Transatlantic Détournement? François Bon's Ambivalent Reception Of Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing*

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INTRODUCTION

Kenneth Goldsmith and François Bon are important figures in the creative writing scenes of respectively the US and France. While Goldsmith has, since quite some time, occupied the position of a spokesperson for an experimental form of writing that goes against the grain of more traditional writing workshops, Bon has become the French atelier d'écriture's leading voice, arguing for its societal importance and theorizing its methodology (Viart, 2008: 94-6; Rual, 2010; Davis, 2010). In this article, I investigate the reception of Kenneth Goldsmith's poetics of uncreative writing by François Bon. In an entry on his personal website, Bon proposes a détournement of Goldsmith's conceptual creative writing practices in the form of a return to narrative fiction. He selects an extract from an essay by Goldsmith and writes that he will "le détourner complètement de son contexte, voire le retourner en contre-preuve du rôle qu'il tient dans le [...] livre de Kenneth Goldsmith" ("deflect it completely from its context, even turn it into evidence against the role it plays in Kenneth Goldsmith's book") (Bon, "Pas de souci"). I will consider this departure on the part of Bon, who, at other occasions, has expressed admiration for the radicalism of Goldsmith's conceptual or uncreative writing, in light of the contexts of American and French creative writing. Reading both authors in this way will shed a new perspective onto Goldsmith's prominence in the American literary field and help us grasp the complexity of Bon's reception of Goldsmith's radical poetics.

After a brief overview of the diverse set of activities that François Bon promotes as animator of writing ateliers, I will zoom in on its most recent manifestations, notably Bon's implication as a teacher of creative writing at an arts school, his dynamic online presence, and his increased interest in American fiction and creative writing handbooks. From this vantage point, Kenneth Goldsmith's poetics of uncreative or conceptual writing will be analyzed, most notably how it puts into question the fundamental parameters of literary culture, that is, the notions of authorship, readership, literature, writing. Goldsmith's image of innovator not only arises from his fruitful engagement with digital media (as many critics have observed), but also from the way in which he actively opposes the institution of creative

writing and its popular counterpart, creative writing handbooks. Finally, I will consider the reception of Goldsmith's poetics, as presented in the book Uncreative Writing, by Bon, especially in his writings on Goldsmith on tierslivre.fr. In one of his blogposts/online writing exercises, Bon performs a détournement of an essay by Goldsmith on John Ashbery and the notions of inspiration and writer's block, and he ends up using Goldsmith's text as a surprisingly straightforward writing exercise on description. Why would Bon use this essay by an avant-garde author whose ideas he sympathizes with and transform it into a writing assignment that goes against these very ideas? To answer this question, I will point to the history of the French atelier d'écriture that is the breeding ground of Bon's creative writing practices. Considering this tradition's theoretical groundwork and its blind spots will allow me to shed a new light on what motivates Bon's transatlantic détournement.

FRANÇOIS BON'S *ATELIER D'ÉCRITURE*

François Bon is a well-established name in the French literary world. He gained recognition with his first novel Sortie d'usine (1982) and has been considered in the eighties and nineties, with others like Pierre Bergounioux, Pierre Michon and Jean Echenoz, as part of a new generation of writers that broke with the almost exclusively formalist emphases of the Nouveau Roman and of structuralist theory in favour of a poetics that again sought to represent reality (Vercier & Viart, 2008: 7-8). Perhaps even more than for his literary texts, however, Bon is known for his entrepreneurial qualities (Cahier & Sutton, 2016: 10). Over the course of his career, he has consolidated his central position in the literary field by boldly going where French writers have not (or hardly) gone before. Firstly, since the end of the nineties, he has been experimenting with online writing and publishing projects, most notably the creation of the collaborative online publishing house Publie.net, the activities on his personal website tierslivre.net, and multi-media writing projects such as Tumulte (2006) (Saemmer, 2010; James, 2011; Bonnet, 2014; Fülöp, 2016). Secondly, he has become the most important facilitator and theorist of French writing workshops, the so-called ateliers d'écriture.

Bon has organized writing ateliers since the beginning of the nineties and his methods have strongly developed over time. What has remained constant is the importance of literary texts as triggers for writing exercises. In Tous les mots sont adultes (2005), his groundbreaking pedagogical work on the writing atelier, Bon demonstrates how he uses short literary texts or fragments to distill specific techniques that can be used in exercises. For instance, he cites passages of Georges Perec's Penser/classer in order to show how the inventory works as a literary technique or he turns to Antonin Artaud's texts to propose a possible way of describing mental states. In his earlier pedagogical work, including Tous les mots sont adultes, Bon's stimulus texts were pre-dominantly French. In recent years, however, Bon relies increasingly on American writers, such as Edgard Allan Poe, H. P. Lovecraft, John Steinbeck, Ernest Hemingway and John Gardner. This change of focus could be due to the different audience that he, as an atelier facilitator, addresses today. In Apprendre l'invention (2012), Bon relates how from

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the 1990s until around 2010, his audiences consisted mostly of inexperienced writers. He taught in youth prisons, primary and secondary schools, theater classes and science faculties. In recent years, however, the groups he works with have become increasingly specialized. The most obvious example is the annual series of creative writing classes he offers since 2013 at the École nationale supérieure d'arts de Paris-Cergy. Another example is the regular series of online writing ateliers that Bon organizes on tierslivre.net. During those, participants can send their assignments to Bon who subsequently posts them on his website. In spite of his insistence on the flexibility of his own method (flexibility meaning that the same exercise should work with diverse audiences), the change of audiences, both in his real-life and his online ateliers seems to coincide with a change of stimulus texts. While the more experimental texts of Georges Perec and Antonin Artaud were effective triggers for an inexperienced audience (probably because they are relatively short and bear the traces of their own construction) the more advanced writers at the arts school or in Bon's online atelier may be better served by the longer narrative prose of Steinbeck and Hemingway or the genre-texts of Lovecraft and Poe.

