

# Ouija board, ghosts and literature

## Conference in English, Iceland 2003

*(Conférence prononcée à Reykholt, province de Borgarbyggð, Islande, dans un colloque intitulé : “The Aesthetic Hypothesis and Man’ qui regroupait des artistes comme Susan Hiller, des psychanalystes comme Darian Leader, des philosophes et des écrivains islandais ou d’ailleurs. Internet ne porte aucune trace de ce colloque, dont je me demande s’il a vraiment existé, malgré des souvenirs de mousse verte fumant sous la neige, et de lacs bleus et brûlants).*



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TOUS LES ALPHABETS

### 1) What is a oui-ja board ?

A oui-ja board is a wooden board, laminated, with an alphabet written on it, the words yes and no, sometimes “thank you” and “good-bye”, and the ciphers from 0 to 9. The word “oui-ja” comes from the french oui and the german ja. Traditionally, the oui-ja board is used to communicate with the spirits. An assembly of believers in ghosts concentrate around the oui-ja board, and put one finger on a glass in the centre of the board. When the spirit comes, the glass moves around the letters and form sentences.

I would have loved to bring you one, but it’s big, heavy, and most of all, incredibly expensive. For the first time in my life I entered an esoteric book-shop and asked for one. “I don’t sell those items so often” answered the esoteric man. He looked on the internet, and found one, for about the price of 30 of my novels. I decided it was much too much.

Plus, I realised I do have oui-ja boards home, on the very walls of my office.

My basque grand-mother and great-grand mother were very good at embroidering alphabets ; and they shared a common legacy of wicthcrafts and white magic, in a strange mixture of almost pagan catholicism. They went to the mass every sunday, and prayed, and had table turning and premonitory dreams, etc. They saw themselves as very decent catholic beleivers. I had their century old alphabets framed above my imac computer. i got so used to their presence that i hardly see them. But I can use them as oui-ja boards after all. They are very few laws regulating oui-jas. And the user's guide say the oui-ja board in itself doesn't have power ; it's just a mere mean of communication.

Oui-ja is a fascinating ceremony for a writer. It's time to be precise about something : i do not believe in ghosts. I believe it's a beautiful theme for litterature, psychoanalysis, and the human spirit in general. But when it's late at night, or if i was alone in this very house, I would not be so affirmative about the firmness my reason. I sometimes slide towards dark regions of my own mind. But that's another problem.

What's fascinating about the oui-ja board is its obvious link with the automatic writting as the surrealists practised it. The writing of the absurd, or of the uncounciouness, according to which side you look at it. Oui-ja boards WORK : it's written in all the guides to ui-ja (and I read many). Of course it works : knowing it or not, fingers push that glass and it looks as if it moved alone. Auto-suggestion, or treachery : the glass moves. That's another thing to get understandable sentences.

The surrealists, or, before them, the members of the Dada group (or non group) practised a particular form of automatic writting : it was made with words, the words you read in the dictionnaires. The sentences sounded like nonsense, but the words existed in the language. I try to translate an example, by the poet Tristan Tzara :

anonymous letter

*brain flower vanishes on the list of skies categories  
he is star convinced mandarin on a visit card  
deserts the double physical flash that cuts the hour with cisors  
the ether spinning in the turning door of faithfully yours  
swelling the stairs mister goat painfully climbs  
etc.*

(fleur cérébrale s'évanouit sur la liste des catégories du ciel  
il est étoilé convaincu mandarin sur une carte de visite  
déserte le double éclat physique qui coupe l'heure avec ses ciseaux  
l'éther en spirale dans la porte tournante des salutations distinguées  
gonfle les escaliers que monsieur chèvre monte péniblement (...))

It's not nonsense. It's poetry. Because you can find a meaning in its ambiguity. You can a way to climb those stairs and visit thoses categories of skies. You also choose (as Dada did) to read a nonsense in it, but it's a meaningful

nonsense. This poem was written just after the first world war, if you want to read an historical sense or non sense in it. You can biographise it, you can let you dream in it, you can close your book if you feel uneasy or bored, or whatever. "The thinking forms itself in the mouth" wrote Tristan tзара in one of the dada manifests. La pensée se forme dans la bouche. Which can mean : the words think for you. Or : trust the nonsense. Or : everything is language. Or : nothing is language, language is nothing. It's dada.

