

INTRODUCTION

Richard Stamelman
Wesleyan University

The history of the French poetry of the last thirty years has been the history of a quest and of a questioning; more precisely, of a quest transformed by the uncertainty of questions. The search for truth, knowledge, meaning, and reality—phenomena for understanding and perceiving the world about which at one time there was never any question—has in the poetry of the past three decades become enveloped by a halo of doubt. The question no longer elicits a reassuring answer, an essential response, an inalterable verity. Reverberating in a world of death, nonbeing, and loss, the question often provokes nothing more than its own echo. Through its agency, no concrete *savoir* is gained, no possession of the world achieved. The hands, having probed the waters for some hidden reality, come up empty. Only their coldness and the few drops of water still remaining attest to what has slipped through the fingers, to what remains perpetually absent, to what is beyond reach in the watery darkness that no language or representation can penetrate.

Yet the poetry of France that has developed since the 1960s is a poetry of hope. The interrogative mode, in which, by necessity, it speaks, sings, and celebrates the errancy and finiteness of life, fills the loss, the silence, and the precarious spaces of human existence with a babble of tenacious questions, each testifying to the indefatigability of the imagination, the inexhaustibility of language, and the humanizing power of dialogue. Whether spoken or unspoken, whether answered or unanswerable, whether conscious or unconscious, questions direct themselves persistently toward what is other. Even silence itself is a response of sorts. The question is speech addressed to another; it moves from the questioner toward the things and the beings that constitute the alterity of the world. By the mere fact of having been posed, the question inaugurates dialogue. Thus, despite the very great differences separating them, contemporary

French poets have created a poetry of dialogue founded on experiences of love, sharing, and community, experiences that certain simple words and a physical, almost corporeal, language—from which our humanness comes—have deepened. We move through life with these simple, elemental words; they have become part of what we are; their resonances mix with the colors and sounds of the world; they participate in the common, everyday acts of living and being which constitute *le vécu* (the lived).

The essays in this issue study the work of poets of different ages, generations, backgrounds, and genders, each of whom is engaged in the dialogue—with self, with world, with language—that characterizes much of what might be called the “poetry of being” that has been written in France during the past thirty years.¹ The sixteen poets share in common a certain belief not in the power of poetry—faith in its magic to attain otherworldly transcendence, to bestow immortality, to transform the world, to change the human condition, and to preserve beauty from mortal destruction disappeared long ago—but in its ability to negotiate a path through the difficult landscape of contemporary life. For these poets, the poem is a candle flickering in the darkness, a shovel with which to excavate a small enclosure of habitable ground, a brush which mixes into the paint of a representation the dirt, sand, pebbles, and leaves of the real world. It is the massing and dispersing of words on a page where white space and writing, silence and discourse, interact to create a vast world of intertextuality. Contemporary French poetry opens itself to the physicality and concreteness of the real as it is discovered in the material substance of a land, a thing, a body, and a language.

There is no one style, or aesthetic, or philosophy that neatly identifies or describes the French poetry of the last thirty years. The poetry of being in France today expresses very different, and often contradictory, poetics, which will be the task of the following essays to reveal, but to which passing reference should be made at this point: first, *a poetics of immanence*, which locates the beyond, the absolute, the real, the center, the limitless, and the ephemeral experience of unity called *la présence* in the concrete reality of terrestrial and mortal existence; second, *a poetics of immediacy*, by which the poet strives to participate in the being of the world (or, among certain poets, the being of the text) before any element of interpretation or consciousness can intervene to compromise the freshness and intimacy of the encounter; third, *a poetics of materiality*, by which the poetic

word is invested with a physical presence, “une richesse de *matière*,”² and the things of the world endowed with a primitive, almost elemental force; fourth, *a poetics of antinomy*, which conceives existence as the irresolvable conflict of contraries, of what one poet calls “the great adversaries”—being and nothingness, life and death, unity and fragmentariness, language and silence, self and other, presence and absence, plenitude and deprivation, darkness and light, proximity and distance, inside and outside; fifth, *a poetics of minimalism*, in which language is pared down to its most elemental, concentrated, and fleeting reality in order either to offer haiku-like evocations of natural events or, by the errancy of a sparse, broken discourse, to undo the illusory richness and self-centered lyricism of traditional poetic language; sixth, *a poetics of space*, which identifies unique topographies (like the garden, the orchard, the *arrière-pays*, the landscape, the mountain peak, the sky, the white sheet of paper) where the mystery of ephemeral events of presence, being, reality, concreteness, and literalness may suddenly appear; seventh, *a poetics of passage*, which, recognizing the ephemerality of the temporal world, assigns to the poet the task of wandering, of passing through, and to poetry the reality of a journey; eighth, *a poetics of decentered subjectivity*, which, by challenging the dominance of the lyrical self—the immobile, egocentric I—expresses a new awareness of the relationship of self to other and of the part traditional language and syntax play in maintaining the supremacy of the subject; and finally, *a poetics of de-figuration*, which questions the power of metaphor, analogy, and image to represent and enclose the temporal world in static figurations and thus announces a poetry open to the imperfectness, the imprecision, the incompleteness, the fragmentation, the variability, the simplicity, and the menace of a finite world beyond representation, on the one hand, and of a non-metaphorical, non-figurative language that subverts the primacy of world over word, on the other.

