

# 'presque rien': minimalism and the modern subject in the poetry of André du Bouchet

by

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Between Mallarmé's 'rien cette écume' and the 'je ne vois presque rien' which concludes André du Bouchet's 1953 volume *Sans Couvercle*, modern and contemporary poetry in general, and French poetry in particular, has been ruthless enough to pursue the study of human experience as absence: absence of certainty, absence of evidence, absence of attribute. Philosophically, a programme of this sort relies upon negativity. Esthetically, it is related to minimalism.

In du Bouchet's poetry, vocabulary becomes theme, voluntarily restricted and displaying an ascetic poverty, both visual and semantic. *Le souffle, la faux, l'orage, le glacier, l'air, la montagne, le jour, le mur, le vent, la route*, through patient iteration, juxtaposition, or isolation, these word-themes 'suggest', in Mallarmé's sense of the term, an extraordinary abundance of meaning. It is my contention that, while these semantic units function to some extent as images in poetry, their real value is not that of concepts with a positive content. Rather, du Bouchet's word-themes become purely differential concepts, meaningful not so much in terms of content as negatively through their relations with other terms of a system. Most strikingly, the word *is*, for du Bouchet, against the blank of what is not on the page.

A word on the 'differential' method followed in this study. Franc Ducros, who has devoted many beautiful pages to the poetry of du Bouchet, favours the effort to write *with* an author, rather than to write *on* one. In an attempt to follow Ducros's suggestion, this paper will take the first line of du Bouchet's *Rapides* (1980) as both exemplum and summary of the poet's own method:

... fragments de montagne remployés pour la chaussée.

The network *chaussée, route, chemin*, is constant in this poetry. It may be taken as a synecdoche of the work itself, not a thing really but a means towards. The interpenetrating of the elemental: earth, air, fire, and water, and the fabricated, is another constant which can easily be seen as providing an image of the poem: '... *air de la montagne entrant dans la maison non jointée.*' (R) Finally, the sum of du Bouchet's work from *Air* (1951) to the present, is a perpetual reworking. Fragments of thought keep surfacing from earlier texts; much of their superstructure has slowly worn away until only the barest bones of thought shine through.

It would be wrong, however, to continue speaking of the imagery in du Bouchet's work as reflecting first on the world, secondly on the poetry. Post-modern thought has largely rejected the notion of secondary process as Freud elaborated the term. Du Bouchet does not oppose word presentation to thing presentation. Words exist in the world of things, no more, no less than other fragments of reality. The *chemin* is not a symbol. When the poet admits: 'Je reprends ce chemin qui commence avant moi' (CV,85), he is experiencing his being in the world as walker and poet on the same level of reality. Both activities are marked by some danger and by an obstinate refusal to alter the pace; both belong to necessity:

quand la route casse  
Je change de pied ... (CV, 31)

Indeed, there is no reason to choose between the meanings which present themselves here: the breaking up of the path, or the rhythm of the verse, the foot as member of the body, or as metric unit. There is something Oriental about the subtlety of du Bouchet's poetry which often reminds us of the notion of Tao as path. Movement is not a matter of choice. Du Bouchet is heir to the Pascalian-Existential belief in that we are embarked upon life: 'Les jambes suppléent au jour' (L). And when the poet says that the 'route me devance comme le vent' (CV, 24), it is obvious that the Western values of individual autonomy and free will as basis for identity are seriously called into question.

Because only in French can one 'possess a language', the contemporary French poet can be afflicted, perhaps more acutely than some of his peers, by an impression of '*dépossession*' with regard to his words. Unlike the moderns, the generation of a Claudel, or a Wallace Stevens, who often gloried in the sensual possibilities of words as though they were truly at home in language, certain post-modern artists have turned their backs on the baroque abundance of vocabulary. Like a painter exploring the possibilities of the monochrome, like Tal-Coat tracing a single line on his paper, du Bouchet pursues words as a minimalist in language.

One aspect of the minimalist esthetic is the refusal of anthropocentrism which becomes apparent in the title *Ce qui n'est pas tourné vers nous*. Minimalism thus demands an acceptance of the solitary nature of man which seems more radical than the stance of the Romantic artist. When du Bouchet admits: 'je ne comprends pas les mots de l'arbre' the renunciation of pathetic fallacy implied becomes intransigent.

Co-present with this absence of illusion is an absence of allusion – something du Bouchet calls 'anachronism':

comme, une fraction de temps,  
 de nouveau la terre transparait anachronique. où  
 nous sommes. sur son éclat,  
 à perte de vue. (R)

Poetry as anachronism is poetry of the real; that is, a poetry without person since only man knows human temporality. Du Bouchet's poetic effort, on the other hand, would seem to have as mission to designate by the simple fact of its rudimentary existence, a primal difference, an irreducible occupation of space and time, the minimum upon which being can be founded.

