

From in the light I touched the light

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“From in the light I touched the light”

Tearing up language in Blake Butler's *Ever*

Anne-Laure Tissut

- 1 *Ever* is a graphic novel, the fruit of a collaboration between writer Blake Butler and the visual artist and writer Derek White. Whereas illustrations sometimes bind the reader's imagination by imposing a given representation of the narrated facts, here on the contrary the dynamics created between the two media opens out the possibilities of meaning and representation by stimulating imagination. Indeed text and image actually feed each other and carry each other beyond their own limitations through fertile interactions. Such opening out appears of particular interest in a novel whose textual contents stage physical and psychological closure and even imprisonment. Much in the tradition of the American gothic, a series of mutations — of the body and of the house in which the character is to be found — leave the reader doubtful as to the character's mental balance. *Ever* seems to offer an experimental, multi-media representation of what is dealt with in Blake Butler's non-fiction book entitled *Nothing. A Portrait of Insomnia*, published by Harper Perennial in 2011. This is the hallucinated memoir of an insomniac, showing the visions and fears that come to haunt his half-awake dreaming. Language has to invent its way through the not quite rational maze of the character's mental life-in-a-daze, made of obsessions, sensations and blurred memories, the representation of which challenges words:

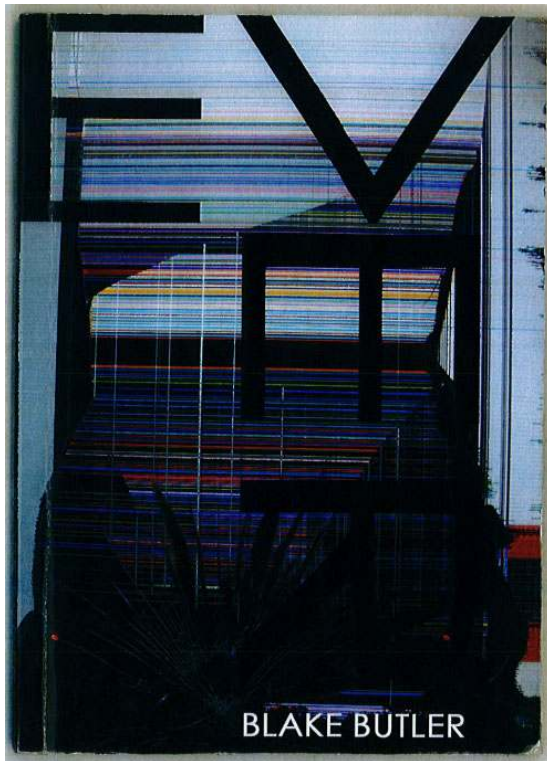
This speech in my remembering, ten years later, sounds like nothing, though I can see the head, can feel the head still in my chest, and even feel the susurrations of the sound waves pillowed through my chest in certain hours again awake too long in different light with longer bones—there is *no word about the word* at all except its speaking, saying nothing- a *mode of color in woven tone*.” (111, my emphasis)

- 2 The insomniac's experience cannot be represented with language alone, but through a “mode” blending text and image, rhythm and “tone”, and finally “color”, here in the form of vibrations and intensities, in this black and white book. Many a sentence or turn of phrase taken from *Nothing* confirm the parallel between this essay and *Ever*, two visionary books of perceptions and mutations. The character in *Ever* is so elusive and her body so

devoid of stable shape or characteristics that this body is first and foremost represented through sensations — its and the reader's on receiving the notations relating to it: in other words, representation is aesthetical throughout, insofar as it builds upon the interplay between impressions and emotions. The character's decaying body, its implausible motions as well as the many blanks left in the narrative draw the reader towards a sensory form of reading as much as an intellectual one, the uncommon nature of the required reading being signaled by unevenly distributed brackets, sometimes up to three at the beginning or end of a sentence: "[For certain lengths I simply suggested myself forward. I felt the tremor of small bees. I kissed the ground in want of _____. When I could not crawl or want or other, I crooked my arms and hid my head in what remained of me.]]" (6) As the character gropes her way through the maze of houses in which she seems to be entrapped, her body undergoes ceaseless transformations and distortions that are echoed and as though stimulated by the mutating pictures. More precisely, house and character are involved in a constant process of inversion which brings them ever on the verge of fusion one into the other: "[I could hear the room above me moving — something in it — someone. I could hear them there inside me, also echoed, jostling around." (43).

