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Recipes

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Recipes

Abstract

After a distinction is made between avant-garde texts, post-modernist texts, and experimental texts, it is argued that the latter consist in the productions and products of recipes for textual rewritings. These rewritings must be systematic, bear on formal as opposed to contentual matters, and have as a dominant the exploration of writing rather than self or world. Furthermore, they may be more or less impersonal, explicit, massive, and new. To put it in other words, an experimental text is one that is taken to substitute the being of writing for the writing of being.

Keywords

avant-garde, post-modernism, post-modernist texts, avant-garde texts, textual rewriting, self, experimental text, being, writing

RECIPES

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Before I started to write a paper for this session,¹ I looked up the meaning of “experimental” in *Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary* and this is more or less what I found: “Experimental, adj[ective]. 1. Related to, or based on experience, esp[ecially] personal experience, as distinct from theory; 2. Of the nature of experiment, founded on experiment; as, *experimental* science; given to, or skilled in experiment.” I decided to discard the first definition since, in terms of it, indefinitely many texts (and perhaps most literary ones) would qualify as experimental (are they not, after all, related, in one way or another, to a personal experience?). I suppose one could even write a paper (or a book) claiming that all literature is, in this sense, experimental (in fact, it has been done), but that would perhaps be too general a claim to be very interesting. More crucially, it would not quite capture what many people, including myself, seem to mean when they speak of experimental texts.

The second definition was more promising: not only because it evoked Zola and his project for an experimental novel (“On a la chimie et la physique expérimentales, on aura la physiologie expérimentale, plus tard encore, on aura le roman expérimental”)² but also because it makes perfect sense to think that “experimental” has something to do with “experiment.” So I looked up “experiment”: “n[oun]. 1. A trial made to confirm or disprove something doubtful; an operation undertaken to discover some unknown principle or effect, or to test some suggested truth, or to demonstrate some known truth; as, a laboratory *experiment*. 2. The conducting of tests.” Though suggestive (particularly through the first entry), this was, once again, too general. If an experimental text is, say, one produced to discover some unknown principle or effect, or to test some possible truth, or to demonstrate some known truth, most if not all literary texts (and even non-literary ones) would qualify. Thus, one of the reasons for writing literature is to read what has not been

written. Another reason is to show that what was thought impossible is, in fact, quite possible: if *L'Immoraliste* implies that happiness is not narratable, for example ("Que serait l'histoire du bonheur?"), I might want to prove that it is. Besides, would any *roman à thèse* illustrating some well-known truth or any essay establishing that Proust was born in 1871 constitute an experimental text? I tend to doubt it.

I therefore decided to check the University of Pennsylvania library catalogue. Though I found many entries under experimental theater, experimental film, experimental art, I could find no heading for experimental fiction, experimental writing, or experimental text. Well, I *know* that the Penn library and its catalogue are quite good; and I believe that there is such a thing as an experimental text. But, as the very topic of our session indicates, it has not quite been defined yet (which probably accounts for the cataloguing gap). Indeed, the set of experimental texts is often confused with the set of postmodernist texts and, more generally, with the set of avant-garde texts. In other words, the fictions of Günter Grass and Peter Handke, the self-reflexive artifices of John Barth, Robert Coover and Thomas Pynchon, Hélène Cixous, or Monique Wittig's search for a specifically feminine writing, Sollers and his inscription of the body, Blanchot and his textual (ageneric?) fragmentation, Duras and her "silences," Beckett and the "poorly said," Oulipian productions, Butor, Ricardou, Maurice Roche, Claude Simon: are all put in the same bag.

