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Literature as "Self-translation" and the Concept of "enigmaticité" in Jean Bessière's "Enigmaticité de la littérature" (Chapter III: "Concept d'écriture et énigmatique")

1. Humpty Dumpty

In modern works of literary fiction we find explicit reflections on the tension between different concepts of interpretation, and in some respect the awareness of this tension may be defined as the very epitome of modernity. As a respectable witness for this we may regard Lewis Carroll's egg-shaped Humpty Dumpty in his double role as an interpreter and a language philosopher. Alice, as we all remember, has detected an enigmatic poem — the famous "Jabberwocky" poem — which requires different steps of deciphering. First, it is written in mirror writing, but this can rather easily be compensated. More problems arise, because it is, secondly, written in unknown words which only resemble the words of conventional language (we later learn that it consists of the so-called portmanteau words, which result from a kind of cross breeding of conventional expressions with new hybrid forms¹), and so Alice has to ask Humpty Dumpty for assistance to understand what the poem means. He explains the single words, and so Alice at least learns about the poem's contents, though there is good reason to ask, if this is real and final "understanding" already. Although Humpty Dumpty on the one hand proves to be a good interpreter, who is able to translate the enigmatic into the comprehensible, Alice and the reader are deeply irritated, when Humpty

1 [...] - there are two meanings packed up into one word" (Carroll 198).

Dumpty on the other hand declares that words usually mean what he wants them to mean.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less" / "The question is," said Alice, "whether you *can* make words mean so many different things." / "The question is," said Humpty Dumpty, "which is to be master — that's all." (Carroll 196)

Taking this seriously we must suspect that his interpretation of the enigmatic poem was no revelation of the poem's enigmatic meaning, but an act of arbitrariness, by which a reader has just demonstrated his fancy and his capability of creating "meanings." For somebody who can make the words mean what he wants them to mean, a poem has an infinite number of possible meanings, none of which is privileged, and which may even unscrupulously contradict each other. Humpty Dumpty might be regarded as an early supporter of deconstruction, which does not prevent him from being deconstructed himself soon afterwards, when he falls from a wall, according to the instructions of a nursery rhyme. Who is the master, then — the reader or the words? The real reader may be doubtful, he may produce different and even antagonistic interpretations of Carroll's text so that the question discussed within the text is repeated on the level of reality (or should we say fictional level?) where we ourselves are busy as readers, interpreters and translators. What seems to be extremely suspicious about the adventure with the hard-headed and insolent egg Humpty Dumpty is, that most obviously he is doomed to be mastered by the words at last, as his fall off the wall at the end of the chapter perfectly accords with the words of the nursery rhyme. The question which model is the right one to describe the process of reading — the deciphering of an enigma or the arbitrary creation of new meanings — thus remains unanswerable in principle. What we realize, however, is, that by reflecting explicitly on the question what reading means the text reads itself.

2. Jean Bessière

Jean Bessière has distinguished between the enigma and the enigmatic: "[...] il faut comprendre qu'au-delà du littéral de l'énigme il y a l'enigmatique" (Bessière X). Enigmas are implicit questions, solutions are answers, but as the concept of the "enigmatic" suggests, there are neither definite and final answers nor

even distinct borderlines between questions and answers. Whatever might claim to be a solution to an enigma, may be regarded as questionable again. Explanations, "answers," do not only provoke new questions, they *are* new questions (cf. Bessière X). Figuring out the reader as somebody who is confronted with the poetical text just as Oedipus was with the enigma of the sphinx, we should be aware of the impossibility to solve the mystery, to answer the questions evoked by the text, to finish the process of mutual interrogation (cf. Bessière 20). But who of the participants of this dialogical interplay provides for its infinity, for the "enigmaticite" beyond any specific enigma? Indirectly, the distinction between the enigma and the enigmatic is related to the leading question, if (a) there is "more" within the text than the reader can ever "get out" of it, or if (b) the text itself is nothing more than the starting point of interpretations which provide for the production of endless "meanings" — or rather: suggestions of possible meanings — by themselves. Is the actual question "which is to be master" (Carroll 198)? Quite obviously, the latter alternative correlates with the question about the text's "identity." Regarded from the first point of view, a text is something coherent, autonomous and identical, though its substantial identity may remain a mystery, regarded from the second standpoint, however, it is not.

One of the most prominent contemporary literary theorists who assigns an enigmatic dimension to *the literary text itself*— a dimension which resists final deciphering — is George Steiner. He argues eagerly in favor of hierarchic models: Works of literature are superior to their interpretations, even to those which are given by the author himself, they are beyond deciphering, resisting any desire to understand them. In his view, it is essential for works of art to *be*, and only in second respect they *mean* something. Steiner's natural enemy, of course, is deconstruction, and his arguments represent a deconstruction of deconstruction.² The antagonistic party, of course, is represented by Derrida, though the idea of leadership does not fit in too well with deconstructivist thinking. Another significant representative is Roland Barthes, who criticizes

2 "The poem comes before the commentary. The primary text is first not only temporally. It is not a pre-text, an occasion for subsequent exegetic or metamorphic treatment. Its priority is one of essence, of ontological need and self-sufficiency. Even the greatest critique or commentary, be it that of a writer or painter or composer on his own work, is *accidental* (*tü*& cardinal Aristotelian distinction). It is dependent, secondary, contingent. The poem embodies and bodies forth through a singular enactment its own *raison d'être*. The secondary text does not contain an imperative of being. Again the Aristotelian and Thomist differentiations between essence and accident are clarifying. The poem *is*; the commentary *signifies*. Meaning is an attribute of being" (Steiner 32).

