

The Pragmatism of Walls, With a Little Help from Robert Frost
Daniel Thomières, University of Reims, France

Abstract: This paper is mainly a theoretical discussion. The problem raised is probably age-old: why do we read books? It seems that some new answers can be tentatively offered. The author argues for a shift from interpretation to pragmatics. In other words, the traditional answer which stresses the discovery and/or production of meaning (either inside the text and/or negotiated with the reader) as it is currently practised in schools and universities is not sufficient. People just don't read books to construct a body of knowledge. The discussion draws upon the last part of Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*, as well as on a famous article by Richard Rorty. Philosophers Friedrich Nietzsche and Gilles Deleuze are also called upon. Bearing in mind that actual readers are extremely different from each other, it may be considered that some of them will react passively to a given literary text, whereas—at the other end of the spectrum—others will discover new perceptions of themselves and their environment and hopefully develop new values, or—more to the point—new habituses, to borrow Pierre Bourdieu's concept. The author also strongly considers that a theoretical discussion will always remain unconvincing without at least one example analysed in detail. As a consequence, the paper suggests six abstract levels at which Robert Frost's famous short poem "Mending Wall" may provide some of its readers with tools helping help experiment with new possibilities of life.

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What happens when I read a book? Is what takes place in my mind always a process of interpretation? I am here mainly thinking of books normally considered 'literary', such as novels, poems or plays. Surely something happens one way or another. My mind is not passive, unless of course the book is of poor quality or very conventional. But do we not all occasionally buy cheap novels, inferior detective stories, or even sentimental love stories, when we need a little relaxation, just like when we are tired and we switch on our TV set? What matters then is recognizing a number of predictable patterns. (Perry Mason always proves the innocence of his client in the end... And Erle Stanley Gardner's stories are often very good. There is worse.) The degree to which books require us to produce something new and unpredictable in our minds could indeed constitute a way of classifying them. My subject is literary works that do not mainly rely on clichés or stereotyped patterns. I grant that university students are expected to produce interpretations, but that is not what we do when we read on our own. I therefore consider that there is room for a pragmatics of reading. The purpose of this paper is to take some time in order to ask what exactly is being produced in the act of reading literary texts. There has been a lot of outstanding literature on the subject. My aim is not to repeat what has been established, but to test it, something which is all too often sadly missing from these studies. Obviously, I will first have to state briefly what I choose to retain of them from a theoretical point of view. Then I will turn to a poem by Robert Frost and see how far I can go in a pragmatic way. With all due respect for theory, I persist in believing that getting one's hands dirty can also be difficult and that that also requires a modicum of method.

Literature is often presented as an instance of communication, that is between reader and text, or in some cases between reader and author. Without any doubt, it is a very special kind of communication. In fact, it is probably a abuse of language to speak of communication in this case. Yet, that is a singularly convenient notion that I will use as my starting point. At the most simple level, we can distinguish three

instances: i) the author, ii) the text, iii) me (or ourselves as readers). I will here take the liberty of hoping that the fact that I am speaking of myself will not sound obscene or overly objectionable. Reading is a fundamentally a solitary act. I am alone with the book. At the same time, when I read a book, I share a large number of mental operations and affects with other readers. No man is an island, or, if, one prefers Baudelaire to Donne, it all comes to a question of "Mon semblable, mon frère."¹ What the poet is saying is that his shame, his hopes, his desires, and his madness are things which all his readers intimately share with him, even if it is in variable proportions and if their personal histories have been different. We are all the same, and we are all unique... I am one such reader, part of humankind, and more specifically part of particular communities with their values and their habituses. I thus hope that I won't be accused of being presumptuous if I am speak of myself in order to offer some sort of theoretical reflection on an essential human activity. When I read a book, "I contain multitudes." (Walt Whitman, this time...)

This simplistic presentation is obviously very idealistic. We consider that the author says or tries to say—directly or indirectly by means of figures, implications, etc.—something to us. The first problem we encounter is very practical. I have only the text to discover what the author wanted to communicate. In other words, is it necessary to imagine what the author was thinking when he wrote his book? We do so when we read a letter sent by someone we know (a relation, a friend, a person we love, a creditor, an enemy, etc.) In that case, we usually tend to forget the letter very quickly and we focus on our relationships with the person who sent it. We assess the hopes, the fears, etc., that that person represents for us. He or she means something to us—good or bad. Sometimes we are indifferent to him or her. What ultimately matters however is that person. Let us now return

¹ Charles Baudelaire, "Dedication" of *Les Fleurs du mal* (orig. published 1857). The poet's warning is clear, we are all "monsters of daintiness," and only those of us who are "hypocritical readers" will refuse to listen further...

to literature. We generally do not know the author personally. As a matter of fact, very often, he or she has been dead for centuries. Maybe we should forget about the author then, which obviously does not mean that books have no authors. They are indeed written by flesh and blood people with their joys, their problems, their cultural preferences, etc.

