

**The Prefix of Prefixes:
Francis Ponge's 'Le Pré' and *La Fabrique du 'Pré'***

by

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'Le Pré' is one of Francis Ponge's last great poems¹, and, also the first one of which he agreed to publish the rough drafts, almost in their entirety, in a volume intitled *La Fabrique du pré*.² His interest in the text's genesis ('Je me livre ici à la préparation de la préparation du pré, ou encore à la préparation de la parution en préoriginale du pré', he writes on page 260) coincides with his examination of origins, inscribed both in the poem's referent, and in the word 'pré' itself, which Ponge links with the prefix 'pre', described as the 'prefix of prefixes'.

The return to sources, at the end of Ponge's productive career, is fairly surprising, since he had long viewed the question of origins as a taboo subject. Firstly for ideological reasons, which kept Ponge apart from major metaphysical questions. Taking the side of things is, in part, to accept them as they are, without wondering why they are. This rejection of first causes and ultimate ends paralleled an aesthetic choice: that of limits, that of the completed text closed in on itself.

It responded also to existential motives, which it would take too long to rehearse here.³ Let us simply recall that his father's death in 1923 had opened up a vast chasm for Ponge, one which he tried to conceal at any price. It lastingly contaminated his concept of becoming, and overwhelmed him with a sense of entropy. One of the rare texts in *Parti pris des choses*, which goes back to the origins of its object, 'Le Galet' provides us with a striking picture of cosmogony combined with 'agony':

La raison ne l'atteint qu'amorphe et répandu parmi les bords pâteux de l'agonie. Elle s'éveille pour le baptême d'un héros de la grandeur du monde, et découvre le pétrin affreux d'un lit de mort.⁴

It would be difficult to find a positive image of birth or growth in the first half of Ponge's work. His preference for the mineral over the liquid, animal or vegetable corresponds with a certain desire to escape becoming. Ponge was to spend a long time in ridding himself of this 'manie pétrifiante'.⁵ The celebration of vegetable growth to be found in 'Le Pré' crowns an evolution which led Ponge, after the war years, to be progressively reconciled with natural life and to valorize the movement of writing *in statu nascendi*, as much as the closure of the completed text.

In 'Le Pré' the question of the origin of the world is closely bound up with that of the origins of language, since its object is simultaneously the source of the landscape and a linguistic root. In the poem the adjective 'originel' qualifies the 'orage' presiding over the flight upwards of the vegetable as much as the onomatopoeias from which language was first born. The genesis of the element and the genesis of language are associated in a recurring expression: 'L'orage originel a longuement parlé'. Now, this coming into being of language and landscape is also linked to the emergence of the subject, as one of the drafts of the poem reveals: 'L'orage, *initial en nous*, a longuement parlé' (p.248). The beginning of the poem coincides with the moment of awakening, in which conscience is born in the world and in language:

Que parfois la Nature, à notre réveil, nous propose
Ce à quoi justement nous étions disposés,
La louange aussitôt s'enfle dans notre gorge.
Nous croyons être au paradis.

The allusion to paradise refers back to the Genesis of the world and the subject (to the 'vert paradis des amours enfantines', evoked on page 219), but also to an eschatology. The first vision of the *pré* situates this paradise in an anteriority: it is 'aperçu tout à coup comme *déjà* habité, promené (parcouru) par les bienheureux', and in a perspective of the future: it is 'le lieu du loisir éternel', 'le lieu aussi de la résurrection de la vie universelle sous la forme la plus élémentaire, le lieu de la renaissance de l'avenir' (p.234).

The *pré* therefore possesses an ambiguous temporal status, referring back to a past that has already happened and to a future which is still to come. So the present in the poem's first lines gives way immediately to past and future tenses:

Voilà comme il en fut du pré que je veux dire,
Qui fera mon propos d'aujourd'hui.