the metaphorical concept of a meaning hidden within the text. The author loses his authority, because he is no longer responsible for the text, and Barthes imagines a text which independently keeps transforming itself infinitely.³ Deconstructivism and constructivism converge, strangely enough, in their rejection of a stable and identical meaning of texts. It is scarcely necessary to point out the fact that according to constructivist ideas, it is the single reader who creates the meaning of what he reads: Meaning is not taken "from" the text, but ascribed "to" it. Less radical than the members of the deconstructivist party, Horst Steinmetz has in a recent publication given an outline of the concept of the reader taking the author's part and becoming responsible for the text. According to his description different historical periods and their respective works of literature require different readers and different concepts of reading. In the modern age, according to Steinmetz's historical perspective, reading is "no longer" the search for a meaning within the text; this search must, instead, be replaced by the *creation* of meaning. Works of art are not understood, it is their incomprehensibility which provides for a process of creating new meanings. Works of modern literature are therefore characterized by a high degree of license given to the reader.⁴

3 "Texte veut dire *Tissu*; mais alors que jusqu'ici on a toujours pris ce tissu pour un produit, un voile tout fait, derrière lequel se cache, le sens (la vérité), nous accentuons maintenant, dans le tissu, l'idée générative que le texte se fait, se travaille à travers un entrelacs perpétuel; perdu dans ce tissu — cette texture — le sujet s'y défait, telle une araignée qui se dissoudrait elle-même dans les sécrétions constructives de sa toile" (Barthes 100-01).

4 "Lesen ist nicht mehr [sic] die Suche nach einer Werkbedeutung, einer Bedeutung, die im Werk gewissermaßen 'verborgen' ist, einer Bedeutung darüber hinaus, die auch für andere akzeptabel sein muß. Das Suchen nach Bedeutung muß durch das Schaffen von Bedeutung ersetzt werden. [...] Die Funktion des 'unverstandenen' Kunstwerks besteht darin, den Leser stets zu neuen Sinn — und Bedeutungssetzungen anzuspornen und ihm die Befriedigung über erreichte Bedeutungen vorzuenthalten. Das 'unverstandene' Kunstwerk fordert den Leser auf, sich seiner Sinn — und Bedeutungssetzungen bewußt zu werden, sowohl derer, die er im Umgang mit Literatur vornimmt, als auch derer, die er in seinem täglichen Leben anwendet" (Steinmetz 89). — "Bin konsequenter Leser wird gewissermaßen zum Mitautor. Das literarische Werk vollendet sich auf diese Weise erst im Leser und in seiner auf den Text angewandten Aktivität und Kreativität, die seiner Deutung zugrundeliegen." (Steinmetz 19).

In his reflections on the topic of "enigmaticity" (cf. Bessière 102-04),⁵ Bessière has given an outline of the main antagonistic description models of literary texts, which assert or neglect that there is something mysterious about literature — models which in different ways and according to different principles correlate the text with what is beyond it. The first model or discourse which is outlined here can be characterized as the model or discourse of blanks, incompleteness, fragmentarity. Literary texts refuse and exclude the reader and at the same time appeal to him. The blanks and fragments stimulate him to answer, although he has not even been actually asked anything.

L'inévitable de l'interprétation doit faire conclure seulement à l'énigmatique que fait le texte par son exercice. Dans ce qui est un mixte de la notation de la résistance du texte et de la notation de l'appel qu'il porterait, l'indication d'un blanc du texte et d'une interaction du texte et du lecteur Q.B. here refers to Wolfgang Iser: *Der Akt des Lesens*,⁶ outre qu'elle définit l'interaction comme un rapport entre une donnée inerte et un agent, par quoi la notation de l'interaction se défait, identifie la question du texte à une manière de mutisme dans le texte, indissociable d'un inachèvement de l'argumentation et de la forme. Mais le blanc n'est pas, en lui-même, une question; il est le moyen de disposer le jeu de la réponse sans question, et de suggérer que, dans ces conditions, la limite extrême de la réponse, hors de toute question explicite, n'est pas ce à quoi la réponse fait réponse, mais la puissance même de la réponse, qui est de se lever sur sa propre limite. Ces diverses hypothèses - résistance du texte, appel du texte, blanc du

5 Also cf. Bessière, p. IX: "On sait la définition de l'énigme: formulation qui pose question, et appelle réponse, et qui porte en elle-même la solution. On sait la stratégie de l'énigme: le mot de l'énigme doit être présenté de manière apparemment complexe et disparate; les traits les plus hétérogènes reçoivent, de ce mot, un nouveau sens et une nouvelle signification. L'énigme résolue est, dans ces conditions, sans résidu. Mais le littéral de l'énigme, malgré ce défaut de résidu, marque l'inévitable de la question au regard de ce qui est, dans l'énigme même, l'affirmation de la vérité. Que dans le savoir et l'expression de la vérité il soit ainsi fait droit à la question fait de l'énigme un geste figuratif." — "L'énigmatique donne simplement à comprendre que l'écriture et la lecture ne cessent d'être la contrepartie à autre chose, une autre écriture, une autre lecture, et un tel jeu de contrepartie en elles-mêmes" (20).

