

Philip Beitchman

City University of New York

**Repetition, Compulsion and Work of Deception
in the Texts of Louis-René Des Forêts.**

*It is when you no longer believe
in help that you no longer need it.*

*Annabelle, in *The Beggar**

Deception is the iron-clad rule for the texts of Louis-René Des Forêts. Habitually in this work there operates a double movement; in the first a certain situation, character, mood, event or reality is offered and a second in which the offering is withdrawn, almost as if it were never made. I am describing there the prototypical system of *The Bavard*, Des Forêts' novel of 1947, whose narrator involves us in his story only to disavow it and himself. In the end not only did he never meet that Spanish lady (who never existed, even fictionally), get beaten up by her boyfriend, have that stupendous epiphany in the Garden, but he was never even subject to crises that compelled him to talk maniacally. Now *that* really hurts, he was never even a bavard: "Inutile de faire observer que je n'ai jamais subi de crises de ce genre" [Needless to point out that I never had these kinds of crises]. I'm only an author's invention anyway, and does even he know what I'm about? : "Sait-il lui-même de quoi je suis fait, en admettant que je suis fait de quelque chose?" [Does he know himself what I am made of, admitting I'm made of anything at all?].

Whereas this system of illusion-disillusion, appearance-disappearance, approach-reproach operates most nakedly in *The Bavard*, it is conspicuous, to say the least, in Des Forêts' other texts too: "The Great Moments of a Singer," story of an operatic performer who gains and loses an astounding talent suddenly inexplicably. The processes of artistic illusion and deception are indeed blatantly thematic, but the narrator cannot explain these processes, only add his own self-confessed hypothetical, fragmentary interpretations to other

less flattering ones (for instance that the singer was using an actor's tricks to fool the audience to think he had a talent he never really possessed). Another hypothesis, more likely, was that M \ddot{o} lieri, misogynist, through his gain and loss of talent, wanted to fascinate, then disappoint a woman who was in love with him. For the narrator our deceptive protagonist M \ddot{o} lieri is a sort of Kierkegaardian "knight of faith," whose greatest moment of triumph was that of the sacrifice he was able to make of recognition and applause in order to demonstrate some essential and necessary truth about the hypocritical nature of the performer-audience relation that any "high art" like opera involves: what the audience resents in the singer's failure is its consequent inability to escape into its habitual-narcotic esthetic daydreaming! Very likely, however, the narrator is the dupe of his own esthetic daydreams, *the need to believe*, for instance, that there is someone worth looking up to, and so winds up as just another character in a story that happens to be told by himself.

If we range across the years and through the genres of Des For \hat{e} ts' texts we may be struck by this self-same vertigo of the uncertainty and endlessness of interpretation, the sheer impossibility of definition, yet the inevitable search for one. For instance, the relatively recent "autobiographical" text *Ostinato* is seemingly guaranteed by an empirical "I" who, looking backward (that's what "I"'s are for) is proudest of: "Les faux d \acute{e} parts et les renoncements sans retour: sa gloire secr \hat{e} te, son unique gloire" [False starts and renunciations without appeal; his secret glory, his unique glory]. A slightly informed reader will however probably think of the five years or so that the author is *known* to have invested in a novel which he then destroyed. Whatever the contradictions involved, at the very least here an authorial voice is certainly claiming an autonomy and free-will much else in *Ostinato* will call into, or put into question. Elsewhere this "accomplishment" would perhaps be just one of "Des mirages, rien que des images fa \acute{c} onn \acute{e} es par les mots pour peupler le d \acute{e} sert de l'oubli" [Mirages, nothing but images fashioned by words to people oblivion], projecting an uncertainty and inconclusiveness already underlined by Des For \hat{e} ts' initial presentation of the text as a sketch and a fragment.

Previously another "autobiographical" text, the long poem, *Witches by the Sea*, is a work that shocks, arrests and convinces

through its vivid recall of some kind of primal sexual scene of seduction-fascination-incompletion that shadows-dooms-and inspires a later life and career. This work was similarly (dis)-qualified by an author's note that the poem was merely a fragment of a longer piece in which it is not even destined to appear! Critics, of course, may and have taken Des Forêts' temporizing techniques in the Freudian sense of denial-as-affirmation. But then this arguably only compounds the uncertainty-dimension of the text by adding another interpretation, essentially another character, the critic's (and his/her public's) expectations and limitations, to it, that is, to a text that already doesn't know exactly what to think of itself, just because of the very superfluity of possibilities.

