L"Interdit’ or the ‘Other’ text in James Baldwin’s “Going To Meet the Man”

Benoît Depardieu
In 1973, in a dialogue with Nikki Giovanni, a young black woman writer, James Baldwin said: “if you're a writer you're forced to look behind the word into the meaning of the word” (89). What is acknowledged here by Baldwin is the absolute, unfathomable power of words in literature. During the same conversation, when asked by Nikki Giovanni if, as some people advocate, black writers should only write about black people, Baldwin answered: “The very first thing a writer has to face is that he cannot be told what to write” (73). Taking this last assertion ‘to the letter’, I would venture to hear behind these words, into the meaning of these words, the inexhaustible power of the literary text to produce meaning and, consequently, the writer’s impotence as regards any total control over the text s/he is producing. Which is why I postulate the existence of an unconscious of the text or textual unconscious. In other words, writers cannot be told what to write because they themselves always miss the very centre of the text, which is what makes it a literary one. There is always something implied, something implicit, which escapes their knowledge and control. It is this ‘lack-of-control’ which creates the pleasure of writing and reading.

Etymologically speaking, ‘implicit’ is derived from the Latin verb implicare which is composed of in + fold. ‘Implicit’, in its etymological sense, means ‘folded within’ (Felman 9) and one can obviously see the spatial relation of interiority that this term indicates, thus perfectly applicable to the literary field, a book being itself made up of pages that are folded in 4°, in 8°, and so on. What I mean is that the implicit is not that ‘something’ which is unsaid but that ‘something’ which is said in-between, which is literally folded within the text. Indeed, the implicit is not something that is absent, it is something which is present but not in the present, hic et nunc. The implicit, this said in-between, is unfolded in the “deferred action (l’après-coup) of an echoing effect” (Felman 121) and will only make sense in the aftermath. Through its very reading, the text so to speak, acts itself out (Felman 101). Thus, the said in-between is what makes the link between the
writer, the text and the reader: it is what is said/read between the writer and the reader. As James Mellard puts it: "A literary text both has a textual unconscious and creates a textual unconscious in readers, whose unconsciousnesses... are texts much like those found in the richest novels and poems" (xiv).

3 This postulate is inspired by Jacques Lacan’s theory of the unconscious, which he defines as structured like a language. By revisiting Freud’s writings and inspired by structuralists and post-structuralists, Lacan produced a theoretical system that is based on the primacy of the signifier over the signified. In other words, in the unconscious, meaning is not fixed but moving or sliding as signifiers are not defined by their direct link to a signified but by a negative relation to the other signifiers. A signifier X is what it is only because it is not signifier Y. Thus, according to Lacan, the unconscious is composed of a signifying chain that is constantly sliding: one signifier refers to another and never to a fixed signified.

4 If we accept the idea that a writer produces a text over which (s)he has no complete control, we may postulate the existence of an ‘Other’ text within the manifest one, a text we could regard as an unconscious text. In a seminar he held in 1973, published two years later with the title Encore, Lacan defined this text as “interdit”: “... this knowledge, as I have just said, because impossible is forbidden (interdit). Here, now, I can play on the ambiguity of the term: this impossible knowledge is censored, forbidden, but it is not if you write the term properly inter-dit, it is said between the words, between the lines” (151, my translation).

5 It is precisely this notion of “inter-dit” which is implicit – folded within – in all literary texts. Practically speaking, there are three strata, three topoi in a literary text which can be likened to Sigmund Freud’s first topographical model of the psyche, namely the conscious, the preconscious and the unconscious. Elaborating on the research led by professor Claudia Tate in Psychoanalysis and Black Novels, I contend that we can distinguish three discourses at work in a text, whatever the genre, which, through their interplay create a literary effect, a writing/reading effect. To illustrate my postulate, I have chosen to deal with a short-story by James Baldwin published in 1965 in the only collection of short-stories ever published by the author. I consider that Going to Meet the Man is a good example of the implicit as “inter-dit” since it raises the problem of the jouissance of the text.

