

CONTEMPORARY WOMEN POETS

Michael Bishop
Dalhousie University

To speak of the work, albeit rich, diverse, pertinent, at times quite brilliant, of contemporary women poets in France, means a number of things. It means, first and foremost, that one is bound to speak in a critical quasi-vacuum. It means, almost equally importantly, that one must be prepared to take special steps to remedy the largely appalling availability of material in most university libraries and major bookstores. It means, too, that one can rarely turn to friends and fellow critics for their thoughts, their advice, their knowledge. Fortunately, this is not quite so bad as it may seem: one plunges of necessity into the near-exclusive waters of the poetic texts themselves and one rediscovers both the innocence and the full responsibility of the act of reading. And then there is the overwhelming generosity of much personal exchange, its simplicity and its warmth.

I do not wish to place any stress upon the politics of publishing which keeps certain major houses from collaborating with contemporary women poets. Criteria are always delicate, and judgment is never overly pleasant. Suffice it to say that Rougerie, Belfond, Folle Avoine, Saint-Germain-des-Prés and, to a lesser extent, Flammarion and Seghers, have in fact played an important role in the dissemination of the feminine poetic voice of our time. And let it be said also that certain critics have remained sensitive to this voice and have indeed felt and told of its force. Whilst, too, there are other social and academic factors, positive and negative, that could be brought into focus to clarify certain aspects of this "problematic," it is not my intention, nor desire, to dwell upon them here. My wish is straightforward: to speak of eight major women poets of the last twenty years, to evoke the essence of their respective *démarches*, to encourage others to discover what I have discovered and been deeply enriched by. My sole difficulty in all of this has been the final selection of poets.

Whilst I have no hesitation in presenting the work of those poets chosen—Janine Mitaud, Andrée Chedid, Jeanne Hyvrard, Marie-Claire Bancquart, Anne Teyssiéras, Martine Broda, Denise Le Dantec and Heather Dohollau—it has caused me some discomfort not to speak of other poets whose work offers fascination and depth. Knowing of Rosmarie Waldrop's decision to write on the work of Anne-Marie Albiach for this issue eased a little my selection of poets. But it is with regret that I find myself unable to offer some account of the at times admirable and always persuasive work of poets such as Marie Etienne, Françoise Hân, Claudine Helft, Hélène Cadou, Yvonne Caroutch, Claudine Chonez, Joyce Mansour, Gisèle Prassinos, Claude de Burine, and Edith Boissonnas. And then there are others with whom I am as yet only barely acquainted—Gabrielle Althen, Denise Borias, Vénus Khoury-Ghata, Martine Cadieu, Annie Salager. And, of course, there are powerful sister poetic voices emanating from Switzerland and Belgium—Monique Laederach, Anne Perrier, Liliane Wouters—that I cannot speak of here anymore than of the work of women poets from Québec, Acadia, Francophone Africa, or the Antilles. There will be other occasions, no doubt, and in increasing company. I shall add finally, from the outset, that my essay will propose no global conclusion. Such criticism is, I believe, rather in its infant stage. I am thus more than happy to avoid any impression of closure or congealment. My intentions are entirely other.

L'Echange des colères appeared in 1965 and may be said to represent a summit of Janine Mitaud's poetic endeavour to that date, her earliest publication going back to 1949 (*Hâte de vivre*).¹ Prefaced by René Char, *L'Echange des colères* is a powerfully dense volume, full of ellipsis and parataxis, intense, even explosive, yet oddly serene and gentle at the same time. It speaks of the relationships between body, mind, and language and reveals a spiritual hunger working itself out through flesh, emotion, and words. If the earth and its material reality play a central role in her work, so too do dream and a sense of implicit transcendence. Thus, themes such as death, memory, self, and matter are off-set by cosmic awareness, a search for meaning and truth, and the sense of love's overriding power. Janine Mitaud's "implacable passion for being" (EC, np) is conveyed in an often thickly metaphorical mode, beyond all gratuitousness. Unengaged she may be, but her combativity is everywhere.

Danger was prefaced (in 1974) by Pierre Seghers who speaks in effect of her "rugged controlled language." "Indomitable above

all," he continues, "permanent combat, she is rigour and wheat, milk of life" (D, p. 7). The book seeks constantly to bear "witness" (D, p. 9), cutting through the banal "in favour of an eternity," (D, p. 11). Writing here is both problem and possibility. On the one hand, there is madness and lack, on the other, individual capacity for change, a sensing of pervasive divinity, the intuited "terrible resurrection" (D, p. 90).

