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HÉRITAGES ET CONTINUITÉS DE LA SÉMIOLOGIE TEXTUELLE

Textual Semantics and Literature: Corpus, Texts, Translation

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Les langues sont des poussières d'œuvres.
François Rastier

Textual semantics and linguistics

Textual semantics is not a school or movement in linguistics or in literary criticism. It can be described as a continuation from and remodeling of the first European structuralism. It is not so much a *theory* as a praxeology, born from the interpretation of texts as practised. And like the first European structuralism, textual semantics provides useful tools for reading all texts, including those texts supplied by the social practice called literature.¹ That is why this paper aims to present a survey of a selection of literary studies inspired by this textual linguistics. Textual semantics was initiated by François Rastier who once worked with Greimas and Pottier and tried to improve on their most debatable implications,

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1. Which does not mean that textual semantics considers all texts as being equal. On the contrary, textual semantics distinguishes between documents (whose science is philology), texts (whose science is linguistics), and *œuvres* (whose science is hermeneutics). The *œuvre* is the artistic work which has subsequently produced its own followers and its own network of commentaries. Not all texts become *œuvres*. To address the issue of value, Rastier explains that it is necessary to articulate internal and external linguistics. The latter concerns a special interaction between point of view and guarantee. See “Du texte à l'œuvre : la valeur en question” (2011b, p. 46). In addition, each social practice produces its own discursive practices and traditions (including its own corpora of texts, i. e. its own genres).

like the existence of universal functions in texts² or that of universal semantic traits called “noèmes.”³ Rastier’s semantics concentrates instead not on language — that abstract object appealing to the philosophy of language — but on languages and the way we produce meaning within empirical utterances. Similarly it focuses not on ‘text’ but on various texts produced by various social practices and their respective discursive practices. Unlike most linguistic disciplines, textual semantics does not rely on the widespread principle inherited from the logical-grammatical tradition, according to which the superior unit is the result of the addition of inferior units: e.g. the sentence is a mere sum of words, and the text a mere sum of sentences.⁴ By contrast, its underlying paradigm is borrowed from the hermeneutic tradition,⁵ according to which, as in holism, the global thing is more than the sum of its individual parts and the local level is always determined by this global object. François Rastier (2011a, p. 17) has described and summarized these two problematics in the following table.

<i>Problematics</i>	Grammatical and logical	Hermeneutical and rhetorical
<i>Privileged Units</i>	Word and clause	Text
<i>Orders</i>	Rules	Norms
<i>Semantics</i>	Signification	Meaning ⁶
<i>Contextualisation</i>	Minimal	Maximum
<i>Instances</i>	System(s)	Corpus

Such a theoretical stand has many pragmatic implications, among which the facts that

- meaning is determined by the context of the linguistic unit, to the point that the context, however extended it may be, can radically reshape the relationships between signifieds and signifiers;
- the various sections of a given text are determined by the global project; some of them, called “passages”, are places where the global meaning is transformed;
- and that a given text is determined by the corpus it emerges from and which it also contributes to changing.

2. See Propp’s 31 functions found in Russian tales and extended to all mythical texts (1969).

3. Pottier’s ‘noemes’ are independent from specific languages, hence universal, whereas ‘semes’ are inherent to a given language.

4. See Todorov’s article “Le texte” (1972).

5. Not philosophical hermeneutics but rather the linguistic hermeneutics embodied by Schleiermacher. See Szondi (1975, pp. 291-292, 301-302) and Schleiermacher (1987, pp. 73-79, 173-183).

6. Jean-Jacques Lecercle (1999) distinguishes between *meaning* (of the text as willed by the author) and *significance* (meaning of the text to the interpreter). But he also explains that both meaning and significance are “coups de force” imposed by the interpreter.

Textual semantics and other semantics

That kind of praxeology distinguishes textual semantics from most contemporary linguistics, and also from the other semantics at large. First, vericonditional semantics assesses utterances as right or wrong, thereby discussing texts in terms of worlds or things; this emphasis on referential elements shows that textual subtleties — possibly worked out by an interpreter, such as intertextual relationships — are lost sight of. Second, pragmatic semantics also disregards the semiotic to focus instead on the situation of enunciation and the speakers involved; it is often interlaced with Speech Act Theory, focusing on utterers' intentions and linguistic actions, or Discourse Analysis, stressing the historical and sociological determinations of the agents involved; as a result, the discourse or text under scrutiny, even the literary one, is displaced to social practices which have other discursive practices, like sociology, history, or politics; it is thus not interpreted as part of its original social and linguistic practice. Even the more recent enunciation theories consider utterances as the expression of a transcendental subject, thus bypassing the issue of textuality.⁷ Third, most cognitive semantics consider language as a medium conveying prior formations called ideas or concepts.⁸ As such, the three types of semantics reviewed above miss the point which is textual semantics' concern — namely interpretation as interaction between a given text and a given interpreter, or, to put it more precisely, the linguistic constraints bearing on any language speaker in the process of making sense. More generally speaking, linguistics, being more and more formalist, cannot account for texts and genres; and grammar, being bent as it is on examining regularities or texts like sentences, is not instrumental either in the study of textual and generic norms.⁹

By contrast, textual semantics focuses on the linguistic constraints imposed on readers' interpretative processes, not on truth, objects or subjects. The text is its minimal working unit, with morphemes being minimal linguistic entities and semes minimal semantic units. Meaning is analyzed and described as semantic traits (semes and clusters of semes¹⁰) which are actualized and virtualized by an interpreter whose interpretation process temporarily stabilizes connections which are originally not reified. A semantic unit influences its context and, conversely, its meaning is determined by its context,¹¹ which can be extended to the whole text,

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7. Even markers are considered as leftover traces from underlying operations, evaluated according to invariants. This testifies to another instance of mentalism.
 8. For an extensive discussion of mentalism in most cognitive semantics, see Rastier (1991).
 9. Unlike rules, norms are not transcendental prescriptions; they are used to be transformed or destroyed. See *Mondes à l'envers*, Introduction.
 10. For a definition and practice of generic/specific semes, on the one hand, and inherent/afferent semes, on the other, see Rastier (1987) and (1989).
 11. Rastier often reminds us that dictionaries statistically idealize utterances, which are more than mere actualizations of dictionary signification. Utterances and texts come first; dictionaries second: "Meaning is not signification transformed by context; signification is impoverished

and even to the corpus (body of texts belonging to a tradition) from which it has emerged.