6 Receptions esthetics, as they have been conceived by Wolfgang Iser, reject the idea of the literary text as a complete and autonomous entity, on the contrary, they stress the reader's activity, which is stimulated by blanks ("Leerstellen") within the text. The reader's main task is to provide for compensation of these blanks and to fill them, thus creating continuity. "[...] die Bedeutung [ist] dem Text nicht vorgegeben [...]; vielmehr entsteht sie erst aus dem Spiel, das im Falle des Findens einer bestimmten Bedeutung verschwindet [...]" (Iser 411).

texte - sont autant de manières de donner une mythologie de l'écriture et du texte, de leur prêter une manière de transcendance alors qu'il est dit l'immanence de l'écriture à la langue. (Bessière 102)

According to the second model the text can be reduced to the totality of its interpretations. It produces innumerable attempts of translation, none of which is a final solution, and none of which is privileged in its relation to the others.

A l'inverse, la tentation de faire du texte cela qui se réduit à ses interprétations, qui n'a d'autres réalités que ses interprétations, en voulant rejeter cette mythologie, néglige de noter l'inertie du texte, par laquelle il y a la possibilité du jeu rhétorique de la lecture, et exclut de corrélérer, au moins en théorie, les diverses interprétations. Les diverses interprétations des mêmes signes écrits produiraient, dans ces conditions, autant de textes. Outre qu'il y a la hypothèse que ces interprétations définissent et participent de mondes distincts — point récusable —, un présupposé reste décelable: si les explications n'expliquent rien et sont sans fonction relativement au texte, ces explications ne sont pas mêmes à considérer relativement au texte. Invalider le texte revient, de fait, à rendre sans pertinence l'analyse même de l'interprétation, la comparaison des interprétations. Il faut donc dire: les interprétations ne vont pas sans le même texte, sans être relatives au même texte. Il faut dire: les diverses interprétations ne marquent pas que le texte est inexplicable, mais qu'elles sont finalement, dans leur diversité, inexplicables par rapport au texte. Il se conclut: le texte n'est pas nécessairement à expliquer, mais il est parfaitement contenu dans ce qui n'explique plus rien. Les diverses interprétations sont jeu énigmatique — réponses sans question explicite, explications si souveraines qu'elles se révèlent en elles-mêmes comme incompréhensibles face au texte qu'elles recueillent et qu'elles déclarent perdre. Ce qui est encore dire: le texte ne fait autorité qu'au prix de l'interprétation créatrice qui le libère des liens de la signification originelle et indivisible. Ce qui est encore dire: les interprétations divergentes sont doublement fonctionnelles — par cette autorité du texte qu'elles établissent, par le fait que, pour chacune des interprétations divergentes, l'interprète tient son interprétation pour satisfaisante dans la mesure où il se fait, par là, une idée plus vaste du texte. (Bessière 102-03)

The concept of "translation" has always seemed helpful to combine the idea of a multiplicity of meanings with the idea of an identical text; Bessière specifies or modifies it by describing literature as a self-interpretation — not failing to take into account the consequence of every attempt to translate a text: approaching always means restriction.

L'auto-identification de la littérature peut encore se définir: la littérature serait cette écriture qui se traduit elle-même, en elle-même, et qui ferait de cette exercice d'aplanissement un exercice d'identité de l'écriture avec ses données linguistiques. Mais ce mouvement d'appropriation est ultimement incommensurable et fait de toute réalisation scripturaire un objet partial qui contraint de penser le livre, les livres, le langage, les discours. (Bessière 103)

Si la lecture est ainsi, banalement, le témoignage du décalage entre le fait du texte et l'expérience de l'idée que Ton peut avoir du texte, l'auto-identification de la littérature est l'hypothèse de l'adéquation du fait (faire) de la littérature et de son expérience, dans le savoir qu'on peut avoir de la littérature. (Bessière 103-04)

The most obvious form of textual self-translation consists in dealing with reading and interpretation processes which are thus the object of the reader's reception and therefore comment on themselves.

A closer look at the history of the modern novel, for which it is characteristic to deal with reading and writing processes on multiple occasions and in very different respects, reveals the importance of this strategy of self-interpretation. Examples of an explicit reflection about interpretation processes, however, show as well, that interpretation inevitably means restriction and simplification, "decalage." To put it simply: Concepts of reading and interpretation which are presented in works of fiction should not be taken literally, should not be regarded as prescriptions for decoding the text according to their explicit message, but they, again, provoke interpretation. The question, which interpretation concept is the adequate one, is therefore not answered, but reiterated.

Cette hypothèse vient à nouveau à une contradiction lorsqu'il est marqué à la fois, à partir de cette auto-identification, l'objectivité formelle de la littérature, la singularité de l'écriture — même si cet acte singulier se dispose suivant l'explicite d'un savoir de la langue, il est singularisé en tant que moyen. Il peut encore être dit, ainsi qu'on l'a conclu de Flaubert, qu'il convient alors de traiter l'idée de la littérature, ainsi que toute idée, comme un art — ou il y aurait encore la justification du livre sur rien, qui serait [...] livre sur le langage. Il faudrait plus simplement dire dans ces équivoques: l'auto-identification de la littérature va avec une sorte de liberté absolue de l'écrivain et de celui qui traite de la littérature. Ce que l'écrivain écrit — et qu'il perçoit exactement — tombe en dehors de lui; l'écriture suppose le droit et l'autorité de l'individu, mais exclut l'autorité du sujet. On marque ainsi dans les équivoques de l'auto-identification de l'écriture une dualité positive: s'il y a à marquer à la fois une conscience du sujet de l'écriture et une inconscience de ce sujet, il faut donc postuler une pensée de la

représentation de la littérature et de l'écriture et une pensée de ce défaut de pensée. (Bessiére 104)

