

Twentieth-Century French Poetry: A Critical Anthology

Modern French poetry is unique in the boldness and creativity of its experiments in form and genre, from classical verse to *vers libre*, from *calligrammes* to prose poems and *poésie sonore*. This anthology includes thirty-two poems by French and francophone poets, each followed by an accessibly written, detailed commentary. The different approaches adopted in the close readings by specialists in their field reflect the major trends in current literary criticism and theory. A foreword by one of France's foremost poets, Yves Bonnefoy, a general introduction, and an afterword provide a helpful theoretical framework for the study of modern poetry. An extensive bibliography, concise biographies of the poets, and a glossary of literary terms are included. Students of French and of comparative literature will gain a deeper understanding of the development of French verse and of the artistic movements (especially in the visual arts) that have shaped twentieth-century French poetry.

HUGUES AZÉRAD is Fellow in French at Magdalene College, Cambridge.

PETER COLLIER is Emeritus Fellow in French at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge.

**Twentieth-Century
French Poetry**
A Critical Anthology

Edited by
HUGUES AZÉRAD AND PETER COLLIER



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-88642-0 — Twentieth-Century French Poetry
Edited by Hugues Azérad, Peter Collier
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Shaftesbury Road, Cambridge CB2 8EA, United Kingdom
One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia
314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre, New Delhi – 110025, India
103 Penang Road, #05–06/07, Visioncrest Commercial, Singapore 238467

Cambridge University Press is part of Cambridge University Press & Assessment, a department of the University of Cambridge.

We share the University's mission to contribute to society through the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521886420

© Cambridge University Press & Assessment 2010

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements, no reproduction of any part may take place without the written permission of Cambridge University Press & Assessment.

First published 2010

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-0-521-88642-0 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-71398-6 Paperback

Cambridge University Press & Assessment has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for external or third-party internet websites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-0-521-88642-0 — Twentieth-Century French Poetry
Edited by Hugues Azérad, Peter Collier
Frontmatter
[More Information](#)

In memory of Malcolm Bowie (1943–2007)
and David Kelley (1941–1999)

Contents

<i>Notes on contributors</i>		page ix
<i>Preface</i>		xv
<i>Acknowledgements</i>		xvi
<i>Copyright acknowledgements</i>		xvii
Foreword: Ending the mission, inaugurating the pact	<i>Yves Bonnefoy</i>	xix
General introduction	<i>Hugues Azérad</i>	1
Part I Traditions and modernisms		
1 Paul Valéry, 'Le Cantique des colonnes' (1922)	<i>Peter Collier</i>	17
2 Victor Segalen, 'Aux dix mille années' (1912)	<i>Charles Forsdick</i>	25
3 Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Lettre-Océan' (1916)	<i>Timothy Mathews</i>	34
4 Marie Noël, 'Attente' (1920)	<i>Alison Finch</i>	44
5 Blaise Cendrars, 'Mee Too Buggi' (1919)	<i>Clive Scott</i>	53
6 Saint-John Perse, 'Écrit sur la porte' (1925)	<i>Mary Gallagher</i>	61
7 Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'À New York' (1956)	<i>Roger Little</i>	70
Part II Avant-gardes		
8 Pierre Reverdy, 'L'Esprit du dehors' (1915), 'L'Esprit dehors' (1960)	<i>Stephen Romer</i>	81
9 Paul Éluard, 'La courbe de tes yeux. . .' (1926)	<i>Richard Stamelman</i>	90
10 André Breton, 'Vigilance' (1932)	<i>Elza Adamowicz</i>	98
11 Louis Aragon, 'Elsa je t'aime' (1941)	<i>Tom Conley</i>	105
12 Henri Michaux, 'Iniji' (1973)	<i>Margaret Rigaud-Drayton</i>	116
13 Aimé Césaire, <i>Cahier d'un retour au pays natal</i> (1939)	<i>Jean Khalifa</i>	123
14 Francis Ponge, 'Le Volet suivi de sa scholie' (1946)	<i>Philippe Met</i>	133
Part III Poetics of presence		
15 René Char, 'Gravité' (1938)	<i>Roger Cardinal</i>	147
16 Yves Bonnefoy, 'Rue Traversière' (1987)	<i>Victoria Best</i>	155
		vii

