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## Steve Tomasula's Work of Wonder

Anne-Laure Tissut

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Steve Tomasula

The Art and Science of New Media Fiction

Edited by  
David Banash



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## Steve Tomasula's Work of Wonder

Anne-Laure Tissut

In the largely desacralized twenty-first century, Western art still seems to offer refuge to an aspiration for transcendence or to a desire to understand the world. The contemporary American novelist Percival Everett states that artistic creation is his own mode of relating to the world—a “religious” mode, consisting in weaving links, according to a speculative etymology of the term.<sup>1</sup> One part of contemporary American fiction is animated by such an impulsive move toward the world. It is made of works of wonder, in the long American tradition brought to light by Tony Tanner in *The Reign of Wonder*. The texts analyzed by Tanner all show great care to present the reader with the environment as such, without the intervention of any perceiving consciousness—a world which would seem to have been conjured up by magic and thriving on the supremacy of its distinct order, of divine origins or at least suggesting some mysterious otherness.

The illusory nature of such nonintervention comes to be flagrant when the world evoked is constantly transformed by an increasing number of manipulations of all kinds while human action introduces artifice everywhere. Such is the case in Steve Tomasula's work, conveying the sense of an apparently boundless wonder toward life—its synthetic artifacts equally with natural things and beings, the near and the far, the past, present and future. If it is no longer really possible today to feign the presentation of an untouched and wholly given world, then from what point of view should the narrative of wonder be delivered, and how far away should the narrator locate himself? To what extent do readers become actors both in the construction of meaning and the blooming of wonder, opening themselves to a sense of surprise while giving up the prospect of complete knowledge, since no truth is to be revealed to them straightforwardly?

By questioning the erasure of narrative authority in contemporary fiction, as well as its so-called neutrality, this study of Steve Tomasula's work is

<sup>1</sup> More precisely, Everett also stated that art was his “way of processing the world” and the novel his “way of making meaning” (presentation, The Sorbonne, Paris, March 15, 2007).

meant as an attempt to show how the strategies of representation developed in his work both amount to and call for a celebration of human ingenuity and of the never-quenched thirst that pushes people into a perpetual quest for knowledge and meaning. The worship of an eternal, immutable being has been replaced by an attentiveness to becoming, in which the readers are invited to take part in their own way. After examining the forms of wonder in Tomasula's work, we shall turn successively to writing and reading as a means of achieving a contemporary religious sense offering a propitious milieu in which to define the subject anew in relation to the total environment.

### Forms of wonder in Tomasula's work

Steve Tomasula's works now include four novels, most recently the new media novel entitled *TOC*, and a collection of stories, *Once Human*, his latest published work. In his books, expressing a boundless and sincere enthusiasm, an on-going meditation is carried out, on creation, representation, languages, and the influence of science and technology upon the subject's place in the world as well as on the subject's conception of herself. In this resolutely anti-creationist literary universe one can still feel some sense of the religious—albeit often a highly ironical one, made of reverent, universal openness, in the respectful awareness of belonging to a community of beings.

*IN&OZ* is a tale or satirical fable illustrating the nonselective nature of the wonder expressed by the author toward his environment as a whole. Human production especially arouses admiration, as demonstrated by the characters' names, each assimilating them to their job: Mechanic, Designer, Photographer, and Poet. Each are looked upon with the same kindly and often amused narrative gaze, and if an ironical nuance sometimes blends in, it is never caustic. Despite failings and disappointments each character plods ahead, blindly wandering under the sole guidance of instinctive values that eventually let love and altruism triumph in a deeply human tableau showing affection-deprived characters in quest of recognition.

*IN&OZ* forms a diptych, contrasting the physical world of IN and the highly sophisticated and abstract OZ. OZ is a caricature of the high tech invasion which has denatured our relation to the world and to others. Such counterpoint offers a symbolic representation of the imaginary construction of an invisible world to be found in most religions, and Tomasula plays with the codes of religious discourse, for instance in Designer's meditation: "And when she looked beyond her art book on the windowsill and out toward the sun rising dully over the brown stain on the horizon that was IN, she couldn't help but feel that there was some answer that she wasn't seeing, something

beyond OZ that she knew nothing about.<sup>2</sup> Beyond OZ, ruled by technology and productivity, lies the down-to-earth world of IN, where poetry thrives. There, Mechanic receives the revelation of the essence of his life while examining the parts of a car engine:

One day in IN, Mechanic was lying in sludge beneath a car, utility lamp tight in his teeth, when something in him snapped. No sooner had he gotten the filthy-black underbelly of the car unbuttoned than he found himself staring into the gleam of silver gears, radiant with honey-gold lubricant. Though he had seen gears like this a thousand times before, it had never occurred to him how eloquently their polished metal teeth explained his life. (IN 19)

He discovers with wonder an order in which everything connects: "It was as if he stumbled upon one of those forces which guide the planets in their orbits and the flight of an arrow—a force that had been there all along, making the visible what it was, though the force itself remained invisible, unspeakable, unrecognizable. Until now" (IN 20). Everything is a source of wonder, including those parts of the environment that are not usually seen and that the wondering gaze tears from the banal background into which they had melted. Far from amounting to blind fervor, the enthusiasm conveyed by the text is mitigated by an often ironical clear-sightedness. The various modalities of appropriation and exploitation of the environment are indeed sources of fascination, while the inadequate mastery of their consequences is considered from a sustained critical distance.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Steve Tomasula, *IN&OZ* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 34.

<sup>3</sup> This passage echoes a similarly ironical one in Thomas Pynchon's *The Crying of Lot 49*, when Oedipa is reminded of the printed circuit of a transistor by the geometrical arrangement of houses. Interestingly while Mechanic accesses a different vision of something he has seen a thousand times, Oedipa is reminded of her first look upon something that had been materially hidden, locked up inside a transistor radio. She notices its likeness with the pattern of the houses in a suburban development and brings out the sense of mystery rather than some unique character: "She drove into San Narciso on a Sunday, in a rented Impala. Nothing was happening. She looked down a slope, needing to squint for the sunlight, onto a vast sprawl of houses which had grown up all together, like a well-tended crop, from the dull brown earth; and she thought of the time she'd opened a transistor radio to replace a battery and seen her first printed circuit. The ordered swirl of houses and streets, from this high angle, sprang at her now with the same unexpected, astonishing clarity as the circuit card had. Though she knew even less about radios than about Southern Californians, there were to both outward patterns a hieroglyphic sense of concealed meaning, of an intent to communicate. There'd seemed no limit to what the printed circuit could have told her (if she had tried to find out); so in her first minute of San Narciso, a revelation also trembled just past the threshold of her understanding." Thomas Pynchon, *The Crying of Lot 49* (New York: Harper, 1966), 14.

Much as with the writers of wonder in Tanner's analysis, landscapes and scenes are described with the exaltation of discovery. Yet the virgin gaze of the tradition of wonder has been replaced by an ever-adjusting vision, constantly sharpened by experience and education. While the writers of wonder deny the benefits of education and even refuse it, calling for a continued state of naivety or a return to such state, Tomasula would seem to stand closer to Rousseau, who celebrated the child's virgin gaze as but a first step toward knowledge, a prime condition that needs to be overcome. More precisely then, Tomasula's work does not so much belong to the tradition brought to light by Tanner as to the tradition studied by Michael Edwards in *De l'Émerveillement*, "Of Wonder," ranging from Plato's *Theoetetus* to François Cheng's *Five Meditations on Beauty*. Indeed Edwards offers wonder as itself a mode of knowing, neither a force resisting knowledge in favor of a direct apprehension of reality, as in Tanner, nor a primitive condition soon to be replaced by the triumph of reason.

The insatiable quest for knowledge and limitless curiosity perceptible in Tomasula's works entail a perpetual creation of associations, with various fields and domains, other times and continents. Thus an imposing sum of knowledge is to be found in his texts, from which nothing seems to have been excluded, while nothing is emphatically exalted either, there being no sense of the sacred in his literary universes. Frontiers keep fluctuating as an effect of the constant restructuring caused by scientific advances, allowing the colonization of nature by technology and artifice to spread ever further. Tomasula's literary works, most of which are the fruit of collaboration with designers or computer programmers, constantly shift toward other fields and media, making good use of the openness of the novel. Such practices tell us much about the vision that the author has of himself: a hard worker, tenaciously pursuing his passion and striving for the achievement of his ideals with the humble feeling of belonging to a community. Throughout his books, but above all in *VAS: An Opera in Flatland*, Tomasula contrasts the man who thinks of himself as one subject among others from the one who sees himself as the hero who stole fire from the gods, or as the center of the universe, or again the top of the ladder of evolution. What holds such community together is their attitude to the world while the gaze they cast upon it offers perhaps the only constant feature among them. Wonder comes to people through the process of exploring and discovering the environment, to which s/he is brought closer in the course of the enterprise of acquiring knowledge—as a contrast from the passivity with which the characters absorb their environment in the tradition of wonder. Mute nature is thus given a voice through the quest or search taking it as an object and milieu of investigation. For instance, in *VAS: "The driver and legionary*

