

NON-DUALITY

BALSEKAR Ramesh, *Consciousness Speaks*, Advaita Press, 1992.

P.14-18

You've said that the entire manifestation is basically impersonal. So how then does the individual fit into the picture?

What is the manifestation? It is just a sudden spontaneous concurrent appearance in Consciousness, within Consciousness, brought about by Consciousness. In that manifestation, the human being is just one object. Basically, as far as the manifestation is concerned, there is no difference between the human being and the inanimate object. As far as the manifestation is concerned, the human being is as much of an object as a piece of rock. So where does the question of individuality arise at all? That arises because in the inanimate object, consciousness is not there in the form of sentience. The human being is endowed with sentience, like any animal. Sentience enables the senses to work. The human being is essentially an inanimate object plus sentience, precisely like any other animal or insect which has the feeling of being present, the sense of presence. That is the sentience.

In addition to that sentience, which the insect or animal has, the human being is endowed with intellect. Intellect is what enables the human being to discriminate and interpret what is cognized, which the animal need not do. So it is this power of the intellect to discriminate and interpret what is cognized that gives the individual being a sense of individuality and makes him consider himself something special in this manifestation. What is more, he goes to the extent of believing that the entire manifestation has been created for his benefit! So, all the time he is thinking, "In what way can I benefit by exploiting nature?" And the extent to which the human being has "benefited" himself, we can all see.

So, we come back to the principle that the human being is like any other object in manifestation, and that he is merely a dreamed character with senses which enable him to perceive things and cognize and interpret and discriminate between what he sees. If he sees impersonality in all this, that he is just another object in the manifestation, with certain additional endowments, like the sentience of animals plus intellect, *that* is the first step in perceiving the impersonality of the whole manifestation. In the impersonality of this manifestation there is an inherent understanding that whatever has appeared cannot possibly have any existence of its own.

Therefore, what has appeared is merely a kind of reflection of that basic ground, call it Consciousness-at-rest, God, or whatever. Seeing the oneness, not only in the manifestation but the oneness between the manifest and the unmanifest, is all that is really meant by enlightenment. Once the individual thinks in terms of his individuality, forgetting this oneness, not only between the manifest and the unmanifest, but the manifestation as a whole, then he begins to think in terms of personal security. Once he begins to think in terms of personal security, he creates any number of problems for himself. So, at that level, the first step in the understanding of the individual is the fact that there can be no such thing as security for the individual, that movement and change are the very basis of life and living. Therefore, in seeking security, he is seeking something which just doesn't exist. That understanding is the beginning of understanding life, and through the understanding of life, to go back into impersonality. The child, in his earliest stages, has an inherent awareness of things. It is his experienced actuality. So no questions arise. But when the intellect gradually expands, the child begins to ask questions. When the child has its first confrontation with the phenomenon of death, death brings the idea of life to the child. Death and disintegration bring the idea of life and security to the child. As the intellect proceeds, the intuitive natural awareness with the Oneness gradually gets dimmed, clouded.

What is a human being, really?

Zen master Tung Shan has expressed this basic fact clearly when he said, "I show the truth to living beings, and then they are no longer living beings." The end question then is, "What really am I now?" Basically all any one is, is an object. And what is this object, as seen through an electron-scanning microscope with its tremendous magnification? Even as it exists at present and based on an intelligent projection, on what the microscope has already revealed, the body appears as really nothing but emptiness and certainly not a solid object. Furthermore, deep within this emptiness, the subatomic physicist tells us, is a nucleus which, being an oscillating field begins to dissolve, showing further organized fields—protons,

neutrons, and even smaller particles, each of which also dissolves into nothing but the rhythm of the universal pulse. In other words, there is no solidity at all, either at the most sublime level of the body or at the heart of the universe. The compact nucleus at the very heart of the atom, then, is nothing solid at all but rather a dynamic individual pattern of concentrated energy throbbing and vibrating at an incredible speed.

This object, the human body, can be seen from another totally different perspective, equally spectacular. The view of this object, as observed from a distance further and further back, is replaced first by a house, then in turn by a town, a country, a continent, then by the earth as a planet, followed by the solar system, the sun, a galaxy, the Milky Way, and finally by clusters of galaxies rapidly dwindling into points of light in a great vastness and about to vanish altogether.

So, the story of the outward and the inward perspectives both come to much the same thing: the human being is virtually empty space and utter illusion. The question then is, "What is our true nature? Who, really, am I or what am I?" The noumenon has become the phenomenal manifestation, the Absolute has become the relative, the potential has become the actual, and the potential energy has become the activated energy. On that empty stage comes this play, and on the empty canvas has come this painting. The source of everything is the potential nothingness. But, because of our limited perception, we think that is real which is perceptible to one of our senses, whereas the real is that which is not perceptible to the senses.

Metaphysically, we are back to the question, "*Who is seeking what?*" The "who," as we have seen, is nothing but emptiness, so there cannot be a real "who." There cannot be a solid "who." There cannot be a solid, individual entity which is the seeker. We have also seen that what is being sought is also nothing. The "what" that is being sought is not something which can be seen by the eye, which can be heard by the ear, which can be smelled by the nose, which can be tasted by the tongue, or touched by the fingers. So, that something which is being sought is not some thing at all.

p. 58-59.