CONTENTS

17	André du Bouchet, 'Accidents' (1961)	<i>Emma Wagstaff</i>	163
18	Jacques Dupin, 'Commencer' (1969)	<i>Mary Ann Caws</i>	170
19	Philippe Jaccottet, 'L'Ignorant' (1958)	<i>Jean-Michel Maulpoix</i>	174
20	Édouard Glissant, 'Pour Mycéa' (1985)	<i>Jean-Pascal Pouzet</i>	181
Part IV New voices, new visions			
21	Michel Deguy, 'Le Métronome' (1993)	<i>Béatrice Bonhomme</i>	195
22	Bernard Heidsieck, 'Poème-partition B2B3 (Exorcisme)' (1962)	<i>Jean-Pierre Bobillot</i>	204
23	Jacques Réda, 'L'Incorrigible' (1995)	<i>Susan Harrow</i>	214
24	Bernard Noël, 'Les états de l'air' (1983)	<i>Andrew Rothwell</i>	222
25	Jacques Roubaud, 'Dès que je me lève' (1986)	<i>Meryl Tyers</i>	230
26	Marie-Claire Bancquart, 'Essentiel' (1986)	<i>Shirley Jordan</i>	240
27	Nguyễn Hoàng Bao Việt, 'Anne Frank' (1959, 1980)	<i>Thanh-Vân Ton-That</i>	247
28	Claude Esteban, 'Ils sont riches, mon père / et ma mère' (1999)	<i>Robert W. Greene</i>	253
29	Gérard Titus-Carmel, 'Or battant. . .' (2006)	<i>Michael Bishop</i>	260
30	Jean-Michel Maulpoix, 'Le bleu ne fait pas de bruit' (1992)	<i>Laure Helms</i>	267
31	Amina Saïd, 'Trois continents dérivent' (1988)	<i>Rosemary Lloyd</i>	272
32	Pierre Alferi, 'Une défense de la poésie' (1997)	<i>Michael Sheringham</i>	279
Afterword: Reading twentieth-century French verse		<i>Clive Scott</i>	288
<i>Biographies of the poets</i>			295
<i>Glossary</i>			312
<i>Select bibliography</i>			319
<i>Index</i>			328

Notes on contributors

Elza Adamowicz is Professor of French Literature and Visual Culture at Queen Mary, University of London. She has published widely on Surrealism. Publications include: *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (1998), *Ceci n'est pas un tableau: les écrits surréalistes sur l'art* (2004), and *Surrealism: Crossings/Frontiers* (2006).

Hugues Azérad is Fellow and College Lecturer in French at Magdalene College, Cambridge. He is the author of *L'Univers constellé de Proust, Joyce et Faulkner* (2002), and he has published articles on a range of writers including Proust, Joyce, Faulkner, Reverdy and Nerval.

Victoria Best is Fellow and College Lecturer in French at St John's College, Cambridge, where she works in undergraduate study support. Her research interests focus on modern French literature, with a particular concern for the interplay between identity and narrative. Her books include *An Introduction to Twentieth-Century French Literature* (2002) and, co-written with Martin Crowley, *The New Pornographies: Explicit Sex in Modern French Fiction and Film* (2008).

Michael Bishop is McCulloch Professor of French at Dalhousie University, Canada. Author of numerous books and essays and director of VVV Editions, his latest works include *Jacques Prévert: From Film and Theater to Poetry, Art and Song* (2002), *Altérités d'André du Bouchet* (2003), *L'Art français et francophone depuis 1980* (2005), *The Endless Theory of Days: The Art and Poetry of Gérard Titus-Carmel* (2007), translations of Yves Bonnefoy and Gérard Titus-Carmel, and two volumes of poetry.

Jean-Pierre Bobillot is Professor of French at the University of Grenoble. He specialises in French poetry (1865–1925) and in twentieth-century avant-garde poetry. He has written: *Bernard Heidsieck poésie action* (1996), *Trois essais sur la poésie littéraire* (2003) and *Rimbaud: le meurtre d'Orphée* (2004). He has also published several books and CDs of poetry.

Béatrice Bonhomme is a poet and is Professor of French at the University of Nice. In 1994, she co-founded (with Hervé Bosio) the poetry journal *Nu(e)*. She is

 NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

the president of the Société Pierre Jean Jouve and leads a research team (*Poïèma*). She has published widely on poetry and literature.

Yves Bonnefoy is a French poet and essayist. He is Emeritus Professor at the Collège de France where he held the Chair of 'Études comparées de la fonction poétique' in 1981–93.

Roger Cardinal is the author of *Figures of Reality: A Perspective on the Poetic Imagination* (1981) and the editor of *Sensibility and Creation: Studies in Twentieth-Century French Poetry* (1977). He writes on French Surrealism and on the modern visual arts, especially *art brut*.

Mary Ann Caws is Distinguished Professor of English, French and Comparative Literature at the Graduate Center, City University of New York. She has written illustrated biographies of Dora Maar, Virginia Woolf, Marcel Proust, Henry James, Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dalí. Her recent books include *Glorious Eccentrics: Modernist Women Painting and Writing* (2007), *Surprised in Translation* (2006), and two memoirs.

Peter Collier is Emeritus Fellow in French at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge. He is the co-editor of *Visions and Blueprints* (1988), *Modernism and the European Unconscious* (1990), *Literary Theory Today* (1990), *Artistic Relations* (1994) and *Powerful Bodies* (1999). He is also the author of *Proust and Venice* (1989), and a translator of Bourdieu, Zola and Proust. He is the editor of two series: *Modern French Identities* and *European Connections*.

Tom Conley is Abbot Lawrence Lowell Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures at Harvard University. He specialises in early modern French literature; film and media studies; and the intersection of literature and graphic imagination. His books include *Cartographic Cinema* (2006), *The Self-Made Map: Cartographic Writing in Early Modern France* (1997), and *The Graphic Unconscious in Early Modern French Writing* (1992). He has translated the work of Michel de Certeau, Gilles Deleuze, Marc Augé and Christian Jacob.

