

Introduction
by
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Literary criticism as such can perhaps be called the art of rereading.
Barbara Johnson, *The Critical Difference*

In introducing a volume of essays on modern French poetry, the question of where to begin was neither difficult nor, indeed, susceptible to an original answer. For the figures of Baudelaire and Mallarmé seem no less influential now than they did to Barbara Johnson, fifteen years ago, when she focussed on them, memorably, in *The Critical Difference*, alongside her analyses of Barthes and Balzac, Melville, Poe, Lacan and Derrida, to remind us that 'difference and reading [...] function as two unknowns in a textual equation where unresolvability is matched only by its ability to engender more textuality?'.¹

It was shortly after the appearance of Johnson's seminal rereadings that the editors of the present collection began to teach a course which, nominally on modern French poetry, from the start emphasized methodologies of literary criticism and theories of reading. About the same time, in the context of the newly established Postgraduate School of Critical Theory at the University of Nottingham, a series of critical studies began to appear, each underpinned by the notion that, in criticism, to write is to rewrite and that redirections at once seek new trajectories and derive from prior movements. *Literary Theory at Work* (1987) and *Literary Theory and Poetry: Extending the Canon* (1989), with the Batsford Academic Press, and *Theorizing Modernism* (1993) and *Redirections in Critical Theory* (1994), with Routledge, have all been edited recently by members of the School, in the spirit of re-examining those philosophical and literary critical discourses which, ever more deprived of their stabilizing functions amidst the multiplicities of a plural theoretical age, have nevertheless returned to many of the texts, the terms, the insights and the inspirations which make of criticism an activity which ever reconstructs.

Though analysis of modern French poetry featured strongly in two of the volumes mentioned above (Mallarmé and Apollinaire) and, more exclusively, in the first Special Issue of *Nottingham French Studies* (1989), devoted to new readings of the poetry of Pierre Reverdy, it is only with the present volume that a more ambitious

attempt has been made to focus extensively on French poets from Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé through Guillaume Apollinaire and André Breton, the women surrealists Valentine Penrose and Alice Rahon Paalen, André du Bouchet, Francis Ponge, René Char, Philippe Jaccottet, André Frénaud, Denise Le Dantec and Heather Dohollau to Andrée Chedid and Marie-Claire Bancquart.

Unsurprisingly, the critical approaches or methodologies are as plural as the theoretical era in which they are written. In all cases, however, it will be obvious to the reader that the contributors both reflect current critical developments and, at the same time, re-assess traditional readings. In no sense is the collection representative let alone comprehensive. Contributors, drawn from France, the UK and the US and Canada in roughly equal measure, and reflecting no doubt the institutional practices of their different national traditions, were approached for the originality of their insights, never for the sake of inclusiveness. Even in the trajectories of redirections, even in the process of reconstructions, the keynote of the collection – as of the critical age – is one of discontinuity.

In the opening essay, Russell King draws on recent theories of gendering as construct in order to reappraise the tensions operating in Baudelaire's *Le Spleen de Paris*. Clear-cut binary oppositions, particularly that of male/female, are revealed as but surface narratives. The process whereby poet constructs poetic persona is shown to derive from appropriations which transcend sexual difference (mis-)read as but the misogyny of Baudelaire's more notorious *Journaux intimes* formulations. King strikes a Barthesian note from the outset, showing how 'the pleasure of the Baudelarian text confounds and exceeds its transparent meanings, however much these are blatantly and explicitly stated in moral terms at the end of many of the prose poems'. Whereas this essay concentrates on *jouissance* and prostitution, Philippe Bonnefis, still on Baudelaire, fixes attention on an altogether more primal though no less ludic phase of his poetic development. He meditates on the setting, the resonance and the implications of both Baudelaire's *joujou* and the morality attached to or deriving from his plaything. Child psychology, voyeurism, sublimated and distorted sexualities, memory and the construction of an aesthetics inseparable from occultism and concupiscence, all these are the ingredients of Bonnefis's suggestive exploration of the difficulties of child's play.