Textual semantics and literature

This brings us to briefly examine the contribution of textual semantics to the critical literary tradition. But just as formal linguistics falls short of explaining how norms, texts, and *œuvres* work, literary criticism is divided into various approaches which offer limited viewpoints on those issues.¹² The traditions centering on the author, his life, his time, his milieu, his subconscious, transform texts into reflections of various realities, neglecting the interaction between texts and interpreters. The movements revolving around the interpreter have produced models of the real, abstract or implied reader which do not account for all textual phenomena. As for the procedures dealing with texts, they have failed to provide satisfactory tools simultaneously addressing all texts and accounting for those texts' specificities. To be more precise, thematic studies have not supplied useful definitions to describe themes and their intra- or intertextual transformations. Myth studies have not provided general methods. Deconstruction allows for the proliferation of meaning but fails to establish objectification leading to a hierarchy of interpretations based on their plausibility. Minority studies see texts as reflections of or discourse on the real. Their emphasis on the referential or on socio-political considerations bypasses the specificities of textual phenomena and literary genres. Postcolonial studies leave out those texts which do not accommodate the postcolonial discourse. Most recent approaches displace the literary text into social practices which have discursive traditions other than the literary ones and interpret it along those alien practices. By contrast, textual semantics provides methodological tools to describe our interpretative trajectories. But it does not tell us in advance what is to be sought for in and said about texts. Its modest ambition is to help us objectivize our interpreting activities in order to transmit them on a basis different from that of individual intuition or feeling.

Although textual semantics does not reduce meaning to referential conformity, it does not deny the existence of the real but offers to temporarily postpone this issue in order to concentrate on textual effects: the way our "referential impressions" are given rise to by networks of signs which are actualized or virtualized by interpreters. The social is not denied existence but it is sifted through as something specific to the cultural field, such as the writer's historical situation, the first readership's own situation, or the generic tradition which is adopted and transformed by the writer.

meaning since it has been cut off from its context" (Rastier 1994, 2002, p. 41). Hence, his sentence: "Les langues sont des poussières d'œuvres".

12. First because those approaches do not work together but separately. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Introduction in Canon-Roger & Chollier (2008).

Rather than rely on feelings and emotions, the interpreter is offered tools in order to go beyond purely quantitative results and reach out to qualitative assessments.¹³

Proposals

Because textual semantics is a praxeological blend of theory and practice, the following will show various fields in which research has been particularly fruitful. Three areas will be investigated: the relationships between corpus and texts; those between texts and passages; those between source and target languages in translation. Why start with corpus? Experience has shown that texts are determined, not constrained, by the genres pertaining to a given discursive practice. They are thus determined by their generic corpus, while reshaping that corpus, just as a child receives determinations from its family which is both followed up and remodeled by the child. Therefore, ignoring a text's corpus leads to misinterpretation because meaning comes from differences¹⁴: contrasting texts within a corpus enables one to pinpoint their respective specificities.

1. Corpus and texts

Critics usually distinguish between explicit or implicit intertextuality, which relates a given text to another, and internal or external intertextuality. Internal intertextuality makes sense of the variations between the successive versions of a final text (its successive drafts), while external intertextuality compares the text with its various sources, be they of the same genre within the same tradition or of another discursive tradition. For clarity's sake, three kinds of corpus — genetic, generic, intertextual — will be distinguished below but analysis and interpretation often combine the three approaches which tend to reinforce each other.

1.1. Genetic corpus

In "Flaubert et les Hérodiades" (*Mondes à l'envers*, "Cinquième monde") François Rastier (forthcoming) has merged two previous studies devoted to the incipit of Flaubert's tale, *Hérodiade* (1992, 1997). The two former studies' titles shed light on the combination of the two approaches — internal and external intertextuality — at work in "Cinquième monde". In addition, internal intertextuality study falls into two movements: first, prospective analysis tries to make sense of the succession of the drafts; then, conversely, retrospective interpretation starts from the final text to raise hypotheses and validate or invalidate them after close study of the

13. This is the program offered in François Rastier's *La Mesure et le grain* (2011a).

14. Textual semantics is neither referential, nor inferential, but differential. It relies on Saussure's definition of value. See, among others, Rastier (1994, tr. ang. 2002, pp. 36-40).

drafts. Let us note that in rewriting semantic traits can be crossed but also resumed; condensed; moved; spread, etc.

The interpretation of the manuscripts shows that the first seven drafts (out of eleven) set up two major isotopies — a generic one //religion// and a specific one //verticality// — merged together with basic point of view. What has become the final text's first paragraph is, according to the norm of 19th-century stories, the descriptive version of what is going to be developed in a narrative mode. As of the eighth draft, historical/political considerations are withered to the benefit of religious traits. The drafts thus combine three *topoi* — *hortus conclusus*, the celestial city and the flower on the edge of the abyss — which are associated to the generic isotopy //religion// and the specific one //verticality//.

The next step concentrates on long-distance comparison between the published *incipit* and another passage from the end, which describes John the Baptist's severed head. Rastier notices that semantic traits have migrated from the citadel to the surrounding landscape. Even more important, the fortress, Antipas and the head all share one cluster of traits — /virile/ /stiff/ /upper/ /vertical/ — while the city, Salome and the dish supporting the cut head are all described by another — /female/ /undulating/ /below/ /horizontal/. The contrast between the two clusters is verified in one version and also from draft to draft.

Eventually, the final text is compared to its numerous sources (external intertextuality). Rastier shows that as of the eighth draft the /vegetal/ traits and the /liquid/ ones are respectively replaced by /mineral/ and /solid/ and that those substitutions go together with narrative transformations such as John's martyr and Antipas' punishment. In other words, the changes introduced to the landscape from /vegetal/ to /mineral/ perform the Biblical destruction of cursed cities and John's prophesy. The Biblical intertext is achieved by the recurring traits /perfective/ /mineral/ /dry/. External intertextuality is combined to internal intertextuality to work out the anticipating function of the text — when vegetal is compared to mineral — as well as the retrospective quality of the last landscape description — when comparisons with water appear and the perfective aspect suggests result.