Enlightenment in some sense is the most natural state. Why is enlightenment such a rarity, rather than the rule?

You see, enlightenment is the original state. Enlightenment is the original state on which this identification with an individual has taken place. It has taken place because if it had not taken place then there would not be any life and living in this dream play. So for this dream play, *lila* as the Hindu tradition calls it, to take place, Consciousness identifies itself with each individual. Each individual has been conceived and created with certain given characteristics so that only certain actions, good, bad or indifferent, as society decides, will take place through that organism. And that is *karma*.

So in other words, what I'm saying is, new organisms are created so that the effects of the earlier actions will take place.

Organisms are not created with some old souls continuing, and new organisms are not created so that they can be punished or rewarded for past actions. Whose past actions?! If s an impersonal process; it's an impersonal play going on. It's like a novelist who begins with certain characters, creates certain actions, and those actions produce effects. So for new effects, new actions must be produced and the novelist creates new characters.

I've been talking about this novelist, the Divine Novelist, and the other day someone sent me a cutting of Schopenhauer's metaphor of the novelist. So no simile, no metaphor, can be claimed as one's own. Let me tell you what Schopenhauer said:

"In the later years of a lifetime, looking back over the course of one's days and noticing how encounters and events that appeared at the time to be accidental became the crucial structural features of an unintended life-story through which the potentialities of one's character were fostered to fulfillment, when this is noticed, one may find it difficult to resist the notion of the course of one's biography as comparable to that of a cleverly constructed novel, wondering who the author of the amazing plot could have been. The whole context of world history is, in fact, of destinies unfolding through time as a vast net of reciprocal influences of this kind which are not only of people upon people, but involve also the natural world with its creatures and accidents of all kind."

What is any action but merely the actualization of a thought which comes from outside? So whose action? And where does that thought come from? Why does a particular thought come? Only because that thought is supposed to produce a certain action through a particular body-mind organism which is conceived and created so that kind of action has to take place. It's so programmed. So who is guilty of what?

RAMESH Balsekar, *The Ultimate Understanding*, Watkins Publishing, London, 2002.

P. 76-77.

5.11

What every human being seeks, deep within himself - whether he admits it or not - is the peace of a still mind. He often does not realize that a mind, coerced into apparent stillness by discipline of whatever kind, cannot contain the peace that is sought, the tranquility that is hoped for.

A human being, tortured by lust, ambition, competitive conflicts, cannot achieve the peace and tranquility that is sought, whatever 'spiritual' path he is advised to follow. The only way peace and tranquility can happen is when the mind is stilled at its very source, when there is the realization that the entire manifestation and its functioning - life as we know it - is an illusion based on an earlier illusion of space and time. If space-time itself is non-existent, being only a concept, how can the manifestation and a part of it - an object called a human being with its sense of personal doership - be anything but an illusion, maya, a divine hypnosis? It is only this deep apperception which can result in a really still mind, a silent mind, which itself is the peace that is sought after so avidly.

5.12

What every spiritual seeker seeks, whatever path he may be following, cannot really be anything other than the peace and tranquility which prevail in the state of deep sleep.

The relevant condition for the prevalence of the peace in deep sleep is the absence of any experiencer of that peace. There is no seeker seeking anything; there is no doer doing anything to achieve anything.

For the peace of the deep sleep state to prevail in the waking state - whether there is the absence of manifestation and its functioning (life as we know it) in the deep sleep state, or its presence in the waking state - the same condition must exist for the peace and tranquility to prevail: the absence of the doer doing anything to achieve anything. It is only the Potential, Primal Energy which is apparently producing whatever seems to be happening in the conceptual universe in the waking state, through the billions of human objects. The total apperception of this simple fact - and it can only happen - is itself 'enlightenment' or 'Self-realization', or peace and tranquility.

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FROM INTIMISM TO THE POETICS OF "PRESENCE":

READING CONTEMPORARY FRENCH POETRY.(Critical Essay)

From: Poetry | Date: 10/1/2000 | Author: TAYLOR, JOHN

Is it possible to read French (or any foreign) poetry? Raising such a question implies asking whether it is possible to empathize. But what does "empathy" mean? The French poems come to us in translation or, if we are able, in the original; and from that moment on, we rope the maverick verses in, corralling them into our native literary patterns and thought-processes. Or -- this is much more difficult -- we allow, as it were, those mustang-poems to roam out on the wild, desolate plateau (a few such ranges still grace the French Pyrenees), within sight but unbridled. What we endeavor to contemplate, study, even imitate, is indeed their independence, untamedness, disturbing beauty. Genuine empathy involves an acceptance and a comprehension of differences.

The maverick qualities of French poems, their disarming "strangeness" from our Anglo-centric viewpoint, are precisely what has fascinated a long line of English-language poets (beginning with Chaucer and continuing beyond Pound and Eliot) who have read French poetry attentively, aspiring to learn (often, so that they could "borrow"). Arguably, no other literature has so consistently influenced the practice of English-language writing. It is equally arguable that this influence has rather waned since World War II, whence the need for some new perspectives, both on the present and the recent past. The contemporary poets presented in this issue illustrate vividly how resourceful and dynamic French and Francophone poetry remains.