There is a "*double blind* qui concerne la *persona* engagée dans *Écriture*":

Il doit être joué de deux contextes — celui que fait l'écriture en elle-même, celui qui caractérise le scripteur alors qu'il dispose l'écriture. [...] Caractériser l'écriture, dans ces conditions, comme une représentation-action, équivaut à marquer que ce changement continu et réversible de contexte est, en lui-même, une composante de l'exercice d'écriture et un exercice de changement de croyance, de la part du scripteur, relativement à l'écriture. (Bessiére 104)

The proposal made here — trying to resume now — is to use a double model or, rather, the combination of two models to describe the relations between the writer and the text as well as those between the reader and the text. This pair of differing models is correlated with the alternatives of regarding a text as self-sufficiently enigmatic, or regarding it as the projection surface of different hypothetical meanings. According to the first model, the text leaves the writer behind, excludes him as well as any reader and is independent from what the author wanted to express. According to the second model, however, the text changes in consequence to the changing contexts it can be related to, one of which is the writer's life.

The reflections and arguments which I have quoted from Bessiére's text are generally dedicated to a question which is crucial for literary theory and for anybody who tries to define what literary texts are and what it means to write and to read them: What kind of description model should be chosen to express the relation between the text, its author, and its reader? Not only that there are differing and contradictory answers to this question — the problem becomes even more intricate as most of them actually do have obvious advantages as they provide for evident partial solutions in respect to certain partial questions. In consequence, however, other questions are left unanswered, very much to the disadvantage of the literary critic and to the reader who want to know what they are actually dealing with, what they are actually doing — and what is actually done to them. Bessiére does not only give very clear and distinct outlines of contradictory models, pointing to their respective advantages and disadvantages, he as well suggests profiting from their difference, switching between points of view and accepting that this is part of the game literary texts invite us to participate in. This proposal appears the more convincing — or

rather: inviting? — as there are literary texts which suggest just the same kind of game.

3. A Community of Readers

Italo Calvino in his novel *Se una notte d'inverno un viaggiatore* presents an encyclopedic collection of reader types and reading models. The reader called "lettore" is not only the main character of the novel, but he has several opportunities to reflect upon his own identity as a reader when he encounters other readers and their respective "self-explanations." According to one of the various approaches which are discussed in the novel the "author" of a literary text is a quantity which may be ignored and can just aswell disappear, making way for the self-confident reader who by himself provides for the continuation of the literary process as a process of creating meanings.

Silas Flannery, the writer, authorizes the reader explicitly:

"Dai lettori m'aspetto che leggano nei miei libri qualcosa che io non sapevo, ma posso aspettarmelo solo da quelli che s'aspettano di leggere qualcosa che non sapevano loro." (Calvino 1979,185)

Correspondingly, in the last chapter of the novel a group of readers meet in a library, each of whom explains what reading means to himself. In spite of all differences we notice that obviously none of them just reads the text before his eyes, but that every one of them rather uses this text as a springboard to something different: to a book of the past, to a book of the future, or to an imaginary book.

Non si meravigli se mi vede sempre vagare con gli occhi. In effetti questo è il mio modo di leggere, ed è solo così che la lettura mi riesce fruttuosa. Se un libro m'interessa veramente, non riesco a seguirlo per più di poche righe senza che la mia mente, captato un pensiero che il testo le propone, o un sentimento, o un interrogativo, o un'immagine, non parta per la tangente e rimbalzi di pensiero in pensiero, d'immagine in immagine, in un itinerario di ragionamenti e fantasie che sento il bisogno di percorrere fino in fondo, allontanandomi dal libro fino a perderlo di vista. Lo stimolo della lettura me è indispensabile, e d'una lettura sostanziosa, anche se d'ogni libro non riesco a leggere che poche pagine. Ma già quelle poche pagine racchiudono per me interi universi, cui non riesco a dar fondo." (Calvino 1979, 256)

Complementary to this first conception of reading, there are others, each of them insisting on the idea of reading as an active search for something beyond the visible letters.

[...] la lettura è un'operazione discontinua e frammentaria. O meglio: l'oggetto della lettura è una materia puntiforme e pulviscolare. Nella dilagante distesa della scrittura l'attenzione del lettore distingue del segmenti minimi, accostamenti di parole, metafore, nessi sintattici, passaggi logici, peculiarità lessicali che si rivelano d'una densità di significato estremamente concentrata. Sdno come le particelle elementari che compongono il nucleo dell'opera, attorno al quale ruota tutto il resto. Oppure come il vuoto al fondo d'un vortice, che aspira e inghiotte le correnti. E attraverso questi spiragli che, per lampi appena percettibili, si manifesta la verità che il libro può portare, la sua sostanza ultima. [...] Per questo la mia lettura non ha mai fine: leggo e rileggo ogni volta cercando la verifica d'una nuova scoperta tra le pieghe delle frasi. (Calvino 1979, 256-57)

Those reading concepts are altogether characterized by their performative dimension. As soon as a text is regarded as a fragmentary structure which has to be enlarged, completed or at least continued by the reader, it *becomes* a fragment provoking continuation; as soon as it is regarded as a mystery, it is *transformed* into a mystery; as soon as it is interpreted as continuously metamorphotical, its metamorphosis has already started.