Rastier concludes that *genesis* of the final text goes together with destruction of the various sources. Thus, what is referred to is not so much the so-called reality as other texts which are gradually concealed as Flaubert's own text is shaped. The writer's celebrated documentation only serves to create more myth, that is, more text.

1.2. *Generic corpus*

Modernity with its glorification of individual freedom in the political realm has affected literature and the way authors and critics look at the relationships between texts and tradition. Individual creation has indeed been conceived of as a way to “make it new” and as complete disconnection from the past. Texts were deemed unique and interpreters were induced to steer clear of classification. But if works

made it all new, they could not be read by anyone except maybe by their authors, as Erich Hirsch put it¹⁵:

Schleiermacher, whose aphorisms on interpretation are among the most profound contributions to hermeneutics, deserves credit for first laying bare the fundamental importance of genre. "Uniqueness in speech," he said, "shows itself as a deviation from the characteristics that determine the genre," for in every case of understanding, "the whole is apprehended as genre — *Das Ganze wird ursprünglich verstanden als Gattung.*" In this insight Schleiermacher laid the foundation for that ideal discipline which impelled his thinking on hermeneutics — a truly general theory of interpretation. For the concept of genre cuts through all particular varieties of biblical, poetical, historical, and legal interpretation of texts because the notion of genre in itself determines an intrinsic mode of proceeding. To be concerned with the precise genre of a text is to give every text its due and to avoid the external imposition of merely mechanical methods and canons of interpretation.

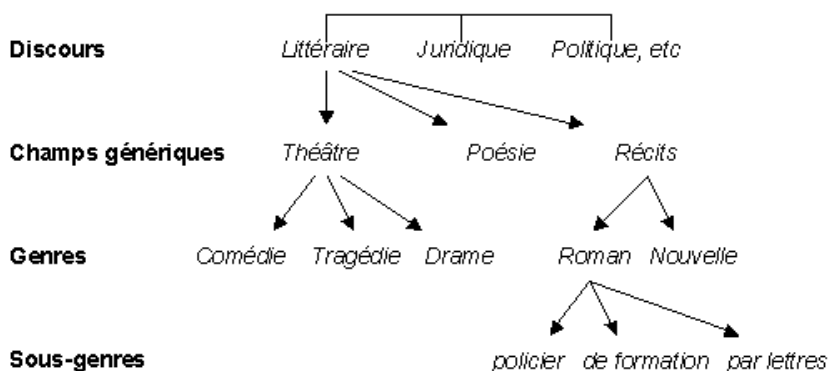
Finally, the concept of genre calls attention to the necessity of self-critical thinking in interpretation, for there can be no apodictic certainty that our preliminary guess regarding a text's genre is correct. Yet that guess governs and constitutes what we subsequently say about the text. (1967, p. 263)

The contrast between legacy and transformation of legacy is precisely what leads us to assess a text's specificity. Data-base research on a corpus of works by French authors Hugo, Lamartine and Musset¹⁶ has shown that individual styles were not as salient as generic specificities. In other words, what the research came up with were, not three writers, but a novelist, a poet and a playwright: Hugo's poems are closer to Lamartine's and Musset's than to his own novels. Thus, genre-determination is more significant than stylistic determination.

The problem with genres is that they are understood as classes, or prescriptions, which inevitably leads to misunderstanding or mistakes. The prescriptive approach (Plato's and Aristotle's) has long been given up and genres are now described as norms, not rules, the former being constantly tampered with and extracted from bodies of texts. Genres are no longer understood as prescriptive rules but as families by which texts are determined but which are reshaped by those texts, too. Therefore, genres can best be described empirically as sets of interacting norms and texts as specific patterns of those norms. Malrieu and Rastier (2001) have produced the following tree showing the various levels of text determination:

15. See also in René Wellek and Austin Warren: "the totally familiar and repetitive pattern is boring; the totally novel form will be unintelligible — is indeed unthinkable" (1948, ch. 17 "Literary Genres", p. 235).

16. Muller & Brunet (1988).



A body of texts produces the set of norms which are performed and remodeled by new emerging works. Therefore, contrasting a set of interacting norms and a given textual achievement can help us describe the text's specificity.

A good example of genre-study inspired by textual semantics is provided by Charlotte Lacoste's ground-breaking work on the literary genre of testimony.¹⁷ In the wake of Rastier's work on Primo Levi,¹⁸ Lacoste has put together 300 texts written by witnesses having survived from major violent 20th-century conflicts. Her first challenge was to stay clear of pre-existing miscellaneous categories, including war novels (with their fictions and fictitious witnesses).¹⁹ Indeed her project was not limited to a thematic definition such as "extreme political violence" but added another criterium pertaining to the ethical dimension of literature — the authors' vow to testify to historic planned destruction of human beings. This validated a number of testimonies about World War I, Third-Reich concentration camps, and the 1960s French war in Algeria. After finalizing the corpus, the next step was to contrast "real" testimonies with diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, novels and false testimonies. Finally, quantitative survey of the scanned corpus made it possible to come up with qualitative results.

The corpus was limited to 20th-century testimonies because in France, the first generations of educated people who could testify in writing appeared only after education was made compulsory in 1882. Moreover, the Great War concerned not only career officers but also enlisted civilians. Then, between 1915 and 1928, one man — Jean Norton Cru — collected 304 texts and published a critical book stressing those works' restraint, as opposed to the grandiloquent bombast foregrounding heroism in war legends. The corpus also included Third-Reich camp and Algerian War testimonies. The historical and political status of these

17. For more details, see her Ph. D. thesis and also "Approche sémantique d'un genre littéraire: le témoignage" (2014).

18. *Ulysse à Auschwitz. Primo Levi, le survivant* (2005). Previously approached in "Le Survivant ou l'Ulysse juif" (2002).

19. See Lacoste (2009).

works having veiled their literary dimension too long, Lacoste argued that their literary value and documentary value were not mutually exclusive and set out to describe this genre.