Ideally, empathy reciprocates. It is by no means insignificant that several outstanding French poets have devoted much of their time to translation, both as a homage and a learning exercise. Yves Bonnefoy (b. 1923) has produced versions of nearly all of Shakespeare's plays, poems, and sonnets, as well as many poems by Yeats. Andre du Bouchet (b. 1924) has rendered Shakespeare, Holderlin, Celan, and Mandelstam. Lorand Gaspar (b. 1925) is a Hungarian who was educated in three languages (Hungarian, German, and Romanian), and privately tutored in a fourth, French; after his medical studies in Paris, he adopted the latter language for his poetry and translations, eventually rendering into French the poetry of D. H. Lawrence, Peter Riley, Pilinszky, and Rilke.

Even more active is Philippe Jaccottet (b. 1925), whose resourceful *D'une lyre a cinq cordes* (1997) includes translations from the Italian, Spanish, German, Russian, and Czech. Importantly, in each case (others could be cited), the choices made by the poet-translator reveal telling aesthetic and philosophical affinities.

Related to this phenomenon of translation is the prestigious line of non-French poets or writers who, like Gaspar, eventually opted for French as their literary language. Samuel Beckett (1906-1989) immediately comes to mind; his first twelve French poems, all written before World War II, gave impetus to his increasing commitment--beginning around 1946--to French as his alternative literary language. Less known to American readers is Gherasim Luca (1913-1994), a Romanian who wrote his first poems in his native language, then, after switching to French, produced a powerfully-rhythmed poetic corpus based on hallucinatory, histrionic visions and extravagant, Artaud-like word-play. Judging from his mid-1940s Romanian poems (which he rendered into French at the end of his life as *L'Inventeur de l'amour / La Mort morte*, 1994), one senses that French gave Luca a liberty, with respect to his idiosyncratic phonetic obsessions, that he might never have seized in his mother tongue.

Luca is not unique. Although by no means similar to him in sensibility, Silvia Baron Supervielle (b. 1934) - - originally from Argentina -- and Heather Dohollau (b. 1925) -- originally from Wales -- join the Francophone Romanian in a common metaphysical search for what might lie beyond humanness.

Accounting for her "leap" from English to French, Dohollau quotes Wittgenstein, who likened philosophy to swimming. "Since the body tends to rise to the surface of the water," she quips, paraphrasing the words of the philosopher, "one should resist and try to swim to the bottom." For her, French raised a "beneficial obstacle" because she could no longer rely on linguistic habits. Similarly, Baron Supervielle observes in her engaging intellectual autobiography, *La Ligne et l'ombre* (1999), that all genuine writing implies the adoption of a "second language," painstakingly constructed as the author struggles toward his or her individual style. She cites the example of Borges, who eccentrically used *esdrújulas*, words accented on the first syllable. In other words, a kind of "translation" inevitably governs the link between the poet's common, everyday idiom and his or her "poetic" idiom, little matter whether the two idioms actually stem from distinct languages.

Also a metaphysically-inclined poet marked by exile and errance, Tahar Bekri, born in 1951 in Tunisia, points out that "writing in the language of the other" demands "modesty" (*pudeur*). At the same time, for

Bekri, the foreign poet writing in French is like a "touchy guest" who refuses to leave all the baggage of his native language -- certain words, accents, rhythms, syntactic constructions, images, metaphors or symbols - on the threshold before entering the host-language's household. Whereas contemporary Francophone poets originating from independent countries (such as Baron Supervielle or Dohollau) and schooled in their mother tongue tend to view French as having "the right weakening effect" (as Beckett percipiently confessed), poets who were raised and initially educated (usually in French) in a former colony or an outlying French territory often conceive of French as a stew into which "non-French" ingredients and spices must be mixed. The poet Edouard Glissant, for instance, who was born in 1928 in Martinique, has been the resourceful precursor of the "Creolity" movement that, with the novels of Patrick Chamoiseau (b. 1953), has recently received international attention. If Glissant does not go as far as Chamoiseau in the mixing of French and Creole vocabulary, his incantatory poetic oeuvre nonetheless richly celebrates the Caribbean isles -- the winds, the waves, the storms, the volcanoes, as well as his fellow islanders and their history. Often compared to Derek Walcott, Glissant has also taken up where Saint-John Perse (1887-1975) and Aime Cesaire (b. 1913) left off: praising the violent beauty of the islands, mourning the human suffering transpiring there. Such Francophones have unquestionably invigorated the lexical and grammatical potentialities of French. In contrast, the delicately symbolic, discreetly lyrical poetry of Andree Chedid (b. 1925), who was born in Cairo but comes from a Lebanese familial background, is marked by a stylistic depouillement or "spareness" reminiscent of Dohollau or Baron Supervielle. Although emanating from sundry backgrounds, the poets who have adopted French ;as their poetic language agree in their insistence on the fruitfulness of overcoming linguistic difficulty. Beckett once remarked that he avoided English because "you couldn't help writing poetry in it." In a conversation with a friend, Lawrence Harvey, the Irishman added (as recorded in Anthony Cronin's *Samuel Beckett: The Last Modernist*, 1996) that "English because of its very richness holds out the temptation to rhetoric and virtuosity, words mirroring themselves complacently, Narcissus-like. The relative asceticism [of French] seemed more appropriate to the expression of being, undeveloped, unsupported, somewhere in the depths of the microcosm." When reading French poetry against a backdrop of ontology and metaphysics, it is crucial to keep in mind this "relative asceticism."