- 3 As I was reading this text on and of obsession, I became haunted by a vague atmosphere, then by pictures that soon enough took the more precise shapes of Francis Bacon's paintings, with its dislocating bodies that seem to be in constant motion, merging into the background or into each other¹, and, as a matter of fact, Deleuze's analysis of Bacon's work seems to offer an adequate depiction of what is happening in Blake Butler's *Ever*: "What is painted in the picture is the body, but not represented as an object, rather lived as experiencing a given sensation [...]" (40, my translation²). In *Ever*, the various matters and materials as well as the differently textured objects both evoked in the text and represented in the pictures give the reader a haptic sensation. Moreover, much like in Bacon's works, the body also seems to be "trying to escape *through* one of its organs, to meet the plane, the material structure." (24, my translation³)
- 4 I shall try to show how Gilles Deleuze's analyses of the figure in Bacon — and of its interactions with the background — shed light on what happens to language in its relation to images in Blake Butler's *Ever*, thus letting Bacon's images and Deleuze's text come forward, meet and illuminate Blake Butler's imaged text.

Fig. 1: *Ever*, cover



- 5 Tension is perceptible from the cover: the word “ever”, suggesting infinite time, is pent up, curbed in the rectangular shape of the cover, while the striated colored background emblemizing a closed, structured space is broken by a spiderweb-shaped bullet- or stone-impact in a window or glass frame. Text and picture seem to be engaged in the competing transgression of their respective limitations. Hence the question is raised of the priority between the two. The text becomes visual and pictures call for being deciphered, as they even include textual fragments: the whole is seen and read almost simultaneously. Yet what is the order of progression on the page? What is the orientation of perception? The reader experiences a global taking in, before proceeding to a more detailed, instinctive exploration, in keeping with the topic of the novel, whose protagonist wanders in a maze of houses seemingly metaphorizing her own body. When conventional reading processes fail to allow the reader to fully receive and appreciate the pages of *Ever*, the reader’s discovery of each page very much relies on improvisation, with few firm expectations because of the relative shortage of given orchestrating principles. Through the interactions between text and image the page is spliced into different levels of reading. A first layer or stratum in the complexified reading process generated by the multimedia nature of the book is a symbolical reading, as the confrontation of text and image highlights correspondences between visual signs and textual symbols.

A Symbolical Reading

- 6 A certain number of emblems and symbols are to be found in *Ever*, pictorial elements recurring in different contexts, thus creating a pictorial language, made of arrows, circles and other, less immediately identifiable elements. They are open symbols so to speak, as

the signs remain ambiguous enough to be interpreted in various ways depending on the context, on how the reader's selective memory works and how her sensibility is affected by the book as a whole at each given point in the reading process. For instance, at the bottom of page 66, it is difficult to say whether the square topped by a hat is an arrow or a house upside down. On the same page the fine curved striations may evoke geographical contour lines or the lines on a fingerprint, so that interpretation may lean towards topography or towards identity, the house or the body, or also bring them together.