The body of works called literary testimonies is thus described as documents written by survivors from extreme political violence who have vowed to the victims and to themselves that they would testify to the facts and who have done so in published retrospective narratives in prose. What distinguishes literary testimonies from fictitious ones is this twofold testimonial pact between survivor and dead people, on the one hand, and between survivor and readership, on the other. Literary testimonies, Lacoste claims, thus fulfill 4 functions:

- i. Establishing facts in order to educate the future generations.
- ii. Honoring the memory of the dead.
- iii. Making political leaders and torturers answerable.
- iv. Transmitting knowledge to the living in order to give them food for thought.

The aesthetic program implemented therefore simply consists in countering the planned destruction of human beings and their cultures through the testimonial pact to tell the truth and this is performed without excessive insistence, without self-aggrandizement, without casting a spell on the reader. What characterizes the aesthetic project is indeed its ethical foundation. This special combination is contrasted with that of false testimonies with their suspense-building, mesmerizing long sentences, enticing thematic emphasis on secretion and excretion, on expected foul smells, and on inevitable anthropophagous rats. After comparing the literary testimony with the fictitious one, Lacoste proceeds to contrast it with the autobiography. And again, differences abound: the former is about collective destruction, uses the first-person plural, with the first-person singular representing only the enunciator, and plurals in general, the present tense and verbs of movement; while the latter is fraught with first-person singular marks, both as speaker and discursive topic, past tenses, modalisations and verbs like BE and HAVE. In addition, in the former, life is marked negatively and it goes together with plurals like “the dead,” — the only reality — whereas in the latter, life is highly cherished and it is found with the abstract noun “death”. The thematic study also contrasts military life prevailing in the testimony with family life pervading the autobiography. Eventually, where the reader’s feelings are not conditioned in the former, the narratee’s reactions are, on the contrary, deeply written into the latter’s text.

What makes literary testimonies different is that they aim to pay homage to the victims, not through magnifying their qualities or weaknesses, but through explaining the crimes committed against them. The foregrounding of facts is addressed to the living but dedicated to the dead and the enunciator does not speak about the latter but on their behalf. This entails blaming those who have committed the crimes, have not stood up to prevent them, have produced heroic

mythology, or contributed to collective amnesia. Educating the living is carried out through explaining and commenting, in such a way that it cannot be reduced to didacticism, although that criticism is often leveled by those who paradoxically reduce literature to fiction (the fictitious) or to aesthetics (the beautiful) while dismissing nonfictional testimonies from the literary canon.

1.3. *Intertext*

Specific intertextuality can be defined as a configuration which actualizes explicit or implicit connections between a given text — or hypertext — and one or several other texts — hypotexts. Those relationships are more or less difficult to establish, depending on whether they are suggested by quotation, reference, allusion or plagiarism, let alone pastiche and parody.²⁰ François Rastier's work on a corpus of Primo Levi's poems (2002, 2005) starts from his interest in the Italian writer's works pertaining to the *Lager*. However, those poems were never isolated in a special selection. They are found in various published collections. Yet, Levi's own notes mention sources like Isaïe, Catulle, Dante, Villon, Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Eliot. I will pick out two main guidelines regarding intertextual studies in Rastier's masterly approach.

Among other things, it is shown how a given hypotext can be reconfigured by the hypertextual linguistic context. In "Il tramonto di Fossoli", Catulle's poetic plural form *soles*, introduced by a reference to "the old poet" and by inverted commas, is replaced by the unusual form *solì*. Rastier shows that the formal change underlines the change in meanings, i. e. the transformation of a *Carpe Diem* poem promising life and kisses into a darker poem anticipating annihilation, where desire is reduced to a memory. The hypothesis is verified in other works where the singular *il sole* refers to past happiness or happiness which can recur only for a day, by contrast with *i solì*, which is associated with death ("Nel Principio", "La bambina di Pompei"). Catulle's image of happiness is reinterpreted as an image of annihilation (*Ulysse à Auschwitz*, p. 11 and ch. VI).

Rastier also examines the twin figures found in Levi's texts, that of witness and that of survivor. The poem "Il superstite"²¹ begins with a line from Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" (VII, l. 582, "Since then, at an uncertain hour") and ends with a quote from Dante's *Inferno* ("e mangia, e bee, e dorme, e veste panni", XXXIII l. 141). The former is highlighted by italics, the English language, its translation in line 2 of Levi's poem, whereas the latter is transformed from a third-person to a first-person singular ending a direct-speech part between inverted commas. The quote from Coleridge is conspicuous while that from Dante is concealed. The context from which the English quote is taken makes it clear that the Old Mariner belongs to Life-in-Death, having kept his bodily form,

20. For a different approach, see Gérard Genette (1982).

21. "Since then, at an uncertain hour, /Dopo di allora, ad ora incerta/ [...] 'Indietro, via di qui, gente sommersa, /Andate. [...] E mangio e bevo e dormo e vesto panni'" (qtd in Rastier 2005, p. 13).

however decrepit it may be. The context from which the Italian quote is extracted is about a gentleman, Branca Doria, who killed his guest, namely his brother-in-law. As a punishment, his soul was precipitated into a huge cistern, Tolomea. In Dante's poem, it is Brother Alberic who speaks of Branca Doria. At first sight, both characters share the same plight: they have violated the rules of hospitality and their bodies have been divided from their souls. However, many differences have been exploited by Levi. Coleridge's witness looks dead whereas Dante's survivor looks alive. The former's soul is alive while the latter's is dead. The former speaks and even holds his listeners under a spell; by contrast, the latter cannot speak. In "Il superstite" Levi bends the problematic to his own preoccupations: Coleridge's quote belongs to a third-person passage, which separates the represented speaker from the survivor, and Dante's quote is buried into a first-person quote attributed to a survivor who is haunted by the dead — the only worthy witnesses — and cannot speak to anyone but his own ghosts. As Rastier concludes, the witness is allowed to speak, whereas the survivor cannot: he is only apparently alive.²²

Levi's reconfiguration of previous texts reminds us that the original context is only virtualized and that it continues to signify. In spite of their recontextualization, the original hypotexts are needed to establish the possible identification or differentiation. In addition, it must be borne in mind that Dante is also Coleridge's master. In other words, both Coleridge and Levi are brothers in rivalry, with Dante as the founding father. Paradoxically, the founding father is not as explicitly designated as the rival.