Although Beckett has few French "heirs," at least to date, much of the best contemporary poetry produced by the generation immediately following his own demands to be interpreted within an ontological framework -- one, however, usually broader than that incarnated in the Irishman's verse and prose. A neo-Romantic search for a fleeting "apperception" of--or even a more prolonged "communion" with -- Being distinctly motivates, in various ways, such poets as Bonnefoy, Jaccottet, du Bouchet, Dohollau, Baron Supervielle, Michel de Smet (b. 1912), Robert Marteau (b. 1925), Jacques Dupin (b. 1927), and Pierre-Albert Jourdan (1924-1981).

This orientation, sometimes accompanied by a quasi-scientific knowledge of natural things (one thinks of Marteau's admirably precise, yet also philosophically resonant, sonnets about various birds and trees), can be linked implicitly with some of Martin Heidegger's ideas. In France, Heidegger's thought was first popularized (with notorious misreadings) by Jean-Paul Sartre and then, more arrestingly, through commentary surrounding the short, oracular poems and prose poems of Rene Char (1907-1988), who was much admired by the German philosopher.

The point is not that this or that French poet, before writing, worked his way through *Being and Time* (1927), which, strangely enough, became available in French only in 1985. (Translations of other books by Heidegger were available earlier, of course.) The point is, rather, that key Heideggerean notions concerning death, man's separation from Nature and especially from Being, or man's use of reason, crop up in post-war poetry. The idea of a logos swelling upwards from the depths of Nature and potentially "hearkened to" -- as Heidegger puts it -- by the attentive poet also informs French poetics, as well as the corollary position -- not far removed from Beckett's, after all -- that what one intends to express lies beyond words yet must somehow be evoked, with words. The "abstractness" or "abstruseness" of which contemporary French poetry is sometimes accused often derives from the (foreign) critic's misprision of this philosophical framework. It is necessary to discern the nature-oriented, "earthgrounded," means mustered by poets struggling with exact perceptions that lead, however, to the ineffable. In *Une apparence de soupirail* (1982), Dupin summarizes this dilemma (and his own austere poetics) by avowing his desire to "write as if I had not been born Anterior words: half-ruined, stripped, sucked into the abyss. Writing without words, as if I were being born." Similarly, on the other side of our existence lies another "wordlessness," the "silence" of death; and this "lack of words," as Marie-Claire Bancquart (b. 1932) phrases it in *Sans lieu sinon l'attente* (1991)--one could almost say this "want" of words--is "all we know about entering death." A poet, too, may project him- or herself into this absence-of-all-utterance, attempting, with analogous paradox, to capture a few "posterior" words.

At any rate, language, by its very essence, is considered to be ontologically problematic even by French poets who are not as explicit in their self-conscious linguistic cogitation as Michel Deguy (b. 1930) or Anne-Marie Albiach (b. 1937). For this same reason, when a poet like du Bouchet spreads words and phrases all over the page, these "layouts" bear only superficial formal resemblance to, say, similar verse-scatterings composed by Ezra Pound or Charles Olson. As du Bouchet scrutinizes a wind-swept mountain-landscape, an extraordinary tension inhabits the blank spaces in his poem, while his lapidary, taut, syntactically wrenched utterances correspondingly seem to derive from a sort of "prehistoric" -- even, paradoxically, "pre-linguistic" -- cosmos, one in which the poet must (as he insists) "push down with all [his] weight on the weakest word so that it will burst and deliver its sky." Du Bouchet's poetry has been characterized as a *poesie blanche*, the term "blanche" here referring literally to "whiteness" or "blankness," and metaphorically to a hard-earned "purification," a "stripping-down to bare essentials." The artfully halting, doubting, inconclusive effects in many of Jaccottet's poems similarly mirror (are not just "about") the poet's grappling with the possibilities of getting "beyond" material facts and reaching out for elusive spiritual mysteries. His life-work charts his attempts (and, poignantly, his failures) to create in himself a readiness for -- an acute receptivity to -- an unpredictable, hypothetical, transitory instant in which an *ailleurs* or "elsewhere" becomes perceptible and thus almost reachable. Qualifiers like "perhaps" and "probably," as well as disaffirming adverbs and adjectives, not to forget conspicuous conditional verb tenses, masterfully evoke the hesitations and second thoughts preventing him from "arriving" at the envisioned lieu. For Bonnefoy, who has devoted perceptive essays to this linguistic paradox haunting him and so many of his confreres, the experience of what he calls "presence" -- the reunion, however ephemeral, with plenitude; the apprehension of transcendence, in the here and now -- presumably must take place, if not exactly beyond words, then at least beyond the obfuscating conceptual connotations that usage has attached to them. These poetic and philosophical ideas (necessarily simplified here) must also be juxtaposed with Cartesian notions concerning the centrality of the self. A substantial amount of contemporary French poetry and prose indeed revolves around the question of the self, to the extent that a given poet's implicit position vis-a-vis the Cartesian "I think, therefore I am" enables his output to be classified. With respect to the metaphysically- or ontologically-oriented poets mentioned above, for instance, a *sine qua non* condition for experiencing Being involves what might be christened "de-selfing": the self, the locus of language, is considered to be the fundamental barrier that must be pulled down, displaced, at least disaggrandized, or even -- in some poets -- bitterly dismissed, if they are to escape "outwards" from the imprisoning qualities of the human condition. Several poets indeed aim at transforming the enclosing "high stone walls" of the monadic self into -- if nothing more transparent can be achieved -- at least a thin, opaque veil. If successful, then a little *lumiere* -- a keyword in contemporary poetry and much more richly connoted than its English cognate -- becomes visible, if not quite tangible. In *La Part des mots* (1983), de Smet notably observes that "a door kept open / to the light / nourishes the waiting / across from / the shattered words / of shadow." Du Bouchet graphically defines this necessary self-effacement as "writ[ing] as far as possible from myself," adding that he aspires to remain "farther from [himself] than from the horizon."