[...] a ogni rilettura mi sembra di leggere per la prima volta un libro nuovo. Sarebbe io che continuo a cambiare e vedo nuove cose di cui prima non m'ero accorto? Oppure la lettura è una costruzione che prende forma mettendo insieme un gran numero di variabili e non può ripetersi due volte secondo lo stesso disegno? [...] In certi momenti mi sembra che tra una lettura e l'altra ci sia un progresso [...]. In altri momenti invece mi sembra di conservare il ricordo delle letture d'uno stesso libro l'una accanto all'altra [...]. La conclusione a cui sono arrivato è che la lettura è un'operazione senza oggetto; o che il suo vero oggetto è se stessa. Il libro è un supporto accessorio o addirittura un pretesto. (Calvino 1979, 257)

Se volete insistere sulla soggettività della lettura posso essere d'accordo con voi, ma non nel senso centrifugo che voi le attribuite. Ogni nuovo libro che leggo entra a far parte di quel libro complessivo e unitario che è la somma delle mie letture. Questo non avviene senza sforzo: per comporre quel libro generale, ogni libro particolare deve trasformarsi, entrare in rapporto coi libri che ho letto precedentemente, diventarne il corollario o lo sviluppo o la confutazione o la glossa o il testo di referenza. [...] potrei dimostrarvi che non ho fatto altro che portare avanti la lettura d'un unico libro. (Calvino 1979, 257-58)

Anche per me tutti i libri che leggo portano a un unico libro, [...] ma è un libro indietro nel tempo, che affiora appena dai miei ricordi. C'è una storia che per me viene prima di tutte le altre storie e di cui tutte le storie che leggo mi sembra portino un'eco che subito si perde. Nelle mie letture non faccio che ricercare quel libro letto nella mia infanzia, ma quel che ne ricordo è troppo poco per ritrovarlo. (Calvino 1979, 258)

Adding these concepts of reading to the idea of replacing the author by the reader in future, the reader might feel authorized to claim the authority over the text for himself. Many readers and critics have interpreted the novel in this sense — as a proclamation of the reader's authority, as a treatise on interpretation as the real process of creating meaning. Although taking literally what the novel suggests, they were misled into simplification. We should not forget, that it is Calvino who as the novel's writer has provided for the arrangement which seems to authorize the reader, and that if there is anybody who is authorized, there is an author authorizing. While Calvino's novel thus doubtlessly interprets itself by reflecting on the creative forces of interpretation, there remains a range of differing possibilities how to interpret this interpretation.

It seems to be a nice experiment of thought to add the voices of other readers to the voices of the visitors in the library of *Se una notte d'inverno* and to take their opinions on texts and reading processes as alternatives none of which represents the ultimate answer to the question at stake, but only one example of numerous possible descriptions how to interpret interpretation, how to read the process of reading.⁷

4. Two Doormen

Confronted with the literary text and its enigmatic dimension the reader may feel like Alice who in Carroll's narration *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* comes to a closed door which is guarded by a doorman. Of course, there is a door, as texts usually have "doors" which stimulate interpretation, an equivalent of "entering" the text. But it is the door itself which reveals to be enigmatic: Is it

7 There is — by the way — an eminent spiritual affinity between George Steiner and the scholar Prof. Uzzi-Tuzii, who in Calvino's novel represents the esoteric realm of a forgotten literature. According to him, all written books point to a transcendental sphere (Calvino 70).

a door at all? Does it have any purpose? And the doorman's task soon proves to be analogously paradoxical.

Alice went timidly up to the door, and knocked.

"There's no sort of use in knocking," said the Footman, "and for two reasons. First, because, I'm on the same side of the door as you are: secondly, because they're making such a noise inside, no one could possibly hear you."

And certainly there was a most extraordinary noise going on within — a constant howling and sneezing, and every now and then a great crash, as if a dish or kettle had been broken to pieces.

"Please, then," said Alice, "how am I to get in?"

"There might be some sense in your knocking," the Footman went on, without attending to her, "if we had the door between us. For instance, if you were *inside*, you might knock, and I could let you out, you know." He was looking up into the sky all the time he was speaking, and this Alice thought decidedly uncivil. "But perhaps he can't help it," she said to herself; "his eyes are so *very* nearly at the top of his head. But at any rate he might answer questions. — How am I to get in?" she repeated, aloud.

"I shall sit here," the Footman remarked, "till to-morrow —"

At this moment the door of the house opened, and a large plate came skimming out, straight at the Footman's head: it just grazed his nose, and broke to pieces against one of the trees behind him.

"— or next day, maybe," the Footman continued in the same tone, exactly as if nothing had happened.

"How am I to get in?" asked Alice again, in a louder tone.

"*Are* you to get in at all?" said the Footman. "That's the first question, you know."

It was, no doubt: only Alice did not like to be told so. "It's really dreadful", she muttered to herself, "the way all the creatures argue. It's enough to drive one crazy!" (Carroll 58-59)

In a comparable way the reader has to regard literary texts as invitations to "get in" on the one hand, as "keeping him out," on the other. The doorman's question is thus asked with regard to ourselves: Are we supposed to get in at all? Alice, by the way, is not discouraged by the idea that she is not welcome. She simply enters, refusing to talk to the doorman anymore.