In addition to his increased interest in American literature, Bon also uses American creative writing handbooks that he collects and annotates. His turn towards American prose is thus accompanied by a simultaneous interest in writing manuals. In spite of Bon's criticisms of the genre and especially some of its overly optimistic promising titles (writing a novel in 21 days / becoming an author today) tierslivre.net does contain multiple entries that seriously address the topic of writing handbooks. One post, dating from 2013, documents a visit to the writer's help section of Barnes & Noble in Brooklyn and contains photographs of a series of handbooks (Bon, "Écrivez votre roman"). Another entry contains a list of favorite writing handbooks that Bon sets out to update regularly (Bon, "Des livres pour écrire"). It is mainly composed of French texts and demonstrates the flexibility with which Bon uses the term "writing handbook." Besides Tous les mots sont adultes, included are a set of French how-to write books, essayistic expositions of poetics by Julien Gracq, Claude Simon, Nathalie Sarraute and Leslie Kaplan, journals of Franz Kafka, Marguerite Duras (Écrire) and Charles Juliet (Rencontres avec Samuel Beckett), and experimental texts of Georges Perec, Valère Novarina and Bernard-Marie Koltès. In a video-entry, Bon enlists his favorite American creative writing handbooks such as Stephen King's On Writing, John Gardner's The Art of Fiction, Raymond Carver's Fires, Sherry Ellis's Now Write!, Kenneth Goldsmith's Uncreative Writing and Malt Olbren's The Creative Writing No-Guide (Bon, "Sur les pistes"). The latter text, which is the focus of the clip, is in fact a pseudo-translated text written by Bon himself (Meyntjens, 2018).

As I will demonstrate, Bon's reception of Goldsmith's work (his détournement) must be regarded in light of his turn to American literature and writing handbooks. In my analysis, I will focus on three recent web entries about Goldsmith on tierslivre.net. On this personal website, Bon posts reviews of books, discussions of authors, proposals for writing exercises and updates on his latest occupations, including his literary and editorial projects and his experiences as a facilitator of writing workshops at the arts school. These posts usually contain texts, photographs and video clips, and are categorized in

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different sections on the website. Bon's first post on Goldsmith appeared in a section on creative writing abroad (Ailleurs, comment ils font "How they do it elsewhere"), the second in a series of writing exercises during an online writing atelier on the novel (Ateliers thématiques "Thematic ateliers"), and a third in a section with video clips (Vidéo-lectures "Video-readings") in which Bon discusses and reads from books. In these website entries, a passionate admiration for Goldsmith's uncreative writing goes hand-in-hand with a discursive departure from it. Bon highlights the importance of Goldsmith's project but also stresses the fact that his own pedagogies are different from Goldsmith's. In one post, he proposes a détournement of Goldsmith's work, a return to the novel, inspired by an essay in which Goldsmith pleads for a mechanistic approach to writing. Before discussing this détournement, I will briefly outline the latter's poetics of uncreative writing and position them vis-à-vis the Anglo-Saxon creative writing workshop and how-to write handbooks tradition.

KENNETH GOLDSMITH'S *UNCREATIVE WRITING*

Kenneth Goldsmith is a contemporary poet, the founding editor of the online cultural archive UbuWeb and a teacher of creative writing, or as he calls it "uncreative writing", at the University of Pennsylvania. As a poet, he gained notice with Fidget (2000), a description of every move he made on Bloomsday (June 16th 1997); Soliloquy (2001), an account of everything he said in a week; and his New York Trilogy, consisting of Weather (2005), the transcription of one year's weather reports, Traffic (2007), the transcription of traffic reports during a holiday weekend, and Sports (2009), a complete radio transcription of the longest major league baseball game on record. Finally, Day (2003) is a 836-page typed copy of one edition of The New York Times, of which about 200 pages are financial tables. In 2013, the self-acclaimed "most boring writer who ever lived" was appointed as the first poet laureate of the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In 2015 he stirred controversy in the literary world and outside of it with his poem "The Body of Michael Brown," a reading of the autopsy report of Michael Brown, the African American teenager who was shot and killed by a white police officer in 2014 in Ferguson, MO (Park Hong, 2015; The Mongrel Coalition, 2015; Keene, 2015). This performance, carried out during a conference at Brown University, was criticized for its appropriation of Brown's autopsy rapport by a white, male avant-garde poet. By turning this black man's violent death into a spectacle for a very privileged audience to witness, Goldsmith, his detractors argued, committed "an act of oppression-as-art that fits well with the logic of white supremacy as it has long functioned in American society" (Keene, 2015).