Language games and libidinal complications of text (to rephrase Tzvetan Todorov's approximation of Rimbaud's *Illuminations*) are the twin invitations to voyage deep into Mallarmé's Idumaeon night taken up by Bernard McGuirk. Heeding Paul de Man's warning of the dangers of univocality – another lurking form of continuity – in literary criticism, he responds not to the song of the siren but to the chants of sailors, of Baudelaire's *mariniers*, of Mallarmé's *matelots*. A trajectory of

evasion is pursued across 'Mes bouquins refermés sur le nom de Paphos', 'Don du poème' and 'Brise marine' to that dark (obscure) moment in which (an Idumaeen) semiotic fluidity gives birth (and rise) to a voluptuous though fragmented orality, a provisional discontinuity voiced just beneath Mallarmé's smooth writing surface. Reconstructions will always risk non-sense. Redirections, perhaps, 'invitant les orages', will always 'penche[nt] sur les naufrages' ...

From language on the brink of exhaustion to art on the point of collapse of belief in representation. Timothy Mathews' essay on Apollinaire and Cubism confronts demystification, defamiliarisation, manipulation and fragmentation in the relation of expression to experience. Through Picasso and Apollinaire, he explores the possibilities of form after the abolition of horizon – and measures the cost of indecipherability. To the spatial is added the temporal, as memory is shown to function in the creation of a present which cannot simply be identified or identified with; Mathews' insight that 'Cubist Art concerns itself with an indivisible unfamiliarity which permeates our experience of the present and our involvement with it' comes close, indeed, to Michel Foucault's telling caution that 'necessarily, we must dismiss those tendencies that encourage the consoling play of recognitions ... History becomes effective to the degree that it introduces discontinuity into our very being'.² Shifting attention from Apollinaire the art critic to Apollinaire the poet, Mathew's goes on to show how 'nostalgia in the poem is galvanized and represents the unavailability of remembered experience' and, memorably, how it is precisely Apollinaire's 'ignorance which allows him to find new forms of expression with which to approach the world'. Finally, and in a powerful re-engagement with Marjorie Perloff and her study of *The Futurist Moment*, Mathews remobilises discontinuity. For the erosion of undifferentiated subjectivity – as unavoidable as the subversion of the unmediated expression of experience – in no way undermines or diminishes the creative power of 'intervening in the process of signification *without repeating it*'.

Where Tim Mathews signs off, Jacqueline Chénieux-Gendron takes over. She, too, confronts fragmentation or, more specifically, *holes*. Tackling the notorious issue of the degree to which it is possible to speak of a theory of poetry in the work of André Breton, Chénieux-Gendron argues that 'demonstration and lyricism feed upon each other' in a kind of *bricolage*. Meticulously, she examines the series of 'symptom texts' in which, she claims, 'a rich and complete meditation on being and time as well as on poetic language and visual expression may be read'. She goes on to analyze such concepts as the imagination and subjectivity in a form of poetic discourse she terms 'fable'. Mirroring the complexity of Breton's own practice, Chénieux-Gendron endorses his metaphor of nest building in the attempt to encapsulate the rhythms (akin to music) of automatism. Suggestively, she argues that, by a process she designates *libido sciendi*, the fable 'arouses in us a taste for interpretation and for all sorts of adventures

of the mind'. To understand the functioning of a fable then, is, for Chénieux-Gendron, the key to potential access to Breton's (underrated) thought-system.