Charles Forsdick is James Barrow Professor of French at the University of Liverpool. His publications include *Victor Segalen and the Aesthetics of Diversity* (2000) and *Travel in Twentieth-Century French and Francophone Cultures* (2005). He is co-editor (with David Murphy) of *Francophone Postcolonial Studies: A Critical Introduction* (2003).

Alison Finch is Professor of French at the University of Cambridge. She is a specialist in post-1800 French literature. Her publications include *Proust's Additions: The Making of 'À la recherche du temps perdu'* (1977), *Stendhal: La Chartreuse de*

Parme (1984) and *Women's Writing in Nineteenth-Century France* (2000). She is currently writing *A Cultural History of French Literature*.

Mary Gallagher is Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies at University College Dublin. Her publications include *La Créolité de Saint-John Perse* (1998), *Soundings in French Caribbean Writing since 1950* (2002), (as editor) *Ici-Là: Place and Displacement in Caribbean Writing in French* (2003), and (as co-editor with Michael Brophy) *Sens et présence du sujet poétique* (2006).

Robert W. Greene is Professor Emeritus of French, State University of New York at Albany. He is the author of *The Poetic Theory of Pierre Reverdy* (1967), *Six French Poets of Our Time* (1979), *Just Words: Moralism and Metalanguage in Twentieth-Century French Fiction* (1993) and *Searching for Presence: Yves Bonnefoy's Writings on Art* (2004). He is also the editor of *Dalhousie French Studies* 21 (Fall–Winter 1991), devoted to 'Art Criticism by French Poets Since World War II'.

Susan Harrow is Professor of French at the University of Bristol. She researches in the field of late nineteenth-century and twentieth-century French poetry and narrative. Her books include *The Material, the Real and the Fractured Self* (2004) and *Zola, the Body Modern: Pressures and Prospects of Representation* (2009). She is President of the Society of Dix-Neuviémistes.

Laure Helms is Associate Research Fellow at the University of Paris X Nanterre. She specialises in nineteenth-century literature and contemporary French poetry. She has published a critical edition of *Pierre et Jean* by Maupassant (2008), and has written articles on Jean-Michel Maulpoix.

Shirley Jordan is Reader in French at Queen Mary, University of London. She has published monographs on the art criticism of Francis Ponge and on new women's writing in France. Other studies explore contemporary writers, filmmakers and artists, including Jean-Daniel Pollet, Sophie Calle, Annie Ernaux, Marie NDiaye and Christine Angot.

Jean Khalfa is a Fellow and College Lecturer at Trinity College, Cambridge. He has published widely on philosophy, modern literature (in particular contemporary poetry and writing in French from North Africa and the Caribbean), aesthetics and anthropology. Recently he has edited *Frantz Fanon*, a special issue of *Wasafiri*, 44 (2005); *Pour Frantz Fanon*, special two-part issue of *Les Temps Modernes*, 635–6 (2006); and the first complete edition of Michel Foucault's *History of Madness* (2006).

Roger Little occupied the Chair of French at Trinity College Dublin from 1979 until his retirement in 1998. He has published extensively on modern French

 NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

poetry and on the representation of Blacks in French literature. He has launched and directed several series including *Critical Guides to French Texts* and *Autrement Mêmes*.

Rosemary Lloyd was Rudy Professor of French at Indiana University until her retirement in 2007. She is the author of studies on Baudelaire, Mallarmé and Flaubert, as well as monographs on jealousy as a literary trope, the representation of childhood in nineteenth-century French literature, and the still life in prose. In addition she has translated writings by Baudelaire, Mallarmé, George Sand, and the contemporary poets Mylène Catel and Philippe Rhamy.

Timothy Mathews is Professor of French at UCL, University of London. He is the author of *Reading Apollinaire: Theories of Poetic Language* (1987) and *Literature, Art and the Pursuit of Decay* (2000), and is the co-editor of *Violence, théorie, sur-réalisme* (1994).

Jean-Michel Maulpoix is Professor of French Literature at the University of Paris X Nanterre. He has published some thirty titles, poetic texts, critical essays and miscellanies. They have a common aim: the elucidation of what might be called the poetic. His work most frequently evolves on the frontiers of narrative.

Philippe Met teaches literature and film at the University of Pennsylvania. He is editor-in-chief of *French Forum* and the author of articles most notably on poetry and cinema. His books include: *Formules de la poésie* (1999) and *La Lettre tue. Spectre(s) de l'écrit fantastique* (2008). He also edited *Le Savon* for the Francis Ponge Pléiade (2002) and *André du Bouchet et ses Autres* (2003). He is currently completing an essay on the poetics and phenomenology of the notebook (*Fausse Notes*).

Jean-Pascal Pouzet is Maître de conférences at the University of Limoges and Associate Research Fellow at the University of Poitiers. He has published widely on English and French medieval literature.

