

Take on the Color of the Dead

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“Take on the color of the dead,” the Delphic Oracle said to Zeno, the founder of Stoicism, who took that exhortation to mean he should read the old philosophers. Roger Chartier’s inaugural lecture at the Collège de France underscores the link between the history of written cultures and that of practices of reading and transmission.

Review of Roger Chartier, *Écouter les morts avec les yeux*, Paris, Collège de France/ Fayard, 2008, 80 p., €10.

Roger Chartier’s inaugural lecture of October 11, 2007, in his capacity as holder of the Chair of “The Written Word and Written Cultures in Modern Europe,” has become a little book entitled *Écouter les morts avec les yeux* (i.e. “Listen to the Dead With Your Eyes”). This intriguing title exalts, albeit not without a melancholy undertone, the resurrecting power of reading and transmitting the written word. It also reminds us that the history of written cultures is inseparable from that of practices of reading, in other words that there is no tenable interpretation of cultural legacies without a history of the various ways in which written works are appropriated and passed on to posterity.

No history of books, texts, written culture, in other words, without a history of exegeses, uses and comprehension: no-one has asserted, demonstrated and taught that credo more persuasively than Roger Chartier in his seminar at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales¹. This is why, although he begins his lecture, as is customary, with an homage to Henri-Jean Martin, the founder of the discipline of the “history of the book”; to Donald MacKenzie, whose sociology of texts was founded on the injunction never to separate “the historical comprehension of writings from the morphological description of their physical media”; and to Armando Petrucci, whose work on writing, whether it be carved in stone or wood or written on paper or parchment, whether handwritten or printed, “has transformed our understanding of written cultures that have succeeded each other over the very long course of Western history,” Chartier nonetheless discreetly and elegantly mentions his own efforts and accomplishments.

An inaugural address at the Collège de France serves to announce a course of study. It is also an opportunity for the speaker to reflect on his own scholarship to date and to put forward not only his scholarly positions, based on many years of research experience, but also the convictions that tie together his intellectual endeavors, the place he holds in his professional field and his civic engagement. This is the principal object of an exercise in

¹ EHESS, School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences.

eloquence in which the orator knows he is measuring himself against illustrious predecessors. So Roger Chartier's lecture takes its place in a series that is not so much that of a collection jointly published by the Collège de France and Fayard (in which it is number 195), after "The Revolutions of Living Beings" and "The Revolutions of Cognitive Neuroscience," as that of his historian predecessors and such great figures as Foucault and Bourdieu, who are indeed very much present in his work.

Bourdieu's "Lecture on Lectures," incidentally, put forth a model of reflexivity that might induce us to undertake a "Chartierist" analysis of *Écouter les morts avec les yeux*. Among other things, that would entail examining forms of oral performance in the published text, for example, as well as shifts in meaning resulting from the very act of transcription, or parsing the two opening sentences: "'Escuchar a los muertos con los ojos,' 'Listen to the dead with your eyes.' This line from Quevedo comes to mind as I inaugurate a course of study on the roles that the written word has played in European writings from the end of the Middle Ages to our present day and age." We would consider these lines both in respect of explicitly or implicitly mobilized cultural repertoires and in respect of the temporality of the transition from the written to the oral (from presumably painstakingly prepared manuscript to spoken lecture) and then from the oral to the written (from lecture to book with a specific layout, format, typography etc.), which renders the phrase "comes to my mind as I inaugurate" a culturally significant rhetorical touch.

Chartier's explanation of the name of the university chair, justifying each term thereof and stressing how the history of recourse to writing characterizes the major developments that define the first stage of modernity in Western societies, starting with the Renaissance, is followed by an exposition of the course of study: the building of the state of justice and finance (with its bureaucracies, archives and production of information and propaganda), the spread and conceptualization of religious experience (with its literate internalization of beliefs and its countless controversies), the "process of civilization" (with its new norms of conduct instilled by moralists and pedagogues) and the emergence of a public sphere. Each of these inquiries traverses the history of these sweeping changes and hinges on questions which Roger Chartier clearly articulates to clarify the issues and contours of the topics to be studied: What is a book? What is an author? What is a text? How much authority does the written word possess? The answers will come in a long history of book metaphors (announced as a study project), through a study of collaborative writings or of conflicts over the proper noun and the paternity of texts. Each question makes it possible to rethink and reformulate – to reconstruct historically – the fundamental problem of the dual nature, material and immaterial, of writing and, in particular, of the book. This gives meaning to the tension between the permanent and the transient, between inscription and erasure, between memory and oblivion, a tension whose innumerable written representations – read, declaimed, sung etc. – trace the ever-reconfigured pattern of written culture's relation to time.

"The attested or contested authority of the written word, the mobility of meaning, the collective production of the text" will form the framing issues of an inquiry into the intersections between the history of the book, textual criticism and cultural sociology. It is this intersecting that leads the historian not to separate *a priori* the study of "pragmatic and practical texts without literary qualities" from the study of works invested with "the strange power to make us dream, think or desire" – i.e. what has been referred to since the late 17th century as "literature." Once these intersections have been acknowledged and investigated, a distinction needs to be drawn. If along with Borges – a figure who, for Chartier, ushers in the historicization of the dream, of thought as aesthetic, and of literary desire – we feel that "everyone can and must play their part in examining these facts, which endow certain,

though not all, texts with the perpetuated power of enchantment,” we still have to construct the history of literary texts whose power of enchantment has been lost or which were conceived and read in a frame of mind and with expectations completely different from those of enchantment.

Can enchantment withstand historicization? Is it, in various ways, the stable indicator of a given text’s ability to endure over time? Roger Chartier seeks answers to these questions in Cervantes and Shakespeare, two giants whose work plays on spatial and temporal divides. He even brings them together in a meticulous analysis of Shakespeare’s lost legendary play *Cardenio*, which supplies matter for Chartier to consider the reception of works through the practice of reuse (of *Don Quixote*, from which *Cardenio*’s star-crossed love stories are drawn), successive appropriations of one and the same text, and, lastly, how the Enlightenment relates to 16th- and 17th-century works, given that Shakespeare was meticulously edited and quite freely adapted throughout the 18th (and even the 19th) century. In a further twist of the spiral, the course will also explore how these authors introduce into their texts, in a realist vein or as metaphorical tropes, the materiality of writing, whether ordinary or not, and make room for wax tablets, printing presses, handwritten manuscripts, embroidered and woven writing. By thus returning to representations of the materiality of written productions, the object is to grasp these “facts,” which, as the historian feels here, “give certain, but not all, texts the perpetuated power of enchantment.”

In his teaching at the Collège de France, Roger Chartier also sets himself the goal of “identifying the sedimentary periods of written culture in order to understand more fully the changes that affect it in the present age.” For it is clear to him that the current deluge of digital textuality represents a major turning-point in the history of written culture, a radical change in the medium of the written word, in the methods of its reproduction and dissemination, and in ways of reading – a “simultaneity unprecedented in the history of humanity,” he adds. Chartier thereby points up the crucial importance of historians’ efforts to comprehend the present-day sea changes, not in the interest of nostalgic or denunciatory commemoration, but of faithfully rendering the past intelligible with the “critical lucidity that our uncertainties and apprehensions require.” What is peculiar about this undertaking, we may note in passing, is its reflexivity: written culture, the subject of this history, also happens to be the instrument of that “critical lucidity.”

Further reading:

- Chartier’s lectures at Collège de France in mp3 format:

http://www.college-de-france.fr/default/EN/all/eur_mod/index.htm

- Jouhaud-et-alii research team:

<http://www.ehess.fr/centres/grihl/>

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