The Footman seemed to think this a good opportunity for repeating his remark, with variations. "I shall sit here," he said, "on and off, for days and days." "But what am I to do?" said Alice. "Anything you like," said the Footman, and began whistling.

"Oh, there's no use in talking to him," said Alice desperately. "He's perfectly idiotic!" And she opened the door and went in. (Carroll 59)

Corresponding to this scene, there is no doorman who assists the reader when he is confronted with Carroll's text; we just have to enter and to accept the strange realities and paradoxical conditions with which we are confronted without any explanation. At the end of Carroll's novel there finally is a door obviously waiting for Alice, and even her name (Queen Alice) is written upon it to indicate that she may pass through it. This conclusion, again, is characterized by an element of self-interpretation, as it seems to promise another door for King Reader to enter the novel's meaning. Are we supposed to trust doorman Carroll?⁸

The second doorman to be presented here has an analogously paradoxical task to fulfill. In Franz Kafka's parable "Vor dem Gesetz,"⁹ we meet a doorkeeper who prevents a man from passing through the gate he guards (Kafka 292-95). It seems to be the gate leading to "The Law", but all his life the man is forced to remain outside time and time again. Only at the moment of the man's death the doorkeeper assures him of the fact that the gate was predestined to be his very special gate, and that now it will be closed forever. A glow of light coming from the space behind the gate is the only impression the man gets from what might have expected him. Is there anything expecting him? Again, Kafka's parable is a reflection about readers and reading, about scriptures and interpretations, which means, again, that the text is interpreting itself. As the doorman in Kafka's text is the only one who at least implicitly comments on the Law (which is the central enigma of the text's construction and symbolizes the enigmatic as such) he may be regarded as the personification of the idea of translation, and again his task is paradoxical, even on different levels. Instead of opening the gate to make the enigma accessible,

- 8 There is another key scene about a locked door in Alice's story which suggests that behind locked doors there are wonderful things waiting for everybody passing through them. Unfortunately Alice, who looks through the key hole, is too large to pass through at first. After she has succeeded in becoming smaller by means of magic, thus physically adapted to the enigmatic space behind the door, she has to realize that she now is too small to reach the door key lying on a high table. Nevertheless, she finally wins (cf. Carroll 19-22).
- 9 "Vor dem Gesetz" has been translated to "Before the law" in reference both to the institution of the court and to the time spent by the man from the country waiting to get in. The German title, however, also covers the mere physical condition of standing "in front of the gate presumably leading to "the law."

he prevents the visitor from using the gate. The final information, however, that there was a special gate for this visitor, at least suggests that the access to the Law is not impossible in principle. Is there a meaning beyond the gate of the written letters — and is there any access to it? Is there only one identical meaning, or is the concept of such a "meaning" just a vague idea which can be put into concrete terms in very different ways? Does the text provide for many gates, each of which is predestined to be used by a special reader? Is there any real gate at all? Or is this the fatal illusion which is nourished by doormen whose task consists in betraying the visitors? Is the doorman just fulfilling his duty or isn't he?

The visitor's fate and the doorman's duty are discussed by Josef K. and the priest, two characters of Kafka's novel *Der Proceß*, after the priest has told the former story to K. The parable is obviously related to K.'s case — it is an interpretation of this case and thus of the whole novel, which thereby is interpreting itself, but this interpretation does not lead to insight, but to disorientation. And so — among other questions which remain unanswered — the reader never learns, if there is a central enigma hidden behind the textual gates, or if he is betrayed by the glow of light promising a fundamental truth.

"Der Türhüter hat also den Mann getäuscht," sagte K. sofort, von der Geschichte sehr stark angezogen. "Sei nicht übereilt," sagte der Geistliche, "übernimm nicht die fremde Meinung ungeprüft. Ich habe dir die Geschichte im Wortlaut der Schrift erzählt. Von Täuschung steht darin nichts." "Es ist aber klar," sagte K., "und deine erste Deutung war ganz richtig. Der Türhüter hat die erlösende Mitteilung erst dann gemacht, als sie dem Manne nicht mehr helfen konnte." "Er wurde nicht friiher gefragt," sagte der Geistliche, "bedenke auch, daß er nur Tiirhiiter war, und als solcher hat er seine Pflicht erfüllt." "Warum glaubst du, daß er seine Pflicht erfüllt hat?" fragte K., "er hat sie nicht erfüllt. Seine Pflicht war es vielleicht, alle Fremden abzuwehren, diesen Mann aber, für den der Eingang bestimmt war, hatte er einlassen müssen." "Du hast nicht genug Achtung vor der Schrift und veränderst die Geschichte," sagte der Geisdiche. (Kafka 295)

The priest speaks as the doorman's advocate, as it seems, and he paraphrases a number of interpretations of the parable. This, however, does not lead to any definite truth, but K.'s case as well as the case of the anonymous man before the Law is obscured further.

