Labyrinths of Desire and Loitering (into) Literature: On Reading Theory — and Loïc Chotard’s *Tiers Monde*

...individualisme et l’art de vivre sont depuis toujours les adversaires du fascisme. L’art de vivre est l’invention d’une micropolitique qui n’abandonne pas la politique à ceux qui représentent l’État ou tout autre instance souveraine ou prétendent s’y substituer. Micropolitique parce que c’est aussi au niveau minuscule et quotidien que peut surgir l’horreur. (Schmidt 37)

On pourrait faire une histoire des limites — de ces gestes obscurs, nécessairement oubliés dès qu’accomplies, par lesquels une culture rejette quelque chose qui sera pour elle l’extérieur; et tout au long de son histoire, ce vide creusé, cet espace blanc par lequel elle s’isole la désigne tout autant que ses valeurs. (Foucault 161)

One of the main problems encountered — and encountered almost daily — by all professional readers, be they / we academics, literary critics, journalists, commissioning editors, or whatever, is how to read. How do we do it? To what extent are we conditioned and even constructed as readers by the market forces that, we are told, govern all publishing decisions? However, what are these "market forces" and who decides them? Publishers, of course, usually speak of commercial forces as if the demands of a capitalist economy were somehow inevitable-because-natural, and as socialism in France, in the UK, and indeed throughout Europe drifts insidiously but ever more rapidly towards the right and as the power mechanisms of capitalism consequently become increasingly

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1 In her lucid and punchy analysis of the implications of the forthcoming UK government-sponsored assessment of research in the universities (in 1996), commissioning editor Anita Röy laments the decline of the academic monograph, but suggests that "academic value and commercial value are not necessarily opposing forces" (21; my emphasis). Her hope for a research culture in which the relationship between publishers and academics is a genuinely symbiotic one is, however, destined to remain a Utopian dream for as long as the UK government sees the process(es) of education mainly in terms of a market-led economy.

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invisible, the oppositional potential of literature is reduced or at least contained. To a great extent, this control is effected by a refusal to publish works which pose a threat to the dominant political and / or moral ideology (in other words, censorship — which is more widespread “even” in the West than is generally recognized, whether this censorship is operated by governments or by religious groups) or by the relegation of works to publication by small, “specialist” houses, this being a form of censorship through marginalization — and through the consequent restriction of distribution outlets.

However, as readers we are equally and at all times constructed not only by the availability and promotion of published material but also by (or possibly, even especially, against) prevailing cultural presuppositions, of which the most powerful are the modes of reading that are permitted and / or privileged by such institutions as the State, the Church, and the Academy. Not only must we ask what exactly constitutes a literary work, but also how subjective we can (allow ourselves to) be in our readings. However, the critical question remains: why read fiction? For pleasure, whatever that may be, to pass the time of waiting as Beckett’s characters suggest, or for some other reason? And why bother with an activity that can be difficult and that has no immediate evident economic return?

Ross Chambers’s work, notably in Room for Maneuver, is particularly important in this regard, for it interrogates the nature of reading, be it personal, communal or institutional(ized), reminding us forcefully that it is impossible to read innocently, just as it is impossible to write innocently — and that forces to which we are oblivious and determine even those processes of reading or writing that appear to be most objective. Chambers’s analysis of the functioning and expression of oppositionality fulfills an urgent political role, arguing crucially that because it is counter-repressive, reading is a matter of self-education (xvii). His work thus encourages, even obliges us to read differently. Furthermore, not only his theoretical position but also his critical practice, in Room and elsewhere, of choosing for consideration texts that are both canonical and non-canonical, mainstream literary and generically marginal, urge us to read other works than we would normally read, since Chambers advocates a suspension of traditional literary judgments in favor of an attention to the oppositional operations and to the cultural operability of “minor” texts — which do perhaps more significant things than they say.

Chambers’s project is double, creatively duplicitous, as is revealed by Room’s subtitle Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative, which stages what might be called its own internal oppositionality through its use of parentheses. Rather than reading the double subtitle as a form of Derridean writing under erasure, I read it, speculatively more as an example of the Mallarméan notion and operation of “pli selon pli,” whereby an infinite folding and unfolding of experience leads to (an ever new reading of) the ever-present / ever-absent Book. It is certainly not my intention to make of Chambers (to read him into) a late-19th Mallarméan idealist, but the subtitle itself already enacts the movement of constant folding-in and unfolding, of enveloping and developing that will be examined in a book which situates the dialectical (necessarily, perhaps, without Aufhebung) as the essence of reading.