*ants are the Huns and Tartars of the Insect world. —Ants: Their Structure, Development and Behavior, 1910*" (VAS 71). And immediately below this, to the right of the five parallel vertical lines partly giving the page the look of a musical score: "Or if you prefer, 'Ants, driven by their genes, organize themselves into patterns for survival'" (VAS 71).

If ants are smart the narrator-observer is even smarter. While the sense of the sublime allows man but a brief glimpse an imposing other that remains unreachable, wonder launches a process of immersion into a dissimilar element that the observer partially appropriates through his capturing gaze. Wonder amounts to a dynamic of exchanges between a subject and a contemplated object radiating a force of attraction and contagion that inspires the rhythms and sounds from which the wondering speech is elaborated. Tomasula brings to light the interactions involved in the process of representation, the latter being influenced by the object which in its turn is modified by the speech delivered about it or by the image given of it.

In *IN&OZ*, the invisible world is built through language, understood in the larger sense of the term, including the language of clothes and style. Such is Designer's conviction:

True enough, her curvaceous fenders and hoods did mask the grotesque viscera of cars. But they did so in the way that an arty dress or designer eye-glasses were more of a language than an article of clothing or medical aide—a dominant language, the way French had once been the tongue of diplomacy, or Latin of conquest. If she wasn't giving desire form—and shaping the world by doing so—what exactly was she or any designer doing? (*IN* 17)

Language builds the world by fashioning the vision we have of it, thus imposing its frames upon the world and orienting it according to its points of view, as Photographer found out: "For a while, I took great joy in looking through the viewfinder, changing the world by the way it was framed" (*IN* 29). The other world, the fruit of imagination, emerges through fiction, which reveals, brings to light, makes visible.

The tone of Tomasula's wonder, resolutely turned toward human appreciation and perception, sheds light on the powers of writing as understood in the larger sense of creation, already illustrated by Tanner's texts of wonder under the pretense of celebrating virgin nature. Tanner underscores the modality of simulation proper to the writing of wonder as the narrating subject feigns to be a mere mediation and not to intervene upon his environment, the reign of illusion is maintained.

## The reign of wonder: Almighty writing

Contrasting with nineteenth-century realist writers whose narrative presences at times can be felt as intrusive, the erasure of narrative authority in wonder may seem to offer an avatar of a godly figure. But the writer-conjurer is the one who brings the landscape to light and allows the readers to immerse themselves into it. For instance, Tanner analyses the uses made by Mark Twain of coordinating conjunctions in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* to create the illusion that the character's thoughts are delivered as such. Yet much like stream-of-consciousness technique, artifice is at its utmost. The writer is responsible for the architecture of the text, its rhythms and its sounds, but in turn the author owes his power to writing's own resources, as distinct from those of the spoken word. Whereas writing may have seemed to be freezing semantic options, on the contrary it launches an interpreting dynamics anew, served by the possibility of returning to an earlier element in the text, of checking and anticipating, and finally of going to and fro in the book, concretely or virtually, through the workings of memory.

Such potentials are illustrated by the play on juxtapositions in *The Book of Portraiture*. The novel consists in a chronological succession of various forms of writing in the larger sense of self-expression: chapter one begins with the invention of writing in the desert, starting from mimetic signs traced in the sand; chapter two shows Velázquez's fictitious diary; chapter three presents the professional notebook of a psychoanalyst at the beginning of the twentieth century; chapter four focuses on a contemporary surveillance society in which all relationships are dematerialized; and chapter five compares a contemporary artist working in an American genetics laboratory in the United States and an Iraqi family hit by the war waged against their country by the United States.