'No Poetry for ladies?'. Georgiana Colvile, echoing James Joyce's - ironic? - observation, begins by reminding us, with Trinh Minh Ha, that 'the Scream inhabits women's writings. Silence is heard there'. Firstly, Colvile takes the reader on a rapid journey through the poetry and collages of Valentine Penrose, recalling that 'the Surrealists were fascinated by monsters and Valentine Penrose outdid them all'. Alchemically transforming the 'brute matter' of such as Erzébet Bathory, *La Comtesse sanglante* of sixteenth-century Hungarian demonology, Penrose is read as revealing the reverse image of the monster, a specular angel no less convulsive for all its beauty. The question of specular boundaries is developed in Colvile's treatment of Alice Rahon Paalen. The interplay of *poème/tableau/objet/paysage*, not only in Rahon's work but also in Surrealism's broad sweep of 'métaphore filée', in Michael Riffaterre's formulation, is brought by Colvile into a psychoanalytical frame. Thereby the Surrealist fetish figure of the *femme-enfant* 'at play in wonderland' is, mercurially, transformed into a mystery-revelation by Colvile's *coda*: 'Indian Summer 1936'. Here Penrose and Rahon come together ... but that's another story; one which Colvile cleverly reveals/conceals in the *chambre double/huis clos* where 'woman's body weaves a ceaseless poem'.

Fragmentation, holes, silence. Nancy Blake takes up a similar trajectory quite explicitly in her opening claim: 'French poetry in particular has been ruthless enough to pursue the study of experience as absence'. The minimalist aesthetic of André du Bouchet provides her with a primal differentiability which she theorizes as symptomatic of post-modern poetry. Here words do not reflect reality but interact with it, are fragments of it. But, she stresses, du Bouchet 'has been anxious to distinguish himself from the *Tel Quel* attitude, hoping to keep his poetry open to something other than language'. For Blake, both a Taoist path and a Heideggerian openness are evoked by this poetry. The blank, for du Bouchet as for Mallarmé, is there to be *read* ... negatively. Poetry is written - and read - against the blank space. Ever close to Nancy Blake's delicately constructed critical interventions is the question of post-modern subjectivity, minimally differentiable from an objective world, apprehended and articulated (though only just) through the word.

'Taking the side of things is, in part, to accept them as they are, without wondering why they are.' Michel Collot begins his meditation on the poetry of Francis Ponge in a mode strikingly close to the focus of Nancy Blake. In 'Le Pré', he argues, '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': *pré/pre-* ... as anti-Cartesian as expression of reality can be. Again,

contemporary critical theory's suffused influence on the re-readings in this volume is strongly in evidence here. On a single syllable is the world/word made to pivot, simultaneously constituting and, paradoxically, undermining ontologies, cosmologies. Differentiability for Collot as for Blake, for Ponge as for du Bouchet, is the keynote: 'for Ponge there is no creation *ex nihilo*'. Collot could be striking that same note for the whole of the present collection when he claims: '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'. Not that immediate access ensues, for Ponge 'denounces as an "imposture" the idea of some total immediacy of language'. Rather, 'one cannot escape from these onomatopoeias', these 'first signifiers [which] are also infrassignifications'.

For Martin Heidegger, 'man is the site of openness'. Touched upon by Nancy Blake with reference to the poetry of du Bouchet, a trajectory of 'thinking-through-language' is further explored by Michael Worton in his treatment of the interface between the writings of René Char and those of Heidegger. In the process, he invites meditation, too, on the multiple performative functions of translation as interpretation and, by extension, of the question of influence. Interrogating various notions of Bloom, Kristeva and Riffaterre, Worton would situate the Char/Heidegger relationship 'in the interstice between post-Freudian, psychodynamic theories and reader-based intertextual theories'. A clear link with several of the other essays here is his concentration on the 'highly imagistic, if rarely traditionally mimetic' modes whereby both writers prefer 'to represent – and thereby to reconstitute – the phenomenal world through language'. Both, for Worton 'situate separation at the heart of their creative enterprises'. In this light, Char's epigraph, from Heraclitus, to *Le Marteau sans maître*, 'Il faut aussi se souvenir de celui qui oublie où mène le chemin', points to a common thread of *via negativa* thinking which binds (and unbinds) much of the poetry discussed in this volume. What is more, Worton's situating of Char's poetry in the Rimbaudian line of 'la pensée chantée' and of Heidegger's 'das dichtendes Denken' (poeticizing thought) re-echoes the strains of earlier Mallarméan voicings. In his 'Interrogative answers to a question from Martin Heidegger' (1966), Worton reminds us, Char writes: 'La poésie sera "un chant de départ". Poésie et action, vases obstinément communicants'. Beyond Breton? Stubbornly (and necessarily) so. For even the hint of a trajectory (be it 'übersetzen'/translation or 'übersetzen'/ferrying across) derives from that very sense of separation (obstinately) confronted in a communicative process which, though it *is* thought, can only be *activated* through poetic expression.