The short poems that Guillevic (1907-1997) devoted to the Atlantic (Carnac, 1961) delve into this seminal contradiction haunting him and his poetic kin: the writing self, writing its way to selflessness -- an irresolvable contradiction, evidently; an unending quest. A human being cannot break out of his inherent ephemerality, his mortality; what the poet may initially perceive as "eternal," an authentic manifestation of Being, must soon thereafter be re-named as "no more than" (as Guillevic qualifies it) a mere thought or feeling enveloped by his own perishable self. He, moreover, cannot get "inside the stone," he laments in *Sphere* (1963); a poet is fated to deal with a mere mirage-like "trembling"--a recurrent word in Jaccottet's nature poetry as well. This persistent ambiguity--this perpetual struggle to overcome an inherent, inevitable "failure"--characterizes the work of several other poets. Surpassing Existentialism, such poetry, evoking the mind's *elan* towards Being and its corresponding inability to arrive fully, represents a new, more spiritual, attempt to define *la condition humaine*. In Jaccottet, this wavering between the positive and the negative is particularly gripping. Ever wrestling with the overwhelmingly pessimistic evidence of a materialism whose only horizon is death and annihilation, he nonetheless pursues his troubling "positive" intuition that there might nevertheless be, as he posits, "something between things, / like the space between the lime-tree and the laurel." He wonders recurrently how he might cross the "threshold," accede to this promising "space." "Threshold," too, is a key French poetic term.

A poet like Charles Juliet (b. 1934) takes a different angle on these problematics. Juliet's limpid poems explore existential distress, the daily discouragements of life, solitude, and fear. His successive poetry volumes thus trace, in almost diary-like fashion, the itinerary of a man perpetually struggling to get beyond despair and to attain inner peace. Intimately self-referential (all while remaining abstract enough, in symbolism, to create an immediate universality), his poems, set against a backdrop of metaphysical anguish and a loss of religious faith, appeal to the need for individuation, for self-fulfillment. It is the duty of poetry,

he maintains, to teach him how to "adhere / to what I am"--an echo of Goethe's "become what you are." Similarly, Louis-Rene des Forets (b. 1918), especially in his profound and troubling *Poemes de Samuel Wood* (1988), attempts to come to terms with himself in the face of approaching death. Samuel Wood is a fictional construct, a poetic "voice" who expounds a philosophy of living (and writing) with respect to the certainty of his demise. In the final poem, des Forets unmask Wood--a mere "invented shade" not at all like himself--and admits that "this voice from elsewhere / inaccessible to time and wear / is no less illusory than a dream." He can only hope that something in this voice "nevertheless" persists, endures, "its timbre still vibrating in the distance like a storm / of which one cannot tell if it is coming near or going away." A related characteristic of French poetry is the poet's relationship to "things." Because of the natural empiricism of most English-language poets, it is hard to imagine an exact equivalent of Francis Ponge (1899-1988), the French "thing-poet" par excellence. His prose poems--devoted to objects such as magnolia trees, potatoes, olives, lilacs, oysters, snails, pebbles, plates, fruit crates, water jugs, candles or bread--have proved to be stimulating exercises in perception and description. Significantly, these texts chronicle the "approach" toward these things--with which he cannot otherwise consort easily. Ponge, more than anyone else before him (except Rilke, the pioneer), poetically depicts the steep, uneven, even treacherous trail that language must climb before attaining a "thing," an "object." In contrast, William Carlos Williams's oft-cited "no ideas but in things" argues for a different teleology of the material world. Roughly speaking, the American poet begins with a fact and works toward an idea, while his French counterpart begins with an idea and works to the fact--as Ponge himself strikingly confesses at the end of his "preamble" to his famous text, "The Mimosa." "All these preliminaries," he concludes, "should be entitled: The Mimosa and I. But it's to the mimosa itself--oh sweet illusion! -- that I now need to come ... to the mimosa without me." For Ponge, in other words, the objectifying poetic process, aiming at grasping the "thing-in-itself," must necessarily take into account the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* as well as its logical consequence: "Because I am, the outside world also exists." Tellingly, the ultimate rejection of the self-referential Cartesian axiom--in the name of what Ponge terms his "bias" or "prejudice" (*parti pris*) in favor of things--implies an initial acceptance of its validity. It is impossible to think of a French poet who has ignored its primacy. In a poem from Edge (1996), Claire Malroux (b. 1935) writes, for example: "I can't get too far in. The wall stops me / Where the spider of my shadow crouches / ... I will stay on this side / ... Without trying to find out what that sun / Might be."