Now, it is no doubt true that avant-garde texts and postmodernist ones often foreground (a more or less radical) experimentation with their own materials. But it is also true that the two sets are not exactly equivalent (in what sense is Pynchon's *V* an avant-garde text or Wittig's *Le Corps lesbien* a postmodernist one?) and, more importantly, that some of their dimensions and goals transcend experimentation and are in no way necessary to or distinctive of experimental texts. For postmodernists (say, Grass, Barth, or Pynchon), there is the assault on modernist assumptions (cultural elitism, faith in the privileged nature of literary language, quest for a fundamental and a historical human experience, attachment to certainty at the level of the signified if not the signifier). For avant-gardists (say, Roche, Cixous, Sollers, or Wittig), there is (and there has been ever since the term "avant-garde" became associated with literature) the importance of being ahead of the crowd, the championing of disruption and

transgression, the compulsion to seek a radically different future, the desire to modify the very foundation of personal and cultural economy, the belief in the social significance of the literary act, the insistence on the liberating aspects of that act at both the sociopolitical and personal levels.³

An experimental text can, of course, contradict modernist assumptions, “be ahead of its time,” prove personally liberating, transgress some dominant set of values, acquire a sociopolitical dimension. But we do not, I think, take it to be experimental for any of these reasons. In fact, the experimental text focuses on—yes!—textual experimenting rather than the expression/constitution of a new social/individual order; it relies on continuity rather than transgression; it favors the composed, the systematic, the programmatic over rupture and rapture. If the postmodernist text is manically (or depressingly!) self-conscious and the avant-garde text hysterical, the experimental text is paranoid.

It is for some of these reasons that I picked “Recipes” as a title. I know that, when applied to literature, the term might suggest disdain. But, in recent years, it has perhaps acquired enough critico-literary nobility to be used in a more neutral fashion: Greimas studied the recipe form in detail and Perec (I owe this to Warren Motte) wrote a piece entitled “81 fiches-cuisine à l’usage des débutants,” which offered 81 recipes for sole, rabbit, and sweetbreads. Besides, “recipes” seems more modest, less contaminated than “experiment” by *esprit de sérieux*; and it connotes systematicity, programming, control, continuity (it is etymologically linked to “receive”), and reproducibility. The experimental text is the production and product of a retrievable recipe.

But this is still far too general a definition and I will attempt, in what follows, to specify it and constrain it. As formalists, structuralists, intertextualists, Tynjanov, Mukarovsky, Bakhtin, Kristeva, Derrida, and—most recently and wittily—Genette (in *Palimpsestes*) have shown, any text (in the broad sense of signifying matter) is a retextualization, a rearrangement of certain (sets of) textual ingredients. More specifically, any writing (including Pierre Menard’s *Don Quijote*) is a rewriting. Such a rewriting can be more or less stylish (bear a more or less personal, idiosyncratic, individual stamp: think of *H* or *Paradis*, on the one hand, and of the famous S+7, on the other). It manifests in varying proportions (and with varying degrees of explicitness) the process of a production or fabrication and

the product of a transcendent vision or message; or, to put it in somewhat different terms, it constitutes both an exploration of its own space and an exploration of existents, events and situations more or less directly related to a "real" space. It is more or less massive (involving the transformation of very few or very many features) and more or less systematic (subjecting all instances of a given set of features or only some of them to a certain kind of treatment). It operates at the level of content and/or the level of expression. I might, for example, transform the spatio-temporal setting of a given text more or less radically. I might also modify the name, the sex, the age, the motivations, and even the actions of one or more characters. I might turn Robinson into Suzanne or Roquentin; I might make Roland wise; I might have Clytemnestra kill Orestes, Holophernes murder Judith, or, more boldly I think, I might (I did) have Oedipus kill his mother and marry his father. Or else, I might versify prose and prosify verse, alexandrinize octosyllables, transpose *A la recherche du temps perdu* into the third person and *Eugénie Grandet* into the first, redo *The Ambassadors* with an omniscient point of view and *Les Lauriers sont coupés* in free indirect discourse, rewrite "La Parure" in index form (I once did), or, more generally, write a fiction using only five of six vowels or only one of them (*La Disparition*, *Les Revenentes*), write a short story in the imperative, compose a diary novel in the third person, written in the future tense and with entries in a non-chronological order, or make up a realistic fiction' (I almost did, but I gave up) using all 66,472 words of the 1957 *Petit Larousse*. Finally, the rewriting can be more or less new (new like New Anacin or New Fab, new like Diet Coke, new like space opera, new like *La Jalousie*).