It is, of course, evident that Chambers’s project of re-reading reading involves a politicization not only of the everyday but also of the aesthetic as a social(ized) category. For this reason, he (re)defines opposition as follows:

Opposition is most generally an involuntary and unexamined response to structures that, although alienating, are not themselves perceived, in “loose” societies, to be other than normal.... Opposition ... has the structure of “hypocrisy” — or, to modernize the concept, of the “presentation of self in everyday life.” ... Duplicity is its essential characteristic. (1991, 8-9)

Duplicity may be conscious and explicit in order to permit it to be exploited for specific oppositional purposes, as when, in a post-Foucauldian mode, Chambers highlights the tension between his assertions that reading is a technology of the self that is fostered in western social structures and that it is also a technology that denies the self as an autonomous entity (xvii, 251-52). However, there is another, less visible duplicity in Room, one which is nonetheless particularly useful for any serious reading of such apparently gay texts as Chotard’s Tiers Monde: the underpinning chain of intertwined references (or, more accurately perhaps, the labyrinthine overlapping of explicit and implicit, conscious and unconscious allusions) to the theories of desire of Foucault and those of Deleuze and Guattari. In his conclusion, Chambers argues that “desire is not anchored in the ‘self’ but instead produces subjects,” desiring subjects who are (only) “agents through whom change occurs, the site of its occurrence” (253). Here, as elsewhere, the thinking of Foucault and that of Deleuze and Guattari are not so much grafted onto one another, but conflated — folded in, over, through, and around each other to form a labyrinth of thought. This labyrinth, though, is not a maze from which there is only one exit which is, indeed, its ludic purpose and definition, but a labyrinth in the sense defined by Deleuze in Le Pli: “Un labyrinthe est dit multiple, étymologiquement, parce qu’il a beaucoup de plis. Le multiple, ce n’est pas seulement ce qui a beaucoup de parties, mais ce qui est plié de beaucoup de façons” (5).

In their radical, anti-psychanalytic examination of the construction and functioning of desire in a capitalist society, Deleuze and Guattari assert that desire should not be seen as the object of desire, since this would entail locating the reality of desire in “une essence de manque” (33), whereas
they see desire in "industrial" terms: "Tout fait machine.... Partout des machines productrices ou désirantes, les machines oniriques, toute la vie générique: moi et non-moi, extérieur et intérieur ne veulent plus rien dire" (8); "Si le désir produit, il produit le réel. Si le désir est producteur, il ne peut l'être qu'en réalité, et de réalité" (34). Desiring machines are constantly (capable of) "coupling" with each other: each individual's machine can endlessly and infinitely plug into and unplug from parts of another's machine in a universal fragmentation — and seizing up or running down — of desire: "Les machines désirantes ne marchent que débrouillées, en se détrayant sans cesse" (14).

While it is now generally recognized (even by psychoanalysts such as Lacan) that the forms of desire are socially constructed, Deleuze and Guattari's notion that there is no given or natural "self" but only what Weeks calls "the cacophony of desiring machines" (31) provided the homosexual theorist and activist Guy Hoquetnghem with the theoretical base for his *Homosexual Desire*. Following Deleuze and Guattari, he views desire as "the plugging in of organs subject to no rule or law" and sees the world of Oedipal sexuality as "deprived of a free plugging in of organs, of the relations of direct pleasure" (95). However, he chooses to literalize their essentially theoretical argument, and his contention that the mechanical scattering of the homosexual pick-up machine corresponds to the mode of existence of desire itself (132), is to be read in the context of homosexual ("everyday") practices of cruising, as well as in the context of a political and philosophical meditation on the status of a (the) privatized and sublimated anus. While Hoquetnghem is acutely aware that homosexual desire is in essence no different from heterosexual desire, being merely "an arbitrary division of the flux of desire, an 'arbitrarily frozen frame' in an unbroken and polyvalent flux" (Weeks 35), he nonetheless advocates and hymns specifically homosexual promiscuity, since, when it is freed from guilt, it not only represents what might be described in socio-psycho-philosophical terms as the essence of desire but also offers a model of revolutionary potential.

Hoquetnghem's work is partial (in both senses of the term), yet this very partiality is another creative form of duplicity. While he denies that there is a specificity to homosexual desire, he also claims — in both a "straight" and an ironic way — that "homosexual love is immensely superior precisely because everything is possible at any moment: organs look for each other and plug in, unaware of the law of exclusive disjunction" (131; my emphases). Furthermore, he assumes and states explicitly that homosexual encounters do not take place in domestic settings but outside, in the open air (131). The assumption may have a certain empirical justification, but it has, above all, a political necessity for Hoquetnghem: in the associative sleight of hand he subsequently operates, in the intellectual "hand-job" he gives them, he engages in a "serious" cruising of Deleuze and Guattari, insofar as they are the authors of *L'Anti-Oedipe*. Both at the beginning and at the end of Hoquetnghem's *Homosexual Desire* (and indeed, I would argue, of all his writings, both fictional and non-fictional) lies an essentially humanist preoccupation with communication. His relationship with his selected (or self-selecting?) "jocks" is thus perhaps best understood as a function of his compulsion to make sense within the labyrinth, hence the overlapping of codes — which only the non-committed but wanting-to-commit reader can see without striving to decode them into entropy.