In *Uncreative Writing. Managing Language in the Digital Age,* Goldsmith outlines his atypical poetics. According to Goldsmith, given the enormous amount of text available today, especially thanks to technology and the Internet, the contemporary writer's task is not to make his or her own "original" contribution to the existing heaps of text, but rather to use available text in order to create new "unoriginal" works. Goldsmith writes that "the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must

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learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists. How I make my way through this thicket of information (how I manage it, how I parse it, how I organize and distribute it) is what distinguishes my writing from yours" (2011: 1). Goldsmith's practice is essentially one of what he calls, borrowing a phrase from Marjorie Perloff, "moving information" (1). Here, the adjective "moving" functions in a double sense. It signifies at once the act of reframing (usually carefully chosen) existing texts to create new work and the emotion associated with this act.

In this perspective the romantic notion of an original and solitary genius becomes problematic. What Goldsmith proposes instead are conceptions of writers as so-called "unoriginal geniuses" (1) or as "language hoarders" (4). In his writing classes, he instructs students to copy, steal and plagiarize and penalizes them for showing signs of creativity (all this with the aid of sometimes simple digital tools). For Goldsmith, the digital, especially the arrival of the Internet, is a fundamental game-changer for literature. Comparing this to the effects of the invention of photography on painting, he argues that "it appears that writing's response [to the Internet] could be mimetic and replicative, primarily involving methods of distribution, while proposing new platforms of receivership and readership. Words very well might not only be written to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated, sometimes by humans, more often by machines" (15). In this poetic framework, the design of a text, its conception, become at least as important as the resulting text. The principle that lies at the basis of a text (what does one select, what does one leave out, how does one reframe) becomes not only a touchstone for judgments of value but is also itself a very visible part of the text.

In this way, Goldsmith's poetics of information question some of the fundamental parameters of literary culture. Writing is conceived less as an individual's efforts to produce an original text than as the managing of large chunks of information. Authorship is less as a site of originality and ownership than the application of by automated principles (Goldsmith writes for example that he intends to become "a word processor" (Goldsmith. "I Look to Theory") reading less as a mode of critical and hermeneutical engagement, but rather as the (often numbing, sometimes moving) encounter with large quantities of data. More than meaning, it is materiality and quantity that count.

However, while this poetics is clearly steeped in digital culture, it should not be taken as a disavowal of writing or literature as a whole. On the one hand, it embraces rather than excludes print literacy. Throughout his career, Goldsmith retains a steadfast affiliation with the book as an object, with the book as materiality. He writes that "it's the accumulation of language" which interests him: "How much does an actual week's worth of language weigh? It's about concretization of the ephemeral" (Pound, 2015: 320). On the other hand, his continuous efforts to historicize and to situate his poetics against the backdrop of not only art, but also literary history, are also indicative of the positive stance that Goldsmith adopts towards literature. In Uncreative Writing, several essays are devoted

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[1]The term poetics of information, as well as some aspects in this analysis of Goldsmith's project are introduced in Pound, Scott. "Kenneth Goldsmith and the Poetics of Information." PMLA. 130.2 (2015): 315-30.

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to figures from the visual arts, writing and philosophy. Apart from American artists such as Andy Warhol, John Cage, the concrete poets, Vanessa Place and Sol LeWitt, Goldsmith emphasizes the importance of a continental, predominantly French, literary, artistic and theoretical tradition. He mentions Mallarmé, Apollinaire, Erik Satie, Marcel Duchamp, Félix Fénéon, Guy Debord, James Joyce, Walter Benjamin, Roland Barthes, the Oulipo and Michel de Certeau. His own poetics appear as a radical exploration of the ideas and works of these figures, an investigation enabled and even required by today's digital culture.

In sum, Goldsmith's project entails a far-reaching investigation of the implications of digital culture for writing and literary culture, but at the same time it remains grounded in literary history and in the materiality of the book. In a recent article, Scott Pound speaks of a "convergence poetics […] that shows us what happens when one cultural apparatus collides with another, when the book slams into electronic media and then the internet" (2015: 319). The fundamental value of such a poetics, argues Pound, "lies in the problem it presents to our definition of literary culture and in the urgency with which it requires us to think about new and competing conceptions of authorship, literacy and reading" (328).

UNCREATIVE WRITING IN LIGHT OF HOW-TO-WRITE BOOKS

The question that imposes itself, especially in light of an understanding of Bon's reception, is that of the singularity of Goldsmith's project. How does it make sense to speak of "new conceptions of authorship, literacy and reading?" In fact, as the essays in Uncreative Writing demonstrate, from a literary historical perspective Goldsmith's views of literary culture are not unprecedented (Warren, 2011; Aji, 2012). The avant-gardes, under the impulse of the technological advances of their time, asked similar questions. Isn't Walter Benjamin's Arcades Project a precursor to Goldsmith's cut-and-paste mode of writing? Didn't the Oulipians propose models of uncreative authorship similar to Goldsmith's word-processing?

And what if one looks at Goldsmith's contemporaries? Might his apparent singularity be explained by the radical ways in which his conceptions differ from those of other writers in today's American literary world? If one takes a look at the contemporary poetry scene, one quickly finds evidence in the opposite direction. Writers such as Vanessa Place and Craig Dworkin both share important aspects of Goldsmith's poetics. Dworkin shares with Goldsmith, amongst other things, a fascination with the materiality of language. For him, too, "the idea of language as quantifiable data" (2009: xxxvi) becomes a guiding principle for the creation of poetry. Like Goldsmith, Place mobilizes modernist techniques such as collage to undermine the idea of the author as master-figure (Place & Fitterman, 2009: 45-46). Noticeably, Place's work has met similar controversy as Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown." Her "Gone with the Wind" project, a series of quotations from Margaret Mitchell's novel and the subsequent film, sparked fierce reactions because of its

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racial insensitivy,[2] eventually leading to Place's removal from an AWP 2016 Conference sub-committee. This begs the question whether there is an incompatibility between uncreative, anti-expressivist poetics and particular expressions of human experience, in particular those related to race, class, gender, national affiliation, age and ability status (Cheng, 2015).