2. Text and passages

Just like texts can be better and more accurately interpreted by being compared to others, provided the corpus is set up on clearly established criteria, passages within texts can be better interpreted against the background formed by the global text. Textual semantics finds no fault with the intuitive idea that texts contain qualitatively unequal passages. In other words, some passages are more important than others in that they are nodal places where semantic relationships achieve a higher degree of complexity and where semantic backgrounds and forms²³ are affected by important transformations. Passages do not provide us with a magical

22. "[L]e survivant n'est pas vivant: cette proposition sonne mal en français, alors que *superstite* signifie littéralement 'celui qui est demeuré'. Si le survivant et les engloutis semblent paradoxalement partager une anthropologie commune, si leur âme et leur corps sont séparés ou en voie de séparation, si le survivant, comme jadis les 'musulmans', ne vit qu'en apparence, ils diffèrent cependant: le survivant n'a pas renoncé au langage; mais soit il veut témoigner et on ne l'écoute pas, soit il ne parvient pas à parler" (*Ibid.*, p. 33).

23. "[S]emantic backgrounds are constructed by the recurrence of generic semantic features that produce isotopies, while *semantic forms* are the result of structures of specific semantic features grouped into some clusters" (1994, tr. ang. 2002, p. 43).

formula giving access to the meaning of the whole text. On the contrary, they are determined by the global level and are related to — contrasted to — other places in the same text.²⁴ Thus, a passage cannot be reduced to an isolated purple patch. But on the contrary, it can be defined as a place where global meaning is reshaped, or where new global meaning is imparted to the text.

However, the selection of a passage raises several practical problems. The choice itself has to be justified.²⁵ This can be done by the determination of the passage by a text which is itself designed by its relation to a genre. Moreover, as a passage is first of all a nodal point interlacing other places in the same text, it is necessarily immersed in a context from which it is never isolated. Thus, the definition of the passage pertains to semantic relations within context.

Interpreting, like producing, texts consists in perceiving semantic backgrounds, establishing the regularity and variation of the forms standing out against those backgrounds, given that the latter are affected by the transformation of the former, and the former are affected by the transformation of the latter. Regularity of those semantic formations is immediately visible but variations are certainly more striking. Variations can be found in beginnings or endings, thematic, narrative and enunciative turning points, above and below blanks, within embedded enclaves, or in the relationships between framed and framing text, etc.

2.1. *Changing backgrounds*

In this part we wish to insist on shifts from one semantic background to another, or, the way semantic backgrounds can be connected. Concrete examples will be taken from Carson McCullers's novel *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter* (1943).²⁶ The novel is centered on four major characters — Brannon, Mick, Blount and Copeland — who are led by their social and psychological isolation to revolve around a deaf and dumb stranger called Singer. The novel's generic isotopies //South// //society// //politics// //economy// //physiology// //psychology// //art// //world// are all connected by a recurring specific trait /degradation/. Sudden death is perceived as a brutal event by the actors whereas it is described as the outcome of lurking disease, brewing and poisoning, by the represented enunciator. Southern society is undermined by rampant poverty and racial discrimination. Doctor Copeland's address to the town's black community links the physiological, the psychological,

24. See Canon-Roger & Chollier (2008).

25. "Le choix du point d'accès semble un des problèmes majeurs de l'herméneutique : certains passages conduisent à tous les autres; certains textes conduisent à tout le corpus. En herméneutique religieuse, les rabbins entrent dans la Torah par la *Genèse* ou le *Cantique des cantiques*; les ministres réformés entrent dans le nouveau testament par la première Epître aux Corinthiens, etc. En bref, le choix du point d'accès détermine pour une part la richesse et la teneur des parcours interprétatifs" (Rastier, 2002, p. 98, n. 5.).

26. For more details, see Chollier (2006) and chapter "Le rêve de Singer" in Canon-Roger & Chollier (2008).

the spiritual and the economic topics: “Our tongues rot in our mouths from lack of use. Our hearts grow empty and lose strength for our purpose. [...] And our offerings are held in scorn and contempt. Our gifts are trampled in the mud and made useless. We are put to labour more useless than the work of beasts’ (171)”. What could be described as growing abjection is also applied to Mick’s drawings and paintings whose subjects are catastrophes such as shipwrecks, fires, deaths by drowning, riots, let alone the factory’s boiler’s outburst which is a prefiguration of her father’s accident, just as the ‘battle’ announces the town’s final riot which will turn Blount into unwanted agitator. What is found in the Southern town is echoed worldwide. The radio broadcasts a “crisis voice” announcing the Danzig events, the invasion of Poland by Hitler’s troops, i. e. the prologue to a potentially explosive situation. Therefore, themes can be interpreted as narrative prefigurations.

Changes introduced to generic backgrounds can concern tone and rhythm. McCullers’s novel is divided into three main parts. In Part One the rhythm is rather slow as it is based on repetition of a given design, that of four human actors repeatedly visiting another, Singer. But in Part Two one fictive year (from July 1938 to July 1939) is covered by 15 sections compared with two months (from Spring 1938 to July 1938) covered by 6 sections in the previous part. Narrative rhythm thus accelerates and culminates in Singer’s suicide. Then a one-month ellipsis suggests the chaos left by this unexpected death. Finally in Part Three pace is slow again, even slower than in Part One, as a single day is covered from morning to evening by four sections. In other words, even rhythm has receded after the climax of the crisis.

The four actors going through the crisis occupy various places but they have one common point/role: they are looking for a quest object. This quest object is (conjugal and family) love for Biff (THLH 25, 207); glory for Mick (34, 212); brotherhood and determination for Copeland (71, 166, 172, 167, 169, 265); and working-class solidarity for Blount (260, 293, 295). Heroism is introduced by Mick’s adolescent dreams of glory: killing Hitler (215), saving Singer (89). Biff Brannon is a café-owner who helps those who need to be helped. Being sensitive to what is worst and what is best in man (“human struggle and valour”), he is a “buddy”, the American hero pervading Cooper’s, Melville’s, Twain’s and Steinbeck’s works and taking care of the naïve and lost. Doctor Copeland wants “the death of poverty” (THLH 221). He is looking for people with “brains, spine and courage” and tries to fight inertia and resignation. Blount seeks to arouse a desire for revolutionary change in the working poor. All quests, however, are doomed to failure. The heroic gift of oneself is never recognized by those it is offered to. Offerings are held in scorn and contempt, to repeat Copeland’s words.