Margaret Rigaud-Drayton is Fellow and College Lecturer in French at Christ's College, Cambridge, and the author of *Henri Michaux: Poetry, Painting, and the Universal Sign* (2005).

Stephen Romer has lived in France since 1981 where he is Maître de conférences at the University of Tours. A practising poet, he has published four collections, most recently *Yellow Studio* (2008). He has translated widely from modern French poetry. His anthology *Twentieth-Century French Poems* was published in 2002.

 NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Andrew Rothwell is Professor of French at Swansea University, specialising in modern and contemporary poetry with particular reference to the visual arts. He has published books and articles on Reverdy and Bernard Noël. He has also translated a number of Noël's works into English.

Clive Scott is Professor Emeritus of European Literature at the University of East Anglia. Between 1980 and 2002 he published a sequence of books on French verse and versification. More recently, he has turned his critical attention to the subject of translating poetry: *Translating Baudelaire* (2000) and *Translating Rimbaud's 'Illuminations'* (2006).

Michael Sheringham is a Fellow of All Souls College, Oxford, and is Marshal Foch Professor of French Literature at Oxford University. His publications include *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (1993) and *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (2006). He co-edited with Johnnie Gratton *The Art of the Project: Projects and Experiments in Modern French Culture* (2005) and edited *Parisian Fields* (1996).

Richard Stamelman is Professor of Romance Languages at Williams College, and is the author of *Lost Beyond Telling: Representations of Death and Absence in Modern French Poetry* (1990), and the editor and principal translator of *The Lure and the Truth of Painting: Selected Essays on Art by Yves Bonnefoy* (1995). His most recent book is *Perfume: Joy, Obsession, Scandal, Sin; A Cultural History of Perfume from 1750 to the Present* (2006).

Thanh-Vân Ton-That is Professor of French at Pau University. Her publications include monographs on Proust (2000), Duras (2005), Léon Cladel (2007) and Mérimée (2008).

Meryl Tyers has taught at Fitzwilliam College, Cambridge, the École Normale Supérieure, St Anne's College, Oxford, and Glasgow University, where she has been an Honorary Research Fellow since 2003. She is the author of *Critical Fictions: Nerval's Les Illuminés* (1998) and has published articles on nineteenth-century bohemians and Bernard Noël.

Emma Wagstaff is Lecturer in French at the University of Birmingham. She is the author of *Provisionality and the Poem* (2006), and of articles about the work of poets André du Bouchet, Philippe Jaccottet and Bernard Noël. She is currently researching French literary responses to the art of Giacometti.

Preface

This book is primarily intended for readers with a good knowledge of French, as the poems are given without translation. However, whenever rare words (from the poems) or particularly difficult quotations or passages in French occur in the commentaries, translations have been given between brackets. Each commentary is followed by a Further reading section, which includes references to existing translations of the volume from which the poem is taken, and of other works by the poet, a short list of critical works not mentioned in the notes, and thus enabling further focused research on the poet. The book includes an Afterword, to be read after the poems, which gives an in-depth survey and reflection on how to read twentieth-century French verse. Even though our contributors have avoided unnecessary jargon, poetry as craft requires an array of critical terms and literary tropes with which we need to familiarise ourselves in order to perceive its internal harmonies and intricate processes. A glossary is therefore provided, regrouping and explaining the most difficult terms used in the commentaries. We also give biographies of the poets (referring to their main works), and finally a select bibliography which is divided into two sections: the first one lists useful reference works and a wide range of French poetry anthologies, in French and in English; the second section, while not claiming to be exhaustive, presents a large number of secondary readings of twentieth-century French poetry and poetics not included in the Further reading. It aims to show that 'poetics' is a fertile field of research in France, where it is often associated with poetry writing and philosophy. This fascinating aspect of French culture tends to be overlooked, and this bibliography should encourage readers to explore some of its richness and engage with it critically.

Acknowledgements

We would like to express our deepest thanks to our editor at Cambridge University Press, Linda Bree, for her trust in this project on French poetry and for her invaluable steering of the book through publication, as well as to Thomas O'Reilly and Maartje Scheltens for their pertinent advice as regards the content and shape of the book. Our gratitude also goes to Yves Bonnefoy for generously allowing us to translate his text on poetry, and to all of our contributors who have unflinchingly shown faith in the project. Their ideas have inflected its overall structure and their writings have brought French poetry to life. Nothing could have been done without the translators and copy-editors, Jane Yeoman, Michèle Lester and Anthony Cummins. We are particularly grateful to the following who so generously offered their support: Marion Schmid, Marie-Josèphe and Julien Azérad, Emma Wilson, Neil Kenny, Michael Tilby, Pierre Brunel, Nicholas Boyle, Robin Kirkpatrick, Julia Dover, Finn Sinclair, Wendy Ayres-Bennett, Andrew Brown, Jean-Pierre Allain, Jean, John and William Gurdon, Aude and James Fitzsimons. Our thanks are also offered to the French Department of the University of Cambridge and to the Master and Fellows of Sidney Sussex College for their generous financial support. Students from the French Department of the University of Cambridge, Sidney Sussex College and Magdalene College have been a ceaseless source of inspiration: they will no doubt recognise their influence and presence in this book.