Foucault's major work on sexuality began to be published four years after Hoquetnghem's *Homosexual Desire*, but his close intellectual relationship with Deleuze and, especially, his admiration for *L'Anti-Oedipe* had a profound effect on his thinking, and illuminate for the late-come reader his constructionist perceptions which now inform almost all thoughtful readings of gay fiction and homosexual theory. However, just as Deleuze's philosophy exerts a labyrinthine subterranean influence on Foucault's later work, from the early 1960s onwards Foucault's thinking is folded (incorporated, wrapped up, preserved, hidden) into Deleuze's thinking, albeit sometimes in an oppositional way. For this reason, before plunging into Foucault's late thinking on gayness, I would like to begin to unpack, to unfold the Deleuze / Foucault axis that underpins much recent thinking on sexual and gender identity, an axis that is much less unilinear or solid than it tends to be seen or constructed in many readings of sexualizing texts. In "Désir et plaisir," Deleuze reveals that in the course of their last meeting, Foucault told him that he could not bear the word "désir," because it was equivalent to "manque" and synonymous with repression, but suggested that perhaps his concept of pleasure was identical to Deleuze's concept of desire. However, as he makes very clear, for Deleuze desire involves no lack, being

3 Hoquetnghem concludes his book with a statement that both looks "back" to the (occasionally — and, indeed, wittily — rebarbate) discourse of his mentors or "masters" (who are also his "jocks") and also implicitly looks "forward" to a time when his program will be (rewritten, reformulated and repositioned by someone else: "Grouped homosexual desire transcends the confrontation between the individual and society by which the molar ensures its domination over the molecular. It is the slope towards transsexuality through the disappearance of objects and subjects, a slide towards the discovery that in matters of sex everything is simply communication" (150).

4 *La Volonté de savoir*, the introduction to his *Histoire de la sexualité* was published in 1976, the second and third volumes, *L'Usage des plaisirs* and *Le Savoir de soi* in 1984.

5 My anti-logical and discursively fragmentational use here of metaphors from different fields which challenge the coherence and value of each other's semantic field is a function and a (tentative) mark of my indebtedness to Deleuze's radical yet rigorous work on language, and especially to the liberation both from and into language that *The Pli* offered me.

6 This text is a series of notes that Deleuze wrote in 1977 for Foucault in response to the publication of *La Volonté de savoir* and essentially out of friendship for Foucault, who had been shaken by the hostile and uncomprehending response to his book. The notes, which chart the divergences and convergences between the two thinkers in a spirit of fraternal exchange and confidence, were given to François Ewald for transmission to Foucault — who did not respond. They had never been published before their appearance in *Magazine littéraire*. 
rather a process, an event, and he regards pleasure as having no positive value, because it interrupts the immanent process of desire; indeed, the reason why he is so interested in Masoch is not because of the detailing of pain, but because he finds in Masoch's work the idea that "le plaisir vient interrompre la positivité du désir et la constitution de son champ d'immanence" (1994, 63-64).

The opposition between desire and pleasure which Deleuze establishes and on which he insists is of particular pertinence to the psycho-sociology of gayness and to queer theory in general, since it challenges the notion that any sexuality (heterosexual, homosexual, lesbian, or whatever) has specificity, without falling into the trap of the hydraulic theory of sexuality that over-privileges sublimation. Furthermore, it theorizes — and theorizes as and potentially into practice — the productive nature of desire as process and affect, rather than claiming, as do many gay activists, that the right to free sexual expression is the essential issue.

Foucault's position is very different, and indeed, in a 1983 interview he explicitly rejected the suggestion that he might share Deleuze's notion of desire (see Foucault 445). The historical aspect of his analysis of the societal construction of sexuality and the thoughtful nature of his (con)textualizing inscription of sexuality in the ethical domain of "le souci se soi" and technologies of the self in *Histoire de la sexualité* have understandably led to his adoption as an authority or guru for much contemporary sexualological thinking, but his radical yet careful responses in late interviews to questions about gay practices offer insights onto the present and future of (homo)sexual behaviour that are potentially even more importantly programmatic. In a 1981 interview for the journal *Le Gai Pied*, for example, he distinguishes between (his own conceptions of) desire and pleasure, asserting:

> Ce à quoi nous devons travailler, me semble-t-il, ce n’est pas tellement à libérer nos désirs, mais à nous rendre nous-mêmes infiniment susceptibles de plaisirs. Il faut et il faut faire échapper aux deux formules toutes faîtes de la pure rencontre et de la fusion amoureuse des identités. (165)

Foucault's notion of pleasure is, of course, not a simply hedonistic one, since in the case of homosexual pleasure, it represents a going beyond of the western Christian ban on homosexuality (329), and thus offers the possibility of creating new "modes de vie," which are not defined only in terms of sexual choice. Indeed, in a 1982 interview, he corrects the statement "il faut s'acharnier à être homosexuel" that he made in the 1981 *Gai Pied* article (163), because he has realized that what is important is not so much the acceptance of one's sexual orientation as the constant development and exploration of sexual and societal identities: "il faut user de la sexualité pour découvrir, inventer de nouvelles relations. Être gay, c'est être en devenir et ... il ne faut pas être homosexuel mais s'acharnier à être gay." (295).