The origin, being what has already taken place, remains still to be conquered. A double horizon of both past and future is organized around the present. This paradox is formulated according to some fantastic etymology linking the word 'pré' and the prefix 'pre' and the Latin past participle of *paratus* which is the origin of *pratum*, according to Ponge:

Crase de paratus, selon les étymologistes latins (...)
Le pré gisant ici comme le participe passé par excellence
S'y révere aussi bien comme notre préfixe des préfixes,
Préfixe déjà dans préfixe, présent déjà dans présent.

The association of the 'participe passé par excellence' and the 'préfixe des préfixes' inscribes in the heart of the word *pré* the paradox of origin: that of an anteriority opening up the horizon of a future. Does not the word 'préfixe' imply what comes before and also summons what comes after?

Préfixe à tout, préfixe à tous les verbes, à toutes les actions. p.234

Amidst this linguistic reverie, all aspects of any meditation on origins are crystallized, reuniting cosmos ('everything'), logos ('all verbs'), and anthropos ('all actions'). Here I would like to tease out all the ontological, cosmological, psychological and poetic implications in this paradox of origins which Ponge detects in the *Pré* and its signifiers.

Ontology

Ponge has always declared his distance from any metaphysical ambition. His object is not 'being' but 'beings'.⁶ And his aim in *La Fabrique du pré* is of a cosmological order rather than a truly ontological one. Yet from time to time his thoughts relate to 'being' itself. Witness his occasional use of the verb *être* without complement: 'ainsi *sommes-nous*', he writes for example on the 25th November 1962 (p.223), and the penultimate version of the poem ends with: 'Ainsi soit-il!' (p.262). The religious connotations of the expressions are consistent with the multiple allusions which transform the *pré* into a sacred place, a 'paradis', or sanctuary:

Serions-nous déjà parvenus au naos,
 Enfin au lieu sacré d'un petit-déjeuner de raisons?
 (...)
 Et tourne déjà le moulin à prières,
 Sans la moindre prosternation d'ailleurs.

The poet's prayer implies no supernatural belief; it is rather a rational acquiescence in what is, a celebration of a completely natural presence. In the present, something is already present, which has always been presented: 'le pré nous présente ou propose au présent, de façon amène, un participe passé' (p.226). The 'aménité' of the *pré* recalls that of the *locus amoenus* of poetic tradition, and summons up the *amen* of religious assent; but it is especially attentiveness ('prévenance'). The *pré*'s presence is Nature's gift to us:

Notre Nature (...) nous présente, nous apporte sur un plateau, nous offre, nous donne, prépare un pré. p.223

That is why Ponge links the word *pré* with *prêt* and *praestum*. The *pré* is what Nature lends (*prête*) us or proposes to us, having prepared it for our intention; but

we can enjoy it only because we are ourselves ready (prêts), predisposed: 'parfois, notre nature nous prédispose à un pré' (p.225). The *pré*'s presence thus arises through the encounter of a proposition from Nature and a disposition of 'our nature'. By *nature*, Ponge means both 'ce que nous sommes' and 'ce qui est offert à nos sens' (p.236):

Parfois, notre nature –
 J'entends dire, d'un mot, la Nature sur notre planète
 Et ce que, chaque jour, à notre réveil, nous sommes-
 Parfois, notre nature nous a préparé(s) (à) un pré.

The graphic 'préparé(s) (à) un pré' combines the presence of the world with our presence in the world. The origin is also our opening to what opens up to us, our awakening to what is presented. This presence in the world that has already-always been there and still to come which Ponge recognizes as the sole *raison d'être* in the quasi-testamentary text reproduced at the end of *La Fabrique du pré*:

Voici pourquoi j'ai vécu.
 Goûtant un vif plaisir à ne rien faire
 que provoquer par ma seule présence
 chargée d'une sorte d'aimantation
 à l'être des choses (...)
 que provoquer une intensification
 de la nature des êtres et des choses
 qu'à l'attendre, qu'à attendre ce moment-là. p.267

Cosmology

Within a less strictly phenomenological or ontological perspective, the *pré* appears both as the result and the origin of 'universal life': 'préfixe à tout' (p.234), and 'past participle' 'auquel ont participé tous les éléments, toutes les actions passées' (p.258). At this cosmological level of Pongian reflection, you find the paradox of origins, an anteriority whose value is one of perpetual beginning: the *pré* is both 'accumulation des jours passés et principe du jour d'aujourd'hui' (p.258).

