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Le jeu de l'ambiguïté et du mot : ambiguïté intentionnelle et jeu de mots chez Apollinaire, Prévert, Tournier et Beckett

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Cover Page



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Summary

This dissertation entitled, *Le jeu de l'ambiguïté et du mot*, subtitled *Ambiguïté intentionnelle et jeu de mots chez Apollinaire, Prévert, Tournier et Beckett*, investigates how these four twentieth-century writers consciously use ambiguities and wordplay in their works.

After an introductory description of terms, this study focuses on the literary function of the ambiguities and wordplay in the works under investigation, showing that this function is much broader than the humour and entertainment function usually associated with such language play. In the work of these writers, ambiguities and puns often generate serious reflections or tragic plots. Moreover, these language games are so central to the works under investigation that they reflect or underlie their very structures. This use of language is common to all texts explored here, despite their significant diversity in terms of execution and design.

This study of the interrelation between ambiguity and wordplay on the one hand and structure on the other, is grounded in *close reading*. This approach was selected for the insight it can offer into the intentions of the writers under investigation, and for being well suited to the kinds of invitations to interpretation extended by the authors themselves. It is evident that all four approach the idea of authorship with the conviction that the role of the author is both insignificant and inconceivable without the additional complicity and involvement of the reader, from whom they require a *co-creative* effort. Michel Tournier formulates this view of authorship as follows: "A book always has two writers: the one who writes it and the one who reads it".

Approaching literary creation from this perspective, five separate chapters (2 to 6) are devoted to the four writers mentioned above. These writers' works belong to the three main literary genres of the period, and the study is therefore focused on two poems, two novels and three plays.

Chapter 2 offers an analysis of the one-line poem entitled *Chantre*, which Guillaume Apollinaire added at the last moment to his poetry collection *Alcools* (1913). Although this obscure monostichon has already been commented on many times, this investigation reveals that the poem benefits from further exploration. With his predilection for humour, Apollinaire incorporated a large number of ambiguities and plays on words into this classical alexandrine. Starting with the 'false' sounding *trompette marine*, which sets the tone for the game the poet wishes to play with the reader. Our intratextual and then intertextual analysis reveals not only the richness of this word game, but also its creative function, for Apollinaire's puns generate sound, image and meaning par excellence, resulting in four distinct levels of interpretation that fit in perfectly with the mythical and mythological world of poet's thought. In contrast to the playful aspects of this verse is the conceptual self-reflection of the poet, who gives the monostichon a surprising depth and a certain stateliness. This duality between humour and seriousness can be considered one of the most important characteristics of Apollinaire's poetry.

The next chapter (3) is devoted to Jacques Prévert, the most read, and at the same time, the least commented on poet in France. Prévert's poetry is certainly not appreciated in intellectual circles; his poems are considered simple and accessible, best suited to school editions of poetry aimed at beginners. The already minor literary and linguistic criticism on Prévert's poetry is in general limited to a list of puns that have been taken out of context; an

approach that violates the unity and coherence of the poems. Our analysis of a short poem from *Paroles* (1946), entitled *Le Cheval Rouge*, can be seen as a plea for the rehabilitation of the poet Prévert. On closer inspection, the clear simplicity of the poem hides a virtuoso and ingenious use of ambiguity and polysemy, especially with respect to wordplay and metaphor. Prévert's poetry is thus characterised by a tendency to conceal the complexity of its creative process. Moreover, it is shown that the well-known accusation against Prévert, that he uses puns only for superficial entertainment, is completely incorrect; his poetry is never gratuitous and always bears meaning.

Chapter 4 examines Michel Tournier's *Goncourt*-winning novel *Le Roi des Aulnes* (1970). The chapter begins with an analysis of the signs that Abel Tiffauges, the main character, tries to interpret from his conviction that he faces a mythical world to which he, and he alone, must find the key. In their simultaneously aural and visual form, these signs, which are cast as a true obsession for the protagonist, can be divided into two categories. The first concerns the signs that the ogre Tiffauges sees as proof of his exceptional nature and supernatural power. The second category of signs relates to the writing and (re)reading of his diary called "Écrits sinistres". The diarist manipulates the reader by appropriating the ambiguous character of these signs and attaching to them an unambiguous meaning, *his meaning*. Tournier plays a serious game by influencing the reader in such a way that the reader is in turn invited into an interpretative puzzle.