Paradoxically, one of the main problems experienced is not the difficulty but the facility with which homosexual men can meet and have sex: society's ban having driven them out of the privacy of domestic settings and onto the streets and beaches, they have exchanged civility for anonymity and conversation for silent touchings. As Foucault puts it: "C'est parce que l'acte sexual est devenu si facile et si accessible aux homosexuels qu'il court le risque de devenir rapidement ennuyeux; aussi fait-on tout ce qu'il est possible pour innover et introduire des plaisirs qui intensifient le plaisir de l'acte" (331).

For Hocquenghem, the homosexual pick-up machine should be regarded positively, as that which represents a model for anti-capitalist behaviour, and behind his privileging of gay cruising lies the notion of "la promenade du schizophrène" (Deleuze et Guattari 7; my emphasis), which is central to *L'Anti-Oedipe*. However, he is aware that the homosexual condition can also be experienced as unhappy "because its mechanical scattering is translated as absence and substitution" (Hocquenghem 131). The association of cruising with the homosexual condition that is theorized and politicized by Hocquenghem and, to a lesser extent, by Foucault has led to cruising being seen almost as a definition of gayness (this notion has been furthered by much gay pornography), but "serious" writers are increasingly using literal and metaphorical cruising as what might be described as the thematic and structural "marginalizing centre" of their works: two important examples are Alan Hollinghurst's *The Swimming-Pool Library* and Renaud Camus's *Tricks*.7

A recent and fascinating addition to the genre is *Tiers Monde*, a first novel written by a young writer, Loïc Chotard. The story of Gérard who leaves his home town of Val-Maubée in Picardy to go to Paris, it is a kind of anti-*Bildungsroman*, in which Gérard learns nothing except how to cruise well. Composed of thirty-two short sequences, it charts the progress of Gérard in and around Paris, especially in the shopping malls of Montparnasse and the Forum des Halles and in the Tuileries, but he neither arrives anywhere nor even looks for a destination: he is a "flâneur," an inveterate cruiser whose life is determined by the impulses of a desire that he does not really understand, a life which, in fact, contains virtually no moments of pleasure — because Gérard has no real conception of what pleasure is. We are told that Gérard is extremely attractive, although no details, no physical descriptions are given, he has no perceptible personality, and is presented in the programmatic opening two pages as emotionally and experientially passive and as decidedly anti-heroic:

> Depuis toujours, Gérard est le même. Il a beaucoup appris au hasard des épisodes, certes ... cependant il demeure essentiellement identique à lui-même, immobile et constant. C'est

7 For analyses of gayness and theory in these novels, see respectively Chambers 1993 and Worton 1994.
un galet rond et poli par les autres galets, roule par le flux, mais qui ne quitte jamais sa plage, témoin des époques préhistoriques. C’est pourquoi Gérard est decevant: tout en lui a tendance à retourner à l’origine, à l’indistinction originelle — pour tout dire: à la vulgarité. (10)

_Tiers Monde_ presents a character of monstrous but wholly unconscious selfishness who almost never pays for his meals, scrounging parasitically off friends or acquaintances, whom he then invariably abandons at the end of his meal to chat with other people or to go cruising in the pre-AIDS Paris of about ten years ago. Indifferent to the fact that he often serves as a sex-object (of desire), he leads a life which has no moral or even geographic centre. Of one thing only is he certain: "Il a le bon de se faire désirer" (45). For Gérard, this knowledge is a simple given and brings with it neither social expectations nor moral obligations. Desire for him is something which is essentially experienced by others and which is interesting for him only insofar as he is a voyeur noting from "outside" the scene of seduction and the effect he has on others: "Il ne se voulait que spectateur, mais, avant tout, spectateur du désir qu’il faisait naître" (30). On the rare occasions that he himself actually experiences desire, it either takes total possession of him, freezing his judgment and his powers of reasoning (22-23), or floods him with "une sorte de confusion" that deprives him of autonomy and self-volition (94). He does, nonetheless, occasionally reflect on his encounters and their role in his life, but even then his response is at best defensive: "Pour lui, il n’est ni dépravé ni marginal: il se comporte d’instinct. Il n’y a qu’une différence de quantité à ses yeux entre l’amour et une passe — et pas de différence du tout entre un Berbère et un employé de banque" (73-74). Obvious to all issues of qualitative differences in emotional or physical relationships, he thinks — and feels — only in terms of quantity (or quantities). As such, he is clearly a child of market forces, a product of capitalism, a merchandise and a dealer, embodying the functionality of a market economy — although, as we shall see later, his own relationship to work is less than totally convincing in Reaganite or Thatcherite terms!