Here Nature is essentially for Ponge a force for generation:

La Nature, selon l'étymologie de Littré, est, comme je le pensais, du même radical que naître, naissance: les anserit *jan*, qui a donné *na* (pour *gna*) [...] je pourrais donc titrer mon texte: *De la gnature des prés* [...] *nature* signifie donc l'engendrante, la force qui engendre). pp.236-237

A thematics of birth runs through the entire text and avant-text, establishing an intimate association between the vegetable dynamics of the *pré* with the emergence of poetic language:

Préparons donc la page où puisse aujourd'hui naître
Une vérité qui soit verte.

Now, most often, this rebirth is presented not as an absolute beginning, but as a new beginning (recommencement), or indeed a re-birth:

Le côté naissant ou renaissant, perpétuellement renaissant du pré.
Renaissance. Prés de Botticelli; pré de Pise;
Josquin des Prés. p.226

The reference to the Renaissance here illustrates the necessity of a return to sources to enable a new departure: the name of Josquin des Prés evokes a 'musique archaïque' for Ponge and, by association, 'Saint-Germain des Prés' and the 'Pré aux Clercs': 'un quartier d'antiquaires', and a place where duels used to be fought. Botticelli's *Spring* adjoins the 'pré de Pise', which is a cemetery: does not any rebirth presuppose a previous death?

For Ponge there is no creation *ex nihilo*: the *pré*'s soil comprises the 'restes des trois règnes' (p.258). The greenness of the grass is born of this 'cendrier universel' (p.233). The mineral's 'lente dégradation' which exposed the triumph of entropy in 'Le Galet', is here transformed into a source of life, thanks to the assistance of water:

Le pré est l'émulation même.
Il représente la transmutation au présent en une nouvelle matière
(principe de vie) des deux autres principes inertes: l'eau et le minéral,
divisés et mêlés à l'extrême. p.245

The *pré*, a 'verte incarnation de la pluie', is the 'suite douce' of the 'orage initial' (p.222) of which every blade of grass retains a memory in the form of a 'perle de rosée' (p.246). But in its turn water too will die, as a result of the sun, in order for the vegetable to take flight upwards:

Quand le soleil revient
L'eau tend à s'évaporer;
elle, qui réimprègne le cendrier
universel, veut mourir à son tour
sous l'effet de la chaleur qui
remonte, elle renonce, elle
s'évapore

mais alors elle entraîne
 avec elle vers le ciel ces restes organiques,
 elle ressuscite le cendrier universel: l'herbe et la vie
 alors ressurgissent et voici *le pré*.
 L'herbe exprime donc la résurrection universelle sous
 la forme la plus élémentaire. p.234

Therefore death is the origin of new life: the *pré* 'est le lieu où tout ce qui a fini recommence' (p.242).

Psychology

The cycle of deaths and rebirths, giving a sense of rhythm to 'l'histoire de la matière organique', also concerns that of the text and the subject. Throughout the long, difficult genesis of 'Le Pré', Ponge underwent many periods of depression and discouragement. One of the most serious of these occurred on the evening of 27 February 1963, when he confided in writing his temptation to 'en finir', to 'se coucher' too in the *pré*, to find permanent rest. But in being united with the *pré*'s horizontality, he took measure of the flight upwards (*essor*) that roused him, and suddenly he regained confidence in life and writing:

Tout près de l'abandon
 allongé sur ce pré
 Et presque décider à ne plus en bouger
 A garder le silence
 A mourir là-dessus
 Pour être mis dessous
 sans plus un geste à faire,
 La prise de conscience soudain
 de la verticalité de l'herbe,
 la constante insurrection du vert
 nous ressuscite. p.231

This sudden recovery probably accounted in some measure for the awakening of some beneficent phantasms: he celebrated the Father's resurrection and the rediscovery of the Mother. The Mineral, that 'aieul énorme' which 'Le Galet' reveals to us forever nailed down on the death-bed, is, in 'Le Pré', 'réduit en grains infimes et *alités*' but 'qui pourtant se dressent, florissent' (p.200), and is now 'merveilleusement debout, dans un élan vertical, un jet d'eau incarnée' (p.218). And for its part, water, for which the poet of the *Parti pris des choses* showed repugnance, since he found it too 'informe' and elusive, gains consistency when mixed with mineral,⁷ the liquid 'élément' becomes 'aliment', providing something 'à boire et à manger', reawakening the most primitive

oral satisfactions: by the mediation of a quotation from Virgil ('sat prata biberunt'), the *prés* 'imbibés' with water, become 'biberons' (p.215).

As this pun shows us, fantasy regression relies on an archaic functioning of language based on the play of 'onomatopées originelles' (p.239). Ponge retraces the paths of creation by means of a return to the poem's and language's sources.

Poetics

In order to be composed, the poem must return to its origin, whilst at the same time proceeding towards its end, which will be the point of departure for some new beginning.

According to Ponge, 'Le Pré' could only 'commencer à se faire' from the moment he recaptures the 'anecdote qui a été au déclenchement de l'émotion'.⁸ The anecdote is reported in a long note in 1964, presented as 'un chapitre du *Temps retrouvé*' (p.243). In fact it doubly belongs to the past: in it Ponge tells of a kind of sentimental, literary pilgrimage with his wife Odette, in 1960, to the places where they had met more than thirty years earlier, and where he had conceived 'entre autres le *Carnet du Bois de pins* et plus de dix ans auparavant 'Le Galet', (p.244). It is therefore really a 'raid de reconnaissance'; and the poem itself was to be an act of re-cognition of what had previously been given: 'si nous aimons les choses, c'est que nous les reconnaissons' (p.23).

The poet's first task would be to preserve the memory of first emotion:

Je fus, je ne sais pourquoi, saisi d'une sorte d'enthousiasme [...] je sus immédiatement que cette vision demeurerait telle quelle, intacte dans ma mémoire. Et donc qu'il me faudrait essayer de la dire. p.244

But poetic memory is not the simple preservation of the past: to what was, it adds the thrust (*visée*) of some future imperative. It opens up for emotion some future in language. Indeed it is not enough to have come across a *prés*: it is essential, in writing, to proceed 'à la rencontre de cette rencontre'. Thus the origin is doubled, since if the poem 'is born' from some preceding emotion, it will succeed in meeting up with it only at the completion of its own genesis:

Voici d'abord de quelle émotion il *naquit* (mais il *n'est pas encore né*).
p.243

Caught between a there-already and a not-yet, poetic emotion is not the simple reception of some anterior given, but the projection of an ulterior language. It is in no

way passive, but sets the poet in motion, leading him towards 'cette activité' which is writing (p.11). Ponge entitles one of his notes: 'Le pré qui m'a ému ou Le pré, où je l'ai conçu' (p.234). Emotion is premonition: both participation in what has been, and anticipation of what will be written. In the same way, sight is always foresight; the poet 'a conçu' 'Le Pré' from the very first time he saw it (p.200): 'je venais de le concevoir (ou seulement de le voir, ou prévoir: et de désirer le faire)'.