Janine Mitaud's most recent books are *De la rose à l'éros* (1983), in which the futility of the "absurd," of derision, is exposed, and poetry is seen as a movement towards some vaster interchange, indivision, initiation, and annunciation; and *Suite baroque* (1983), which is a more developed and complicated collection. Here the poet argues that written signs are the "nerve-ends of the torn soul of the gods" (SB, p. 7). The book, which is a knot of surging energy bursting into compact fragments, reveals much of human dilemma: our thirsting for the absolute and the wrestling with the relative; our multiple fears and our sense of available grace; the "nudity" of expression and its capacity for ultimate triumph. "Haute Forêt" is a fine example of Janine Mitaud's brimming dynamism and resiliently joyous, though tragically hued, poetic consciousness:

Haute forêt d'hiver délire dénuement de la neige
 Avalanche et langage Scintillantes coulées des mots
 Branches chamarrées Déchirure Chute lente des poèmes
 Chuchotement d'ailes serrées qui se déploient Essor
 D'un seul oiseau Verbe de plume et d'air
 Chant du cygne-solstice Cri de cristal
 Paroles acérées de toute lumière en décembre (SB, p. 24)²

Compacted, telescoped to the point where sense and sensuousness, semantics and music, language- and body-function seem thoroughly interpenetrated, the poem nevertheless avoids a slippage into *dérive* and undiscipline, while permitting a complete, metaphorical reciprocity of the "discourses" of world and word. Language, poetic process, is thus seen to be simultaneously abrupt and slow, sharp and yet whispered, like the movements and articulations of the things of the world (snow, trees, branches, the flight of birds, their song, etc.), which, in turn, are poetically imbricated with the "things" of language, and so on, according to the endless homological rhythms of being as well as language's or poetry's "being-as" or "being-like," as

Michel Deguy puts it. The final two lines of the poem not only speak of poetry's powers of illumination, concentration, exuberant and maximal or "solstitial" voicing; they ineluctably confirm—"Paroles acérées de..."—the crucial relationship of exchange, osmosis, mutuality, existing between words and world. Words "of," "from," "for"—a relationship in which reciprocity remains beyond definable origin and, above all, beyond questions of disequilibrating supremacy.

The continuity and the coherence of Andrée Chedid's poetry—characteristics which, moreover, arguably extend throughout her entire opus right up to *Echec à la reine* and *La Maison sans racines* (1986)—become particularly perceptible with the very recent publication of *Textes pour un poème* (1987). The latter volume, gathering together with very little retouching the great majority of her poems published between 1949 and 1970, and re-applying the still eminently pertinent title of a 1950 collection, spreads before us the vast panorama of her poetic concerns and the delicate yet sure tracery of the aesthetics underpinning them. Poetry may indeed be prey to endless "stumbings" and "hollownesses" (TP, p. 11); it may be tempted by refusal and high-flying, angelic distance, doubt, and arrogance. "Unsubdued," however, as Andrée Chedid maintains, poetry "scours appearances, tumbles the truths of the moment. Clairvoyant, it reminds us that we are only 'passing by.' Ardent, it keeps us properly amazed at the very natural mystery of the universe" (TP, p. 12).

Cavernes et soleils (1979) takes up the buoyancy and resilience of such a poetics whilst remaining alert to the teeming upheavals without and within. It is a collection where polarities are clearly visible—death and resurrection, "scars" and freshness (CS, p. 44), "sèves et déchets" (CS, p. 46)—and reconciliation is constantly sought: a volume available to the rhythms and dynamism of earth and soul; a volume both rooted in the elemental and raised to the cosmic. Similarly, whilst self-reliance and self-recognition are crucial to all acts—of poetry, of being—both self-effacement, opening up to, even as, the other, and an awareness of poetry's or being's pure, streaming "advent" remain central to Andrée Chedid's *démarche*. Language, of course, is very much caught up in this dialectic and is reflected in the poet's sensitivity to Reverdyan notions of "distance" and *justesse*.

Epreuves du vivant (1983) ineluctably pursues these lines of concern and principle and reveals a poet "at ease" with the trials of enigma, pain, and struggle by virtue of her continuing sense of

recovery and light, purpose and daily “redemption.” The first two sections of “La Table des poussières,” long meditated as the title of the volume as a whole, show much of the transcendent complementarity that informs the poet’s “contradictions”:

Inscris

Le poème doublé de nuit
Le poème drapé du linceul des mots

Le poème
S’égayant dans les cavernes du doute

Se rétractant sous les rides du chagrin
Sombrant dans les puits sans échos

...

Inscris

Le poème s’étirant dans les blés
Le poème s’allongeant vers les sphères

Le poème bondissant
dans les pâturages de l’âme

Le poème frémissant
dans le corps des cités
Devançant regard et moissons (EV, pp. 53–4)³

Questioning is thus intense, but quiet affirmation remains; scream is anguish, but also release: “Everything is abyss / Everything is light // Fogs / And transfiguration” (EV, p. 82). Doubt, absence, grief, and void are “restored” through “stretching” and a kind of *infinitisation*, through a steeping of the text in the soul, through a power of clairvoyance and “precognition.” Love’s power, ultimately, penetrates all and, if there were a single definable guiding element in the “logic” of Andrée Chedid’s poetry, it most certainly would be this.