Even in a man as capable of Ponge-like "down-to-thingness" as Jacques Reda (b. 1929), nearly every detail in his poems seems accompanied by bewilderment, stupefaction, admiration, joy, even occasional grumpiness--emotions all illustrating how uneasily or anxiously separated from the material world a French poet can be. In *La Liberte des rues* (1997), Reda refers to those "modest yet incontestable marvels" that he chances upon during his aimless wanderings (by foot or on his antiquated Velo-Solex moped), especially through Parisian streets, but also as far as the headwaters of the Seine or even Dublin. In *Les Ruines de Paris* (1977), his serendipitous findings include acacias blossoming fragrantly in drab Parisian side-streets, shops selling cheap delicious wine, rare jazz recordings, carefully painted lead soldiers, and obscure cigarette brands. (Smoking strange tobacco mixtures, he avows, is his "way of seeking for the Absolute.") The "idea" inciting him to seek out, to ready himself for, such unpredictable "miracles" thus entails ever "going out"--the verb *sortir* and its synonyms occur emphatically in many a contemporary poet of like sensibility. In brief, he hopes to find "what [he] isn't looking for." Beginning with these odd, usually jubilant happenstances, Reda often spins off on one of those half-fanciful, half-serious metaphysical tangents that make his books so delightful and thought-provoking. Although quite different in tone, the increasingly aphoristic poetry of Christian Hubin (b. 1941) likewise struggles to reconcile the microcosmic with the macrocosmic, the brute physical detail with its potential metaphysical resonance.

Inversely, some French poets celebrate what is closest to home. Taking their example from the great, still insufficiently-acknowledged precursor in this domain, Jean Follain (1903-1971), poets such as Francois de Corniere (b. 1950) and Gil Jouanard (b. 1937) often devote their attention to "humble" everyday objects, landscapes and localities, as well as (in the former's case) family life. Moving from the particular to the general, or vice versa, their poems and prose poems meditate on the sense and the respect that one should give to the quotidian and to a "full instant" of being alive. Yet their vantage point on dailiness is not fully informed by an uncompromising realism; an attempt is made to get beyond facts to ideas (particularly in Jouanard's case) or to an oft-melancholy emotion associated with the fragility of human life and love, with the radiant "presence" of certain simple things, with the richness of "privileged moments," or with the perennial mysteries concealed in the most routine events. Often, what most intrigues is not what the poet relates, but rather what he intentionally omits. The outstanding lessons taught by Follain to his "intimist" descendants are how to look around, wherever one is, and to place the enigma between the lines.

One of the most engaging expressions of French intimism occurs in the "stroll," a meditative poetic rambling through the countryside and especially Paris. As the lieu of such excursions, it is hard to think of a

metropolis more tailor-made for poetry than the French capital. Apollinaire's mellifluous "Le Pont Mirabeau" (included in *Alcools*, 1913) already links the bitter memory of an amorous sentiment to a specifically "local" recurrent detail (the Seine flowing underneath the bridge); a still more graphic example is his much less lyrical "Zone" (also in *Alcools*), a free-verse "curriculum vitae" employing the haunting leitmotiv of "walking in Paris, all alone amidst the crowds." As to contemporary poets, Reda (himself inspired by the ebullient, erudite, unclassifiable Swiss poet and prose-writer Charles-Albert Cingria, 1883-1954) has produced a monumental series of prose-poem and poetry volumes devoted to, literally, every arrondissement and outlying suburb. His haphazard, sharp-eyed excursions are all the more endearing in that he remains a true provincial at heart (he hails from Luneville). Poetry collections such as *Hors les murs* (1982), *L'Incorrigible* (1995) or *La Course* (1999), prose-poem collections such as *Les Ruines de Paris*, *La Liberte des rues* or *Le Citadin* (1998), as well as hybrid collections (combining verse and prose) such as *Chateaux des courants d'air* (1986), are already classics of this "itinerant" genre.

Reda's example is contagious, as Jacques Roubaud (b. 1932) implies in his Baudelairean-entitled *La Forme d'une ville change plus vite, hélas, que le coeur des humains* (1999). Roubaud likewise offers multivarious strolling poems in this drolly heterogeneous collection. Some passages are grave in tonality (such as the "Square des Blancs-Manteaux" sequence, based on a death-theme), while others are commemorative, whimsical, even outlandishly arithmetic. "Portrait mineralogique de Paris 1992," for instance, is arranged as a list of automobile license-plate numbers spotted at various spots in the city.

