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Zahi Zalloua, *Reading Unruly: Interpretation and its Ethical Demands*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2014. 232pp. \$35 U.S.; £24.99. (pb). ISBN-13 978-0-8032-4627-0.

Review by Patrick Bray, The Ohio State University.

In this truly outstanding book, Zahi Zalloua makes the case for an ethical practice of interpretation he calls “reading unruly,” by which he means “an ethics of interpretation that foregrounds fidelity to literature’s unruliness, that is, its resistance to hermeneutic mastery, its ungovernable character” (p. 2). Zalloua’s study serves both as an introduction to the “ethical turn” in literary studies and an engagement with some of the most difficult theorists of ethics with the aim of proposing a new ethics of reading that privileges the experience of literature over the “message” of the work’s author or the original context. The six chapters look at some of the more “unruly” texts in the French canon, from Montaigne’s *Essais* to Duras’s *Le Ravissement de Lol V. Stein*.

The introduction puts into dialogue such diverse theorists as Levinas, Derrida, Badiou, Žižek, Barthes, Blanchot, and others. Zalloua’s argument marks a transition in the ethical turn from one model of reading based on an analogy of ethics taken from the early Levinas’ face-to-face encounter with Otherness to another analogy, Žižek’s notion of the “parallax,” a continual shift between two perspectives that cannot be mediated (p. 11). An ethical reading, in this sense, would involve alternating between the search for meaning in a text and respect for the work’s singularity, its unruly resistance to any attempt at confining meaning. It is significant that Zalloua chooses works spanning the French literary canon, because, he argues, these “unruly” texts continually challenge readers and push up against the very movement that tries to inscribe them in a literary movement and history. At the same time, he shows that one has to learn how to read in an unruly fashion, it is a hermeneutics, or anti-hermeneutics, of our time. By reading works from five different centuries, Zalloua demonstrates what can be accomplished transhistorically in French studies, with literary works in dialogue with each other. At the same time, Zalloua is very attentive to the original historical and literary contexts of all the works, skillfully bracketing context when discussing the modern reader’s experience of the book and then shifting back to the radical strangeness of the book’s origin. What he calls a “parallax view” reading ensures an honest account of the immeasurable distance between a reader and a text at the same time as it validates the sense of intimacy we have with reading “unruly” literature.

Zalloua’s analyses in the six chapters make for fascinating reading, both for experts in the field and for those who might not know the texts in depth; this is quite a feat with such canonical works. The first chapter, “Montaigne: the Accidental Theorist,” provides an apt beginning to the book, as Montaigne explored the limits of philosophy, history, and memoir before the invention of what would come to be known as “literature.” The *Essais* constantly challenge the notion of the self and ask the same of their reader, providing a model for reading and ethical engagement. The second chapter, “Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*: Allegory and the Mind Body Problem,” further investigates the threshold of philosophy and literature, which is to say when ethics becomes aesthetics. Diderot’s dialogue plays with the reader’s expectations, frustrating any attempt to identify with either of the two protagonists. In chapter three, “Translating *Modernité*: Narrative, Violence, and Aesthetics in Baudelaire’s *Spleen of Paris*,” Zalloua argues that Baudelaire’s famous definition of modernity as the fleeting half of art may be analogous to

his idea of unruly reading, since *modernité* in art is “the radical noncoincidence of both of its halves”—the fleeting and the eternal (p. 71).

Turning towards the twentieth century, the fourth chapter, “Living with Nausea: Sartre and Roquentin,” reads Sartre’s début novel *Nausea* alongside and against his later philosophy, illustrating how the novel both puts into question and anticipates the coherency of Sartre’s philosophical project. Zalloua writes that his ethical reading of *Nausea* is “less faithful to its ideas and more responsive to its provocations” (p. 17). Alain Robbe-Grillet’s *Jealousy* serves as the subject of chapter five, as Zalloua lays out the challenges posed by this maddening text, one which resists classification all the while calling on the reader to betray the novel’s “inexhaustibility” in order to make some sense of its narrative, however tentative (p. 128). The sixth chapter, “Fidelity to Sexual Difference: Marguerite Duras’s *The Ravishing of Lol Stein*,” looks at the implications of “unruly reading” for feminism by following how Duras’s novel challenges our ability to read sexual difference in a novel. Duras’s male narrator, Jacques, unravels the expected misogynist knowing and recounting of the female other, since “he knows that he knows nothing of her” (p. 143). Instead of reducing the roles of Jacques and Lol to gender stereotypes, Zalloua reads for the encounter between the two of them to see how the novel’s narrative is unraveled.

One of the main antagonists in *Reading Unruly* may be René Descartes, who provides the foil for several of the authors studied. Cartesianism as a rationalist philosophy that emphasizes the division between mind and body appears as an easy target for Diderot, Baudelaire, Robbe-Grillet, and, anachronistically, Montaigne. But as Derrida argued in his critique of Foucault’s *Histoire de la Folie à l’âge classique*, Descartes’s writing may be one of the most unruly for the modern reader. Zalloua no doubt knows of Descartes’s unruliness, but the relatively minor blind spot of the book is how an “unruly reading” is actually a writing of a text or rather a rewriting of another text that necessarily distorts the original (interestingly, de Man is relegated to a single footnote).

While an unruly reading may be fidelity to the experience of literature, in what ways does it erase its own literariness? To paraphrase Pierre Bayard’s *Comment parler des livres qu’on n’a pas lus*, when we read, we don’t owe a book anything [1]. Rather, it is, as Zalloua suggests elsewhere in his book, when we communicate an interpretation (a second reading?) that we have a responsibility—but a responsibility to whom? Zalloua’s chapters rely not only on an experience with literary texts but also on texts by other critics, each of them making different (and often wildly divergent or even outrageous) claims. An interpretive community may act as an ecology where different types of readings (historical, theoretical, cultural, economic, aestheticist, ethical) by different types of critics (scholars, journalists, students) need each other in order to stake out a territory. In such an interpretive ecology, is there space for the unethical, the untimely, and the uninteresting that would make an “unruly reading” possible?

NOTE

[1] Pierre Bayard, *Comment parler des livres qu’on n’a pas lus* (Paris: Minuit, 2007).

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