are filled with the otherness of the writing; we come out of ourselves. Thus, language, by virtue of its mediatory function, its verbal form—which is common only to humankind—is capable of effecting durable changes in us. A poem, or a prayer, made up of the creative words, open up to the reader the transcendent dimensions of grace, enabling him to touch the elusive nature of eternity.

At the same time, the reader's values and standards are modified by the experience of reading. As we read, we make constant comparisons between our earlier reading and the words in front of our eyes. Unforeseen elements that we encounter in the course of reading oblige us to reformulate our expectations and to reinterpret all that we have read in the past. And so reading acts in two directions at once, forwards and backwards. The criterion of consistency underlies the search for

meaning, and the continuous revisions by which reading guarantees its overall significance for our experience. Thus, the text is a potential mechanism whereby the reader may construct a consistent and meaningful object. Meaning is consequently something the reader has to experience, and not a definite object pre-existing the act of reading.⁽¹⁰⁾

Reading as a Space for Inner (Re)creation

The reader or (re)creator, like a potential writer, while being stimulated by reading, is invited to carry out a check on his knowledge and on his scale of values, and to reach a view on the text. Indirectly, he is even invited to write his own version of, or reply to, the work that he has read. In reality, every reader is the best reader of himself. The writer's work is only a kind of optical instrument, offered to the reader to enable him to discern that which, without the book, he might perhaps not have seen in himself. Even so, the reader remains free and independent: once he has taken the decision to embark on the reading he makes the effort to understand the text, all the more so since, only through reading it, can he understand himself.

The reader has the experience of learning both *gnomosumè*, a Greek term meaning the discernment of matters presented by the text, and *paideia*, another Greek term meaning the judgement of its message. Embarking on the reading, he lets himself be carried along by the writer's reasoning and narrative style; they exert on him a certain *psychagogia*, again, a Greek term meaning the leading of the soul, emotional assistance, or the pedagogical direction of the inner life.⁽¹¹⁾ Aided by his imagination and his

9. Merlin C. Wittrock, "Reading Comprehension," in *Neuropsychological and Cognitive Processes in Reading*, Oxford, 1981.

10. The Polish philosopher, Roman Ingarden, who founded the aesthetic of phenomenology during the nineteen twenties, saw in the text "a potential structure", given concrete expression by the reader. He saw reading as a process that put the text into a relationship with extra-literary norms and values, through the medium of which the reader could give meaning to his own experience of the text. In short, readers always bring to the text their own norms and values.

11. The phenomenon of psychosomatic healing is not improbable. Bibliotherapy proves the therapeutic benefits of reading such books as *Bouvard et Pécuchet* or *Voyage au centre de la terre*, see Marc-Alain Ouaknin, *Bibliothérapie: Lire c'est guérir!*, Paris, Seuil, 1984.

memory, the reader allows the text to work on him. He proves vulnerable to its transforming action and capable of altering his knowledge and convictions. The text may expose him to *kenosis*,⁽¹²⁾ and consequently it may change him into someone ready to accept the newness of the message conveyed by the text.

Such a reading experience may be compared to a journey undertaken by a reader who undergoes a psychosomatic traversée,⁽¹³⁾ or crossover. Philippe Labro, who is both the writer and the protagonist of the story, having experienced clinical death and having come back to life, feels an irresistible need to change his life, to become a new man, humane and generous. As he undergoes this ordeal, the author finds a new vision of life in reading the poems of Verlaine and Hugo, which once he learned by heart. From then on, in his eyes, everyday things take on a miraculous importance. He re-reads his life through the grace he has received, having been capable of recognising its presence.

Reading as an Adventure in Transcendence Favourable to Kenosis

To begin reading a narrative is to reconnect with a spiritual adventure, to hear an invitation to listen to one's own heart, one's

inner voice; it is to rediscover that spiritual life is, above all, an experience, like that of reading or writing. Each book opens up a path promising an inner journey. It all begins with a wrenching departure. The wrench makes sense only in an inner conversion (*kenosis*), when you submit yourself to the ordeal of the text. Kafka wrote: "The book must be the axe breaking through the frozen sea in us. That's what I think."⁽¹⁴⁾ On this journey, only by putting your whole heart into it can you spot the signs that Providence leaves along the road through reading.

