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Percival Everett's *The Water Cure*: A Blind Read

Anne-Laure Tissut

- 1 *The Water Cure* (2007), Percival Everett's latest published novel, is a complex and disturbing work; yet the twin notions of exposure and overexposure, as applied to the analysis of the manipulation and dismantlement of words, and to the game of hide-and-seek carried out with the reader, provide openings into this all but daunting book, by shedding light upon the reading experience it offers, as an evolving process of discovery, depending on the specific structures of the book as well as on the minute work to which language is submitted. The dynamic relationship between the two notions of exposure and overexposure will help me show how Everett plays on representation in order to interrogate — in keeping with the central topic of this novel on torture — the relations between reality and language, in a book of an innovative genre, which calls for the invention of new reading modes.

The Exposed Reader

- 2 Reading *The Water Cure* is most uncomfortable. The shock experienced by the reader is due to the topic of the book — torture — as well as to the violence of form. She is exposed to an assault of apparently disconnected fragments, punctuated with drawings imitating those of a child, with isolated, proverb-like or just mysteriously allusive phrases, and with paragraphs written in an almost unidentifiable language, in a challenge to her both analytic and synthetic abilities. Yet she is not the *acknowledged* target of the novelist, whose purpose is in part to expose the country's propaganda, advocating among others the practice of torture, for which the narrator sarcastically gives thanks. The reader is made uncomfortable by the torturer's cool and unruffled manner and tone, and is further exposed to perpetual doubt, thanks to the displayed strategy of deception, as several forms of illusion, attention-catching and deviating are explored.
- 3 The narrator, who writes romance novels under a female pseudonym, pretends to make friends with the alleged murderer of his young daughter to then bring him to his house

and torture him, while remaining all the time aware that he may have the wrong man. Illusion reigns supreme: many scenes show an oneiric, supernatural atmosphere, while the universe conjured up in the book is characterized by pretense, maybe as a means to suggest that pain alone is real — an idea repeatedly brought to the fore.

- 4 The novel seems to rely on a set of mirrors, to be found within the torturing device elaborated by the narrator, whose idea is that his victim should be unable to escape the vision of his own suffering face. In an almost mimetic way, readers are made to face their responsibility in elaborating the meaning of the text, namely through identifying processes promoted by the use of the first person pronoun and by the narrator's often addressing his victim as Art, or W. —“double U” or “you” — and thus secondarily addressing the reader.
- 5 Yet the title, *The Water Cure*, creates a deceptive, or at least ambiguous horizon of expectation, oscillating between hydrotherapy and torture — the latter option being reinforced by the book cover — thus totally omitting the reflexion on language that makes up most of the book (for which one of the previously considered titles was *Other Languages Is All We Have*). The reader's expectations are constantly challenged and shattered, namely in the minute depiction of flaying, which is revealed only at the very end to be the skinning of an elk, and not of the narrator's prisoner (152). *The Water Cure* requires a perspicacious reader, alert to the recurring allusions and quotes, such as the elliptical segment “Shan't”, or, slightly more enlightening “Shan't, said the cook”, which, once combined with the mention of pepper tarts, betrays its origin. Puns, plays on words and ambiguities abound, as well as situations of misunderstanding.
- 6 The reader's confusion reaches a paroxysm when she encounters the first paragraph written in a transformed language, reminiscent of Joyce's in *Finnegan's Wake*, as early as page 16:

As a oneder-loving and wonder-see king sort, I will exhhibit esnuff off myshelf, my deep sadnest asidle, my disillusionmantle acider, my fear and lax thereof asighed, my asides aslide, to yiell a bravf picture of the main I yam, my preverse colloudiness aside. And so I weight, my bird, my spiright, my sorehorse, my slights havink flown. I leak aboot and keep yondering when my Pinel or Tuke might enthere and caste oft these chains. Nyet, I cuncider this life a prism, meself mhad, tall this in spite of my comforit, sew-calleed, exstream combfort that costs me so much discomfjord and then guilt for feeling bad abutt feeling good and one tit goes untillt the doctorn enters the asshighlum.
- 7 We are faced not with a foreign language but with a familiar one that has been disfigured, as if we were under the blinding effect of overexposure. For the artist, the stakes of such practice seem to be to deviate the reader's attention towards the material and connotative dimensions of language, while exposing the vulnerability of meaning.