Timely reassertion of a poetics devoted 'to the hazardous rhythms of a *présence* beyond fixable meanings', Michael Bishop's essay on 'Presence and the Imperceptible' might serve as an overdue reminder – before the reader slips into the

lure of a metaphysics of absence – of Jacques Derrida's by now totemic cautionary insistence:

Play is the disruption of presence ... Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of play and not the other way round.³

The *site* of poetry is, for Bishop as for Char, or for Yves Bonnefoy, 'a place of unfinished and unfinishable business, of ever-(ex)changing transaction'. Poetry, as in Richard Stamelman's memorable formulation of *Lost Beyond Telling*, performs for Bishop too as 'the void filling its own lack; absence distilling a presence'. As with Collot's inescapable onomatopoeias, infrasinifications again abound. Here, for instance, in André Frénaud's 'Là-près', past, pres-ence, absence ('là'), nearness ('près') are performed out of separateness or, as Bishop expresses it, 'presence [is] knotted into an imperceptible that is its other name'. Instances of such knotting from Denise Le Dantec, Martine Broda, Janine Mitaud and Heather Dohollau lead him to speculate, multiply, on the modes and necessities whereby 'presence flees [and] will not be shut up'.

The mutest of eloquent presences is perhaps one of the most familiar resources of French poetry, namely the powerful 'speaking *E*'. Elisabeth Cardonne-Arlyck's *entrée* to her essay on women poets is Héléne Cixous's 'Vite, les signes. Avez-vous bien mis votre sexe ce matin?'. In a poignant excursus into the *trobairitz* past, Cardonne-Arlyck sets up her argument that 'by means of this gendered split within the poem, the question of poetic subjectivity is, by a woman, written into the beginnings of the lyric tradition'. From the very restriction-cum-resource of a linguistic form, such female inheritors of the tradition as Andrée Chedid, Jacqueline Risset and Marie-Claire Bancquart are shown to 'exploit an essential constraint of the French language' to open up 'un espace pour une indécision de la subjectivité' (Cixous). In 'signifying *passage* merely by its oscillation between presence and absence', the *E* not only acts for Cardonne-Arlyck as a particular instrument of poetic analysis but might also be said to perform as the shuttle-effect, the mobile third term, of post-structuralist critical discourse in general. The language Cardonne-Arlyck chooses to express her subtle insights conjoins such critical practice with the deconstructive turn: 'the "excessive" *E* represents, then, an extraordinary economy of means. Absent or present, it *signifies*, in poetry signed by a woman'. The radical bite of such theorising comes in the claim: 'the feminine *E* enables the poet to affirm sexual identity (and therefore personhood), even as it drains the voice of "personal" attributes'.

Again, at the end of this collection of essays, the tensions played out in the trajectories between presence(s) and absence(s) form not only the textualizing but also the re-readings of the poetry under analysis. An introduction can but (fore)shadow the delicate operation of such interplays.

Notes

1. Barbara Johnson. *The Critical Difference. Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*, Baltimore and London, the Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, p.x
2. Michel Foucault. 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1984, p.88.
3. Jacques Derrida. *Writing and Difference*, trans. A. Bass, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972, p.292.