More, not only Goldsmith's contemporaries, but also an earlier generation of poets, upheld similar writing practices and poetics. In particular, the poetry that appeared in the journals L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E and This testified to an anti-expressivist ethos and an eagerness to explore the materiality of language. These poetics, too, were rooted in the experiments of the modernist movements. In an interview with BOMB in 2011, poet Charles Bernstein remarks:

> We tried to trace a history of radical poetics, taking up the model presented in Jerome Rothenberg's Revolution of the Word, and later by Rothenberg and Pierre Joris in Poems for the Millennium and Marjorie Perloff in The Futurist Moment. When you go back 30 years, you see that poetics that now are widely accepted as foundational for contemporary poetry were harshly rejected then. Poetry's center of gravity has shifted to the poetic left, to call it that, though not everyone has heard the news. Even in the more mainstream poetry magazines now there's a certain amount of work that is far looser and formally radical than you would have seen in the mid-'70s. (Sanders, 2011)

Bernstein suggests that the poetics of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poets, which have strongly impacted Goldsmith's work, have, by now, become prominent in American poetry.

How should one account for Goldsmith's novelty then? It seems that two views are possible. Most critics have connected Goldsmith's novelty to the fact that his work explores twentieth century avant-garde questions in the time of the internet. In their views, Goldsmith, more than others, comes to terms with the implications of digitalization for literature. Here, I would like to propose an alternative account that has been surprisingly overlooked by critics and that considers uncreative writing in light of American creative writing. According to this view, Goldsmith's work derives its edge from its constant discursive opposition to the poetics of creative writing.

In Renaissance Self-Fashioning, Stephen Greenblatt has famously pointed out how the (mainly) discursive development of the artistic or authorial persona is closely linked to the designation of figures of authority and of the alien (2005: 9). By means of submissive and antagonizing discursive operations, authors seek to occupy positions amongst peers in the domain of literature. In Goldsmith's discourse, similar strategies are at play. Authority is granted to literary and artistic figures like Walter Benjamin and Andy Warhol. Discursive alienation, on the other hand, is the fate of creative writing, and even more its autodidact variant, how-to-write handbooks. On multiple occasions, these texts are presented as the antithesis of Goldsmith's own work, even as the root

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[2]For the change.org petition that lead to Place's removal from the AWP subcommittee, see https://www.change.org/p/association-of-writers-and-writing-conferences-remove-vanessa-place-from-the-awp-los-angeles-conference-committee

of the problems associated with contemporary literary culture. In the introduction to Uncreative Writing, Goldsmith says:

> Perhaps one reason writing is stuck might be the way creative writing is taught. In regard to the many sophisticated ideas concerning media, identity, and sampling developed over the past century, books about how to be a creative writer have completely missed the boat, relying on clichéd notions of what it means to be "creative." These books are peppered with advice, like "A creative writer is an explorer, a ground-breaker. Creative writing allows you to chart your own course and boldly go where no one has gone before." Or ignoring giants like de Certeau, Cage, and Warhol, they suggest that creative writing is liberation from the constraints of everyday life." In the early part of the twentieth century, Duchamp and composer Erik Satie both professed the desire to live without memory. For them, it was a way of being present to the wonders of the everyday. Yet it seems every book on creative writing insists that "memory is often the primary source of imaginative experience." The how-to sections of these books strikes [sic] me as terribly unsophisticated, generally coercing us to prioritize the theatrical over the mundane as the basis of our writings. (7-8)

Goldsmith presents how-to-write poetics as the complete opposite of his own endeavor, out of touch with present times and critical discourses, unaware of the artistic and literary avant-garde movements of the twentieth century, and cliché in terms of formulations and advice.

In "Infallible Processes" (2011: 125-49) Goldsmith continues this criticism. Here, the focus is on the remedies that handbooks provide against writer's block, particularly so-called "free-writing" exercises and the rather practical pieces of advice that are reminiscent of the self-help genre. The essay was inspired by a piece on John Ashbery in The New Yorker in which the acclaimed poet recounted his occasional struggles with writer's block:

> There are dozens of books offering up antidotes for people like you. For instance, you might want to change your clothes ("to get a truly fresh start, John"); or try stretching a bit; it's a good idea to get up and get a glass of water every twenty minutes; you really should try freewriting – just let your mind relax and let it flow, John; or you could try writing "badly"; it might be a "good idea to turn off the Internet"; and perhaps it would help if you got up from your writing desk and did just one chore. But there's one solution that each and every book on writer's block offers: write five words. Any five words. Follow this advice, Mr. Ashbery, and you'll never have writer's block again. (2011: 127)

In this passage, too, Goldsmith parodies how-to-write handbooks. The informal tone in which they address the reader, the formulaic phrases, the sense of aura with which the solution "write five words" is endowed—they all appear as signs of what is wrong with contemporary literary culture and conceptions of writing. The reference to the article on Ashbery in The New Yorker is further significant in that Ashbery himself used to be a teacher of creative writing at Brooklyn College. Clearly, Goldsmith's criticism not only concerns handbooks but extends to the creative writing workshop as well.