At the scale of the book, in the absence of any transition from one chapter to another, discourses nevertheless seep into each other through the interplay of echoes. Irony also contributes to the interpenetration of discourses, relying as it does on anachronism—between the various chapters located in different ages—as well as on the reader's privileged stance, enjoying the temporal contextualization offered by the specific architecture of the novel. Thanks to a device of reflections and collage, Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*, evoked in the second chapter, is taken up in chapter four, set in contemporary American society. But there the Infanta's face has been replaced by that of the Japanese artist who hijacked the Spanish master's painting: a face crested by an Iroquois hairstyle on a

digital collage standing as heir to Velázquez's piece, into which the artist had already painted himself.<sup>4</sup>

The digital photograph stands as a reminder of the extent to which the power of the written text largely comes from its capacity of absorbing other media. The chronological progression of chapters, while introducing the game of anachronism, also exposes the artifice of written discourse together with the illusion of identification: the "I" in the text may well wander as far from the author's personality as allowed by the fertility and extent of the latter's imagination. Such creative distance suggests an autonomy of writing that would develop alone from the original idea, progressively fleshing out the created characters while being fed from them. All along the successive chapters, points-of-view keep multiplying while consciousness is represented with increased sophistication, thus conveying the developing complexity of communication and of relations in general between increasingly unstable subjects. Bits of sentences pass each other in chapter four, in which characters only receive a letter as a name. In the age of the proliferation of messages it becomes difficult to actually meet, as shown by the fragmentary, disconnected forms of discourse as well as the layout of the pages. Whether they are aware of it or not, the characters are fashioned by the type of society in which they live. Each and every one of us is the product of his or her times, expressing in speech or writing a given cultural moment. In writing especially, with its lasting power, there is something that exceeds the individual, an irrepressible trend conveying meaning outside the writer's intentions. The opening of *The Book* suggests as much:

Long before the heroes of martyrdom began to fade<sup>5</sup> from living memory, before monks (†430) discovered faith through the malleability of words, long before the heroes of psychiatry (1900) construed dreams as language, and almost four millennia before cows began to carry the genes of fish; before mile-high buildings collapsed into dust, or men and women everywhere proclaimed their bodies to be, after all, their most potent weapons, their poems, their canvas, something powerful had been straining to come into the world. Its silent efforts were there in the bloodstains aborigenes made on boulders—perfect prints of human hands-first portraits that were repeated and repeated and repeated as if out of the sheer awe that they *could* be repeated, and wonder at what

<sup>4</sup> Steve Tomasula, *The Book of Portraiture: A Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 162.

<sup>5</sup> The words forming this first sentence are written in increasingly smaller font, starting from the huge adverb "LONG" that takes up the whole line (*Book 1*).

that might mean. This something was there in cave paintings-stick figures wielding stick spears as if to shout *I! I was! I did!* Its silent efforts grew stronger in the ciphers that ancient Chinese scratched on tortoise shells, in the tally marks of Minoan merchants, in the runes destroyed by Assyrian armies, and in the clay tablets listing animals sacrificed by Sumerian priests. But not until these efforts began to gain a voice, emerging as it did from the symbols for fish and shields and owl in Egyptian hieroglyphics could this force. (*Book 3-4*)

The force of writing shows in the visual dimension of the page. For instance in chapter five the dual layout of the pages materializes the confrontation between enemies, in this case the Americans against the Iraqi people.<sup>6</sup>

The diversity of styles, as heightened by the juxtaposition of chapters referring to various times and belonging to various genres is fed by the diversity of typographical forms. For instance the antique letters in Velázquez's diary evoke the old-style handwriting of a manuscript, while the flesh color of the background and the brown one of the ink bring to mind sanguine paintings or sketches, or at least the natural materials once used for writing and painting. Gothic types, on the other hand, may well suggest order, if not violence (*Book 51*). Everything bears an effect in writing, and the apparently most neutral narrative, even the rough presentation of a dialogue, vigorously orient reception. Structures speak, as much as silences and blanks, as though under the thrust of some intrinsic force. In chapter four for instance, writing delivers the thoughts of characters who are no longer able to communicate directly, thus creating a subterranean world of sorts, in which the fate of the tangible world is determined. The most powerful forces remain invisible, as Q realizes:

Before shrapnel ever peppered Q-'s face, before her fingers had begun to go numb, before she'd ever joined the army, she'd seen how the most potent forces in the world were invisible. In fact, desk-jockeys like her, soldiers who operated computers not rifles, probably knew more about invisible forces than any VA doctor could imagine, the data and the tools she'd used to massage it an invisible force as potent as those that guide the path of an arrow, the planets in motion, that call down napalm fire on hostiles. Or not. (*Book 183*)

The anaphoric play on "before" and the taken up consonants "p" and to a lesser degree "d" and "t" endow the sentence with a specific rhythm that

<sup>6</sup> See Tomasula, *Book*, 288-289 or 320-321.

forcefully brings its meaning home to the reader. In such a disembodied universe, scanned by surveillance cameras, the materiality of writing comes out of the page to touch the reader's senses. The text stages the return of the body, through the sounds of the text that give it thickness and substance, or in the radically different context of power conflicts, in which the body becomes a weapon in the suicide terrorist attacks evoked in chapter five. In the same chapter the body also is used as an artistic medium, through the frozen blood statues produced by bioartist Mary.

In the works of the writers of wonder a single vision is imposed above all others, even if discreetly, via its opposite or in a suggestive, elliptical mode, thus leaving the reader some leeway. Tomasula creates an open system of instability, doubt and surprise, thanks to the multiplication of points of view presented as equal apparently, without any perceptible hierarchy. Favoring proliferation over the succession of the narrating subject's impressions, *VAS* for instance offers a multiple and fluctuating vision of identity, exemplified by Walt Whitman's "I contain multitudes" that stretches across the five vertical lines evoking a music score, with fragments of sentences being written on both sides, and lending themselves to various associations, which somewhat liken the reader's unpredictable course through *VAS* to his or her free trajectory in an electronic literary text.<sup>7</sup> A thorough reconsideration of the definition of experience is at stake in those texts of revelation, orchestrating the mysteries of fiction so as to arouse questions without providing any simple answers, inviting the readers to let themselves be carried along by the changing cadences of a perpetually mutating text.

Another type of relation is sought between writer and reader, whose judgment indeed is oriented but with much freedom left thanks to the many possibilities of play opened out by language. Fiction seems to offer the most favorable milieu to the development of continued collective creation through reading become an existential model.

### A universal reading community? Reconfiguring the subject

Of all of Tomasula's books, *VAS* is the one that most explicitly suggests such possible continued creation. Novelist Square has to undergo a vasectomy on his wife's request. Indeed she has been exhausted and shocked by two miscarriages and believes that now he should "take his turn."<sup>8</sup> Faced to this radical decision he is experiencing writer's block. This is the beginning of

<sup>7</sup> Tomasula, *VAS*, 298.

<sup>8</sup> Tomasula, *VAS*, 1.

a meditation on creation in all senses of the term. Having been deprived of his traditional landmarks or beacons by the exponential development of technology and the shaking of the limits between the natural and the artificial, Square is trying to decipher the signs around him, as well as on and in his body, in an atmosphere of confusion that seems to threaten human sovereignty.

God's image has been dethroned by the image of a self that can be reproduced *ad infinitum*, as hinted at by the advertisement showing a little girl holding a doll which looks very much like her (VAS 258). Genetic manipulation even offers the means of transforming the model itself and not only its image—and the numerous advertisements to be found throughout VAS, for plastic surgery or for genetic manipulations allowing choice in the eye and hair color of one's offspring suggest as much. Despite such exaltation of the self, no individual lives at the center of the worlds depicted in Tomasula's works, drowned as men are in the constantly growing flux of data. Such diffuse configuration is reflected in the narrative choices as well as in the structures of the work, promoting instability and discordance by largely resorting to the wide range of available media: comic book pages, scientific charts or tables, musical notation and a variety of typographical characters compete on the surface of the page, infusing it with changing dynamics and questioning any claim to a prominent viewpoint. Emerging parallels and cycles defuse any dominant stance as well as any hasty moral judgment. For instance racial cleansing policies existed in the United States before Nazi Germany. Despite the manipulation perceptible in the architecture of the text as well as the layout of objects on the pages, the author does not claim mastery over anything. The elaboration of meaning is collective. From the offered text the readers strike their own individual courses and much like Square, a hero who is deeply aware of his limitations, the readers have to decipher the signs surrounding them, weaving their way through the semantic, visual, and sonorous proliferation.