The “singing” or the signifying chain in the conscious discourse

6 Claudia Tate refers to the first stratum or discourse as the conscious discourse, which is obviously that of the plot, characterization and dialogue. Nevertheless, this discourse, albeit conscious, harbours some aspects of the unconscious (13). In the short-story by James Baldwin, the conscious discourse is exemplary of this as the plot is acted out on a psychological level. Jesse, a deputy sheriff in a southern town of the United States, is in bed with his wife Grace to whom he is functionally unable to make love. This mechanical impotence – concretely “having trouble getting it up” (232) as Jesse says to himself – is rendered even more obsessive as Grace keeps repeating in her sentences the signifier “hard” (231) which insists on the erection trouble. The whole short story revolves around the attempt by Jesse at reconstructing his own history and finding the missing chapter,
the “blank” chapter, which could explain the present symptom. Thus, the conscious discourse resembles an anamnesis and mixes present elements and past events to progressively get back to the source of the conflict.

7 Anamnesis is a quest for identity urged by the desire to know which is addressed to the Other, this agency which is presumed to know who/what I am. Increasingly, Jesse’s text unfolds the linguistic elements and structure that form the signifying chain of his history, the very place where he is inscribed as a subject. This signifying chain – the actual thread of the text – is materialized by the repetition of a “singing”, a singing which Jesse “was supposed to make them stop” (234). It is particularly important to notice that it is not the song which is repeated but the singing, the verb here taking on the value of a “re-acting-out”. Thus the singing acts as a metonymy – the part for the whole – as it represents both black people and the very desire of Jesse’s unconscious text. Desire, as Lacan says, is a metonymy in that it always misses its actual object. Desire is the desire of the Other (Ecrits II 175, my translation). It is through the repetition of the metonymy that desire is openly disclosed, unfolded in Jesse’s text. As Claudia Tate writes: “[a] pattern of repetition propels a signifying chain... and is reminiscent of Freud’s theory on compulsive repetition: the compulsion to repeat signals the resistance of repression. The repetition therefore suggests that they are signifiers of the repressed” (137). This resistance of repression is clearly expressed in the text of the short story: “something deep in him and deep in his memory was stirred, but whatever was in his memory eluded him” (235-6). So, Jesse suffers from an incapacity of “let[ting] whatever was in him out” (232), in other words an ejaculation problem, being either words or semen.

8 The repetition of the “singing” which pervades the first half of the short story suggests the resistance to the return of the repressed which is, nevertheless, already inscribed in the text. While Jesse “lay there, one hand between his legs” (231) – the very place of the “matter” – the various signifiers belonging to the traumatic episode which is being re-acted out enter the text, waiting for re-activation: “A faint light came from the shutters; the moon was full. Two dogs far away, were barking at each other, back and forth... He heard a car coming north on the road... The lights hit the shutters...” (232, my emphasis). The singing which “filled him” coming “from the depths of his own belly” (237) is “the sound with which he was most familiar – though it was the sound of which he had been least conscious – and it had always contained an obscure comfort” (238), something that resembles the Freudian definition of the Uncanny (Unheimliche), something that belongs in you but that has been repressed. This singing “would never end” (239) because it is the very essence of Jesse’s desire. And it is precisely when he wishes to make the singing stop, in other words to make them shut their mouths (241) that the singing becomes the song: “I stepped in the river at Jordan. Out of the darkness of the room, out of nowhere, the line came flying up at him” (241).