Let us talk about the book first. A book is made of millions of words. That also means that there are billions of possibilities of connections between these words. Unless we re-read a book—possibly in order to write an article in an academic journal—we never perceive all that semantic richness. We all have read those perfectly written but disappointing papers which ignore most of details of the work they are writing about, when they do not flatly contradict crucial points they have sadly overlooked. It is certainly a pity that American scholars have all but forgotten about the close readings that used to be fashionable in the days of the New Criticism. Admittedly, the final interpretation was very often predictable, but at least critics said something about the books they were supposed to study. The same can almost be said about the vogue of deconstruction today. The conclusions too are often trite and hackneyed, but at least occasionally new details are discovered which are not as unimportant as they may look. It follows that talking about a literary text implies a selection—more or less conscious—of details from that text. We will however never be able to express the truth, nothing but the truth, the whole truth about a book. Such an ambition is of course an illusion. What can we now say about readers? Here again generalizing is difficult, not to say impossible. I will never discover the final truth about myself. Such a question is meaningless. I suppose that I am fairly typical, that is to say disappointingly unremarkable. I am full of contradictions. (I have already made my confession: I contain multitudes...) I belong to several social groups, sub-groups and subcultures. (But it is fair to say that homogeneous cultures do not exist and that no-one is entirely part of a given culture. There has never been such a thing as a

homogeneous culture...). Nothing is more divided than a society, even though some societies like to pretend that they are unified behind a king, a religion, a distant past and/or a set of symbols. Well, perhaps something is more divided than a human society. I am thinking of the identity of the author of these lines.... It is perhaps easier now understand a little better why the model of communication presented above is exceedingly simplistic. The problem seems to be: what happens between these two heterogeneous entities, a given text and, on the other hand, readers who are all deeply different?

Is there then some sort of ongoing dialogue between these two entities, a dialogue carried out when the reader reads the text, and possibly re-reads it, thinks about it later, and also when the impressions derived from the text make their slow way inside the readers's unconscious? One thing at least is clear. The book would not exist without me. To begin with, I paid for it (instead of buying cigarettes or a pack of beer). It has thus a value that is first and foremost economic. It also has something which I am tempted to call a human value. I would not exist without it, or, rather, I would be a completely different person if I had never read a poem in my life. The list of books we have read, skimmed through, or simply mis-read, account in a large part for who we are. In short, books give humans meaning and pleasure. Could not one say that a book has been successfully read when the interaction (or dialogue) between the book and its reader is 50%/50%? There must probably be some sort of equality in the interaction. I bring something of my inner self and the book offers me some of his semantic wealth.²

² These ideas are of course by no means new. Wolfgang Iser, for instance, develops such an approach in *The Act of Reading* where he explains that reading a literary text is fundamentally a "cooperative enterprise" (27) based on what he calls a "dyadic interaction" (66) between a text and its reader. He also adds that texts and readers share a common code both at the linguistic and at the cultural level. That last point appears however debatable, at least as far as culture is concerned. Iser has applied his theory to a number of texts in his study of Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and of course in *The Implied Reader*. It has to be recognized, however, that on the whole

It is thus probably wrong to state that the ultimate purpose of reading a literary work is to produce an interpretation. That is incidentally also the case with other types of books, say, a school textbook. If I buy a textbook to learn how to use spreadsheets, I will probably read the book very closely in order not to lose any important passages, but the result I am expecting is to be found in the skills I will have acquired when I am in front of my computer. When I have become competent, I will no longer need the textbook and I throw it away, or sell it to another student. The same is probably true of literary texts. I become a different person—at least, a slightly different person—with each book I open. I feel that Richard Rorty³ is probably right when he says that our approach must be first and foremost pragmatic. To summarize Rorty's point, we could argue that there are two ways of relating to a text.

In the first, I will try to arrive at a scientific body of knowledge about the text, in the same way as a biologist tries to discover facts about the germs in a test-tube. That is the interpretation approach, usually followed in schools and universities. Our conclusions must be as objective as possible. This approach could be called the point of view of God. An object is considered from the outside and the goal to discover the truth about it by means of induction and/or hypotheses and deductions. Such a thing is unquestionably legitimate, and interpretative semantics especially has made a lot of progress over the

he studies the structure of the work rather the way the reader (re)construct that work. His theoretical pronouncements are undeniable more daring than his practical applications which all too often seem to be on the side of interpretation rather than that of semantics.

³ I am referring to Richard Rorty's famous paper delivered at the occasion of the Tanner Lectures organised in Cambridge, Britain, in 1990, under the titular figure of Umberto Eco. The seven texts were published in English under the general title *Interpretation and Overinterpretation*, Cambridge: C.U.P., 1992. Rorty's text, which is unquestionably the one possessing the most far-reaching implications for the problem at hand, bears the title "The Pragmatist's Progress".

last twenty years⁴. As mentioned earlier on, texts are made up of words (should we say semes?) and of a host of complex relationships between these elements. A good interpretation will cover as many details as possible. Conversely, the author of a good interpretation—a student or an instructor—must not project himself or herself upon the text. Their objective is to be as objective and unbiased as possible. In other words, the interpretation arrived at must be deemed true. Truth in this respect means an exact correspondence between the text and what is said and conceptualized about it. Something essential, however, seems to be missing in such an approach of literary texts. The problem is that it simply ignores the question is why in the first place people read books, and why they think, talk, dream, possibly quarrel about them. Books and especially literary texts have something to do with us, with our bodies, our minds, our desires, our violence, our unconscious, about what is most individual, personal and specific in us. Besides, a book doesn't have one single meaning. Its meaning is not something which has been fixed for all eternity. It changes over time. Homer or Shakespeare certainly did not foresee the implications that are found today in what they wrote. (Well, after all, who knows ...?)