"Du glaubst also, der Mann wurde nicht getäuscht?" "Mißverstehe mich nicht," sagte der Geistliche, "ich zeige dir nur die Meinungen, die darüber bestehen. Du

mußt nicht zuviel auf Meinungen achten. Die Schrift ist unveränderlich und die Meinungen sind oft nur ein Ausdruck der Verzweiflung darüber. In diesem Falle gibt es sogar eine Meinung, nach welcher gerade der Türhüter der Getauschte ist." (Kafka 298)

Again, there is a problematic balance between different interpretations of Kafka's text, self-interpretations of the novel, which contradict each other: One interpretation or, rather, one group of interpretations confirm the idea of a hidden enigmatic meaning, the others confirm the idea of multiplicity and creative reading.

To sum up these fragmentary observations, it seems plausible to assert that there is an essential feature of paradox which is generally constitutive for literary texts: They simultaneously invite and repel the reader, they promise him the possibility of detecting an enigmatic message and, at the same time, leave the decision to him what meaning exactly he wants to attribute to the written letters. An equivalently paradoxical trait is characteristic of reading models and theories of interpretation — which is the reason why they are often integrated into works of modern literary fiction. The doormen are no less enigmatic than the things which may be hidden behind the doors. Those who suggest that there is an enigma of the poetical text thus demonstrate that they reclaim for themselves the authority over the text (teaching what poetical texts actually "are," like Steiner, whose deep respect towards literary works of art is combined with an authoritative attitude in respect to questions of esthetical value). And those who regard meaning as being produced by the reader thereby attribute to the text the capacity of stimulating different interpretations.

We have to accept that poetical texts are obviously characterized by a paradoxical tension between the tendency to refuse the reader and his interpretation on the one hand, to appeal to him on the other. Literary theory participates in this paradox, it is contaminated by it, as on the one hand it makes proposals on how to read texts, if not even how to 'understand' them, on the other hand, however, it affirms their enigmatic character in order to prevent them from being misunderstood as simple media of artificial communication. Literary critics therefore should be regarded as doormen of the very special kind, which is depicted by Carroll and Kafka. Whoever comments on a literary text obviously suggests that there is a door which the reader might go through, but the first and central question the critic himself has to repeat again and again is whether anybody is supposed to enter. For those who remain in front of the door, there may be some consolation, just as there is a consolation for Kafka's man remaining outside the gate leading to The Law. If

it was his destiny to remain outside, he has actually lived "within" (in the sense of "according to") the Law all his life. If it is the readers' destiny not to understand what they read, they have in a certain sense, already understood it. In final consequence, it seems inevitable to reflect on interpretation in terms, which at least tend toward the paradox, if they are not in fact paradoxical already.

Il faut donc dire: les diverses interprétations ne marquent pas que le texte est inexplicable, mais qu'elles sont finalement, dans leur diversité, inexplicables par rapport au texte. Il se conclut: le texte n'est pas nécessairement à expliquer, mais il est parfaitement contenu dans ce qui n'explique plus rien. (Bessière 103)

5. A Mexican Teacher and a Tourist

A Mexican teacher and a tourist who specializes in cultural studies are the protagonists of Italo Calvino's narration "Serpenti e teschi" (serpents and skulls), which is contained in *Palomar* (97-100). Signer Palomar, who visits some Mexican temple ruins with a friend who gives him a lot of information about the meaning of the relics of the remote Aztec culture. These explanations suggest that there is nothing illegible to it at all. A young teacher who is at the same time showing a group of pupils round the excavations, however, asserts repeatedly, that nobody knows what the signs of the native culture mean. Finally there is an open controversy between the two guides when the teacher comments on a relief showing serpents and skulls. The latter again refuses to interpret the hieroglyphs, Signer Palomar's companion, however, gives an interpretation according to which the serpents represent Life, the skulls stand for Death, and the combination of both indicates their reciprocal dependency. Palomar skeptically asks himself, if now the enigma of the hieroglyphs is actually solved, as the word 'life' and 'death' only point to new mysteries. What is life, what is death, and what did both ideas mean to the Aztecs?

Il signer Palomar pensa che ogni traduzione richiede un'altra traduzione e così via. Si domanda: "Cosa voleva dire morte, vita, continuità, passaggio, per gli antichi Toltechi? E cosa può voler dire per questi ragazzi? E per me?" Eppure sa che non potrebbe mai soffocare in sé il bisogno di tradurre, di passare da un linguaggio all'altro, da figure concrete a parole astratte, da simboli astratti a esperienze concrete, di tessere e ritessere una rete d'analogie. Non interpretare è impossibile, come è impossibile trattenersi dal pensare. (Calvino 1983, 100)

Analogously to Palomar's idea, that the solution of the enigma by answering it with the words "life" and "death" is not a final solution after all, Bessière has — in the footsteps of Jorge Luis Borges — referred to the mythological scene in which Oedipus meets the sphinx:

Comme Borges le note, la référence de la réponse au sphinx est tout à fois *l'homme* et la *difformité de l'homme*. [...] Designer *l'homme* est un geste ambivalent qui contraint à une nouvelle interrogation, et définit ce geste comme un geste qui ne suppose aucun secret de l'homme, ni aucune occultation de *l'homme*, mais exclut cependant de pleinement le montrer, comme d'enigmatiser complètement son identité. (Bessière X)

Similar to the sphinx's enigma, the hieroglyphic relief is another symbol of the poetic text which invites us to read and decipher, and even provokes interpretation, and at the same time tempts us to replace one enigma by another.