Overexposed language

- 8 If one returns to the paragraph quoted above, one may observe distinctions emerging from the perplexing, excessively meaning-loaded whole. The maintained grammatical structure together with the rhythms of sentences provide guidelines of sorts, while suggestive sounds prompt an impressionistic approach to the text, or one relying on hearing as much as on seeing: in the first line, “one” evokes the subject, while “see king” make up a verb; “disillusionmantle” contains “dismantle.” Attention is drawn to language

per se through exposure, which deprives it of its transparency as a communication means, while highlighting its virtually infinite suggestive potential, together with the selection processes at work in the creation of meaning. Just as the almost supernatural character of the overexposed photograph on the cover arouses wonder, language becomes the object of renewed astonishment. The reader's imagination is stimulated to elaborate a three-dimensional rendering of speech that branches out in all directions, is endowed with volume and body, as opposed to the flatness of everyday language, devoid of any contrast – a language that has all but closed itself to any form of questioning by dint of being used and abused, an overused language as distinct from overexposed language, its exact opposite. Even the most common expressions and phrases are being considered anew and revived, losing the meaning that we took for granted. Language is no longer seen as a secondary description of a pre-existing world, “adequate or inadequate to the world or to the self,” (Rorty, 10), but as a creative process, while words are viewed as material objects.

- 9 This is a recurring concern in Everett's work, where it often takes the form of metatextual play. In *The Water Cure*, the idea appears for instance in the parable of the wordshop. A little girl walks into a wordshop to buy words. She finally makes up her mind for a “grab-box,” said to contain four words. When she opens it, she finds the box empty:

She marched back into the wordshop and said, “THIS BOX IS EMPTY!”

“Those are fine four words,” the woman said, smiling quite broadly.”

Then she gets another box, and opens it:

Outraged, she screamed, “THIS ONE IS TOO!” And she slapped her hand over her mouth, realizing that again she'd let her new words go without so much as a thought. (101)

- 10 The story suggests that words come to existence through our use of them, which may be related to the interpretation of the riddle offered by the narrator: “if your child screams in the forest and there is no one around to hear, does she make a sound? It turns out that she does not”. (10) Sounds being a human concept, she may frighten the animals, but not “make a sound.” The idea of the precedence of human conscience over facts recurs throughout *The Water Cure*. But closer to our interests here, the riddle points at the necessary witness, just as words acquire substance when we use them, in thought or speech, thus becoming the message itself, and not only its carriers.
- 11 If language is no longer seen as a medium, then the question that keeps cropping up in philosophy, “What medium to use to talk about the medium?” may be eluded, if it is not met with an appropriate answer. Everett's work suggests that the practice of language in its variegated forms may offer more efficient research protocols than theoretical considerations (and this is how Everett explains his choice to turn away from philosophy to devote himself to fiction). Rather than overtly asking philosophical questions of the readers, Everett deviates their attention onto language through overexposure, that is, verbal play, leading them along an exploration of the fluctuations of meaning as well as of the many tensions at work in the most simple sentences and that overexposure highlights.
- 12 More particularly, overexposure may take the specific form of intertwining several semantic fields or metaphorical threads, in order to enhance the arbitrary nature of images as well as the absence of logic in a great many utterances. A case in point is this passage, partly taken up on page 169:
- Here in this topsy-turvydom a man can control his voice and words and yet make no sense and still have the senselessness of his utterances be true. He can stamp out

and construct riddles round about and say that ideas smell like myrrh. He can coin a word and exact change and leave things as they were before. (66-67)