Such jokes are not uncommon of O.U.L.I.P.O. members such as Roubaud. The "Ouvroir de Litterature Potentielle" was founded in 1960 by the mathematician Francois Le Lionnais and the novelist, poet and amateur mathematician Raymond Queneau (1903-1976). Oulipian poets place great emphasis on form, which is not to say that the specific inspiration of their poems is impersonal. The classical poetic forms used or transformed in Roubaud's *Quelque chose noir* (1986), devoted to the death of his young wife, do not prohibit these poems from constituting one of the most moving volumes of the past twenty years. Claude Esteban (b. 1935), who is not an Oulipian, has also devoted poignant, sorrowful writing to the accidental death of his wife. An elegiac tone continues to preside over his latest collection, *Sur la dernière lande* (1996), an interconnected series of sparse, meditative laments accompanied, each time, by a quotation from King Lear.

As Roubaud's title-borrowing from the author of *The Flowers of Evil* suggests, the roots of these poetic explorations of Paris go back to Baudelaire's engagement with a city he perceived as "ever-changing." "But none of my melancholy / Has budged," he adds (in "The Swan"), "New palaces, scaffoldings, apartment blocks, / Old faubourgs, all this becomes allegorical, / And my fond memories are heavier than boulders." A similar "spleen" runs through the work of another inveterate "stroller," Paul de Roux (b. 1937). The haunting sadness and solitude animating his most recent collection, *Le Soleil dans l'oeil* (1998), is often associated with a particular street, place or itinerary.

An even more influential presage of the contemporary poet's concern with place and movement is announced by Rimbaud. Famous for his incitations to "departure" (for example "into new affection and new sound"), his poetry simultaneously disturbs because of the antithetical implications of another oft-quoted, simple, yet mysterious line: "On ne part pas." The phrase literally means "one does not leave" or "never gets away," but in the context of the "Bad Blood" sequence, it serves as an abrupt transition, also suggesting "you (or we) never get away" or even a strangely de-personalized "I never get away." The tense contradiction arising when these Rimbaudian quotations--deriving from his two major works, *A Season in Hell* (1873) and *Illuminations* (1886)--are juxtaposed, can be said to characterize much contemporary poetry devoted to strolling or travel.

Not surprisingly, Guy Goffette (b. 1947), who admires Rimbaud and especially Verlaine, takes up this theme of mobility and immobility--the necessary yet impossible voyage. Up to now, instead of Paris, Goffette's superbly-crafted verse has mainly celebrated the harsh, bitter beauties of the "dark, cold, slate-covered villages" and gray, rain-drenched farmland of eastern and northern France. In *Partance* (2000), his recent collection of meditative prose (in which some of the pieces artfully straddle the border between the prose poem and the "personal essay"), Goffette examines the phenomenon of "leaving without moving," tellingly ruminating on this predicament in a camping trailer left to rust at the end of an unproductive fruit orchard.

No evocation of these strolling or travel poems can ignore the ways in which the Surrealists took up where Baudelaire and Rimbaud left off. The initially Surrealist, ultimately Communist, lyric poet Louis Aragon (1897-1982), for instance, embarks on a meticulous investigation of Paris in *Le Paysan de Paris* (1926 / 1953), essentially a prose work that nonetheless reproduces street posters, professional nameplates, and other "found poems." A grim example consists of two hand-written notes--one tacked on top of the other--discovered on a stamp shop in a covered shopping arcade near the Opera. The first note states "CLOSED BECAUSE OF AN ILLNESS," the second "CLOSED BECAUSE OF A DEATH." Nadja (1928), by Andre

Breton (1896-1966), is likewise a poetic-prose "wandering" through Paris. The author considers "streets" alone to be capable of giving his life "surprising detours." Even for contemporary poets who otherwise eschew Surrealist posturing and stylistic quirks, the idea of celebrating odd things or unsettling events--come across by chance--has indelibly marked French poetry. A revealing example is Genevieve Huttin's *Paris, litanie des cafes* (1991), a distant cousin of *Nadja*, as it were, which turns the "poetic stroll" into a precisely-described itinerary from which emerge intriguing, fragmentary strands of a love story. If Huttin's verses are marked by a compelling *pudeur*, the trials of love have also been expressed more forcibly in contemporary poetry. Jude Stefan (b. 1930) has produced remarkably musical, syntactically complex, erotic poems memorably evoking the most violent, ephemeral, corporal pleasures. Sexual desire is--in Stefan's "baroque" verse--often juxtaposed with the inevitability of death or with the deterioration of the ageing body. However, no spiritual horizon or hope informs his writing, which draws its inspiration more from Catullus than from Pierre Jean Jouve (1887-1976), the poet who remains the classic mentor of other contemporary poets fascinated by the intermingling of love, sex, death, and mystical experience. Bancquart, for instance, seems a direct inheritor of Jouve; her symbolically complex work similarly develops Christian themes amidst images of death, erotic love, and the natural world. Admiring both Baudelaire and the Christian mystics, Jouve unites the crude and the ecstatic, the sensual and the sacred. Whereas Stefan, with a sort of hardy Elizabethan concreteness, insists on the bitter termini of sexual experiences, during which one can seek no more than a temporary "absolution from selfhood" by blending with "someone who is not you," Jouve postulates that love becomes powerful, transcendent, and pure only when it cannot be fulfilled. The daily, indeed "earthly," presence of the beloved must be transformed into an "absence"; this "absence" then becomes an overwhelmingly internalized "presence." Stefan's love poetry posits that, in the absence of any spiritual hope, physical pleasure is the only justifiable goal of a doomed existence. In contrast, Jouve's singular hedonism remains metaphysically ambitious. His "plunges," as he phrases it, into the "abyss" of sexual gratification, aim dizzily to attain a sort of NeoPlatonic, Plotinian, "Oneness."