This transformation of the reader is what I call inner (re)creation. It is the fruit of grace—the grace of good reading, which is able to build up the reader's inner self, his aesthetic values, his point of view, his convictions and prejudices, all in order to bring about in him a definitive change of life. George Steiner said that reading "... asks of us not only an understanding reception, but a reaction as well. We are required to act afresh, as Dante explicitly postulates; we must enter '*una vita nuova*' [a new life]... Often in art, this appeal remains implicit, or is made within the form."⁽¹⁵⁾ With this perspective, the reader should accept a text as a gift from a microcosm (Rahner's *Muschel*, or shell),⁽¹⁶⁾ which takes him back to the realities asserted or touched upon in the text.⁽¹⁷⁾ Similarly, from inside the shell can be heard a rushing sound, the sound of the surging oceans where the finite calls to the infinite. On hearing this phenomenon, the listener feels privileged and by analogy may begin to wonder about his own origins. Inwardness, otherness and the religious path then converge into an inner unity in which humankind and the world, the spirit and

12. *Kenosis* is a notion from Christian theology expressed by a Greek word from St. Paul's epistle to the Philippians (2:7). *Kenosis* designates the act of humility by which Jesus Christ "emptied himself" of his divine attributes to join our humankind, to the point of living in obedience to pure faith and dying on the cross.

13. Philippe Labro, *La Traversée*, Paris, Gallimard, 1996.

14. Franz Kafka, "Letter to Oscar Pollak," January 27th 1904, in *Correspondance 1902-1924*, trans. Marthe Robert, Paris, Gallimard, 1965.

15. In George Steiner, *Errata, récit d'une pensée* (The account of a thought), Paris, Gallimard, 1998, pp. 41-2.

16. I am quoting from Y. Tourenne, *Amorce d'une esthétique théologique chez K. Rahner*, Recherches de Science Religieuse, SR85/3, 1997, pp. 383-418, which indicates the source in K. Rahner, *Ecrits théologiques*, 9, Paris, DDB, p. 193.

17. Here, there is a sort of *mise en abyme*: the book held in one's hand becomes the mirror for all the books ever written.

the heart, the wonderful and the ordinary are all as one.

Sylvie Germain describes the phenomenon of reading: she uses exact terms, chosen with exquisite care. Each time the reader confronts a text, she says, he is called upon to "... welcome, accept, consent to, listen to the silence and to scrutinise the invisible—for the human consciousness, these are the highest forms of attention. Impatience must be resisted, together with any desire to be given signs, any febrile search for proofs. There are just a few impalpable traces scattered here and there, showing fleetingly through the surface of things, unexpectedly and for no longer than an instant, traces as discrete as they are troubling: they allow us no certainty, but summon us constantly into astonishment, dreams and expectancy."⁽¹⁸⁾ By consenting to everything that the author may ask of us in reading, we expose ourselves to the risk of inner transfiguration—and sometimes the experience can be painful. We should not forget that there are also bad writers, and harmful and degrading texts, books that present us with the false appearance of truth while soliciting our acquiescence.

Reading—Writing—(Re)reading as a Humanising Spiral

Because of their proximity, these two actions, reading and writing, fit together

in some way. It seems appropriate that the original languages in which the Bible was written, Aramaic and Hebrew, do not differentiate between the acts of reading and writing and employ the same word to describe both these activities.⁽¹⁹⁾

When the reader meets the author within the text, he responds to him, as does man to his Creator, through the medium of faith. That faith is founded upon God's own Word, the faithful Word revealed in the Son who cannot deny Himself (2 Tim. 2:13). This is on his part the expression of the confidence that the reader feels in the writer's words. This response that man makes to the God who reveals Himself (Rom. 1:5) is the fruit of his free decision to have faith in Him. Having a trusting faith in the author's work opens the eyes of the heart, as St Paul says (Ep. 1:18).