Another approach than interpretation seems therefore to be necessary. It means that we will have to give up our pretensions at objective knowledge. Two passages which I borrow from *Remembrance of Things Past* by Marcel Proust will, I believe, help us see things in a somewhat different light. Proust's narrator remembers that, when he was a child at Combray, he had seen ready-made spectacles in the window of an optician's. In fact, that sort of glasses which don't require a doctor's prescription can still be found today in a lot of our supermarkets. Of course, you have to try on a lot of them before you find the one that fits your eye-sight. Literary works are like

⁴ An excellent example of this approach can be found in François Rastier's own brand of interpretative semantics which includes a full consideration of the cultural components of texts and of course of their fundamental ambiguity. See his *Meaning and Textuality*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997.

these glasses. They enable readers to look at the world and at themselves a little better. In other words, they offer a sort of framework that leads readers to discover distinctions and patterns of which we had not been aware before. They see things that were there outside or inside themselves but that they had not noticed. What is important is the notion of interaction. What I now see depends of the world of course, of the glasses obviously, but also of that great mystery which is myself, my consciousness and my unconscious. The second metaphor used by Proust refers to the paintings of Auguste Renoir. When they were first exhibited, a lot of people judged them very modern. They constituted something to which they were not used and the general public accordingly found it difficult to accept them. Indeed some people said that they were shocking and, worse, that they had nothing to do with reality. Then, gradually, they became accepted. Today—says Proust—we tend to look at the world as it were a painting by Renoir. "And, lo and behold, the world around us (which was not created once and for all, but is created afresh as often as an original artist is born) appears to us entirely different from the old world, but perfectly clear." (*The Guermantes Way*, 323-24). The idea is of course the same as that of the spectacles. One doesn't interact with the world directly.

It would thus seem that a pragmatic approach to literary texts could prove more relevant than one focusing solely on interpretation. By relevant, I mean that that approach would be close to the way literature actually functions. In other words, a text—or at least some aspects of it— has to become actualised by a reader—that is, it has to exert an action on the reader's mind and/or body. More specifically, it should first be pointed out that there are two main conceptions of what pragmatism is. The first is the more traditional and the less interesting one. It is usually summed up as, what is true is what works. The consequence of that brief definition is that what we should be concerned with is actual actions in the world. The problem is that it is very difficult to come up with absolutely convincing examples. In what is usually considered the most famous instance of what looks like a

successful pragmatic example, the spectators of the premiere of Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* in 1830 walked out of a Brussels theater at the end of the performance and started a revolution that eventually led to the independence of Belgium. They had been especially roused by a duet, "Amour sacré de la patrie," which celebrates the sacred love one feels for one's fatherland. More generally, the opera describes a number of (mainly aristocratic) abuses eventually put right. The libretto proclaimed that hopefully there can be such a thing as Justice. Other possible examples concern the books of Voltaire which are said to have been "the" cause of the French Revolution. The problem of course is that another possible cause is the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a famous enemy of Voltaire... Most probably, such a momentous event as the French Revolution is liable to have had several causes situated at different levels. (There also remains to ascertain whether the French Revolution was a unified whole). In the same way, it is often assumed that Walter Scott is at the origin of the American Civil War. His novels were best-sellers at the time and a lot of (white) people living below the Mason-Dixon line equated the American South with Scotland. Both countries were seen as unfairly victimized by foreigners who had no sense of the lofty, aristocratic values these regions held sacred. We have to recognize when we look at these examples that the link between the supposed cause and an actual series of events is much too loose and distant. Only in the Auber opera does the connection seem convincing. However, we must bear in mind that the spectators who attended that performance were not representatives of the (future) Belgian people as a whole. They were rich, influential individuals who could afford the price of a ticket for the premiere. Apparently a large number of them already shared patriotic and revolutionary ideals. They possessed the necessary desires, ideals and mental categories. The opera just provided them with a sort of spark which crystallized something which had already almost acquired its definite form in their minds.

Speaking of minds has led me to the second type of pragmatism which is situated at the level of our representations and not that of our actions. It will help us to remember Proust's glasses. The problem is the way we look at the world, and especially the way we look at least at a number of levels of reality about which we will never know anything sure in an objective way. It seems safe to assume that that no consensus will ever be reached about God (does He exist? Is He alone or should we speak of gods in the plural? What religion should we choose if we decide to believe in Him, unless our beliefs have already been conditioned by a family tradition?), the self (you can see your face more or less accurately in a mirror, but you will never see, let alone grasp, your self), and the world (is it infinite? is it a whole? what is the nature of the links that unite us to the world? In that category should also be included society and politics, a subject about which there unquestionably is very little agreement throughout the vast world.) What should be examined when we talk of the action of literary texts on readers is beliefs, habits, attitudes, emotions. Reading displaces things in their minds, it alters perspectives. Readers look at the world and at themselves in a different light. And of course it should be borne in mind that we are all different, we all have had different lives, our identities are all specific. It follows that the same book will never have exactly the same influence on two individuals—if only because these two individuals will perhaps not read it with as much attention. They will stress different details, they will connect these details differently, etc. Yet, I suggested that reading could be a 50%/50% dialogue between a reader and a book. It still seems possible to generalize and abstract structures or patterns from a book. These patterns may or may not be actualized by actual readers, but they represent a valid starting point for a way of studying literature that has nothing to do with interpretation.⁵ Teaching literature should also be a dialogue. What is it

⁵ Readers with a bias for sociology might like to look at Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' which he borrowed from Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. Habitus consists in a scheme which is both objective and subjective at the same time. It helps people

that a class can share? Not personal data certainly, what I feel for John, Paul or Mary.... Students do not enrol in a literature class to talk about their personal lives, their loves, their losses, and why not about their evil impulses.... Studying a text implies reading it (and re-reading it) very closely and generalizing upward from its content and its formal structures in order hopefully to arrive at intuitions, distinctions, patterns that will help me being more "myself," (whatever that word means...).