The novel takes the form of sequences which are organized in a non-linear way and often without narrative linking or historically logical explanation; characters appear with no justification and sometimes disappear with even less justification; psychological realism is ignored, if not deliberately flouted; and phrase piles repetitively upon phrase, image upon image, in an accumulation of textual matter that makes the book seem apparently worthless unless or until it has a key. However, the question of its literary quality is perhaps less important and less urgent than the question of what kind of novel it is — and of why we should (bother to) read it. As so often with texts written in the postmodern West, the means (or, more accurately, _a_ means — and a crucially _productive_ means) of reading it usefully, operatively, is offered by the paratext, by the supplement of a (post) terminal "Note" written by Chotard. While this note has a "visible" marginal status and will generally be read by very few readers, it, nonetheless, offers a key to situating the novel in the tradition that Chambers calls the tradition of "loiature," since the revelation that each of the sequences is based on the personal experiences the author shared with the thirty-two named men (who are named _belatedly_ at the end of the book — as the dedicaties of the novel), has to be read in conjunction with the episodic expressions within the novel itself of anxiety as to its worth as a _récit_ and indeed the worth of all literary telling.

_Tiers Monde_ is a problematic text, in that it is a novel which does not correspond or subscribe to the normative criteria of the modern French novel (its construction is aleatory in a less "voulu" way and it is not always well-written by traditional standards of style), but it is also a novel which — creatively — both performs and repeatedly proclaims its own failure: "Il n’y a pas d’histoire de Gérard, pas d’intrigue ni de coup de théâtre... C’est la vie de Gérard, et il n’y a rien à en dire, cette succession de scènes, de paroles, dans les rues, dans les chambres" (40-41; for further statements expressing similar dissatisfaction with the novel and the value of writing, see 66-67, 75, 119). _Tiers Monde_ therefore poses for the reader not the simple question of whether it is readable or not, but the politically more urgent question of what reading is (about). It is also a text which _demandait_ attention, because its very "failures" are bound up with a presupposition (inscribed by the author and thereafter, crucially, assumed by his programmed and institutionalized reader) that "literature" operates a powerful effect on everyday life through its ability to "reveal" ontological or at least socio-political truths and that reference (back) to literature legitimizes all text(ualizing) by inscribing it into an approved cultural continuum.

Haunting Chotard’s novel is a dominant shadow, the shadow of Baudelaire, especially the Baudelaire of urban modernity in the late prose poems, _Le Spleen de Paris_ and in _Le peintre de la vie moderne_, the poet who is never named but whose phrases and poetic images abound in and (pre)form Chotard’s discourse: the Montparnasse shopping centre is now the "temple" which Nature was in _Correspondances_ (15), Gérard suffers anachronistically from "le spleen du stagiaire" (23), and both he and his anti-mentor, the Polish actor Ugo, are repeatedly described as "étrangers," not only in the sense of foreigners or 8 Chotard makes of his final "Note" both a traditional "Acknowledgement" and a personal and political statement of loss, writing, after his listing of the 32 people who made his novel possible because they were / had been "there": "Beaucoup d’entre eux demeurent heureusement d’irremplaçables amis, quelques-uns se sont éloignés, trois au moins ont quitté cette existence — mais tous sont rassemblés ici au nom d’une profonde fidélité" (247). The (post-para-)textual allusion to the AIDS-related deaths of Chotard’s friends and _models_ cannot but draw the reader (in)to a re-casting of his / her understanding of the contrast between reader and text, since the real is now textually included — and thereby made unavoidable.
outsiders, but in the metaphysical and anti-familial sense proposed by Baudelaire in "L'étranger," the poem that opens Le Spleen de Paris. Furthermore, the many references to crowds that stud the text recall "Les Foules," where Baudelaire writes: "Il n’est pas donné à chacun de prendre un bain de multitude: jouir de la foule est un art.... Ce que les hommes nomment amour est bien petit, bien restreint et bien faible, comparé à cette infinie orgie, à cette sainte prostitution de l’âme qui se donne toute entière, poésie et charité, à l’imprévu qui se montre, à l’inconnu qui passe" (1: 291). In his novel, Chotard often literalizes Baudelairean metaphors or, more precisely, he banalizes them. Thus, the "sainte prostitution" of the poetic soul becomes the cruising of a young man who does not even "work" as a rent-boy, merely taking money or accepting gifts and meals if he happens to be in need of them at the time.

Like Baudelaire's "étranger," Gérard neither has friends nor really understands the concept of friendship; he is an "habitué des foules" (97), at ease only when he is wandering through the crowded streets and malls of the city: "Les foules lui appartiennent un sentiment d’aise" (77). The only coherence offered to his life is furnished by chronology, by the passing of time, by the sequence of one encounter after another. Trapped in a perpetual present with no real sense of temporal referents or of either a past life or a life to come, he is indeed "disappointing," because of his refusal to intervene, to commit himself to anything. His preferred mode of life is one of drifting, in which all he does is "traîner, regarder ce qui passe et se laisser aller" (63), and although he initially takes some pleasure in the gay bonding effected in the malls by the exchange between adolescents of cassettes, clothes, even address books and descriptions of conquests, he is essentially a solitary being, "happy" only when he is wandering or loitering without intent: "Les erreurs de Gérard dans la ville n’avaient aucun but précis, ou du moins qu’il sût positivement désigner. Il lui fallait toujours sortir, et marcher" (184). A nomad with no destination, a walker with no place (see de Certeau 103), he can be seen as a postmodern "flâneur" who goes botanizing on the asphalt" (Benjamin 1983, 36). He is a sexualized flâneur, who, like his nineteenth century precursor, breaks through his own isolation only by filling the hollow space created in him by such isolation with the borrowed — and fictitious — isolation of strangers" (58).