The work of Jeanne Hyvrard functions openly at many levels, placing in doubt as it does “all the economic and cultural development of the West by opposing it to what could have been.”⁴ While known perhaps principally for her novels published with Minuit in the mid-seventies, she remains a combative, vigorous poet of sustained

lyrical power, at once idealist, utopian even, and yet firmly pragmatic, sensitive to the reality of her dream, the transformations truly available in the midst of apocalyptic vision and broad ecological concern. Language, in this context, unfolds before us its problematics of division, destruction, and alienation, and yet is appropriated in the hope of uncovering, within it and without, a "fusional," inclusive, existential mode beyond any aggressively rationalistic schism. This involves a significant feminisation of the wor(l)d, the reversal of certain basic, often masked, criteria of the Judeo-Christian tradition, the demystification of taboos and "totems," and an endeavour to rethink from top to bottom the socio-economic theories that prevail. The voice, poetic or other, of Jeanne Hyvrard is full of courage, strikingly original and richly sensitive. It articulates itself in a "writing [which] is the very locus of transmutation," a rigorous and intuitive locus wherein, slowly, the unthinkable and unificatory dream of a "third culture" fleshes itself out.⁵

Le Silence et l'obscurité (1982) offers us a text of simple, almost naive poetic power, of sustained emotional intensity and deep historical pertinence. Jeanne Hyvrard's poetic voice rises up, clear, fragile, yet resistant. It is a voice that speaks plainly, beyond high metaphor, clear-sightedly and in freedom, so that free song may still be. It is a voice that honours and solemnly celebrates what, once more, the world might have been, intoning a gentle yet sober "requiem" for the crumpled bodies and minds of another crumbling fragment of a still cherished world. It is a voice that refuses the "silence and obscurity" that descended brutally upon the people of Poland in the pre-Christmas days of 1981; it is a voice, too, that contrasts with the terrible relativity of response, the "foaming" impotence or rank distortion of language, that flooded the world's media in the days following. Fiercely, though lovingly, combating the quick congealments of History, Jeanne Hyvrard gives us a great poem of resistance that demonstrates her manifest need to avoid separating "art from life, politics from feeling, poetry from information" (SO, back cover).

La Baisure / Que se partagent encore les eaux appeared in 1984 with the Editions des Femmes, which also published in the same year her series of *nouvelles* called *Auditions musicales certains soirs d'été*. The second of the two long poems of the former volume articulates with fine quasi-allegorical continuity the delicate problematics of the history of maleness / femaleness. Here is affirmatory

feminism in all its wonder, for we, *nous autres*, can hardly be said to deserve its moving generosity: reconciliation and renewal, the “seeing” of that magnificently simple order of human, planetary, even universal “totality” where difference is merely a part of collective unity; where language would cease (consciously and feelingly) to deform and alienate; where the fullness, the completeness of origin might be recovered (as recovery is possible from a crippling malady or a shocking nightmare); where joining would not be violence, distrust, and distortion; where memory would drown out History; where the infinite and the possible would surge (back) up from constraint, system, and organisation; where here and now would reassume their “otherness” and their “elsewhereness.” Here, without commentary for lack of space, is a short section that conveys something of the poet’s superb ambition of recuperation:

Le désordre crois-tu

Mais non

L’ordre de la totalité

Il ne parle pas

Comment saurait-il

Puisqu’il n’a d’autre activité que ce va-et-vient

Elle ne chante pas

Comment saurait-elle

Puisqu’elle n’a d’autre mère que la poussière de la terre

Il n’y a ni parole ni image

Ni serment ni injure

Ni entrave ni déchirement

Ils sont dans la plénitude d’être seulement elle et lui

Créés ensemble

D’un seul geste

Adam homme et femme réinventant le monde

(BQSP, pp. 126–7)⁶

Marie-Claire Bancquart has been a prolific writer over the past fifteen years, since the publication of *Projets alternés* (Rougerie, 1972). Her fifth, and rather more fully articulated collection,

appeared only six years later: *Mémoire d'abolie*. Although here again needs and desires (for warmth, caress, greater "centering," dehiscence) surface, the book as a whole continues to stress the difficulties of being and saying. Marie-Claire Bancquart's place of habitation is shifting, unstable, though it thus retains greater universality. Malaise, rancour, a sense of marginality and self-deconstruction continue to weigh heavily. And whilst there is a desire to "find language of grass and radiolarian," (MDA, p. 62) "self-pronouncement [remains] / between two oblivions" (MDA, p. 77), language impales us upon its pre-existence, its fixity, its self-imposition, its bloodless pallor. Despite, however, this insistence upon dreams of self-annihilation and the end-time of humanity, Marie-Claire Bancquart is alert to the facileness of "entering negation" (MDA, p. 113), even if quite unsure as to achieving her desire for some perhaps salvatory "after-consciousness" (MDA, p. 117).

Partition appeared three years later, in 1981, after *Voix*. A crucial shift in tone, even in effort, may be clearly detected, even though the volume does not yield up any of the poet's earlier dismay and anguish. If, then, the disarray of love and body, minimality and failure, exile and incomprehension, persists at once globally and personally, other factors emerge to demonstrate beyond any doubt the combative, yet delicately resilient character of Marie-Claire Bancquart's work. "Geldings of God" we may thus be (P, p. 26), but our severance or castration does not prevent us seeking a "lessening of the silence" of God (P, p. 27): a credence in hope, smile, desire, despite their "wind-like" quality; a sense of love's possible absoluteness. Marie-Claire Bancquart thus remains "this side of despair," aware of a seminal minimality all about her, full of a nostalgia for knowledge of great intimacy ("the second when the cherry reaches its full redness," P, p. 98) and a desire to see the "marriage" of things (P, p. 108). All this leads to a persistent "apostrophising of the cosmos" (P, p. 114) but it is also based on a sense both of universal ritual—"the beginning of an act of faith" (P, p. 120), in which all things are altars?—and of an improbable "beatitude" being born, low down, somehow (P, p. 153). The poet's journey may be incomprehensible, but it leads "towards a definitive transhumance" (P, p. 190).