In this respect, we should recall Friedrich Nietzsche's pronouncement that what we should always try to discover new possibilities of "life," a theme synonymous with creation and invention — as opposed to repetition of a model — that runs through most of what he wrote. Literature indeed helps humans discover new possibilities in themselves and in the world. Of course, these possibilities are not unlimited. They are always part of what the different cultures to which they belong permit them to do. Their bodies and their mental faculties also impose upon them obvious restraints. Underlying this conception is the idea that the self is not innate. It is not given at birth, it is not static either, it evolves, it may regress, it may also become fixed and paralysed. Nietzsche also produced the concept of the Eternal Return. Scholars have always found it exceedingly difficult to determine what Nietzsche exactly had in mind when he used that phrase, especially throughout *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, where two conceptions of it can be discovered depending whether Zathustra is sick or cured.. Here again a choice has to be made. The most convincing explanation that has been provided of the Eternal Return is that of Gilles Deleuze⁶. It is not the return of the same, which would

adapt to new situations and enables them to anticipate what turn events will take. In addition—that is especially important—habitus is transferable to other fields of our experience. See Bourdieu's *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Cambridge Studies in Social and Cultural Anthropology, Cambridge, C.U.P., 1977, and also more specifically the essential "Habitus, code et codification," *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales*, 1986, n° 64.

⁶ My approach of Nietzsche draws its inspiration from Gilles Deleuze's indispensable *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1983. Deleuze's

imply that reality is static, a most pointless consideration. Deleuze proposes that what returns is a movement, it is difference that returns, that is new possibilities as life goes on whether we accept it or not. This conception is more convincing than speaking of the return of the same, because it can be linked to pragmatism and because it seems in a position to help humans understand a little better the importance of literature in our lives. What should be borne in mind is that time has neither beginning nor ending. In other words, Nietzsche's conception is entirely non religious, which obviously some of my readers will not be able to accept (just like these readers probably objected to what I said earlier on about the self which is not given at birth. They will reject the belief that an immortal soul is a historical, cultural illusion based on a rather naive brand of narcissism and on our fear of death). It follows that there is no Genesis and no Revelation. These things are fictions some of us are asked to believe in. It should be noted that the Eternal Return is also a story. We may or may not believe in it. We should perhaps look at it as a sort of bet or wager⁷. If we decide to believe in it, it follows however that there is no guilt, no legacy of a supposed original sin—which obviously does not mean that there is no evil today in the world.... If there is no guilt, we can start our lives again if we wish to. In other words, the Eternal Return is not the repetition of the same. That would condemn humans to guilt and resentment, to repeat their lives all over again in the same way, to conform to patterns imposed upon them by their past. The Eternal Return is the repetition of difference. To some extent, man is largely a free creature. We invent things, we fall in love, etc. Spring is more than a season. It is also a symbol. The idea is surely a bit silly. "The past is not dead. In fact, it's

explanation of the originality of the Eternal Return is extremely convincing, especially for my purpose.

⁷ Blaise Pascal argued that religious belief could very well boil down to a wager. If I choose to believe that there is such a thing as a god and if He indeed exists, I win when I die. If He does not exist, I have nothing to lose. Consequently, I had better bet that God exists. Cf. *Thoughts, Letters and Minor Works*, #233, Kessinger Publishing, repr. 2004. (Originally publ. 1669).

not even past"⁸. Faulkner knew it. But isn't also Faulkner somewhat partial and systematic in his own way? Do we really believe that we all are Faulknerian characters and that our future will only be the accomplishment of some dark fate that is eventually going to crush us? Maybe I can choose to believe that, even if my life has been particularly unhappy, I can still hope to be a little happier before I die, if I just make a tiny effort? If a book has been able to convey to me that intuition and that desire, I must then conclude that this book really has an unquestionable value which obviously has nothing quantitative about it. I thus offer to consider that the world is still open and that our future is still largely unwritten. There are still things to be discovered, shared, and relationships to be created⁹.

Another way of expressing that intuition is to remember that there is indeed something "outside the text." (When Jacques Derrida declared that there is nothing outside the text—"Il n'y a pas de hors texte"¹⁰—, he was positing that it would be illusory to look for an origin before the text and to hope that that origin would be the cause of the text. The problem for this paper is not what happened before the text, but what

⁸ William Faulkner, *Requiem for a Nun*, I/3, New York: Random House, 1951.

⁹ It is perhaps time to re-read that wonderful French writer cum philosopher who is sadly a little forgotten today. Albert Camus rewrote the myth of the unfortunate Sisyphus who had been sentenced to pure repetition. He had to push a heavy rock up a hill. When the top of the hill was reached, the rock fell back, and poor Sisyphus had to start all over again. Surprisingly, Camus ends his essay with this statement: "One must imagine Sisyphus happy," meaning that he is happy, or can be happy. What Camus says is not quite clear. The point however is that my life is a mixture of fate, sadness and repetition on the one hand, but that, on the other hand, there is always the possibility of some sort of difference and/or (limited?) happiness. See his *The Myth of Sisyphus, And Other Essays*, Vintage, reprinted 1991. (Originally publ. 1942).