In a key passage of his *Confessions*,⁽²⁰⁾ St Augustine describes an episode that had left a strong impression on him. Tortured by indecision, unhappy about his past defects, fearful that the hour of judgement had finally struck for him, Augustine moved away from his friend Alypius, with whom he had been occupied in reading aloud in the garden (it was summertime), and burst into tears. Suddenly he heard the voice of a child who was singing a song with the refrain "*Tolle, lege*" (Take and read). Augustine was convinced that the voice was addressed to him; he ran back to the spot where Alypius was still sitting and picked up the book they had been reading, a volume of St Paul's Epistles. "I took it up and opened it," Augustine relates, "and in silence I read the first passage that my eyes fell upon."⁽²¹⁾ He reached the end of the sentence as though struck by a thunderbolt. The light of confidence

18. Sylvie Germain, *Immensités*, Paris, Gallimard, 1989.

19. Henri-Jean Martin, "Pour une histoire de la lecture", in *Revue française d'histoire du livre*, Paris, 1977, p. 46. According to Martin, neither Sumerian nor Hebrew have any specific verb meaning "to read", p. 64. In Hebrew, the verb closest to reading may also be used to express the act of shouting, summoning, naming or reciting. Y. Tourenne informs me that Genesis 1:5 could, after all, be translated as "And God read the light Day...".

20. St Augustin, *Confessions*, IV, 3, Paris, 1959.

21. The passage was from Romans 13:14: an exhortation to "follow the Lord Jesus Christ and not to abandon oneself to the preoccupations of the flesh and not to yield to one's desires".

flooded his heart and the shadows of doubt were dispersed. The return of his confidence gave the reader a *quantum fidei* (a quantity of faith) that is indispensable to all subsequent readings. Augustine's reading aloud emphasises another important point: once St Augustine is confronted with a written text, he adds his voice to the silent letters, the *scripta*, and allows them to become the *verba*, the spoken words from which the spirit arises. For him the Word must be articulated, proclaimed and shared throughout the community. It must make the air vibrate, and become part of things heard. He says that if it is read in silence it can refresh only one's personal ideas. It is timely to remember here that Augustine, pupil and friend of the celebrated Ambrose of Milan was impressed by Ambrose's talent for reading. The history of reading informs us that it was indeed Ambrose who introduced the practice of silent reading.⁽²²⁾

"Deus Absconditus"⁽²³⁾ Has Taken Refuge in Books

The reader has enjoyed an impressive career in literary theory. Having for a long time been ignored by philology, then by the New Criticism, by formalism and structuralism; having been kept at arm's length as an embarrassment, in the name of affective illusion, the reader, making

his appearance again on the literary stage alongside the author and the text, has broken up their confrontation. His privileged status over author and text has made reading subjective and, in the end, has falsified it.

These days, we see literary productions that are often the object of suspicion and manipulation. Similarly, the *poiesis* and the *aisthēsis*⁽²⁴⁾ of the work, together with the author's role, have been put into question. During the nineteen sixties, Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes proclaimed the death of the author and launched the controversy over literature and the text. From then onwards, the New Criticism endlessly pilloried the author, seeing in him the typical bourgeois, and the embodiment of capitalist ideology. Now the author is envisaged as the initiatory and explanatory principle of literature; he must be replaced by language, impersonal and anonymous. Little by little, language comes to be claimed as the exclusive matter of literature by Mallarmé and Valéry, by the surrealism of Proust, and lastly by linguistics—whereby the author is never anything more than someone who writes. Mallarmé even demands that the poet as spokesman should disappear: henceforward he should surrender the initiative to words alone.⁽²⁵⁾ So the author yields the front of the stage to writing, to the text, or again to the writer who is never merely a "subject" in the grammatical or linguistic sense, rather a being made of paper and not a real person in the psychological sense; he is the subject of the enunciation, which does not exist prior to the enunciation but is produced with it, here and now.

22. St Augustine also described for us Ambrose's silhouette as he was reading: "When he was reading, his eyes scanned the page and his heart examined the meaning, but his voice remained mute and his tongue motionless. He never read aloud." (*Ibid.* V1, 3). From the tenth century onwards, this way of reading became customary in the West. A few centuries afterwards, with the Reformation, it even contributed to the claims to reach a personal interpretation of the Bible made by Luther, Calvin and other Protestants.