We all are readers, as VAS tends to show, blind and blinded to several degrees. The invasive question-form in the novel reflects confusion and doubt, often introduced through fragmentation and spacing, which break the unity of speech. Throughout the novel, mentions of iniquitous experimental practices on patients' bodies are followed by such ironical comments as "for the good of the patient," or "for the good of society." From one repetition to another, the reader's point of view keeps changing, according to an unpredictable trajectory proper to each reader and not offering the immediate reflection of the evolution of the text that yet stands at its origin. Thus reading may seem to offer a paradigm for an ideal human behavior: while leaving the world intact, it brings to light its inordinate wealth and

diversity via the multiplication of interpretations. The read text remains while its changing imaginary versions keep blooming, contributing to the reader's maturation process through his opening to the other. Such sharing of identities is described by Jean-Luc Nancy in *An Inoperative Community* (*La Communauté désœuvrée*):

I cannot find *myself*, nor recognize *myself* in the other: in the other or of the other I experience the otherness and "othering" which "in myself" sets out my singularity while infinitely achieving it. The community is the singular ontological condition in which the other and the same are kin: in other words the sharing of identity.<sup>9</sup>

From an identification phenomenon and through the play of imaginary projections, reading contributes to the elaboration of the reader's identity. Against sterile repetition or a continued status quo, the vital practice of reading allows readers to assimilate and transform the elements necessary to the development of their minds and bodies.

By essence creative, reading meets writing in the behavior that the reader of Tomasula's work is encouraged to adopt, a behavior recalling American writer Paul West's description his mother, a pianist, as being able to put as much *gusto* into playing Beethoven as in cooking soup (*Mother's Music*).<sup>10</sup> Not only through the forms of creation yielding tangible products but through reading too, and not necessarily to a lesser degree but according to different modalities, individuals take part in defining what being human is, if one is to follow Emmanuel Lévinas when he sees in the human character the continued invention of a demand, an ideally responsible prospect kept up by man in the awareness of each and any one of us' duty toward others and the whole of humankind. The human would be "such being as it matters anyway"<sup>11</sup> according to Giorgio Agamben's definition of the "characterless singularity," that is "determined only through its relation to an *idea* that is the totality of its possibilities."<sup>12</sup>

In the moment of suspension offered by reading man escapes both the categories and demands of society and yet he is put face to face to his kin, sharing the same fundamental needs and the same fears. Looming above the horizon of reading, a potential, ever-shifting community appears, protected by no savior, and relying on itself alone for its perpetuation, each member

<sup>9</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *La Communauté désœuvrée* (Paris: Bourgois, 1986), 83–84, my translation.

<sup>10</sup> Paul West, *Mother's Music* (New York: Viking, 1996), 189–190.

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *L'Humanisme de l'autre homme* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1972), 9.

<sup>12</sup> Lévinas, *L'Humanisme de*, 68.

yielding to the other that part of himself “that in poetry one gives up to the other” as Edouard Glissant writes about the process of translation.<sup>13</sup> I would argue that a similar giving away occurs in reading, also opening onto a “language of sharing [...] which is the very mode of grazing thought through which we keep recomposing the landscapes of the world.”<sup>14</sup>

Recomposing landscapes certainly is part of what Tomasula’s work does, by constantly offering new visions and propositions for readers to gather around and adhere to, assembled by the links of reading.<sup>15</sup>

## Conclusion

After the postmodern era Tomasula offers his readers the refreshing vision of a trusting work, carrying hope but with no illusions, celebrating the prodigies of human inventiveness while humorously exposing its perverse effects and its dangers. Should his work be viewed as the expression of a new, atheistic and reasoned form of transcendentalism, whose impulse would have been moderated by over one century of wars and destruction? I would rather see in Tomasula’s work, twenty-first-century version of Humanism, a clear-sighted vision relying on the strength of a continued faith in people despite a sometimes bitter clairvoyance. The thought-provoking aesthetics of his work are likely to arouse in readers an intense curiosity indefectibly bound to the respect of otherness, and a propensity to cultivate humility in the acute awareness of our finitude.

<sup>13</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), 46 (my translation).

<sup>14</sup> Glissant writes of this language: “langue de partage...[qui] est la pensée même de l’effleurement, ... par quoi nous recomposons les paysages du monde.” Glissant, *Introduction*, 46.

<sup>15</sup> Such links are present in the etymology of “reading” through the Latin verb *legere*.