While du Bouchet's poetry is eminently concerned with the visual, it is not figurative. His language is not based on symbolism, not founded upon abstracted resemblance. Indeed it is 'plus proche que toute ressemblance' (Q, 30) perhaps because it concerns that which can never be said, precisely because it precedes language. A moment ago I quoted: 'Je reprends ce chemin qui commence avant moi.' I speak a language which I have not invented. I am spoken by language which shapes my thought without my knowledge. Du Bouchet is not however a materialist of language. He has been anxious to distinguish himself from the *Tel Quel* attitude, hoping to keep his poetry 'open to something other than language'.<sup>1</sup>

Language, then, is not to be explored for its own sake but rather as evidence of a minimal difference founding being:

... parole – à un point muet de la parole – figurée sur ce froid, et  
 pareille, dans les lointains, à la bave des torrents de montagne,  
 inaudibles quand on les entrevoit. (R)

Du Bouchet's work forms a part of the small body of thought elaborated as a result of the loss of any distinction between subject and object. Yves Bonnefoy has called du Bouchet 'ce moins cartésien des poètes'.<sup>2</sup> Indeed du Bouchet's poetry posits a radical rejection of the subject-object dichotomy. The poem, according to du Bouchet's experience, is written as an enquiry into the distortion that language imposes on the body, on the breath, and finally on the totality of experience.

There is something impersonal about du Bouchet's poetry and this 'impersonal', anonymous quality may seem paradoxical in lyrical poetry which is traditionally, and not just since Romanticism, devoted to the exploration of the self. 'J'écris pour précipiter ce qui ne tombera pas sans moi', (D) says the poet. Note the use of the future tense 'I write in order to precipitate that which will not fall without me', instead of the expected 'would not' of the conditional tense. This slight deviation from our anticipations is typical of du Bouchet's efforts. The effect here is a re-enforcement

of the inevitability of the action of the poem in the world. But that which 'falls' belongs in fact to no one, neither to poet, nor to reader. What becomes apparent here is the gaping wound of reality, the wound discovered in modernism as inscribed upon the body (where Kafka's country doctor was so astounded to find it). Du Bouchet is often explicit about the interrelationship between the wound and language: 'Ici la plaie parle, elle est devenue nécessaire.' (R, 42) This wound can simply be seen as an absence of continuity or coherence which the notion of divinity was supposed to heal, but which remains an open wound in much of modern and post-modern experience.

As corollary to his notion of the wound, our experience is one of the disappearance of the subject: being can now find itself only upon the fragility of our breath, upon something which is invisible and evanescent. Poetry, art in general, has traditionally been grounded in a disavowal of mortality. Since du Bouchet's books surface after the disappearance of the subject, after the demise of individual identity, after the acceptance of evanescence, the notion of immortality would no longer seem relevant. (The review du Bouchet helped to found in 1967 was called *L'Ephémère*.) The word in this poetry, far from being a symbol, that is to say a substitute for something else, remains, the thing itself, the minimal discretionary mark separating itself from silence, being as noise.

Here once again, du Bouchet's thought seems to draw near the esthetics of Oriental poetry, to something which is difficult to conceive for the West – evidence in its etymological meaning as that which is *vide*, the thing itself, in Wallace Steven's words, without anything left over.

The subject then, as responsible for the writing, as he who recognizes himself in the mirror of the text, does not experience the language as belonging to him. Du Bouchet, like many of his poetic contemporaries in France, articulates his production upon his activity as translator. Faulkner, Shakespeare, Hölderlin, Joyce, Mandelstam or Celan speak through and with the poet. The effort toward translation based upon an approach forever frustrated, on the illusion of adequacy, leads du Bouchet to rediscover his own language as foreign. On the occasion of the bicentennial of Hölderlin's birth, du Bouchet noted that if he felt inadequate to the German language, his attitude toward French was also lacking in naturalness.<sup>3</sup>

Mais la parole qu'ici je me vois prononçant en français, je ne peux pas non plus me confondre à elle aujourd'hui, elle m'est pour une part étrangère ...<sup>4</sup>

## Subjectivity and Psychosis

The demise of individual identity is articulated upon the fusion of voice and air, the refusal (or inability) to situate the self in space. For du Bouchet, this fusion becomes reciprocity as experience resonates in the world:

... Je ne sais pas si je suis ici  
ou là,  
Dans l'air ou dans l'ornière. Ce sont des  
morceaux d'air que je foule comme des mottes ... (C,59)

The poet is not just a subject walking towards a new day, (an image easily recognized as belonging to modernism); he is the day on the march. A to-and-fro rhythm, a reciprocity of action, reaction, as well as subject-object, is one of the most characteristic notes of du Bouchet's work. The consequence of this fusion is that the poet no longer sees the day in which he walks, for vision demands distance, the proper distance between eye and object. The poetic experience is thus a correlative of the loss of narcissistic autonomy, and also of the loss of vision. Paradoxically a 'lien avec les choses – à la fois lucidité et oubli de soi' can only be rendered as blindness (p.44). This is perhaps du Bouchet's understanding of Reverdy's 'notion d'obstacle'.

Subjectivity is further problematized by the play of pronouns, gravitating, in certain poems, from first person singular, to second, to first person plural, without the possibility of assigning fixed values to those verbal signs, which enhances our feeling that identity is fluctuating. The instability of pronouns leads to the ambiguity of the projection of the human body in the verse. The *front* is both my forehead, slicing through the air as I walk, and the forehead of space, the sky which I confront. The *genou* is my knee, but also that of the door, or the fire. The *main* is my hand, dividing the air and writing the word, but, at the same time, the hand is *là-bas*, signalling to me from the limits of my horizon. Member of the body, or element? anthropomorphic or physical? inside, outside, content or container? It is no longer possible to decide.

Identity and identification are not only problematic, but artificial, yet necessary. Identification as naming justifies the poetic process. The question remains: who is speaking?

'A côté, on parle de plaie, on parle d'un arbre. Je me reconnais. Pour ne pas être fou.' *Le moteur blanc*, vi.

We have noted the characteristic situation of the walker in the poem. This image would seem to create the necessary framework for an illustration of spatial-temporal relativity.

Yet, as we have seen, space is problematic since the subject *is* the day towards which he walks. This is likewise apt to telescope in surprising ways. We have had occasion to consider the concept of anachronism. As du Bouchet notes of one of his predecessors: 'Au terme de ce trajet inestimable, Baudelaire se retrouve là où il n'a jamais cessé d'être ...'(B, 8).

In his 1962 study of du Bouchet, Jean-Pierre Richard noted something which has only grown more apparent since then: the family resemblance between the ideas of the poet and the philosophy of Heidegger<sup>5</sup>. Nowhere is this more important than in the insistence upon openness. The preoccupation with the open can be seen as thematic: the poem evokes the outdoors, or if an interior appears it is shot through with empty space: 'air de la montagne entrant dans la maison non jointée.' If the open is consonant with possibility, it demands humility. The poetic voice renounces the human, to lend itself to the world: 'le ciel parle', or 'Aujourd'hui la lampe parle' Qui parle, in *Air* and *Relief*, in *Dans la chaleur vacante*?

It should by now be evident that if du Bouchet's work comes to speak of the loss of individual identity comparable to that experienced in psychosis, this is only in so far as Lacan notes that psychosis is the absence of illusion, the approach therefore to the reality of man.

### Minimalism

As du Bouchet's poetry has evolved, it has become more and more evident that what one is reading is as much the absence of marks on the page as words. The blank spaces on a given page of poetry can be articulated on the thematic concern with air. The blank for du Bouchet, as for Mallarmé, is read in the context of negativity:

Quand je ne vois rien, je vois  
l'air. Je tiens le froid par les  
manches. (MB, s. p.)

Du Bouchet's first volume *Air* could have been sub-titled 'or the vision of invisibility'. The poet resembles Leonardo composing the Mona Lisa and painting, not really the portrait of a woman, but rather the air at a particular moment in the evening. The humidity which separates eye from object. The efforts of Da Vinci and of du Bouchet can be seen as comparable to the project, which is however inverted, of the hyperrealists whose shiny surfaces deny distance, lack. These paintings create an immediacy, an absence of barriers between eye and object.

Peser de tout son poids sur le mot le plus faible pour qu'il éclate, et livre son ciel. (*A*, s. p.)

This is an ongoing concern: cf.

Séparé de la montagne par l'air que j'ai à respirer, mais la montagne, c'est l'air encore. L'air, aux lèvres entr'ouvertes, comme accroché. Là, je heurte. (*J*, s. p.)

