H-France Review Vol. 23 (Month 2023), No. x.

Henri Béhar, *Essai d'analyse culturelle des textes*. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2022. Index. 252 pp. €29.00. (pb). ISBN 9-78-2406126478; €68.00. (hb). ISBN 9-78-2406126485.

Review by Madeleine Chalmers, Durham University.

"L'atmosphère n'est pas la même: on n'y respire pas de la même façon, notre cœur y bat autrement" (p. 7). Henri Béhar's evocation of historic literary texts is a poetic one, his project a pragmatic one. In *Essai d'analyse culturelle des textes*, he articulates a core belief. In order to be able to understand what an author is doing differently, we need to be able to see them in relief, emerging from an existing culture and society with a whole host of implicit knowledge which is no longer available to readers today.

Drawing on his decades of teaching experience, Béhar opens his volume with an anecdote. When leading a seminar on dream narratives with French students, he turned to Alfred Jarry's *Les Jours et les nuits* (1897), a text inflected by fin-de-siècle psychiatry and notions of the unconscious. However, his students struggled to "get it." By contrast, when teaching Racine's *Phèdre* (1677) in a French-speaking public university on the African continent (Béhar provides no further details), students understood immediately the ramifications of the eponymous character's desire for her stepson. As Béhar summarizes: "sur le plan culturel, mes interlocuteurs se trouvaient de plain-pied avec Racine, tandis que les précédents, plus proches de Jarry dans le temps et l'espace, ne partageaient aucune de ses préoccupations: il leur était totalement étranger" (p. 9). This anecdote is intended as an accessible illustration of Béhar's critical credo, but it raises questions rather than answers. Even setting aside the essentialist assumptions about the cultural backgrounds of Béhar's students inside and outside France, this is not a legitimate comparison. Béhar's French students would no doubt have been able to grasp that carnal passion for one's stepson is unlikely to end well. Jarry's text is equally unlikely to have resonated with francophone readers outside the *métropole*, as it remains challenging terrain even for those with extensive knowledge of Jarry's works. This skewed perspective is the first taste of a certain awkwardness in the book as a whole: a book that is neither fish nor fowl.

The volume contains an introductory chapter and sixteen short case-study chapters, each of which focuses on a nineteenth- or twentieth-century French literary text. According to the blurb, Béhar focuses on texts which have, for the most part, featured on the syllabi for France's prestigious and competitive *agrégation des lettres modernes*. It is perhaps worth noting that only three of the focal texts discussed have appeared on the syllabus in the last three decades: *En attendant Godot* (most recently in 2009-2010 and previously in 1998-1999); Jules Laforgue's *Complaintes* (in 2000-2001), and Ernest Renan's *Souvenirs d'enfance et de jeunesse* (in 1992-1993).

The introductory chapter, “L’Analyse culturelle des textes,” is engaging and accessible. Wearing his considerable erudition lightly, Béhar combines anecdotal reflection with close textual and contextual analysis of three short passages from texts by Alphonse Allais, Alfred Jarry, and Camara Laye. On the basis of these illustrations, he defines the aim of his form of cultural analysis as being to “mettre en consonance l’espace-temps des lecteurs que nous sommes avec celui du texte” (p. 21). Béhar highlights the cultural analyst’s role as twofold. First, he or she must tease out the “éléments implicites du texte, ceux que l’auteur n’a pas cru devoir désigner spécialement parce qu’ils faisaient partie des évidences quotidiennes à ses yeux” (p. 20). This allows readers to understand the “trame culturelle que l’auteur suppose partager avec son lecteur implicite” and to appreciate the social context, audience, and practices surrounding that text (p. 20). However, cultural analysis should also look to receptions in other times and contexts. While highlighting the need to explore porous boundaries between popular and elite cultures and acknowledging the complexity of writing in French outside the *métropole*, Béhar’s approach remains conservative: a sensible, but not revolutionary approach. He suggests a grid structure for classifying texts according to space and appeal: local, regional, international; popular culture, elite culture, mass culture. He does not question those categories, and the critical controversies to which he refers are confined to the mid-twentieth century. The chapter was originally published in 1990 and does not appear to have been updated.

For example, Béhar expresses his lukewarm feelings towards cultural history by reprising Bakhtin’s critique of Lucien Febvre’s *Le Problème de l’incroyance au XVI^{e} siècle: la religion de Rabelais*.[1] Béhar offers the sweeping comment that “la pensée de Rabelais n’a rien à voir avec le débat théologique” (p. 12). This is slightly polemical: Bakhtin’s argument does not exclude theological debate entirely from the Rabelaisian world but situates it in a much broader context of folk tradition and humour.[2] Béhar’s debt to Mikhail Bakhtin is clear.[3] However, it is important to note that a wealth of Rabelais criticism since Bakhtin’s work was first published in Russian in 1965 has challenged and expanded upon his approach. Béhar’s most contemporary interlocutor here is Umberto Eco’s *Lector in Fabula*, first published in Italian in 1979.[4] These are all seminal texts, but the chapter’s original publication date of 1990; the passing, undeveloped references to the German Reader-Reception school; and the total absence of more recent explorations in the field give the book a dated feel.