Marie-Claire Bancquart's most recent collection is *Opportunité des oiseaux*, published in 1986. She speaks of it in the following terms: "I have reached a stage where mythology plays, within me, a larger role than before. And mythology is a way of getting in touch

with a constant state of mind of humanity. God is probably, for me, still absent from the world, but my revolt in the face of absence has become a question, indeed an invitation thrown out to the Eternal, so that it may come upon earth to restore order in its creation" (Letter to the author). There is here, as Luc Balbont has argued, a sense of the "positive absence of God" (ibid.). Many negative characteristics thus continue to haunt the poet's work, but she nevertheless writes in a spirit of quiet and urgent "celebration of the ephemeral" (OO, p. 38), "participating in the solemn gestures / of the anonymous in progress" (OO, p. 49), always at the intersection of defectiveness and possibility, of anguish and the fact that "derision is not certain" (OO, p. 64). In conjunction with—rather than in place of—that earlier end-game scenario, Marie-Claire Bancquart now offers us a sense of the growing nearness of the "ungraspable" (OO, p. 21). As well, the volume articulates greater affirmation and even gives "thanks," and speaks of alliance, allegiance, potential universal meaning, and a language "covering all of existence" (OO, p. 81). *Opportunité des oiseaux* is, in short, a moving, powerful, and mature collection and one that demonstrates at once the authenticity and the originality of its author. Here is the penultimate text, entitled "De sable":

Crépis les murs avec un long poème d'olives blanches
et consume l'absence
en aimant sexe et peau
tout l'éphémère qui gonfle et te gonfle
à l'image de rues dilatées par un sacre royal.

Oublie l'ombre.

Il y a cette douceur en nous
que rien ne justifie dans l'immense caillot du monde

douceur de gens beaucoup piétinés
qui se reprennent aux choses dignes:
vent
pierres

loin de l'homme

si ce n'est l'allégeance universelle du désir.

Et le visage en sang
quelquefois
participe à la tendresse du soleil. (OO, p. 124)⁷

The poem's title immediately thrusts upon us images of "sandiness," of insubstantiality and passing. And yet, presence remains through mind and metaphor. The poem proceeds to intermingle inextricably world and poem, each seemingly the metaphor and the origin of the other and entailing a general "annihilation" of nothingness, of absence. The ephemeral, despite its "sandiness," is thus "restored" and restoring: by the sweep of the poem of the heart and mind unfolding "royally," re-vealing, re-covering the ground and the endless vehicles of presence. The poem, too, limns a poetics of light, of lightning, of illumination. It is a poetics focussing attention and need upon gentleness: the shedding of tiresome logics that would pin us down; the resilience of the trodden; the recovery of worth(iness), of simplicity, of all that is available, fundamental, open to our collective, shared love. Blood and violence, even, may be recuperated—beyond naivety and presumption—by "the tenderness of the sun."

Anne Teyssiéras' sixth volume, *Parallèles*, appeared in 1976, ten years after the publication of *Epervier ma solitude*. It offers us poems of great emotional intensity, in which love and the poet's ceaseless interrogation of signs repeatedly meet with frustration and are forced to the brink of "madness" (PA, pp. 19, 21). The power of resistance is, however, great: death is not absolute, the (absent) other remains a "high keeper of my song" (PA, p. 36), whilst the *hic et nunc* retains its vital compulsion: "I shall not wear mourning / Elsewhere summons me / Here is my obligation wherein I cleanse a swamp" (PA, p. 32). *Le Pays d'où j'irai* (1977) betrays similar tensions. Marginally more positive in tone and centered upon departure and future event, the volume nevertheless displays the many sober traces of the wretchedness and marredness of things as well as the exile wrought paradoxically by poetry itself. *Juste avant la nuit* (1979) specifically articulates these paradoxes and tensions by means of a contrapuntal rhetoric in which the "intertwinement of speech" (JAN, np) is delicately explored and enacted and in which factors of poetic place and non-place, recognition and non-recognition, going and (non)-arrival, loss and regrowth are subtly and evocatively elaborated as poetry, as *élan*, and as problem, as disillusion.