9 The ambivalence of Jesse’s affect: “He felt an overwhelming fear, which yet contained a curious and dreadful pleasure” (241-42) belongs to the uncanny effect of the return of the repressed: here the lyrics of the song, the singing getting nearer and clearer. The text, as Tate puts it, “acts out... the narrative’s repressed desire by staging repetitive incidents and characters. These repetitions form a series of metonymic displacements – Lacanian signifying chains – to fill the lack caused by a primary loss” (136). The situation of the incipit of the short story is but the repetition of a past incident belonging to Jesse’s history: “It had been night, as it was now, he was in the car between his mother and his father... The car lights picked up their wooden house... Their dog, chained to a tree, began
to bark” (242-43, my emphasis). So, what is keeping Jesse awake now is exactly what kept him awake that night:

He wanted to call his mother, but he knew his father would not like this. He was terribly afraid. Then he heard his father’s voice in the other room, low, with a joke in it; but this did not help him, it frightened him more, he knew what was going to happen... He heard his mother’s moan, his father’s sigh, he gritted his teeth. Then their bed began to rock. His father’s breathing seemed to fill the world. (243)

This episode, reminiscent of what Freud called the primal scene in which the subject saw or heard his parents having sexual intercourse, is but one step in the attempt to stop the signifying chain and discover the object of the quest. The singing resumes, floats, echoes then begins to cease as the car gets to the “clearing” where the unforgettable picnic is to take place. Then “all was silent” (247).

The black body: the “unfolded corpse” in the preconscious discourse.

Everything gets clearer as Jesse enters the clearing and though he is unable to see what the others are staring at, he can feel that there lies the object of the quest. What stands at the very centre of this clearing is the black body about to be lynched. This black body hanging from a tree stands out as a revelation, something like an epiphany, at the very core of which lies the secret object of the White’s desire.

In fact, what is implied in the “singing” is also this jouissance of black people, the power they are presumed to have to transcend death: “Even when they’re sad, they sound like they just about to go and tear off a piece” (242), Jesse’s father says. This jouissance of the other, which is just presumed, is the cause of a hatred which is the essence of racism: the hatred for the jouissance of the Other. The black body is the metaphor of the Other, the one occupying the position of that presumed jouissance, which is unbearable because it is barred to the subject, it is prohibited (interdite). Yet, this jouissance is inscribed in Jesse’s text: “there they sat, a whole tribe, pumping out kids, it looked like, every damn five minutes, and laughing and talking and playing music like they didn’t have a care in the world” (233), “it wasn’t his fault if the niggers had taken it into their heads to fight against God and go against the rules laid down in the Bible for everyone to read!” (238). Therefore, the Black represents that subject presumed to have/to know this jouissance which amounts to transgression. Indeed, the confrontation with the young black activist is but the repetition of the lynching – the confrontation with “the black corpse floating in the national psyche” as Baldwin said in an interview (Leeming 201).

What is folded within the preconscious discourse of “Going to Meet the Man” is the inevitable connection between race and sex and the oedipal source of white racism. This is represented through the association of the primal scene and the lynching. What’s more, the eroticization of the black body: “Sweat was pouring from the hair in his armpits, poured down his sides, over his chest, into his navel and his groin” (249), “the hanging, gleaming body, the most beautiful and terrible object he had ever seen till then” (250) insists on the sexual content of the hatred for the black body.

The apex of the lynching scene – and of Jesse’s text – is represented by the castration of the black body as though what was most unbearable in this confrontation were the actualization of the difference: “In the cradle of the one white hand, the nigger’s privates seemed as remote as meat being weighed in the scales; but seemed heavier, too, much
heavier, and Jesse felt his scrotum tighten; and huge, huge, much bigger than his father’s, flaccid, hairless, the largest thing he had seen till then, and the blackest” (250, my emphasis). Thus, “Cutting the dreadful thing away” (251) annihilates the difference.