Fig. 2: *Ever*, 66



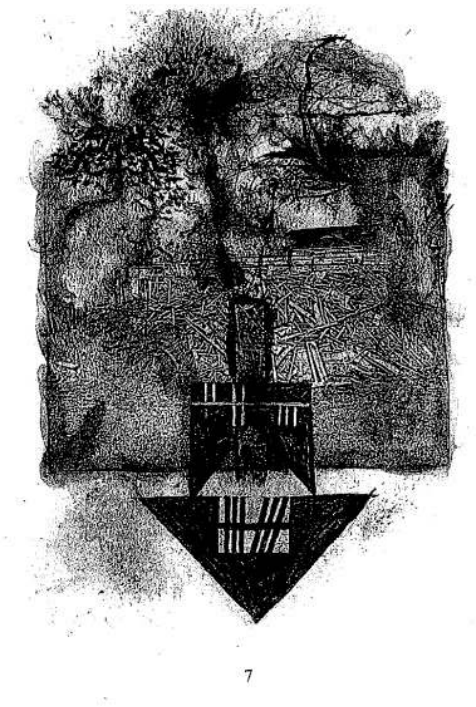
66

- 7 Throughout *Ever* (and later in *Nothing*), brackets call for transgression. Torn maps suggest the absence of guidance, or of any reference book: the reader is invited to feel her way through the text. Light is everywhere, the light into which Bacon's figures are supposed to dissolve eventually, or are constantly tempted to do so, according to Deleuze: "Beings disintegrate as they rise up into the light [...]" (121⁴) This move possibly symbolizes a revelation, that never comes, in a book about subterranean worlds, burrowing, and closing in. The many blank spaces, which often enough are perceived as emblems of fragmentation, here allow light to circulate, as though linking up text and images to bring them all into a single, open signifying universe. Despite the absence of marked regulating principle providing interpreting instructions for the reader to find her way in the mixed-media world of the pages, her reception is oriented through recurring processes operating between text and pictures. Thus a dynamics is created, from which reading draws its impulse.

A Process Reading

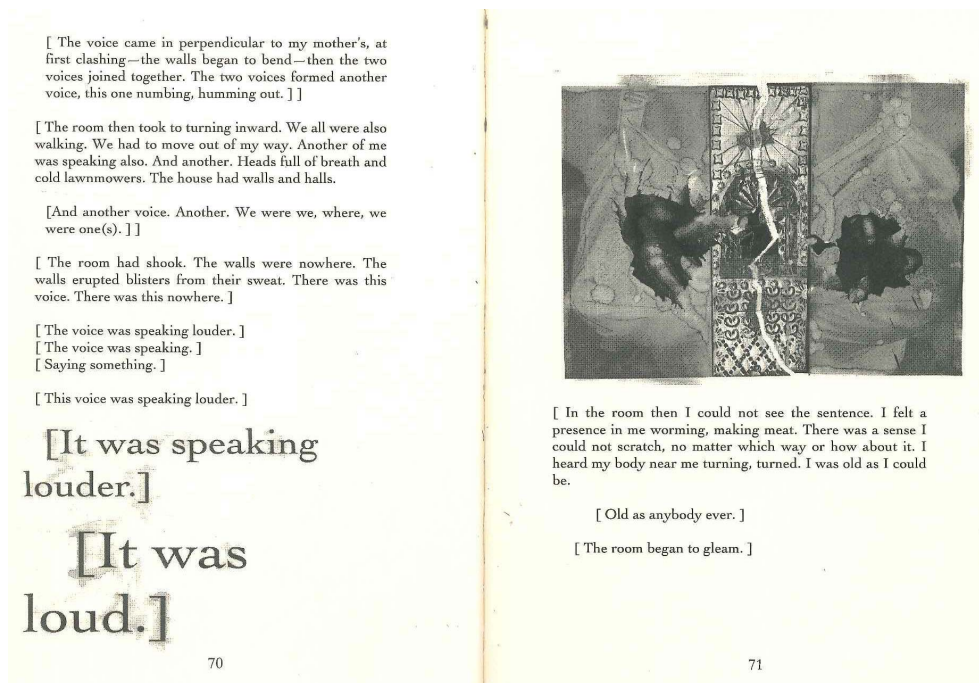
- 8 The images in the text work as visual stimuli inviting the reader to imitate their transformations and interactions in her reception of the book. Mostly unawares, the reader lets her vision be fashioned by the forces animating the multimedia layout of the pages, bearing on her reading with an almost hypnotic effect. For instance, the perpetual cross-fertilization at work between text and pictures is visually suggested through patterns of overlap, overflow or through smudging. On page 7, for instance, one can notice the unclear borders of the square that takes up most of the page.

Fig. 3: *Ever*, 7



- 9 More generally speaking, geometrical figures are not cleanly filled, or they appear to be unstable, as if they were submitted to an overall transgression impetus or impulse –a force that may remind one of Deleuze commenting on Bacon’s figures flowing out of themselves to meet the material background. Indeed, the immutable drawings on the pages seem to have become animated under the forces generated by the tensions and interactions between text and image. Somewhat as in Bacon, sensations mainly come down to vibrations: « [...] sensation [...] has but an intensive reality [...] sensation is vibration. » (Deleuze, 47). Thus animated, pictures come out of the page, at the reader, or to meet the text, as on pages 70-71: growing letters on page 70 seem to tear themselves from the text to meet the picture on the next page.