As far back as we can go in Des Forêts' work we may witness this same phenomenon and spectacle of mutually derisory points of view, a "conflict of interpretations," a clashing and disharmony of politics, needs and creeds, where, as for Sartre "Hell is other people", in *The Beggars*, a novel of 1943, characters, while coherent entities in themselves, systematically disappoint each other. *The Beggars* is essentially a text *made* out of fabric of disappointment, in the sense that the chart actors' discourses are aimed at modifying the behaviour of others, or of an *absurd* world that, in Camus' relevant phrase, is sublimely indifferent to human needs. Their words are made drastically from what is missing from their lives, what is lacking...What, indeed would Hélène, a character who complains about her boyfriend's infidelity, say, what would she be made of, if she could ever be fulfilled in love? A text, an identity is produced by what is absent; its presence *and* absence are existentially synonymous. Fulfillment, in art and in life, of course means silence, unless happiness becomes, as it maybe does in later works, a new form of misery, usurpation and suspicion. In *The Bavard* and the collection of echoing tales, *The Children's Room*, the deception goes beyond merely of characters of each other, but comes to haunt the reliability or referentiality of the very words we read. That "communication," the nature of which is never really clear, between Leonard and Louise's brother, in "In a Mirror," close in spirit to the abstraction of Blanchot's *One Who Did Not Accompany Me*, is presented, for instance, as a resolution of some kind of Hegelian Master-Slave dialectical antagonism, by way ineffably of a zen-like

satori: "on aurait dit que quelque lumière jusque-là cachée avait traversé le champ de sa conscience pour la tirer enfin d'un long sommeil. Ce qui se passait à cet instant de plus remarquable était que toute lutte nous paraissait désormais sans objet, car j'avais cessé d'être son jouet et il n'était plus ma victime." [...you might say that a certain light, until then hidden, had crossed the field of his consciousness and pulled him finally from a long sleep. What happened at this moment even more remarkable was that, from then on all struggle seemed to us to be pointless, for I was no longer his toy and he no longer my victim.] In brief, a radical alteration of human rapports that Des Forêts, in a rare polemical moment a few years later, was to describe as the real stakes of the events of May '68. Whatever occurred or failed to in history, however, we notice in the story that the deception and suspicion are instantaneous and total, magnified also by the very intensity with which the epiphany has just been described.

A likely possibility is that the speaker of this annunciation has been performing for an audience of at least one; the events, if indeed they happened as reported, may have been manufactured for the benefit of the voyeur known to be listening in; they were "on a stage" as we all are, as the bavard liked to say; the "communion" involves, besides, an effort by the actor to pay his interlocutress' expectations with words. As the story unravels, anyway, the entire incident, together with its deconstruction-reversal-staging is further denied-absorbed as just a text, part of the scribbling on the manuscript-mirror in which the cousin-writer, suddenly turned main character and narrator, is pretending to show Louise (others) herself but has only been reflecting his own torments! The reader then is the spy on the spy on the spy; and if we stop there it is only because our toleration may have reached a momentary threshold, not that any sure conclusion or end has been attained: "Why stop here, why stop anywhere?" as William S. Burroughs wonders in *The Ticket that Exploded*. Only because we're tired and need to get off!

In the story, "The Children's Room" similar shifts and qualifications are dizzyingly and exponentially manifested. Since the children's conversation shows such precocious and sophisticated understanding of the mechanisms of complicity and consent that underlie outwardly antagonistic rapports of authority — this

dialogue, we are "aware" from the very beginning may be spoken for the benefit of a character who is eavesdropping in on the conversation, and behind him, of course, would be the reader, watching, listening to him listen. But in a conclusion, worthy of Poe and Ambrose Bierce ("Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge", where a Southern planter, hanged as a spy! dreams he's swimming to freedom, only to be snapped back at the end), vertiginously he was only dreaming — deconstructing the possibility of any privileged return or access to a child's world, room or reality: "C'est alors qu'il revint à lui pour se souvenir avec allégresse que son nom était Georges." [Then it was he came to and realized, alertly, that his name was Georges.] Finally the child who has responded to his calling out in his sleep or nightmare: "Êtes-vous là, les enfants?" [Are you there, children?], smiles enigmatically, like a Mona Lisa: "mais ce sourire était loin, indéchiffrable" [but the smile was distant, puzzling], qualifying the "only a dream" conclusion significantly.