Whether contemporary French poets speak of the plurality of a self responsive to the energy of being (André Frénaud), or call upon poetry to touch the common, everyday things of the world in the immediate evidence of their being (Jean Tortel), or seek to recover the ineffable light of presence radiating from a billowing cloud or the redness of an apple (Yves Bonnefoy), or feel the vibrant, unseizable radiance of a landscape (Philippe Jaccottet), or listen to the summer sounds of a garden where the indifferent beauty of nature opens itself to the physical pain of the human world (Pierre-Albert Jourdan), or

assert the dependence of thought and language on vision (Bernard Noël), or practice a poetics of erasure and effacement that undoes the deformations of metaphor and creates a poetry of mysterious literalness (Claude Royet-Journoud, Anne-Marie Albiach), or, finally, express in a fragmented, poetic style the pain and hurt of feminine experience—the contemporary French poets studied in this issue fulfill, each in his or her own way, whether through a poetry of being or of *écriture*, of world or of text, the fundamental task of the poet, as René Char defined it: namely, to preserve “des infinis visages du vivant” (“the infinite faces of the living”).³

NOTES

1. The sixteen poets studied in this volume range in age from their early eighties to their early forties. Their dates of birth are as follows: Jean Tortel (1904), André Frénaud (1907), Andrée Chedid (1920), Janine Mitaud (1921), Yves Bonnefoy (1923), Pierre-Albert Jourdan (1924), Philippe Jaccottet (1925), Heather Dohollau (1925), Bernard Noël (1930), Marie-Claire Bancquart (1932), Anne Teyssières (1935), Anne-Marie Albiach (1937), Denise Le Dantec (1937), Claude Royet-Journoud (1941), Jeanne Hyvrard (1945 ca.), Martine Broda (1947).

2. Philippe Jaccottet, “Remarques” in his *L'Entretien des Muses. Chroniques de poésie* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968), p. 300. In addition to Jaccottet's discussion of the works of twenty-nine French and Swiss poets published between 1910 and 1966, several other critical studies of modern and contemporary French poetry have been published in this country and in France during the past twenty-five years; they are: Jean-Pierre Richard, *Onze Etudes sur la poésie française* (Paris: Seuil, 1964), Alain Bosquet, *Verbe et Vertige. Situations de la poésie contemporaine* (Paris: Hachette, 1966), Mary Ann Caws, *The Inner Theatre of Recent French Poetry* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), Mary Ann Caws, ed., *About French Poetry from Dada to Tel Quel. Text and Theory* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974), Roger Cardinal, ed., *Sensibility and Creation. Studies in Twentieth Century French Poetry* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), Robert W. Greene, *Six French Poets of Our Time. A Critical and Historical Study* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), Michael Bishop, *The Contemporary Poetry of France. Eight Studies* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1985), Jacques Darras, ed., *Arpentage de la poésie contemporaine. 14 Portraits-entretiens*, Coll. In'hui (Amiens: Trois Cailloux, 1987), Philippe Delaveau,

ed., *La Poésie française au tournant des années 80* (Paris: José Corti, 1988). In addition to the present number of *Studies in Twentieth-Century Literature*, other scholarly and literary journals that have during the past thirty years devoted special issues to the study of contemporary French poetry are: *Yale French Studies*: "Poetry since the Liberation," 21 (Spring-Summer 1958), *Sub-Stance*: "Contemporary French Poetry," 5–6 (1973) and "Poé-sie/Poe-try," 23–24 (1979), *Critique*: "30 Ans de poésie française: Des singuliers au pluriel," 385–386 (juin-juillet 1979), *Magazine littéraire*: "50 Ans de poésie française," 247 (November 1987).

3. *Feuillets d'Hypnos* [1943–1944] in *Fureur et mystère*, Coll. Poésie (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), p. 107.