But for the oui-ja, that is, for the exterior of litterature : if there's no actual treachery (someone used enough to the board to form sentences on an alphabet like on antoher sort of QWERTY writting machine), if there's no treachery, the risk of the oui-ja is a total randomness of the letters. So- something completely non-readable. Non readable because non-written. A mere bunch of letters put together. All the users guides tell you : don't panic if you don't understand. Someday you will. And : don't panic when it actually makes sense. The spirit has finally found a common language with you. There's something so romanesque with the oui-ja board that I'll certainly keep the theme for a novel someday. My novels are full of ghosts, I'll come back to that. What's romanesque is of course the dialogues with the dead people, the suffering of the mourners that try to get in contact with their dead beloved -- Victor Hugo, a rational man before that, had tables turn in Guernesey after the death of his beloved daughter Léopoldine. Oui-ja board is not litterature, it's mere writing. The users guide even say that when you get used to it enough, you can do without the board, and use a simple pencil on a sheet of paper. One of the guides I read gieve the example of a 2 years old little boy whose right hand wrote a mature wrinting ; his arm and hand was haunted by the phantom of a dead man, and the child kept ruubbing his arm as if it had gone numb. That's a very pretty, scary story, sounding like all traditional ghosts stories of the 19th century, the reaction against the believers in science and steam engines and electricity. Another user's guide give the example of mourning parents, trying to contact young children who kept bouncing and sancing around the oui-ja, without giving clear messages, because, even as ghosts, they were acting like non-controlable children. It's a "testimony" dating back to 1913, a time when progress, science, etc, were on their way, but when medicine still could not prevent young children from dying.

In some cases, the oui-ja has some direct relationship with litterature. For example, there's the "well known case" of the young Jones. Jones was a 18 years old mecanician worker in the USA in the end of the 19th century. He became a "writing medium", and wrote eveyday, with a quick hand, a dozen of pages, before or after his working day. It lasted for several months, and he covered 1200 pages "without any deletions or alterations". What he wrote was... the 2nd part of Charles Dickens "*Mystery of Edwin Drood*" ! No litterary critic can doubt the fact that this part is of a different style than the first one. And one can easily understand that Charles Dickens, very upset of having died in the middle of his book, wanted to achieve it. This is what a certain Dr Dusart quietly explains in *Spiritisme, faits et doctrine*.

## 2) Style and absence from oneself.

When I am in the middle of a book I write, I fear death more than ever. When I have achieved it, I become very fatalist... before I start a new book. And the cycle goes on and on. I understand the efforts of Mister Charles Dickens through the young Jones : it must be very frustrating to leave a book in the middle of it. But let's cut the joke -- what's interesting for me in this oui-ja automatic writing is its actual relation to the experience of writing literature (or trying to). I cannot write if I don't reach a certain level of concentration that's close to a certain "trance".

Let's cut the neck of the word "inspiration" right away. I don't believe, and I don't feel, that I'm possessed by a transcendent force when I write. I know how much work it implies to write. I'm not possessed by magic. I sweat. I get head aches, back aches, my fingers hurt. I don't sleep sometimes, I think about what I'll write tomorrow. I think about what I have to throw away. All those pages lost, rewritten etc. All those hours. And all this enormous pleasure too. Everything is human and alive here. No spirit implied. No Muse, to speak as the male writers in the 19th century.

But yes : a certain "trance". As in any concentrated activity I forget the trifles of life, little annoyances, bills to pay, etc. But also, as maybe in any passionating job I forget about who I am. I forget my entire psychology. My love affairs. My childhood. My parents. My child. I become lonely, and empty. I need this loneliness and emptiness to write. If not, I'll write crap. I know it, it's already happened to me, and I had to throw pages and pages to the bin : because I was too present. Too aware may be.

It has nothing to do with a critic of the autobiographical writing. I love autobiographies to the point that I wrote my Phd on them, and I also wrote something close to a diary called "Le Bébé" when my son was born. But even when I wrote "le bébé", I was not here, at my desk. I was away. I become an open and empty spaces where the sentences will sound and find their rhythm, their music... Of course I was writing about my direct experience (more than usually : I write fiction in general). But even then, it was completely transformed by the rhythm of the sentences, and the way words were coming to me. And it was more TRUE than if I had tried to write a documentary about my life.

I write with very ancient archaic feelings and thoughts ; I also write with the memory of the books I've read, because when I read, it's a form of absence to myself too. I'm not here. I'm in the book. In a parallel space. The words resound, rebound... The images float. I'm not here. Something writes (or read) in me, that's not exactly me. It has not much to do with Marie Darrieussecq, born on the 3rd of January in Bayonne, etc... It has much to do with non-consciousness, instincts, muscles, but most of all : emptiness. I like to think that I'm a resounding box for objects of the world -- ideally : for the world. Or that I'm a sponge : I absorb the world, and I pour it on a page like water.

It is a certain experience of time of course. I'm talking about STYLE here. What is style ? Roland Barthes distinguished 1) language 2) style 3) writing. I'll go fast here. The language is the anonymous and common "nature" in which the writers moves. It belongs to everyone. The writing is a choice, a way to place oneself in the field of literature, a reflexive attitude. The style can't be chosen. "Images, rhythm, vocabulary, are born from the very body

and past of the writer and become the automatism of his art. It's an autarcic language, the language of the writer, and he can't do nothing about that. This language has his roots deep in the personal and secret mythology of the writer" (I try to translate). The writer can't do anything about his style. his writing can be different from one book to another (which is my case, for example : each book must find his own form). But the style, much deeper, can't be chosen, decided, anticipated, planned. You recognise it when you read it, but it's hard to describe. That's why "style" is an empty word. It's a topos that you can fill with linguistic science, or feelings, or critics ("a bad or a good style") but who really knows what it means ? It's the words critics use in magazines when they don't know how to describe the writing. They mix up the two notions.