In sum, speaking of "new conceptions" with regard to Uncreative Writing not only makes sense because of Goldsmith's engagement with digitalization, but also in light of the discursive ways in

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which he alienates the popular and wide-spread poetics of how-to-write handbooks and, by metonymy, the poetics and institution of creative writing. Both these instructive texts and the workshops are so important for American writing culture that they form ideal objects of critique for a writer looking to occupy a position in the literary field. To highlight the unconventional gist of his own (pedagogical) project, Goldsmith antagonizes what he seems to consider the most conventional didactic genre available. In a paper presented in 2013, he emphasizes this contrast again: "We've […] needed to acquire a whole new skillset that they don't teach you in 'How to Write'" (Golsmith. "Uncreative Writing").

FRANÇOIS BON'S RECEPTION: FROM *ECRITURE SANS ECRITURE TO DETOURNEMENT*

Taken into account Goldsmith's disavowal of creative writing books, it is somewhat ironic that François Bon reads Uncreative Writing precisely as such a handbook. He speaks of "le livre le plus excitant paru ces dernières années en ce domaine [du creative writing]" ("the most exciting book that recently appeared in the domain [of creative writing]") and praises it particularly for the unconventional, internet-based writing exercises it contains (Bon, "Kenneth Goldsmith"). In the web entries on tierslivre.net devoted to Goldsmith's work, Bon oscillates between praising the latter project's radicalism and discursively pointing out how it differs from his own intentions. In a first post, Bon expresses admiration for Goldsmith as a poet, as the founder of UbuWeb, but most of all as a teacher of writing (Bon, "Kenneth Goldsmith"). He situates the essays in Uncreative Writing against the backdrop of the American creative writing manuals that he collects and concludes that Goldsmith's text stands out. While most manuals, with the exception of those by John Gardner, Gertrude Stein and Malt Olbren, are disappointing, Uncreative Writing, in his view, is a landmark. Bon writes:

> Et qu'il prend une approche radicale: le contexte de l'écriture a changé, aussi bien dans nos outils que dans la publication, alors laissons le creative writing du vieux côté et explorons les outils neufs sans reprendre les techniques de l'invention narrative. Il le dit très sérieusement et bien sûr c'est très loin de ma propre approche. Mais, du coup, Kenneth Goldsmith est le premier à prendre au sérieux la publication blog [et] l'écriture collaborative.

> (And he surely takes a radical approach: the context of writing has changed, with regard to both our tools and means of publication, so let's leave aside creative writing and explore new tools without reverting to techniques of narrative invention. He says it very seriously and obviously it's a far cry from my own approach. But, consequently, Kenneth Goldsmith is the first to take blog publications and collaborative writing seriously.)

From a French writing teacher's perspective, it is highly unlikely that a teacher who endorses a poetics like Goldsmith's and calls it uncreative writing can still be invited to teach at Columbia or Princeton. He also

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[3]Ashbery has been the object of criticism on more than one occasion. For instance, see Baetens, Jan. "Ice Haven, du comic au graphic novel." Textimage. (2016) http://revue-textimage.com/conferencier/06_montage_demontage_remontage/baetens1.html

gives examples of the exercises in Uncreative Writing and translates a passage from the essay "Uncreative Writing in the Classroom. A Disorientation." More, Bon draws attention to the large number of French writers in Uncreative Writing. Finally, he writes how much he would like to translate Goldsmith's entire text ("ô rêve" ["oh dream"]) and thinks of possible translations for the term uncreative writing such as "nous n'écrirons pas" ("we won't write"), "l'écriture sans expression" ("writing without expression") and his own favorite "écriture sans écriture" ("writing without writing") (Bon, "The Future"). [4]

In a second post, Bon is equally enthusiastic when he comments on the publication of Goldsmith's text Theory (2015) by the recently created (2011) publishing house Jean Boîte Éditions. According to Bon, this publication is remarkable for at least two reasons. First, both the French translation (which he regrets not having made himself) and the English version are published by the French publisher Jean Boîte Éditions. Moreover, the French version, Théorie, translated by Léa Faust, appeared before the English one. This seems to confirm the French connection in Goldsmith's work. Second, the form in which Theory appeared is highly unusual. By publishing it as a paper ream (a unit of five hundred loose sheets of copy paper), Goldsmith and Jean Boîte Éditions attempt to come up with a printed format that suits the digital age. In his post, Bon considers it a denial of the fixed form of the traditional book in favor of a much more open format that evokes the hypertextuality of the web. On the level of content (if one can make such a distinction for a moment here), Bon discerns a similar negation. Aphorisms like "non pas la ligne, le sonnet, le paragraphe, le chapitre, seulement la base de données"[5] ("no verse, no sonnet, no paragraph, no chapter, only the database") and "de copier: ce n'est pas une erreur, c'est un outil" ("on copying: it's not a mistake, it's a tool"), essentially put into question dominant literary conceptions, and, for Bon, Goldsmith should be applauded for this: "Hommage à Kenneth Goldsmith" ("Homage to Kenneth Goldsmith") he writes, "et suivez-le sur twitter" ("and follow him on twitter").