The book is dedicated to the memory of Professor Malcolm Bowie and Dr David Kelley, who knew how to share their incomparable love and understanding of poetry.

Copyright acknowledgements

Thanks are due to the publishers for permission to reprint the following poems in whole or in part:

Pierre Alferi, 'Une défense de la poésie', from *Sentimentale journée* © P.O.L. (1997).

Guillaume Apollinaire, 'Lettre-Océan', from *Calligrammes* © Éditions Gallimard (1918). Reproduction of 'Lettre-Océan' by kind permission of Victoria and Albert Museum, London (© V&A Images).

Louis Aragon, 'Elsa je t'aime', from *Le Crève-cœur* © Éditions Gallimard (1941).

Marie-Claire Bancquart, 'Essentiel', from *Opportunité des oiseaux* © Belfond (Place des éditeurs) (1986).

Yves Bonnefoy, 'Fin du mandat, besoin d'une alliance' © Yves Bonnefoy and *Semicerchio* (2006); English translation © Peter Collier (2008).

Yves Bonnefoy, 'Rue Traversière', from *Rue Traversière et autres récits en rêve* © Mercure de France (1987).

André du Bouchet, 'Accidents', from *Dans la chaleur vacante* © Mercure de France (1961).

André Breton, 'Vigilance', from *Le Revolver à cheveux blancs*, republished in *Clair de terre* © Éditions Gallimard (1932).

Mary Ann Caws, 'It's Up to Us' © Mary Ann Caws (2008).

Blaise Cendrars, 'Mee Too Buggi', from *Poésies complètes de Blaise Cendrars*, vol. I, 'Tout autour d'aujourd'hui' © Éditions Denoël (1947, 1963, 2001, 2005).

Aimé Césaire, extract 'ô lumière amicale. . .' from *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* © Présence Africaine (1956).

René Char, 'Gravité. L'emmuré', from 'Seuls demeurent', republished in *Fureur et mystère* © Éditions Gallimard (1948).

Michel Deguy, 'Le Métronome', from *Aux heures d'affluence. Poèmes et Proses* © Éditions du Seuil (1993).

Jacques Dupin, 'Commencer comme on déchire un drap. . .', from 'Moraines', republished in *L'Embrasure* © Éditions Gallimard (1969).

Paul Éluard, 'La courbe de tes yeux fait le tour de mon cœur. . .', from *Capitale de la douleur* © Éditions Gallimard (1926).

Claude Esteban, 'Ils sont riches, mon père. . .', from *Fayoum* (1999), republished in *Morceaux de ciel, presque rien* © Éditions Gallimard (2001).

 COPYRIGHT ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Édouard Glissant, 'Ô terre, si c'est terre. . .', 'Si la nuit te dépose au plus haut. . .', 'Je t'ai nommée Terre blessée', 'J'écris en toi la musique. . .', 'L'eau du morne est plus grave. . .', 'Je n'écris que pour te surprendre. . .', 'Et n'est que cendre. . .', extracts from 'Pour Mycéa', from *Pays rêvé, pays réel* © Éditions Gallimard (1985).

Bernard Heidsieck, 'Poème-partition B2B3 (Exorcisme)', from *Partition V* © Le Bleu du Ciel (2001).

Philippe Jaccottet, 'L'Ignorant', from *L'Ignorant* © Éditions Gallimard (1958).

Jean-Michel Maulpoix, 'Le bleu ne fait pas de bruit', from *Une histoire de bleu* © Mercure de France (1992).

Henri Michaux, extract from 'Iniji', republished in *Moments* © Éditions Gallimard (1973).

Nguyễn Hoàng Bao Viêt, 'Anne Frank' © Nguyễn Hoàng Bao Viêt (1959, 1980).

Bernard Noël, 'Les états de l'air', from *Les Yeux dans la couleur* © P.O.L. (2004).

Marie Noël, 'Attente', from *Les Chansons et les heures* © Éditions Gallimard (1920).

Saint-John Perse, 'Écrit sur la porte', from *Éloges* © Éditions Gallimard (1925).

Francis Ponge, 'Le Volet, suivi de sa scholie', from *Pièces* © Éditions Gallimard (1946).

Jacques Réda, 'L'Incorrigible', from *L'Incorrigible* © Éditions Gallimard (1995).

Pierre Reverdy, 'L'Esprit du dehors', from *Le Cadran quadrillé* © Flammarion (1915); 'L'Esprit dehors', from *La Liberté des mers* © Flammarion (1960).

Jacques Roubaud, 'Dès que je me lève', from *Quelque chose noir* © Éditions Gallimard (1986).

Amina Saïd, 'Trois continents dérivent', from *Gisements de lumière* © Éditions de la Différence (1998).

Victor Segalen, 'Aux dix mille années', from *Stèles, Œuvres complètes* © Robert Laffont (1995).

Léopold Sédar Senghor, 'À New York', from *Éthiopiennes* (1956), republished in *Œuvre poétique* © Éditions du Seuil (1964, 1973, 1979, 1984 and 1990).