¹⁰ This oft-repeated statement, which apparently even non-French scholars now commonly use in their everyday conversation, first appeared in Jacques Derrida's first seminal work, *De la Grammatologie*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1967. Engl. transl. *Of Grammatology*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976. The phrase has kept appearing and disseminating everywhere, including in this essay

can take place after.) It follows that the question raised by a literary text is not that of its interpretation. As Gilles Deleuze often said, it is rather that of experimentation: "Remplacer l'anamnèse par l'oubli, l'interprétation par l'expérimentation"¹¹. Reading a book ultimately means connecting the assemblage of singularities it is made up of, the patterns that can be discovered in it, and the numerous contexts of its readers' lives. Let us also add that, if it is accepted that books possess some value, reading them means turning it into questions whose answer are not ready-made. A good book should be like a scandal. (The word originally meant a stumbling block). A good book, especially if it is literature, invites its readers not to take anything for granted. What is perhaps essential about a literary text is that it should bring about a crisis in its readers' existence. (Etymologically, the word "crisis" signifies a distinction. In other words, there are distinctions where none appeared to be before. Put it simply, it is a case of two instead of one, or even perhaps more than two. New possibilities appears where previously there apparently was only one road...)

Reading and studying literary texts has far-reaching implications. Literature is about life (whatever that word means... Admittedly, the word sounds vague, but it is used by Nietzsche, as well as by all the 20th century empiricists like Henri Bergson, Jean Wahl and Gilles Deleuze). Men all somehow—perhaps only dimly—know that they can construct themselves, that they can also construct the world—which is the only world that exists. It follows that it would seem that I respond in two different fashions to the situations in which I find myself. (I) I resort to habits, reflex actions, I don't change (because unconsciously I don't want to change or because I have interiorized a social or psychological commandment that tells me not to change). (II) I act in a creative way, I look upon situations as as many problems to be solved. Nietzsche expressed in his own way that dichotomy when he said that our acts

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaus*, 187. ("Substitute forgetting for anamnesis, experimentation for interpretation," Engl. transl., 167).

are either reactive or active¹². He certainly was part of a century-old tradition, of which Spinoza was another outstanding representative. Spinoza as for him distinguished between two kinds of affects: sadness or joy?¹³ Probably my life is a mixture of these two affects, and literature may perhaps help me to keep faith in joy. If these notions look too hazy and ambitious, maybe we could after all content ourselves with a suggestion made by Stanley Cavell who more modestly maintains that literature permits us to experience the "uncanniness" of daily life. As Cavell puts it, with literature, we discover "the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic" (168)¹⁴. To put it differently, when for instance I read a novel, I vicariously share in the adventures of the characters with all that that implies (fantasies, epiphanies, revisions of values, the discovery that some things are possible, etc.) Indeed the adventures of the characters very often give birth to the adventures of the reader in the reader's mind. Proust—to return to him—knew very well that literature was just as rich as life... (Indeed, Proust's narrator is fond of reminding us that little Marcel kept arguing with his grand-mother who wanted him to go and play outside instead of staying in his rooms with his books!)

Abstract pronouncements about literature should always be put to the test. I promised an example. My choice has been motivated by an

¹² It would really be a pure waste of time to ask ourselves whether we had not better reject the fragments published as *The Will to Power: An Attempted Transvaluation of All Values*. Here again, we are not concerned with the author, but the force (a most Nietzschean notion...) of the ideas we encounter on our road (and in the books we read...)

¹³ Here again I beg to be allowed to mention another inspiring book by Gilles Deleuze who completely renewed our vision of that philosopher. Gilles Deleuze, *Spinoza: Practical Philosophy*, City Lights Publishers, 1988. Following Spinoza, Deleuze distinguishes very carefully between the two kinds of values—positive or negative—that govern our minds.

¹⁴ See Stanley Cavell's *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988. Cavell refers to his adaptation of Sigmund Freud's conception of "*das Unheimliche*" (usually rendered as the "uncanny" in English.)

obvious desire to avoid what would be too personal. It is certainly out of the question for me to impose a catalogue of the love affairs, deaths, of all the happiness or horror that have accompanied my life. These events and their psychological repercussions have certainly made me pretty similar to the vast majority of my fellow human beings, but that is not a reason for giving away personal details. Yet any resemblance with living persons is intentional... I have chosen to speak of a poem by Robert Frost, "Mending Wall."¹⁵ It offers—as usual with Frost—a great wealth of implications and possibilities. It is also extremely well-known, so that most of my readers will immediately understand my allusions. In the poem, a persona—whom I propose to call "the poet" if only for the sake of simplicity—explains that both he and his neighbor have a garden with a wall in between. Each spring, the neighbor insists that they repair the wall after the winter. "Good fences make good neighbors," is indeed the neighbor's favorite proverb. The poet however is rather skeptical. What's the use of a wall in his case? He grows apple-trees, whereas his neighbor has pines. ("My apple trees will never get across / And eat the cones under his pines.") No confusion is possible. His neighbor strikes him as a very irrational person. Yet, the poet decides to help him with the wall and finally seems to be fairly happy about it.

Was not this poem written especially for me by Mr. Robert Frost, who certainly never heard of me? I think that that is precisely the case for six reasons which I now propose to develop.

First, I will start with the title, "Mending Wall." As with most titles, it is an invitation to read, a promise made to us as it were. In the case of Frost's poem, it also tells us at what manner we should look upon the text. Two features appear to be significant. To begin with, the word "wall" is in the singular. I suppose that a lot of readers expect "walls." (It is indeed a common experience to discover that usually people who have heard of the poem believe that its title is "Mending Walls"....) That

¹⁵ Robert Frost, *Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays*, Library of America, 1995. The poem is the second poem of *North of Boston*, originally published in 1915.

would seem to suggest that what comes next—the problem raised by one particular wall—will probably be metaphorical and that readers are in that case expected to generalize. "Wall" has almost become a concept here. And the poem certainly refers to more than my garden—indeed possibly to something that has nothing to do with gardens... In addition, the verb "mending" displays an ostentatious "-ing" implying that what is stressed is most probably not the result (the mended wall), but the activity, the work in progress. In other words, walls are perhaps of secondary importance, as is mending for that matter. Could we say that what matters is engaging in that kind of activity?