If seeing is thereby the equivalent of conceiving, that is because perception is not limited to recording perceptible data: it organizes data to provide meaning. The *pré* is thus offered, in its concrete plenitude, as already endowed with meaning:

Il s'agit d'une réalité exemplaire, d'une des plus parfaites notions, à la fois logique et physique, que nous puissions, avec évidence et dans la clarté, à la fois percevoir et concevoir. p.263

If such logic is inscribed in perception, the poet should not have too much difficulty in telling the origin of his emotion. 'Le fait de l'écriture', according to this hypothesis, should be only the 'lecture d'un texte du monde' (p.22), and the naming of the thing should coincide with its presence: 'A l'appel de son nom, le pré, présent, dit son nom: pré' (p.257). And in fact scarcely is the *pré* proposed to the poet than 'la louange, aussitôt, s'enfle dans (sa) bouche'.

Yet, as we have pointed out, this coincidence, in a unique present, between the coming into the world and that of speech, is soon after belied: one slips into the past, whilst the other is borne away towards the future:

Voilà comme il en fut du pré que je veux dire
Et qui fera mon propos d'aujourd'hui.

To the 'proposition' made to him, the poet proposes to reply, by making it his future 'propos'. Thereby a gap is established between the language of the origin and that of the poem:

La louange aussitôt s'enfle dans notre bouche. L'émotion qui s'ensuit, descelle notre bouche. Nous croyons être au paradis. Tel fut pour moi ce pré, que je dois donc vous dire. Tel sera mon propos d'aujourd'hui. Il y faut la parole et non pas la peinture. p.257

Ponge denounces as an 'imposture' the idea of some total immediacy of language; perhaps what is valid for painting is not so for poetry:

Malgré notre amour de la peinture
 Prendre un tube de vert, l'étaler sur la page, ce n'est pas faire un pré.
 Ils naissent autrement.
 Ils sourdent de la page [...]
 Il y faut l'espace de l'écriture, de l'inscription,
 Et que le temps nécessaire à la parole, à l'élocution y soit mis. [...]
 La nature aussitôt le rappelle, contre les impostures de la poésie. Point
 d'imposture, nous préférons l'imposture à la poésie. La prétention à
 l'imposture. pp.254-255

Between the poem and its origin, writing introduces time, the delay of preterition. There is opposition between the dream of coincidence and the work of some *différance*. Only at the end of the work can the poem meet up again with its object:

Il y a un pré.
 Mais il reste trop à distance. Et comment l'avoir sans y être. Comment
 en somme l'avoir sans l'être. Et comment l'être sans le dire, sans le
 sortir, de nous-même de notre bouche, comment l'être sans le refaire en
 paroles. p.250

In order to recover the language of the origin, the poet must accept the detour of writing. The origin becomes horizon: 'l'orage originel a longuement parlé'; but 'il s'éloigne, n'occupant plus que partiellement l'horizon'. What paths of access can writing open up to this horizon?

Writing

Ponge's writing, like the *pré* itself, seems animated by some double movement, regressive and progressive. It is a question of the poet returning to the origins of language, notably by etymological enquiry; but also of taking the text to its logical conclusion, so that its perfection corresponds with that of its object.

Ponge ponders at length the etymology of the word *pré*. The quest of linguistic origin turns out to be disappointing, deceptive, since, though it is possible to go back to the latin *pratium*, the etymology of this latter word is obscure:

Rien de tout cela, ni les définitions, ni l'historique, ni l'étymologie, ne me donne rien, ne me paraît le moins du monde intéressant, en raison certainement de l'ignorance où nous restons quant aux origines du latin *pratium*. p.205

The need to find the origin of *pré* leads Ponge to accept an etymology which he knows to be flimsy:

'Les étymologistes latins le (*pratum*) regardent comme une syncope de *paratum*, la chose prête; mais cette étymologie, dit Littré, n'est soutenue ni par la forme, ni par le sens' ... Ah pardon! mais nous allons revenir là-dessus. p.206