Another semantic background is introduced in embedded stories until it becomes a major theme. It appears in a Sunday school lesson given by Biff’s wife, Alice. After Jesus has looked for disciples, disciples tell Jesus that people have been looking for Him:

“... and in the morning, rising up a great while before day, He went out, and departed into a solitary place, and there prayed. And Simon and they that were with Him followed after Him. And when they had found Him, they said unto Him, ‘All men seek for Thee’.”²⁷ (31).

Mysticism is also linked with Blount whose first love was Jesus, who nailed his hand to a table, whose speech takes on biblical overtones like that of repetition and rhetorical questions. He is made to say “the Gospel” to unbelieving workers. By trying to tell them the truth, he becomes a crazy preacher’s doubles: “All we can do is go round telling the truth’.” (141). Copeland is also ascribed religious terminology (‘gifts’, ‘offerings’) when addressing the black community: “The Negro race of its own accord climbs up on the cross on every Friday’.” (71). He is characterized by asceticism. Thus, the heroic quest attached to the characters’ dream life gradually shifts into a mystic quest bound to their actual life. This is how heroism is replaced by mysticism.

2.2. *Changing forms*

Even more important are changes in forms which usually stand out against those backgrounds. Forms can be defined as clusters of specific traits, to which can be added generic ones and roles. For example, an actor can be characterized by a generic feature such as /human/ or /animal/, specific traits like /male/ or /female/, /benevolent/ or /malevolent/, roles like /villain/ /lover/ /culprit/, etc. Throughout the story, traits can be kept, dropped and acquired.

Metamorphisms correspond to changes affecting those forms. Transformations can concern themes, narrative, represented enunciations, and succession. McCullers’s novel is divided into three parts which fall into sections — 6, 15 and 4 respectively. Except for sections 1 and 6 in which the two deaf-mutes are introduced by an omniscient enunciator as they are not expected to use words²⁸, each section is based on one character’s universe/monologue. Thus, focalization varies from one section to another but remains relatively stable within each section. The following table shows the succession of the characters’ universes.

27. Mark (1: 35-37).

28. “The parts concerning Singer are never treated in a subjective manner. The style is oblique. This is partly because the mute, although he is educated, does not think in words but in visual impressions. That, of course, is a natural outcome of his deafness. Except when he is understood through the eyes of other people the style is for the main part simple and declarative. No attempt will be made to enter intimately into his subconscious.” (“Outline” 138). “Author’s Outline of the Mute” is the script of the short story that was to become *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*. It can be used as external intertext.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
I	a	b	c	d	e	a									
II	c	b	e	d	c	e	a	b	c	e	c	d	e	c	a
III	e	d	c	b											

a = Singer; b = Biff; c = Mick; d = Blount; e = Copeland.

Middle section II 7 is centered on Singer, which promotes him to his pivotal, centripetal role. It is the section devoted to his dream, which announces his suicide in II 15.

II	section	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	
	actor	c	b	e	d	c	e	a	
	actor	b	c	e	c	d	e	c	a
	section	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15

a = Singer; b = Biff; c = Mick; d = Blount; e = Copeland.

The central section is a pivot on which places hinge. Consequently II 15 appears as surplus, as if the character were doomed to disappear in spite of his centripetal force. Once the center has collapsed, the wheeling galaxy blows up in Part III: Copeland is taken away from town; Blount is threatened with social agitation and has to leave; Mick has a job and needs to be alone; Biff is left lonely in his café.

What is striking in II 7 and II 15 is the fact that access is suddenly and unexpectedly given to Singer’s innermost being through internal focalization. Both succession of returning monologues and rule concerning Singer’s inexistence are violated. To convey his “visual impressions” McCullers describes his dream. As will be seen in the next subpart, the dream is given paramount significance.

Before focusing on the dream’s role, it is necessary to examine changes in forms regarding theme and narrative. We have said that heroism is gradually replaced by mysticism. Heroism is characterized by the following recurrent traits: /action/ /object/ /superiority/ /community/ /recognition/ /reward/ as it must be acknowledged by those to whom it is offered and who both recognize and award glory to the chosen one. Precisely, in McCullers’s novel the chosen hero is never acknowledged and his quest is never actualized in the real world. Whoever the sender may be, the addressee fails to respond.²⁹ The hero’s gift is repeatedly not hailed. Throughout parallel narrative sequences, heroism loses its most salient traits and gains other features like /attitude/ /inferiority/ /divinity/. The horizontal relationship with the community develops into a kind of vertical connection with a “home-made god”, Singer. Wild frustrated Blount is mesmerized by the deaf mute. Furious Copeland is calmed down. Mick compares God to Singer, not the other

29. “Each one of these three people has struggled to progress to his own mental proportions in spite of fettering circumstances. They are like plants that have had to grow under a rock from the beginning. The great effort of each of them has been to give and there has been no thought of personal returns” (“Author’s Outline of ‘The Mute’, 1972, p. 152).

way round, because the former is like the latter, silent. Biff is the one who reads into these mystic relationships. The unobtrusive omniscient enunciator's remark ("they felt that the mute would always understand whatever they wanted to say to him. And maybe more than that" 87) is echoed by Biff's: "Each man described the mute as he wished him to be (197) [...] a sort of home-made God. Owing to the fact that he was a mute they were able to give him all the qualities they wanted him to have"³⁰ (204). Biff is the internal observer who is made to perceive the mystic twist of the situation which was part and parcel of McCullers's project (1972, pp. 137-138, 148). Thus the heroes' sequences with others are replaced by sequences in which they turn towards their god.

2.3. *From backgrounds to forms and conversely*

Another interpretive activity consists in pinpointing relationships between backgrounds and forms in terms of diffusive or summoning movements: how forms are transformed into backgrounds and backgrounds into forms. In McCullers's novel heroism and mysticism are interlaced themes but the former loses ground and the latter is more and more visible as the story develops. However, the mystic background results from a form which grows into an embedded vignette, the dream.