Indeed, while this first chapter draws our attention to an important issue, the rest of the book struggles to provide a convincing framework, methodologically or analytically, to bolster its claims. Nine of the chapters have previously appeared as conference papers, introductions to editions, contributions to edited volumes or exhibition catalogues (some decades old). The case studies are ordered according to the chronology of the focal texts and the reprinted chapters are interspersed with chapters written specifically for this volume. Some of the latter--such as the two chapters on Albert Cohen--are designed to build on one another. However, reprinted chapters which would seem to be natural bedfellows, such as the two chapters on Béhar’s home turf of surrealism, are placed in sequence but are not actually connected in any meaningful way. It is as though the book is still waiting to be joined up.

Only one reprinted chapter, “Pour une approche culturelle du surréalisme,” is described as having been revised and updated since its initial publication in 1997. This chapter first appeared in the *Revue Mélusine*, the publication of the Centre de Recherches sur le Surréalisme de Paris III, founded and directed by Béhar since 1971.[5] Intriguingly for an updated and revised chapter, it contains sentences such as “Le dossier présenté dans ce numéro de la revue *Mélusine* n’est qu’une première esquisse de ce à quoi ol atteindre [*sic.*]” (p. 150). The two pages preceding this sentence alone offer thirteen lengthy, unanswered questions which Béhar thinks we should be asking about Surrealism. In light of the twenty-five years which have elapsed since that original publication, it would have been pleasing to see what progress had been made since this initial sketch, and whether new answers and new questions might have arisen.

Throughout, there are missed opportunities to bring the different case studies into dialogue. Evocations of Jarry’s Breton roots in the first chapter are not picked up again in a chapter entitled “Bretonneries,” as one might expect. This makes for a frustrating reading experience, as there are some tantalising lines of connection which it would be fascinating to see developed. Reflections on Patrick Modiano’s relationship with Jewish identity in the first chapter chime with later explorations of Yvan Goll, the figure of “Charlot le Juif,” Albert Cohen, and Colette Guedj. Here, insightful readings of Jewish culture offer a glimpse of what could be a compelling and original book in its own right, but those opportunities for resonance are merely hinted at.

To be clear, this is not a criticism of Béhar’s admirable scholarship, but rather of how the book is packaged. Béhar’s erudition is clearly in evidence and there are some delightful rapprochements: a chapter on Eugène Labiche wends its way through Henri Bergson, Buster Keaton, and Lévi-Strauss. However, a firm editorial hand and a more robust sense of who this book is for, and what it is for, were required. By their very nature, chapters which originated as introductions to special issues or critical editions stop short of developing a genuine argument. Even new chapters fall into this trap at times. The chapter “Bretonneries,” approaches Ernest Renan’s *Souvenirs d’enfance et de jeunesse* by juxtaposing extensive quotations about Brittany from writers including Balzac, Michelet, Chateaubriand, and Pierre Loti. These are presented under generic headings (“La Nature,” “Impressions de Bretagne”) and interspersed with a handful of sentences of fairly superficial comparison. The ratio of quotation to analysis is weighted too heavily in favour of the former.

In a chapter on Beckett’s *Fin de partie* and *En attendant Godot*, Béhar teases out what he describes as harmonic resonances with mythology, the works of Shakespeare, Charles Baudelaire, the Bible, religion, pre-Socratic philosophy, Descartes, Leibniz, and the Hegelian master-slave dialectic. Curiously, despite Béhar’s interest in popular culture in other chapters, vaudeville or Buster Keaton do not appear in his discussion of *En attendant Godot*, despite the play’s choreographed physical comedy--and the opportunity this would have offered to draw connections with the Labiche comedy discussed in an earlier chapter. Indeed, the Beckett chapter ends with the reflection that suggests that such resonances are somewhat irrelevant: “Si, pris dans le détail, comme je l’ai fait, tel ou

tel son fondamental attire infailliblement une réflexion sur, disons, les rapports de domination ou bien la misère de l'homme abandonné de Dieu, ou encore l'espérance d'un autre monde, il est clair que chaque séquence, par ses contradictions internes ou son irrésolution, rend impossible toute méditation de ce genre" (p. 192). The chapter stops there, with no further reflection on how a reader might deal with forms of writing which seem to resist our customary critical or contextual lenses. What happens when a text isn't culturally legible?