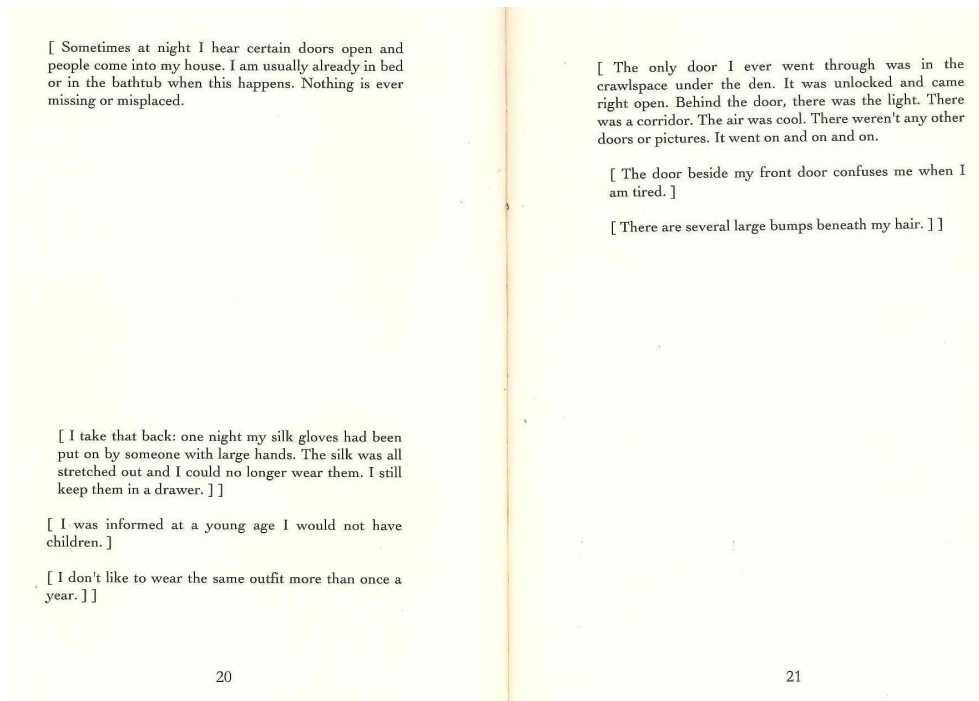
Fig. 4: *Ever*, 70-71



- 10 Throughout the novella, various forms of playing upon typography thus enhance the visual dimension of words. Exchanges develop between the two media, as organic motifs reappear in different contexts, offering visual echoes to the various processes of metamorphosis evoked in the text, which abounds in representations or simply suggestions of growing and decaying. Moreover fragments taken up from text reappear in the pictures: the phrase “and this was mine” appears first on page 78, and then later in the text, in italics, on page 99. Meaningless capitalized words come close to stand as drawings within the text (66), their visual and sonorous qualities being enhanced in the absence of semantic ones. On pages 66 and 67, the words inside the picture are mirrored on the opposite page, within the course of the text. Such circulation of elements between pictures and text reveals a constant process of fragmentation and reshuffling, enhancing the oneiric or more precisely nightmarish quality of the represented world, and suggesting invisible forces at work. Recurring motifs, patterns and shapes give the reader an internal sense of motion, making of the reading experience one of kinesthesia—and again, these phenomena recall those at work in Bacon’s paintings, and in art in general, according to Deleuze: « In art, [...] the point is not to reproduce nor invent forms, but to capture forces.” (57⁵)
- 11 The dominant burrowing move, in connection with the topics of absorption, excretion and birth, is related to many embedded patterns, most obviously illustrated by the accumulated brackets at the end of sentences. In pictures too, collage strategies of inclusion or insertion with repetition (34) offer a visual echo to the collapsible houses evoked in the text (66), reminding one of a bottomless trunk, or of dwellings saturated with secret traps, passages and cellars (88). Similarly, the pages harbour many surprises as, of a sudden, the reader’s gaze may find itself deviated towards a picture opening out onto another dimension in the space laid out by the text: the picture is then looked at under the influence of the read text, while the text is modified *a posteriori* in the reader’s

memory, shaped and reorganized by the currently faced picture, according to a phenomenon of perpetual readjustment of the reader's expectations.