The novel's first section does not focus on the four most present actors but on two deaf mutes, Singer and his mate Antonapoulos. The latter is associated with excess — of food, drink, body fat, social behavior and mystic adoration of idols: "At night, if he were not too drunk, he would *kneel down* before his bed and *pray* awhile. Then his plump hands shaped the words 'Holy Jesus', or 'God', or 'Darling Mary'. (8) [...] He *fumbled* with his hands to say 'Darling Mary' and then *held to the small brass cross tied to his neck with a dirty string*. His big eyes would *wall up to the ceiling* with a look of *fear* in them" (10, my italics). The specific trait /mystic/ is then toned down in the relationships between the other four actors and Singer but, as underlined above, these relationships with an idol who does not belong here take on a mystic dimension, until the failure of their attitude to their fellowmen makes them rely solely on Singer for solace, although the deaf-mute cannot respond. Throughout Part Two the /mystic/ form is diffused into a background.

It is in central section II 7 that what was previously a form is developed into a background. The section focuses on Singer's dream. This first access to Singer's psychology stands out as an important passage. The intuition is supported by the interpretation of the contents. The dream describes a pyramid of steps on which all the actors kneel, with Antonapoulos at the top, Singer the dreamer half-way, the other four on the ground and behind them crowds of kneeling people. Each one is looking upward toward the one above and turning his back to those below.

30. Here Brannon is turned into the enunciator's spokesman, which is made obvious when II 7 ends on the narrator's conclusion and II 8 begins with Biff's question: "Why ? The question flowed through Biff always [...]" (1940, p. 197).

For a moment nothing moves except for yellow lanterns swaying in the dark and the dreamer's hands trying to reach to Antonapoulos and the unknown thing that he held. Kneeling, praying, and fascination were already found in Antonapoulos's description as a mystic. They now characterize all the four other major characters' relationship to Singer. The Southern town's society frozen in its laws and the people's mute resignation only favor vertical relationships with idols. But idols do not belong to this world — they are silent and turn their backs. Ironically Singer himself has an idol, Antonapoulos, who, although described as sly and narcissistic by the global enunciator, is seen by his worshiper as nice and smiling, "like some wise king from a legend". The idol's death, despite his self-centredness, leads to Singer's suicide, which triggers off the galaxy's explosion in Part III. This big bang is also announced in the dream which ends on a ferment lifting the steps and collapsing them. The upheaval followed by collapse is a prefiguration of the town's riot which leads to the characters' departures in Part III. The dream located in the novel's middle section transforms the mystic form into a background. Its premonitory function characterizes the dream as a "mereomorphism" whose role is to turn backgrounds into forms, and forms into backgrounds.³¹

3. Translation

All those who have tried their hands at translating know that it is first and foremost an activity before it can be evaluated as a result (a translation). And results will not be improved until the activity has been also. The translator's good sense is just not good enough. Textual semantics is also interested in translating in so far as what is translated is not a chain of words but meaning. Now, as Saussure figured out, a sign's meaning both depends on the linguistic context and also on the language's other signs. Consequently, in translating, changing signifiers amounts to changing signs, thus signifieds. Since each language produces its own network of signs, there is no direct, systematic equivalence between the signs of two different languages. To put it bluntly, what we do in translation is translating a context, or creating semantic backgrounds and forms, in another language.

However, this should not prevent us from reflecting on the translating activity. On the contrary, it compels us to add ethical requirements to aesthetic ones. The difficulty lies in bridging the gap between awareness of each language's specificities and necessity to reveal the source text's meaning in another language. Indeed textual semantics can help us think that what is translated is not a language but a text. And a text can be defined as the semiotic product of the interaction between

31. Or, as Rastier put it, "d'établir des relations entre des parties du texte qui présentent de manière compacte et locale des formes amplifiées ailleurs de manière globale et diffuse. Par exemple, des configurations codifiées comme la description initiale, la parabole, le rêve annonciateur sont transposées dans la suite du texte par d'autres formes plus étendues. Les méréomorphismes traduisent en linguistique des phénomènes de *solidarités d'échelle*" (2001, p. 46).

three linguistic systems: that of a given language, with its general rules; that of social norms, including discursive and generic ones; and that of the individual project, namely style. In other words, a text is a semiotic system interlacing dialect, sociolect and idiolect. As a result, translating a text involves a complex system which engages more than just cultural parameters such as two languages but also the generic corpora of both source text and target text.

3.1. *Genres*

In “Régimes de l’interprétation et traduction” Françoise Canon-Roger mentions the case of Jack London’s *White Fang* (*Croc-Blanc*, 1917). The first translation into French concentrating on the /animal/ dominating isotopy, the work was pulled in the direction of a children’s book whereas it could have been interpreted as a naturalistic story, London being, like Frank Norris, influenced by scripts based on the struggle for life and survival of the fittest. The dog’s point of view should have been maintained from the outset. Françoise Canon-Roger adds that the misunderstanding was continued with *Michael, Brother of Gerry* translated by *Michaël, chien de cirque*, which lifted the weight carried by the trait /human/ inherent to ‘brother’: as a result, London’s pressure to locate solidarity in the animal domain turned out to be neutralized. Disregarding the work’s genre generally leads to grotesqueries such as that cited by Rastier: ‘Attar’s mystic fable was translated into the epitome of French fables, *i.e.* La Fontaine’s fable, which may end on a moral but has nothing mystic about it.’³²

3.2. *Dialect*

Françoise Roger also raises the issue of the translation of regional dialects. Usually, the only possible equivalent is thought to be informal, colloquial language. As dialect is not necessarily colloquial, the result is not always convincing. Françoise Canon-Roger mentions D. Vittoz’s attempt to translate Sicilian dialect found in a novel³³ into lexicon from the French city of Lyons, which essentially limits variations to glossary and conveys defamiliarization.