Les Clavicules de Minho was published in 1986. Taking up the

interrogations Anne Teyssiéras began in part in her short *La Boule de cristal* (Rougerie, 1982), "this work is," she says, "the end consequence of a period of reflection on, if one wants, the result of the 'gropings' that went before" (letter to the author). It is, at all events, a both powerfully felt and a brilliantly lucid assessment of the problematics of poetic voice and, indeed, all artistic expression. As such it stands alongside the writings of contemporaries such as Yves Bonnefoy, Michel Deguy, and Bernard Noël. A book to be reckoned with in profundity and authenticity, it happily avoids all pretentiousness and tendentiousness. Poetry and art for Anne Teyssiéras offer an oddly intransitive knowledge, a kind of "laughter . . . in response to all questions" (CM, p. 7). They are predicated upon "belief," desire, "promise"; they hesitate between sense and non-sense; their "focussing" is illusory (CM, p. 22), their contact is with Nothingness; they both delight in and "dismiss" their place of origin and anchorage: the earth. They function as *détour* (CM, p. 35), as metaphenomenality as it were, though they offer a "way"—of relativity, ephemerality, non-absoluteness. Founded upon an intuition of a merely approximate and convenient structure, poetry and art have no specifiable logic and delimitable meaning. They are, one might say, living "deconstruction." The poet, as Anne Teyssiéras says, "seeks shelter in the eye of the cyclone, whereas you exhaust yourself at the fringes of non-sense" (CM, p. 43). Poetry and art are thus "movement not achievement" (CM, p. 55). Myth, she rightly argues, comes precisely from poetry's and art's "detour" or distancing (CM, p. 68). Other forces, however, are infinitely greater and possibly less mystifying: love, the forces of being beyond us, the "distant effusion" of which poetry and art are but an "echo" (CM, p. 84). The latter are merely "the saliva of nothingness" (CM, p. 101)—but "everything is in Nothingness" (CM, p. 40)—and require our smiling, compassionate but lucid laughter to show both their skeletalness and their residual potential for illumination. *Les Clavicules de Minho* gives us the revealed originality of Anne Teyssiéras as poet and theoretician.

The two poetic "fragments" I have chosen are taken from the few such examples that crop up in the midst of the great swirl of metapoetic texts offered in *Les Clavicules de Minho*. Here is the first:

Ton regard est une eau qui bouge
 Tu portes l'empreinte d'une fougère sur l'occiput

Un coquillage armé te blesse les reins
Le fiel des générations a rongé tes artères
La force centrifuge t'a plaqué contre tes os
La force centripète t'a ramené aux dimensions d'un point
Une vanne a bloqué la vague de tes nerfs
Ton sang a viré au noir absolu
Et tu vis encore! (CM, p. 67)⁸

The brief intercalated poem reveals the marked continuity of Anne Teyssiéras' preoccupations: death, the primacy of the earth, "presence," intimacy, identity, the imbrication and tensions of being and nonbeing, "absolute blackness" and continuing life-force. The culminating exclamation gives us, as do the dense musings that frame the poem, a sense of uplift, surprise, smiling reversal, lucid yet improbable jubilation. Similar to Bonnefoy's poetry in a broad thematic sense—one thinks of his *Du mouvement et de l'immobilité de Douve*—Teyssiéras' *oeuvre* often shows further that same restraint, that terse though soft, caressing assessment of world and word. The second poem, more apparently enigmatic, offers us a prime example of the "poem [as] emergence of being out of its vital field, like a burgling of presence upon a terrain where only absences confront one another" (CM, p. 96):

Des mouches se noient dans mon encre.

Combien fausse cette traversée
combien délirante cette marche dans l'innommable POESIE
La vase qui gicle entre tes orteils
Et quelquefois une inquiétude:
 est-ce un insecte vivant
 une brindille
 un coquillage tranchant
 un clou rouillé?

Non, ce n'est qu'un mot oublié. (CM, p. 97)⁹

Here, and more or less throughout *Les Clavicules de Minho*, the tone, whilst remaining relatively serene or at least controlled and at times even quietly matter-of-fact, edges towards a degree of self-reflexivity that, too, is highly characteristic of Yves Bonnefoy, yet also reminiscent of poets such as Jacques Dupin and Bernard Noël, where

discretion and intensity, smile and grimace, incisiveness and relaxation, attain to a curious, but happy marriage.

Double (La Répétition, 1976), which is the second of the four slim but striking *plaquettes* Martine Broda has published to date, offers us spare texts, hemmed in white space, like a voice from a distance, barely real, yet sensed to be urgent. Its own blatant syntactic ellipses seem to mime that precarious equilibrium of which Broda speaks, between division and fusing, intimacy and unspeakableness, communication and dislocation, fullness and absence. The notion of "double"-ness is, of course, central to all of this, and the text makes at least adequately implicit the questions of (ex)change, of looking, of dreaming, the relation between reality and mind and soul, and the shimmering effects of love. Love, indeed, lies tantalizingly at the heart of this text which is near-mystical in its implications.

Five years later appeared *Tout ange est terrible* (1983). A meditation upon a line from Rilke, this volume again articulates itself in played, holed forms emblematic of that blinking, intermittent exchange or equivalence of presence and absence. The writing retains an enigmatic quality, despite its air of simplicity and even evidence. It lacks contextuality and is often plunged into disarticulation, which should not surprise us. Besides, this very "imperfection" and obscurity may be said to pertain closely to the contradictions—of brilliance and beauty, of lack and shame, earth's abominable, ambiguous states—that underpin the volume's imaginative "structure." "This world is this world," Martine Broda exclaims (TAT, np), in her somber evocation of the ineffableness (pain, solitude, death) of much that flickers across the half-lit screen of things. Poetry, as for so many women poets, however, has a deep, painful, and even ambivalent connection with love. Death, as with Bonnefoy, may be the founding experience, yet, like him, Martine Broda seeks to move beyond, marrying brevity with deprivation and possible beauty, too.