Fig. 5: *Ever*, 20-21



12 As they destabilize meaning, deviating it from the course that the text alone would have set, pictures open out the universe of the novel and launch the text anew. While repetition in the text may reflect stalling, or paralysis, as the text hiccups or stutters, the process of repetition with variation according to which textual elements are taken up in a visual form is the very principle of evolution, relying on maintaining and managing tensions.

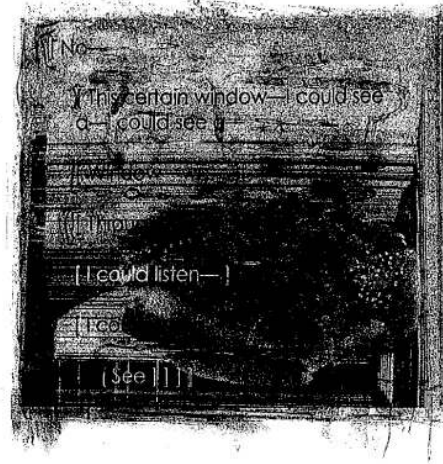
13 Indeed the many tensions in the book seem to create a driving force in reading: reading *Ever* sets up unstable worlds, rattled by perpetual shifts that do not cease with the end of the book, steeped in ambiguities:

[...] squeaking — and again I began to bleed. Bled like those mornings [...] Bled like those days [...] and then again in repetition — in repetition — in — in — and. And. Bled like when even younger I cut my finger [...] Bleeding on the glass now, slid in slow strokes streaking, all bubbling in pools. A slow baptism, puddled in my teeth and belly button. Pooled in the room the size of me — the room from which now through the windows, through the minute, I could not see anything at all. (102)

14 The staccato beat (“and then again in repetition — in repetition — in — in — and. And.”) and the repeated verb “to bleed” suggest paralysis, oncoming death, while on the opposite page (103), the language segments reproduced on the picture also convey a sense of fragmentation, suffocation, and powerlessness.

Fig. 6: *Ever*, 102-103

squeaking—and again I began to bleed. Bled like those mornings with my head soaked on the pillow all teenaged, my nostrils slickened, my vision white. Bled like those days when I was twenty and my whole womb's load would spout out of me at once, and then again in repetition—in repetition—in—in—and. And. Bled like when even younger I cut my finger there in father's shed and he'd take it in his mouth and suck and suck. Bleeding on the glass now, slid in slow strokes streaking, all bubbling in pools. A slow baptism, puddled in my teeth and belly button. Pooled in the room the size of me—the room from which now through the windows, through the minute, I could not see anything at all.



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- 15 Yet at the very end, the isolated verb “see” brings a denial to the text on the previous page, “I could not see anything at all.” (102) This is vision without any definite object, indeed the object is replaced by the accumulated brackets after the verb. Now, this form of vision is accessed through the mixed medium of picture-cum-text, or the other way round, when no longer possible in the text alone. The dynamics of ceaseless circulation created between text and images, involving several layers in them, from the most concrete to the radically abstract, may be represented by the flow of light evoked from the first line, spreading so intensely as to become material and tangible: “[From in the light I touched the light. I knew the light grew mold inside me.” (4) The indirection conveyed in the almost tautological first line may refer to a dead-end of the written form, incapable of fully representing movement because of the fixity of the text on the page.

Writing (in)tensions

- 16 Blake Butler, in *Ever*, seems to be playing with the constitutive tensions of the written text. They may be aptly described by what Michel Leiris writes of the paradox lying at the heart of Francis Bacon’s project: “Trying to transcribe a living presence and to transcribe it as such, without letting its essential life escape from it, is to try to fix it without fixing it, to paradoxically try to fix what cannot and even should not be fixed, for to fix it is to kill it.” (*Francis Bacon, face et profil*, 20, my translation)⁶ The haunting presences torturing the insomniac seem to offer an ideal object for experimenting with representation, especially around the question of how to represent motion. The narrator admits: “As you know or may have heard there are often not the words for sorts of things in which you feel as if something about you is not the same, or if it might be in the midst of shifting, or.” (33) In their ordinary condition both text and picture represent a frozen state in time

and space, here disturbed by the multimedia layout and the non linear reading thus entailed, the pages being set in motion anew with each reading. Blake Butler's writing of obsession allows an exploration of the characteristics of the text as a medium and, even further, it calls for a questioning of the conditions of the very possibility of writing. Language itself is under scrutiny, from the statement of its failings and through the detour taken via the image. Much as the book deals with light, the condition of the possibility of vision, it exhibits and represents the conditions of the possibility of speech and language, through a play on reflexivity.