In "A Lying Memory" thresholds of credibility are similarly crossed and recrossed: these portraits of the child convince through their intensity, verisimilitude, torment and occasionally even elevation. But a thematic recourse to the formula of what is called a "dream-memory" exercises systematically a pull on a rug that is so solidly laid, and in at least two directions: first, a mystical sense, say of Gérard de Nerval's, "Aurelia" for a moment of sublimely spontaneous participation the formerly refractory child experiences in a choir of God-praising children's voices; or secondly the diametrically opposite Freudian sense of a dream of Oedipal murder of the father, as when the "memory is recounted of the child's liberating assassination of a tormenting priest-educator, prior to a flight-to-freedom and tender reunion with his mother.

It may be that for the "polyphonic" fictions of such as Rabelais and Dostoevsky, a reader, following Bakhtin, is given a choice of what to believe, but Des Forêts' reader, more like Nietzsche's, is not given anything to believe, not the very words on the page. The word here not only refuses any transcendent function or promise, it rejects even the limited certainty, say that we know a little bit about what we are dealing with. Finally it's undecidable whether our narrators' mirror-manuscripts report on a world or reflect only their own torment. However, the very force of the denial in "In The Mirror," discussed

above, that Louise makes that she can learn anything about herself in the cousin-writer's portrayal of her, — this conveys a certain element of possibility that art can, therefore still should try, to transcend the merely particular toward the universally human. The Hegelian question of whether art still matters cannot be dismissed with a simple no! Entering into the equation endlessly are the intentions, makeup, discipline, ethics of the artist, as well as the seriousness of the audience. Molière's public in "Great Moments of a Singer" certainly deserved its deception. In this sense the very failures of the artist may convey more eloquently than competence can what should be there by constituting its lack. Hegel (in an *aufhebung* of contraries that distances him from the "beautiful souls" and "unhappy consciousness" of a certain romanticism) and, more recently, Heidegger have suggested as much, as in the latter's famous correction of Sartre's privileged Nothingness, that Nothingness confesses always a connection to a primordial sense that, to put it in Derridean language, has always come before; and in fact recent readings for meanings in Des Forêts' texts that ostensibly were hidden from or were missed by earlier "nihilist" interpretations (Blanchot's and Tel Quel's) have referred to Heideggerian solutions to the paradoxes of anarchism as a tool for the recovery of these texts. Being comes before Becoming for Heidegger, as for Freud the strategies and tactics of desire (to be loved) before their channelings, displacements and deployments in the world of dreams and the imaginations of art.

Heidegger I and II, referring respectively to the subject and language-directed chronological phases of this philosophy, correspond furthermore to the shift we have been describing as endemic to Des Forêts' texts from signifying to signifier-oriented discourse, from subject to object, story to representation, act to acting out, memory to the fiction of a dream. Viewed globally and externally, Des Forêts' texts convey, even recently, this double movement that involves an effort at substantial statement, then erasure and qualification by a later interpretation and style. Thus the heralded restoration of the empirical I or autobiographical signifier in *Witches by the Sea* and *Ostinato* throws retroactively a different light on sexual and pedagogic traumas that were somewhat, to say the least, effaced behind the rhetoric of dream and art in *The Bavard* and the

Children's Room stories. For instance, that unconsummated seduction which never happened in *The Bavard* (where the narrator talks to his pickup instead of taking her upstairs) seems to have *really* NOT taken place in *Witches by the Sea*, where an event of sexual fascination, deception and sublimation is presented in terms as convincing autobiographically as, say, a Rousseau would have confessed them! And Des Forêts seems as veracious in his recent work as Walt Whitman and William Wordsworth were in their autobiographical poems about the influence of childhood on their later lives, careers and feelings. Likewise scenes of childhood persecution, pedagogical punishment and rebellious episodes, cautioned, for instance by the framework of dream-memory in the earlier "A Lying Memory," emerge nakedly, substantially and undeniably in the recent *Ostinato*. Whereas before we were told that everything we were led to believe was based on the intrinsically false premises of tricky language and reliable dreams here we are presented seemingly with the "facts" about youthful traumas that made the subject into a writer — that is, in the author's stubbornly uncomplimentary terms (both for himself and the environment that turned him into one), still a falsifier, mountebank, charlatan, counterfeiter. Just as the "unreality" of Des Forêts' earlier fiction that maybe we had come to depend on too much is undermined by the triumphed reentry, miraculous survival of an author, identity and subject in the later texts, so is the reality of these avowals subverted by how seriously he and others have taught us how not to take him.