Gérard Titus-Carmel, 'Or battant. . .', from *Seul tenant* © Champ Vallon (2006).

Paul Valéry, 'Le Cantique des colonnes', from *Charmes* © Éditions Gallimard (1922).

Every effort has been made to trace copyright holders, but if any have been inadvertently overlooked the editors will be pleased to make the necessary arrangements at the first opportunity.

Foreword: Ending the mission, inaugurating the pact

YVES BONNEFOY

I

For me the idea of poetry is that it should transgress conceptual thinking, and aim to ensure the proper functioning of what such thinking renders difficult or even impossible: namely to become aware of our essentially finite nature and of the needs and aspirations that it creates in us, to perceive the meaning that poetry can find in life – that is, another way of knowing – and ultimately to renew our relationship with others, which has been spoiled by our inevitably abstract and fragmented approach through analytic thinking. And since this project is never totally attainable, since the poems which it believes that it has set free from the categorisation and intentionality of the conceptual drive are immediately invaded by the daydreams of desire, which are themselves still conceptual, there is – as I persist in thinking – a second degree to poetry, which is to acknowledge this flaw in the poems in their actual form, to deem that they are less poetry than art, and to try to understand their numerous layers of illusion. This is a self-critical undertaking, but one that obviously requires a contribution from the reader, who is often an accomplice but who is in need of guidance in order to attain full awareness. This is therefore an undertaking which creates a field of deconstruction and reconstruction of thinking within the poems, but also within social relationships; and which therefore establishes within society a space for truth.

I also intend to argue that this ongoing exchange, and this linguistic field born under the sign of the poetic, are our sole specifically human reality in an abyss of matter whose phenomena are deprived of meaning: our sole reality, or even our sole being, of which poetry is thus the source. Poetry proposes a pact of alliance which a poet, conscious of the difficulty of his or her enterprise, offers readers, knowing well that – since they too are conditioned by the limits of their language – they experience the same contradictions and the same aspirations as the poet, although often unaware of this. It is a pact whereby readers engage in a struggle to achieve full self-presence, and will face the same perils and vicissitudes that the poets incurred in their initial writing, but will now relive these events in the activity of their own mind, in the hope, even in the harshest times, that one day in the future there will be a grand dialogue of mutual enlightenment: the dialogue which Rimbaud called ‘Noël sur terre’.

And poetry? Briefly, it is the most fundamental project of a society, and one

YVES BONNEFOY

that requires the readers of the poem as much as its author to meet on the same level of radical and fundamental questioning. Between the poets, if they live up to their claims, and those who may come to meet them either in the present or the future, this pact is the only relationship which has any significance in the eyes of poetry: a linguistic pact concluded in order to ensure the viability of being on earth.

Which leads me now to consider the idea of the ‘mission’, first formulated by Walter Benjamin, in ‘The Task of the Translator’, and more recently by Franco Fortini in *Semicerchio*.

Was the ‘mission’, which Benjamin mooted in a period now superseded by our own, a means of recognising the value of poetry? Yes, of course, since he refers to the ‘symbolic’ capacities of the poem. But does this word, ‘symbolic’, promise to do more than present, through analogy or other figurative means, ways of being and ideas of the world characteristic of any particular social milieu in its historical period? And may we agree to call this the specific characteristic of poetry, true poetry, since I have defined the latter as a transgression of concepts (which themselves inform these analogies) and ideas of the world and existence? Looked at from this point of view – that is, understood as mere literature – poetry is reduced to precisely what poets refuse to accept as the fate of their writing: reduced to just what they want their readers to help them undo. And the ‘mission’ that we entrust to poetry, which is to exist on its own terms, albeit limiting its repercussions to a search for psychological or aesthetic meaning, is a mission of an order wholly different from the pact which poetic intuition needs in order to live on in the mind.

In truth the notion of a ‘mission’ is an outright misunderstanding of the poetic. Thinking in terms of a ‘mission’ of ‘letting be’, or ‘delegating to’ the poets without collaborating with them, allowing them into the heart of society, however willingly, but without participating actively in their enterprise, is already a proof that poetry is no longer considered as poetry. The readers who do not understand that authentic poets reject the illusions that constantly flow from their pens, the readers who find meaning in this idea of a ‘mission’, are the readers who reduce poems to no more than ideas and desires, however forcefully and ingeniously formulated. They do not bother to notice that these networks of meaning remain forms of conceptual thinking, that they signal the failure of a great poetic project, and that this failure consigns the readers in their turn to imprisonment within its walls.

As soon as we conceive of a ‘mission’ granted to poets, and as soon as we accept this mission, we forget poetry and its vocation, we forget what is specifically poetic in the poem, considered from then on as only one of the forms – albeit more inventive and freer from convention – of self-expression of our everyday consciousness, which thinks in terms of objects to be defined or possessed, rather than of living relationships. And in this case it matters little whether the mission is considered sympathetically, carefully even, or whether

it has fallen out of the public eye, as has happened in our own Western society. In both cases the poets, deprived of their truth and their hope, will be in great danger, tempted, for example, as I have said, to find meaning by limiting the range of their art, tempted to render the poem absolute, to privilege its specific language and difference, to indulge in its own private coding – to indulge in what Guido Mazzoni calls ‘the self-reference of its own aesthetic canons’.