- 13 To take up Russell's terminology, (in *Essays on language, Mind and Matter, 1919-1926*, 93) the words (or "signs") in this text do have "mnemonic effects appropriate to sets of occurrences," (in other terms, they have meanings), only the sets of occurrences are mixed. In "coin a word", "coin" also reminds us of money, because it stands next to "exact change", which also brings to mind its verbal form, "to exact", as "to demand", because of the previous verb to "coin", just as "change" may be understood as "difference" through its combination with the phrase "leave as they are". The sentences abide by correct syntax, yet fail to be matched by any corresponding fact in the world: they are "senseless", which in its turn is a true statement. "Truth" and "senselessness" are not incompatible, which seems outrageous to our rational minds, yet may not trouble Everett much, truth not ranking first in his preoccupations — and here, one may feel the influence of J.L. Austin, who thought philosophy wrong in considering only assertions which can be said to be true or false.
- 14 In Wittgenstein's view, "A picture can correspond or not correspond with the fact and be accordingly true or false, but in both cases it shares the logical form with the fact." (Russell, 103). As soon as the "picture" is overexposed, and blurred, or that the utterance is liable to fluctuating meaning, truth itself becomes unstable. By overexposing language, Everett confirms his unabated fascination for its unpredictable uses and effects.
- 15 Its infinite ambiguities are widely exploited in *The Water Cure*, which implicitly advocates a sense of mutual responsibility in communication, meaning being a collective elaboration: each speaker's mission is to produce a message that is as unambiguous as possible, while the listener's, in his turn, is to prove perspicacious and good-willed in interpreting it. In *The Water Cure*, the reader's responsibility looms particularly large, given the morally offensive topic of the novel: how much of it is ours, or has been brought by us to the text? How much was in there from the start? The reader finds herself embarked on an exposed reading.

A dazzling read

- 16 Reading *The Water Cure* is a blinding experience, all-but paralyzing insofar as it shatters our representations of reality, while unsettling our relation to texts, hence to reading. Having been deprived of our usual bearings, we are imposed a blindfold read, find ourselves in a position, which, symbolically speaking, resembles that of the tortured victim.
- 17 Reading *The Water Cure* amounts to a progressive discovery, as the reader reaches an increased awareness, without necessarily ever reaching any certainty. Rather, the context often invites the reader to intuit the ethical dimension of language.
- 18 First, our world extends only so far as our language does, as Wittgenstein contended. The point is repeatedly illustrated through the narrator's exchanges with his four year-old daughter, which point out the misunderstandings that keep occurring because we do not all grant the same value to terms or phrases, hence the limits of communication. Yet such situations also open out the possibility of learning, with the learner repeating the word sometimes without quite understanding it at first, as may be the case in the following

example. The narrator catches his daughter Lane watching her goldfish “not quite floating on his orange-and-white mottled side:”

“So, he’s going to die?” she asks.

“I’m afraid so?”

“Why?”

“All animals die. Some live longer than others, but all of them die.” I told her.

“No, I mean why are you afraid?”

It took me a couple of beats to catch up. “‘I’m afraid so’ is just a figure of speech, an expression, just a way of saying that a thing is going to happen, and we can’t do anything about it.”

[...]

“Well, I guess I’ll take Goldie into the backyard and bury him. Do you want to come?”

She shook her head.

“You’re just going to stay in here?”

“I’m afraid so.” (116)

- 19 Throughout the novel, the character of the little girl is used as a naïve consciousness, whose fresh vision of language has been unspoiled by the rigid frames imposed by habit. The scene in which she claims that her drawing is the sun, which her father corrects to: “represents the sun” not only shows the child’s active imagination, which has not yet been muzzled by the rational imperative, but also the arbitrary power of language: I am free to call things a certain way — but are things what I call them? — as illustrated by the parable of the beetle in the box, borrowed from Wittgenstein.