- 17 The book is scattered with metatextual comments that expose the limitations of language, as is the case in the following passage, between the mimetic and the performative:

"[When the prayer was over I began again.

[When the prayer was over I began again.

[When the prayer was over I began again.]

[I hadn't meant to speak in repetition; [...].]" (25)

Other, non metatextual forms of reflexivity may point at how necessary separation is for meaning to exist — separation between the object and the sign referring to it — while many a tautological or redundant use of language proves the necessity of difference. Such sentences as "I pressed my teeth against my teeth" (29) or, less easily visualized, "I lay gummed up in the grunting, my skin against my skin." (76) increase the sense of the character's imprisonment in her body and in the house of language. In *Ever*, it seems that the body's attempts to escape through its organs, as noted in Bacon's works, are thwarted by the hiccups of a stunted language ceaselessly hitting against its own limitations: "[In the long contusion of the room's glue I felt my innards going slush — wanting ways out of *myself itself* — my skin goosefleshed and *mostly smothered* bright where *rubber'd rubbed* — and scored with fields of tiny potholes where my arm's *soft follicles* had been *ripped out by the root.*]" (79, my emphasis) The repetition of sounds and syllables clinches closure here, thus ruling conventional meaning out for lack of differentiation, and forcing meaning into other, devious ways, relying on sounds, rhythms, sensations and emotions. The dominant trend of reflexivity in *Ever*, combined with a constant blurring of frontiers between outside and inside, challenge the very possibility of reaching an exterior point of view from which to describe oneself, and beyond, talk about language. This is where pictures step in, bringing a new perspective, and another medium to interact with language and implicitly comment upon it.

- 18 The complexities of talking about the medium from inside the medium are often broached, more or less overtly, for instance in "This new me now stood against the wall and looked into my eyes with my own eyes." (69), or again, in "[One thing I could not see through the windows was the outside of the house — at least any walls or roofs or grass or driveways or the yard, or any of those other things one might find when looking inward from the outside, even now.]" (93) Under the pretense of raising the question of point of view or perspective, the passage actually operates a radical destabilizing through inversion, between inside and outside, the house and self being eventually turned inside out, and possibly several times so. References are constantly blurred in *Ever*, which stages a split subject even further multiplied through mirroring effects and engaged in a continued process of exchange with a ceaselessly metamorphosing house, in the text as in the pictures: "The room then took to turning inward. We all were also walking. We had to move out of my way. Another of me was speaking also. And another. Heads full of breath and cold lawnmowers. The house had walls and halls." (70), "halls" in which one almost hears "holes". This audible closeness as well as the confusion between the various

subjects and the personal pronouns referring to them stresses the crucial part played by differentiation in the production of meaning.

- 19 The role of differentiation and the possibilities of language are questioned in *Ever* through a constant play between closeness and distance. The sentence "I brushed my knee against my knee", though syntactically correct, fails to allow immediate representation, or at least makes it problematic, exposing the ambiguities of a language in which my left knee is my knee as much as my right one. Further, language may even come close to mere sounds, possibly mimetic ones, which at any rate are immediately perceived as material signs rather than abstract ones:

"[I left the light.

"I left the light and came back into it. Into here, to us.

[Came back in the house, back-cracked and brain brayed. The walls whitewashed and very near." (23)