If Gérard needs the crowds, it is because he has no emotional centre and no notion of what (his) desire is and, therefore, needs to fill his time and his life with encounters that will give him the illusion of Dasein, of being (there), of being-in-the-world. A moneyless window-shopper, who scans the shifting reflections in the windows rather than the objects contained behind them, he is at home in what Anne Friedberg calls the "privatized space" of the malls (421), but he himself rapidly becomes (perceived as) a mechanism: his strolling marks him out as a carnal commodity, just as the women who strolled alone through the Parisian arcades in the nineteenth century were marked out as "professional" street-walkers. The malls are attractive to him, because they are abstracted from the reality of the "real" outside world, where things happen because people make decisions, whereas the mall "envelops a passive subject within an illusionary realm" (Friedberg 424). Funded by his occasional casual work as a barman or a door-to-door distributor of publicity tracts and by the hand-outs of his acquaintances, Gérard leads a postmodern life which can be seen as an inversion or, at least, a displacement of that of the gentleman of leisure, who, as Benjamin points out, does not have a fundamentally anti-social role, and who, in order to become a true flâneur, must assume his / an alienation: "the man of leisure can indulge in the perambulations of the flâneur only if such as he is already out of place. He is as much out of place in an atmosphere of complete leisure as in the feverish turmoil of the city" (Benjamin 1969, 172-73).

Gérard is clearly sufficiently alienated from both the society of capitalism and the society of the family to become, and to operate as, a flâneur, particularly since his wanderings and even his gazings occur in a state of distraction: although his wanderings and loiterings take place in shopping centres that are concrete representations of a capitalist economy, his (narratively) functional marginality is made possible by his indifference not so much to the merchandising on sale as to the very operation of financial exchange, of buying and selling. He operates within the mall and its materialistic presuppositions, yet is also constantly outside its financial metaphoricity, whilst being within its materiality. William Kowitzki has proposed, persuasively using a Coleridgean metaphor, that "the mall concentrates drama, suspends disbelief" (62). The physical reality of a mall is not unlike that of a theatre with its wings, flies, and green ("back") rooms, and both venues have as their purpose the attraction of people into a space of illusion, a space where illusion is the reality. The theatricality of Gérard’s life in the mall as presented by Chotard is frequently reminiscent of Baudelaire’s description in "Le peintre de la vie moderne," his essay on the artist, Constantin Guys, of the modern man who plunges into the crowd and can be compared "à un miroir aussi immense que cette foule; à un kaleidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple.... C’est un moi insatiable du non-moi, qui, à chaque instant le rend et l’exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instable et fugitive" (2: 692; Baudelaire’s emphases). The multifold nature of Baudelaire’s vision of the kaleidoscopically-seeing flâneur or man of the crowd(s), who experiences the "shock of the new" in his plunges into that which is both foreign and strangely, illicitly, impossibly-but (maybe)-necessarily maternal, finds an unfolding in the...

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9 As Susan Buck-Morss suggests, such women were not only objects for sexual consumption by clients but also the objects of a voyeuristic consumption by the flâneur or the Baudelaian poet, whose mobilized gaze was as exploitative as that of those who bought a prostitute’s services.
inescapable echo, in the modern — and pessimistic — variation effected by Chotard in his choice of the metaphor of moving images, wherein he reiterates the failure of his novel within the process of writing it: "Scènes, séquences, flashes, comme une vie au stroboscope, qui fixe en tableaux des moments, sans que jamais, jamais il soit possible de reconstituer, d'imager même, ce qui était advenu, peut-être, entre deux éclairs, si rapprochés fussent-ils" (80; my emphasis).