Suppose everyone had a box with something in it: we call it a ‘beetle.’ No one can look into anyone else’s box, and everyone says he knows what a beetle is only by looking at *his* beetle — Here it would be quite possible for everyone to have something different in his box. One might even imagine such a thing constantly changing—But suppose the word ‘beetle’ had a use in people’s language? — If so, it would not be used as the name of that thing. The thing in the box has no place in the language game at all; not even as a something: for the box might be empty [...]. (*Philosophical Investigations*, no.293, quoted in *Glyph*, 82)

- 20 It is most often the all-but absolute and divine power of naming that is considered in *The Water Cure*, as the torturer keeps designating his victim by a different name, thus appropriating him to a certain extent by choosing his identity for him:

“Do you have a name?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t tell me. Names are always just substitutes for nouns, and you know what good nouns are. I will name you. I’ll do that for you. The performative act of naming will be yet another little thing I do to you. I name you W. Poor, poor W. ‘Where is W?’ they are asking. ‘Who cares?’ others are saying.”

“Why?”

“W, I am necessary. I am a necessary thing. My actions are all necessary here. Call it fate. Call it your god’s word. Say it is in the stars. Say it is written. Think it however you like. Think god knows it, if that helps you make sense of it. But I’d rather have you consider that I have renamed you Art and now you are Art and no longer W. My god, what have I done to you? Poor, poor W. now has a new name. Just like that, a new name.

[...] How about that, W.? I mean Art, I mean Harvey, I mean Mort, I mean— Isn’t it wonderful? The naming of things? You get no story at all. But let me ask you this: do you have a name?” (91-92)

- 21 “You get no story”: without the prospect of any potential development, the victim (actual murder?) is not even granted the potential freedom of imaginary *scenarii*; only the limited

leeway of the names made up for him, stressing the identification with the reader –as torturer? – “double you”, also the initial of the then-President’s second Christian name, George W. Bush; “Art” may remind the readers of the narrator’s power over his creature, while evoking the archaic form of the verb “to be” in the second person singular; “Mort” introduces a bilingual pun staging death as against creation. As to “Harvey, is he a reminder of a President’s murderer, again represented through his second Christian name? The three phonetically linked names – Art, Harvey, Mort – let their suggestive forces spread throughout the passage. As the narrator imagines names to give to his victim, he fashions his character to his liking, according to the all-but magical or divine, at any rate creative powers of naming. The performative function of language is investigated in the novel, which is itself partly a confession, abounding in expressions of agreement, forbidding or ordering. Just as in *The Adventures of Alice in Wonderland* the Queen can kill people by saying “Off with their heads,” the narrator can decide that the man in the bar is his daughter’s murderer by saying so, or the latter may be found, but above all “declared” guilty by a court. Similarly, the narrator recurrently wonders whether one may be redeemed by praying, in other terms whether words can, not so much erase action, as allow its consequences to be forgotten or cancelled:

There is a time for atonement, and it is the hour after midnight. At one. Atone at one. At onement. There will be perpetual levelling of all things at one, at once atoned. The flesh of sentiment will be stripped base at one, leaving little more than a skeleton. I can hear the bleating of sheep and the barking of greyhounds in the distance, but no such animals reside on this mountain. They must be the animals Art counts to find sleep. (103)