In what sense can we then regard a literary text as enigmatic? What does the phrase "enigmaticité de la littérature" indicate? Beyond all specific questions arising when a text is read, the crucial question, what writing and reading actually mean, according to which model they should be interpreted and what kind of interaction there is between texts and readers, remains unanswerable. But — as I'd like to repeat, referring back again to Bessière's proposal — we should regard the embarrassment resulting from this question as part of our interactive game with the text. Literary texts do not only provoke hypotheses about their meaning, they also provoke reflections about the conditions under which they are interpreted — which means, that they provoke the reader's self-analysis. In radical consequence we might suspect that the reader is the final enigma. But this would mean being too simplistic again.

Finally, I would like to stress the affinities between the game of uncertainties Bessière suggests the reader to be participating in, and the famous ironic essay about incomprehensibility by Friedrich Schlegel. This text is amazingly autoreferential in respect to the question, if texts can be understood at all and what kinds of reasons usually prevent us from understanding them. Is it the reader's insufficiency? Is he unable to react appropriately to the texts' provocations and invitations? But how should he, in this case, be able to understand his own misunderstanding?

[...] Was kann wohl von allem, was sich auf die Mitteilung der Ideen bezieht, anziehender sein, als die Frage, ob sie überhaupt möglich sei; [...]/? Der gesunde

Menschenverstand, der sich so gern am Leitfaden der Etymologien, wenn sie sehr nahe liegen, orientieren mag, dürfte leicht auf die Vermutung geraten können, der Grund des Unverständlichen liege im Unverstand. Nun ist es ganz eigen an mir, daß ich den Unverstand durchaus nicht leiden kann, auch den Unverstand der Unverständigen, noch weniger aber den Unverstand der Verständigen. Daher hatte ich schon vor langer Zeit den Entschluß gefaßt, mich mit dem Leser in ein Gespräch über diese Materie zu versetzen, und vor seinen eignen Augen, gleichsam ihm ins Gesicht, einen andern neuen Leser nach meinem Sinne zu konstruieren, ja, wenn ich es nötig finden sollte, denselben sogar zu deduzieren. (Schlegel 363)

Schlegel consequently describes the words themselves as active forces and he even regards them as the subjects of self-understanding. They are like spirits escaping from the texts they are used in, confusing the minds and subverting reasonable practice and communication.

[...] ich wollte zeigen, daß die Worte sich selbst oft besser verstehen, als diejenigen von denen sie gebraucht werden, wollte aufmerksam darauf machen, daß es unter den philosophischen Worten, die oft in ihren Schriften wie eine Schar zu früh entsprungener Geister alles verwirren und die unsichtbare Gewalt des Weltgeistes auch an dem ausüben, der sie nicht anerkennen will, geheime Ordensverbindungen geben muß; ich wollte zeigen, daß man die reinste und gediegenste Unverständlichkeit gerade aus der Wissenschaft und aus der Kunst erhält, die ganz eigentlich aufs Verständigen und Verständlichmachen ausgeht, aus der Philosophic und Philologie; und damit das ganze Geschäft sich nicht in einem gar zu handgreiflichen Zirkel herumdrehen mochte, so hatte ich mir fest vorgenommen, dieses eine Mai wenigstens gewiß verständlich zu sein. (Schlegel 364)

Analogously to the famous *Monolog* by Novalis, Schlegel ironically reflects on the comprehensibility of his own words — to the reader and to himself. If we take his argument seriously, the words may also revolt against the author's will instead of obeying it in order to signify something special. There is no superior point of view from which understanding and misunderstanding could be judged. In a circular movement the discourse about misunderstanding in favor of better understanding might end up in another misunderstanding. Therefore the only solution is to confirm the incomprehensible.

Aber ist denn die Unverständlichkeit etwas so durchaus Verwerfliches und Schlechtes? — Mich dünkt das Heil der Familien und der Nationen beruhet auf ihr; wenn mich nicht alles trügt, Staaten und Systeme, die künstlichsten Werke der

Menschen, oft so künstlich, daß man die Weisheit des Schöpfers nicht genug darin bewundern kann. Eine unglaublich kleine Portion ist zureichend, wenn sie nur unverbrüchlich treu und rein bewahrt wird, und kein frevelnder Verstand es wagen darf, sich der heiligen Grenze zu nähern. Ja das Köstlichste was der Mensch hat, die innere Zufriedenheit selbst hängt, wie jeder leicht wissen kann, irgendwo zuletzt an einem solchen Punkte, der im Dunkeln gelassen werden muß, dafür aber auch das Ganze trägt und hält, und diese Kraft in demselben Augenblicke verlieren würde, wo man ihn in Verstand auflösen wollte. Wahrlich, es würde euch bange werden, wenn die ganze Welt, wie ihr es fodert [sic], einmal im Ernst durchaus verständlich würde. Und ist sie selbst diese unendliche Welt nicht durch den Verstand aus der Unverständlichkeit oder dem Chaos gebildet? (Schlegel 370)

Finally, Schlegel quotes his own words, saying that a classical piece of writing should never be understood definitively (or that it should never be conceived to be understood entirely, or that it must not necessarily be completely comprehensible — the German text is ambiguous in this respect). Those, however, who are erudite and who keep educating themselves, should be prepared to learn more and more from it. "Eine klassische Schrift muß nie ganz verstanden werden können. Aber die welche gebildet sind und sich bilden, müssen immer mehr draus lernen wollen" (Schlegel 371). I would suggest to take this postulate to heart not only in regard to literary texts, but as well in regard to inspiring examples of literary criticism.

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