Bon's third post on Goldsmith is the final installment of a series of writing exercises in the framework of an online writing atelier called "outils du roman" ("tools of the novel") held in December 2015 (Bon, "Pas de souci"). In this virtual atelier, Bon opts for his usual approach. He presents a brief text of a particular author, in this case an essay by Goldsmith, from which he deduces a writing exercise in several steps. Participants are then invited to send their texts to Bon who will later post them on his website. Bon selects a fragment from Goldsmith's "Infallible Processes. What Writing can Learn from Visual Art" (2011: 125-49), already mentioned above. Goldsmith argues that writers could benefit from adopting the uncreative ethos that has become common in the visual arts since Duchamp and Warhol. Such a change of beliefs and the concomitant abandonment of ideas of originality and authentic genius would be an effective remedy against writer's block, hence the title "Infallible Processes." For instance,

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[4]Bon has indeed proceeded to make a translation of Uncreative Writing. It will be published in 2018 by Jean Boîte Éditions under the title of Écriture sans écriture.

[5]This statement echoes Lev Manovich's idea of the database as the essential symbolic form of our time. See Manovich, Lev. "Database as a Symbolic Form." http://courses.ischool.berkeley.edu/i290-1/s04/readings/manovich_database.pdf

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if one uses already existing texts that are there to be found like an objet trouvé, the problem of writing block would not pose itself any longer. While Goldsmith takes his cue from the artist Sol LeWitt's call for a recipe-based art in which "all the decisions for making an artwork should be made beforehand and […] the execution of the work is merely a matter of duty, an action that shouldn't require too much thought, improvisation, or even […] skill" (2011: 128-29) Bon uses Goldsmith's essay to go into the opposite direction.

Ironically, when we take Goldsmith's interest in Guy Debord into account (2011: 34-62), Bon proposes a détournement of Goldsmith's text and a return to narrative writing and the idea of literary craft. Here, Bon's understanding of détournement is similar to Debord's and Wolman's definition of deceptive détournement as "celui dont un élémént significatif en soi fait l'objet; élément qui tirera du nouveau rapprochement une portée différente" ("that of an intrinsically significant element, which derives a different scope from the new context") (Debord & Wolman, 1956). It signals a text's relocation from one context to another in a strategic attempt to subvert its meaning. The specific passage Bon appropriates from "Infallible Processes" is the journalistic portrait of the poet John Ashbery procrastinating quoted by Goldsmith as a steppingstone for his musings about the topic of writer's block and the value of a machine-like, uncreative, and un-narrative approach. In the context of Bon's online writing exercise, however, this passage is reframed in such a way that its narrative qualities become the focal point.

After introducing Kenneth Goldsmith and the fragment on Ashbery that will serve as a stimulus text, Bon points out that "la force du portrait journalistique, ici, c'est l'irruption du temps quotidien pour mettre en scène le temps du travail. Un temps qui s'exprime par gestes, objets, corps, ville. Retenez bien la série des quatre, ça va vous aider" ("the strength of the journalistic portrait here has to do with the irruption of ordinary time to stage working time. A time that expresses itself through gestures, objects, bodies, the city. Keep in mind those four, that will help you") (Bon, "Pas de souci"). He then calls to mind literary scenes that draw on the experience of procrastination or, more generally, on a description of the writer's everyday working conditions, such as Proust's Temps retrouvé, Flaubert's Éducation sentimentale and Perec's "Notes sur les objets posés sur ma table de travail." In the next step of the exercise, Bon returns to the portrait of Ashbery to discuss how it brings into play the four notions he mentioned earlier. The participants in the atelier are in their turn invited to examine their own:

> gestes (s'asseoir, se lever, attendre, boire du thé), les objets (la machine à écrire, le CD dans la chaîne), la ville (météo de New York l'été, le resau [sic] indien), le corps (le petit tour à la salle de bain dans l'article Ashbery), certains éléments (le coup de fil à l'ami poète malade) croisant les diverses catégories.

> (gestures (sitting down, standing up, waiting, drinking tea), the objects (the typewriter, the CD in the stereo), the city (the New York weather in summer, the Indian restaurant), the body (the short visit to the toilet in the Ashbery article), certain elements (the phone call to a sick, befriended poet) that traverse the different categories.) (Bon, "Pas de souci")

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Bon continues to describe the exercise as "une archéologie du quotidien" ("an archeology of the everyday") and emphasizes that its goal is to investigate "ce qui se passe *avant* écrire, ce qui se passe *quand on n'est pas encore prêt à écrire*" ("what happens *before* writing, what happens *when we aren't ready* to write just yet") (Bon, "Pas de souci"). He further instructs his readers to write in the third person singular.

Finally, just before telling the participants to start writing, he concludes: "Alors oui, tout d'un coup nous y voilà: on n'est plus dans une écriture sur l'écriture, ni même chez Kenneth Goldsmith et son *écriture sans écriture*, on est revenu au bon vieux roman – celui qu'on cherche, justement" ("And suddenly we are there: no longer with a writing about writing, nor with Kenneth Goldsmith and his *writing without writing*, we are back at the good old novel – just what we are looking for") (Bon "Pas de souci"). In this way, the portrait of John Ashbery that Goldsmith advanced as a counterpoint to promote an uncreative approach is deflected in Bon's atelier and reframed as a compelling description of the writer's everyday life. Thus, the *détournement* of a passage from an essay on conceptual poetics is turned into an exercise in the "bon vieux roman."