23. Latin: God hidden, ignored or mysterious.

24. A Greek term, among the Stoics, for empirical experience, often considered the highest form of knowledge.

25. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Œuvres Complètes*, La Pléiade, Vol. 1, Paris, Gallimard, 1996, p. 366.

It follows that writing can no longer represent or portray anything that comes before its enunciation; therefore it follows that writing has no more origin than does language.

The notion of inter-textuality is a further consequence of the death of the author. As for critical analysis, that too disappears with the author, since at the heart of the text there no longer exists any unique or original meaning. This is the end of writing, which quietly takes its leave after the death of the author. In this new configuration, it is with the reader—and not the author—that the unity of the text is accomplished. Thus, either the writing or the text promotes an activity hostile to theology, and opposed to any immutability of meaning.⁽²⁶⁾ Writing itself suppresses both God and reason, both science and the law. It is an anti-authoritarian rebellion in the style of May 1968, overthrowing the author and ushering in post-structuralism.

And yet, as Maurice Blanchot says in his metaphorical text on “The Dialectic of the Work”⁽²⁷⁾: “The poem takes second place behind the sacred that names, it is the silence leading to the Word, the God which speaks within it—but the divine being the inexpressible is always without words. So the work is at the same time hidden in the deep presence of the God, and visible throughout the absence and obscurity of the divine. [...] So the work

comes from the Gods to mankind, it helps in this transition, because each time it pronounces the word ‘beginning’ in a more original way than are the worlds, the powers that borrow it reveal themselves in order to act.” In a word, the literary work is a mystery of the silence of the God; it is the presence of His absence.

Our epoch is dominated by scientific and technical rationalism permeated with logical atheism. The belief in God seems to have been abandoned. And even poetry no longer replaces it with its redemptive role. In consequence, the artist finds it very difficult to find words to describe his creation. But, precisely, in the name of this reality, can there exist secular poetry in the literal sense? The question seems absurd, since two categories that characterise every work, seriousness and constancy, seem to say the opposite. However, there is something in us that can exist without us; and we cannot say how this something has come into us. Art reflects this intuition as a lived and living form.⁽²⁸⁾ It is the privilege of aesthetics to sustain and illumine the continuity between temporality and eternity, between matter and spirit, between man and God. Thanks to the religious aspects and the latent metaphysics that guarantee it, the *poiesis* can open itself to meaning, without which, quite often, we are ignorant of what we are experiencing.

The Text-mystagogue, Accompanying the Reader to His Encounter with Grace

The reading of a literary text can bring us also to a further discovery, namely that of the author. Indeed, it is also susceptible of unveiling the author’s

26. Jacques Derrida, in his writing, acknowledges that the issues examined above are neither of a linguistic-aesthetic nature nor of a philosophical nature; he says they are in reality linked to the meaning founded in the postulation of the existence of God. Certainly, semantics and poetics are inseparable from the postulation of transcendence.

27. In *L'Espace Littéraire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1955, pp. 307-8.

28. Jacques Maritain, *Intuition créatrice dans l'art et dans la poésie*, Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1966, p. 420.

soul, allowing us to see a reflection of his person, a light by which the reader can look at himself. At the same time, the text conveys the beliefs of the author who often invests with his authority the questions to which humanity seeks answers, questions of moral and ethical choices that men and women have to make on their progress through this temporal state. An allegory borrowed from the book of the Apocalypse (Ap. 10:8-10) speaks of this phenomenon whereby the pleasure of reading, the sensation and the taste, is followed by a demanding moral choice imposed by the reading of the text, an accomplished book that, according to the Johannine description, fills the reader's entrails with bitterness. As Jean-Paul Sartre notes, "The literary work is never a natural piece of information, but a demand and a gift."⁽²⁹⁾ Often the aesthetic imperative carries with it the moral imperative.