Fascinating also is how critical reaction repeats this Fort-Da system, Freud's famous figure for his grandchild's pleasure in the appearing-disappearing bilboquet, symbol of an effort to control the present-absent mother, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The earlier nihilist interpretations play in fact Bavard II against Bavard I: Des Forêts' texts do indeed mean something, only that something is nothing, image of a mutual strangulation of reader and writer, or of an infinite reflection of mirrors, mise-en-abyme that characters, texts and words afford each other. Subsequently the substance and subject rediscovery of more recent treatments: Heideggerian, Austinian, Freudian, Platonic-esthetic-essentialist, or blends of the above; some even rivalling in density, complexity, nuance the texts themselves. Do they not all play Bavard II, disillusioning us with the

earlier “meaningless” reading that then play Bavard I? “That’s not what I meant at all,” in the Hamletic words of T.S. Eliot’s (“The Lovesong of J. Alfred Prufrock) (the bavard is Hamlet too, master of delay, and self-recriminating tergiversation!). Or in the words of *Ostinato* that contrast a fragile, merely human repetition with the awesome tyranny of the compulsion in an absurd nature: “Précarité de la pulsion répétitive comparable au rythme de la vie plus qu’à celui de la nature — non pas l’avance et le retrait ininterrompus des eaux sur la grève, mais souffle inspirant, expirant jusqu’à l’expiration dernière qui marquera pour le dernier homme la fin des temps, tandis que la mer poursuivra son va-et-vient infatigable à travers un temps de nouveau sans histoire.” [Precarity of the repetitive compulsion comparable to the rhythm of life rather than nature — not the uninterrupted advance and retreat of sea on land, but the breath drawn-in, expired until the last expiration which will mark for the last man the end of time, while the sea will pursue its indefatigable coming and going through a time once more devoid of history].

Furthermore, here I am, helpless not to play Bavard II against the Bavard I I’ve constituted of the combined nihilist and substantialist readings. Des Forêts’ texts and their critical accretions, ramifications, interpretations and corrections can only accept what has been rejected, can only reject what has been accepted. This dialectic of history is also the same that Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, with all the optimism of the true believer in art, claimed was the nightmare from which he was awakening, in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: A Des Forêts’ narrator might wonder, more modestly, whether that wake weren’t also a sleep we need to wake from.

Bibliography

Avni, Ora. "Silence, vérité et lecture dans l'oeuvre de Louis-René Des Forêts." *Modern Language Notes* 102.6 (Sept. 1987): 877-97.

Baudry, Jean-Louis. "Louis-René Des Forêts et le thème du miroir." *Tel Quel* (automne 1961) : 42-49.

Beitchman, Philip. "A Deconstructed Epiphany: Des Forêts' *Le Bavard*," in *I AM A PROCESS WITH NO SUBJECT*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1988: 182-215.

Blanchot, Maurice. "La Parole vaine", in *L'Amitié*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971: 137-49.

Bonnefoy, Yves. "Une Écriture de notre temps: Louis-René Des Forêts." *Nouvelle Revue Française* #'s 402-408 (juillet 1986-janvier 1987). Six instalments.

Burroughs, William. *The Ticket that Exploded*. New York: Grove Press, 1962.

Canadas, Serge. "L.R. Des Forêts: l'inabordable question". *Critique* 442 (1984) 229-44.

Des Forêts, Louis-René. *Les Mendiants*. Paris: Gallimard, 1943. *The Beggars*. Translated from French by Helen Beauclerk. London: Dennis Dobson, 1948.

La Chambre Des Enfants. Paris: Gallimard, 1960.

The Children's Room (including *Le Bavard*, "Great Moments of a Singer", and "Disordered Silence"). Translated from French by Jean Stewart. London: John Calder, 1963.

"La Littérature aujourd'hui," interview in *Tel Quel* #10 (1962), 47-60. *Les Mégères de la mer*. Paris: Mercure de France, 1967.

Ostinato. *Nouvelle Revue Française* (janvier 1984), 1-64.

Pingaud, Bernard. "Le Pouvoir de la voix," in *Experience romanesque*. Paris: Gallimard-Idées, 1983, 265-81.

Quignard, Pascal. *Le Voeu du silence*. Montpellier: Fata Morgana, 1985.

Rabaté, Dominique. "L'Impossible mémoire de L.R. Des Forêts." *Poétique* 16.61 (février 1985), 91-99.

"Parole d'exès, poésie du silence." *Pleine Marge* #1 (Cognac, 1985): 29-39. "D'Une autobiographie abstraite, lecture du *Bavard*." *Autobiography in French Literature*. Univ. of South Carolina French Literature Series XII (1985): 185-88.

Roudat, Jean. *Le Bavard*, ou "le secret diffusé." *Nouvelle Revue Française* #336 (janvier 1981), 63-76.