In Jesse’s text the emasculated black body – “a black charred object on the black, charred ground... lay spread-eagled with what had been a wound between what had been his legs” (251) – operates as the repressed which has been at the centre of Jesse’s history since that day and which is at the centre of his present text. Indeed, at the very beginning of the story, “the image of a black girl caused a distant excitement in him, like a far-away light; but... instead of forcing him to act, it made action impossible” (231) because it is not the female black body which is repressed but the (presumed) phallic power of the black male, the “phallophany” (Felman 29) during the ever-present picnic. And, above all, because it is not the sexual relation between a white man and a black girl which is “inter-dite” but the oedipal transgressive act of raping the white woman, that which is acted out by Jesse at the end of the short story: “Come on, sugar, I’m going to do you like a nigger, just like a nigger, come on, sugar, and love me just like you’d love a nigger” (252).

The jouissance of the textual unconscious.

According to Claudia Tate, the unconscious discourse in a literary text is to be found in the “longings inscribed in the [text]’s most deeply encoded rhetorical elements” (13). So far, I have dealt with the metonymic displacement of the “singing” and the central metaphor of the black body. What can be deciphered of the unconscious discourse in Baldwin’s short story is a “something” which has to do with the Father. The Father, as a symbolic agency, plays an essential role in mediating the alienating relation between the mother and the child, by imposing a law prohibiting incest and introjecting the threat of castration. Obviously, the whole scenario is played at both an unconscious and symbolic level. Lacan defined this fundamental unconscious process as the “paternal metaphor” because the Name-of-the-Father is substituted to the desire of the mother. Therefore all psychological conflicts revolve around the economy of Desire and the Law.

Interestingly, Jesse is a deputy sheriff, whose models have always been his father’s friends, “[m]en much older than he, who had been responsible for law and order much longer than he...” (239). The problem seems to lie in the fact that he is but a deputy sheriff, this signifier containing an idea of incompleteness which grows unbearable to Jesse.

The ‘Other’ text (reference to the lacanian great Other) is ‘inter-dit’ that is to say said in-between, between the lines, between the words. One way the ‘Other’ text finds to cross the bar of repression is through the linguistic process studied by Freud in Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Indeed, language is far from univocal and polysemy is the essence of it. By letting out one or several signifiers that can refer to different signifieds, the unconscious finds a way to circumvent repression. In “Going to Meet the Man” several occurrences of this phenomenon can be found. First of all, as I postulate that a writer lacks total control over the text (s)he is producing, some signifiers, which appear as rather disconnected with the rest of the conscious discourse – diegesis –, may be regarded as originated by some other agency. This is the case of the expression “mail-order” (233) in which we can hear phonetic play on mail/male and lexical play on the meaning of order. As a chain of signifiers makes sense only in the deferred, this expression will not make sense until we reach the central metaphor. We already know that Jesse is obsessed with law and order, but the “mail-order” expression takes on its
‘Real’ value, which belongs to another order. Jesse suffers from a ‘lack-of-power’, first by his position as a deputy, then when faced with the resistance of black people and particularly the black boy, finally by his sexual impotence. Jesse is unable to belong to the order of males, to the male order. In addition, the episode connected to the “mail-order” job focuses on the problem of naming, which is later associated with the words of the song (I stepped into the river at Jordan), the river Jordan being the very place where Jesus was baptized, thus raising the problem of the Name-of-the-Father.

The other occurrences of what could be regarded as word play concern the metaphorical value of the lynching. Once the hanging black body, half-burnt, had been emasculated, “the crowd rushed forward, tearing at the body with their hands, with knives, with rocks, with stones, howling and cursing” (251, my emphasis). It is the verb “tearing” which, once again in the deferred, unfolds the ‘Other’ text by allowing two previous expressions to make sense: “he would drive over yonder and pick up a black piece” (232, my emphasis) and “Even when they’re sad, they sound like they just about to go and tear off a piece” (242, my emphasis). It is by taking these expressions ‘to the letter’ that the unconscious discourse is disclosed. The metaphorical value of “tearing off/picking up a black piece” lies in its connection with what I have defined as the hatred for the jouissance of the Other. The black body is the metaphor of the Other presumed to have... the power, the phallus and so, is but an avatar, by condensation, of the Other represented by the Father.