Now, experimental texts constitute a subset, a proper subset of the set of rewritings. Of course, needless to say, by, when I use the term, the two words, the term, I am not only referring to fictional writings, works, and more particularly narrative, to fictional and more particularly narrative fictional works (though they are the ones that I know best and though they perhaps lend themselves best to experiment, though they perhaps, though they potentially constitute, though they might) I am not only referring to narrative fictional texts but also to non-fictional ones, but also, as you perhaps can perhaps already tell, to non-fictional ones and, why not, essayistic or even critical ones. For instance, what I've been doing for the last couple of minutes and what I thought, what I initially thought I would do throughout my presentation is to read what I wrote, is to present the,

but I thought I'd spare you, for it becomes, for—you will surely agree—it quickly becomes very tedious, is to present a draft of my text, complete with repetitions, hesitations, corrections, mistakes, and so on and so forth.

Experimental writings constitute a proper subset of the set of rewritings. They range from the less to the more experimental and thus can differ considerably from one another. But they have at least three features in common (and they can have as many as seven). First, the rewriting bears (primarily) on the formal and not the contentual level (this would eliminate such works as *Dr. Faustus*, John Barth's *Climera*, *Suzanne et le Pacifique*, *Vendredi*, *La Nausée*, as well as my own *Oedipus*, but would not eliminate Robbe-Grillet's *La Jalousie* or Genette's "Vue de Rouen"). Second, to use a Russian Formalist term, the rewriting must have as a dominant the process of elaborating its own textual space rather than the exploration of another space; it must foreground the limits and possibilities of writing rather than of self or world; it must formalize rather than thematize (this would eliminate texts like *Pierrot mon ami*, *Les Choses*, *Lois*, *Tricks*, *Souffles*, or "disent les imbéciles," but not, say, Ricardou's *Les Lieux-dits*, subtitled "Petit guide d'un voyage dans le livre," or Queneau's *Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*). Third, the rewriting must be systematic (this might eliminate Ricardou's novel—I didn't bother to check—but not Queneau's collection of poems).

Of course, a recipe for experimental writing might include other ingredients. *Impersonality* (though, like certain scientific experiments or cooking recipes, a textual experiment might evoke an individual style): *explicitness* (as in Ponge's "Le Pré," which presents all the different states of a single poem, or Butor's *Intervalle*, which goes from first draft to published draft and similarly foregrounds production; however, explicitness too is not a *sine qua non*, since a recipe might call for the opposite); *massiveness* (the more features undergo a systematic treatment, the more manifestly experimental a text is; but, again, many experiments can be confined to one feature: it makes for more control!); and, finally, *newness* (but new is new strictly in terms of a "for someone and something," which explains why some texts—any sennet, sannat, or sinnit, for instance—are considered experimental when they are not the product of a new recipe and why other texts—*Cent Mille Milliards de poèmes*, for example—remain experimental well after they have stopped being new).

In short, an experimental text is one that is taken to pose and

answer the question “What rewriting would obtain if . . .?” in terms of a recipe using the first three (and sometimes more) of the basic ingredients I have described; or, to put it differently, an experimental text is one that is taken to substitute the being of writing for the writing of being.

NOTES

1. A version of this paper was presented at the 1984 NEMLA Convention Section on Experimental Writing in French. The topic for the section was “Toward a Definition of the Experimental Text.”
2. Emile Zola, *Le Roman experimental* (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1971), p. 70.
3. I have found Charles Russell, ed., *The Avant-Garde Today: An International Anthology* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press; 1981) more than useful in its characterization of post-modernism and the avant-garde.