Second, before we reach such an abstract level, I think we should start asking ourselves what roles walls—metaphorical or not—actually play in our lives. The poet eventually comes to the conclusion that they are essential. We could almost say that that is his "adventure" in the poem. He mends the wall because it has to continue being a wall. His final decision leads us to the important question: do we need walls? I suppose we need walls to separate us from the people next door, in the same way as our houses have doors. We are different, we insist on the sacred character of our personal lives, we hold that private property is something important. Countries also have "walls," or if one prefers frontiers—natural or artificial. A frontier is like a wall. It is meant to prevent war (hopefully...) Strangely enough, it also permits relationships (and in this respect an embassy, a commercial mission abroad, etc., are also metaphorical walls). It is through these walls that nations communicate with each other. Even today in Europe, at a time when borders, customs officials and immigration officers have disappeared, people still consider that, say, France is not Germany or Italy, and that that is a good thing. Each country has its own identity, its own traditions, its own cuisine. Otherwise it would be completely meaningless to travel from one country to another. They would all look the same. All human beings would be considered similar, whereas they are in fact different. (Only totalitarian states want people to look identical and they send to death those who are arbitrarily perceived as

different). Another question could be: Are there walls between friends? It is usually very difficult to define what friendship truly is. Literature has always spoken of love but rarely of friendship. It is far from sure that a real friend is someone who looks like me. Jacques Derrida offers an extreme position¹⁶. Starting with Aristotle's most paradoxical pronouncement which, according to Montaigne in his *Essais*, he is supposed to have been fond of repeating, "Friends, there is no friend." "If the great canonical meditations on friendship (Cicero's *De Amicitia*, Montaigne's 'De l'Amitié,' Blanchot's *L'Amitié*, for example) belong to the experience of mourning, to the moment of loss — that of the friend or of friendship — if through the irreplaceable element of the named they always advance in testimonial order to confide and refuse the death of the unique to a universalizable discourse ('... my friends, there is no friend': Aristotle-Montaigne; 'Que sont mes amis devenus?' Villon; 'Wo aber sind die Freunde?': Hölderlin), if by this token they simultaneously *found* and *destabilize* [...] perhaps *all* oppositions, can it be said that the relative invariance of this model is *itself* fractured and fractures *itself*, and opens on to his own abyss?" (290) Derrida takes Aristotle's statement as a sort of wall, as an obstacle to mechanical thinking, as it were: Friendship is not a notion that should be taken for granted. It implies that the way we think becomes fractured, destabilized. It has then to be displaced, constructed, and regularly reconstrued, just like Frost's wall is regularly mended. Derrida in fact shows that the real friend is someone who is dead and out of reach. After my friend's death, I discover one day that he or she bequeaths to me a new point of view on reality, and that that point of view was not my point of view. It is as if I now had two different points of view, just like there are two gardens in Frost's poem on either sides of the wall. It

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, *Politics of Friendship*, London: Verso, 1997. Friendship seems to exist and not to exist at the same time. It follows that, if we wish to apprehend what it really is, we must develop a very ambitious conception of it. A friend is not just just someone we like having a beer with, someone who perhaps thinks just like us. At bottom, what we should in fact recognize is that a friend does not think like us.

would thus appear that the notion of friendship is closely bound up with that of crisis: friendship is what makes us question reality and realize that life is richer and more complex than we assumed. Two instead of one....

Last but not least, we must not forget marriage. The person I am in love with is not me. It takes two to be in love. Claude Lévi-Strauss has written a fascinating study of South American myths in the four volume of *Mythologiques*¹⁷. The third volume, *The Origin of Table Manners*, has a lot to say about what a couple is. How should husband and wife relate to each other? As usual with Lévi-Strauss, everything hinges on an opposition between nature and culture. Humans are not animals, they cook their food (or at the very least eat it in a ritualized way, pour for instance sauce upon their salads, etc.), they wear clothes even in the summer when the weather is warm, which from a rational point of view makes clothes totally unnecessary. One feels much better entirely naked... Lévi-Strauss goes on to explain that a couple is like a pirogue, a small elongated boat with two people on it, the wife and the husband. What is important to note is that a correct distance has to be respected between the occupants of the pirogue. The man and the woman must not be too far away from each other, nor too close either. In the first case, there would be indifference between them, and in the second that would signify fusion and then they would lose their identities in favour of an illusion of communion—which normally does not last very long as everybody with a sane mind perfectly knows.... Without the right distance, there is no exchange and no communication. It is exactly the same with married couples—or people in love for that matter—as with countries¹⁸. The same principles could be applied to

¹⁷ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Mythologiques*, volume III, *The Origin of Table Manners*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1978.