So rather than bother about the latest developments in the history of the ‘mission’ accorded to poets, it seems to me that it would be better to try to understand why, at a certain time, the mission replaced the pact which, we believe, did exist in other periods of Western civilisation.

II

Why and how did poetry become reduced to an artistic activity? Insofar as it essentially transgresses the conceptual, we might imagine that its readership collapsed because of the omnipresence of the conceptual at increasingly numerous and profound levels in everyday life, since technology has taken over our lives with its almost totally conceptual products – from the car and other machines through to even our processed food and drink. But this ‘total immersion’ has gone beyond the quantitative, and we need a better understanding of what has been happening if we want a better understanding of the rationale of this ‘mission’.

What did happen? Conceptual thought, in its ancient philosophical forms, saturated with metaphysics but also with everyday praxis, had long accepted that it did not control in depth the reality with which it engaged. Faced with the world as a whole, or with objects or persons, it abandoned the entire framework of its discourse to another kind of explanation – that is, the divine, and the myths which related it to the world of appearances, as recognised by our senses; thus belief and faith also came to assume the work of ordinary reason.

But reason itself was then used to untangle the network of myths. The day came when Mallarmé could declare them to be ‘glorious lies’. What happened then? Taking the hint dropped by God as he departed from this world, that his creation was, like him, supernatural, our conceptual faculty believed itself proudly capable of understanding everything that exists, which implied devoting all our thinking to studying phenomena and their laws, with two equally dangerous consequences. On the one hand, the concept focuses on objects in general, without caring for the meaning that one object or another might have in its particular existence – the fruit that I pick, rather than the fruit named in the dictionary – and it follows from this fundamental choice that contact was lost with existence in specific times and places and circumstances, namely with a person’s self-awareness, which is nonetheless the centre of his or her real needs and also the site where the real can be comprehended in all its depth and unity, in the most felicitous and intimate way. Having stifled remembrance of the specific and the finite, the networks of the concept have become reduced

YVES BONNEFOY

to a purely schematic representation of the world and being in the world; they provide partial and abstract images, laden with enigma and anxiety.

On the other hand, all of this might prevent us from seeing that the demise of the divine should certainly not imply that we no longer need to admit transcendence as a factor in our relations with the world – quite the contrary. For what is the slightest fragment of empirical reality other than an infinity of irreducible qualities and aspects, whose core remains impenetrable by concepts? This is what we mean by transcendence. And this power of reality to transcend what we can say about it can most naturally be experienced in things that human language has identified – designating them by name, making them familiar, allowing us to love them. And it is this transcendent reality that allows us to glimpse in the site thus constituted a bedrock of reality impenetrable by language – that is, a foundation of unity. Only this will allow individuals, however transitory they perceive themselves to be, to feel that they are a part of the world: ‘au monde’, to quote Rimbaud once more. It is through transcendence of the basic that we find the proof of our existence.

Having said this, it is the infinity at the heart of everyday reality, the transcendence within immanence, the promise of unity – it is all this, as we know, that is remembered by poetry. And thus I associate with the demise of those ‘glorious lies’ the demise of our previous belief in the project of poetry: not because what myths said of supernatural worlds was true, but because the demise of their illusory transcendence has led us to forget the fundamental truth of real transcendence – that of all things, whether tree or stone or path, and also that of all people, transcending the appearances offered by conceptual discourse, as well as the ways we use these appearances in our relation to ourselves, in our conception of life. The human mind was confronted with a parting of the ways: in one direction lay religious transcendence, leading beyond the world; in the other, the kind of transcendence I have mentioned, the secular option, the one that gives substance to our stay in the world and enables us to give voice to the One and Indivisible, and link it to our finite existence. Finally, there was also the denial of all transcendence, religious or lay; and a bad choice was made, for between the two other ways the pathway to simple mystery was ignored and untrodden, except by the most lucid poets. A great opportunity was lost, at least at one moment in history.

I think of another crossroads, which occasioned a far better choice, at least for certain great painters: one which occurred at the beginning of the seventeenth century, when Galileo illuminated with his new, sublunary lens the entirely material surface of the moon. Thus crumbled some of the myths that had underpinned traditional religion. The moon, which until then had remained an enclave of symbolism in an environment which had already become a simple natural reality, finally took its place on the horizon of the merely human and terrestrial. But despite this, neither the moon, nor any aspect of its location, was understood as reducible to concepts, as we can see from the great landscapes

painted at the time by Annibale Caraccio or Poussin or Gaspard Dughet, where there is such a strong sense of the unity of all things vibrating across the hills, trees, rivers and paths through whose highways and byways they allowed human beings, still breathing freely, to venture forth.