Passage (1986) is the latest collection to appear. Although somewhat reminiscent of the mode of a poet such as Anne-Marie Albiach, Martine Broda's style remains more "centered," despite its broken, disconnected quality. *Passage* thus recounts the difficulties of "passage," exchange, communion, and love, whilst succeeding in rendering us alert to the endless, marginal, near-imperceptible ways in which these difficulties unfold. If the intensity of mourning and

speaking are locked together, it should be noted too that the voice emerging is purged, stripped of all but the barest traces. Here is a brief section from the volume:

deuil inclus dans la voix
tisse le chant des anges

“TON PASSAGE est ellipse” en ce grand jour
de sang fané où l'être vire

un reste somptueux le trop-tard le trop-tôt
de la voix (PS, np)¹⁰

Passage within a poem of passage, ellipsis of all that presents itself—phenomena of the senses or the mind, sight, vision, text or emotion—this fragment, mirroring the partiality and yet the metonymy at play in all relationship and interchange, offers a compacted, truncated, though implicitly expandable minimum within a halting, discontinuous “structure” which seems to belie all feasibility of coherence and delimitable sense. Yet the fragments within this fragment of a poem, in itself merely (of) “passage,” are already either half-echoes or anticipations of other textual fragments, and, perhaps much more importantly, echo and anticipate non-textualised fragments of emotion, of thought, of dream, of observation. In this sense they inflate and cohere, like the endless, teeming separatenesses of the world forming and deforming, dividing and sealing the ultimately seamless simplicity of its being and presence. Mourning, voicing, the “song of angels,” (self-)quotation, dried blood (upon the page or the skin), the affective characteristics of speech, all participate in the vast swirl and swerve of a being separable and inseparable from that “being-like” of words upon the page, that dried blood of the throat’s spluttering murmurs.

Le Jour, published with the Editions des Femmes in 1975, was Denise Le Dantec’s second book after *Métropole* (1970). It offers a series of prose texts upon the feminine condition, of which the last, “Notes pour un scénario imaginaire,” is perhaps the most well-known. It is feminist, she feels, only in the most powerfully and delicately positive sense: it is about women, their minds, their oppression, and it endeavors to discover whether feminine perception and feeling exist *per se*. It is “an ethical reflection on feminine experi-

ence, but also a call for transgression, for political transition and fulguration" (LJ, p. 142).

Mémoire des dunes appeared in 1985, eight years after her third book, *Les Joueurs de Go*. It is a slim, elliptically eloquent collection, at once centered upon the world, presence, and self-reflexively concerned with the questionableness of its own links with the real. The world relentlessly ciphers itself, constant and shifting, falling prey to the senses, especially sight and consciousness, especially through memory. The beauty, the "magic" and the "ecstasy" of the simple thus mesh with the "lack" inhabiting all "alphabets" (MD, np), and although things are given again through writing, yet everything is perceived to be "in default," to have "reverted by escheat" (MD, np). In this sense, for Denise Le Dantec, writing is doubly lucid, beyond hope, beyond stupor, yet it does move towards some fullness in the midst of its marred and holed condition.

Les Fileuses d'étope also appeared in 1985 and, together with *Mémoire des dunes*, heralds a period of intense creative and critical activity, with various other books to appear soon. *Les Fileuses d'étope* is a much more extensive and complicated collection than *Mémoires des dunes*. Predicated upon a desire to match the "dimensions of the world" (FE, np) in its ecstatic-convulsive spasms, the collection articulates a taut serenity at the intersection of near-mystical feminine principles and the extreme alertness to all that threatens to overwhelm. On the one hand, Denise Le Dantec plunges into the simple and the profound in being, sensitive to the shadow within the shadow, the other within what appears to be, ever open to "The Angel (that) quietens my wound and bears me up" (FE, np) in the midst of all that is spun around us, within and without. On the other hand, her writing can be "confounded" with a consciousness of all that is wretched, poisoned, and hurt, by a sense of invading darkness, restlessness, and nervous wear. A "Black Angel" may thus impose its presence, rendering love a hell, exchange mutual enmity. The collection achieves some reconciliation, however, in balancing combat with prayer, in fusing "visible and invisible / In the filthy gentleness of our earth" (FE, np), in interlocking dismemberment with re-creation in the high emotion of recognition, in trusting to intimacy and openness in that quasi-Taoist sense of life sweeping us along, bathed now in love, now in melancholy. Here is the closing text of the entire collection:

Passent les grands charrois d'automne, l'amour
la neige, le viol et les grands froids
Tous les forfaits du coeur, toutes les mélancolies,
L'Ardeur inoubliable de tout ce qui fut beau,
égaré comme les feuilles sur les glèbes,
Passent les sens et les soupirs de l'Ange
Sur les chemins immenses, de l'autre côté du
monde,
Et l'angoisse de nos rêves marqués de cet amour