Minimalism is a way of rendering negativity in language, a rigorous application of differential esthetics. On the very bottom of a blank page with an entirely blank page facing we read:

... de l'autre côté de la prairie,  
une matière humaine malmenée – matière sans langue – hulule. (*R*)

and also

... l'espace disparaît dans l'étendue qui n'a pas de langue. (*R*)

Graphically, poetry of this sort is close to painting – words are air

Un instant, ces mots, je les aurai faits miens. Un instant, j'aurais été à côté de ces mots. Un instant, qui met une lenteur infinie à parvenir, j'ai été, masse d'air en formation, auprès de ces mots, premiers à disparaître ... (*J*)

The matter of poetry can be given in discrete bits or be rendered as continuous flow:

et les mots séparés – aussi loin qu'ils peuvent l'être les uns des autres sans que le fil distendu qui les relie soit perdu – ne se confondent pas moins que si jamais ils n'avaient été articulés ... de cette articulation qui élève, aère, espace ... élève, aère, de tout l'air surgi, pour commencer, dans les intervalles ... air qui reprend globalement du dehors sans espacer. (*J*)

It would seem certain, however, that du Bouchet's vision of reality is one which privileges separation. There are numerous references in the work to '*la faux*' separation, also '*cassure, éclat*, etc'.

Pas d'air  
qui ne soit rompu

and

air venir  
scinder. (L s. p.)

\*

The beauty of du Bouchet's work is articulated upon admiration – a movement out of the self. It is true that the visual demands distance. The proper distance, therefore, begins by reinforcing the identification of the eye/I in space. But it operates, especially when fascination is attained, by obliterating the separation between subject and object.

A visual artist whose itinerary has often coincided with that of André du Bouchet is Pierre Tal-Coat. Surprisingly enough the American modernist Wallace Stevens was one of minimalist Tal-Coat's earliest collectors. There is a certain family resemblance between du Bouchet's esthetic position and that of his American predecessor which may in fact be considered in terms of du Bouchet's personal formation. During the war du Bouchet was a student first at Amherst College, then at Harvard where he was seen at one of the lectures given by Stevens, later collected in the volume *Necessary Angel*.

I would like to conclude by suggesting that the poem Stevens chose to close his collected poems published in 1954, as a point of departure for the work of du Bouchet. The poem is entitled *Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself*. In it Stevens notes: 'It would have been outside'. Characteristically, Stevens' use of the conditional throws objective reality into question. We have seen du Bouchet using the future tense when a conditional would have been expected. Yet the absence of the conditional also serves to call into being the missing grammatical notion.

For Stevens, 'It would have been outside', as for du Bouchet, 'j'attends que la réalité parle'. The concern with the open, like the insistence upon a poetic work articulated upon the real is always, in du Bouchet's work, driven to the limits of the logical possibilities of language:

cela vient  
du dedans, mail il faut  
tout de même  
sortir pour cela (D).

Poetry must come from outside, must articulate the real world. And neither Stevens, nor du Bouchet, can passively await the arrival of the poetic: both must ruthlessly pursue 'a new knowledge of reality', which is continually disappearing before our eye. Both Stevens and du Bouchet, tireless walkers who compose according to the rhythm of this momentum, are following in the footsteps of the poet of the blank-*blanc*, following the 'rien cet écume' of Mallarmé.

je sors enfin  
 ce n'est pas moi qui taille ces rues  
 tout existe si fort  
 et loin  
 que je peux lâcher ma main  
 mes yeux ne se regardent pas  
 ils regardent dehors  
 sans loucher  
 et je ne vois presque rien.

## Notes

Abbreviations for Works by du Bouchet are as follows:

*Air*, Paris, Jean Aubier, 1951 (*A*)

*Sans couvercle*, Paris, GLM, 1953 (*SC*)

*Le Moteur blanc*, Paris, GLM, 1956 (*MB*)

*Dans la chaleur vacante*, Alès, PAB, 1959 (*CV*)

*Laisses*, Lausanne, Françoise Simecek éditeur, 1975 (*L*)

*Un jour de plus augmenté d'un jour*, Paris, le Collet de Buffle, 1977 (*J*)

*Rapides*, Paris, Hachette, 1980 (*R*)

*Défets*, Paris, Clivages, 1981 (*D*)

1. Quoted in ed. Serge Gavonsky, *Poems and Texts*, New York, October House, 1969, pp.147-48.

2. 'La Poésie d'André du Bouchet', *Critique*, No. 179, 1962, p.295.

3. See John E. Jackson, 'L'étranger dans la langue', in *Autour d'André du Bouchet*, Paris, Presses de l'École normale Supérieure, 1986, pp.13-25.

4. *Hölderlin aujourd'hui*, (1970), Paris, Le Collet de Buffle, 1976; without pagination.

5. *Onze études sur la poésie moderne*, Paris, le Seuil, 1964, p.235.