

Récoltes et Semailles

Alexandre Grothendieck

1986

Contents

1	By way of a foreward	7
---	----------------------	---

**Presentation of the themes
or PRELUDE IN FOUR
PARTS**

Chapter 1

By way of a foreward

January 30 1986

p. A1

All that was left to write was the foreward, in order for *Récoltes et Semailles* to be given to the publisher. And I swear that I went into it with all the will in the world to write something which would be suitable. Something **reasonable** this time. No more than three or four pages, but carefully phrased in order to introduce this huge tome of more than one thousand pages. Something which “grabs” the attention of the jaded reader, which gives him a glimpse that in these frightening “more than a thousand pages”, there could be things of interest to him (or things which concern him, who knows?). It is not really my style to pander. But I was ready to make an exception for once! The “publisher crazy enough to give it a shot” (to publish this visibly unpublishable monster) had to make ends meet one way or another.

But then, it didn’t come. And yet I tried my best. And not only for an afternoon, as I originally planned. Tomorrow will mark three weeks since I started, since the sheets began accumulating. What came, for sure, isn’t what one could decently call a “forward”. It is yet another miss! Blame it on my old age - I have never been a salesman. Even when it comes to pleasing (oneself or friends...).

What came is a sort of long “Walk” with commentary, through my work as a mathematician. A Walk intended mostly for the “layman” - he who “never understood anything about math”. And for myself as well, having never indulged in such a Walk. Step by step, I found myself unearthing and saying things that had previously remained unspoken. As if by chance, these are also things which I feel are most essential, both in my practice and its outcome. They are things which are not technical in nature. It will be up to you to decide whether or not I succeeded in my naive enterprise to “get the message through” - an enterprise which surely is also a bit mad. My satisfaction and my pleasure will come from making you feel these things. Things that many of my wise colleagues do not feel anymore. Maybe they have become too wise and too prestigious. This often leads to losing touch with the simplest and most essential things.

During this “Walk through a body of work” I also speak of my life. As

p. A2

well as, here and there, what *Récoltes et Semailles* is about. I mention this in more detail in the “Letter” (dated from May of last year) which follows the “Walk”. This Letter was directed towards my previous students and to my “old friends” in the mathematical community. But even the Letter is not technical in nature. It can be read by any reader interested in learning through a “heartfelt” narrative, the odds and ends that led me to writing *Récoltes et Semailles*. Even more than the Walk, the Letter will provide a preview to a particular atmosphere in the “prestigious mathematical world”. And also (just as in the Walk) of my writing style, as peculiar as it may seem, and of the spirit that is expressed through this style - a spirit which is not universally appreciated.

In the Walk and throughout *Récoltes et Semailles*, I speak of the activity of **doing mathematics**. It is an activity for which I have first-hand experience and know very well. Most of the things I say about it can surely be said of any kind of creative work, or work involving discovery. In any case it is true of all “intellectual” work, that which is done using the “brain” and in writing. All such work proceeds through the outbreak and development of an **understanding** of the things which are being probed. But to take an example at the opposite extreme, romantic passion is also an activity of discovery. It opens us to understanding of a “physical” nature which also renews itself, develops, and deepens over time. Both of these impulses - that which, say, livens the mathematician at work and that of the lover - are much closer in nature than we generally assume or we readily admit. I hope that the pages of *Récoltes et Semailles* will make you feel this impulse in your work and in your daily life.

p. A3

Most of the Walk focuses on mathematical work itself. I remain mostly silent concerning the **context** in which this work takes place, and concerning the **motivations** at play outside of mathematical work itself. This risks giving me, or the mathematician, or the “scientist” in general a flattering but deformed image. In the style of “grand and noble passion” without any form of rectification. In accordance with the great “Myth” of Science (with a capital S, if you will!). The heroic myth, “promethean”, to which writers and thinkers have succumbed (and continue to succumb). Only historians, maybe, manage to sometimes resist this tantalizing myth. The truth is, within the motivation of these “scientists”, which sometimes lead them to devote themselves entirely to their work, ambition and vanity play a role just as important and universal as they do in any other profession. This phenomenon appears in blunt or subtle ways depending on the person - and I am no exception to this pattern. The reading of my testimony will hopefully leave no doubt about this fact.

It is true also that even the most intense ambitions are powerless at discovering or proving a novel mathematical statement - just as they are powerless (for instance) to “make one hard” (in the proper sense of the term). Whether man or woman, what “makes one hard” is not ambition, nor the desire to shine, to exhibit power, of a sexual nature in this case - quite the contrary! It is the acute perception of something strong, at once very real and very delicate. One could call it “beauty”, though this is one of a thousand faces of this thing. Being ambitious doesn’t prevent one from sensing the beauty of a being or a thing. But it is **not** ambition which makes us feel it...