Des quatre points du monde jauniss sous la
tourmente
Les yeux ne servent plus

A peine si on décèle la Vierge dans le Loup (FE, np)¹¹

The poem describes life's all-embracing, all-deluging movement. It is the song at once of passage, of precarity and vulnerability, of swirling, blinding destiny and its inscrutable contradictions; and yet it is the song, implicitly, of a softer acceptance, melancholic it is true, though resilient and even tautly serene: the poem of a poem of struggling appraisal and intuition despite the forces that work to crumble vision and love, passion and beauty, purity and dream. In this sense, Denise Le Dantec's text remains caught between, on the one hand, the pull of that purely Taoist flow of existence wherein all is reconciled, rendered even innocent, by virtue of its "mere" belonging to the sweep of a being divergent in its forms though undifferentiated in its essence or "soulness;" and, on the other hand, an engagement which clings to the very act of articulation and the swirling but re-grouping gestures of thought applied to emotion and pure ontic streamingness. In all of this, the prestige of formalism and systematisation, the traps of hubris and aestheticism, seem to play no obvious role. Like all the poets dealt with here, Denise Le Dantec has priorities that spring from life into art only to return to life.

Seule Enfance appeared in 1978 and is Heather Dohollau's first collection of poetry. It is an exquisitely simple and deep book. Its preoccupations are numerous, but all central: reality and time; the visible and the invisible; the "equilibrium" of here and there; love and mortality; the enigma and the simplicity of being; angelic presence and the "weight" of nothingness. Poetic voice occurs here "in a place

of nothing for the pursuit of everything" (SE, np). Condemned to passing, our passage is fullness: "Finding in the immense void / The faithful places / Of a never lost paradise" (SE, np).

La Venelle des portes (1980), beautifully illustrated, like her next two books, by Tanguy Dohollau, plunges us again, with perhaps greater intensity though the same serenity, into an exploration of the infinite depths of our finite being. The writing is spiritually rich, tranquilly penetrating and essential, filled with a sense of simplicity in no way reductive. Again, its dealings are multiple: earth's links to the soul; the significance of all for our innerness; a perpetualness within the dying; the recognition of "the graces of an instant" (VP, np); the centrality of love. In this perspective, mind and materiality become reciprocally "faithful," mutually pertinent; the imaginary provides life, fertility, germination. "Living is closing one's eyes," we may be told (VP, np); and, although the tone is never didactic, it has constant urgency: "Why do we not do / the most important? // To keep the impossible intact" (VP, np). Although we are already in paradise, we have almost everything to remember.

After *La Réponse* (Folle Avoine, 1982), a very finely respectful meditation upon the last hours of Jules Lequier, wherein so many crucial factors of existence are (re)lived and weighed, Heather Dohollau published *Matière de lumière* (1985). The volume is the provisional, crowning achievement of a brief but brilliantly insightful, serenely intense, and original literary career. It treats of the simple mysteries of opaqueness and light, matter and soul, "music" and nothingness, death and birth, decline and freshness, presence and absence. The equations traced out are not banal, and they are presented with rare humility, unpretentiousness, and a clear unabusinessness of revealed poetic power. Poetry, for Heather Dohollau, is also summary dwelling, a place of gathering and retention, close to disappearance and death, yet a path of fragile light and flickering shadow (cf. "Torcello," ML, np). The love sought is beyond all appearances, limitations, impotence, just as reality is a continual "baptism" of what it does not appear to be, of divinity. "We are the hieroglyphs of depth / In depth itself," the poet argues (ML, np). Whilst, then, nomination always retains an element of deception, loss is in a sense impossible. Heather Dohollau's poetic voice comes from a "listening to the Eternal speak of its trees" (ML, np). "Comment perdre . . ." is a poem without title, chosen at semi-random from *Matière de lumière*:

Comment perdre ce qui est toujours là
Le vrai incroyable
La présence d'un feu, un lit, un jardin
L'ombre en tête d'oiseau de la plume
N'est pas plus fidèle
Que ces lieux où nous vivons
Par la caution des choses

La table, les chaises, les fleurs
Dans l'eau des heures
L'espace partagé
Où en tendant la main
Nous poussons la porte du présent
Et le regard s'arrondit comme un fruit (ML, np)¹²

The tone is unmistakably serene, despite the interrogation and negation, and gives off a sense of resting comfortably with being—which is nothing to do with having, but on the contrary steeped in presence and coexistence, passingness and fluidity. The poem thus traces the equations of implicit bliss, of invisible yet certain continuity, of truth that defies credulity, and of a fragile yet intuited “faithfulness” of space and time. What awaits, indeed has always awaited, in this acceptance of a simplicity of infinite depth is an eternal opening of the present, constant ontic present-ation (in which “I am the threshold” [“Rêve de Sierre,” ML, np]), a “rounding” and fructification that render the bond of self and world full, ever-brimming, and predicated upon a true sharing: an amazingly elementary, though also abundant, give-and-take wherein nothing is losable, as with love itself.