Another unconscious process confirms this connection.

The language used by a writer is made up of phonetic and graphic elements. Lacan refers to the importance of the Letter, which is actually the graphic structure and composition of the text. The ‘inter-dit’ in a text reveals itself by creating a writing/reading effect of oddity, either phonetic, graphic or lexical. This is the case at the beginning of Jesse’s text with the repetition, deconstruction, recomposition and inversion of a sequence of letters: “The sound of the car slipped away, he heard it hit gravel, then heard it no more. Some liver-lipped students...” (232, my emphasis),... that blood run down of the fat split or the sealed eyes struggle open” (233, my emphasis). The sequence S. L. I. P., which could be regarded as a Freudian slip, is turned into the sequence L. I. P. S. But it is only when reaching the lynching scene that this sequence of letters makes sense and unfolds the unconscious discourse it sealed: “His father's lips had a strange, cruel curve, he wet his lips from time to time, and swallowed. He was terribly aware of his father's tongue, it was as though he had never seen it before” (247, my emphasis). Apart from an obvious phallic metaphorical value of the father’s tongue, what is implied here is the oral drive of incorporation which is displaced onto the tearing off/picking up of black pieces from the lynched body. The “picnic” as Jesse’s father calls it is the acting-out of what Freud analysed as the totemic meal after the murder of the Father in Totem and Taboo. The oral drive of incorporation is even clearly expressed in Jesse’s father’s words: “I reckon we better get over there and get some of that food before it’s all gone” (251). It is precisely in this repressed oral drive that lies the uncanny effect of the lynching scene both on Jesse (he then both loves and hates his father) and the reader.

‘Signifyingly’ enough, the last scene of the short story which is but the fantasized acting-out of the incest with the (M)other after the emasculation and murder of the Father, is introduced by the repetition of the father’s words: “I reckon” (252), Jesse taking the place of the Father-Other, the subject presumed to have. It is this transgressive act which lies at the core of the ‘inter-dit’ and that triggers the jouissance of the text.
A poetics of the ‘Other’ text?

If we were to try to create a poetics of the ‘inter-dit’ of a literary text, we would have to consider various processes which all belong both to literature and the unconscious – the latter being structured like a language and language being the essence of literature. First, albeit not in a hierarchical order, metonymy, which operates on the syntagmatic axis and is likened to the process of displacement in the unconscious, as an expression of desire but a process that does not cross the bar of repression. Second, metaphor, which operates on the paradigmatic axis, likened to the process of condensation in the unconscious, which permits a crossing of the bar of repression. Third, the slips and puns which play on the polysemy of language. And, eventually, the graphic effects of the “Letter” and what Lacan called “lalangue” – the phonetic effects of a language which “is aimed at anything else but communication... and affects us first and foremost through all the effects it produces – effects that are nothing else but affects” (Encore 176, my translation).

L’ ‘inter-dit’ or the ‘Other’ text has to do with the jouissance of which, as Alan Sheridan makes clear in his translator’s note to Lacan’s Ecrits:

there is no adequate translation in English... ‘Enjoyment’ conveys the sense contained in jouissance, of enjoyment of rights, of property, etc. Unfortunately, in modern English, the word has lost the sexual connotations it still retains in French... ‘Pleasure’, on the other hand, is pre-empted by ‘plaisir’ – and Lacan uses the two terms quite differently. ‘Pleasure’ obeys the law of homeostasis that Freud evokes in ‘Beyond the Pleasure Principle’, whereby, through discharge, the psyche seeks the lowest possible level of tension. ‘Jouissance’ transgresses this law and, in that respect, is beyond the pleasure principle” (Sheridan, x).

The difference I would venture to make between the preconscious discourse and the unconscious one lies precisely in the distinction between pleasure, which is discharge, and jouissance, which is transgression of the Law.