¹⁸ I have no intention of even attempting to solve the vexed problem of the (possible) relationships between men and women in a marriage and/or a love relationship. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan— a close friend of Claude Lévi-Strauss in his structuralist period—used to repeat *ad nauseam*, “Il n’y a pas de rapport sexuel.” Will we also say that there is no sexual rapport? Lacan never intended to say that there is

the problem of the relationships between parents and children and to countless other examples, always bearing in mind that we live in time: relationships such as love or war constantly evolve. At bottom, there are thus only three possibilities open to us: communication, loneliness or madness¹⁹.

no sexuality. There are bodies connecting and interpenetrating each other. What he meant was that there is no rapport between genders, and more specifically that men and women (or same-sex sexual partners for that matter) will never communicate, let alone discover some sort of communion in the sex act. It is as if they were not on the same wave length when their bodies touch and give them sexual pleasure. The idea that the two partners see the same things or images at the same time is a myth, like for instance that of the androgyne in Plato's *Symposium* whose two halves could be reunited if only we could find the right partner. All along his life, Jacques Lacan kept returning to this formula. Readers wishing to pursue its implications and development are advised to turn to the published of his Seminar XX, *Séminaire XX: "Encore"* (1973-1975), Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975, pp. 131-132. Interestingly, Lacan adds by way of explanation: "Le rapport sexuel est ce qui ne cesse pas de ne pas s'écrire." Sexual rapport is what which never stops not writing itself, which is precisely the point I am trying to make. We keep trying to build walls. They separate us, but, at the same time, they hopefully help us—at least if only briefly—connect. And there remains of course the inevitable question of love. Love isn't sex. Every child knows that. Could I suggest *in fine* that maybe love precisely consist in some kind of symbolic creation akin to the act of writing, inventing something both material and immaterial at the same time, a sort of trace to which we can cling, and thus constructing as it were a wall uniting (for a brief moment? for ever?) two singular people?

¹⁹ This discussion about human relationships could also include a number of considerations about hospitality. Jacques Derrida here again wrote a most illuminating book on the subject (*Of Hospitality*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000). On the one hand, we are always responsible for the other whether we like it not. By definition, the other can be just anybody who crosses our path by pure chance. In this respect, Derrida borrowed heavily from Emmanuel Lévinas's *Totality and Infinity* (Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1969.) As Lévinas points out, the other carries a trace of the infinite in him or her (a trace of God if one is a believer in religions). The meaning is thus clear: that trace is to be found by me in the other, not in me. In other words, the other is more important than me (who some days is sufficiently conceited to believe that I was made in the image of God...). In other words again, I need the other if I want to know who I am (or, more properly, who I can be.) On the other hand, there is—as with Robert Frost's wall— an inescapable

My third point will be a little more theoretical. It is very very very tempting to ferret out an age old pun in the poem. Isn't "wall" the mirror image of "law"?²⁰ Can man live without laws? Only in the Garden of Eden were laws useless, in the same way as clothes were unnecessary. Certainly we should not confuse laws with Justice (with a capital J). Laws are human inventions, they are often contradictory, some of them are patently unfair. (Slavery, then segregation, for instance, were long legal in the United States). Maybe we should consider that, just like language, laws are social and arbitrary. They are also necessary. Freedom, happiness, love, desire, are not contradictory with laws. On the contrary, laws make them possible. Even perversions need laws in order to exist²¹. Let us remember in this

contradiction. Hospitality cannot be extended without limits, be it in your own home or in the case of a country to which immigrants flock. There are of course material considerations to be taken into account. You need space, food, money in order to welcome a stranger, let alone a lot of strangers. There is also the fact that you show hospitality towards a stranger because you are not a stranger yourself and because he happens to be a one. Frost would have loved these typical Derridean ambiguities. The other always remains other... Indeed, Frost's neighbor, who is presented as a "savage," loves walls. Why should he need a wall if he truly is a savage?

²⁰ Herman Melville for instance seems to be resorting to the same pun in his famous short story "Bartleby." The unfortunate copyist has to first to work in a corner of the lawyer's office. His desk is between two windows overlooking two walls. When one remembers that the office is situated in Wall Street, we very quickly understands the implications of the symbolism. Bartleby will never escape, or, should we say, what Bartleby represents has no place in the lawyer's society. Laws in America are the service of lawyers and of their rich clients, John Jacob Astor to begin with, as the narrator himself points out..

²¹ Freud in his paper on "Fetishism" shows that perverses constitute their own personal law side by side with social laws(s). They know fully well that institutional laws exist, but they prefer to abide by their own arrangements. It follows that perversion is what enables some people not to become mad, as the contrary of law always means chaos, the absence of identity as well as meaninglessness. In other words, there are three and only positions for adults to exist: the law or perversion or madness. Freud explains that he chose the example of fetishism as it provides a very clear theoretical model of the way other perversions function. Cf. *Standard Edition*, vol XXI. (Originally published 1927).

respect that, at the end of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne has Hester return to Boston. She then puts back the letter on her chest. We know that the book is not realistic. (The very word was then meaningless). That means for Hawthorne that Boston is to a large extent synonymous with the concept of society and that one cannot live on the sea or in the forest, which are both synonymous with chaos, in other words with an absence of meaning or with madness. Our identity comes from society. It is bound up with the way people look at us. It is also part of the modifications of the way they think about us. Originally, Hester's "sin" was due to chance. (There is actually very little we can say about her "sin". Her first meeting with the minister is outside the book.). The A and its various interpretations then become her only identity. That is what Hawthorne's book is about. At the beginning, the red letter represents the law. Then, in the course of the book, we understand that Hester could not have survived and started a new life and develop new possibilities for her self if she had not carried the mark of the law upon herself.