For want of any assured, guaranteed genealogy, Ponge would invent for *pré* one of those 'géné-analogies' whose secret he knew. The homophony of the words *pré*, *près* and *prêt* is sufficient to prove that, even without a common origin, they possess at least some hidden relationship:

C'est pourtant de cette origine à mon avis possible (origine? - du moins parenté) que je tire la raison de la proximité sonore (phonétique) de ces trois mots. p.207

It is true that *près* has nothing to do with *prêt* etymologically speaking: 'C'est bien étrange! Ainsi nulle part on ne le rapproche de *paratus*' (p.207). Worse: 'proche' itself is not related to 'près': 'il me semble de plus en plus bizarre que *près* et *proche* ne soient pas rapprochés' (p.208).

The insistence on lexical closeness is significant here: his etymological enquiry corresponds with a desire for 'rapprochement' between words, but also between words and things. In going back to 'roots', Ponge hopes to reach a state of language anterior to the arbitrariness of the sign, a break between signifier and signified. Between *pré*, *près* and *prêt*, the 'liaison' can only be operated 'au niveau des racines, où se confondent les choses et les formulations' (p.240).

If in this case some simple homophony can replace some common root, this is in function of another myth about the origins of language: that of the primitive word as onomatopoeia. *Pré*, according to Ponge, is part of 'nos onomatopées originelles' (p.239). These first signifiers are also 'infrasignifications' (p.263). Elementary kernels of meaning (signification) which can be common to notions as logically different as those of 'pré', 'près' and 'prêt'.

Ponge declares repeatedly that one cannot escape from these onomatopoeias, which are our heritage or our heredity, and which allow us to participate in our language's past history. But at the same time, through the indetermination of this infra-logical meaning, they open up for writing a whole field of possibilities. They are prefixes for linguistic invention, 'de petits grains d'érudition' which will germinate within the text (p.242). To return to the origins of language is not therefore necessarily

to carry out an archeological project, but to recover language at its birth, in order to give a better account of the perpetual rebirth of engendering Nature:

Onomatopées originelles: comment en sortir? Impossible! Donc il faut y rentrer [...] Leurs variations, leurs développements, diversifications, ramifications, feuillaisons, floraison, fructifications, réensemencements suffisent à dire la complexité de la vie et du monde. p.240

The productivity of onomatopœia is borne out in Ponge's actual practice. His text is engendered from phonic-semantic chains, of which the variations on *pré* provide the most remarkable example. We have also seen how, as an echo to Virgil's 'sat prat biberunt', the *pré* imbibed with water becomes a '*biberon*', and thence a place that is '*prohibé*' (p.211). And the return to etymology is often the source of creation of neologisms: Ponge forges '*gnature*' on the model of a Greek root, and the Latin inspires him to replace *parler* by *paraboler* and *aubépine* by *albépine* ...

Alongside this work on sonorities, Ponge exploits the resources of graphic and typographic signifiers in order to remotivate the sign. For example he makes the most of the acute accent on *pré*, in which he glimpses the image of a bird in flight: the *pré* is 'survolé comme par un, par l'instantané d'un oiseau rapide, volant bas en sens inverse de l'écriture (à contre-sens tel est l'accent aigu)' (p.212). At the same time as he refers back to the landscape of the *pré* through mimography, the acute accent is the occasion for much linguistic reflection. The fact that it is traced 'en sens inverse de l'écriture' can at first be interpreted as a 'contre-sens': an emblem of the regressive movement of Pongian poetry, going against abstract meanings (à rebours des significations), in order to reach 'infrasignifications', and through them, to the concrete itself:

L'oiseau qui le survole en sens inverse de l'écriture
Nous rappelle au concret, et sa contradiction [...]
 Sonne brève et aiguë comme une déchirure
 Dans le ciel trop serein des significations.