Of all the signs presented to the reader in the novel, the onomastic signs have been chosen as the focus of this analysis. These have rarely been investigated, despite their key presence in the novel and the richness from a semiotic and anagrammatic point of view. Tournier attaches great value to the choices that lie behind names, paying special attention to their aural effects and (connotative) meaning aspects. In addition, the anagrammatic composition of many proper names shows similarities with the theme of the *phorie* and the principle of reversal that structures the novel.

Chapter 5 is also devoted to Tournier, namely his *Gilles & Jeanne* (1983), which brings together two historical figures of mythical proportions: Gilles de Rais and Joan of Arc. The anagrammatic play in this novel extends beyond the level of proper names, and is instead directed at the manipulation of text fragments. Our analysis concerns the way in which Tournier uses five source texts, without mentioning them, to rewrite history. The role of ambiguity in *Gilles & Jeanne* differs from its role in the other works studied; ambiguity, here, does not take place on the level of words and their double meanings, but on the level of historicity, which Tournier plays with by interpreting historical facts in his own way and by confronting the reader with his textual manipulations. Finally, we explore the interpretation of the title of the novel in light of the significant onomastics discussed in chapter 4.

Chapter 6 deals with three plays by Samuel Beckett: *En attendant Godot* (1953), *Fin de Partie* (1957) and *Pas* (1976). In the stage, ambiguity is expressed in a specific way; it is not read but heard, and this auditory perception is complemented by visual perception of the stage directions. Ambiguity is omnipresent in Beckett's theatrical work; it is expressed at the intersection of didascalia, spoken text and their interaction. The first part of this chapter takes the role of the couple Nagg and Nell in *Fin de Partie* as a starting point. Here, failure to respect the play's very precise stage directions appears to lead to a loss of double meanings, which affects the essence of Beckett's theatre. A similar form of ambiguity is reflected in the stage

props. For example, the lids of the famous bins in which Nagg and Nell are dumped depict halos, bicycle wheels and the infinity symbol. The dialogue, for its own part, contains an incessant associative play with anagrams and paronyms.

In the second part of this chapter the point of view of the spectator is exchanged for that of the reader. Our analysis of the stage directions in *En attendant Godot* reveals that they transcend mere technical performance aids, taking on instead a poetic function. They achieve aesthetic and comic value through assonance, alliteration, paronym and even rhyme, and these stylistic devices can be found not only within the stage directions themselves, but also within their relationships with the dialogue of the play. In *Pas* we notice that the didascalia is incorporated gradually into the spoken text. The stylistic figures mentioned above are further enhanced through the effects of doubling and inversion, effects that invite the reader to take an anagrammatic approach to both the spoken text and the didascalia. A similar use of doubling and inversion also underlies the very structure of the piece. For example, by walking back and forth on stage, the main character May (later called Amy) actually performs the verb *ressasser*, a palindrome that recurs in the play like a chorus. This chapter concludes with an analysis of the play's title, taking *Pas* as a striking example of Beckett's use of ambiguity.

In the final chapter we draw a number of conclusions from our research. None of the four writers leaves anything to chance; all their texts are carefully calculated and thought through. While ambiguity is central to all four writers, significant differences can be found in the ways in which these authors approach and apply ambiguity. We identify these differences not only with respect to the content of the various texts, but also in terms of *mise en page* of the poetry of Apollinaire and Prévert and of the *mise en scène* of Beckett's theatre. Finally, we emphasise the position of the reader, whose ability to recognise wordplay, and whose willingness to make a *co-creative* effort, determine whether intentional ambiguity and wordplay in a given work achieve their full potential and complexity.