Chotard's conception of the mall and of Gérard's flânerie is undoubtedly (post-)Baudelairian, but he adds a dimension that, seemingly only episodic and realistic, can pass unnoticed. This detail is, nonetheless, crucial to an understanding of Gérard's (and the entire novel's) relation to the problematics of desire. After describing the mall as a temple, Chotard briefly describes the carpet over which everyone walks without noticing it: "Sur les moquettes à grands motifs géométriques, les pas glissent doucement. Le labyrinthe est figuré au sol, mais l'espace reste grand ouvert" (15). A realist detail and no more? Perhaps, or ... surely not. The novel's own unfolding envelopes, hides or forgets, this detail for a while, but its full cultural and intertextual sense comes into operativity later when Gérard's cruising begins to be analyzed. Discovering, like Ugo, that many of his conquests have the same name, Gérard has to come to terms with the inevitable need to establish a gay — albeit hardly gayly — subversive variation of the Don Juan-esque catalogue: "En se pliant à la loi des nombres, il accepte d'inscrire la trame du temps dans la trame immatérielle de ses jours. Qu'il le veuille ou non, un catalogue s'inaugure" (50; my emphases). His bowing to, his acquiescent (self-)folding into, the labyrinthine complexities of desire as a capitalist répertoire is incorporated by Chotard into a tradition that is literary even more than it is psycho-sociological. In one of his cruising excursions to the Forum des Halles, Gérard meets a young man whom he vaguely cruises or is cruised by, but when he shows reluctance to go any further, the young man asks him to say simply that he doesn't want to have sex with him, that he doesn't desire him. Gérard's response is revelatory, albeit only for a semantically sophisticated (and cynical) audience: "Il ne s'agit pas de vouloir ou de ne pas vouloir. Je n'ai pas envie" (128). Gérard has no (sense of) desire; he reacts only in function of — and as a capitalistic function of — the better-focused desire of others. However, his existence is in essence a novelistic one, no matter how urgently Chotard's "Note" may claim referentiality for him. And this is why Tiers Monde interests me; a novel which has an indisputable historicosociological value in its tracings of non-centred desire in Paris of the 1980s, it presupposes and articulates, it depends upon, the desire of the reader to respond, to make of reading an activity that is both retrospective and proactive. The reader of Tiers Monde, I would argue, has to be a "jock": whether male or female, gay or straight, this reader will be a textual detective as well as a textually constructed odalisque, seeking information as insistently as she seeks textual pleasure.

Chotard's reader cannot but be a worker, a quester for a meaning to this novel which is both "prenant" and "détachant," in that it calls or seduces the reader into complicity with its apparent capitalist ideology, in order then to contest the functionality of any and every ideology. What remains performatively in, and so what justifies, every authentically attentive reading is an awareness of the non-capitalistic power of literature and intertextuality. The Montparnasse carpet is a key to the novel or, at any rate, a key to reading it. Unnoticed by Gérard and by the other flâneurs, be they shoppers, rent-boys, or other dispossessed inhabitants of the postmodern city, the carpet has a pattern. Its labyrinthine pattern is as visible as the goods on show in the window, but the carpet is not seen — because it is underfoot, because it has no place in capitalist psycho-economies and no evident commercial or exchange value for those who frequent the mall. Yet the novelist or, rather, the "loiterateur" who is Chotard and his narrative voice, sees it and so later notes about Gérard's desperate mall-cruising: "Que cherche-t-il? Le sait-il même: Il n'y a que les pas qui comptent, pas les pèlerins, pas même le chemin" (50-51). This explicit but unique reference to pilgrims is inscribed into the novel's sustained sequence of references to footsteps, but it appears once only, and no allusion is subsequently made to pilgrims or labyrinths. How important then is this allusion? Perhaps essential — because its position and its "passing" or episodic status illuminate and contextualize the narration of Gérard's errance and his non-centred search for a centre within a tradition of "loiterature." Chotard's "buried" novelistic reference here is none-the-less to a reality, to a referent which is particularly and importantly French, to a "theatricalized" place that is / was also a European centre for spirituality and the socialized yearn for actualizations of spirituality: the maze set into the floor of the Chartres cathedral, over which tourists and even pilgrims walk without noticing it, since it is beneath them. But the Chartres maze is a model, the (iconographic, ideological, and narratological) model, for the Montparnasse carpet described in Tiers Monde, since its function was to permit pilgrims to effect an ecclesiastically sanctioned pilgrimage to Jerusalem "at second hand," when they could not, for family, financial, physical, or other reasons, actually undertake the journey to the Holy Land that would, they believed, save their souls. These surrogate pilgrims would thus, crawling on their knees, carried by others or advancing slowly on foot, follow the convolutions of the Chartres maze, passing the time of their progress through the maze with prayers and thereby trans-forming an act of physical mimetism, of substitutional piety into a true act of faith. After all, the maze was built into the floor of the cathedral in order to permit (especially poor) Christian believers to enact — and with some physical suffering — the pilgrimage that would, they thought, buy them salvation.
— or, at least, a better chance at it. In other words, the maze was and is a cipher of the capitalistic, indeed of the simonistic, nature of desire within society.