3.3. *Generic isotopies, semantic backgrounds*

We have suggested above that what is translated are semantic backgrounds and forms. Rastier (2006) points out that translating *schiera* by the French *cohorte* in line 2 of Primo Levi’s poem *Buna* about detention in Auschwitz-Monowitz (*Lunga la schiera nei mattini grigi*) introduces a military background which is not required

32. “Les octosyllabes typiques de la fable et plus généralement de la poésie légère sont bien là (8858888), tout comme l’anthropomorphisme social (*expert, président*), les termes hérités du fabliau (*compère*) et l’entrain convenu (*cri de papillon, en hâte, tout essoufflé, quelque peu*)” (2006).

33. Camilleri (1992).

by the plight imposed on prisoners. In addition, the reference to Dante's *Inferno*, with *schiera* describing the line of the damned, is lost sight of. Similarly, translating *tedeschi* by the French *Schleus* (*sic*) in Partigia (*Hanno rotto l'assedio dei tedeschi*) turns the tone of the poem into pejorative slang which is reminiscent of World War I soldier slang but disregards Levi's poetical project.

3.4. *Anticipating or delaying semes*

As said above, a language's word has no complete and direct equivalent in another language. The units actualized or virtualized when reading, interpreting and translating are the signifieds of morphemes, called *semes*. Translating often amounts to losing or gaining semes (under- or over-translating). Both loss and gain can be compensated for by acting on the context. The lost trait can be actualized above or below. The surplus trait can be dropped. In a novel by Caryl Phillips, *Crossing the River* (1993), a colored character named Martha tries to cross the US continent from Kansas to California to escape the injustices of being a slave. The character's monologue includes flashbacks, one of which goes back to her long-timed friend Lucy's incentives: "Lucy's *man* had told her, and Lucy in turn had told Martha. Girl, you sure? Apparently, these days, colored folks were *not* heading west prospecting for *no* gold, they were just prospecting for a new life *without* having to pay *no* heed to the white man and his ways". The translation of *man* into the French *homme* — which could be considered as fresh and bold — can be supported by the use of Black English in free indirect discourse. Indeed, it can anticipate the problem raised by the translation of the double negative which is specific to Black English and has no working equivalent in French.³⁴

3.5. *Revealing the text to itself*³⁵

Françoise Canon-Roger has compared several translations of Othello's famous monologue in Act V, ii as the Moor is about to murder Desdemona lying in bed.

Put out the light, and then put out the light:
If I quench thee, thou flaming minister,
I can again thy former light restore,
Should I repent me; but once put out thine,
Thou cunning pattern of excelling nature,
I know not where is that Promethean heat
That can thy light return (...) (V, ii, 7-13)

34. Except if the translator decides to include emphasis as in: "Apparemment, de nos jours, les gens de couleur ne se ruiaient pas à l'Ouest à la recherche d'or, **non**, mais ils partaient en quête d'une nouvelle vie où ils n'auraient pas, **pas du tout**, à tenir compte de l'homme blanc et de ses volontés..."

35. Rastier ("La traduction", 2006).

She explains that the repetition in line 1 is often interpreted as paronomasia, and leads to dissimilation in the translation:

Hugo : (Montrant le flambeau) Éteignons d'abord cette lumière, et puis...
(montrant Desdémona) Éteignons celle-ci. (1975, p. 931)

Bonnefoy : Que j'éteigne cette lumière, puis cette autre. (2001, p. 431)

Desprats : Éteindre cette lumière, et puis éteindre cette lumière. (2002, p. 1259)

In the following lines, the *topos* which connects 'light' and 'life' is developed along the guideline of extinction through the opposition between /restorable/ vs /unrestorable/. As Canon-Roger explains, the last line's *thy light return* should then be distinguished from the previous occurrence *thy former light restore*. Hugo uses *ressusciter ta clarté* to account for the first occurrence, Desprats *restaurer ta lumière première* and Bonnefoy *te rendre à ta clarté première*. As for the second one:

Hugo : Mais la tienne une fois éteinte, ô modèle achevé de l'exquise nature, je ne sais pas où est le feu prométhéen qui pourra la rallumer! (1975, p. 931)

Desprats : mais si j'éteins la tienne, /Toi, le modèle achevé de la nature parfaite, / Je ne sais pas où est le feu prométhéen / Qui peut ranimer ta lumière. (2002, p. 1259)

Bonnefoy : Mais éteinte la tienne, / Ô modèle de tous les biens de la nature, / Où chercher le feu prométhéen / Qui redresserait ta lumière! (2001, p. 431)

Hugo maintains 'rallumer la lumière', which is consistent with the beginning; Desprats actualizes /life/; Bonnefoy seems to hit wide off the mark but in fact actualizes traits found in the context: 'redresser la lumière' may not be fluent French but /horizontal/, inherent to *in bed* and affecting *die* (line 6), actualizes /restoration/ +/verticality/ + /movement/ inherent to 'redresser'. As Canon-Roger suggests, Bonnefoy's translation restores Shakespeare's context.

At the end of this survey of a number of research studies conducted into literature along the guidelines offered by textual semantics, we can but rephrase the most important principles that reinforce the way we look at literary works.

- Signs do not exist empirically but texts do.
- Texts cannot be properly interpreted if their corpus is disregarded, as meaning arises from differences. Indeed, a text is related to a social discursive practice through its genre, i. e. a set of norms which determine its genetic, mimetic, and hermeneutic regimes.
- Just as it is determined by a genre, a text characterizes its passages.
- A passage is not a self-contained unit, but a local actualization of the text's global meaning.

- The interpretation of a sign depends on the global, i. e. on its linguistic context, which is used to act upon its meaning. Contextualization provides instructions to actualize or virtualize traits. This fact is well-known to translators who have to take into account a complex combination of parameters, namely dialect (language), sociolect (genre) and idiolect (style, or empirical actualization in utterance).
- Textual semantics offers methodological tools which can be applied to all kinds of texts, including literary ones. It does not tell us what is to be found. Its apparently modest ambition is to help us explain how we make sense in a way which can be transmitted because it describes what we do with linguistic constraints in the interpretative process.

Interpretation as DOING rather than DONE involves working with corpora, genres, and description. This simple fact applies not only to literary texts but to all cultural objects. Therefore the practice produced by textual semantics might be extended to all cultural sciences.

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