The person that first discovered and mastered fire was somebody just like you and me. Not at all what we refer to as “hero”, or “demi-god”, and so on. Surely, just like you and me, he has encountered the grip of anxiety as well as the time-worn remedy of vanity which alleviates the grip. At the instant at which he “knew” fire, there was no fear nor vanity. Such is the truth in the heroic myth. The myth becomes insipid when it is used to to disguise another aspect of things which is just as real and essential.

My aim in *Récoltes et Semailles* has been to address both aspects of the myth - that of the impulse towards understanding, and that of fear and its vain antidotes. I believe I “understand”, or at least **know** this impulse and its origin (or perhaps one day I will discover to what extent I was deluded). But concerning fear and vanity, as well as the resulting insidious creativity blocks, I know thta I have yet to thoroughly uncover this great enigma. And who knows if I will ever reach the conclusion of this mystery in the year I have left. . .

As I was writing *Récoltes et Semailles* two images emerged in order to represent the two aspects of the human journey: that of the **child** (aka the **worker**), and that of the **boss**. In the Work which we are about to undertake, we will be dealing mostly with the “child”. It is also him that is featured in the subtitle “**The Child and the Mother**”. The motivation for this name will hopefully become clear over the course of this work.

p. A4

In the remainder of this reflection, however, it is the Boss who takes the lead. He is living up to his name! It would be more accurate to speak of multiple bosses of competing enterprises rather than of a **singular** boss. But it is also true that all bosses essentially resemble one another. And once we mention bosses it is implied that we will also have to deal with “villains”. In part I of the reflection (named “Fatuity and Renewal”, which follows the present introductory section). I mostly take on the role of the “villain”. In the following three parts it is mostly the “others”. Chacun son Tour! That is to say that, in addition to philosophical reflections and “confessions” (not contrite), there will be “vitriolic portraits” (to use the expression of one of my colleagues who found himself tormented). Not to mention large-scale well-oiled “operations”. Robert Jaulin¹ assured me (half jokingly) that in *Récoltes et Semailles* I was making the “ethnology of the mathematical community” (or maybe the sociology I do not quite remember). It is flattering of course to learn that one has been (unknowingly) doing scholarly things! It is true that during the “investigation” segment of the reflection, I saw in passing, in the pages I was writing, a good chunk of the mathematical establishment without counting a number of my colleagues and friends of more modest status. Over the past few months, since I have been sending preliminary versions of *Récoltes et Semailles* this has been “brought up” again. My testimony arrived like a tome landing in a pond. There were responses of every kind (except for boredom. . .). Yet almost every time the response was far from what I expected. There was also a lot of silence, which speaks volumes. Visibly, I had (and still have) a lot to learn about what

¹Rober Jaulin is an old friend. From what I understand, his position with respect to the establishment of the ethnological milieu mirrors mine with respect to the “high society” of mathematics (as white wolves).

happens in people's minds, among my previous students and other colleagues - excuse me I meant about "the sociology of the mathematical milieu"! To all those that contributed to the great sociological work of my old days, I would like to express sincere recognition.

Of course, I was particularly sensitive to warm responses. There were also some rare colleagues who conveyed a sentiment (thus far unexpressed) of crisis, or of degradation of the inner workings of the mathematical milieu with which they identify themselves.

Outside of this milieu, among the very first to respond positively to my testimony, I would like to recognize Sylvie et Catherine Chevalley² Robert Jaulin, Stéphane Deligeorge, Christian Bourgois. If *Récoltes et Semailles* achieves a wider diffusion than that of the initial printing (addressed to a very limited social circle of people), it is mostly thanks to them. Thanks mostly to them communicating their conviction that what I strived to seize and say had to be said. And that it could have an audience outside of my colleagues (who are often sullen, sometimes even belligerent, and strictly opposed to question their position...). Indeed Christian Bourgois did not hesitate to risk publishing the unpublishable, and Stéphane Deligeorge did not hesitate to place my indigestible testimony alongside works of Newton, Cuivier, and Arago (I could not ask for better company). To each of them, for their repeated expressions of sympathy and trust, intervening at an especially sensitive moment, I happily extend all my gratitude.

²Sylvie et Catherine Chevalley are the widow and daughter of Claude Chevalley, the colleague and friend to whom the central part of *Récoltes et Semailles* is devoted (ReS III, the key of the Yin and the Yang). At multiple times in the reflection I speak of him and of the role he played in my journey.