Extending these notions of "presence" and "Oneness," in both his poetry and his essays, Bonnefoy, too, has been nourished by Jouve; yet he has also departed from the author of *Matiere celeste* (1936-1937) by incorporating, increasingly, amorous companionship into his poetic outlook. In the process, the ontological "presence" sought solitarily by Bonnefoy, in his earlier poetry, has taken on a discreetly feminine ambience. This effect is subtle, as if the search for presence--a "chosen path" over which modern man's distraught relationship to reality can, in his view, hopefully be nursed--could also create the conditions by which love became possible (and vice versa). Such a choice--the Dantean "yes" ultimately elected over an embittered "no"--offers an affirming alternative to the typically entrenched solitude of the neo-Romantic poet obsessed with his separation from Being. In his moving prose poems, which are likewise often centered on love, a much younger poet, Jean-Michel Maulpoix (b. 1952), has adopted a similar orientation.

Maulpoix's mastery of the prose poem brings me to this genre that has never gained, among English-language poets, the popularity and prestige that it has long enjoyed in France--continuously at least since Baudelaire's posthumously-gathered *Petits Poemes en prose* (the first six of which appeared in 1857, ten years before his death) and Rimbaud's stunning prose pieces in *A Season in Hell* and *Illuminations*. The French prose poem goes back at least as far as Aucassin et Nicolette (late 12th or early 13th century), a love story alternating verse and "poetic prose"; and metrically "cadenced" prose sermons were written--notably by Saint Bernard (1091-1153)--even earlier.

Remarkably, many French poets pass with ease between prose and verse. When questioned about the borders or differences between the genres, such poets reply that, for them, essentially no distinctions exist; or, rather, that differences lie elsewhere than in form. Reda, who is as celebrated for his Alexandrines and "false Alexandrines"--composed with phonetic meticulousness in what he calls *vets mache* or "chewedup verse"--as for his prose poems, has pointed out dryly that, in verse, one simply pays attention to how lines end whereas, in prose, one does not. This is no naive observation, as is amply illustrated by his funny, yet ever penetrating, studies of French versification, collected in *Celle qui vient a pas legers* (1985).

The unifying, all-encompassing title *Œuvre* (as opposed to the plural *Œuvres*) chosen by *Mercure de France* for their standard edition of Jouve's prose and poetry could not have stated this phenomenon more forthrightly. And certainly the dreamy, sometimes fantastical fiction, prose poems, and poems of Andre Hardellet (1911-1974)--whose collected works have also been singularized into a three-volume *Œuvre*--inter-acted on each other in ways more rarely witnessed in English-language poets. Henri Michaux (1899-1984) likewise produced a life-work in which the boundaries between prose and poetry are constantly transgressed. An additional illustration of this overlapping of poetry and prose is of course "Prose du Transsibérien et de la petite Jeanne de France" (1913), written by Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961).

Significantly, Cendrars calls "prose" this long, generally free-verse travel poem--yet not without occasional end-rhymes, internal rhymes or half-rhymes--that graphically relates a jewelry-smuggling adventure in

which the poet finds himself involved in Russia. It is not surprising that this "train-ride poem" was later much admired by the Beats. For a novelist like Julien Gracq (b. 1910), who increasingly writes short, autobiographical, elaborately descriptive prose pieces encroaching on the prose poem, his little-known series of genuine prose poems, *Prose pour l'étrangère* (1952), offers a key to the implied eroticism of his earlier fiction.

It is tempting to associate as well this quintessentially French phenomenon of prose poetry with certain inherent qualities of the "literary language," and notably a strictly stylistic tendency to manipulate abstractions that is independent of any philosophical preoccupation. There is not enough space here to describe the historical, political, social, educational, grammatical and lexicographic causes of this propensity (which first becomes perceptible in the 17th century). Let it suffice to say that "abstractions" in French are not "received" by the French reader in the same way that they are in English. This same distinction also applies to symbols and metaphors.

Stemming directly from these internal characteristics of the language, and similar in its relative "foreignness" for us, is the aphorism, another French specialty that likewise must be comprehended for a full savoring of the country's poetry. Beckett was attracted to, then translated, the pessimistic maxims of Chamfort (1740-1794); and Rimbaud makes it clear, in the "Phrases" section of *Illuminations*, that a mere sentence or two can compose a "poem." What inspires the aphorism or the very short French poem (that is neither an epigram nor a haiku) is a desire to reach out for a wholeness, to summarize a universal with a mere handful of words. As we have seen, this generalizing intention, intensely combined with an awareness of "relative linguistic asceticism," "probable failure," "inherent contradiction," has guided many 20th-century French poets in their visionary aspirations, in their quest for Being, in their approach to both the material world and the ineffable. Pointedly, Michel de Smet needs only six, deceptively simple words to sum up the characteristic intimism, self-consciousness, ontological anxiety and writerly hopes that underlie much of the best contemporary French poetry: *Tout voir / tient dans la main.*

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