But for Ponge the accent's value is not only one of '*rappel*' which '*réveille la mémoire*' of language. It also inscribes in the word some *élan* or *appel*: it is a matter of '*un accent aigu, le plus aigu qui soit, le plus proche du point sur l'i, comme une étoile fixe transformée tout à coup en aéroliithe, qui ferait le plus court trajet possible dans l'atmosphère*' (p.211). The accent's acuity and briefness corresponds to a quality which Ponge appreciates also in the object: the *pré*'s grass can be short, '*rasée de près*' (p.211), in the word: '*pré est bref, concis*', and in the text. Indeed the poet should cut short the interminable '*palabres*' to give his text a finished form, if need be, by a decision as brutal as that when one fights a dual in a *pré*:

C'est qu'aussi bien, lieu de la longue palabre
 Peut devenir celui de la décision [...]

Voici donc, sur ce pré, l'occasion, comme il faut,
Prématurément, d'en finir.

His meditation on the acute accent thus sums up the double movement of Pongian writing, moving towards language's origin, as well as to the text's completion. To render language in its state of being born, it must also be prevented from being bogged down in 'palabres': we must know how to 'en finir'. With the same level of attention which Ponge pays to the text's fabrication, he also has a desire to arrive at a finished product. The very fact that in *La Fabrique du pré* the definitive text of the 'Le Pré' is reproduced, before the transcription of the manuscripts, and on a different coloured paper, reveals his wish to maintain a clear distinction between the two phases of creative work, though they are complementary.

The Esthetic

At the same time as it conceals the process of its genesis and the nourishing chaos from which everything proceeds through the complex chemistry of its substrata, the *pré* itself also offers the image of perfect form, an ordered cosmos. The association of *pré* with *prêt* and *préparé* is achieved beneath the double sign of origin and perfection. Indeed it also implies the idea of esthetic or cosmetic *apprêt*, as witnessed by the numerous metaphors borrowed from the semantic field of clothing and beautification:

Le pré est le lieu de la décision. Tout y est *prêt* pour cela. La nature l'a prêté, *apprêté* pour cela, tout est préparé, tiré à quatre épingles, entre quatre haies d'aubépines. Il est rasé au plus près [...] Tiré à quatre rochers, deux à l'orée du bois, les autres tenant au torrent (à la rivière) comme le cou de la belle au collier. pp.210-211

Thus the *Pré* provides Ponge with a model of artistic accomplishment, in which he projects his desire for perfection and completion:

Le pré est étendu à plat par la nature comme l'une de ses *réussites finales* comme à main levée, (comme d'un seul coup de pinceau ou de brosse) [...] une de ses *fins les plus parfaites*. p.213

One of the most visible signs of the *pré*'s perfection is its careful demarcation on which the definitive text most especially insists:

Pourquoi donc, vu d'ici, ce *fragment limité* d'espace,
Tiré à quatre rochers ou quatre haies d'aubépines,
Guère plus grand qu'un mouchoir [...]
Nous semble-t-il plus précieux soudain
Que le plus mince des tapis persans?

The limit is, for Ponge, a fundamental esthetic function: he likes 'oeuvres parfaitement circonscrites, bouclées dans leur perfection'.⁹ The *pré*'s quadrature gives the eye looking on it from a window a frame that prefigures that of the page or a painting. It is revealing that in certain manuscripts, Ponge feels the need to frame those terms that speak of some limit:

Rectangle de tapis
Lapis, Surface aminée:
Étendons nous-y

Limite
unique
accusant

Préparé par la
nature

The following sheet is characterized by a first attempt at 'putting on the page' in which the word 'carré' also appears framed:

Pré Carré Limite

Carré de tapis

Que nous dominions, éprouvons en sus, plonge

La pré est une surface
aminée, limitée, préparée
par la nature

But in the eyes of Ponge, there is another mark of the *pré*'s perfection, which may appear more paradoxical: its horizontality. The *pré* 'est un à-plat horizontal, strictement limité' (p.224). Now, 'la platitude est une perfection' (p.228). It brings rest, perhaps eternal sleep; you come to the *pré* only to lie down there, even when you fight a duel: 'vous y arrivez debout, puis vous croisez vos épées obliques pour parvenir enfin à la plus parfaite horizontalité' (p.219).