This speaks to broader questions about Béhar's approach. In a chapter on Jules Laforgue's *Complaintes*, he identifies only two modes of access for students approaching poetry, stating quite clearly that "Je n'en vois pas d'autres" (p. 34). His first suggestion is extremely telling, and I quote it in full: "Il y a d'abord la parole du maître. Je veux dire les explications que procure l'enseignant en fonction des résistances qu'il perçoit parmi son auditoire, et que, par expérience, il apprend à placer à bon escient. Cette médiation est indispensable, voire irremplaçable. Qui mieux que lui peut faire appel à la culture des élèves pour coopérer à l'interprétation de l'œuvre? Qui mieux que lui en connaît les substrats et les coordonnées? Qui mieux que lui peut mobiliser et actualiser les connaissances innombrables que demande toute lecture?" (p. 33). While Béhar's celebration of the university tutor or lecturer's expertise might be deemed flattering, it indicates a particular dynamic which centres the "sage on the stage."[6] It suggests that there is a right way and a wrong way to read, and that a *maître* is required to deploy, *à bon escient*, his knowledge to guide students in that right direction. We are as far away from Jacques Rancière's vision of the *maître ignorant* and the *émancipation intellectuelle* of the student as it is possible to get.[7] This top-down transmission of knowledge sits uneasily with Béhar's admiration for Bakhtin, for whom the word is supposedly shaped in dialogic interaction.[8]

The second mode of access is described in similarly vertical, geological terms: "Vient ensuite l'essai d'analyse culturelle qui met en place les grandes strates de culture sur lesquelles repose le texte, tout ce que l'auteur n'a pas senti la nécessité d'expliciter puisqu'il supposait que son savoir était partagé par ses contemporains, imaginant n'avoir affaire qu'à son semblable, son frère, en quelque sorte, ayant même éducation que lui (pp. 33-34). Béhar's career of research into Surrealism and avant-garde movements makes the assumption that writers always write in a way that is recognizable, identifiable, or even accessible to contemporary lay readers surprising. It leaves no space for opacity, resistance, or provocation. Anglo-American readers may also be taken aback by the whimsical nature of Béhar's psychological portraits of authors: "Labiche est resté un enfant, s'amusant de l'agitation permanente des adultes" (p. 25).

With "son semblable, son frère," Béhar quotes--without acknowledgement--the opening poem of Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du mal*, entitled "Au lecteur": "Hypocrite lecteur,--mon semblable,--mon frère!".[9] In doing so, Béhar reveals his own assumptions about his reader's cultural awareness, and fails to acknowledge his own aesthetic fabric. In the same chapter in which he analyzes the impact of Laforgue's education on his later poetry, Béhar does not explicitly reflect on how his own readings are shaped by his own education and career within the French academic system. His

chapter on Claude Simon even ends with the observation that “la culture à l’œuvre dans *La Route des Flandres*, celle que le lecteur doit posséder pour y accéder pleinement, ne dépasse pas le niveau secondaire, du baccalauréat pour tout dire” (p. 227). When we return to the anecdote I quoted at the beginning of this review, we can see the limitations of this approach. It centres and situates the author or other historic readers, but does not do the same for the reader or teacher in the here and now. It is a book that maintains the pedagogical status quo. It would have been fascinating to see Béhar consider the place of this mode of thought in an academic and pedagogical landscape increasingly focused on plurality, where we now recognize the limited nature of our own knowledge, experiences, and perspectives.

Taken on their own terms, the individual texts within this volume are intriguing meditations on individual texts. However, it is difficult to picture the audience for this particular set of readings as a whole.

NOTES

[1] Lucien Febvre, *Le Problème de l’incroyance au XVI^{e} siècle: la religion de Rabelais* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1942).

[2] See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), pp. 88-90.

[3] See for instance Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in Michael Holquist, ed., *The Dialogic Imagination,* trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), pp. 269-422: “For the prose writer, the object is a focal point for heteroglot voices among which his own voice must also sound; these voices create the background necessary for his own voice, outside of which his artistic prose nuances cannot be perceived and without which they ‘do not sound’” (p. 278).

[4] Umberto Eco, *Lector in fabula: la cooperazione interpretativa nei testi narrativi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1979).

[5] https://melusine-surrealisme.fr/wp/, date cited: 01/12/2022.

[6] Alison King, “From Sage on the Stage to Guide on the Side,” *College Teaching* 41/1(1993): 30-35.

[7] Jacques Rancière, *Le Maître ignorant: cinq leçons sur l’émancipation intellectuelle* (Paris: Fayard, 1987).

[8] Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” p. 279.

[9] Charles Baudelaire, “Au Lecteur,” *Les Fleurs du mal*, 2nd edn. (Paris: Poulet-Malassis et de Broise, 1861), p. 1.

Madeleine Chalmers
Durham University
madeleine.chalmers@durham.ac.uk

ISSN 1553-9172