Probably what is needed is an answer to the quest for meaning, an answer that the literary text is admirably designed to give. In this task it acquires the status of a pedagogue who teaches (in the literal sense), who persuades (in the allegorical sense), who urges action (in the moral sense) and who suggests to the reader what reality he should expect (in the anagogic sense). Each text, in its content but also in its linguistic, syntactic and semiotic form, reveals its own origins

and attests the presence that inspires it. But for the sense not to lose its actuality, it has to be rich in significance. The role of significance is crucial, especially in poetry and stylistics. It was Montaigne who said that such texts mean more than they say.⁽³⁰⁾

Sense refers to that which remains stable in the narrative and in its reception: the immutable sense embedded in the sense of the creative words. On the other hand, significance refers rather to that which changes in the reception of a text.

While sense is singular, the significance that places it in its setting is variable, therefore plural, open and oriented towards the infinite. When one reads a text (contemporary or ancient), one connects the sense of the text to one's own experience, one ascribes to it a value that is independent of the original context. So sense is the object of the interpretation of the text, while significance is the object of the application of the text to the setting of its reception and its evaluation. Similarly, the reader gains access to the sense by way of the significance conveyed by the symbolic words that bring him closer to the mysteries of life, and that open to him the gateway to the inexpressible. The ideal would be that the text, thanks to its mystagogy, might accompany the reader pedagogically, towards the questions of existence, towards the sources and the conclusion of his earthly life.


Considered in its entirety, the literary text should play a role akin to that of Chinese pictorial art, which is a mystical art *par excellence*. In its contemplative approach, it should initiate the reader in drawing from the narrative thread

29. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?*, Paris, Gallimard, 1948, re-edited 1985, Folio-Essais, p. 78.

30. Just like Czeslaw Milosz: "You must understand these simple words: others would shame me/ I swear to you, my language is not enchanted/ I speak to you through the medium of silence/ like a cloud, like a tree," in "Czeslaw Milosz, or Lazare poète," *Etvdes*, February 1981, (354/2), p. 196.

31. This is *qigai*, an original breath, a moral spirit. Thus, Chinese painters do not speak of the beauty of the work, but of its breath.

the kernel of the story, the essence⁽³¹⁾ of the creative words. Only such reunion with his origins can make man joyful and confident in his destiny. Sadly, globalisation, and the pluralism of the world on the threshold of the third millennium, produce a relativism in all propositions of sense, religious or not, and in all values, leaving individuals and social groups without standards of discernment or decision. Even literature no longer dares to put forward universal meanings. In our time it presents only a multiplicity of heteroclite views on a few aspects of human life. It locks man into a cell of powerlessness; it leaves him battered by historical events and scientific progress; they crush him under their weight. Today, literature even deserts history and plunges into the nihilism of writing, cynically flaunting the mercenary side of its undertaking. That is the case with the new literature in France: these heralds of modern times, such as Houellebecq, Darrieussecq or Ravalec, who claim that the declining values of Western Catholicism should give way to the hegemony of science, that desire should be institutionalised, and that abortion amounts to a positive form of eugenics which they wholeheartedly welcome.⁽³²⁾

Yet, man has the gift of words and should not let himself be deprived of them. Having seen the origins of the Word, he should realise that his own words go far beyond the language of science. Firstly, they are the Word incarnate, which, although trapped within human bodies and thought, transcends them. The source of this Word and its role in the redemption of mankind endow it with a unique value, a supreme importance, which is expressed in the use that man makes of it for good or ill. In the diversity of the words that he utters or writes, there are words that enlighten us, which make the infinity of all reality show through into the particular. They are like shells, however small, in which the sounding sea may be heard. Karl Rahner calls them “creative words” (*Urworte*), in which the spirit and the flesh, the signified and its symbol, the object and its image are still one, as once they were. In consequence, they enable us to conceive man in his primordial union of spirit and flesh, of transcendence and intuition, of metaphysics and history.⁽³³⁾ 

Translated from the French by Philip Liddell

32. “*De l’ordure en littérature*” (On Filth in Literature), the article by Henri Raczynew published in *Le Monde*, October 10th 1998.

33. Karl Rahner, “A preface to a collection of poems on the priesthood”, which Jorge Blajot published under the title: “*La hora sin tiempo*”, in *Éléments de théologie spirituelle*, Paris, Desclée De Brouwer, 1964, p. 273.