What I have tried to demonstrate with the ‘analysis’ of “Going to Meet the Man” is the presence of various strata of discourse which form the literary text and provoke by their interplay writing/reading effects/affects. “We read, writes Jane Gallop, to learn what the Other (what the Author) knows, to learn what are his desires, in the hope of understanding and satisfying our own” (185). In this transferential relation, the author and the text are the subjects presumed to know and we, readers, desire to know what the Other knows. Transference, says Lacan, is “the acting out of the reality of the unconscious” (Quatre concepts, 158). Through this unconscious process, we attempt to take hold of the knowledge of the Other and as James Mellard writes: “It is this ‘deeper’, more unconscious relation... that makes our reading of literature so vibrantly meaningful for us, and explains why we cannot always say why a work will touch us so powerfully. That power of affect is the one that comes from the unconscious, whether it lies in us or in the texts that seem to bring it up or from which we bring it up” (55). Jacques Lacan expressed the “vibrantly meaningful” using word play which is unfortunately untranslatable in English but quite appropriate as a concluding remark for this analysis: la jouissance du texte est là où j’ouis sens (the jouissance of the text lies where I hear sense).
BIBLIOGRAPHY


NOTES

1. The French term jouissance in its Lacanian acception, James Hulbert writes, is particularly difficult to translate in English as it comprehends the notions of enjoyment, use, bliss and orgasm (Felman 53).
5. For an in-depth analysis of the “paternal function” in James Baldwin’s novels, see my PhD dissertation “L’économie de la fonction paternelle dans l’œuvre romanesque de James Arthur Baldwin (1924-1987)”. 
6. Allusion is made to Lacan’s algorithm representing the primacy of the signifier (S) over the signified (s): S/s. The bar represents the repression.
8. I allude to what Jacques Lacan calls the 'Real': what is impossible to express, what has been thrown out of the Symbolic by the primary repression and which returns with the repressed.

9. Connections between the hanging black body and Jesse’s father are numerous throughout the lynching scene (see pages 249-251).


11. The motherlike value of Grace, Jesse’s wife, is expressed in the following sentence: “He felt that he would like to hold her, hold her, hold her, and be buried in her like a child...” (233). It is worth noticing the signifying repetition of “hold her” which is so close phonetically speaking to “older”, recalling the father figures and Jesse’s own growing problem.

ABSTRACTS

A la suite de Sigmund Freud et Jacques Lacan, qui jetèrent les bases d’une psychanalyse des textes littéraires et se tournèrent vers la littérature pour illustrer certains de leurs concepts ou hypothèses, cet article tend à démontrer que la nouvelle, comme tout texte littéraire, est faite de trois ‘strates’ rappelant la première topique de Freud. Par une ‘textanalyse’ de la nouvelle de James Baldwin intitulée “Going to Meet the Man”, ces trois strates, ou discours, sont mis au jour ainsi que leurs interactions à l’intérieur du texte, au-delà du texte et au plus profond du texte. En d’autres termes, l’‘Autre’ texte ou ce que Jacques Lacan appelle “l’inter-dit” qui n’est pas le non-dit mais ce qui est ‘entredit’, est dévoilé par l’étude attentive des répétitions métonymiques, de la métaphore centrale et des effets phonétiques et graphiques de la langue, une poétique de l’inter-dit qui pourrait aider à entendre la jouissance implicite du texte.

AUTHORS

BENOÎT DEPARDIEU

Benoît Depardieu is professeur agrégé at the University of Evry-Val d’Essonne where he teaches English, civilisation and translation. He holds a PhD degree from the University of Paris III-Sorbonne Nouvelle, where he wrote a dissertation on “The Economics of the Paternal Function in the Novels of James Arthur Baldwin”. He has delivered papers and published essays about the novels and short-stories of James Arthur Baldwin and is currently at work on a volume dedicated to James Baldwin in the series entitled “Voix Américaines”. He is engaged in research on a psychoanalytical approach to African-American literature.