At this initial stage of the demise of the mythological, the transcendence inherent in all things real was in fact revealed to a few great minds, who were, naturally enough, painters, and whose poetic sensitivity was thereby reinforced rather than diminished. And then, three centuries later, in Paris, Georges Bataille published (in *Documents*) that famous photographic enlargement of a big toe: an aspect of something human, yet just as alien as the surface of the moon in Galileo's lens, although interpreted in quite another way. There is nothing in the depth of things other than the dull evidence of their matter, thought Bataille and his friends. Beyond language there is only non-being; we are walled in by language, by relations between words; we are doomed to fear death; we are reduced to self-mockery and its various 'lugubrious games'.

It is the loss of the sense of the infinite in the things – and also the beings – of Nature that has prevented our modern times from hearing poetry, from following poets along their way, which is as much a way of seeing as of writing: to dispose of them otherwise than by allowing them to exist in a sort of Indian reservation of the mind where we may come to watch their dances without bothering to wonder what they mean or rather indicate. Our need therefore is to relearn the positive value of the material world, to sense the 'divinity' of a blade of grass, of the scent of basil, of the laughter of children, of the very shape of a path that we see winding away before us and them, between a line of trees.

And our task, as we meditate on the original moment of the crisis – when the poets were reduced to the mission of doing no more than providing texts for reading, or documents for scholarly analysis – is to return to this fatal crossroads in order to re-establish what in fact is an authentic language: using conceptual thinking, it is true, but providing a fund of key words designating major realities to which the poetic use of language would allow us to regain access, even if only to realise how contradictory and torn we are, and how much more potential tragedy than facile happiness in some *locus amoenus*, some Arcadia, we harbour. In order to enable a new pact to replace the failed mission, we need to acknowledge this poetic supplement, which is actually as evident in our bodies, which we now know to be mortal, as in the world of appearances.

And today there are surely men and women who know this instinctively, which is why some of our friends are absolutely right to draw attention to the ongoing – in fact, the increasing – importance of song. I am glad to say that this does not imply the spoken sing-song which we so often hear in France, which is hardly more than a monologue with a bit of rhythmic support, but rather those songs from all over the world where noises distilled from the natural world and simple, fundamental rhythms predominate over notions. This, in fact, would be a way of describing the more private creative process that leads to similar results

YVES BONNEFOY

in the case of true poetry. Here indeed the auditory qualities of the word transgress the authority of discourse, opening out into a language where our deepest Self becomes aware of its self-presence in all its mortality. And that is really where the heart of the experience of living lies, where the Self can encounter the Other and use this experience to confront its illusions and criticise them, and then offer to society a communal project. Song can help revive the pact between the poet and the common man, which had been interrupted during the period of the mission.

But this does not mean that song can replace poetry, for in its brevity it cannot undertake what the poem can at least attempt: to submit to the authority of the rhythms arising from the body – the rhythms of the finite and the physical – not only a variety of words, but all the bizarre and unpredictable sounds and images that the unconscious, for instance, can suggest through writing, without feeling bound to instantly shape a text, or immediately understand what it says. Poetry, that writing born of intuition, encompasses language in its totality, at the conscious level of action or the unconscious level of desire. It is as much the memory of society's past as the anticipation of its future. It is this desire to embrace everything, which alone can ensure effective action against the illusory, that is the task of poetry. Song is certainly less able than poetry to resist the dream, although its dreams are often truer and closer to our collective needs than the dreams that undermine the self-awareness of writers who are more intricately and specifically involved in the idiom of their era.

III

Who today is really able to give voice to what I have called the divinity of simple things, to transcendence through immanence? Who can recreate this divinity *sans* deity, temporarily scattered throughout the chaos of a world that we perceive as no more than an enigmatic mass of phenomena? Only, I argue, some great poet in the future, and this despite the fact that our present society, in a vicious and potentially fatal circle, is not yet prepared to listen to him or her.

But also today it would perhaps be fitting to think of the other participants in the pact, which once existed and which we wish to revive – that is, readers, whose resources are not as depleted as we are led to believe. Readers? Were the readers not in fact children before yielding to the conceptual thinking that regulates adult life? Children in whose minds this thinking was not yet established, despite the vital language growing inside them, which would mark out the limits of their existence; children who, by the same token, experienced intuitively what poetry would now like to retrieve. Thus it was in their childhood that the great poets – Nerval, Baudelaire and Rimbaud in France, and Leopardi in Italy – first found the nourishment of their vocation, and later the energy to keep it alive. Adolescence is the age of anxiety and myth; it is not the most profound source of poetry, but childhood is the underground water table which, whenever the poetic in society has dried up on the surface, provides those springs which

Foreword

some accident of adult life can suddenly resuscitate. I have often discussed this question of childhood as the source of poetry, and this is not the place to repeat myself. But I can suggest that our chance for the future, if we have one, as I believe we do, depends on our schools: where teachers might consent not to stifle under textual analysis, under meanings so often loaded with ideology, the spontaneous urge of a child to unite with a poem, however naïvely.

Yves Bonnefoy, lecture 'Fin du mandat, besoin d'une alliance' given in Italy, and published in *Semicerchio*, 2006. Translated by Peter Collier.