- 22 Going beyond the discrepancy in sounds, the narrator as arrogant divine figure exploits the visual identity between “at one” and “atone” to decide of the moment of redemption. The poetic play on the structure and sounds of the word “atonement”, as a form of etymological or genetic reflexion aiming at analysing the precise meaning of the term, may seem vain, or appear as a critique of the belief in atonement, exposed as an easy way out. Yet it may also open onto an interesting field of ethical considerations. Namely when translating *The Water Cure* I found myself musing similarly over the word “pardon” (forgiveness), which readily splits into “par” and “don”, or “as a gift”. Overexposure not only fixes objects in a suspended present, it unfolds backwards into their history, and simultaneously in all the directions evoked by associations of sounds or images.
- 23 The reflexion on the performative power of words appears necessary in the novel in relation to the practice of torture, the victim eventually being led to say just *anything*. This is illustrated by a joke about soldiers in Guantanamo who are required to bring back a deer from the forest. The Canadian and Austrian soldiers fail, but the American claims to have succeeded, although he brings back a rabbit:
- “What’s this all about?” asked the Aussie.
 “That’s not a deer,” said the Canadian.
 “Yes it is,” said the American. “Ask it.” (66)
- 24 In this joke about torture and confession, for instance, the linguistic approach ties in with a continued reflexion on the violent manipulation of thoughts and minds. The text particularly focuses on the consequences of lying and more generally, on the serious consequences of any use of language, suggesting that just as one shouldn’t do something just because one “can” – a recurring sentence in the novel—, one shouldn’t say anything that crosses one’s mind. Saying that “ideas smell like myrrh”, an earlier quoted phrase, does bear an effect, as limited though it may be, on our conception of the world. Any

tampering with the conventional associations that give language its structures destabilizes meaning and unsettles the relation between language and facts in the process while opening our visions to a poetic dimension, letting us smell the inebriating scent of words, as Thoreau expresses in the conclusion he brings to *Walden*: “The words which express our faith and piety are not definite; yet they are significant and fragrant like frankincense to superior natures.”

- 25 Indeed, what kind of world do the transformed passages in *The Water Cure* conjure up? The readers are deprived of most conventional landmarks, even within the narrative, as some passages are taken up in different parts of the book, with or without alterations. Thus they are offered a renewed awareness of the many different possibilities of perceiving an object that stem from the structures of language itself. The experience of reading *The Water Cure* may radically transform our relation to the world. Faced with the endless possibilities of formulation, whether logical or not, whether they make sense or not, the reader bears the responsibility of acknowledging the wealth of potential interpretations. Such awareness of the instability and openness of meaning seems to be promoted by this novel rather than an increased acuteness in choosing an improbable right path.
- 26 Yet the whole book is a sequence of critical moments in which the reader has to select associations among several possibilities. Moreover our relation to the work keeps fluctuating: pictures and text are apprehended at different paces, and so are the paragraphs in unheard-of language; in addition, the work appears to be variable or adaptable as it circulates, its parts being recalled by echoes, likenesses, repetition motifs. Such a disruptive structure leads the reader to question the relation between the narrative and its “factual” contents, suggesting that they may even be an illusion. That would make us guilty of having projected imagined horrors upon the text — especially since a number of hints make it unclear whether the narrator did capture and torture the alleged murderer. On many occasions doubt is shed as to the actuality of events, according to a twofold move of alternate overexposure and ellipsis, leaving us with our projections, resort as we may to intentional fallacy in order to analyze the narrator’s aims — and the author’s behind him. From the start, the narrative structure itself — a narrative in the first person — practically coerces the reader into identifying with the narrator who at times appears as a cynical monster. The reader almost finds herself guilty for saying “I” with the narrator as he tortures his victim.
- 27 While the workings of the unconscious are obviously under scrutiny in *The Water Cure*, our reading processes are specifically exposed — and maybe more overtly so, since they are closer to the author’s interests — and shown to rely so much on expectations and predictability that any innovation may be checked or at least uneasily negotiated. Indeed, as shown by Bertrand Russell, meaning depends on “mnemonic causation” (93), that is on memory effects, through identification and association with previous occurrences. But there are no previous occurrences of the transformed language used in *The Water Cure*. Or so thinks the reader when she first meets one such passage. Then a whole tradition comes to mind, including some of the masters — Lewis Carroll, James Joyce. Yet, were the alterations fewer in the experimental paragraphs, we would automatically amend them, since we have been trained to read what may be expected. At a conference on Everett’s work held in Grenoble in 2007, a speaker analysed the poetic wandering of letters in his novel *Zulus*, which another colleague denounced as typos. Our training as readers limits our ability to receive difference and change. This, especially for us academics, leads to