Style is linked to the rhythm of the body, certainly. But I like to think even my body is not here when I write. That's why it aches when i "come back to me". I have to stretch and do yoga to recover from my hours of oblivion at my desk. For me, style has more to see with this notion of absence to oneself. What writes in me is not me. It's my "style", like a friendly ghost lodged in my brain. It has to do with a certain experience of time : a time disconnected from the hours, from spacial limits too.

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But let's come back to WORK. I like to see writing as my JOB. Nothing romantic about it. I make a living out of it. Of course I have no choice. Since childhood, I have to write. But getting published, talking about your own books, the relations with the media, etc, is something else. It's a business. There's a part of the work where i'm very active and present as a writer : it's the re-reading or the re-writing. The first draught, I write it in this delicious absence from myself. I forbid me to have an overlooking judgment on my page, I do not censor me or whatever. When after several months, I start re-reading, after the first cruel phase of depression (what a crap, it's nonsense, etc), I take all my courage, and i work. I read, re-writte, erase, cut, rebuild, etc, as if I had rushes in front of me and an editing work to do. The style is still here, but I write more consciously. I organise this flow. Like when you decide to diet or do sports on your own body.

I'll just give you one example : repetitions. I use the adjective "brusque" twice in the same paragraph, for example. It's quite a rare word, so twice is too much. I search in my mind for a synonym. I find "soudain", but it has two syllabs. And the rhythm i hear in my head demands one syllab for that very sentence. So I can stay blocked for hours, sweating. When you find the good rhythm, you can't abandon for the meaning. The good rhythm MEANS. So you have to find the words that will let the music run through them, without betraying your "intentions", what you had to "say" (though I don't think you have something to "say" when you write).

The style is that "music". You don't have the choice. The meaning is secondary. If you have style, you'll mean. Your work will be to search for the exact writing, for the writing that will let your style breathe easily, and find its own freedom, its own form.



### 3) Ghosts and litterature.

As I told you, my books are full of ghosts. What is a ghost ? A ghost is someone who's dead but who still has something to say. In general, someone who's been ill-buried, and who wants to break the secret of this evil dead.

Someone whose tumb doesn't satisfy him or her.

One of the topos of the oui-ja guides is : stay away from the talkative ghosts (les fantômes "verbeux".) Verbose, prolix, wordy. Critics use that term too : what a verbose writer ! etc. Well, the verbose ghosts take all the talking time for themselves, tell you crap, and prevent the other ghosts, whose messages are important, to speak ! So the oui-ja guides help you recognise the good and the bad ghosts -- on those criterias.

Litterature doesn't have a message. But i believe it has something to reveal. To break the secret of apparences. To see beyond. To open new windows. To have the reader hear new sounds, to help him see new realities, or to give new tools to understand the world. Litterature is a constant fight against clichés and topos, all the ready-made sentences and thinking. I like to think litterature as "the voice of the ghosts". If a ghost is something that has been silent until now, let's hear its voice.

It's a topos to say that you don't know where we are going. To say : we are in darkness. It's always been like that. Spirituality, and the quacks, the treachers, root themselves in this topos. We need to think. We need to know. I won't insist on that point. There certainly is a feeling of loss that's stronger since the falling of the Berlin Wall, and the end of dear old cold war, that was so clear and simple : if you make a move, we atomise you. Now everything seems more blurred. OK.

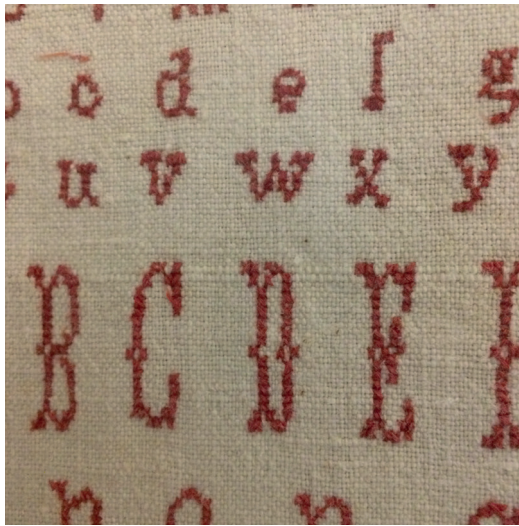
I think it's a wonderful time for creation. Litterature being my business, I'll concentrate on it, but I'm also very interested in art, photography, cinema. Can literature be a oui-ja board today ? It is certainly the voice of ghosts.



PLAGE DE CENDRES, ISLANDE



ISLANDE LAC BLEU BRÛLANT



ALPHABET



ISLANDE, MOUSSE