- 20 The density in consonants conjures up a broken character ("back-cracked and brain brayed") and participates in creating the impression of closure, within "The walls whitewashed and very near." This impression is so pervasive that the reader can easily distort words unawares, to bring them towards the lexical field of imprisonment or closure. This is made possible by a careful play on paronomasia and ambiguities, such as, on the same page, "I'd wake to find the pillow sopping, chock full and black around the edges." (23). Visually and through its sonorities, "chock full" is very close to the verb to "choke".
- 21 The images in *Ever* intervene in a process of oscillation between assimilation — when language mimics the signified — and separation, between word and object, to bring in the necessary distance for meaning to exist. Much according to the fashion in which the figure is torn away from the figurative in Bacon's paintings, language is torn away from its conventional uses in *Ever*. Under the influence of the image, language is unhinged, (hence the title of this paper, "tearing up language") and thus comes out of its stalled or locked up position.
- 22 Away from realistic representation, the combination of text and image in *Ever* explores the potentials of language as well as its origins. Indeed it creates an elaborate expression of basic perceptions and affects, much relying on the visual and more generally material qualities of language. In *Ever*, Blake Butler does not so much *build* a world, nor worlds in the plural, as he *calls for* worlds, visual ones, such as the world of Francis Bacon's paintings. Or rather, what is conjured up is the dynamic system of a text interacting with pictures, such as Deleuze's commentary on Bacon's work — and further, Deleuze and Guattari's theorizing of the rhizome may come to mind, as finding its visual representations in the interactive combination of Blake Butler's texts and Derek White's images, all of them expressions of becoming (Deleuze & Guattari, 31-32). For me reading *Ever* started an endless circulation between texts and images, ever metamorphosing one into the others, "ever".
- 23 Blake Butler's hybrid work exploiting the potentials of encounters between text and picture suggests that the traditional meanings of such literary terms as reading, author, page, text, image have been diversified and enriched. In the era of digital literature, as increasing threats are being agitated upon the book, Blake Butler pays a tribute to the materiality of literature by opening out new reading possibilities of the book-as-an-object.

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NOTES

1. A number of reproductions of Francis Bacon's works may be found at <http://www.francis-bacon.com/>
 2. "Ce qui est peint dans le tableau, c'est le corps, non pas en tant qu'il est représenté comme objet, mais en tant qu'il est vécu comme éprouvant telle sensation [...]"
 3. " [...] toujours le corps qui tente de s'échapper par un de ses organes, pour rejoindre l'aplat, la structure matérielle."
 4. "Les êtres se désagrègent en montant dans la lumière [...]"
 5. "En art, [...] il ne s'agit pas de reproduire ou d'inventer des formes, mais de capter des forces."
 6. « Essayer de transcrire une présence vivante et de la transcrire comme telle, sans laisser échapper cette vie qui lui est essentielle, c'est chercher à la fixer, s'efforcer paradoxalement de fixer ce qui ne peut pas et ne doit même pas être fixé, car le fixer c'est le tuer. »
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ABSTRACTS

In the collaborative graphic novel *Ever*, writer Blake Butler and visual artist and writer Derek White explore the various forms of interaction between text and image to open out the possibilities of meaning and representation. Indeed text and image carry each other beyond their own limitations through a fertile dynamics of mutations, aptly reflecting what happens in the story. As the protagonist gropes her way through the ceaselessly shifting volumes of a prison-house, her body undergoes ceaseless transformations and distortions, bringing to mind Francis Bacon's works. Gilles Deleuze's analyses of the figure in Francis Bacon — and of its interactions with the background — are used to shed light on what happens to language in its relation to images in Butler's *Ever*. While the reader is drawn towards a sensory form of reading, Blake Butler's writing of obsession allows an exploration of the text as a medium and calls for a questioning of the very conditions of the possibility of writing.

Dans le roman collaboratif *Ever*, l'écrivain Blake Butler et l'écrivain et artiste visuel Derek White explorent les diverses formes d'interaction possibles entre texte et image, pour étendre le champ du sens et de la représentation. En effet, le jeu du texte et de l'image repoussent les limites respectives de chaque médium, grâce à une fertile dynamique de mutation, également à l'œuvre dans la diégèse. Tandis que la protagoniste erre dans les volumes changeants d'une demeure dans laquelle elle semble emprisonnée, son corps subit d'incessantes transformations et distorsions, qui rappellent l'œuvre de Francis Bacon. Les analyses de Gilles Deleuze sur la figure chez Francis Bacon, et ses interactions avec le fond ou l'arrière-plan, sont utilisées ici pour éclairer les rapports tissés dans *Ever* entre image et langage, ainsi que leurs effets. Tandis que le lecteur est conduit à adopter un mode de lecture plus sensoriel qu'intellectuel, l'écriture de l'obsession pratiquée par Blake Butler permet d'explorer les potentiels du médium textuel et de remettre en question les conditions mêmes de possibilité de l'écriture.

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Mots-clés: Francis Bacon, Blake Butler, Derek White, image, mutation, représentation, limites, lecture sensorielle

Keywords: Francis Bacon, Blake Butler, Derek White, image, mutation, representation, limits, sensory reading

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