question the specific reading provided by critics, focusing on a limited number of extracts, which sometimes, by dint of being repeated, end up representing the whole work in the cultural conscience. In *The Obligation Toward the Difficult Whole* (2004) (an essay about the long postmodern poem), Brian McHale studies how we select and analyze what seem to be the most meaningful passages and derive an analysis of the whole. Critical vision is biased, relying on overexposed fragments — and I in turn may have to plead guilty here.

- 28 The general question raised in *The Water Cure* is that of knowledge and its acquisition: how do we represent the world and how do we learn about it? If one goes further, the notion of cultural evolution also is at stake, as well as that of changes in mind-frames and points of view. Richard Rorty pays tribute to the Romantics for having acknowledged that “a talent for speaking differently, rather than for arguing well, is the chief instrument of cultural change” (Rorty 7), an evolution to which, in this perspective, *The Water Cure* may contribute.
- 29 Could this book be seen as a textual representation of a virtual artwork, through which the reader makes her fluctuating way, with an endless number of different possibilities each time she returns to it? Its immediate effects are the simultaneous loss of knowledge and proliferation of questions, concerning language and reading more particularly. *The Water Cure* offers a more individually-involving access to, and elaboration of “knowledge” — which may no longer be the appropriate term — through a new genre of literary artwork. It forces its reader to take the risk of experimenting and of exposure, those being two conditions of acquiring knowledge according to Michel Serres in *Le Tiers-Instruit* (1991). Having been made aware of an increased responsibility in using not only language but also the immensely powerful media now available, the reader of *The Water Cure* has to invent new modes of reading and interpreting, to explore fluctuating itineraries under unstable conditions, all the while negotiating perpetual adjustments between reason and imagination, what is felt and what is understood, the visible and the invisible: modulating between the two inseparable aspects in critical activity, according to Paul de Man — *blindness*, and *insight*.

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ABSTRACTS

In his 2007 novel *The Water Cure*, Percival Everett explores and explodes representation through language so as to offer the reader a radical experience of questioning her expectations in reading and more generally her reading processes together with her language habits. The interplay of the twin notions of exposure and overexposure allows to approach the dismantlement of language taking place in *The Water Cure*, that brings out the wealth of language potentials as well as the constant threat to which communication is subject. The exploration and questioning carried out by Everett call for new ways of reading and writing literary criticism.

Dans *The Water Cure*, paru en 2007, Percival Everett se livre à une exploration de la représentation langagière qui ébranle jusqu'aux fondements du langage. Le lecteur se voit offrir l'expérience d'une remise en question de ses attentes de lecteur, et plus largement des modalités de la lecture et de ses habitudes langagières. Le jeu des notions connexes d'exposition et de surexposition permet une approche du démantèlement du langage qui s'opère dans *The Water Cure*, mettant en lumière la richesse des potentiels langagiers autant que la menace constante pesant sur la communication. Le questionnement radical poursuivi par Everett appelle de nouvelles façons de lire et d'écrire la critique littéraire.

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Mots-clés: déviation, Percival Everett, langue inventée, nouvelles modalités de lecture, transgression, violence, *The Water Cure*

Keywords: deviation, Percival Everett, invented language, new reading modes, transgression, violence, *The Water Cure*

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Anne-Laure Tissut is a Professor of American Literature at Rouen University. She specializes in contemporary American fiction and translation. Her current research focuses on reading and aesthetics, and particularly the evolution of forms of representation and the modes of exchange between art forms and media. She has written a study on Paul West, published by Belin in the collection "Voix américaines," and has edited several collective publications. She is also a translator (Percival Everett, Nick Flynn, Joumana Haddad, Aryn Kyle, Adam Thirlwell, Steve Tomasula).