DÉTOURNEMENT **IN THE CONTEXT OF THE FRENCH** *ATELIER D'ÉCRITURE*

How can we understand this *détournement*? One explanation is that Bon is simply attracted by the descriptive strength of Ashbery's portrait and that he wants to explore its potential to trigger interesting pieces of writing. Another, more general conclusion is that Bon, although recognizing the importance of Goldsmith's endeavor, just has a different agenda. The questions at the heart of his project and the writing he adopts to explore them are simply different from the stakes in Goldsmith's work. While the latter essentially sets out to challenge common assumptions that he considers problematic in digital times, the former's main objective is providing people with tools to write strong, intriguing texts. While Goldsmith operates mainly as a conceptual artist for whom the text gives way to the concept, Bon's model is that of the craftsman who, whilst taking into account the implications of digitalization, is primarily interested in (the construction of) the literary text itself.

Further, Bon's *détournement* can be read, as I did in the case of Goldsmith's posture of newness, from a literary historical point of view that especially takes the context of French creative writing into account. From such a perspective, one can first of all consider Bon's return "au bon vieux roman" as inspired by the absence of a French creative writing tradition that initiates students into the basics of prose writing. This is what Bon himself suggests in his video about American writing handbooks when drawing a comparison between American and French creative writing and pinpointing an important difference (Bon, "Sur les pistes"). The Americans, Bon argues, under the impulse of the workings of their literary market, start out by introducing students to genres and generic conventions.[6] This is particularly true for the short story and its rules of character, time and action. The French writing atelier,

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by contrast, and Bon sees his own case as a paradigmatic example, first makes participants familiar with the singularity of a literary text or an author and draws out this singularity in order to create a writing exercise. Not coincidentally, the selected writers are often those whose oeuvre resists genre-classification, for instance Artaud and Beckett. Moreover, exercises in the writing atelier do not necessarily have to lead to longer (narrative) works, but can be considered valuable in themselves. In spite of these differences in methodology, at a certain moment in the video, Bon notes:

> La question, c'est de se dire, vis-à-vis de mes étudiants, est-ce que je n'ai pas moi aussi quand-même la responsabilité d'entrer dans des questions qui pour moi, enfin dans mon travail à moi, peuvent être secondaires : définir un personnage, installer une situation, une scène d'action, des choses comme ça. Au début, c'était dire, allez, comme ça, nagez dans une piscine que je ne connais pas.

> (The question is to say, with regard to my students, don't I as well have a responsibility to tackle questions that for me, that is to say in my work, might be secondary: defining character, constructing a situation, an action scene, all these things. In the beginning, it was to say, well, let's go, swim in a swimming pool that you don't know.) (Bon, "Sur les pistes")

French creative writing lacks a component that instructs students in prose writing and Bon feels responsible to fill this gap. In view of this remark, his *détournement* appears as a remarkable statement. Bon, in spite of his well-documented resistance against genre-classifications and against the genre of the novel in particular (I will briefly return to this issue below) not only gives a series of writing exercises on the novel, he also uses an essay by one of the most notorious conceptual (and un-narrative) writers of today to do so.

Finally, paying attention to the poetics of the historical French writing atelier can provide another understanding of Bon's *détournement*. In fact, apart from those involved in it, critics have left the history of French creative writing largely unexplored (André, 1989; Rossignol, 1996; Bilous & Oriol-Boyer, 2013). Isabelle Rossignol situates the atelier's origins in the aftermath of *mai* '68. Together with the political upheaval, she signals the importance of new theoretical ideas and literary innovations in shaping atelier practices. She refers to the Nouveau Roman's refusal of the notion of inspiration in favour of a conception of writing grounded in practices and labour, Claude Lévi-Strauss's idea of bricolage, Gérard Genette's analyses of intertextuality, and the constraint writing practices of Oulipo.

Even though Bon's atelier is not directly steeped in this tradition[7] (he recounts for instance how, when giving his first workshops, he did not know the term *atelier d'écriture*) his poetics is certainly rooted in a very similar literary and cultural history. Although it appears as an attempt to bypass the formalist

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[6]The genre Bon has in mind here is the short story, in particular what Mark McGurl has called the lower-middle class minimalist short story.

[7]Bon, however, is well aware of the history of the atelier d'écriture. See, for example, Bon, François. Apprendre l'invention, 224.

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and autonomic propensities of the Nouveau Roman, François Bon's work remains deeply entrenched with the phenomenological questions that animated the texts of writers such as Claude Simon and Nathalie Sarraute (Gefen: 2010). Equally, the constraints of Georges Perec and Raymond Queneau, for example the former's use of the inventory as a literary device, infuse not only Bon's own writings, but, more importantly, his entire practice as a facilitator of writing ateliers. It is significant that *Tous les mots sont adultes* opens with a chapter that pays homage to the work of Georges Perec. Structuralism, too, though less prominently, plays a role in Bon's atelier, from Genette's concept of focalization being applied to infer constraints regarding point of view to Barthes's *Mythologies* as trigger texts.

This literary and theoretical background, which played an important role in the development of French creative writing as a whole, allows us to understand Bon's *détournement* of Goldsmith's project as a sign of a certain redundancy. The "new conceptions" that Goldsmith proposes, i.e. writing as recipe-based (or constraint-fuelled), authorship as text-management (or as a fundamentally intertextual work of bricolage), and the emphasis on the materiality of language, have always been an integral part of the poetics of French creative writing. Even more poignantly, they are not merely part of it but actually constitutive of the whole endeavour. Consequently, what Scott Pound considers the fundamental value of Goldsmith's project, namely the challenge that it poses to the general literary culture is already intrinsic to Bon's poetics of the writing atelier.