Chotard’s reader is from early on in the novel programmed to ask what exactly Gérard’s desire is or does, but the novel’s narration never furnishes a sufficient answer, and in this respect, as in its self-said failure, it may be seen to mean, to operate in the "loiterature" tradition that Chambers has defined as follows:

Loiterature is a genre which, in opposition to dominant forms of narrative, relies on techniques of digestion, interruption, deferral and episodicity ... to make observations of modern life that are unsystematic, even disordered, and are usually oriented toward the everyday, the ordinary and the trivial (what is called "flâneur realism"). (1993, 207)

In Chambers’s conception of the marginalized literature that is "loiterature," the writer / narrator is someone who performs the failure of writing "not for its pathos, but as an oppositional comment on the ambitious pretensions of aesthetic sublimity, and on the blindness, rigidity and exclusionary formalism of disciplined and systematic modes of knowledge" (208). Absence and presence are therefore inscribed into reading as simultaneously necessary but not essential — or essential only insofar as they are perceived and inscribed in the context of an economy of desire — the desire to read and / or be seduced by a text.

Chotard’s narrator, who is (creatively, if problematically) doubled by the author himself in his terminal "Note," works at being a writer, even if he is only working at becoming a "loiterateur." But the novel itself has as a main purpose the interrogation of capitalism and the appropriation of desire by social structures rather than by individuals, so we need to address the problem of what Gérard’s jobs are, when he chooses to work, and, more importantly, whether he needs these jobs. Chambers highlights Maurice Blanchot’s literalizing and punning use of désœuvrement in order to lubricate, to facilitate his adventurously anticapitalist mode of reading postmodern texts (see 207, 218). Yet the pun, the joke has its base in the cruel reality of worklessness — and worklessness, Blanchot permitting, is actually no joke in the 1990s. If Chotard’s drifting Gérard is “voit non pas à l’attente, mais au désœuvrement” (Chotard 115), (i)his désœuvrement cannot but be seen in the context of the capitalist ethos in which he moves and evolves, in the frame of "opportunity" offered and refused. When he is in employment, Gérard is an unreliable and impertinent employee, one who invariably loses his post, because he has no sense of hierarchy, and, consequently, he "se brouille vite avec ses employeurs" (85). His need for work is paradoxically perhaps based on his need for the désœuvrement that will almost inevitably come, a time when he can wait as activity (see 85-86, 217-18, 224-26). Work and the money he earns episodically from temporary jobs are for him merely "des circonstances," no more or less interesting and important than whether it is raining or the sun is shining: "Sa vie est bien autre, irréductible aux pièces de monnaie dans sa poche" (115). He is hostile to the paid employment that underpins all capitalist economies, because it leaves him worn out, “usé,” ready only to go to bed (65), when he wants to get on with his real business: the loitering for which he has dutifully followed a training, an "apprentissage" (95).

The novel charts in a fragmented, kaleidoscopic way the months that form Gérard’s "stage," or training, in a Paris that is a "Third World," because it is poor yet constantly confronted by the obsessively capitalist visions of consumerism. Like the other boys and young men who loiter in the labyrinthine corridors of the malls or in the serpentine streets of Paris, Gérard easily and frequently forgets, being even incapable of "remembering" whether or not he was fucked by Didier an hour or two after their encounter (166). The novel’s discourse is similarly amnesiac, "forgetting" narrative linkage, chronology, description of places, objects and people, and above all psychological realism, substituting for narrative linearity a multiplicity of almost random camera-shots.

Deleuze closes Le Pli with the exhortation: "Nous découvrons de nouvelles manières de plier comme de nouvelles enveloppes, mais ... Il s’agit toujours de plier, déplier, replier" (189). In Tiers Monde, once Gérard discovers the possibility of development, of maturation, he vanishes from the novel, disappearing into the baroque intricacies of Bach’s last, unfinished fugue and being replaced as loiterer, as apprentice cruiser in and of the text, by his adolescent lover: "Sans s’en rendre précisément, Stéphane avait appris à marcher" (232). The novel thus performs its own failure in traditional literary terms, since its very closure is a denial of closure and it wanders back to its beginning, folding back upon itself and thereby drawing the reader into new constructions and configurations of him / herself as reader. Like Gérard, Tiers Monde is disappointing, at least in terms of narrative intrigue. However, this is precisely what makes it compulsive reading: it says little but evokes much — by presupposing other readings of other discourses, by making it necessary for the reader to fold into his / her reading of its knowledge of other, different texts. A novel about gay practice which has no theory of gay sexuality or gay desire, a novel about Paris which contains virtually no descriptions, a novel about wandering which goes nowhere, it is, nonetheless, eminently readable, because it is in essence and always — already a site of intertextual speculation. To read Tiers Monde is to think through theory, to work through theories that are absent from the text but necessary for its readerly construction. Some theories, like those of Baudelaire, are programmatically inscribed through a process of obligatory intertextuality, others wander in and out of various readings in an aleatory way and according to different subjectivities. It is indeed in its very inadequacy that Tiers Monde has its meaning and function, since it makes us read theories that will illuminate it, establishing itself (temporarily) as theory and theory as fiction, and calling into question the standard criteria of literature and readability.
Works Cited


—. "De l’amitié comme mode de vie." Dits et écrits: 1954-1988. 163-68.¹¹


¹⁰ This preface (i-xt) was published only in the first edition of Folie et déraison: Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique (Paris: Pion, 1961) and was not included in any of the reprints.