NOTES

1. Reference is made throughout to the following books (abbreviations are indicated in the text in parentheses): Janine Mitaud: *L'Echange des colères* (Rougerie, 1965): EC; *Danger* (Rougerie, 1974): D; *De la rose à l'éros* (Pont de L'Épée, 1983): RE; *Suite baroque* (Fanlac, 1983): SB. Andrée Chédid: *Textes pour un poème* (Flammarion, 1987): TP; *Cavernes et soleils* (Flammarion, 1979): CS; *Epreuves du vivant*

(Flammarion, 1983): EV. Jeanne Hyvrard: *Le Silence et l'obscurité* (Montalba, 1982): SO; *La Baisure/Que se partagent encore les eaux* (Editions des Femmes, 1984): BQSP, Marie-Claire Bancquart: *Mémoire d'abolie* (Belfond, 1978): MDA; *Partition* (Belfond, 1981): P; *Opportunité des oiseaux* (Belfond, 1986): OO. Anne Teyssières: *Parallèles* (Rouerie, 1982): PA; *Le Pays d'où j'irai* (Rouerie, 1977): PDJ; *Juste avant la nuit* (Rouerie, 1979): JAN; *Les Clavicules de Minho* (Rouerie, 1986): CM. Martine Broda: *Tout ange est terrible* (Clivages, 1983): TAT; *Passage* (Lettres de Casse, 1986): PS. Denise Le Dantec: *Le Jour* (Editions des Femmes, 1975): LJ; *Mémoire des dunes* (Folle Avoine, 1985): MD; *Les Fileuses d'étoupe* (Folle Avoine, 1985): FE. Heather Dohollau: *Seule Enfance* (Editions Solaire, 1978): SE; *La Venelle des portes* (Folle Avoine, 1980): VP; *Matière de lumière* (Folle Avoine, 1985): ML.

2. All translations given are my own:

"High forest of winter delirium destitution of snow
Avalanche and language Shimmering of words
Bedizened branches Rending slow Fall of poems
Whispering of bunched wings unfolding Soaring
Of a single bird Logos of plume and air
Song of solstice-swan Cry of crystal
Sharp words of all light in December"

3. "Inscribe

The poem lined with night
The poem draped with the shroud of words

The poem
Wandering lost in the caverns of doubt

Retracting beneath the furrows of grief
Sinking into the unechoing well-holes

...

Inscribe

The poem stretching in the wheatfields
The poem reaching out towards the spheres

The poem leaping
in the pastures of the soul

The poem trembling
in the body of cities
Anticipating gaze and harvests"

4. Cf. Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Mair Verthuy, *Jeanne Hyvrard*, Collection Monographique Rodopi en Littérature Française Contemporaine, (Editions Rodopi, 1988, in press).

5. Cf. Waelti-Walters, *Jeanne Hyvrard*.

6. "Disorder you think

Not at all

The order of the sum of things

He does not speak

How could he

Since his only activity in this coming and going

She does not sing

How could she

Since her only mother is the dust of the earth

There is neither speech nor image

Nor oath nor insult

Nor obstacle nor rending

They are in the fullness of being merely she and
he

Created together

In a single gesture

Adam man and woman reinventing the world"

7. "Rough-cast the walls with a long poem of white olives
and consume absence

loving sex and skin

all that is ephemeral swelling up and bloating you

in the image of streets dilated by a royal consecration.

Forget shadow.

There is that softness within us

that nothing justifies in the immense clot of the world

softness of people much trampled

who set once more to worthy things:

wind

stones

far from man

perhaps the universal allegiance of desire.

And the bloodied face

sometimes

joins with the tenderness of the sun."

8. "Your gaze is a moving water
You bear the imprint of bracken upon your head
An armed shell damages your back
The bile of generations has eaten away your arteries
Centrifugal force has flattened you against your bones
Centripetal force has brought you back to the dimensions of a dot
A sluice-gate has blocked the wave of your nerves
Your blood has turned to absolute black
And you are still alive!"
9. "Flies drown in my ink
How false this crossing
how delirious this movement through unnameable POETRY
The mud squelches between your toes
And sometimes an anxiety:
 is it a living inspect
 a twig
 a sharp-edged shell
 a rusty nail?
No, it's just a forgotten word."
10. "mourning included in the voice
weaves the song of angels
'YOUR PASSAGE is ellipsis' on this great day
of faded blood where being turns
a sumptuous residue the too-lateness the too-soonness
of the voice"
11. "The grand autumn cartings pass by, love
 snow, rape and the deep cold days
All the crimes of the heart, all the sadnesses
The unforgettable Ardour of all that was beautiful,
 adrift like leaves upon the glebe,
Meanings pass by, and the sighs of the Angel
along the vast pathways, on the other side
 of the world,
And the anguish of our dreams marked by this love
From the four points of the world yellowed beneath
 torment
Eyes are of no more use
We can barely discern the Virgin in the Wolf"
12. "How can we lose what is always there
The incredible trueness

The presence of a fire, a bed, a garden
The bird-headed shadow of the quill
Is not more faithful
Than these places where we live
Through the granting of things

The table, the chairs, the flowers
In the water of the hours
The shared space
Where with hand outstretched
We push open the door of the present
And our gaze rounds out like full fruit"