FINAL PRECISIONS: THE *BON VIEUX ROMAN* REVISITED

To recapitulate, this article has studied Bon's ambivalent reception of Goldsmith's work, at least as it manifests itself in three blogposts and especially in the entry that figures in the online writing atelier "outils du roman." from a point of view that takes the contexts and histories of French and American writing into account. It showed that the apparent novelty of Goldsmith's projects and its notoriety in the American literary world can be understood by considering not only its implication in digital culture but also its continuous discursive resistance against the poetics of creative writing, especially as they appear in how-to-write handbooks. More importantly, it demonstrated that Bon's departure from Goldsmith, his transition from "une écriture sans écriture" to the "bon vieux roman," can be viewed in the context of, on the one hand, a contemporary *atelier d'écriture* that hardly instructs the basics of prose writing and, on the other, of a history of French creative writing that has always incorporated and was even shaped by the questions and conceptions that Goldsmith's project puts forward.

Two final precisions should be made with regard to Bon's return to the "bon vieux roman" that has been hitherto taken at face value. First, given Bon's notoriously conflicted attitude towards the genre of the novel (Korthals Altes, 2008; James, 2011), i.e. his oft-commented rejection of the label in *Impatience* (1998) and its reappearance some years later on the covers of the very unusual texts *Tumulte* (2006) and *Daewoo* (2006), it is difficult not to note the irony in the phrase "le bon vieux roman." In fact, Bon's

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instructions are a far cry from what one finds in how-to-write fiction handbooks. Although they do center around the unsurprising notions of character, action and structure, at the same time, they also seem to resist conventional approaches to these elements of fiction. This is most obvious when considering Bon's warnings against planning. While a mainstream manual can be counted upon to give advice as to the construction of intriguing plots and coherent characters, in the first installment of the virtual atelier, Bon writes that "ce qu'on voudrait relâcher, c'est l'idée de la démonstration, l'idée du livre, l'idée même de la construction" ("what we should to let go of is the idea of the demonstration, the idea of the book, even the idea of construction") (Bon, "À table"). In another entry, he argues that it is "exactement la démarche inverse du principal procédé de constitution d'un roman" ("exactly the opposite of the main approach to the composition of the novel") (Bon, "De comment se trouver"). This tension in Bon's approach to teaching prose is representative of the entire problem of the novel in his work and merits further analysis in the context of his writing ateliers.

Second, Bon's *détournement* does not signal a general refusal of digitally driven creative writing methods that challenge more traditional genre-classifications and writing practices. For example, in addition to his atelier *on outils du roman, tierslivre.net* contains a series of online writing workshops called "jalons pour l'écrire web" ("milestones for online writing"). Here one finds exercises on collaborative writing in google docs or on the use of blogs as tools to spur the writer's imagination. In another entry, Bon explains that he urges his students at the arts school to "garde les ordis ouverts même dans le face à face. L'écriture se contextualise par les ressources et la documentation web autant que par le livre" ("keep the computers on even during face to face meetings. Writing contextualizes itself through online resources and documentation as much as through the book") (Bon, "Cergy"). In tandem with his (re)turn to the novel, these digital writing practices, which often resemble Goldsmith's, attest to the rhizomatic development of Bon's atelier practices. Bon simultaneously constructs his atelier practices in multiple directions. Whereas one component penetrates further into a digital space where older conceptions of genre, authorship, reading and writing become problematic, another, originally constructed to fill a gap in the contemporary French writing atelier, introduces students to the basics of the novel.

Given this rhizomatic structure, Bon's ambiguous reception of Goldsmith's work makes sense. On the one hand, uncreative writing seems to underlie some of Bon's *écrire web* exercises. Here, Bon's admiration translates into new writing methods. On the other hand, Goldsmith's "Infallible Processes" is used as a pretext to instruct prose writing. Through his *détournement* of Goldsmith's poetics, a conceptual poetics *par excellence*, Bon highlights, just as he does through his use of and comments on writing manuals, the need for basic prose writing methods in the French context.

In 2018 Bon's translation of *Uncreative Writing* will be published by Jean Boîte Éditions, reinforcing Kenneth Goldsmith's growing reputation in France. No longer drawing primarily on French and continental critical thinking in order to construct a poetics of uncreative writing in the digital age, Goldsmith can bring this body of theory back to France, mediated through the prism of digitalization. Moreover, this translation, made by one of France's most studied and critically acclaimed living

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novelists, will help canonize Goldsmith's place in the French literary field, which strongly contrasts the strong criticism he received in the U.S. after "The Body of Michael Brown." This raises interesting questions about the differences between U.S. and French literary cultures: are the poetics and the politics of uncreative writing, denounced at different occasions in the U.S., in some way more at home in the contemporary French literary world? On a more general note, Bon's ambivalent reception of *Uncreative Writing* emphasizes the importance of context, in this case national traditions, to appreciate creative writing practices. These methods do not appear in a void and cannot be straightforwardly copied from one setting to another. They are always in some way translated and adapted and hence the result of a specific *détournement*. For those interested in these transfers of creative writing practices, especially from one national context to another, Bon's anticipated translation of *Uncreative Writing* within the context of the French *atelier d'écriture* can shed a further light on the specificity of both the French and the American creative writing scenes and, by extension, on their literary and cultural constellations.

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