If perfection is platitude, does it not correspond with some kind of collapse of the creative spirit? Is not a finished text killed off? The discovery of the *pré*'s platitude corresponds with a phase of profound discouragement that has already been evoked; but it is immediately followed by resurrection:

Après un découragement propice
à l'expression de la platitude du pré,
La conscience soudain de l'incessante
résurrection du vert nous ressuscite. p.230

Everything happens as if it were necessary both for text and poet to die and be reborn. That is the meaning of the epitaph which concludes the definitive text tracing a 'trait final', horizontal, but in preparation for a flight upwards to come:

Messieurs les typographes,
Placez donc ici, je vous prie, le trait final.

Puis, dessous, sans le moindre interligne, couchez mon nom,
Pris dans le bas de casse, naturellement,

Sauf les initiales, bien sûr,
Puisque ce sont aussi celles
Du Fenouil et de la Prêle
Qui demain croîtront dessus.

Francis Ponge.

The final underlining is that where the 'initiales' grow. The text's completion, the author's disappearance, are for Ponge the conditions for a new life of the work which has now become autonomous: 'tout cela fonctionne sans que la personne qui les a arrangés, ajustés, soit encore nécessaire', in a kind of 'mouvement perpétuel', and 'l'auteur peut mourir, à ce moment-là'.¹⁰ The past participle in writing is the prefix to any reading; the text must have attained its definitive state to be able to be rewritten indefinitely by its readers.

One will therefore not be surprised if the search for the origin ends at the poet's tomb. That also happens in *La Table*, Francis Ponge's last great work, as if he has felt the need, in order to bring his work to completion, to return to the foundations of its possibility: 'la table (de l'écritoire: table ou tablette), qui m'a permis d'écrire mon oeuvre, reste (très difficile à écrire) ce qui me reste à écrire pour en finir'.¹¹

But in its turn his work's completion opens up a second birth, as witnessed by the abundance of commentaries it has provoked for some years. The work's destiny confirms the *Pré*'s lesson: the text's life, like that of the universe, presupposed death, and is saved from it only by a perpetual return to sources, and a no less constant search for perfection. It is a fundamental esthetic and existential law, 'qu'il faut être passé par la perfection, la géométrie parfaite, pour que la vie baroque ait quelque fondement, quelque valeur, quelque élan. Par la mort ...'.¹²

Notes

1. Composed between 1960 and 1964, it was first published in *Tel quel* 18, in 1964, and then included in the volume *Nouveau Recueil*, Gallimard, 1967. Translator's note: I have decided to leave both article and noun in the original French, rather than compromising with 'The Pré', as has been done elsewhere.
2. In the series 'Les sentiers de la création', Skira, 1971; new edition 1990. The page numbers in parenthesis refer to this edition.
3. I attempt to explore these in greater detail in *Francis Ponge: entre mots et choses*, Champ Vallon, 1991.
4. Tome premier, Gallimard, 1965, p.104.
5. Which he himself recognizes in 'Baptême funèbre', *Lyres*, Gallimard, 1961, p.37.
6. 'Texte sur Picasso', *L'Atelier contemporain*, Gallimard, 1977, p.341.
7. See 'De l'eau', *Tome premier, op.cit.*, p.58.
8. Interview given to the *Cahiers critiques de la littérature*, Number 2, December 1976, p.26.
9. 'Nouvelles notes sur Fautrier', *L'Atelier contemporain, op. cit.*, p.260.
10. *Entretiens de Francis Ponge avec Philippe Sollers*, Gallimard/Le Seuil, 1970, pp.187-188.
11. F. Ponge, *La Table*, Gallimard, 1991, p.73.
12. 'Joca seria', *L'Atelier contemporain, op. cit.*, p.183.