Fourth, it is important to notice that there is a twist in the poem. (Poems are made not only to be read, but re-read too, and that is especially true of Robert Frost's...) In actual fact, the one who tells the other that it is time to go about mending the wall is... the poet. That comes as a sort of surprise to the reader who maybe did not read the poem very closely the first time. ("I let my neighbor know beyond the hill.") Didn't the poet say that the whole thing about fixing the wall was a bit silly and more generally that was completely useless? After all, it would appear that it is not that useless. In other words, it appears that the poet possesses a divided personality. But aren't we all split selves one way on another? Don't we all suffer from deep-seated contradictions? It now appears that the poet tries at the same time to defend tradition (such as the neighbor's proverb he quoted in which he follows in his ancestors's feet) and, on the other hand, change and novelty. He is both rational and irrational. He needs order and what is outside order, that is to say chaos. More simply, nature is here seen as

a mixture of apple-trees and of pine trees, that is to say that one part of it is domestic, and the other belongs to the wilderness. It is as if the human being needed both sides—order and disorder. That is also true of the neighbor who is apparently on the side of the wilderness but who keeps insisting on proverbs, that is to say on culture, which makes of the neighbor some sort of alter ego of the speaker. That is probably the main point readers have to understand. On first reading, the speaker is identified to the poet. On rereading, however, the poet is both the speaker and the neighbor. Can that intuition be connected with what I tried to show above: the self is not united, it is not given to us when we are born, but it is something that changes all the time?

The fifth point concerns time and once again Nietzsche's Eternal Return and of what that concept could signify for humans. Literally the poet says that spring has come round once again and that the time has returned to establish new relationships. Slyly, Frost begins his poem by saying that "Something there is that doesn't love a wall," explaining that that "something" is responsible for the damage sustained by the wall in the winter. (It "sends the frozen ground swell under it.") Another pun? The "something" is question has surely a name? Is it "frost"...? It is then the poet (a certain Robert Frost!) who destroyed the wall (symbolically...) In other words, in our lives it is both indispensable to create and to destroy. One doesn't go without the other. Didn't Freud's daring hypothesis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* expresses the same intuition when he says that life was paradoxically a mixture of death drives and life drives? The poet and his neighbor have thus to fill the holes left by nature in the wall. "No one has seen them made or heard them made." As Freud put it, the death drive works in a silent and invisible way hidden behind—or, rather inside—life. Life is thus a process of equilibrium, and time plays a crucial role in it. Spring is more than a season. It is a ritual. In other words, what Robert Frost conveys through his poem is the necessity for all of us without exceptions of a wall, of time, and of the others.

There remains a sixth point. (Just for the pleasure of it. The act of reading can also be fun, can it not?) The wall in the poem is apparently destroyed, not only by the frost—and by Frost the poet and metaphysician—, but also by another force. "Elves," the neighbor says. Does the supernatural play a role in our world? Maybe. Maybe not. Perhaps this is to be connected to the way the two men actually repair that unfortunate wall. Speaking of the boulders, the poet says, "We have to use a spell to make them balance." Well, human relationships when they are successful are about reaching the right balance, we know that already. The "spell" represents an additional dimension. Is a relationship—friendship, love, war or peace, etc.—successful because people rationally make the effort to render it successful or isn't it rather a matter of chance? After all, not everything is rational in our lives. We are sometimes full of luck. At other times, we are unlucky²². I spoke of belief when we discussed choosing between theoretical approaches earlier on. Why is it that someone should choose between being rational and believing in the supernatural?

The purpose of my modest proposal was to suggest that reading—when that activity is taken seriously—can ultimately be an ongoing dialogue between the text and ourselves. It is probably an error to believe that we discover the truth of the text—let alone of the author. (What would be the point of that truth for me?) What matters at bottom when we read a literary text is to find is the existence of new possibilities of life. I would just like to add that that dialogue should be a real dialogue. When I speak with someone, I normally try to respect that person. (Maybe that is an illusion of mine. I am probably like

²² Jean Giraudoux. *The Trojan War Will Not Take Place*, London: Methuen, repr. 1983. (Originally published 1935). What is the real cause of a war? Fate? Chance? The continuation of commerce by other means? Or perhaps a simple detail? "An imperceptible impoliteness," as Ulysses puts it in Giraudoux's play? The Trojans could very well have killed admirals or kings without bringing about a war, Paris could have seduced twenty leading Greek women, but there must have been something special about Helen, a virtually imperceptible detail... Giving back Helen would then be useless. A frontier has been crossed.

everybody else. It is possible that, in some cases, I only start speaking with someone else in order to influence that person. Doing things with words...) In any case, the same should be true of my relationships with a text. It is important to respect texts. There are things that a text will not say, or that it will say only if I mis-read it and project myself into it. That would be another way of reading. That is not however the approach I have attempted to delineate here. Maybe a better way of expressing this point is to note that a book is not a totality—no more than the world could be apprehended as a totality. We will never see the whole of a text, and it follows that interpretation is but an illusion, or at the very least something largely pointless. It is only a historical institution, like Halloween, religions or the rules of baseball...I can only relate to parts of a text, or, to be more accurate, some parts in me will relate to some parts of a text. By saying these things, I am being modest, I suppose. In fact, I'd say I am only trying to be selfish. With my conclusion, the time for my confession has now come. I need literary texts, because they make me richer from a semantic point of view, they help me understand who I am, who I can be, and how I can live more fully and in a richer and more complex way with my "walls". That means that I will unashamedly go on reading poems. Plays and novels too.

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DANIEL THOMIÈRES is professor of American literature at the University of Reims, France. His field of research is hermeneutics and the interpretation of texts. He has published extensively on classic American writers. He is also the author of a number of articles dealing with the theoretical and practical problems of teaching foreign literatures and cultures in schools and colleges.